

Précis



System-Wide Evaluation Office, United Nations

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The System-Wide Evaluation of the United Nations Development System Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19

This system-wide evaluation assessed the progress of the United Nations Development System (UNDS) in responding as a collective to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The report provides an analysis of how the UNDS reforms have enabled and constrained the response. It examined how well UN Country Teams (UNCT) supported core UN values such as Human Rights, Gender Equality and Leave No-One Behind (LNOB) during the pandemic. The evaluation also aimed to identify barriers to improve results and to learn lessons which will better position the UNDS to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the realization of Agenda 2030.

The evaluation recommends changes for the UNDS to work together as a system.

The evaluation finds that to build a stronger and more coherent UNDS contribution to accelerated progress toward the SDGs would require that some of the most important challenges identified by the evaluation are addressed. These proposed changes are based on the achievement of the UNDS in context of the socio-economic response to COVID-19.

The recommendations of the evaluation include the need for: continued efforts to advance UNDS reform process at country level with a particular emphasis on Cooperation Frameworks: actions to address the persistent country level competitive environment for securing resources among UNDS entities and improve the low capitalisation of pooled funds; better and full operationalization of the Management Accountability Framework; UN entities to reinforce their commitment to UN reform in their Strategic Plan/Frameworks to reflect the agency uptake of intergovernmental decisions; acceleration of UNDS reforms at regional level to support progress at country level; development of stronger models and approaches for ensuring coherence between the UNDS entities and International Financial Institutions (IFIs); undertaking an evaluation of UNDS efforts to support an environmentally sustainable recovery and address climate change; and, engaging the expertise of all UNCT entities including those without a physical presence at country level.

Findings

Relevance and the UNDS Immediate Response

COVID-19 presented the world with a deep and lasting development crisis as recognized by the Secretary-General in early 2020. The evaluation confirmed the deepening challenge the crisis presented for the achievement of the SDGs and Agenda 2030. The social and economic impacts of COVID-19 were most dire for those vulnerable groups identified in the *UN Framework for the immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19* especially women and girls, self-employed and informal workers, migrant workers and refugees. The five pillars of the UN Framework (Health First; Protecting People; Economic Response and Recovery; Macroeconomic Response; and Social Cohesion and Community Resilience) provided UNCTs with an effective structure to organize their response at country level. The UN Development Cooperation Office (DCO) also provided flexible oversight and guidance to UNCTs in this task.

UNCTs gained crucial experience in responding rapidly and coherently to COVID-19 during the very early days of the pandemic. The coordination and leadership of the Resident Coordinator (RC) and the support of the Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO) in each country helped UNCTs make a rapid shift to collective analysis and planning. This shift was made concrete in Socio-Economic Impact Assessments (SEIA) and Socio-Economic Response Plans (SERP).

"Here in Rwanda, we in the UNCT built on our experience as a pilot Delivering as One Country. In addition, when COVID-19 hit we had a head start with functioning coordinating bodies and a national government committed to effective action while maintaining the progress of the National Strategy for Transformation."

Rwanda UNCT Stakeholder

Added Value of the Socio-Economic Response Plans in the Context of UNDS Reform

The SERPs provided added value by supporting a more focused UNDS response to COVID-19 which was more closely aligned with country response plans and priorities. This response contributed to results in critically important areas such as the maintenance of health services and enhanced, better targeted and expanded social protection programmes. It also supported important efforts to strengthen to combat Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

"This was a huge effort. We put the report together using a matrix approach and identified the synergies between actions. The RC played an important role in identifying and eliminating duplications."

Argentina UNCT Stakeholder

One of the most important dimensions of UNDS Reform from 2018 to 2022 has been putting in place a system of independent and empowered UN Resident Coordinator at country level. This helped to support a more coherent and focused UNDS response to COVID-19. One aspect of this improvement was greater involvement in analysis and planning by smaller UNCT entities and those UN agencies without a physical presence in the programme countries. However, progress toward a more focused and coherent UNDS response was challenged somewhat by barriers that continue to limit progress in UNDS reform. These included issues of accountability and the fact that individual agency priorities remain the determining factor in programme planning and performance measurement.

The evaluation also identified limitations in the extent that UNCTs were able to effectively engage with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in order to ensure coherence between the

core UN agencies and the IFIs. This is especially important in the areas of policy engagement, advocacy and supporting national budgeting for progress toward the SDGs. However, UNCTs are searching for mechanisms and approaches to ensure more consistent and meaningful engagement with IFIs.

"We had already made gains in cohesion during development of the UNSDCF in 2019 but developing the SERP allowed us to consolidate and extend those gains."

Sierra Leone UNCT Stakeholder

Pursuing Human Rights, Gender Equality, Inclusion and Leaving No-One Behind

The evaluation found that UNCT entities demonstrated strong ownership of the guiding principles of Human Rights, Gender Equality, Inclusion, and Leave No-One Behind (HR/GE/LNOB). This work is never fully complete however; continuous effort is necessary to make these principles fully operational. RCs themselves, played a leadership role in advocacy for HR/GE/LNOB and Inclusion during the pandemic. This helped UNCTs to successfully engage with governments so that national responses address the needs of vulnerable populations. The strength of UNCT capacities in HR/GE/LNOB is also an important factor in success in this area: examples include the presence of a Human Rights Advisor in some RCOs and the establishment of empowered interagency groups. Despite progress in this area, there is still a need to accelerate efforts to meet standards and improve results.

Ensuring a More Equitable and Environmentally Sustainable Recovery

Ensuring a strong focus on a more equitable and environmentally sustainable recovery from

COVID-19 has been a challenge for UNCTs. This includes the challenge of ensuring that SERPs supported action to mitigate or adapt to climate change. However, UNCTs are turning their attention to engaging on environmental sustainability and climate change. They have also taken advantage of the process of developing new generation UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (CF) to better address an equitable and sustainable recovery.

"We in Jordan are at the beginning of understanding what build back better means – we have not yet fully made the case for what help the UN can offer for designing this more equitable recovery."

Jordan UNCT Stakeholder

Pooled Funding Mechanisms

Pooled Funds played an important role in enabling a more rapid and focused response to the pandemic. The three funds examined during the evaluation (the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund, the Joint SDG Fund and the Spotlight Initiative Fund) demonstrated the usefulness of pooled funding mechanisms in supporting a more cohesive UNDS response. These Funds provided UNCTs with a mechanism for innovative programming and a vehicle for new partnerships.

"Overall, the Fund made significant contributions to the socio-economic response to COVID-19, probably more, because we did not create new mechanisms for emergency response but adjusted our Joint Programmes to continue building systems and developing policy and financing solutions that are transformative, strategic and cross-sectoral."

Global UN Stakeholder

Conclusions

The main conclusion of the evaluation is that the results indicate that very large numbers of vulnerable people benefited from the UNDS response to COVID-19. The depth and scale of the crisis presented by COVID fully justify the Secretary-General's declaration of a development emergency and appeal for a global response in March 2020. The deep and unequal socio-economic impacts foreseen at that time also provided a strong rationale for the UN Framework and the SERPs. The UN Framework has proven to be an effective instrument for guiding a coherent UNDS response at country level through SERP development adapted to national contexts. SERPs have provided important added value to the process of planning the UNDS response at country level.

UNDS reforms helped to establish the necessary pre-conditions for a coherent and effective response to socio-economic impacts of the crisis. Progress in the reforms was crucial to enabling a coherent UNDS response at country level. However, impediments remain including the competitive environment for resource mobilization and ongoing issues of selective accountability. Continued progress in UNDS reforms at global, regional and country level is required.

Pooled funding mechanisms provide a valuable mechanism for engaging in new areas of programming and collaborative partnerships by UNCT entities. Challenges remain in relation to capitalization of the Funds in line with the Funding Compact.

The UNDS response encompassed a strong commitment to Gender Equality, Human Rights, LNOB and Inclusion (including for persons with disabilities). Tailored accountability tools and metrics applied to programming have played an important role in fostering collective accountability.

Many SERPs did not provide a high level of visibility to measures to support a more equitable and environmentally sustainable recovery. However, recent Common Country Analysis (CCA) and CFs demonstrate a heightened ability to address these issues UNCTs have used the experience of developing and implementing SERPs to learn valuable lessons regarding effective collaboration for progress toward the SDGs. Lessons were also learned from efforts to implement a robust and relevant results monitoring and reporting framework.

Related Resources:

[Final Report: System-wide Evaluation of the UNDS Response to COVID-19](#)

[Interim Report: System-wide Evaluation of the UNDS Response to COVID-19](#)