

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP SUPPORT TO E-GOVERNANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a bold commitment to end poverty in all forms and dimensions by 2030. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is helping countries to address emerging complexities by “future-proofing” governance systems, through anticipatory approaches and better management of risk.¹

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of UNDP undertakes reviews of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP work. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices in pertinent working areas. The Reflection series, launched in 2022, aims to contribute to knowledge about the “enablers” and “directions of change” of the UNDP Strategic Plan. This paper focuses on lessons from UNDP support to e-governance over the last decade and, wherever possible, focus was given to e-governance interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery process.

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,ⁱ designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP [Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by UNDP IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, qualityⁱⁱ decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Sampling and coding of the evaluations benefited from the Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics (AIDA) tool, launched by UNDP IEO in early 2022. The emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer

ⁱ 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 the better-known systematic review, 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.

ⁱⁱ For evaluations that have received a quality assurance review, only those scored as moderately satisfactory, satisfactory, or highly satisfactory were included in the sample.

practical and timely insights to support effective UNDP decision-making. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature.ⁱⁱⁱ

The lessons draw broadly on 39 independent country programme evaluations, 11 thematic evaluations, and 48 decentralized evaluations of e-governance and digital government uploaded to the ERC, dated from 2012 to 2022. Five evaluations from the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) were also used for generating lessons learned. Publications including strategic documents, studies and reports from UNDP and other international organizations, academia and think tanks were consulted to cross-check development implementation results in similar areas to the extracted lessons, to validate their applicability and generalizability.^{iv}

CONTEXT

With advancing technology and digitalization, e-governance has the potential to improve government transparency and accountability, expand service coverage and accessibility, and engage citizens in public discourse and policymaking. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and fast-tracked the use of e-governance tools for service continuation and citizen participation, where social distancing and other measures restricted service delivery via physical sites and contact. At the same time, the digital divide may exacerbate inequalities, leaving vulnerable communities further behind. The requirements for e-governance, such as regulation, digital infrastructure and literacy, and data protection, remain largely unmet, especially in least-developed and low-income countries.

UNDP support to countries for digital transformation emphasizes a whole-of-society approach to digitalization, connecting people, businesses, government, regulation and infrastructure.^v UNDP e-governance support addresses the three interlinked core components of e-administration, e-service delivery, and e-participation, as well as three crosscutting components of policy environment and regulation, access to ICT and connectivity, and access to information.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1

E-governance solutions can enhance interoperability and the efficiency of public service delivery and promote service continuity, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2

Making digital public services accessible and inclusive for vulnerable and underserved populations requires targeted interventions adapted to their specific needs and capacities.

3

One-stop-shops, combining digital technology with a human/physical interface, can reduce time and costs, and reinforce localized public service delivery in rural and remote areas.

4

Transforming public administration requires both modernization and reform, where the introduction of technology and capacity is accompanied by updated regulations and changes in the work culture.

5

Digital tools can promote open government initiatives and facilitate citizen participation in decision-making processes.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the detailed methodology note in annex.

^{iv} This includes 33 publications from UNDP (23), United Nations University Operating Unit on Policy Driven Electronic Governance (3), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2), and other international organizations, academia and think tanks (5). For more information, please see the detailed methodology note in annex.

^v See UNDP Strategic Plan for 2022-2025 and Digital Strategy 2022.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 E-governance solutions can enhance interoperability and the efficiency of public service delivery and promote service continuity as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

E-administration systems can improve the efficiency of the public sector. In Argentina, digital government initiatives, such as the introduction of digital signatures and the digitalization of civil registration, significantly reduced processing time and improved administrative efficiency.² In countries such as Bangladesh,³ Tajikistan,⁴ Uzbekistan⁵ and Moldova,⁶ UNDP supported digital records and documentation management systems, allowing for electronic storage, exchange and tracking of data, as well as documentation and requests, to improve efficiency and transparency. The process of introducing the system itself, however, can be complex and time consuming,⁷ and a lack of baseline data at times renders it impossible to quantitatively assess the improved effectiveness of the system.⁸

Past evaluations highlighted UNDP support to digital social registries and national ID systems, where UNDP technical expertise in digitalization intersected with public service delivery. For example, UNDP supported the development and implementation of digital identity and registration mechanisms in Malawi⁹ and Tajikistan;¹⁰ and a comprehensive cross-sectoral electronic database for institutions of social welfare, public health, education, internal affairs, judiciary and civil society organizations in target municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹¹

Montenegro is a prominent example, where the digital social registry has proven to improve the interoperability and delivery of public services. Long-term UNDP support to the development of the Integrated Social Welfare Information System (ISWIS, commonly known as e-social card) has contributed to improving the efficiency, inclusion and coverage of beneficiaries of the social welfare system. ISWIS provides sex-disaggregated analysis for modelling social transfers and allowing e-referrals of vulnerable children, adults, persons with disabilities, and the elderly for placement in social welfare institutions. UNDP support to the development of the country's Single Information System for Electronic Data Exchange (SISEDE) helped to ensure the interoperability between key electronic State registers, the domestic violence database and the court IT system, to improve the efficiency of the justice and social welfare system.¹² Subnational platforms helped to integrate administrative data on population, education and employment, among others, for the development and implementation of social policies at provincial and municipal levels.¹³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, ISWIS was used to implement social measures in the Government's emergency COVID-19 response, enabling increased coverage of social rights and allowing for uninterrupted and targeted social welfare support.¹⁴

COVID-19 has highlighted the role of technology to ensure the continuity of public services and access to up-to-date information (Peru¹⁵ and Nepal¹⁶). UNDP provided videoconferencing technology, such as Zoom licenses, to governments and judiciaries to ensure the continuity of communication and other functions (e.g. Nepal,¹⁷ Zambia¹⁸ and Uganda¹⁹). In South Sudan, UNDP supported the Peace and Reconciliation Commission to develop and pilot the Conflict Early and Response mobile application.²⁰ Overall, UNDP support for the use of modern technology and strengthening of e-services outreach was particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, to overcome restrictions on the fulfilment of basic administrative tasks.²¹

2 Making digital public services accessible and inclusive for vulnerable and underserved populations requires targeted interventions adapted to their specific needs and capacities.

People in vulnerable and marginalized situations are often excluded from access to digital government and citizen-government interaction, due to a lack of resources, skills, equipment, infrastructure and connectivity, as well as geographic isolation.²² COVID-19 revealed the unequal access to e-governance services for vulnerable and marginalized groups. For instance, the UNDP-supported digitalization of legal services in Moldova resulted in 82 percent of legal aid requests being submitted online as of June 2020; but COVID-19 clearly demonstrated that online services did not offer equal access to services for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Consequently, additional support was provided, including the expansion of paralegal services in villages.²³

It is important for e-services to establish in-person or physical contact points for those who are not digitally literate to receive assistance. In the Pacific islands, UNCDF-supported financial inclusion initiatives used local agents in villages to assist rural consumers with mobile banking services. This has proven to be an effective way to promote e-service usage, while at the same time addressing the challenges brought by the low levels of digital literacy and weak infrastructure in remote and underserved areas.²⁴ In Serbia, a call centre was established alongside digital platforms to provide services to those who were not digitally literate.²⁵

Partnering with the private sector for mobile money has promoted e-payment to the poor and people in remote areas in some countries. In Egypt, for example, UNDP support to the modernization of Egypt Post contributed to the introduction and dissemination of payment cards through agreement with Visa International and Mastercard, and “Easy Pay” prepaid cards, which according to stakeholders were especially important for people in remote areas.²⁶ Partnership with the private sector was also one of the success drivers for the “mobile money for poor” interventions carried out by UNCDF in Africa and Asia.²⁷

E-inclusion challenges are particularly acute for people with disabilities. Good practices in this regard include accessibility mapping²⁸ and the provision of targeted services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP assisted Egypt’s National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority to develop a mobile application with a sign language chatbot to provide access to emergency services for people with hearing or speech impairments. This was particularly relevant for people with hearing disabilities to check their symptoms and get proper health support.²⁹ In Belarus, UNDP supported the implementation of an e-module for submitting electronic appeals to State agencies, including a pilot special application for people with visual impairments.³⁰

3 One-stop-shops, combining digital technology with a human/physical interface, can reduce time and costs, and reinforce localized public service delivery in rural and remote areas.

Public service delivery in rural and remote areas can be lengthy, irregular, and have unclear bureaucratic procedures. Due to their remoteness from public service providers, populations in rural and remote areas need to travel long distances with financial and time costs. In response, UNDP has been promoting e-services for public service delivery, establishing e-governance systems, creating service centres, and simplifying administrative processes (Bangladesh,³¹ Montenegro,³² Uzbekistan,³³ Bosnia and Herzegovina,³⁴ Georgia,³⁵ Turkey³⁶ and Bulgaria³⁷).

Digitalization is not a panacea. E-services provision in rural and remote areas needs to be balanced with physical presence for flexible and localized service delivery. One-stop-shops created at local, or community levels can complement digital technology with a human/physical interface and help to increase accessibility and overcome a lack of internet or electricity connection and digital literacy in rural and remote areas (Bangladesh,³⁸ Georgia³⁹ and Serbia⁴⁰).

In Bangladesh, for instance, UNDP supported Access to Information (a2i) interventions to provide easy access to simplified and digitized public services for underserved communities. The one-stop-shop model was applied to create a network of Union Digital Centres in remote and rural areas, for citizens to access e-services and help to overcome poor connectivity. A wide range of public services were made available at these Centres across the country, and, on average, they reduced service waiting times from seven days to one hour and travel distances from 35 km to 3 km.⁴¹ In Georgia, a UNDP-supported one-stop-shop e-services model integrated a total of 468 civic and business services and has contributed to improved public accessibility. The one-stop-shop saw a surge in usage sparked by COVID-19 restrictions.⁴² Similarly, in Serbia, an e-government support centre played a significant role as a one-stop-shop for citizens to access digital services during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴³

However, in Bhutan, the lack of information on the kinds of services provided by one-stop-shops and the administrative processes of e-services, has limited e-service usage in rural communities.⁴⁴ The results of community surveys conducted in Moldova highlighted the importance of promoting the benefits of using e-services, to boost confidence in the security of online public services, and thus increase e-service usage.⁴⁵

For one-stop-shops, revenue generation can be a major challenge to sustainability. In Bhutan, for example, almost all of the community centres established by the Government-to-citizen project faced sustainability issues, mainly due to unsatisfactory revenue generation.⁴⁶ In Bangladesh, the continued operation of local one-stop-shops was dependent on revenue, as they were run by local entrepreneurs.⁴⁷ In Laos, the One Door Service Centre that was piloted in two regions saw an increase in revenue collection due to its transparent and reasonable fees, and reported an improved relationship between local authorities and citizens.⁴⁸

4 Transforming public administration requires both modernization and reform, where the introduction of technology and capacity is accompanied by updated regulations and changes in work culture.

The promotion of open government using digital technology has been a key feature of UNDP in-country support to public administration reform. For example, in Uruguay, UNDP has been supporting open government, digital government and transparency policies since the creation of the Electronic Government and Society for Knowledge and Information Agency in 2005. UNDP supported the development of the electronic government strategy and the digital strategy, as well as the implementation of the digital government agenda, through which most central administration procedures have been digitalized.⁴⁹

E-Justice is a sector of growing significance in e-governance development, including in crisis-affected and fragile contexts.⁵⁰ In Chad,⁵¹ Eritrea⁵² and Trinidad and Tobago,⁵³ digitalization eased the flow of information, and improved the efficiency of courts and other justice sector institutions. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, UNDP support contributed to the endorsement of an e-Justice matrix by justice institutions, setting out a roadmap for the operationalization of e-services, including the roles of each institution.⁵⁴

Digital technology alone is not a guarantee of change in practice. The 2010 evaluation of earlier UNDP support in Georgia, for example, found more success in introducing ICT to public administration than in introducing e-governance.⁵⁵ Building

technical capacity for the use of digital systems and tools is essential. In Montenegro, an evaluation found that the UNDP upstream-downstream model for e-governance support responded to changing priorities at central and local government levels, and brought reform to the local level, where institutional capacity development was most needed.⁵⁶

In addition to the establishment of digital infrastructure, it is necessary to update laws and regulations to establish data sharing and protection requirements and procedures in the public sector. The safe and reliable exchange of data between authorities in Montenegro, as discussed above, was enabled by the Law on General Administrative Procedures, drafted with the support of UNDP.⁵⁷ Similarly, in Serbia, UNDP supported the preparation of the Information Security Act and related rules and procedures.⁵⁸ A good practice introduced in Malawi was to develop a local-level Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) template for data sharing with service providers.⁵⁹

Moreover, it is important to institutionalize practices and capacity, and change the working culture in public administrations.⁶⁰ Good practices in this regard include the assessment of local government capacity and will for e-transformation,⁶¹ and empathy training for public servants to better understand the needs and user experience of citizens, in order to change their mindsets and enable more service- and people-centric solutions.⁶²

5 Digital tools can promote open government initiatives and facilitate citizen participation in decision-making processes.

Digital technology can help to improve citizen participation in local governance processes. In Albania, UNDP supported the creation of an e-participation tool to solicit and incorporate citizen feedback into local governance processes, such as budgeting, urban planning and quality public service delivery.⁶³ In Ukraine, as a result of amendments to the Law on Access to Information, several civil society organizations were able to obtain copies of local development plans, allowing citizens to participate in local administration decision-making.⁶⁴ However, e-participation in local governance may be hampered by unequal access to technology and different levels of digital literacy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, local and cantonal governments used online channels to engage citizens in development planning and management processes during the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved problematic for social groups that did not have digital literacy or access to digital equipment.⁶⁵

Similarly, e-Parliament activities at national and local levels can facilitate interaction between citizens and elected officials and enhance public participation in the legislative process. UNDP supported open/e-parliament initiatives in Ukraine,⁶⁶ Serbia⁶⁷ and Armenia.⁶⁸ In Armenia, for instance, citizen engagement via e-Parliament promoted public participation in the legislative process and resulted in several legislative amendments and greater parliamentary responsiveness.⁶⁹ At local level in Bhutan, UNDP helped to set up *Virtual Zomdu*, a video conferencing platform that allowed the Parliament to organize community meetings and connect with voters nationwide.⁷⁰

In the area of elections, in Haiti, a web-based voter registration system has improved the quality of election administration and increased the overall credibility, transparency and efficiency of the process. This allowed voters to check their registration and polling sites, reduced confusion at polling stations, standardized procedures, and reduced the space for preferential treatment and fraud.⁷¹

Digital tools can also help governments to solicit citizen feedback and improve citizen-oriented public engagement. In Moldova⁷² and Georgia,⁷³ UNDP supported local public administrations to use e-tools to solicit citizen perceptions on the level of information and participation in local decision-making processes and their satisfaction with local government and

public services. In Uzbekistan, UNDP supported the establishment of the Public Council on Openness, whose website published a ranking of the openness and transparency of the activities of different government agencies, from the perspective of citizens.⁷⁴

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⁷² UNDP Moldova, 'Joint Integrated Local Development Programme Evaluation', UNDP, 2015, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6727>.

⁷³ UNDP Georgia, 'Final Project Evaluation: Supporting Public Administration Reform (PAR) In Georgia', UNDP, 2021, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/13119>.

⁷⁴ UNDP Uzbekistan, 'Final evaluation: eGovernment project', UNDP, 2017, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/8074>.