

# United Nations Population Fund

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## United Nations Population Fund

### Evaluation of the UNFPA response to the Syria crisis

#### Summary

In 2018, the Evaluation Office conducted an evaluation of the UNFPA response to the Syria crisis, as part of the quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan (2018-2021).

Covering the period 2011-2018, the evaluation assessed all humanitarian interventions targeting affected populations within Syria and in neighbouring countries.

The evaluation generated important findings, conclusions and recommendations. It is intended to support accountability for past and present performance and contribute to evidence-based decision-making, both for the continued UNFPA response to the Syria crisis and future UNFPA humanitarian responses elsewhere in the world.

### UNFPA – EVALUATION

Annual session 2019  
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New York

## I. Background

1. Since 2011, the crisis in Syria has had a profound effect across the region. By the end of 2017, 13.1 million Syrian women, men, girls and boys needed humanitarian assistance, 6.1 million within Syria and 7 million in surrounding countries. Close to 3 million people inside Syria were in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, and were exposed to grave protection violations.<sup>1</sup> Half the people of Syria have been forced from their homes and many of them have been displaced multiple times.
2. In 2014, the Whole of Syria approach was introduced across the United Nations. This approach is an effort to ensure a coordinated humanitarian response to all people in need in Syria, using all relevant response modalities. In particular, United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2322 (2016) among others, provided the framework for cross-border operations from inter-agency hubs in Jordan and Turkey attempting to reach those areas that could not be reached from Damascus.
3. In addition to the cross-border work, and operations from Damascus within Syria, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) aims at harmonizing protection and assistance to Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey).
4. UNFPA has been responding to the crisis since 2011 (in many cases building on pre-existing longer-term development activities in each of the affected countries). In 2013, UNFPA established a regional response hub in Amman with the aim of facilitating more effective UNFPA representation at the different humanitarian coordination forums, increasing the effectiveness and visibility of humanitarian response activities and enhancing resource-mobilization efforts.
5. As part of its response to the Syria crisis, UNFPA has: (1) supported life-saving sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights services, including maternal and new born health, family planning, the clinical management of rape and the provision of necessary sexual and reproductive health commodities; (2) engaged in programmes that seek to mitigate and prevent the occurrence of gender-based violence and provide response services to gender-based violence survivors, including through gender-based violence case management and psychosocial support for women and girls at risk from, or survivors of, violence; (3) distributed specialized, customized and culturally sensitive hygiene or dignity kits (containing various sanitary items) targeting primarily women, girls and families; (4) deployed medical and other specialized personnel to assist in providing and coordinating services to affected communities; and (5) deployed trained personnel to support and encourage the participation of affected youth in society by facilitating recreational and educational programmes, rehabilitation and psychosocial interventions, and life-skills education.

## II. The purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

6. The primary purpose of this evaluation was to assess the contribution of UNFPA to the Syria humanitarian crisis response. A secondary purpose was to generate findings and lessons that would be of value across UNFPA and for other stakeholders.
7. The specific objectives of the evaluation were: (1) to provide an independent comprehensive assessment of the UNFPA overall response to the Syria crisis, including its contribution to the Whole of Syria approach; (2) to examine the organizational structure set up by UNFPA to coordinate its Syria crisis response interventions, in particular the operations of the Syria regional response hub; and (3) to draw lessons from UNFPA past

<sup>1</sup> OCHA, 2018 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2017

and current Syria humanitarian crisis responses and propose recommendations for future humanitarian responses, both in the subregion and elsewhere.

8. The evaluation covered all UNFPA humanitarian interventions targeting populations affected by the conflict in Syria during the period 2011-2018, both within Syria and in neighbouring countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey).

### III. Evaluation methodology

9. The evaluation methodology followed a mixed multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods, including a desk review of documentation, key informant interviews, community-based focus group discussions and an online survey.
10. Triangulation of data was ensured through systematic crosschecking of pieces of evidence from different sources and by applying different data analysis methods.
11. Overall, the evaluation team reviewed 338 programme documents, interviewed 348 people (covering governments, donors, non-governmental organizations and United Nations organizations), consulted 397 community members through focus group discussions (80 per cent of whom were women and girls) and conducted an online survey. The evaluation team also produced two case study reports, respectively on the UNFPA regional response hub and UNFPA cross-border interventions.

### IV. Key highlights

**Despite a slow start, the UNFPA response has been appropriate to the needs of affected populations over time, with priority given to the hardest-to-reach populations.**

12. The UNFPA response to the Syria humanitarian crisis was slow to start, although this was in the context of a wider stakeholder trend of underestimating the scale, scope, complexity and duration of the crisis in the early years. From 2014, UNFPA was able to scale up its response through continuous investment in human, technical and financial resources. The good relationship between UNFPA and host governments of the region prior to the crisis also contributed to a stronger refugee response.
13. In its response, UNFPA consistently and strategically prioritized hard-to-reach areas and the most vulnerable populations, ensuring, in particular, a good presence in newly accessible areas. Despite the challenges and complexity of the crisis, UNFPA interventions have been designed based on continual adaptation to evolving needs.
14. Overall, UNFPA has been more effective at providing response services (in the fields of gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health) than prevention. UNFPA has not taken advantage of its expertise in population data to analyse and collate results within a population profile.

**UNFPA has been a key player in the delivery of quality gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health services for women, girls and youth across all countries involved in the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis.**

15. Evidence indicates that UNFPA-supported activities are positively received and are filling essential gaps. Within Syria, in particular, UNFPA has successfully increased the provision of gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health services despite severe restrictions due to political, security, access and partnerships issues.
16. However, the lack of systematic monitoring of outcome-level results precludes reliable and quantifiable measurement of the effectiveness of UNFPA-supported activities.

**In its programming, UNFPA has not systematically documented gender and inclusion analysis, nor has UNFPA documented its adherence to international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law.**

17. While there is some anecdotal evidence of gender and inclusion analysis in UNFPA programming, these are inconsistently documented across the Whole of Syria and refugee responses. In addition, UNFPA still has limited focus on, or investment in, ensuring access to services for people with disabilities. However, all country offices expressed a commitment to further their efforts to improve the situation.

18. Explicit reference to international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law is also inconsistent, although there is an overall sense of commitment to these principles in the implementation of the UNFPA response.

19. This lack of documentation suggests a missed opportunity for organizational learning and support to country offices for a consistent approach to humanitarian principles.

**The inconsistency of the inclusion of men and boys in gender-based violence programming has impacted on how successfully UNFPA has leveraged its comparative strength in this area.**

20. UNFPA country offices in the region have demonstrated a different understanding of programming within a gender-based violence response, with some promoting inclusive gender-based violence programming for women, men, boys and girls and others opting for interventions more focused on women and girls. Inconsistencies are based on the different interpretations of organizational language when it comes to gender-based violence programming.

21. This has led external stakeholders to see different approaches in terms of engagement with men and boys across different contexts rather than a consistent UNFPA position.

**The UNFPA refugee response is strongly connected with longer-term development programming, but primarily at country level.**

22. Within each refugee-response country, connectedness between the refugee response and longer-term development via UNFPA programming has been both strong and aligned with country-specific chapters of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, which prioritize resilience building across host and refugee communities.

23. However, connectedness between different refugee responses and the cross-border operations has been weak, undermining the humanitarian-development continuum. Likewise, connectedness between interagency hubs outside of Syria and the Syria country office has been inconsistent – albeit partly for valid reasons that have affected all United Nations agencies to some degree.

**The UNFPA gender-based violence response within the framework of the Whole of Syria approach (in terms of both programming and coordination) has been exceptionally good.**

24. The high-quality products developed by the UNFPA regional response hub, such as “Voices” and the gender-based violence dashboard, have demonstrated a high return on investment of resources allocated to the gender-based violence response.

25. Gender-based violence data management by the regional response hub has been effectively used for both programming and advocacy and is a model for gender-based violence data management.

26. However, this success could have been better leveraged to embed gender-based violence response as a life-saving intervention across country-level refugee responses.

**Coordination in the field of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights has received less attention and investment than coordination of gender-based violence prevention and response within the UNFPA regional response hub.**

27. UNFPA programming is highly integrated, with sexual and reproductive health components systematically embedded within gender-based violence programmes.
28. However, the lack of a sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights specialist in the regional response hub has resulted in sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights being prioritized less than gender-based violence programming in terms of resource mobilization, communication, coordination and technical assistance.

**The emerging leadership role for youth in humanitarian action is not reflected in the UNFPA Syria response.**

29. The UNFPA youth leadership role is an emerging one, both through the leadership of the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action<sup>2</sup> and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security.
30. However, the UNFPA regional response to the Syria crisis has not leveraged this global coordination and leadership momentum to emerge as a clear youth coordination voice at field level. UNFPA has no coherent youth coordination function for the Whole of Syria approach. While youth, to a certain extent, is highlighted as a specific target population for both gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health work, there is no leverage of the global work of UNFPA on stand-alone youth programmes.

**The UNFPA regional response hub has generated a high return on investment, but its role and functions have not been adequately adjusted over time.**

31. During the initial years of the conflict, the regional response hub provided a strong overall coordination function as country offices struggled to catch up with the escalating crisis in terms of human resources, resource mobilization and humanitarian technical capacity.
32. Overall, the hub has generated high returns in terms of: (a) mobilizing significant multi-year funding; (b) advocacy and representation at Whole of Syria strategic steering group level, increasing the credibility of UNFPA as a humanitarian actor; (c) raising the profile of gender-based violence programming as a life-saving intervention; and (d) coordination for the Whole of Syria approach.
33. However, UNFPA has not adequately reviewed and revised where necessary the role and functions of the hub in line with the increased capacity of country offices.

**UNFPA operational and financial systems and structures have not fully supported the effectiveness of the response to the Syria crisis.**

34. The increasing reliance of country offices on other resources, less flexible than regular resources, has inhibited their responsiveness to a rapidly evolving crisis.
35. The lack of flexibility in systems and structures at UNFPA has led country offices to make inconsistent use of surge, fast-track procedures and emergency commodities.

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<sup>2</sup> Established after the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016.

## V. Recommendations

36. The following nine recommendations are based on the analysis that informed findings and conclusions, and on discussions held with the evaluation reference group.

### Recommendations for the UNFPA Syria regional response

37. Recommendation 1. UNFPA should recognize the current limitations with monitoring, including the gap in data management within the Syria regional response, and utilize its expertise in population dynamics, demonstrated within development programming, to contextualize results data.
38. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
- (a) Develop a global UNFPA humanitarian resource for utilizing population data to underscore UNFPA programming results across all Syria response countries
  - (b) Commit to building and consistently implementing (and resourcing) monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems that include outcome-level quantitative results across all Syria response countries
  - (c) Develop a strategy to continue to engage with UNOCHA and International Organization for Migration in order to expand the use of population dynamics data and broaden humanitarian action within Syria response countries.
39. Recommendation 2. UNFPA should review the functions of the Syria regional response hub in light of changing circumstances and agree the future role of the regional response hub.
40. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
- (a) Conduct the review in early 2019 after UNSC has decided on whether to renew cross-border operations in December 2018 and based upon the continuing situation in Idleb and other areas.
41. Recommendation 3. UNFPA should clarify and ensure consistency in its position on the inclusion of men and boys in gender-based violence programming within the regional response and ensure organizational consistency in gender-based violence language and programming in relation to the inclusion of men and boys.
42. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
- (a) Clarify its position across Syria response countries
  - (b) Develop a workplan to bring programming in line with the clarified position across countries.
43. Recommendation 4. UNFPA should review the use of surge, fast-track procedures, and emergency commodities, and continue advocating with Member States and donors for an adequate level of regular resources, to increase the efficiency of the Syria regional response.
44. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
- (a) Develop a strategy for increased efficiency of surge usage
  - (b) Collect data across all countries regarding use of commodities, average timeframes from ordering to final usage, cost, and wastage (for example, cost of items in kits that could not be or were not used)
  - (c) Develop a strategy for increased efficiency of commodity usage based on data collected.

45. Recommendation 5. UNFPA should recognize the vacuum around youth leadership and step up youth programming and coordination across the Syria regional response.
46. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Seek a resource-mobilization strategy for increasing UNFPA coordination leadership of youth in Syria response countries
  - (b) Formulate a measurement framework for documenting the effectiveness of youth coordination in countries involved in the response to the Syria crisis and use this as a foundation to leverage further financial and other support
  - (c) Support the development of youth coordination mechanisms across responses (and help to continue to support those that already exist such as in Syria, co-led by UNFPA and UNICEF) taking into account aspects of young people in humanitarian action as well as aspects of youth, peace and security
  - (d) Support the roll-out of the guidelines for working with and for young people in humanitarian action across UNFPA Syria regional response countries when these guidelines are launched.
47. Recommendation 6. UNFPA should commit internally to resourcing and supporting sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights coordination within the Syria regional response to the same level as the coordination of gender-based violence prevention and response.
48. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Produce an internal regional paper committing internally to resourcing sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights working group coordination responsibilities to the same extent as the coordination of gender-based violence prevention and response.
49. Recommendation 7. UNFPA should increase documentation of gender analysis and adherence to international humanitarian principles, international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law in the Syria regional response.
50. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Start using the Inter-Agency Standing Committee gender and age marker for all proposals
  - (b) While recognizing the attempts of all countries to more fully consider disability aspects into programming, start to integrate Washington Group disability criteria into programme design as a consistent inclusion first-step mechanism for disability
  - (c) Integrate consistent usage of the new disability in humanitarian action guidelines when they are launched
  - (d) Start documenting adherence to international humanitarian principles as well as any challenges associated with that procedure, for example, around donor conditionalities
  - (e) Plan for an exchange of issues with other countries, leading to shared learning and the development of a regional UNFPA paper highlighting the UNFPA approach to humanitarian principles and what is acceptable and what is not.

**Recommendations for UNFPA globally**

51. Recommendation 8. UNFPA should use the Whole of Syria gender-based violence sub-cluster as a blueprint for UNFPA coordination responsibilities globally.
  52. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
    - (a) Commit to resourcing gender-based violence sub-clusters with: (i) a dedicated coordinator at a level equal to other cluster coordinators; and (ii) dedicated information management support within level 3 emergencies
    - (b) Roll out this commitment to all level 3 and level 2 emergencies
    - (c) Organize a shared learning meeting where the regional response hub can present the products developed to country offices
    - (d) Develop a roll-out and support plan, including measurement indicators for country offices, to monitor the impact of using products emanating from the regional response hub.
  53. Recommendation 9. UNFPA should use the evaluation Regional Response Hub Case Study, together with a further mapping/rapid appraisal of the effectiveness of other agency hub mechanisms, to develop a blueprint for the establishment of other potential hubs in the future
  54. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
    - (a) Review the Regional Response Hub Case Study and commission a rapid review of successes and challenges from other agencies Whole of Syria approach coordination mechanisms
    - (b) Develop a “hub position paper” outlining criteria to determine if a hub is necessary for a swift and timely response that is able to cover a large-scale multi-country crisis. The paper should also outline (i) when and in what circumstances a hub should be considered; (ii) how it should be established (initial investment, positions); (iii) what functions it should initially cover (for example, resource mobilization, coordination, technical assistance, representation); and (iv) how it should be regularly reviewed
    - (c) Ensure that future hubs are established with a monitoring framework for determining added value (as an addition to normal UNFPA architecture) and return on investment from the outset.
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