COVID-19
UNDP working together with the UN system
(Initial) Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 pandemic is a test case for UN reform in action. Later this year, the UN General Assembly will assess progress of the ongoing repositioning of the UN development system and decide on its future direction by working in effective and impactful ways across peace, development, humanitarian affairs and human rights (QCPR).

The pandemic is a litmus test for the commitment we have made to deliver better, quicker, and more effective support to programme countries – leveraging our collective and individual strengths as a strong and joined-up UN development system.

It also presents opportunities to learn from our successes - as well as from our failures - and to make more informed decisions as we are entering a Decade of Action to accelerate sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges.

The purpose of this paper is to showcase some evidence of how UNDP is leading efforts in support of an integrated UN system response to COVID-19 at the country level. It complements an initial mapping of how UNDP is working hand-in-hand with UN Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordinators and UN Country Teams and with our sister development and humanitarian agencies globally and regionally. Specifically, it aims to identify

(a) bold and innovative initiatives that may inspire replication and scaling in other countries,

(b) key success factors underlying these initiatives as well as persisting challenges, and finally

(c) proposed incentives for a more impactful UN joined-up response.

I. IN WHAT AREAS DOES INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION WORK BEST?

From the initial mapping of joined-up approaches at the country level, we see positive collaborations and innovative initiatives mainly around six areas:

1) Working together on health systems support/coordinated procurement

In support of National Strategic Preparedness and Response Plans and under the overall coordination of RCs, UNDP has been working closely with WHO, UNCT members, Government ministries and partners to strengthen national systems and preparedness efforts. In the first phase of the response, the emphasis has been on ensuring timely procurement of critical medical supplies.

To ensure effective leveraging of agency-specific strengths and avoid competition, procurement needs to be well coordinated among agencies. Three possible ways have emerged for effectively streamlining efforts and generating efficiencies across the UNCT: a) Developing joint procurement plans; b) setting up digital platforms to coordinate procurement activities; and c) designating a lead entity, which extends its service offer to partners.

➢ In Fiji, UNDP is working with WHO, UNICEF and WFP in support of the national COVID-19 plan and equivalent plans for nine countries in the Pacific to address **critical gaps in COVID-19-specific health care systems**, which were identified with help from the WHO-led Joint Incident Management Team.

➢ In Guinea-Bissau, UNDP is teaming up with UNICEF, IOM and WHO in a **coordinated effort** to help build and finance isolation facilities and triage space while procuring the most necessary equipment, both for the national hospital as well as for the re-modelling of the UN clinic.

➢ In Togo, UNDP and UNICEF have developed a **joint procurement plan** to support the acquisition of critical medical supplies for the Government.

➢ In Serbia, UNDP developed a **web-based joint procurement platform** to coordinate and map UN procurement activities as well as identify funding gaps against the UN CPRP.

➢ In Azerbaijan, UNDP has been **designated as UN lead agency** on COVID-19-related logistics and supply management and has also been recommended to development partners as the go-to agency for procurement of COVID-19-related health supplies.

➢ In Belarus, UNDP and UNICEF co-chair a special **UN COVID-19 Response Task Force on procurement**, which comprises the UNCT, IFIs and national counterparts to develop a joint procurement plan and approach to provide the health system with critical medical supplies.

2) Working together on inclusive and integrated crisis management and response

In the first phase of the response, inter-agency collaboration primarily focused on joined-up support for the preparation of National Preparedness and Response Plans. Innovative and promising collaborations include (a) strengthening of national operational command centres to facilitate whole-of-government responses, (b) setting up of partnership platforms to facilitate broad-based stakeholder coalitions and pooling of data and analysis, and (c) engaging the private sector and civil society to amplify the UN system's collective reach through 'challenge' competitions and incentive mechanisms.

➢ In Madagascar, UNDP is working with WHO to **strengthen the capacity of the Government's Operational Command Centre** that is coordinating a whole-of-government COVID-19 response, including through the provision of critical ICT equipment.

➢ In Bolivia, UNDP helped set up a **COVID-19 situation room** to facilitate joint decision-making and intersectoral actions. Led by the Presidency, it is staffed by experts from UNDP, RCO, PAHO and OCHA.

➢ In Comoros, the RC, WHO, UNICEF and UNDP helped establish effective coordination structures bringing together Government, civil society, the private sector and development partners, and the UNCT **collectively deployed its key experts to the Government**'s high-level coordination committee.

➢ In Moldova, at the request of the Prime Minister's Office, UNDP established a **Big Data for COVID-19 partnership platform** in coordination with the RCO and together with WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, the European Space Agency and private sector companies.

➢ In Serbia, UNDP in partnership with WHO has launched a **challenge competition for new, innovative solutions** to protect service providers and caregivers from COVID-19 and to minimize the risk of transmission. The goal of the Challenge is not only to incentivize local private sector production but also to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship.

3) Working together on raising awareness and combating misinformation

In support of inclusive crisis management and public awareness raising, there have been a number of successful collaborations around social media campaigns to amplify public health advisories and combat misinformation. These have been particularly innovative and successful in extending the UN system's voice where agencies pooled their expertise (e.g. health + social media expertise), leveraged their respective communications channels (e.g. their Goodwill Ambassadors) and focused on engaging citizens to spread the message by creating their own social media content.

➢ In China, UNDP mobilized youths for a **social media campaign "Spread the Word, Not the Virus"** based on WHO health advisories. It amplified the UN system's voice by promoting user-generated content that reached 36 million people in 50 languages and dialects.

➢ As people return to the workplace in China, UNDP is working with WHO and private sector partners to **increase awareness of the importance of workplace safety**, incl. by launching a joint campaign with LinkedIn targeting private sector CEOs and professionals.

➢ In Libya, UNDP and UNSMIL have joined forces to support **public information and awareness-raising** by mobilizing local networks established through the Stabilization Facility and a social media campaign to support the global call for ceasefires (#peacenowstopcorona).

➢ In South Sudan, UNDP in collaboration with UNICEF and WHO is supporting the Ministry of Health's committee for media engagement, which focuses on **enhancing the capacity of journalists** to responsibly report, fact-check information and share accurate analyses.

➢ In Lao PDR, UNDP partnered with WHO and other UN agencies to reach remote communities in their ethnic languages through its **Community Radio network.**

➢ In the Philippines, UNDP collaborated with WHO to produce an **animated infomercial for children** ("#BataMayMagagawa" or "Children Can Help") to help them cope with the lockdown and teach them how they can help protect their families from COVID-19.

4) Working together on social and economic impact needs assessment and response

The multi-faceted nature of social and economic impact needs assessments makes this a key area where the UN development system can bring its unmatched breadth and depth of expertise to bear. It can build on existing partnerships for conducting assessments, such as the joint declaration on post-crisis assessments and recovery planning signed by the World Bank, the EU and the UNSDG. Promising initiatives include (a) setting up national platforms for inclusive stakeholder engagement, (b) close collaboration and work with IFIs and other partners, and giving due attention to normative and gender dimensions, and (c) uniting the humanitarian and development responses under a common approach.

➢ In Moldova, the **UN COVID-19 Social and Economic Taskforce led by UNDP was transformed into a partnership platform** rallying 25 entities – UN entities, IFIs and major development partners – in support of addressing the impacts of COVID-19 in a coordinated way.

➢ In Morocco, UNDP is working with the UNCT on a **gender-sensitive, human right-based needs assessment framework** and a **national coordination platform** bringing together UN agencies, IFIs and relevant technical and financial partners for an efficient coordinated response.

➢ In Somalia, the UNCT is working together under the leadership of the DSRSG to **combine the humanitarian and development responses into a single response plan** and create a costed socio-economic plan.

➢ In the Pacific, UNDP is technically leading a **multi-country socio-economic impact assessment**, with participation of 15 UN entities as well as the World Bank, ADB and other partners to advise government on policy options to address the impacts of the crisis.

5) Operational support to UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams

UNDP is supporting RCs in their coordination mandate with critical backbone services, including procurement, ICT, logistics and administrative support. Forms of collaboration include providing temporary surge capacity to facilitate joint decision-making and intersectoral actions, as well as joined-up collaboration around resource mobilization and strategic communications.

➤ In Eswatini, UNDP is supporting the RC Office by providing **administrative, ICT, procurement and logistics support**, including to the UN House.

➤ In Syria, the RC has requested UNDP to support the RCO by establishing a **coordination structure** dedicated to the Covid-19 response that coordinates between the UN and the Government in support of **multi-sectoral responses**.

➤ In Niger, UNDP supports the RC Office in **resource mobilization and strategic communications** in support of the Government's overall response to the pandemic.

6) Joint funding in support of a UN system-wide response

Joint funding can serve as critical incentive for a joined-up UN system response to COVID-19. As a complement to the global MPTF, some UNCTs have established dedicated local funding modalities for rapid disbursements, using globally agreed standards and procedures. While these initiatives are still in their infancy, they already offer some insightful lessons.

➤ In Nigeria, UNDP played a lead role in preparing the joint UN strategy on the COVID-19 response and set up a **COVID-19 fund** in support of its integrated implementation.

➤ In Togo, UNDP and UNICEF are working together on setting up a **COVID-19 MPTF**, which will be under the leadership of the RC.

II. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PLACES WHERE COORDINATION IS FUNCTIONING?

Inter-agency collaboration works best where a combination of the following success factors is present:

Strong national ownership with committed leadership and an effective coordination mechanism in support of a unified framework for joint action across ministries and sectors.

Joined-up UN support for developing and implementing a government-led national plan. The UNCT can facilitate broad stakeholder engagement in support of the plan through a Government-led national coordination platform or by transforming its internal mechanisms into broader partnership platforms that bring all relevant partners behind a common effort.

An integrated and context-specific UNCT plan for a cross-sectoral response agreed upon and set up jointly from the outset. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of each UNCT member and the RCO, as well as anticipated resource flows. All UNCT initiatives are aligned to the national plan and agencies are committed to working through national institutions to the greatest extent possible. The RC is leading overall coordination together with designated lead entities for each pillar of the UN's support based on clearly delineated responsibilities.

👍 **UNDP's integrator role at the heart of the UNDS** has been given strategic framing, policy shape and immediacy in application during this crisis response. Being neither a health nor a humanitarian agency, UNDP plays an important role as convener and facilitator of the short-term and longer-term socio-economic, environmental and vulnerability fall-out, as well as the security and political considerations of government and public service delivery. The designation of UNDP as technical lead in the socio-economic response has helped clarify UNDP's role in supporting the RC to elaborate the UN response and leverage the wider system to implement the socio-economic work.

👍 **Leadership and a trusted relationship between the RC, the UNDP RR and the WHO Rep.** Clarity in the division of labour of the three functions is important along with the ongoing relationships and daily exchanges among the three – and good two-way communication flows with the UNCT – is what makes it work. Strong collaboration takes genuine commitment and investment of time and resources from the leadership down and recognition of each other's strengths and differences. UNDP's early and consistent support to RCs and WHO has been an important ingredient for success.

👍 **Regular, timely and transparent information-sharing and joint planning**, including systematic consultations with smaller agencies and agencies without physical presence. This needs to happen from the design phase of interventions so as to seize joint programming opportunities and ensure truly joined-up approaches within and across programming pillars.

👍 **Existing joint initiatives and mechanisms that can be quickly scaled or transformed** into joined-up COVID-19 initiatives. Inter-agency collaboration has been particularly strong in identifying existing health and civic engagement programming interventions that can be scaled or activated for COVID-19 responses (e.g. UNDP regional initiative on gender justice in the Arab States; UNDP-UNV youth engagement programme in India). UNCTs with strong Common Country Assessments (CCA) in place have a head-start in quickly developing socio-economic impact assessments. UNCT mechanisms can also sometimes be effectively transformed into national partnership platforms by inviting Government, IFIs, development partners and the private sector. This puts high expectations and demands on lead agencies in terms of technical support, a quick response, partnership engagement and resource mobilization.

👍 **One UN Voice, speaking on behalf of the most vulnerable** who are likely to suffer most from this crisis, is an essential role in every country. A strong values agenda is essential to driving a common UN approach.

👍 **Leadership and joined-up support from the regional level.** Issue-based Coalitions can play a key role in supporting country offices through joint policy positions, advocacy, and joint programmes, particularly on cross-cutting normative issues. Collaboration around strategic communications helps convey a coherent UN image and brand. Regional OMTs are instrumental in accelerating the common operations agenda and supporting an effective and efficient response on the ground.

👍 **Joint funding modalities as key enablers** for a joined-up UNCT response. Complementing the global UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, country-specific inter-agency pooled funds offer opportunities for mobilizing resources and fostering joined-up partnership approaches in support of the UN system's strategic response in the country. Key success factors are (a) a compelling and unified UNCT vision, (b) clearly outlined results aligned to the national plan, (c) strong and transparent leadership by the RC and trusted relationships within the UNCT, and (d) relying on MPTFO to ensure existing standards, systems and best practices for inter-agency pooled funds are applied.

III. WHAT ARE KEY CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES TO A TRULY JOINED-UP RESPONSE?

! **The complex and rapidly evolving nature of the crisis** impacts a coherent and coordinated approach. On the one hand, the multi-faceted nature of the pandemic across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus challenges established coordination structures. Coordinating planning and implementation across the nexus requires committed leadership, dedicated resources and strong communications. On the other hand, the need for a speedy response in the initial phase did not always allow for a system-wide approach. In Asia-Pacific, for instance, UNDP was quick off the mark as it was present in the initial 4-6 weeks of the COVID-19 response in many countries in the region. It could not wait for a system-wide strategy and had to act fast. However, it did so with regular alerts to RCs and WHO and working with the latter to share information and growing concerns.

! **The UN system's fragmented structural design** poses inherent challenges, which are particularly pronounced in times of crisis when independent UN entities with their own boards, agendas and internal organizational structures are inclined to compete with each other for partnerships, funding and visibility, especially in middle-income countries where funding opportunities are limited. A multiplicity of agency-specific funds and current donor funding patterns exacerbate these tendencies and lead to agencies being drawn to the "honey pot" of ad hoc funding opportunities, sometimes in disregard of a higher strategic purpose. This puts a premium on the RC's ability to understand agencies' comparative strengths and give strategic direction to the UN's overall offer.

! **Different organizational models and cultures** resulting in differing degrees of delegated authority, agency-internal timelines and clearing processes, can be serious impediments to joint programming even in the best of times. These differences are all the more heightened in times of crisis when rapid and decisive actions need to be taken in a reversal of the bon mot "if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

! **Myriads of methodologies, approaches and analytical tools**, which UN agencies continue to deploy. These are often sponsored by regional offices, HQs, and donors and regularly lead to distinct views on who the most vulnerable groups are and how to assess and address their needs. This richness in methodologies and approaches is equally a blessing and a challenge but organizational incentives tend to lead agencies to use 'home-grown and tested' tools, which are not always 'open' or multidisciplinary but tend to point to response interventions from the organization owning the tool. This also can make it challenging to capture jointly agreed and coherent data for joint analyses and assessments.

! **Situations where there is no unified UNCT vision and lacking clarity of roles and responsibilities**, including regarding delivery modalities, requirements and assigned resources, greatly diminish the overall impact of the UN system's response. It also risks that national counterparts and partners do not perceive each entity's contribution as adding up to a strategic and complementary response, resulting in lost resource mobilization opportunities and reputational damage. A particular pain point concerns ensuring clarity of roles between the overall coordination mandate of RCs and the technical leadership role of thematic lead entities, particularly regarding coordination with the Government and partners – putting a premium on two-way communication with the RCO and joint planning.

! **Greater emphasis on public communications and social media is needed** to effectively convey the UN's work and results. A lot of progress has been made by many country offices, but more remains to be done. Our websites still do not carry enough of the stories of work underway with our traditional and new sets of partners.

! **Genuine partnership should never be taken for granted** even if it is a "family" partnership between UN agencies. The legacy of the past, misperceptions and lack of knowledge of each other's experience requires a conscious effort, time and honest commitment to move the relationship from a turf-defending stand to truly joined-up action. The commitment should be led from the top of each agency in a very hands-on way to ensure the new way of working takes root. It requires being flexible, adaptable and ready to compromise, and sometimes also to be willing to give up some control.

IV. WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO INCENTIVIZE A JOINED-UP RESPONSE AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL?

Skilled Resident Coordinator leadership that leverages each agency's strengths through strategic joint planning, empowering agencies to lead thematic pillars of the response on behalf of the UNCT, ensuring that joint resources are allocated fairly and transparently, and robust joint reporting.

Leadership and consistent messaging from all agency HQs in support of a joined-up UN system response at the global, regional and country level is critical. UN executive heads rallying behind the Secretary-General's report and the UN framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 are important signals in this regard.

Frequent and transparent communication flows are a prerequisite for effective collaboration, especially in times of crisis when quick and informed action by all parties is of the essence. DCO's daily bulletin to RCs, which is shared with all UNCT members, is very helpful. Similarly, the weekly DCO webinars have been opened up to UNCT members and attract an average of 800 participants. At the country level, it is key to ensure smooth two-way communication flows particularly between RCOs and thematic lead entities, as well as with UNCT members.

Sharing experiences from 'first mover' countries across country offices and agencies can give the UN system a critical head-start in its global response. Case studies and lessons should be made available swiftly and widely. Joint guidance materials should be quickly updated to reflect lessons learned and streamlined for both programming and operations (e.g. health systems, human rights etc.).

Empowering leadership and recognizing good teamwork, innovations and joint action is key. UNCT agency heads should be fully empowered and duly recognized in their performance evaluations for taking bold action and demonstrating commitment to joint and collaborative work.

Fostering a UNCT common understanding of the country context based on joint analyses and assessments is a prerequisite for the UN system to work better together. Equally, it is important that UN agency personnel are aware of programmes and projects of other agencies to understand complementarities and avoid duplication. Incentives could include trainings, a system of KPIs for joint UN work, and regular updates on the implementation of UN reform resolutions and best practices.

Inter-agency pooled funds can be an effective incentive for a joined-up UN system response. Operationalizing the UN funding compact is critical. In addition to the global *UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund*, several UNCTs have successfully established inter-agency pooled funds, which have drawn significant donor interest. As an immediate measure, Joint Rapid Response Facilities with fast-track disbursement mechanisms could be set up between agencies to incentivize swift action around common programming areas. Country offices should be afforded flexibility to re-allocate resources, as has happened for the use of existing budget allocations from the Special Purpose Trust Fund (SPTF) and the Joint SDG Fund.

Working together by using "portfolio design" to tackle complex development challenges in integrated ways can bring UN agencies together in genuine long-term collaboration under country-level joint programmatic frameworks (e.g. UNSDCF or, in the case of COVID-19, the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response). While financial resources are necessary, they are not a sufficient precondition for true collaboration. The incentives should be built-in in such a way that they boost the culture of collaboration developed around specific issues rather than projects.