



UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

# Unlocking quality funding

## United Nations evaluation evidence brief

In the context of repositioning the United Nations development system (UNDS), funding is understood to be a key enabler of the transformative, collaborative action required to help countries achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This brief, one in a series of five, draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by 51 independent evaluations conducted across the UN development system between 2020 and 2024<sup>1</sup>. It presents evidence on funding quality, defined as a measure of how well funding received by UN agencies supports efficiency, effectiveness and sustainable development outcomes.

Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), which is the primary policy instrument of the UN General Assembly. The QCPR defines the way the UN development system

operates to support programme countries in their development efforts.

The complete version, including a bibliography, is available at: <https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/oas-qcpr/2020-qcpr-status-reporting>.

### Insights from UN evaluations

#### 1 Flexible core funding fuels innovation and responsiveness.

Flexible core funding was considered crucial. It allowed for swift reallocation to address needs, particularly during crises, and helped convene, innovate and support inter-agency collaboration and long-term planning. When core resources were available, joint programmes, trust funds and UN interventions benefited from more catalytic ideas and innovation. However earmarking funds and relying on voluntary contributions often resulted in a reduced capacity to plan strategically, engage with partners, innovate, fund cross-cutting issues, strengthen

coordinated action and retain staff. This inflexibility was particularly challenging for demand-driven programmes, whose sustainability relied on national ownership. It led to a disconnect between programme activities and the needs of the communities they serve.

*Evaluations recommended:* ensuring that long-term goals are closely matched with sustained support (multi-year commitments); and improving the tracking of unearmarked funds; and increasing the visibility of core and lightly earmarked funding and its contribution to innovation.

## 2 A growing disconnect is evident between donor advocacy for, and action on, quality funding.

Advocacy from donors for greater coordination and a demand for programmes tailored to national priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals did not necessarily manifest in flexible, multi-year core funding. Donors are increasingly opting for light earmarking, and the changing development landscape has affected agencies' ability to secure long-term, flexible funding. As a result, interventions are impacted by specific donor requirements. While some donors encouraged joint programming to reduce costs and increase collaboration, others maintained bilateral cooperation, hindering collaboration. UN country offices have become more affected by limited funding and prone to compete for funds, despite their increased openness to engage in joint programming. Consequently, agencies tended to focus on small-scale projects and short-term funding cycles, offering little flexibility to allocate funding beyond immediate priorities.

*Evaluations recommended:* clearer communication and engagement strategies with donors in shifting from project- to programme-based funding; and encouraging a more proactive role for partners and donors to address the undercapitalization of UN funds.

## 3 Early and targeted resource mobilization strategies secure quality funding.

Early development and strategic multipronged resource mobilization targeting diverse donors, were crucial for securing funding. The consultative nature of strategic reviews and country strategic planning offered increased opportunities for joint resource mobilization and joint programming. However, there was donor preference for funding emergencies over preparedness and prevention, limiting the ability to mobilize resources for development.

Similar to donor contributions, private sector funding varied and was influenced by thematic focus, the existing private sector environment and staff experience.

*Evaluations recommended:* increasing the professionalization of the partnerships and resource mobilization function; investment in early and joint resource mobilization; innovative resource mobilization campaigns; national commitments; outreach to non-traditional donors; working relationships with financial institutions; and the linking of resource targets to multi-year results frameworks.

## 4 Committed senior leadership and sponsorship drive quality funding and impact.

Programmes with strong leadership were more likely to be prioritized and to secure resources. In the case of joint programming, the resident coordinator role was vital. An engaged and impartial resident coordinator, who effectively mobilized joint resources for joint programming, was key. The impact of UN senior sponsorship on funding quality varied, depending on the consistency of the leadership and on the existence of a clear corporate funding strategy.

*Evaluations recommended:* specifying how donors can better participate in governance structures and strategic decision-making; and establishing stronger senior sponsorship and leadership as well as strategic



support and endorsements to enhance the visibility of interventions.

## 5 Enhancing joint programming requires flexible, predictable funding.

Joint programmes were regarded as highly relevant and aligned with national priorities and SDGs. They added value in areas requiring diverse competencies and joint efforts. When backed up with flexible funding, joint programmes demonstrated a capacity for early initiation, an ability to draw on expertise from multiple partners and support for activities that might otherwise be underfunded. They provided significant benefits by harnessing the strengths of multiple stakeholders, promoting multisectoral approaches, combining the resources and expertise of different UN entities, strengthening inter-agency coordination and advocacy and providing more comprehensive support to countries.

However, joint programming did not significantly reduce transaction costs or achieve operational efficiency gains in the development, implementation and resource mobilization. While they served as a mechanism for joint resource mobilization, their impact on overall resource generation was not always successful. The sustainability of joint programmes is contingent on donor support, leadership and trust and on the ability of governments to continue the benefits.

*Evaluations recommended:* defining the catalytic role of UN inter-agency pooled funds and programmes; encouraging donors to channel funds through inter-agency pooled funds and trust funds; and promoting joint programming through incentives for agencies to participate.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Manual extraction of information from 31 of the most relevant reports, and LLM-accelerated extraction from a further 20 country-level evaluations.

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October 2024

## UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

The United Nations Sustainable Development Group System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWEO) has been established by the Secretary-General to provide independent evaluation evidence to support the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

This initiative is a collaboration between SWEO and evaluation offices across the UN system. The initiative is coordinated by SWEO, with contributions from:

### FUNDING



### MANAGEMENT GROUP

