

Quality Standards for Programming

1. Quality standards for programming strengthen and enable the achievement of results. They improve development effectiveness and efficiency. This policy outlines UNDP standards and mechanisms to assure programming quality.
2. All country, regional and global programmes and projects are required to adhere to the quality standards for programming. Managers are accountable for upholding them.
3. Quality standards are as follows:

Strategic

Programming priorities and results contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are consistent with the UNDP Strategic Plan and are aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework ('Cooperation Framework'). Programmes and projects are based on clear analysis backed by evidence and theories of change. The latter justify why the defined approach is most appropriate and will most likely achieve, or contribute to, desired development results along with partner contributions. The role of UNDP vis-à-vis partners is deliberately considered. New opportunities and changes in the development context are regularly reassessed, with any relevant adjustments made as appropriate.

Relevant

Programming objectives and results are consistent with national needs and priorities, as well as with feedback obtained through engaging excluded and/or marginalized groups as relevant. Programming strategies consider interconnections between development challenges and results. A gender analysis is integrated to fully consider the different needs, roles and access to/control over resources of women and men; appropriate measures are taken to address these when relevant. Programmes and projects regularly capture and review knowledge and lessons learned to inform design, adapt and change plans and actions as appropriate, and plan for scaling up.

Principled

All programming applies the core principles of Leave No One Behind, Human Rights, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Sustainability and Resilience and Accountability. Social and environmental sustainability are systematically integrated. Potential harm to people and the environment is avoided wherever possible, and otherwise minimized, mitigated and managed. The complete Social and Environmental Standards can be found [here](#).

Management, Monitoring and Evaluation

Outcomes and outputs are defined at an appropriate level, are consistent with the theory of change, and have SMART, results-oriented indicators, with specified baselines and targets, and identified data sources. Gender-responsive, sex-disaggregated indicators are used when appropriate. Relevant indicators from the Strategic Plan's Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF) have been adopted in the programme or project results framework. Comprehensive, costed monitoring and evaluation plans are in place and implemented to support evidence-based management, monitoring and evaluation. The evaluation plan should be strategic, balanced, practical (timing/sequencing), cost-effective/resourced, and include evaluations of different types (project, programme, outcome, etc.) that will generate the most critical and useful information for UNDP and its partners in the future programming, ensure

accountability, and learning from implementation. Risks, in terms of both threats and opportunities, are identified with appropriate plans and actions taken to manage them. Governance of programmes and projects is defined with clear roles and responsibilities, and provides active and regular oversight to inform decision-making.

Efficient

Programming budgets are justifiable and valid, and programming design and implementation includes measures to ensure efficient use of resources. The size and scope of programmes and projects are consistent with resources available and resource mobilization efforts. Plans include consideration of scaling up and links with other relevant initiatives to achieve greater impact. Procurement planning is done early and regularly reviewed. Monitoring and management include analysis of and actions to improve efficiency in delivering desired outputs with the required quality and timeliness, such as country office support to national implementation modalities. Costs are fully recovered (see the [Cost Recovery Policy](#)).

Effective

Programming design and implementation are informed by relevant knowledge, evaluation and lessons learned to develop strategy and inform course corrections. Targeted groups are systematically identified and engaged, prioritizing the marginalized and excluded. Results consistently respond to gender analysis and are accurately rated by the gender marker. Managers use monitoring data for making decisions that maximize achievement of desired results. South-South and triangular cooperation are used, when relevant, and captured in the results framework. Required implementing partner assessments have been conducted, and the implementation modality is consistent with the results.

Sustainability and National Ownership

Programming is accomplished in consultation with relevant stakeholders and national partners, who are engaged throughout the programming cycle in decision-making, implementation and monitoring. Programming includes assessing and strengthening the capacity and sustainability of national institutions. A strategy for use of national systems is defined and implemented, if relevant. Monitoring includes use of relevant national data sources, where possible. Sustainability of results is accomplished through tracking capacity indicators and implementing transition and scale-up plans.

4. To assure adherence to these quality standards, UNDP-supported programming is monitored through objective programme and project quality assurance (QA) assessments. Along with regular programme and project monitoring, the QA assessments ensure that at the design stage, at least every two years during implementation and at closure there is a formal focus on key performance issues outlined across seven quality criteria. This helps improve development effectiveness and increase accountability for results.
5. Quality assurance is required for all UNDP programmes and development projects,¹ regardless of their budget, size, location, duration, characteristics, context or circumstances.
6. For **programmes**, during the design and appraisal stage, the programme manager is the **QA Assessor** accountable for ensuring that the country programme document or regional programme document

¹ Project categories exempt from project QA include: development and institutional effectiveness projects; initiation plans and GEF project preparation grants; projects for which UNDP is the Managing or Administrative Agent only; engagement facility; development services

meets corporate quality standards prior to submission to the Executive Board. The chair of the headquarters Programme Appraisal Committee serves as the **QA Approver** for country programme documents.

7. During implementation, programme quality is assessed through the Results-Oriented Analysis Report.
8. During programme closure, the quality of results achieved is assessed through the independent country programme evaluation (ICPE) to the UNDP Executive Board (see [IEO mandate](#)).
9. For **projects**, accountability for the completion of accurate and timely quality assurance assessments lies with the UNDP staff member accountable for project assurance. Each office must designate at least one **quality assurance approver** who reviews the credibility of the QA assessments. The QA Approver must function at a higher level of accountability than the QA Assessor. The QA Approver is typically the Resident Representative, Deputy Resident Representative, or head of portfolio.
10. If projects do not meet the quality standards for programming, management actions to improve quality must be recorded in quality assurance reports and addressed by targeted deadlines. If UNDP cannot resolve the issue, adequate management justification must be recorded. If appropriate action has not been taken by the time the project is rated again, the project may be suspended by the programme manager until the issue is resolved.
11. The quality of project documents for development projects must be assessed prior to the project appraisal process, which should consider the quality assessment. Projects that do not meet quality standards to a satisfactory level should not be approved. If the context requires approving a project that does not meet the standards, for example, in a crisis situation requiring rapid action, the project may be approved if adequate justification is recorded by management, and if actions are taken to improve quality as soon as conditions permit.
12. When UNDP responds to crises triggered by a disaster or conflict, immediate needs may require the organization to respond as quickly as possible. In this case, the QA rating procedure may be deferred for country offices with approval from the Regional Bureau. QA ratings must be done within 12 months after the deferral unless a further extension has been granted by the Regional Bureau.
13. During the implementation stage, project quality assurance assessments are required for each project every two years. Projects that have been approved, but where no or little action has been taken due to operational, resource, partnership or other bottlenecks, will still need to complete an assessment, noting challenges affecting the quality delivery of results.
14. Prior to project closure, a final project quality assurance assessment is required along with a summary of lessons learned during the project.
15. **UNDP accountability** to the Executive Board and national stakeholders through independent evaluations; accountability to the Administrator for the sound use of resources dictates that it must take responsibility for measuring and ensuring the quality of programmes and projects it is funding and supporting. While other staff, national partners, development partners, outside experts and advisors are encouraged to participate in and support programme and project quality assurance, it is the responsibility of the QA Assessor and the QA Approver to ensure that quality assessments are effectively conducted. They are best positioned to provide accurate information on programme and project status and quality, and are obligated to ensure complete, objective and accurate information in quality assurance reports.

16. UNDP Regional Bureaus, and the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support for global projects, are responsible for '**spot checks**' of project QA reports to assess their quality and accuracy, and inform organizational learning. Regional Bureaus will spot check a sampling of project QA reports large enough to reasonably ensure the overall credibility of assessments in their region. The sampling should include a mixture of random sampling, country offices with very high value or strategically important projects, and country offices with extremely high or extremely low quality assurance ratings.