

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS UNDP'S COVID-19 ADAPTATION AND RESPONSE: WHAT WORKED AND HOW?

INTRODUCTION

In 2019 the world committed to a [Decade of Action](#) to push for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a commitment that came in recognition that the achievement of the 2030 Agenda was becoming increasingly unlikely. The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening this commitment, pressuring past SDG gains in many countries and threatening further regression in yet more.

COVID-19 has required UNDP and many of its projects to 'pivot' to address the new and prominent issue of a global pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, especially on the most vulnerable. The pandemic has led many projects and agencies to be flexible and innovative in addressing this new challenge, assigning funds for COVID-19-related support or broadening target groups to include those impacted or to include new needs.

This paper explores some of the emerging evaluative evidence exploring the challenges faced by UNDP's projects and programmes during COVID-19 and whether, when the world emerges from the pandemic, projects could return to the objectives they were once designed for, having reassigned budgets away from core goals, expanded beneficiaries and expectations or having lost commitments from partners now focused on the pandemic.

This paper offers some early lessons from UNDP's COVID-19 adaptation and response during 2020 and through to May 2021: What worked and how?

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,¹ designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the [UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre](#) between April 2020 and May 2021. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of UNDP were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Within each

review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support effective UNDP decision-making. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature.

The lessons draw broadly on nine independent country programme evaluations (ICPEs) and 90 decentralized evaluations, regardless of setting. Initial evaluation evidence during 2020 does not go into detail on the approaches UNDP has used in responding to COVID-19 though this is building during 2021. It is important to note that this Reflection has come at the early stages of UNDP’s response to COVID-19 and is reliant on emergent evaluative evidence and is designed to help inform the ongoing response and recovery work of the organization. Some important aspects of UNDP’s COVID-19 response are not yet covered, including support to the vaccine roll-out, the implementation of the UN country team (UNCT) socio-economic response plans (SERPs), as well as the toll of the pandemic on the wellbeing of UNDP’s staff.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1	Successful pandemic responses are integrating longer-term planning into UNDP support to Government-led COVID-responses to build forward better.	2	3	Robust, reliable and flexible procurement systems are indispensable to allow organizations to quickly respond to crises in an accountable and transparent way.
4	In-built flexibility in the design of interventions can help UNDP adjust and adapt to urgent and unexpected needs and reach new beneficiaries when a crisis hits.	5	6	Pandemic crisis responses are strengthened by ensuring consideration of the impact of the pandemic on the longer-term achievement and possible regression of the SDGs.
7	Evaluation has proved relevant, adaptable and possible during crisis through the rapid adoption of technology, thus ensuring safety.			

LESSONS LEARNED

1	Successful pandemic responses are integrating longer-term planning into UNDP support to Government-led COVID-responses to build forward better.
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While support to initial Government-led responses has focused on immediate pandemic needs such as supporting the health and response efforts, stronger UNDP responses considered the impact of the pandemic across the longer term, including the possible regression of the SDGs. In doing so, UNDP has been able to build on its strong and long-standing relationships with Governments (Mongolia, Barbados, Honduras, Montenegro, Belize, Tanzania, Zambia, Saudi-Arabia).²

However, the close relationship with Government has sometimes also slowed responses and hindered UNDP agility, as Government systems and ability to respond to project needs have been slowed by the pandemic (Ethiopia).³

The development of detailed socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA) and UNDP's timely support in these areas in the first few months of the pandemic illustrated to Governments the relevance of UNDP (Nepal, Mongolia).⁴ The development of SEIA by country offices, UNCTs and Governments also evolved during the pandemic as demanded, with some moving away from broad economic analysis to more specific thematic areas supporting government support to vulnerable groups, MSME/Business (Zambia),⁵ Employment (Montenegro),⁶ human rights, women and girls (Botswana, Nepal, Mongolia, Montenegro),⁷ enabling sector and thematically focused support. Furthermore, the development of SEIAs and the impact of COVID-19 has enabled discussions on the need for equality, inclusive economic growth, and better social protection (Nepal)⁸ during and after the pandemic, opening new space for UNDP support to Governments (Mongolia, Honduras).⁹

However, UNDP's leverage of this role through SEIAs was not always guaranteed and is often dependent both on the Government's view of UNDP and its services as well as the role of IFI's in different countries (Tanzania).¹⁰

Regional Bureau support and global expertise have been critical for the drafting of technical documents such as of the SEIA and the SERP and ensuring contextual reality to response and recovery plans (Asia-Pacific region; Mongolia, Barbados, Honduras, Montenegro; Belize, Botswana, Tanzania; Zambia Saudi Arabia).¹¹ In the Asia-Pacific, the regional hub was able to galvanize the Economic Network of 20 economists under the Global Policy Network (GPN) to generate policy options for country offices and inform the SEIA development across the regions. The GPN, only recently established as the pandemic hit, saw a considerable rise in demand for its support across a range of policy areas including economics. It has also been key in driving areas advice in a number of areas (Mongolia, Asia-Pacific region, Strategic Plan)¹² and has seen an acceleration of its use during the pandemic.

2

Accelerated adoption of digital tools ensures the continuity of Government services as well as UNDP's operations, strengthening the COVID-19 response.

The COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the relevance of the UNDP Digital Strategy and has been a reminder of the importance of organizational adaptability to ensure rapid innovation and engagement with digital transformation initiatives. UNDP was positioned to support and leverage a digital transformation through its rapid deployment of digital tools and was called on by Governments for support to ensure continuity of government business and service delivery during the pandemic (Zambia).¹³ This support and the adjustments enabled the continuation of essential government services and, in some cases, parliament sessions through video conferencing facilities (Jordan, Laos, Nepal, Botswana).¹⁴ At the same time, provisions such as 'virtual courts' had to be put in place to support the continuation of critical legislative procedures ensuring fair access to justice (The Gambia).¹⁵ In Honduras, the Government called on UNDP's support to digitize three key services central to the COVID-19 economic recovery while promoting transparency and efficiency, while also facilitating connectivity to various actors.¹⁶ UNDP often built on past digital engagements to accelerate the adoption of digit tools, building on existing work and examples of digital platforms (Moldova).¹⁷

On the other hand, the sudden need to adopt digital solutions was sometimes challenging and needed a comprehensive strategy and technical and human resource support (Lao PDR),¹⁸ needed to recognize the limited technical infrastructure

and connectivity issues in many countries (The Gambia).¹⁹ While some projects were able to use technology to move activities, especially training online, challenges are also demonstrative of a key concern regarding digitization, namely the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities by widening the 'digital divide'. This was highlighted particularly in relation to work with disadvantaged youth (Pakistan, YouthConnekt)²⁰ and young girls and women (see also [Reflections: Digitalization](#)), where those with Internet access and access to technology were able to continue their education in general as well as their participation in the project, creating a 'digital learning gap'.

The adoption of digital solutions and partnership with governments has provided an opportunity for UNDP to further step up its digital transformation agenda, **balancing supply-side provisions** (network infrastructure, accessibility issues, endowment with adequate equipment, digital security provisions, etc.) **with the demand** (especially digital literacy and inclusion) (Moldova, Pakistan, YouthConnekt).²¹ Past reflections on evaluation findings on digitization have found that digital transformation is not just about the adoption of technology or digital solutions but also requires talent development to ensure ongoing and sustainable digital transformation ([Reflections: Digitalization](#)).

Equally, UNDP's own adoption of digital tools and approaches has been key for the continuous implementation of UNDP's projects under constrained conditions, with virtual training or technical assistance being provided to governance-related projects in Nepal²² and medical waste management projects in the health sector in Africa, ensuring implementation could continue.²³

3 Robust, reliable and flexible procurement systems are indispensable to allow organizations to quickly respond to crises in an accountable and transparent way.

UNDP's past experience in supporting crisis and health challenges as well as its robust procurement systems has positioned the organization to respond to COVID-19 and gain Governments' trust, positioning it to support the timely procurement of medical, health and information and communication technologies (ICT) equipment and software (Asia-Pacific, Honduras, Montenegro, Zambia).²⁴ UNDP expenditure on support to medical systems and digital disruption, was US\$578 million by June 2021, over 50 percent of all COVID-19 financial support. However, ambitious COVID-19 support goals needed to be realistic and, in some cases, were held back and delayed due to UNDP's procurement procedures, impacting the timeliness of support responses (Lao PDR, Pakistan).²⁵

4 In-built flexibility in the design of interventions can help UNDP adjust and adapt to urgent and unexpected needs and reach new beneficiaries when a crisis hits.

COVID-19 has required many projects to refocus/pivot funds and interventions to support COVID-19 relief and response and sustain a pace of implementation despite COVID-19-related constraints. This has been made possible due to flexible structures and decision-making that have allowed interventions to reallocate funds towards COVID-19 activities or beneficiaries pivoting to refocus activities, including addressing new and emerging needs and new vulnerable beneficiary groups impacted by the pandemic.

Existing flexibility in the implementation of interventions has proven to be key for adaptation and could be a key parameter to be considered for the design of post-pandemic interventions, especially as the recognition that the needs of beneficiaries change over time. For instance, beneficiaries of eco-tourism, or transportation projects were highly impacted by pandemic travel restrictions, significantly impacting livelihoods and reducing incomes, which impacted

implementation and also required new approaches as needs changed (Kenya; Bhutan; Montenegro).²⁶ In some cases, previous implementation goals were no longer appropriate or difficult to implement, as was the case when working with private sector firms, which, in some cases, were facing financial difficulties or had gone bankrupt (Armenia).²⁷

Some interventions recognized emerging constraints and pivoted their support to address COVID-19 relief and response or adjusted themselves to include additional vulnerable groups impacted by the pandemic. In Bangladesh, the Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB) repurposed the social media tools they developed to fight violent extremism, to curb COVID-19 disinformation.²⁸ The flexible structure of the theory of change of the PTIB project was the key enabling factor for the project to pivot in its focus. UNDP's Accelerator Labs and their flexible approach enabled some country offices to leverage the labs and their interventions and partnerships to meet pandemic needs, including national partnerships for mask delivery and advocacy through social media (Tanzania).²⁹ Digitalization proved to be key for the continuous implementation of projects under constrained conditions, with virtual training or technical assistance being provided to governance-related projects in Nepal³⁰ and medical waste management projects in the health sector in Africa, ensuring implementation could continue.

In Nepal, several initiatives responded to the changing needs. A labour skill development project adapted its work to support the participation of returnee migrants in COVID-19 relief activities through the mapping of their skills.³¹ In access to justice, interventions were adjusted to address gender-based violence, exacerbated by pandemic lockdowns, developing guidelines on providing legal services during the pandemic.³² UNDP adjusted its parliamentary support by ensuring human rights issues were considered as part of the response and ensuring business continuity of the parliament through the procurement of ICT tools.³³

5 Challenges in project implementation have highlighted the need for clear risk management plans, flexible programme design and measurable results frameworks to minimize the regression of results during crisis.

The pandemic has exacerbated implementation delays and management issues that need to be addressed in a timely manner rather than being allowed to build. It has also highlighted weaknesses in oversight structures that have allowed ongoing delays in project implementation (Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Georgia).³⁴ In addition, some interventions may be blaming the pandemic for previous failures to address project implementation challenges and delays (Bhutan).³⁵

Where projects faced challenges in management arrangements prior to the pandemic, such as delays in bringing management boards together, these have further constrained the ability of projects to react to COVID-19 and made decision-making more problematic (Ethiopia),³⁶ limiting the ability to respond. Though the pandemic is unprecedented, it has illustrated the need for stronger adaptive management structures, monitoring and risk management, across interventions and existing country programming approach (Mongolia, Malawi).³⁷ While the pandemic is unprecedented, some interventions have been unable to cope with crises in the past and did not have adequate risk mitigation plans (Kenya, Ethiopia).³⁸

As country programme documents realign to COVID-19 and the new context (Kenya, Ethiopia)³⁹ and to changed demand for support (Malawi),⁴⁰ results frameworks and overall objectives and goals will need to be reconsidered and adjusted accordingly. In many cases, theories of change (Asia-Pacific region, Ethiopia)⁴¹ will need to be adjusted. A strong element of the COVID-19 pandemic response has been the UN and UNDP's strategic planning response built on SEIA⁴² and UN country team SERP.⁴³ SEIAs articulate the impact of COVID-19 across society and economies and in many cases have

helped governments to strengthen their own response plans, while SERPs outline the areas of work that the UN Agencies in the country support the Government in addressing in response to the pandemic (Mongolia, Montenegro).⁴⁴

6

Pandemic crisis responses are strengthened by ensuring consideration of the impact of the pandemic on the longer-term achievement and possible regression of the SDGs.

Where UNDP interventions were unable to adapt to the pandemic, they were understandably constrained and slowed, with some seeing the reversal of previous achievements. In some cases, livelihood-related interventions needed to first address the negative impacts of the pandemic on their beneficiaries and on the project itself (Jordan)⁴⁵ before being able to move forward, while other interventions could not simply continue under lockdown, such as border demarcation of indigenous forest (Zambia⁴⁶), or experienced significant delays, such as the signing of international treaties on wildlife trade (Ethiopia⁴⁷). Travel restrictions due to the pandemic have reversed previous achievements especially impacting tourism revenues (Kenya⁴⁸).

The urgency of the pandemic shifted the priorities of UNDP and governments to developing strategies and approaches to address COVID-19. This meant that some interventions saw a reduced focus and response from governments⁴⁹ while others found partners unavailable to plan or approve interventions, slowing down implementation (Botswana, Ethiopia, Zambia).⁵⁰

Government partners are also facing financial constraints as resources have been redirected to the pandemic response (Samoa).⁵¹ This meant that some ongoing projects have **lost the priority focus of the government** and fiscal constraints have meant government co-financing and **financial contributions are not there** (Armenia, Cambodia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Botswana, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Mongolia).⁵² Reduced government cost sharing due to the pandemic and delays in the implementation of projects, especially those with the need for consultation activities (Belize, Honduras, Tanzania, Zambia),⁵³ has held many projects back. Furthermore, UNDP itself has also been reallocating project funds to meet pandemic needs, further constraining existing projects (Kosovo).⁵⁴

7

Evaluation has proved relevant, adaptable and possible during crisis through the rapid adoption of technology, thus ensuring safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant constraints for the implementation of evaluations, impacting data collection, stakeholder consultations and the observation of project interventions. The majority of evaluations reviewed and referenced here detailed the challenges caused by the pandemic and the limitations placed on them. Many evaluations have been implemented remotely, with national consultants still not going out for data collection, have increasingly used ICT and virtual interviews, and relied on deeper desk reviews to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder consultations and observations.

The remote modality has highlighted the availability of **national evaluative expertise**, mitigating the impact and restrictions of the pandemic. The immediate benefit of using national expertise is to mitigate data collection constraints, such as limited ability to conduct field missions to undertake site observations and ensure direct interactions with stakeholders and beneficiaries were included (Cabo-Verde, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Mongolia, Zambia).⁵⁵ This has been key for the triangulation of evaluative evidence collected through desk review. National consultants in most cases conducted

project site visits (Armenia, Cambodia, China, Papua New Guinea, Malawi, Cabo Verde, Samoa, Vietnam, Tanzania, Sierra Leone)⁵⁶ and in-person, face-to-face/phone interviews with local stakeholders (Armenia, Cambodia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea).⁵⁷ In some cases, national consultants also provided online interpretation during interviews or enabled the use of local languages, supported the organization of virtual interviews, as well as providing an improved understanding of the local context (Belize, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Samoa).⁵⁸

The use of national consultants and teams sometimes came with limitations, as they were themselves constrained by prevailing in-country travel restrictions due to the pandemic limiting their access to stakeholders.⁵⁹ Coordination between the local and the remote (international) evaluation team members is necessary (Sierra Leone),⁶⁰ especially in the use of data collection approaches (Papua New Guinea).⁶¹

The appropriate use of ICTs ensured successful stakeholder consultations. Most evaluations conducted in 2020 and 2021 used virtual meeting platforms to conduct interviews (Zoom, Microsoft Team, Skype, WhatsApp, e-mail and phone calls). However, to ensure the optimal use of these technologies, virtual interviews required greater organization and flexibility in timing. This included informing interviewees in advance of the evaluation and its goals and agenda (Tunisia),⁶² and a detailed description of the evaluation process and its confidentiality (Montenegro).⁶³ Flexibility in the timing of evaluations and online meetings has been key to the maximization of stakeholder consultations (Armenia, Pakistan, Kenya, UN Office for South-South Cooperation).⁶⁴ Where Internet connectivity was poor, phone interviews were often successfully used, in some cases supplemented by online surveys (Bhutan, China, Kosovo).⁶⁵

Access to beneficiaries, especially for the evaluation of projects or programmes which targeted poor and vulnerable groups was a major limitation faced, with the use of national consultants or virtual communication platforms only partially helping to overcome this (Cambodia, Nepal),⁶⁶ especially with COVID-19 related travel restrictions (Nepal).⁶⁷ Where possible, evaluation teams used two key strategies to reach out to beneficiaries: interviews with grass-root civil society organizations working with beneficiaries as a proxy for their perspectives on the project performance (Montenegro, Nepal),⁶⁸ and bilateral online interviews (Armenia and Kosovo).⁶⁹

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¹ Rapid evidence assessment (REA) is a process of bringing together information and knowledge from a range of sources to inform debates and urgent policy decisions on specific issues. Like better-known systematic reviews, REAs synthesize the findings of single studies following a standard protocol but do not analyse the full literature on a topic: REAs make concessions in relation to the breadth, depth and comprehensiveness of the search to produce a quicker result.

² [UNDP Asia-Pacific, Regional Programme Mid-Term Review, 2020](#); [ICPR Mongolia \(2021\)](#); [ICPE Barbados and Eastern Caribbean \(2020\)](#), [ICPE Honduras \(forthcoming\)](#); [ICPE Montenegro \(2020\)](#); [ICPR Belize \(2020\)](#), [ICPR Botswana \(2020\)](#), [ICPR Tanzania \(2020\)](#); [ICPE Zambia \(forthcoming\)](#); [ICPR Saudi Arabia \(2020\)](#).

³ [The United Nations Peacebuilding Fund project inclusive governance and conflict management support to Ethiopia \(2021\)](#).

⁴ [UNDP Nepal, Country Programme Document \(CPD\) 2018-2022, Mid-Term Review \(2020\)](#).

⁵ [ICPE Zambia \(forthcoming\)](#).

⁶ [Final Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework \(UNDAF\) for Montenegro 2017-2021, \(2020\)](#).

⁷ [ICPR Botswana \(2020\)](#); [UNDP Nepal, Country Programme Document \(CPD\) 2018-2022, Mid-Term Review \(2020\)](#); [ICPR Mongolia \(2021\)](#); [ICPE Montenegro \(2021\)](#).

⁸ [UNDP Nepal, Country Programme Document \(CPD\) 2018-2022, Mid-Term Review \(2020\)](#).

⁹ [ICPE Mongolia \(2020\)](#); [ICPE Honduras \(forthcoming\)](#).

¹⁰ [ICPR Tanzania \(2020\)](#)

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⁶⁸ [Final Evaluation of the, United Nations Development Assistance Framework \(UNDAF\) for Montenegro 2017-2021, \(2020\); ; ICPE Montenegro \(2021\); UNDP Nepal, Country Programme Document \(CPD\) 2018-2022, Mid-Term Review \(2020\).](#)

⁶⁹ [Mid Term Evaluation – ‘Enhancing Human Security and Building Resilient Societies in Disadvantaged Communities of Armenia’ \(2020\); Final Evaluation – ‘Healthier Kosovo’ Project \(2020\).](#)

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP’s development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

ABOUT REFLECTIONS

The IEO’s *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP’s work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP response towards keeping people out of poverty.

