UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

# Building a whole of system response to complex settings
United Nations evaluation evidence brief

Conflict and violence cause immense suffering and significantly hamper sustainable development. Addressing the complex interlinkages across humanitarian need, development goals and sustainable peace requires enhanced collaboration between humanitarian action, long-term development interventions and peacebuilding activities. This summary highlights the successes so far and the major challenges faced.

This brief, one in a series of five, draws on the extensive knowledge and evidence generated by 33 independent evaluations conducted across the UN development system between 2021 and 2024.

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   **Leadership at the UN country-office level requires further investment.**

Good leadership is considered essential, especially in complex and conflict-affected contexts, but results have been mixed. Efforts have been made to invest in leadership capacities, and country representatives have

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often been critical in promoting collaboration. However, entities have not consistently integrated peacebuilding and conflict analysis in fragile contexts into programmes. Key stumbling blocks include the siloed nature of UN entities and a lack of institutional backing.

*Evaluations recommended*: empowering country-level leadership to engage in wider systems-thinking, conflict sensitive programming and "technical diplomacy" in fragile contexts; and promoting transformative leadership that emphasizes consensus-building, partnerships, and navigating complex environments.

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

Evaluations highlighted the difficulty of incorporating conflict analysis and risk management into hard-to-reach locations. Embedding systematic approaches to conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive programming in development and humanitarian programmes was a critical challenge.

*Evaluations recommended*: institutionalizing conflict-sensitivity across all programmes; developing leadership training in conflict sensitivity, systems-thinking and partnership-brokering; and fostering collaboration at the intra-agency level.

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

Risk-informed approaches tailored interventions to be more adaptive and resilient. They identified vulnerabilities and reduced setbacks, while enhancing the sustainability of the interventions. Considerable progress has been made in integrating risk-informed approaches. However, the tools are applied inconsistently.

*Evaluations recommended*: 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.

Inclusive targeting and participation is essential to ensure that programmes cater to the needs of the most vulnerable, marginalized groups and the wider community. It fosters social cohesion, reduces grievances and tensions and addresses systemic drivers of conflict, hunger and poverty. Inclusive targeting

has had inconsistent successes, however. Many have been effective, but, participatory approaches were less applicable to larger country-wide programmes.

*Evaluations recommended*: adopting contextual approaches that consider the dynamics of different population groups; strengthening local participation at all stages of the programme; and fostering joint approaches between UN entities to ensure inclusive targeting mechanisms.

### 5    Gender, equity and social inclusion require greater focus.

Gender inequality and social exclusion underpin the drivers of conflict and poverty. The UN development system has been making efforts to integrate gender and social inclusion into HDP work, but challenges remain and major stumbling blocks included: a lack of institutionalization of gender and social inclusion; a reliance on isolated initiatives and short-term projects; and insufficient funding and resources to support inclusive programming.

*Evaluations recommended*: promoting gender-transformative approaches that address structural barriers; institutionalizing gender and social inclusion using gender- and inclusion-sensitive theories of change and conflict analysis frameworks; and strengthening local partnerships with women's organizations and community organizations representing marginalized groups.

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

Linking peacebuilding to humanitarian and development work proved more difficult than simply bridging humanitarian and development activities alone. A stumbling block was the perceived division between "technical" development and "political" peacebuilding. The siloed nature of much peacebuilding institutional capacity also reduced the potential for comprehensive conflict-sensitive approaches at the country level.

*Evaluations recommended*: prioritizing mainstreaming peacebuilding across all programming; encouraging joint programming and partnerships that more coherently align food security, resilience-building and peace initiatives; and enhancing the technical capacity of agencies by training staff on conflict-sensitive analysis and programme implementation.

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

Multi-year and flexible funding are essential. A funding framework that goes beyond short-term project cycles is needed alongside complex multi-party partnerships and joint programming, tied together with flexible area-based programming. Some progress has been made, but much funding remained short-term, siloed and linked to project-specific programme cycles, while limited coordination across different mechanisms added to the complexity of securing multi-year flexible funding.

*Evaluations recommended*: advocating strongly for multi-year flexible funding from donors; and improving UN entities' own internal systems for managing multi-year funding, including by breaking down entity silos and allowing 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 could only be met through collaboration across diverse groups of actors formed in response to the need of each intervention. Partnerships across the three domains are essential to harness the advantages of each actor. Private sector actors offered the opportunity to build in innovation and scale through financial investments, technology and market access.

*Evaluations recommended*: developing clear partnership strategies at entity-level to enhance links with technical partners and the private sector; reforming internal UN entity systems to make it easier for private sector and other actors to form partnerships; and increasing the use of partnerships with regional organizations to foster local collaboration.

## 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.

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