

## Annex 4: Programme alignment to the UNDP Strategic Plan 2014-2017

### Background

In a significant step forward from action in previous planning cycles, the UNDP Strategic Plan 2014-2017 has been implemented with a view to ensuring the best possible ‘fit’ or alignment between commitment to results and areas of work at the organisational level and priorities determined at country, regional and global levels. A key thrust within this approach was to improve the overall quality of UNDP programming. Implementation was pursued through a dedicated alignment initiative, launched in early-2014, which was designed flexibly to accommodate pragmatic but meaningful measures by operating units at any stage of the programme cycle.

### Approach and Implementation

A methodology to help country offices, in particular, to align to the Plan was tested in three countries, selected for their diversity of development needs and UNDP engagement: Argentina, Nepal and Sierra Leone. The promising results of these pilots were discussed at a Global Management Meeting held in March 2014 to strategize on solutions to deliver transformational results under the Strategic Plan. The meeting brought together UNDP Headquarters senior managers, Resident Coordinators/Resident Representatives, Country Directors, selected Deputy Resident Representatives and leaders of Representative Offices, Regional Service Centres and Global Policy Centres. UNDP’s leadership adopted the Tarrytown Outcome at this meeting committing the organisation to ensuring alignment of work to the Strategic Plan.

The aim of the alignment exercise was not just to adjust the programme portfolio to the current Strategic Plan, but about *institutionalising* a systematic approach to implementing *any* future Plan. While there were specific milestones that UNDP aimed to reach within the first year or year and a half of the Plan, programme alignment was neither intended neither as a compliance measure nor as a one-off exercise. It represented a concerted effort to trigger behavioural change and use approaches which would enhance programme quality and results and, thus, support, not disrupt, ongoing programme and project implementation. Recognising that country offices operate in different circumstances and find themselves at different stages of their country programmes, the alignment exercise was designed explicitly to avoid any re-negotiation of ongoing country programmes with the government or the Board, but rather the identification of adjustments which could be made within existing commitments, with deeper shifts expected to be introduced in new Country Programme Documents, if needed. It was also made clear that country ownership and priorities remained central to UNDP’s programming, with corporate priorities helping to shape how and where UNDP would be best positioned to support programme countries.

Utilising lessons learnt from the pilots, UNDP developed a complete approach to alignment built around three groups of parameters:

- **Thematic alignment parameters** – Less fragmented responses to programme country needs with a focus on UNDP’s global offer defined by the three areas of development work in the Plan, looking as well at opportunities to address new or emerging issues, particularly sustainable production technologies, access to modern energy services (especially renewables) and energy efficiency, natural resource management, extractive industries, urbanisation, citizen security, social protection, and risk management for resilience.
- **Design parameters** – Programmes and projects designed to ensure clear targeting, adoption of issues-based (multi-sectoral) approaches to development solutions, scalability, sustainability, voice and participation and the use of South-South and triangular cooperation (SSC and TrC).
- **Operational or management parameters** – Programmes and projects based on evidence (in-depth use of data, policy research and analysis), consistently applying theories of change, adopting portfolio management for issues-based approaches, and with improved monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as well as risk management.

Those parameters were explained and specified in the Alignment Handbook, Part 1 - [Guide to Concepts](#). The Alignment Handbook, Part 2 - [Methodology](#) provided hands-on, step-by-step, guidance on how to diagnose where country programmes and projects stood vis-à-vis the parameters, identify necessary adjustments, and develop related action plans.

To ensure uptake of the alignment methodology throughout the organisation, training was organised both in New York and in each region. During two training of trainers workshops in NY in 2014, a core group of staff in regional and central bureaux familiarized themselves with the alignment methodology in order to guide and drive

alignment across the organisation to ensure rapid and effective implementation. Following this, 9 regional workshops covering all regions were organised to train teams from 126 country offices, while the remaining offices benefited from in-country alignment missions, often within the framework of preparations for new Country Programme Documents. Participants were a mix of senior managers and programme or M&E staff, expected upon their return to engage the rest of the office in an alignment diagnosis and preparation of an alignment action plan. The total direct cost of this exercise was less than USD 1 million in 2014-15 but with significant positive effects across UNDP's multi-billion dollar portfolio.

Momentum to ensure follow-up was reinforced through UNDP's annual corporate planning process which brings together efforts across all levels of the organisation worldwide. Alignment was, thus, made a priority in the 2014 and 2015 Annual Business Plans. At the time, focal points in each of the regional and central bureaux as well as regional hubs, coordinated by the Executive Office of the Administrator, provided a corporate network to help monitor, trouble-shoot and share experiences and lessons learnt. Trained country office staff also served as advocates and change agents for the alignment process, helping to carry out alignment diagnostics involving a cross-section of country office staff, under the leadership of senior country office management.

## Early Results

Independent consultants were deployed in late-2015/early-2016 to provide a preliminary assessment of the alignment exercise. The team made full use of internal documentation and data, complemented by in-depth interviews with a sample of staff from Headquarters and 16 Country Offices representing all regions and typologies.

The consultants found that country offices generally appreciated corporate efforts to actively manage the process of alignment, creating strategically located units, forums, processes and systems to advance alignment. This helped the reorientation of capacities, programme and operational procedures and programme activities to support implementation of the Strategic Plan in as short a time as possible, yielding valuable early gains.

Analysis of monitoring and reporting against corporate priorities by all country offices allowed the consultants to go further to assess the 'degree' of alignment at country level on a scale from 0 to 100 based on: a) the specificity of the intent to align the country programme as described in the office's plan; b) the overall progress against stated alignment activities, as reported through mid-year monitoring and end-of-year reporting; and c) overall understanding of alignment parameters demonstrated by answers to specific questions in the result-oriented annual report on implementation of parameters. The methodology is summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1: Assessment of Country Office Alignment*

Assessment of	Sources	Scale	Weights
<b>Specificity of intent of alignment</b>	Result Oriented Annual Report 2014	0= no specific intent 1= very limited intent 2= good specifics 3= very specific intent	Weighted at 20%
<b>Progress in implementing alignment</b>	Integrated Work-Plan end of year reporting and Result Oriented Annual Report 2015	0= alignment not part of the plan 1= no progress 2= some progress 3= significant progress  0= alignment reported as not a priority 1= alignment action plan, not on track 2= alignment action plan partially on track 3= alignment action plan on track with specific progress	Weighted at 40%
<b>Quality of understanding of alignment</b>	Result Oriented Annual Report 2015	0= did not understand alignment 1= limited understanding 2= good understanding 3= advanced -very specific understanding	Weighted at 40%



Figure 1: Distribution of overall Alignment Scores

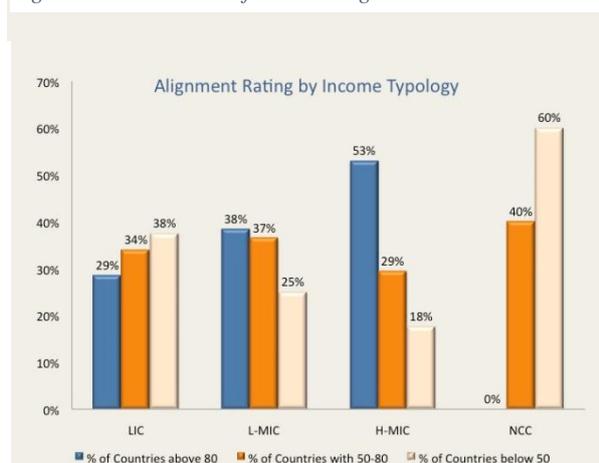


Figure 2: Distribution of Alignment Rating by Country Typology

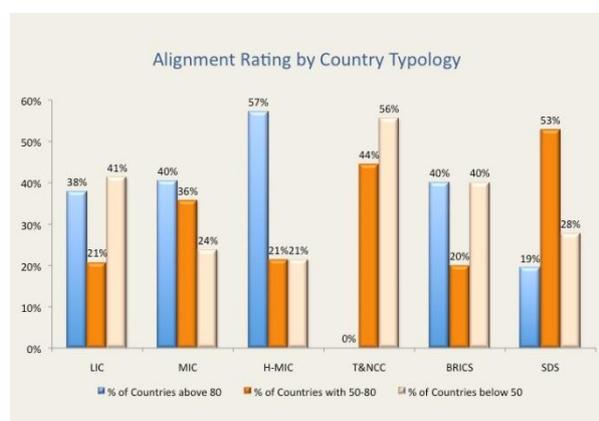


Figure 3: Distribution of Alignment Rating by Income

This analysis of alignment revealed that 33 per cent of country offices scored above 80, while 68 per cent of country programmes scored 50 or above. Only 32 per cent scored below 50 (Figure 1), offering UNDP an opportunity to dig deeper to understand factors explaining progress and shortfalls and take remedial action.

Differences observed between countries by typology and by income levels were also instructive although these findings should not be seen as definitive (Figures 3 and 4). Countries in Special Development Situations had low levels of alignment due largely to their challenging circumstances. The lowest level of alignment was found among Net Contributor Countries (NCCs) where programming by UNDP is less conventional, pointing to the need to better understand how alignment could be designed for these settings. This was mirrored in the analysis of countries disaggregated by income level, where 60 per cent of NCC countries scored below 50 and fully 100 per cent scored below 80. In the income-disaggregated statistics, high middle-income countries scored best, with 53% scoring above 80.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews with country offices indicated that, as expected, those with ongoing country programmes when the Strategic Plan was approved faced a relatively greater task in reorienting their activities compared to country offices which used the alignment opportunity to prepare a new programme adhering to the proposed standards. Nevertheless, a broad spectrum of country offices have made progress in raising awareness of the Plan and higher standards, training staff, and introducing new procedures and tools to make the identification of needs and programme formulation more systematic and rigorous. Several offices have restructured themselves to reflect the focus of the Strategic Plan. Most country offices have experienced good technical support from regional hubs in programme design as well as ongoing advice during programme implementation. Despite the added transitional cost of meeting more rigorous standards, country offices self-report a noticeable improvement in the quality of programme design, concluding as well that the new, more systematic approach to design has better positioned UNDP in a rapidly changing development environment.

## The Way Forward: Institutionalization of Alignment Parameters

To ensure that the alignment exercise is not just a one-off, the alignment parameters have been institutionalized in UNDP's programme quality standards. New country programme and project templates have been developed with guidance aimed at embedding the alignment parameters, starting from the design phase. Appraisal processes as well as monitoring and evaluation practices have been revamped to take the parameters into account. As of 2016, all country, regional, and global programmes and projects are required to adhere to the following quality standards for programming:

- **Strategic:** consistency with the Strategic Plan and aligned with the UNDAF, based on clear analysis backed by evidence and theories of change.

- **Relevant:** Programming objectives and results are consistent with national needs and priorities, as well as with feedback obtained through the engagement of targeted groups as relevant. Programming strategies consider interconnections between development challenges and results.
- **Social and Environmental Standards:** all programming applies the core principles of human rights, gender, and environmental sustainability.
- **Management and Monitoring:** outcomes and outputs are defined at an appropriate level, are consistent with the theory of change, and have SMART indicators. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plans are implemented and appropriate plans and actions are taken to mitigate and manage risks.
- **Efficient:** programming design and implementation includes measures to ensure efficient use of resources. Plans include consideration of scaling up and links with other initiatives to achieve impact.
- **Effective:** programming design and implementation is informed by relevant knowledge, evaluation and lessons learned to develop strategy and inform course corrections.
- **Sustainability and National Ownership:** programming includes assessing and strengthening the capacity and sustainability of national institutions.

To assure adherence to the quality standards, UNDP-supported programming is monitored and recorded through programme and project quality assurance (QA) assessments at the design stage, annually during implementation, and at closure. Data collected through quality assurance screenings in 2015 represent a benchmark to assess progress by the end of the Strategic Plan period and going into the next Plan, providing scope for the identification of strengths and weaknesses and follow-up through a process of continuous improvement.