

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP SUPPORT TO DIGITALIZATION IN CRISIS COUNTRIES

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global crisis of our time, with devastating social, economic, and political consequences worldwide, and a tragic loss of life. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in shaping and driving the United Nations response to the crisis.

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis contexts. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices that are responding to requests to help prepare for, respond to, and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable.

This paper focuses on lessons from UNDP's past digitalization support to countries, both as drivers for development and as accelerators for preparedness, response and recovery from crises.

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,¹ designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP [Evaluation Resource Centre](#) (ERC) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the IEO 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 from evaluations to support UNDP decision-makers for effective crisis response. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature on crisis support.

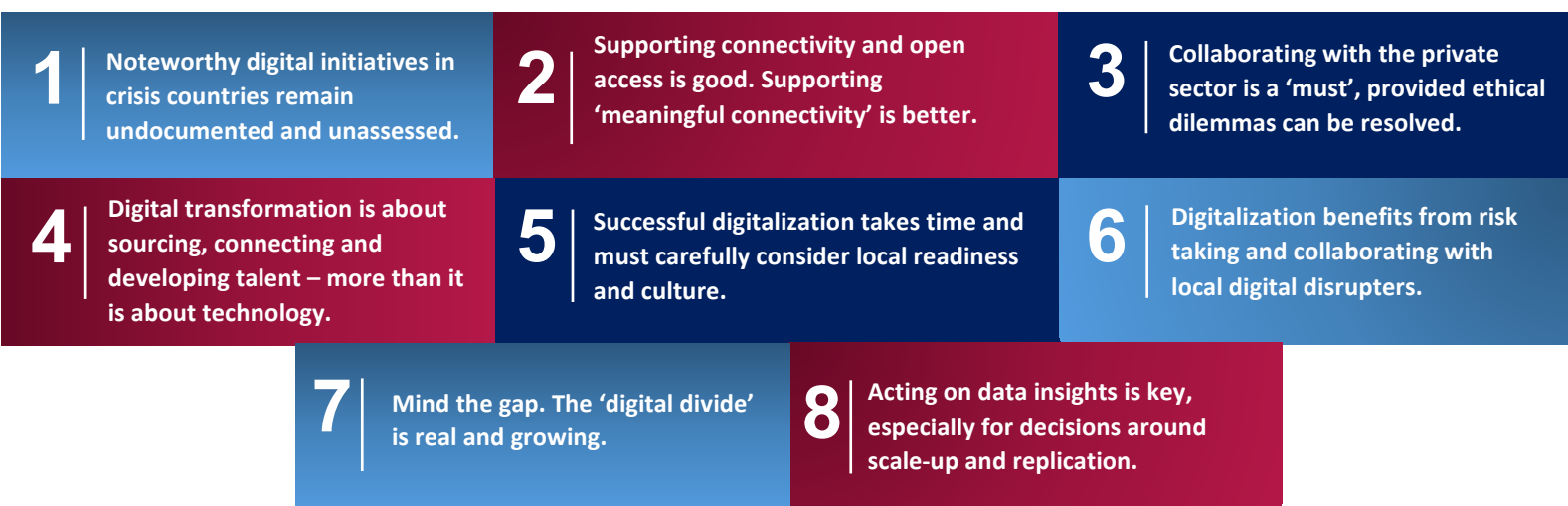
CONTEXT

COVID-19 has accelerated countries' reliance on digital technology – from e-commerce to tools for teleworking and e-learning to virus tracing and vaccine research. To be fit for purpose, UNDP has fast-tracked digital collaboration and investments in digital public goods throughout 2020. As part of its [Digital Strategy](#) (2019), UNDP invests in conceptual clarity, building a global network of 'digital champions', and implementing rapid digital demonstration projects to showcase the potential of new technologies to staff and partners. Digital solutions are expected to revolutionize how people access basic services, including health, and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) and the pledge of leaving no one behind. Crucially, this involves addressing the digital divide between those on and offline, which according to the Secretary-General is threatening to become “the new face of inequality”, reinforcing the social and economic disadvantages suffered by women and girls, people with disabilities and “minorities of all kinds”.²

The lessons draw broadly on 42 evaluations of digital initiatives uploaded in the ERC, regardless of setting, but emphasize UNDP’s work in crisis contexts as available. Lessons regarding UNDP’s efforts to digitally transform itself internally are not covered.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED



LESSONS LEARNED

1

Noteworthy digital initiatives in crisis countries remain undocumented and unassessed.

The body of evidence reviewed shows that digital solutions are part and parcel of many UNDP development interventions, across focus areas. The most well-documented examples refer to development (not crisis) settings and the areas of e-governance and support to electoral processes, digital health and disaster preparedness (early warning systems). Applying digital solutions in countries affected by crises is hard as government may be weak, divided or absent, resources scarce and other needs more pressing. There appears to be much need for documentation, knowledge exchange and learning about digitalization in crisis settings, to avoid merely extrapolating lessons from development contexts to those affected by crises.

Noteworthy digital initiatives in crisis countries that were captured in evaluations include UNDP support to electoral processes to reduce opportunities for fraud (biometric equipment for voter registration in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau) and digital finance to transfer salaries to health workers (Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis) and the police (Afghanistan, Central African Republic) to reduce corruption, reduce vacancies and allow expansion of services. In settings prone to natural disasters, UNDP supported early warning systems and other climate monitoring techniques that routinely employ digital technologies (Barbados, Ethiopia, Gambia, Liberia, Malawi, Sao Tome and

Principe, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia). Other well-known initiatives were never evaluated. These include a number of stalled pilots, such as using drones and satellite imagery to provide real-time monitoring data that could inform relief efforts (Syria, Mali)³ and a cryptocurrency called CedarCoin backed by blockchain technology intended to promote the reforestation and protection of Lebanon's ancient cedar forests (Lebanon).⁴

Evaluations suggest that UNDP-supported digital solutions in crisis settings emphasized automation or converting physical information into digital formats for efficiency gains (early warning systems, digital finance for salary payments, digitization of voter registration systems) or to demonstrate the way an innovation works (drones, blockchain). Less frequently, UNDP used digital solutions in crisis countries to optimize and streamline service delivery, with a view to increasing quality (support to e-governance systems). As a forthcoming thematic evaluation points out, in conflict settings such initiatives add a level of sophistication to UNDP's operational support but overall appear out-of-date, as they focus mainly on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and show little success in longer-term application and scaling-up.⁵

2

Supporting connectivity and open access is good. Supporting 'meaningful connectivity' is better.

Critical infrastructure is needed for the roll-out, scaling and sustainability of digitalization efforts. For example, early warning systems that rely on automated weather stations need reliable mobile network coverage to collect raw climate data and disseminate processed climate information to end-users, such as farmers (Liberia,⁶ Tanzania,⁷ Zambia,⁸ Malawi,⁹ Ethiopia¹⁰). In Ethiopia, the lack of reliable access to Ethio Telecom's mobile data network hindered the transmission of climate data and the effectiveness of the established early warning system. An e-governance initiative in Bhutan was hampered by lack of reliable Internet connectivity. Out of 101 access points established, only 23 had Internet access. As a result of this and other issues, analog services such as photocopying was the most commonly availed service in the 'digital' access points for government services, followed by printing, lamination and passport photos – as opposed to the intended ones such as birth registration, land records, or life insurance.¹¹ Since connectivity depends not only on government policy (keeping social media and Internet access open and free of interference) but also on private sector providers (usually providing the hard- and software), a key element for UNDP support in digitalization processes is leveraging the private sector (see lesson 3).

Yet, connectivity is not the end of the story. In order to ensure connectivity is meaningful, governments and their development partners must champion the development of digital literacy and skills (lesson 4) and ensure the instrumental use of ICTs throughout society. UNDP can support roadmaps for the digital future (Bangladesh,¹² Uzbekistan,¹³ Kazakhstan¹⁴), help build stronger national ecosystems of innovation (Serbia¹⁵) and shed light on the 'inclusion dynamic' (lesson 7) to encourage more inclusive, diverse and equitable post-COVID societies that partake fully in the digital world.

3

Collaborating with the private sector is a 'must', provided ethical dilemmas can be resolved.

The coverage, reliability and quality of Internet and mobile phone networks is a key success factor for the roll-out and scaling-up of national digitalization efforts. The principal developers of networks and data typically are private sector players. There are examples from the fields of health (Sierra Leone¹⁶), e-governance (Bangladesh¹⁷) and financial inclusion (Pacific Island Countries,¹⁸ Zimbabwe¹⁹) showing how UNDP leveraged private sector actors to advance digitalization. In Sierra Leone, UNDP relied on an established mobile network and used privately owned local kiosks to distribute hazard pays to 16,000 Ebola workers. In an access to information programme in

Bangladesh, UNDP relied heavily on a network of over 5,000 Union Digital Centres, established by the government and run by entrepreneurs, to ensure the delivery of free public e-services to local populations (e.g. land records, birth registration, issuance of passport, and even telemedicine), along with private services (mobile financial services).²⁰ Through collaboration in the Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme, UNDP contributed to helping nearly two million low-income Pacific islanders gain access to financial services and financial education. In Sierra Leone, recovery cash transfers for affected survivors of Ebola achieved efficiency gains and strengthened financial inclusion.²¹ Similarly, in Zimbabwe, UNDP-supported emergency public service sector payments for health care workers had the unintended benefit of bringing health workers into the formal banking system as they were required to open bank accounts to receive the payments.²² This points to the opportunities of linking mobile money programming with inclusive finance.

All the above, however, throws up important ethical questions that are not fully covered in the body of evaluations reviewed. UNDP must invest in research that gauges the prospective impact of digital technologies. Government regulations have been developed in many countries in the areas of privacy and data protection. For example, the evaluation on the UNDP-supported automation of voter registration in Kyrgyzstan notes that, in line with international norms and standards, commercial entities such as banks need citizen's consent to access the data contained in the system, e.g. to obtain basic info on citizenship and passport details.²³ Evaluations are silent on other ethical issues that may go hand in hand with digitalization such as human dignity and autonomy or discrimination and unequal balance of power. It is unclear if government supervision in these areas is incomplete or lacking, and whether this has been flagged by UNDP which typically positions itself as a rights-based organization.

4 **Digital transformation is about sourcing, connecting and developing talent – more than it is about technology.**

Governments can now buy any given technology, but their ability to adapt to an even more digital future depends on developing the next generation of skills. Countries need to close the gap between talent supply and demand, sometimes referred to as 'future-proofing' of human resources. Evaluations show that UNDP-supported digital transformation initiatives that build on or are accompanied by investments in capabilities to effectively use, manage, and maintain associated technology are more likely to succeed. Key capabilities include concrete ICT competencies and skills (Moldova),²⁴ being able to speak from actual experience with the methods (CIS region),²⁵ ease at using the digital equipment and at trouble-shooting, in real-time and during 'dry-runs' (Kyrgyzstan),²⁶ ability to maintain and update a data portal, and capacities of decision-makers to use complex data and knowledge (Papua New Guinea).²⁷ UNDP has effectively supported the development of these skills on and offline, e.g. through training-of-trainers seminars followed by local training, through deploying experts or through communities of practice that utilize digital technology to bring people together (India).²⁸

The sourcing of experts deserves special mention. UNDP's ability to provide a bridge between local challenges and global expertise is emblematic, and regional experts who broker knowledge across UNDP country offices play a key role here.²⁹ By providing technical expertise, UNDP can respond to stakeholder needs while influencing the design of digital solutions (e.g. keeping data protection and the needs of vulnerable groups in mind; Kyrgyzstan,³⁰ Uzbekistan,³¹ Kazakhstan³²) and improving effectiveness and efficiency (Bangladesh,³³ India,³⁴ Jordan,³⁵ Haiti³⁶ and Nepal³⁷). To support the flagship programme 'Digital Bangladesh' which created digital access points for government services at the local level, UNDP facilitated access to national and global expertise. This has increased the speed and quality of progress made in the digitalization of public services. Social assistance programmes in Jordan were more cost-efficient by employing biometrics and Blockchain expertise. This helped reduce opportunities for fraud, duplication of services and mistargeting. In Haiti and Nepal, UNDP provided technical assistance to election planning, logistics and security through e-systems. This included online registration portals for candidates as well as hiring and training poll watchers

equipped with cell phones. UNDP-sponsored expertise in these and other cases contributed to increasing administrative efficiency and reducing the space for preferential treatment, human error, and fraud, thus contributing to the fight against corruption by enhancing transparency and accountability. Accelerator Labs were found to effectively support knowledge facilitation and exchange in terms of what kinds of digital solutions work and how to adapt them to other contexts. They were deemed less successful in originating new digital solutions for use in UNDP programmes in conflict countries.³⁸

5 **Successful digitalization takes time and must carefully consider local readiness and culture.**

To adapt to a continually changing and disrupted present, UNDP is rightly speeding up. Yet, evaluations point to a trade-off between speed and quality when it comes to digital solutions. Failure to make adequate time for digitalization is one of the most recurrent challenges reported.³⁹ In Sierra Leone, UNDP started but did not complete work on a civil registration system, from which the voter registry was to be extracted, as it became clear that a more comprehensive approach, and more time, was needed than foreseen in the project.⁴⁰ In Guinea-Bissau, there was a lack of political consensus about the technical prerequisites for voter registration equipment and absence of a clear and adequate legal framework to establish the independence and respective competences of the electoral management bodies. This ultimately meant that UNDP procured biometric equipment for voter registration so late that it was not available in time for the March 2019 elections.⁴¹ While digitalization can strengthen UNDP's brand and efficiency gains can be made in the longer-term, additional time, effort and capacities are needed at the programme design stage to get digital initiatives right.⁴²

Digital solutions need to be introduced in line with country capacities and readiness and respect local cultures. To break the pattern of development agencies flying in experts from the global North, and more generally the global North developing digital solutions to test in the global South, digital solutions must be adapted (if not developed) locally to solve problems 'within the society'. Some positive examples (albeit with their own challenges) were found in the field of digital health, where appropriate digital solutions were developed in partnership with local actors, and as part of larger initiatives. These include the use of mobile tablets to conduct real-time monitoring of local health centres to track malaria outbreaks and coordinate the rapid responses in Guinea-Bissau⁴³ and a telemedicine solution offering medical consultations through computers or smartphones in Bangladesh.⁴⁴ In contrast, evaluations noted cases of programme countries being invited to adopt technologies not yet used in highly developed countries, such as the biometric equipment for voter registration,⁴⁵ not sufficiently adapted to take local users' perspectives into account⁴⁶ or not fully aware of context. For example, new diagnostic equipment was procured in Argentina that could not be used fully due to the lack of digital medical record keeping.⁴⁷ In those cases, UNDP support to digitalization did not lead to lasting change.

6 **Digitalization benefits from risk taking and collaborating with local digital disrupters.**

Innovators appreciate risk-taking and see failure as a strategy for achieving success in the long run. UNDP can support governments in trying out new digital solutions and exposing themselves to risk. In Kazakhstan, a UNDP-supported e-application called 'Digital Agent' enables citizens to assess the quality of public services and provide feedback, including reporting on inaccessible buildings and spaces that limit the mobility of persons with disabilities.⁴⁸ UNDP also successfully supported the creation of enabling environments for local digital disrupters. In Serbia, UNDP spearheaded a major initiative to help implement the government strategy for digital transformation which included

the development of new e-services, awareness-raising and the use of open data. According to a recent evaluation, this opened new opportunities for economic actors and strengthened the software development industry.⁴⁹

Failing fast means having a culture in place that tolerates quick pilots and, should they fail, is ready to learn the lessons to become stronger and smarter. Direct engagement with youth and young innovators plays a key role in this regard. In Honduras, to support the reintegration of young victims of violence, UNDP partnered with social entrepreneurs through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to develop orthopaedic hand prostheses in 3D with a useful life of five years when used daily.⁵⁰ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNDP hosted a Global Crowdsourcing Academy to spark employment ideas for flood-affected municipalities that are home to large returnee populations.⁵¹ In Afghanistan, UNDP organized a hackathon 'Hack4Integrity' which allowed youth to develop technology-based solutions against corruption.⁵² In Rwanda the 'YouthConnekt' Initiative leveraged ICT innovations to address youth unemployment, citizenship and engagement and in national policy dialogue.⁵³ In India, well-qualified youth moderated and synthesized discussions on a web-based development solution exchange platform which helped produce reference materials in crucial policy areas now used by the government and development practitioners.⁵⁴ Evaluations found that, through these and other examples, UNDP fuelled youth entrepreneurship and helped demonstrate the potential of homegrown innovation and the power of youth to shape their digital future.



Mind the gap. The 'digital divide' is real and growing.

Digital technology is not neutral, nor is it a mirror – it is a magnifier of existing inequalities. Digital solutions are most accessible to those with good ICT skills, who have access to the necessary technology or infrastructure and who are literate (often English is required). These tend to be younger, more affluent persons living in cities, without disabilities, and male. Several evaluations noted that it had been harder to reach women and vulnerable groups, including people living with disabilities, with digital initiatives.⁵⁵ Other evaluations showed that digital solutions failed to reach intended beneficiaries altogether. For instance, climate information from UNDP-supported early warning systems in Uganda and elsewhere was poorly disseminated from district to sub-county to parish to farmer.⁵⁶ Digitalization efforts that contributed to closing the digital divide, or at least not exacerbating it, were those that explicitly included the most vulnerable as part of their core beneficiaries at the design stage, produced materials in accessible formats (translation into local languages, braille, voice-assisted technologies, etc.), and ensured that communication strategies use inclusive language, including in terms of gender.⁵⁷

Limited access to quality education, affordability and cultural norms still prevent women and girls from entering the digital world. UNDP-supported programmes such as 'Forsati for her' in Bahrain specifically target women for digital literacy and coding backed by Microsoft certifications.⁵⁸ The more expansive 'IT for Literacy' programme in Egypt has shown some positive results but would need to be scaled up significantly to make an appreciable dent in female illiteracy, or access to digital services.⁵⁹ During times of crisis, women and girls often play the role of (unpaid) caregivers and heads of household at the expense of their own careers and personal well-being, with impacts on the family and local economies.⁶⁰ In this context, requirements to use new technologies have been reported to overburden some women, such as in the case of Afghanistan, where biometric voter verification machines introduced for the 2018 and 2019 elections reportedly deterred female voter turn-out.⁶¹

On the flip side, digital technologies have been reported to make indirect contributions to the empowerment of women, such as in the realm of digital finance and vaccines. Women were a viable market segment in the Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme given the high labour participation in sectors like agriculture, but very few products and services were especially designed for women and their needs. Initiatives like SolaPayGo in Papua New Guinea have shown that uptake of solar products helped women find ways to budget their time in the evenings for household chores using the solar-powered lights, leaving them with more time for work and other economic pursuits in the

morning. However, these outcomes are incidental and few and far between within the larger financial innovation portfolio under PFIP II.⁶² India's electronic vaccine intelligence network (eVIN) digitalizes entire vaccine stocks and tracks their storage temperature and movement to cold chain points in the country. The intervention contributed to reducing waste of expired vaccines as well as stock-outs, while improving record-keeping and promoting transparency and accountability. As part of UNDP support, women (including older women) were trained to contribute to the real-time vaccine management information system via smartphone, thus enhancing their IT literacy.⁶³ While not itself an example from a crisis-setting, this has clear relevance in terms of designing gender-responsive digital initiatives to support recovery from COVID-19.

8

Acting on data insights is key, especially for decisions around scale-up and replication.

Scale-up and replication of digitalization initiatives hinge on early investment in documentation and assessment, including measurement of unintended effects. To date, evaluations note widespread lack of systematic collection and reporting of performance data on digital solutions⁶⁴ – at worst, inviting replication based on anecdotal evidence. Many digitalization initiatives lack theories of change and measure few intermediate results, e.g. of rapid prototyping, along the results chain. Measurement tends to take place either against quantitative activity indicators or against long-term, aspirational goals which make it hard for UNDP to demonstrate contribution at the level of changes in attitudes or capacities.⁶⁵ Where UNDP supported digitalization projects as part of larger national initiatives, reporting sometimes failed to differentiate between the two, thus inflating UNDP's impact.⁶⁶ In general, reporting lacked an identification of ongoing challenges and adverse effects, thus failing to advance organizational learning about digitalization, both internally⁶⁷ and with partners.⁶⁸ Further reflection is needed to understand how to capture very recent or ongoing initiatives in evaluations. While they may not be ripe for evaluation in the traditional sense, by leaving them out the evaluation function misses opportunities to weigh in and support evidence-based decision-making on taking digitalization pilots to scale, or replicating them elsewhere.

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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 [Digital Divide 'a Matter of Life and Death' amid COVID-19 Crisis, Secretary-General Warns Virtual Meeting, Stressing Universal Connectivity Key for Health, Development \(2020\).](#)

³ [Satellite imagery provides clearer picture of Timbuktu reconstruction \(2016\).](#)

⁴ [Adopting a cedar tree brings diaspora money home \(2019\).](#)

⁵ Evaluation of UNDP support to conflict-affected countries, IEO-UNDP (forthcoming).

⁶ [Terminal evaluation of 'Strengthening Liberia's capability to provide climate information and services to enhance climate-resilient development and adaptation to climate change' \(2019\).](#)

⁷ [Terminal evaluation of 'Strengthening climate information and early warning systems' \(2018\).](#)

⁸ [Final evaluation of 'Strengthening climate information and early warning systems in Eastern and Southern Africa for climate-resilient development and adaptation to climate change' \(2019\).](#)

⁹ [Terminal evaluation of the 'Strengthening climate information and early warning systems project' \(2018\).](#)

¹⁰ [Strengthening Climate information and Early Warning System: Terminal Evaluation.](#)

¹¹ [Evaluation Report of G2C Project - Enhancing Government to Citizen Service Delivery Initiative; Connecting the remote areas of Bhutan through e-Governance Project \(2013\).](#)

¹² [ICPE Bangladesh \(2019\).](#)

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- ¹³ [ICPE Uzbekistan \(2020\).](#)
- ¹⁴ [ICPE Kazakhstan \(2020\).](#)
- ¹⁵ [ICPE Serbia \(2020\).](#)
- ¹⁶ [Mobile money for 16,000 Ebola workers \(2014\).](#)
- ¹⁷ [ICPE Bangladesh \(2019\).](#)
- ¹⁸ [Final Evaluation Report of Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme - Phase II \(2020\).](#)
- ¹⁹ [ADR Zimbabwe \(2015\).](#)
- ²⁰ [How a2i is using empathy to foster innovation in Bangladesh \(2017\).](#)
- ²¹ [Final Evaluation of the 'Social Rehabilitation and Payment to EVD Survivors Project' in Sierra Leone \(2017\).](#)
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- ³⁴ [ADR India \(2012\).](#)
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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's work in crisis settings.

