Building a whole of system response to complex settings

Summary of United Nations evaluation evidence

Conflict and violence cause immense human suffering and significantly hamper sustainable development. But addressing the complex interlinkages across humanitarian need, development goals and sustainable peace requires enhanced collaboration between humanitarian action, longer-term development interventions and peacebuilding and peace-sustaining activities. Such work demands flexibility, adaptation and constant innovation. The past four years have seen considerable effort by the United Nations development system to bridge humanitarian, development and peace approaches in countries experiencing complex crises. This summary highlights the successes seen so far and the major challenges faced.

This summary draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by independent evaluations conducted across the United Nations development system between 2021 and 2024. It presents key issues and learning from evaluations for consideration in the context of United Nations system-wide and intergovernmental policy discussions. Its publication is timed to provide information to stakeholders involved in the 2024 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), in line with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 78/166 (2023).

This summary is part of a series produced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) System-Wide Evaluation Office (SWEO) which includes summaries of United Nations evaluation evidence on:

United Nations

I   the resident coordinator system;

II   development system reform at the regional level;

III funding quality;

IV   sustainable food systems; and

V   an interactive evidence map featuring United Nations evaluations, published between 2021 and 2024, mapped against priority areas of the 2020 QCPR[1].

The complete series is available at: https://ecosoc.un.org/en/what-we-do/oas-qcpr/2020-qcpr-status-reporting.

Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

ThThe QCPR is the primary policy instrument of the United Nations General Assembly to define the way the United Nations development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts. It assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of United Nations operational activities for development. A QCPR resolution is adopted by the General Assembly every four years with annual follow-up and guidance from Member States provided by the Economic and Social Council at its Operational Activities Segment and the General Assembly in its Second Committee. The 2020 QCPR resolution builds on the United Nations development system reform[2]. The next QCPR resolution will be negotiated in late 2024 to guide efforts from 2025 to 2028.

The 2020 QCPR resolution outlines several requests for United Nations entities to fulfil when it comes to bridging the gap between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work[3]. Firstly, the resolution asks United Nations development entities to "enhance cooperation, collaboration and coordination with humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding efforts" in countries facing humanitarian emergencies and conflict. Secondly, it asks United Nations entities to contribute to collective outcomes based on "jointly developed and risk-informed analysis" and joined-up planning and action. Thirdly, it asks United Nations entities operating in countries facing humanitarian emergencies to move beyond short-term assistance by engaging in multi-year efforts to reduce need, vulnerability and risk over time. Lastly, the resolution asks resident coordinators in countries experiencing humanitarian emergencies to work with humanitarian and

development actors to provide joint needs assessments and requests the Secretary-General to provide resident coordinators with adequate training and support to do so.

The Secretary-General provides annual reports on the implementation of the QCPR to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Since 2019, the UNSDG Chair has also reported annually to ECOSOC on the work of the United Nations Development Coordination Office (DCO). Recent achievements in advancing humanitarian, development and peacebuilding linkages, as reported in the annual reports of the Secretary-General and UNSDG Chair, can be summarized as follows:

- As of 2024, 93 per cent of host country governments assessed United Nations collaboration between humanitarian and development interventions as "close"

- 83 per cent of programme country governments in conflict-affected countries agreed they receive integrated policy advice from the UNDS (compared to 64 per cent in 2020)

- 93 per cent of host governments engaged in peacebuilding positively assessed United Nations efforts to ensure a continued focus on longer-term development and sustaining peace

- 82 per cent of resident coordinators agreed United Nations country teams regularly report to them in ways that ensure stronger coherence and complementarity across the nexus (compared to 72 per cent in 2021)

- Collaboration is underway between the United Nations and the World Bank in over 50 countries, including in areas such as prevention, food security and forced displacement

- In 2023, the Partnership Facility of the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) supported collaboration between the United Nations and international financial institutions in over a dozen country and regional contexts.

Some significant challenges have also been reported by the Secretary-General. Joining peacebuilding interventions to development and humanitarian programming has proven the greatest challenge, according to resident coordinators and country teams. Even where joint planning and programmes are emerging, there remains a need to better fund and support sustainable development as the main tool for preventing and exiting crises. Finally, United Nations development system entity headquarters still cite

financing as the biggest challenge for bridging humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities, with 80 per cent of headquarters reporting this as difficult in 2024.

Insights from United Nations evaluations

The following summary of evidence on whole of system United Nations responses in complex settings draws on 33 evaluations conducted at global and country levels by 13 United Nations entities[4]. The sample includes: (i) United Nations entity corporate and global evaluations of contributions to or engagement in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) approaches or HDP-related sub-topics; (ii) inter-agency evaluations in complex settings; (iii) country-level evaluations in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and South Sudan[5].

1   **Leadership at the United Nations country-office level requires further investment.**

Good leadership is essential for navigating the complex, interrelated challenges presented by humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work, especially in complex and conflict-affected contexts. In such contexts, strong leadership is needed to foster transformative and adaptive approaches that promote dialogue across sectors while ensuring context-sensitive, flexible and focused organizational strategies that can prioritize long-term outcomes over short-term results. This involves brokering partnerships and building consensus across actors and entities with differing mandates, as well as managing cross-sectoral collaboration while upholding the humanitarian principles.

The sampled evaluations suggested results have been mixed in this area to date. On the one hand, efforts have been made to invest in leadership capacities within United Nations country offices, and the skills and initiatives of individual country representatives have often been critical in promoting cross-sectoral collaboration. On the other hand, most evaluations pointed to a failure in consistently integrating peacebuilding considerations and conflict-analysis across agency programming in fragile contexts, while calling for more systematic approaches to leadership development in conflict-sensitive environments to overcome this challenge. Key stumbling blocks identified in the evaluations included the siloed nature

of United Nations entities and a lack of institutional backing for leaders seeking to improve HDP programming in conflict-affected contexts, which limited the ability of leaders to innovate and adapt beyond traditional approaches.

Major recommendations coming from the evaluations include: (i) empowering country-level leadership to engage in wider systems-thinking, conflict sensitive programming and "technical diplomacy"[6] in fragile contexts; and (ii) promoting transformative and inclusive leadership that emphasizes consensus-building, partnership-brokering and the navigation of complex environments.

2   **Organizational goals should be aligned with institutional capacities.**

The evaluations showed a gap between ambition and capacity when it comes to bridging humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. Without clear and consistent alignment between organizational objectives, technical guidance and institutional capacity, it has proven difficult to address the complexity of contributing to longer-term development in conflict-affected contexts while respecting the humanitarian principles. Several evaluations pointed to fragmentation between development and emergency-response approaches and a persistent difficulty in incorporating conflict analysis, risk management and operational capacities to deploy in hard-to-reach locations in order to ensure contributions to building and sustaining peace in fragile contexts. A critical challenge in this regard has been embedding systematic and consistent approaches to conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive programming in both development and humanitarian programmes.

The major recommendations coming from the evaluations include: institutionalizing conflict-sensitivity across all programmes; developing and enhancing leadership training in conflict sensitivity (see Box 1), systems-thinking and partnership-brokering; and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration across divisions and departments at the intra-agency level.

3   **Risk-informed approaches should be embedded systematically into programmes.**

Risk-informed approaches help organizations tailor their interventions to be more adaptive and resilient to future shocks. For example, integrating climate risk and food insecurity dynamics within agropastoral

BOX 1: INTEGRATING CONFLICT ANALYSIS

A clear example of success in this regard is the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) training programme in Iraq, which provided specialized training on tools for integrating local conflict analysis and peacebuilding principles into IOM's work in the country. This improved the institutional capacity to integrate humanitarian, development and peacebuilding approaches.

improvement programmes can improve resilience in settings where climate, conflict and food insecurity all interact. In such contexts, risk analysis can help identify specific vulnerabilities and proactively reduce the chances of setbacks, while enhancing the long-term sustainability of interventions.

The evaluations showed that considerable progress has been made by United Nations entities in integrating risk-informed approaches, including "early warning early action" systems, shock-responsive social protection systems and risk-informed approaches to disasters caused by natural hazards. But several evaluations pointed to inconsistent application of the tools developed thus far. In some cases, this was attributed to a culture of treating such analyses as one-off exercises rather than ongoing processes, in others it was associated with a lack of resources to fully implement risk-informed approaches developed by specialist entities. The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis tool, for example, is, while relevant, perceived to place high technical demands on entity monitoring systems. Recommendations coming from the evaluations include promoting joint risk assessments, increasing investment in early warning systems and integrating climate risks into development programming.

4 Inclusive targeting and participation should be promoted.

Aligning development, humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts in complex settings increases the importance of using inclusive targeting and participation.

South Sudan. Woman measuring a costumer © WFP/Eulalia Berlanga

The complex, multi-dimensional nature of the needs and rights presented by such work require a concerted effort to address community dynamics and intertwined drivers of need across social, economic and political domains. Inclusive targeting can ensure that programmes cater not only to the needs of the most vulnerable individuals but also to marginalized groups and the wider community, which can help foster social cohesion, reduce grievances and tensions and address systemic drivers of conflict, hunger and poverty.

The evaluations indicated that, while some entities have made progress in inclusive targeting, success has been inconsistent across the United Nations system. Community-based participatory programmes have been effective in many contexts, as have inclusive approaches to targeting undertaken by joint resilience programmes of WFP and UNICEF in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

But here again, as with risk-informed approaches, the evaluations demonstrated that application has been inconsistent. Participatory approaches were often seen as well suited to small-scale community-based projects, but less applicable to large-scale country-wide programmes. In these cases, local communities and implementing partners were often left out of decision-making processes, leaving communities with little ownership over the programmes and the results achieved. Recommendations coming from the evaluations include: adopting contextual and area-based approaches that take into account the dynamics of different population groups (see Box 2); strengthening local participation and ownership at all stages of the programme cycle; and fostering joint approaches between United Nations entities to ensure inclusive targeting mechanisms.

5 Gender, equity and social inclusion require greater focus.

Gender inequality and social exclusion often underpin the drivers of conflict and poverty. Sustainable peace and development are hard to achieve without addressing systemic, underlying inequalities that marginalize women, young people, or particular groups and communities that are vulnerable to exclusion and harm. This is recognized by global frameworks such as the Security Council resolution 1325 on Women,

BOX 2: INCLUSIVE TARGETING

The WFP Interim Country Strategic Plan (ICSP) for South Sudan (2018-2022) was noted for taking an inclusive targeting approach. The ICSP used a needs-based planning exercise to identify the most vulnerable populations. By integrating a vulnerability assessment, the exercise allowed WFP to address the needs of marginalized groups through specialized access teams and door-to-door assessments, ensuring support even in hard-to-reach locations.

Peace and Security, which highlights the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding.

The evaluations demonstrated that the United Nations development system is making increased efforts to integrate gender and social inclusion in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. But many challenges remain. For example, while many entities take greater care now to consider the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and young people in conflict, very few show a consistent recognition of women and young people as active agents of peace. And, while the evaluations demonstrated considerable attention made to gender-targeted initiatives in fragile contexts, gender-transformative approaches have broadly not been implemented.

Major stumbling blocks include: (i) a lack of institutionalization of gender and social inclusion across programme areas and all entities of the United Nations development system; (ii) a reliance on isolated initiatives and short-term projects with insufficient attention to long-term transformative outcomes; and (iii) insufficient funding and resources to support inclusive programming at scale.

Key recommendations coming from the evaluations include: (i) promoting gender-transformative approaches that address the structural barriers perpetuating gender inequality; (ii) institutionalizing gender and social inclusion through the use of gender- and inclusion-sensitive theories of change

and conflict analysis frameworks; and (iii) strengthening local partnerships to increase collaboration with local women's organizations and community organizations representing marginalized groups (see Box 3). Notably, many United Nations entities have sought to make progress on these recommendations during the timeframe of the evaluations reviewed for this summary. Each entity has, however, reached a different level of progress on each area. As such, within this wider set of recommendations, each entity will demonstrate a different configuration of strengths and weaknesses. But the evaluations reviewed suggested that none have managed to fully respond to each recommendation thus far.

6   A concerted effort is required to integrate peacebuilding in development and humanitarian work.

As highlighted above, resident coordinators and country teams report the greatest difficulty in linking peacebuilding to humanitarian and development work, as compared to bridging humanitarian and development activities alone. This was echoed by the evaluation findings, which demonstrated several challenges in doing this well. The biggest stumbling block was the perceived division between "technical"

BOX 3: ADDRESSING MARGINALISATION

An example of how United Nations entities can improve in this regard is provided by UN Women in Colombia. UN Women specifically sought to include women's and marginalized groups and indigenous people in its peacebuilding work. The evaluation of UN Women's programming in Colombia over the period 2018-2021 noted how this approach helped UN Women to address the rights and empowerment of marginalized groups, including indigenous women, which underpinned some of the conflict drivers in the country.

development or humanitarian actions on the one hand, and "political" peacebuilding or peace-sustaining activities on the other. Some evaluations cited this perception as leading to a disconnect between increasing policy-level attention to peace and a continuing lack of prioritization within country offices, which are more comfortable working on technical workstreams. This in turn linked to a further barrier

Former FARC-EP Members Grow Vegetables for Schools. © UN Photo/Hector Latorre

in terms of the capacity and resources required to integrate long-term peacebuilding and peace-sustaining efforts into more immediate humanitarian and development work. Lastly, some evaluations pointed to the siloed nature of much peacebuilding and peace-sustaining institutional capacity, which reduced the potential for comprehensive conflict-sensitive approaches at the country level. The major recommendations made by the evaluations are: (i) prioritize the mainstreaming of peacebuilding across all development and humanitarian programming; (ii) encourage joint programming and partnerships that align food security, resilience-building and peace initiatives in a more coherent way; and (iii) enhance the technical capacity of entities by investing in staff training on conflict-sensitive analysis and programme implementation (see Box 4).

7   The use of multi-year flexible funding arrangements should increase.

Multi-year and flexible funding are essential for ensuring the combination of predictability and flexibility required to bridge humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work, while ensuring alignment towards long-term collective outcomes. Many of the recommendations made by the evaluations pointed

BOX 4: RESTORING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

An example of success here is the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which facilitated the restoration of state authority, promoted access to justice and reinforced rule-of-law institutions, such as tribunals, police stations and detention centres, in northern and central Mali. Critically, this was done in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international partners. The evaluation noted that the rehabilitation and extension of these institutions increased visibility and trust in state authorities, improving public perception of security and governance, though challenges remained in maintaining sustainability.

to the need for complex multi-party partnerships and joint programming, tied together with flexible area-based programming. Such approaches require a

Head of MINUSMA Visits Ménaka Region in Mali. © UN Photo/Harandane Dicko

funding framework that goes beyond the short-term project cycle.

The evaluations demonstrated some cases of progress made in this regard. On the donor side, the European Union has begun providing holistic funding spanning humanitarian, development and peace pillars. But these remain the exception rather than the rule. On the whole, funding remains short-term, siloed and linked to project specific programme cycles and objectives. A key stumbling block here relates to the hesitation of donors to commit to multi-year agreements in politically volatile contexts and settings. But challenges also remain within the United Nations system itself, where limited coordination across different mechanisms adds to the complexity of securing multi-year flexible funding. Key recommendations made by the evaluations include: (i) advocating more strongly for multi-year flexible funding from donors, including by showing the long-terms benefits of such funding, particularly regarding resilience-building and the reduction of future humanitarian need; and (ii) improving United Nations entities' own internal systems for managing multi-year funding, including by breaking down internal entity silos between humanitarian and development operations and adopting financial systems that allow for greater flexibility in the use of funds.

8   Strategic partnerships need to be built.

The complex, multidimensional nature of bridging humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work can only be met through collaboration across diverse groups of actors formed in response to the specific needs of each intervention. Strategic partnerships across the three domains are essential to harness the comparative advantages of each actor. Further, private sector actors offer the opportunity to build in innovation and scale through financial investments, technology and market access. The evaluations offered some examples of success in this regard: the partnership between FAO and InterPeace being a case in point. But more broadly the findings pointed to the need for increased attention to strategic partnerships at country and programme levels. Key recommendations made by the evaluations include: (i) developing clear partnership strategies at entity-level to enhance linkages with technical partners

and the private sector; (ii) reforming internal systems within United Nations entities to make it easier and quicker for private sector and other actors to form partnerships with United Nations entities; and (iii) increasing the use of partnerships with regional organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), to foster collaboration rooted in local context and priorities.

Approach and methodology

This summary, produced between July and September 2024, brings together evidence from 33 evaluations completed across the United Nations between 2021 and 2024. The sample was purposively selected to include the most relevant evaluation evidence and balance across regions and United Nations entities. The four focus countries were selected from a longlist of complex settings, on the basis of having the greatest depth of inter-agency evaluation evidence[7]. Relevant evidence was extracted from the sampled reports according to an analytical framework and analysed to identify common issues of system-wide relevance.

The sampling strategy, methodological approach, and draft report were reviewed by an inter-agency reference group from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Limitations: The significant attention given by a body of high-quality evaluations to this topic, provides for a high level of confidence in the summarized findings. However, some clear gaps in the evidence base did emerge. Most notably, since the focus of the evaluations was on specific programmes and interventions, there was little evidence gathered about systemic constraints on bridging humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work, such as industry incentive structures or partnerships with private sector actors. Assessing evidence on such systemic topics would most likely require a review of multi-partner evaluations, or a large-scale synthesis across multiple sources and evidence categories beyond United Nations evaluations.

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 strengthen learning, transparency and accountability in order to incentivize joint work and collective learning and conduct and advance system-wide evaluation evidence on the United Nations development system's contribution towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to work with United Nations evaluation offices to draw on and augment their contributions and capacities, to fill critical gaps, to promote collaboration on joint and system-wide evaluations and to improve the quality and usability of United Nations evaluation evidence in relation to the SDGs, 2030 Agenda, and United Nations reform priorities.

Endnotes

[1] A/RES/75/233

[2] A/RES/72/279

[3] The QCPR is situated within a context of other policy initiatives aiming to improve the linkages between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. Most notably, the humanitarian system's commitment to a "New Way of Working" at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016; the 2016 General Assembly and Security Council "twin resolutions" on sustaining peace (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282); and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus adopted in 2019.

[4] FAO, IFAD, IOM, OCHA, OHCHR, OIOS, PBSO, UNCTs (supported by DCO), UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN-Women, and WFP.

UTILIZING UNITED NATIONS EVALUATION EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE 2024 QCPR

This initiative is a collaboration between SWEO and evaluation offices across the United Nations. It provides user-friendly mapping and summary products of United Nations evaluation evidence to support engagement in the 2024 QCPR. The initiative is coordinated by SWEO, with substantive contributions from the following entities:

FUNDING

MANAGEMENT GROUP

[5] Includes United Nations development assistance frameworks (UNDAF) and cooperation framework evaluations, peacekeeping and political affairs evaluations, and UN entity country programme evaluations.

[6] "Technical diplomacy" here refers to the use of technological expertise to facilitate international cooperation, negotiations, and conflict resolution).

[7] Countries selected provided: a completed UNDAF or cooperation framework evaluation; OIOS evaluations of UN peacekeeping or political missions; and four or more UN entity country programme evaluations.

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