INDEPENDENT Evaluation Office
United Nations Development Programme

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP LOCAL GOVERNANCE SUPPORT TO COUNTRIES IN CRISIS

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. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in shaping and driving the United Nations response to the crisis.

To support the UNDP response to COVID-19, 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 local governance support and is one in a series of knowledge products from the IEO focusing on important areas of UNDP support to countries in crisis. The topic of UNDP's work on local governance in crisis contexts is of high interest to UNDP management, recognizing that UNDP has been expanding its subnational work and is looking to help national and local governments in their COVID-19 recovery efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,[1] 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 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 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 highlighted the vital role of local governance in daily life. Now more than ever, citizens throughout the world depend on local governments – as the level of government closer to the population – to deliver essential services to ensure people are safe and secure through this pandemic (clean water, sanitation, housing and citizen security). In addition to deep increases in expenditures and decreases in local revenues, governments at all levels continue to deal with fiscal decentralization and power devolution issues. The pandemic also brought additional challenges to the

private sector and civil society at the local level which also play a key role in promoting economic development and ensuring transparency and accountability of government action.

This paper identifies some key lessons learned from evaluating UNDP's past local governance support in crisis contexts. The lessons are not extensive and are drawn from some countries that have undergone devastating natural and/or man-made disasters. They reflect a small range of vast work undertaken by UNDP to support local governments as well as opportunities and challenges to move the agenda forward during these times of crisis.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1. Local governance programming is an effective way to build blocks and assist in crisis recovery and prevention efforts.
2. A holistic approach to local governance programming works well to reduce fragmentation, create synergies and enhance efficiencies at the local level.
3. Improving local infrastructure and capacities is critical to enable host communities cope with demands created by refugees and IDPs.
4. Rapid assessments of local needs are good tools to prioritize needs and develop appropriate responses in the aftermath of crisis.
5. Decentralization reforms are important investments towards better-structured municipalities to address crisis but require an early start and long-term commitment.
6. Linking successful individual interventions at the local level to national policy reform is an effective way to scale up interventions and enable wider impact.
7. Inclusive and bottom-up approaches promote the engagement of local stakeholders in planning and build-back-better processes and contribute to achieving lasting results.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 Local governance programming is an effective way to build blocks and assist in crisis recovery and prevention efforts.

The local level is where the recovery of societies deeply affected by crisis takes place, and where the resilience of communities is ultimately built.[2] Accountable and inclusive local governance systems are building blocks that can not only help restore services and infrastructure, but also foster social cohesion in divided communities, facilitate participation in public life, distribute resources and opportunities equitably, and safeguard minority rights.[3]

The UNDP Local Governance programming is comprehensive, involving work with local governments and other stakeholders (e.g. national governments, the private sector and civil society) in several areas to help address local needs and recovery, prevent violent conflict, and ensure that responses are locally-owned and effective.[4] UNDP has supported improvements in service delivery and revenue collection and simplification of government services (e-governance) for peace and development at the local level, such as work in post-conflict areas in **Bangladesh.**[5] It supported local communities directly for the building of low-income housing and basic services through participatory processes in **Nicaragua,**[6] after the devastating hurricane Mitch; and, for water supply management and building resilient communities in **Kyrgyzstan**[7] to prevent conflict**.** In **Afghanistan,** UNDP efforts focused on increasing awareness among civil society and subnational governments, and on technical and capacity-building support to municipal and district levels, enhancing public oversight of budgeting (revenue generation) and local development planning.[8]

UNDP has also supported livelihoods through work with communities for better income and strengthened resilience, such as the creation of the one-stop shop for government services in **Cameroon,**[9] or contributed to the strengthening of municipal police services and solid waste management, such as the work in **Lebanon,**[10] in the context of host community response to the refugee crisis. Other examples exist of UNDP assistance to central governments in support of local level decentralization and power devolution, through draft legislation, or analysis and/or inputs to policymaking, such as in **Turkey,**[11] where policy-related contributions led to strengthening the loan system of local authorities as well as increasing revenues and inter-governmental fiscal transfers to local authorities.

2 A holistic approach to local governance programming works well to reduce fragmentation, create synergies and enhance efficiencies at the local level.

The extensive range and types of services needed at the local level during a crisis provide opportunities to integrate efforts and combine projects, which can generate synergies and enhance efficiencies in UNDP local governance programming. UNDP adopted a holistic approach towards building communities in **Tajikistan**[12] with a combination of economic development projects and investments in governance and (re)constructing social infrastructure (schools, medical centres, water supply systems, electric power supply). This has brought significant results in improving the livelihoods and well-being of the local population, drawing on continuous engagement with local authorities and citizens. However, consideration needs to be given to properly resourcing these as, for example, in **Bangladesh,**[13] despite designing a comprehensive programme of about 57 activities of assistance in several areas of support in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the scope of UNDP activities were substantially narrowed due to lack of funding. As a result, important work, such as support to local government authorities, construction of shelters for women victims of violence, improving policing and land administration, were not implemented.

3 Improving local infrastructure and capacities is critical to enable host communities cope with increased demands created by refugees and IDPs.

Providing essential services, improving governance and social infrastructure at the local level in host communities is critical as crises are exacerbated by the new and additional demands to address needs of refugees and/or internally displaced people (IDPs). For example, the large-scale human migration in Syria led to a large number of refugees living in cities and towns in neighbouring countries,[14] in areas where basic municipal services are not available. This led to an overstretching of the local infrastructure to the breaking point. UNDP has helped governments to rapidly expand essential services such as energy, solid waste, job creation and social protection services to cope with this huge influx of displaced persons through Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) country programmes in **Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon**.[15] In **Turkey,**[16] for example, UNDP played a key role in strengthening municipal capacities in environmental conservation and solid waste management in response to priorities of Turkey's national plan to address the challenges of the Syrian population and the host community.

Other examples exist of increased demands due to conflict-related vulnerabilities, where there are losses of physical infrastructure and livelihoods and added pressure in women-headed households, in particular. To address these in **Sri Lanka,**[17] UNDP supported community-focused housing and livelihood-related social infrastructure to enhance opportunities for vulnerable communities, including women and IDPs. These were vital to the recovery process of communities and effective in helping communities regain livelihoods as well as their sense of dignity, confidence and stability. Another example of UNDP work to improve living conditions of IDPs and returned refugees is found in **Somalia,**[18] where the focus was on the establishment of governance systems, increased housing, land and property rights and social, economic and political inclusion to enhance conditions for local integration of IDPs in two Mogadishu settlements.

However, the influx of additional people, the overstretched infrastructure capacity and the increased demands for services can lead to increased tensions among the local population competing for resources. This points to the need to also build capacities at the local level to deal with tension and conflict. In **Lebanon,**[19] UNDP is making contributions to the reduction of tensions among the host and refugee population through the establishment of Mechanisms for Social Stability (MSS) which consist of working groups or committees with the mandate to monitor tensions and intervene whenever needed. This creates a positive environment at the local level through dialogue and activities. Social stability is promoted by addressing social and cultural challenges faced by both Lebanese communities and displaced Syrians while fostering the role of local actors and local authorities' role as inside mediators in their communities.

4 Rapid assessments of local needs are good tools to prioritize needs and develop appropriate responses in the aftermath of crisis.

Generally, it is challenging to identify and prioritize local priorities in times of crisis, which in turn can delay responses, and recovery and reconstruction efforts. In **Bhutan,**[20] UNDP has shown a high level of responsiveness to disaster events at the local level by providing expeditious support for recovery and reconstruction in the aftermath of earthquakes in 2009 and 2011[21] and a rapid post-disaster needs assessment and recovery of infrastructure that was damaged by floods in the summer of 2016[22]. The effort also laid the foundation for effective work to strengthen capacity for climate change adaptation and disaster risk management at both national and local levels. However, it is important to coordinate rapid assessments with those of other agencies to avoid raising unrealistic resources expectations among the local population and, in certain cases, delaying responses. In **Uganda,**[23] UNDP worked towards building local capacities for disaster risk reduction and both national and district officials were trained to carry out gender-sensitive assessment of the effects of the earthquake in 2016. However, there were a large number of government agencies and NGOs involved in similar disaster assessments exercises, which led to increased expectations at the community level and slower disaster response.

5 Decentralization reforms are important investments towards better-structured municipalities to address crisis but require an early start and long-term commitment.

Helping countries decentralize, devolve responsibilities to municipalities, and improve their capacities is key to setting the stage for better-structured municipalities, capable to rapidly respond and recover when crisis strike. However, these efforts take time, continuity and should be part of a long-term strategy at the national level to be implemented well in advance of a crisis. For example, UNDP has a long-standing engagement in **Somalia,**[24] where state-building work started in 2009[25] and continues to be challenging. Over the years, progress has been made towards the formation of State structures and governance processes at three levels of government. The work supported the Somali Government to extend governance, services, and reconciliation to areas newly liberated from al-Shabaab through stabilization and is considered a crucial part of the national and international community's strategy in Somalia. Progress is being made in the building of local government structures and district councils through a systematic approach to capacity development so that new local institutions are able to perform essential devolved governance functions. Among the challenges that continue to persist at all levels is the need for a long-term capacity development strategy.

In many cases, national government commitment is slow, and it takes time to engage centralized states resisting to transferring resources and autonomy to local levels of government. In **Bangladesh,**[26] UNDP achieved good results in assistance and support to national policymaking, by drafting policy studies, strategies, regulations, rules and guidelines to support improved implementation of local government acts. These included improvements in revenue collection and execution of budgets at the local levels, with the value-added of allocation of resources targeting gender equality activities, as well as e-governance with better service delivery, simplification of government services and also targeting

core development issues. However, these incremental improvements were bound by the limited progress the country has made in delegating additional resources and autonomy to local government institutions.

Similarly, UNDP's public modernization efforts in **Iraq**[27] initiated in 2010 brought important contributions to the simplification of working systems and procedures and service delivery models across national, subnational and local levels of government over time[28]. However, once a strong and influential part of the programme in the early days, the governance programme became fragmented and diminished. Despite being a critical factor in building stability and confidence in Iraq's Government, decentralization of public services is challenging, as Iraq has traditionally been a centralized State and there is resistance to relinquishing power to the provinces.

6 Linking successful individual interventions at the local level to national policy reform is an effective way to scale up interventions and enable wider impact.

UNDP programmes tend to support many diverse and small-scale activities that are individually successful but do not add up to systemic change or have links to policy reform.[29] Adequately leveraging government policies or institutionalizing successful pilot initiatives is critical for broader application by governments and development agencies, especially in times of crisis.

In disaster risk management for example, while national processes establish the framework that guide actions during national emergencies and natural disasters, it is also important to work at the local level to validate strategies, strengthen local regulatory frameworks and build local capacities to implement actions. In **Ecuador**, UNDP, jointly with partners at the national and subnational levels, worked with the Municipalities of Cuenca and Quito to strengthen urban risk management in these cities and test DRR methodologies and tools applicable to urban contexts, with expectations that the learning will constitute benchmarks for work with other urban municipalities.[30] In **Sri Lanka,**[31] UNDP promoted and supported mainstreaming of disaster management into development plans, land-use plans, building codes at the local level with significant achievements and improvements towards an effective disaster management system. UNDP worked to build capacity for effective preparedness, mitigation and response to natural and man-made disaster at national and subnational levels.

In many situations, addressing structural barriers that hinder transformation requires broad and sustained efforts. Good work at the local level can be leveraged to promote wider reach and create greater impact. For example, in **Turkey,**[32] UNDP has contributed to local administration reform processes and the establishment of a civilian oversight mechanism for internal security at the local level, among other interventions, through support for several studies which contributed to identifying institutional capacity gaps and strengthening policies and processes. But, while there is momentum for the local administration reform processes, UNDP has yet to go forward and leverage on its subnational level initiatives for a structured engagement in local administration reform issues. Similarly, in **Guatemala,**[33] UNDP made relevant contributions to enhancing institutional frameworks for attention to victims of violence and sexual abuse and promoting greater participation by women and indigenous peoples in local development processes. However, the issue requires a broad, sustained and concerted effort to address the structural barriers and achieve transformative gender and rights results.

7 Inclusive and bottom-up approaches promote the engagement of local stakeholders in planning and build-back-better processes and contribute to achieving lasting results.

In many intervention areas, good results have been achieved through inclusive and bottom-up approaches to local governance. In **Lebanon,**[34] UNDP was able to bring communities together to undertake conflict assessments and identify solutions to address some of the conflict drivers. Months were spent in discussions and negotiations to guarantee buy-in and ownership from stakeholders, with good progress achieved in the design of components for the professionalization of municipal police in that country. In **Iraq,**[35] UNDP ensured ownership of partners, such as

governorates and the government administrations (water, electricity, etc.), as well as stakeholders through their involvement in the identification and prioritization of basic services projects and successfully addressed the needs of IDPs, refugees, returnees and vulnerable host communities, providing them with the basic necessities of living (electricity, water, housing and other infrastructural projects). Similarly, in **Kyrgyzstan,**[36] UNDP involved communities in water supply management and obtained positive results in increasing their ownership and accountability both on water supply and demand side with positive impacts on the building of more resilient communities. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in **Nicaragua,**[37] UNDP used a bottom-up approach to provide direct support to the building of 400 low-income housing units and basic services for victims affected by the catastrophe. Working in cooperation with the municipality, a participatory process was used to select beneficiaries and the local population was involved in housing design and construction processes. This presented an opportunity to also build the capacity of a small number of people in construction management and building maintenance practices.[38] In **Timor Leste,**[39] using a bottom-up planning and budgeting process at the local levels, UNDP contributed to developing capacities, systems, tools and processes for local planning, programming, implementation and management (public expenditure management) of local development projects. Area-based, rights-driven and bottom-up approaches were also used by UNDP to provide innovative multisectoral solutions in response to challenges of internal displacement in **Somalia.**[40]

REFERENCES

[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] Terminal Evaluation Report: Recovery and Resilience in Selected Typhoon Yolanda-Affected Communities in the Visayas (Project RECOVERY), Philippines (2018)

[3] https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/local_governance/local-governance-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-settings.html

[4] https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/peace/conflict-prevention/strengthening-local-governance.html

[5] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Bangladesh (2019)

[6] Assessment of Development Results: Nicaragua (2007)

[7] Integrated Area-based Development in Osh province, Kyrgyzstan (2019)

[8] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Afghanistan (2019)

[9] Assessment of Development Results: Cameroon (2016)

[10] Outcome Evaluation of UNDP's Crisis Prevention and Recovery Programme in Lebanon (2019)

[11] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Turkey (2019)

[12] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Tajikistan (2019)

[13] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Bangladesh (2019)

[14] Only roughly 10 percent of the more than 4 million refugees in neighbouring countries are in UNHCR-managed camps. The rest live in cities and towns.

[15] Evaluation of the UNDP Strategic Plan and Global and Regional Programmes (2017)

[16] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Turkey (2019)

[17] Assessment of Development Results: Sri Lanka (2012)

[18] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Somalia (2019)

[19] Mid Term Evaluation of the Lebanon Host Communities Support Project (LHSP), Lebanon (2018)

[20] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Bhutan (2017)

[21] Terminal evaluation of the Bhutan Recovery and Reconstruction Project, Bhutan (2012)

[22] In Bhutan, a rapid Post Disaster Needs Assessment carried out by UNDP in October 2016 noted that disruption in the supply of treated water posed health risks and disruption in medical services of the Central Region Referral Hospital, disruption in education and loss of learning for over 3,000 students and loss in business income. The assessment stressed the need to build back better so that the facility would be able to withstand floods in the future, even if they are more severe than the July 2016 floods.

[23] Final Evaluation: Strengthening Disaster Reduction Management and Resilience Building Project, Uganda (2017)

[24] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Somalia (2019)

[25] It is key to note the special circumstances in this case. UNDP in Somalia is widely recognized as a strong partner to government counterparts at the level of the Federal Government and of Federal Member States. Some partnerships

are long-standing, and others are emerging in response to current needs and the proactive attitude of UNDP staff.

[26] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Bangladesh (2019)

[27] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Iraq (2019)

[28] Final Evaluation: Iraq Public Sector modernization Programme, phase II, Iraq (2019), p.10

[29] Evaluation of the UNDP Strategic Plan and Global and Regional Programmes (2017)

[30] Evaluación del Resultado 306: Fortalecimiento del Sistema Nacional Descentralizado de Gestión de Riesgos (SNDGR) en Ecuador (2012)

[31] Assessment of Development Results: Sri Lanka (2012)

[32] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Turkey (2019)

[33] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Guatemala (2018)

[34] Outcome Evaluation of UNDP's Crisis Prevention and Recovery Programme in Lebanon (2019)

[35] Final Report: Evaluation of the Iraq Crises Response and Resilience Programme (ICRRP), Iraq (2020)

[36] Integrated Area-based Development in Osh province, Kyrgyzstan (2019)

[37] Assessment of Development Results: Nicaragua (2007)

[38] The sustainability of this intervention, according to the evaluation, depended on the existence of ongoing flow of resources for housing, which at that time were not fully secured.

[39] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Timor Leste (2018)

[40] Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Somalia (2019)

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.