

# Evaluation Synthesis of Strategic Planning

08 February 2021

Assignment No: IED-21-001



## Inspection and Evaluation Division

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### Function

*“The Office shall evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the programmes and legislative mandates of the Organization. It shall conduct programme evaluations with the purpose of establishing analytical and critical evaluations of the implementation of programmes and legislative mandates, examining whether changes therein require review of the methods of delivery, the continued relevance of administrative procedures and whether the activities correspond to the mandates as they may be reflected in the approved budgets and the medium-term plan of the Organization” (General Assembly resolution 48/218 B).*

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## Executive Summary

This report provides a synthesis review of key results and recommendations emanating from the reports of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) - Inspection and Evaluation Division (IED) pertaining to the topic of strategic planning within and across Secretariat entities.<sup>1</sup> This is part of a series of synthesis reports that pulls together evidence from different OIOS-IED inspections and evaluations on topics of strategic importance to the United Nations Secretariat, in order to speak collectively on their relevance and impact on the work of the Organization. It is meant to facilitate a learning process by sharing trends and insights that can be helpful to senior leaders and programme managers.

The ultimate objective of the Secretary-General's reforms is to enhance the effectiveness of the Organization in meeting all its mandates and to enhance its accountability for results, while complying with the parameters set out by Member States.<sup>2</sup> The Organization's ability to achieve its core mandates to promote peace and security, protect human rights, address humanitarian needs and advance economic and social progress set out in the 2030 Agenda, is highly dependent upon effective strategic planning. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted fragilities within and among nations and across the Organization for mounting a coordinated whole-of-system response to its effects.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the United Nations liquidity crisis has made absolutely necessary the strategic planning and use of diminishing resources. In order to rise to these challenges, learning lessons in strategic planning has become that much more crucial for effective programme performance for mandate implementation. Good strategic planning ensures the utilization of the Organization's resources in an integrated, coordinated, focused and effective manner towards the achievement of mandates.

The United Nations does not have a single clearly articulated definition of strategic planning. Related references are embedded within different General Assembly resolutions, Secretary-General Reports, and planning and budgeting rules and guidance.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this synthesis review, strategic planning is defined as:

*The process by which an organization's medium- to long-term goals,<sup>5</sup> as well as resources and plans to achieve them, are defined, and a documented plan is developed to monitor achievement of these goals.*

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of this synthesis report has been Secretariat entities. A few reports included in this synthesis are evaluations of the United Nations entities outside of the Secretariat (UN Women, UNHCR, UNRWA). See Annex 4.1 for details.

<sup>2</sup> A/72/492; para. 7.

<sup>3</sup> See Executive Summary - United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19; September 2020, page 5. - <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un-comprehensive-response-to-covid-19.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See JIU report definition and OHRM strategic planning guide. JIU definition: "Strategic planning is the process by which an organization's medium- to long-term goals, as well as the resources and plans to achieve them, are defined."

<sup>5</sup> Articulated in formal Secretariat budget and planning documents as "objectives" and "expected accomplishments."

Based on a review of 37 OIOS-IED inspection and evaluation reports published between 2016 and 2020, this synthesis report identified ten strategic planning dimensions as enablers of programme performance. These dimensions related, broadly, to enabling programme relevance, enabling programme effectiveness and enabling programme efficiency as follows:



Evaluation report result statements were assessed and coded as positive (enabling programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency), negative (indicating a need for strategic planning improvements) or mixed; 24 percent were assessed as positive, 62 percent as negative, and 14 percent were mixed.

Within the context of these strategic planning dimensions, several shortcomings were identified. Joint planning was largely lacking; strategic planning was often insufficient at the sub-strategy level<sup>6</sup> and mostly lacking in coherence; prioritization in strategic planning was found to be mixed, with, for example, inadequate links between strategic plans and resource allocation being an area of concern; and, accountability mechanisms for strategic plans were assessed as being weak. All these shortcomings, as well as several strategic planning constraints, have the potential to undermine mandate delivery, including the United Nations response to emerging needs such as the pandemic and its global effects.

<sup>6</sup> In this evaluation, the term “sub-strategy” refers to strategies that underpin the entity’s formal overarching strategic plan. Usually, these sub-strategy references related to specific types of strategies necessary to plan for the delivery of a given component of an organization’s programme of work. Examples included advocacy, communication or coordination strategies. Additional examples are provided in para. 29.

Encouragingly, this synthesis has also revealed good practices that have already been developed and implemented in some entities and these can be the basis on which to strengthen strategic planning and the system-wide responses. These include:

- Integrating lessons-learning in the context of planning exercises;
- Developing strategies focused on specific issues (such as advocacy, communication or coordination strategies in support of the SDGs or COVID-19 response), which are effectively linked, and which are complementary to each entities' over-arching strategic plans;
- Enhancing coordination through common chapters in strategic plans across United Nations entities; and,
- Operationalizing strategic plans through the development of indicator frameworks, and effectively monitoring and reporting on project outcomes.

Regarding the United Nations reform agenda, the synthesis review affirmed the pivotal role that strengthened strategic planning can play in fulfilling the reform vision and identified several areas where the United Nations reform proposals address key strategic challenges. However, gaps in, and constraints to, strategic planning remained; these include:

- Inadequate information sharing platforms for joint planning across entities, which resulted in insufficient and siloed planning;
- Accumulation of mandates, which constrained entities' ability to respond strategically to emerging needs;
- Inconsistent approaches to planning processes, which led to a lack of alignment and planning documents with conflicting priorities based on funding arrangements;
- Lack of guidance on how to achieve integrated planning within and across entities given the subprogramme-level orientation of the strategic planning process in the Secretariat, and an associated lack of demonstrated planning capacity;
- Continued shortcomings in monitoring and evaluation, including insufficient results orientation, inadequate performance frameworks, resources and limited capacities to support these;
- Frequent leadership changes within entities constraining the strategic vision and implementation of plans; and,
- Inadequate development of supplementary strategies.

To capitalize on the lessons which this synthesis report identifies, and to maximize the results of the United Nations reform vision to improve the ability to deliver on mandates effectively, programme managers should make, or re-double, efforts to enhance programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency through better strategic planning.

## Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Objective .....	2
1.3 Definition, Strategic Planning Dimensions and Approach .....	3
1.4 Limitations .....	6
<b>2. Detailed Results by Strategic Planning Dimension .....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Enabling Programmatic Relevance.....	7
Factoring lessons learned and emerging issues into strategic plans .....	7
Strategic planning in support of SDGs, Gender and Human Rights goals.....	8
Factoring in stakeholder needs .....	9
2.2 Enabling Programmatic Effectiveness.....	9
Joint planning .....	10
Sufficiency at sub-strategy level .....	11
Coherence in planning approaches.....	12
Accountability mechanisms .....	13
Planning constraints .....	13
2.3 Enabling Programmatic Efficiency.....	14
Prioritization .....	15
Resource allocation .....	15
<b>3. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Implications for United Nations response to COVID-19 pandemic.....	18
3.2 Key take-aways for programme managers.....	19
<b>4. Annexes.....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1 List of IED evaluations and inspections reviewed .....	21

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

1. The ultimate objective of the Secretary-General's reforms is to enhance the effectiveness of the Organization in meeting all its mandates and to enhance its accountability for results, while complying with the parameters set out by Member States.<sup>7</sup> The Organization's ability to achieve its core mandates to promote peace and security, protect human rights, address humanitarian needs and advance economic and social progress set out in the 2030 Agenda, is highly dependent upon effective strategic planning. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted fragilities within and among nations and across the Organization for mounting a coordinated whole-of-system response to its effects.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the United Nations liquidity crisis has made absolutely necessary the strategic planning and use of diminishing resources. In order to rise to these challenges, learning lessons in strategic planning has become that much more crucial to effective programme performance for mandate implementation. Good strategic planning ensures the utilization of the Organization's resources in an integrated, coordinated, focused and effective manner towards the achievement of mandates.

2. The Secretary-General identified three focus areas of reform to enable the Organization to deliver better results and improve the lives of those it serves: management, sustainable development and peace and security. Given the complexity of these reform areas, enhanced strategic planning plays a pivotal role in meeting this vision.

3. *Figure 1*, developed by OIOS-IED based on Secretary-General reform reports and related General Assembly resolutions, provides an overview of some elements within each reform pillar – management, development and peace and security – where strategic planning has relevance and utility.<sup>9</sup>

4. For example, within the context of ensuring effective resource management, the management reform included recognition of the need to increase attention to strategic issues such as workforce planning and talent management, improved approaches to the implementation of strategies and policies, and strengthened monitoring of delegated human resources management authority.<sup>10</sup> On strengthening transparency and accountability, the management reform has called for strengthening the implementation of results-based management to refocus the efforts of staff at all levels towards the achievement of the Organization's objectives and results, and defining a four-year action plan towards that end.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A/72/492; A/72/492/Add.1; A/73/366 (management reform).

<sup>8</sup> See United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19; September 2020, page 5. See also footnote 3 of this report.

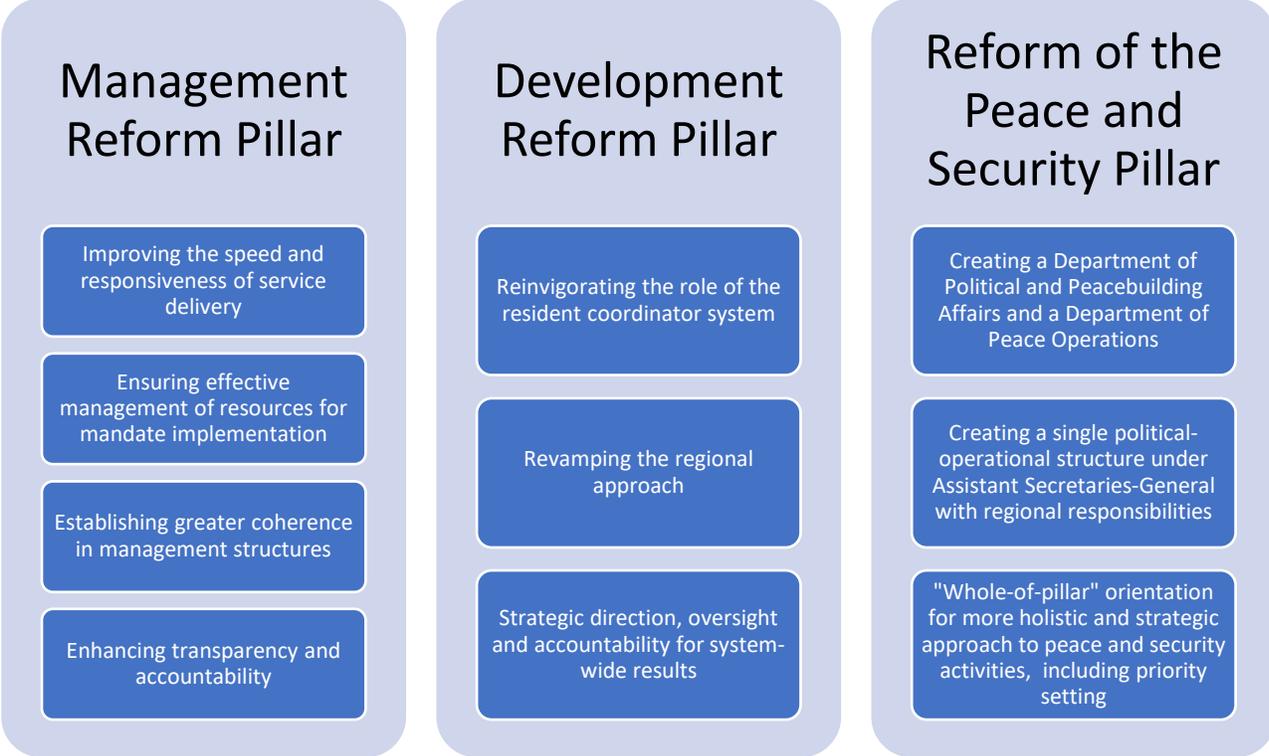
<sup>9</sup> A/RES/72/199; A/72/525 (paragraphs paras: 15,17,20,21 and 50 and the Executive Summary); A/72/772 (peace and security reform); A/RES/72/279 (development system reform). See also footnote 7 of this report for references.

<sup>10</sup> A/73/366, para. 11.

<sup>11</sup> A/72/733 para. 4b.

Under the development reform pillar, repositioning of the development system has the critical goal of improving strategic direction, oversight and accountability as a means to the achievement of improved system-wide results.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, reform under the peace and security pillar, included the need for a “whole-of-pillar” orientation to become more nimble, coherent and effective and to prioritize prevention and sustaining peace while addressing key strategic, political and operational priorities.<sup>13</sup> Robust strategic planning is needed to accomplish all these envisioned reform objectives.

**Figure 1: Selected reform area elements under each reform pillar**



Source: OIOS based on A/72/525; A/72/772; A/RES/72/199; A/RES/72/279.

**1.2 Objective**

5. This report provides a synthesis review of key evaluation results and recommendations relating to strategic planning in OIOS-IED inspection and evaluation reports from 2016-2020. It is meant to facilitate learning by sharing information on strategic planning as an enabler of programme performance for mandate implementation. This is part of a series of OIOS-IED synthesis reviews that pull together evidence from different inspections and evaluations on

<sup>12</sup> A/RES/72/279, para. 20.

<sup>13</sup> A/72/525, para. 17.

topics of importance to the United Nations Secretariat.<sup>14</sup> This synthesis review is not a systematic evaluation of strategic planning in the Organization, but an analysis and summary of the most frequently cited strategic planning issues that impact on programme performance.

### 1.3 Definition, Strategic Planning Dimensions and Approach

6. The United Nations does not have a single definition of strategic planning. Related references are embedded within different General Assembly resolutions, Secretary-General reports, and planning and budgeting rules and guidance.<sup>15</sup> These strategic planning references often do not contain a significant degree of explicit detail to help define strategic planning.

7. For the purposes of this exercise, based on the results of the strategic planning literature review undertaken and a review of how the term has been utilized in past IED reports, strategic planning is defined as:<sup>16</sup>

The process by which an organization's medium- to long-term goals, as well as resources and plans to achieve them, are defined, and a documented plan is developed to monitor achievement of these goals.

Strategic planning within individual entities, as well as across different entities, was considered as an enabler of programme performance. Effective strategic planning must be done at entity, thematic and Secretariat wide levels, in order to ensure programmatic relevance and coherence, and maximize the efficient and effective use of resources within an entity and across the Organization.

8. For the purpose of this synthesis, references in evaluation results and recommendations that would reasonably fall within the definition above were included in the analysis on a case-by-case basis, even if the term strategic planning was not explicitly used. Based on a preliminary review of these references, ten distinct "dimensions" of strategic planning, as enablers of programme performance, were identified, broadly relating to the three categories of enabling programme relevance, enabling programme effectiveness and enabling programme efficiency. These are presented in *Figure 2* below.

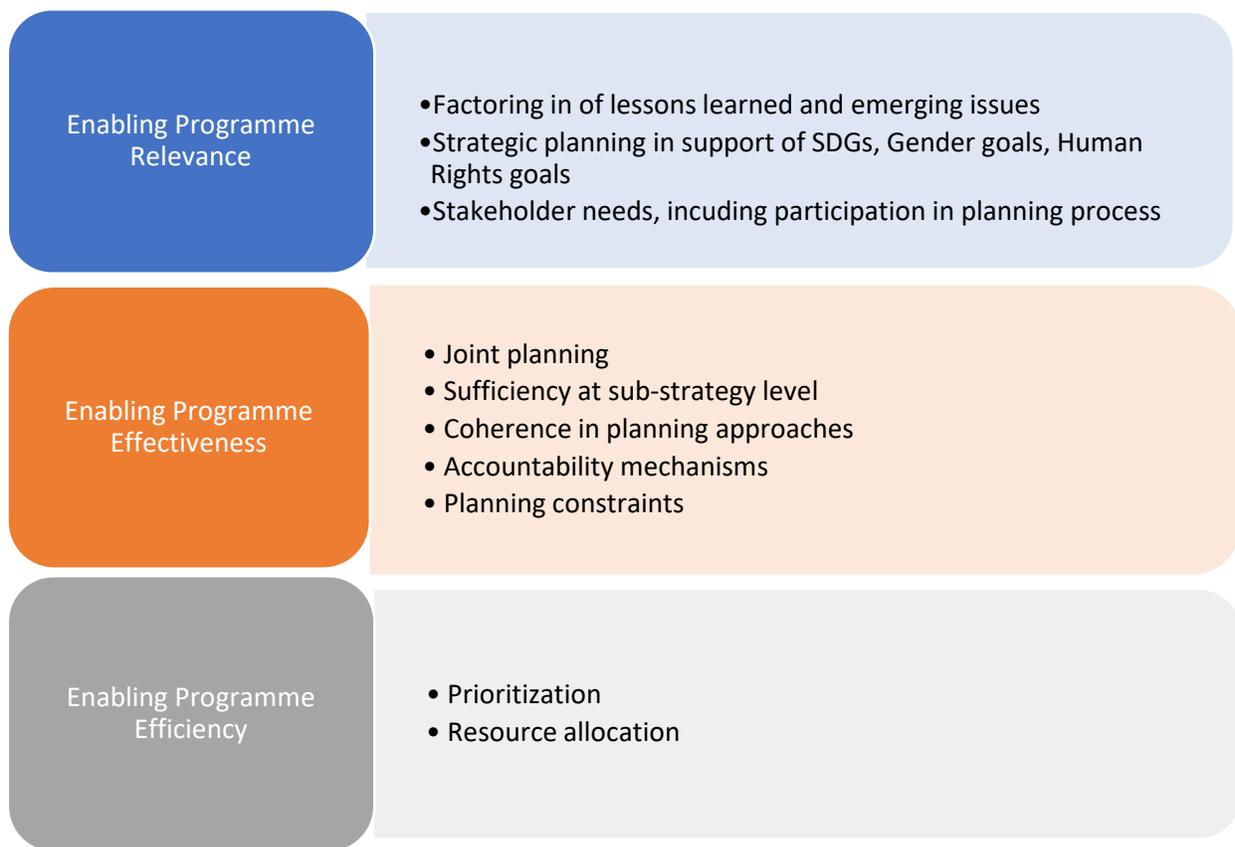
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<sup>14</sup> The focus of this synthesis report is on Secretariat entities. However, a few reports included in this synthesis were on United Nations entities outside of the Secretariat (UN Women, UNHCR, UNRWA). See Annex 4.1 for details.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Secretariat strategic planning related references are most often found within programme planning and budgetary documentation, including some related to human resource management.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 4 above on JIU definition of strategic planning.

**Figure 2: Strategic Planning Dimensions Enabling Programme Relevance, Effectiveness and Efficiency—as utilized for strategic planning synthesis review (\*)**



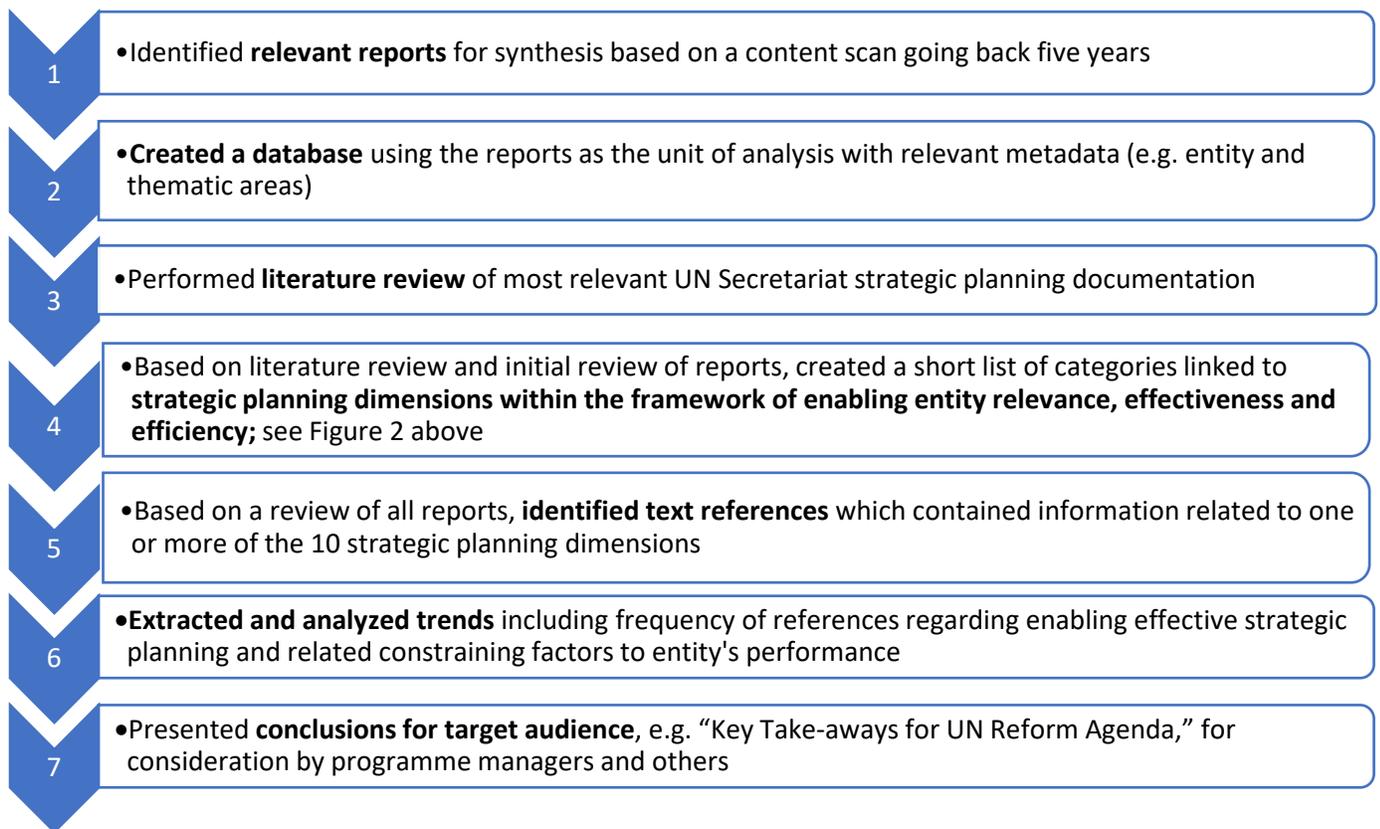
(\*) Descriptive information related to each of these dimensions is expanded upon under Section 2 of this report - Detailed Dimension Results.

9. In aggregating evidence in line with the overall framework of this review, the synthesis sought to answer three key questions:

- What were the patterns and practices with respect to strategic planning?
- How has strategic planning enabled programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency?
- What can be learned from this body of OIOS-IED reports about improvements in strategic planning which may further enable programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency?

10. To answer these questions, the analytical approach summarized in *Figure 3* below was used.

**Figure 3: Summary of analytical approach**



11. For step 1 above, 37 OIOS-IED inspection and evaluation reports published between 2016 and 2020 were identified for review. They covered 26 individual United Nations entities, including five reports which covered a group of entities. While strategic planning was not the single focus of most reports, all of them had relevant content related to strategic planning as an enabler of programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency that was coded and analysed.

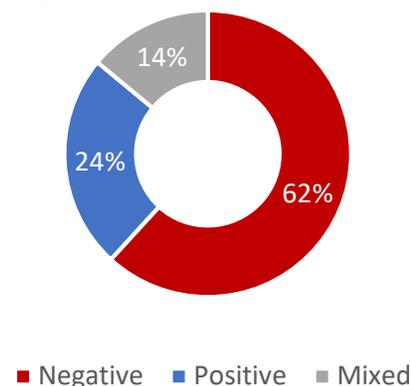
12. For step 2, a database was created with the 37 reports as the primary unit of analysis. The 37 reports covered all four thematic areas of work of the Organization (Human Rights and Humanitarian Assistance; Organizational Management and Support; Peace and Security; Sustainable Development). There were 635 text references which were determined to contain relevant strategic planning text; these formed the basis for the findings of this report. Specifically, 505 text references were from the report results and 130 were from report recommendations. Additionally, result and recommendation references were categorized according to the thematic area covered by each evaluation. See *Table 1* below for related details.

**Table 1: Number of references per thematic area**

Thematic area	Result References	Recommendation References	Total References	# of Reports	Avg. # of References per report
Human rights and humanitarian assistance	46	12	58	7	8.3
Organizational management and support	73	17	90	7	12.9
Peace and security	197	53	250	13	19.2
Sustainable development	189	48	237	10	23.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>635</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>17.2</b>

13. For the analysis, steps 3-6 were utilized to identify report paragraphs containing text which referenced one or more strategic planning dimensions. These text references were categorized and coded into the most relevant dimension as spelled out in *Figures 2 and 3*. The assessment of each result statement was coded as positive, negative or mixed, depending on identified strengths and practices. A mixed assessment was assigned when the result statement had both positive and negative elements or no clear direction could be identified. The distribution in *Figure 4* shows that there were more than twice as many negative references as positive ones. Recommendations were viewed separately from result statements and were not coded as negative, positive or mixed.

**Figure 4: Assessment of results**



14. The results of step 6 (extracted and analysed trends) are presented in Section 2 of this report. Step 7 relates to the conclusions presented in Section 3.

## 1.4 Limitations

15. This synthesis review encountered three main methodological limitations. First, the findings of this review should not be considered as fully representative of strategic planning across the United Nations: while most entities regularly evaluated by OIOS were represented in the 37 reports assessed, some were not. (See Annex 4.1 for specific details.) Second, there is possible research bias given that the analysis may be focused more towards elements of strategic planning that constrained rather than enabled programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, due to less focus in IED reports on the latter. Third, given the different approaches used by IED teams in assessing strategic planning in different entities – either directly or indirectly – and the fact that some interpretation was needed to identify, code and analyse result and recommendation “references” in this report, inter-rater reliability is not known.

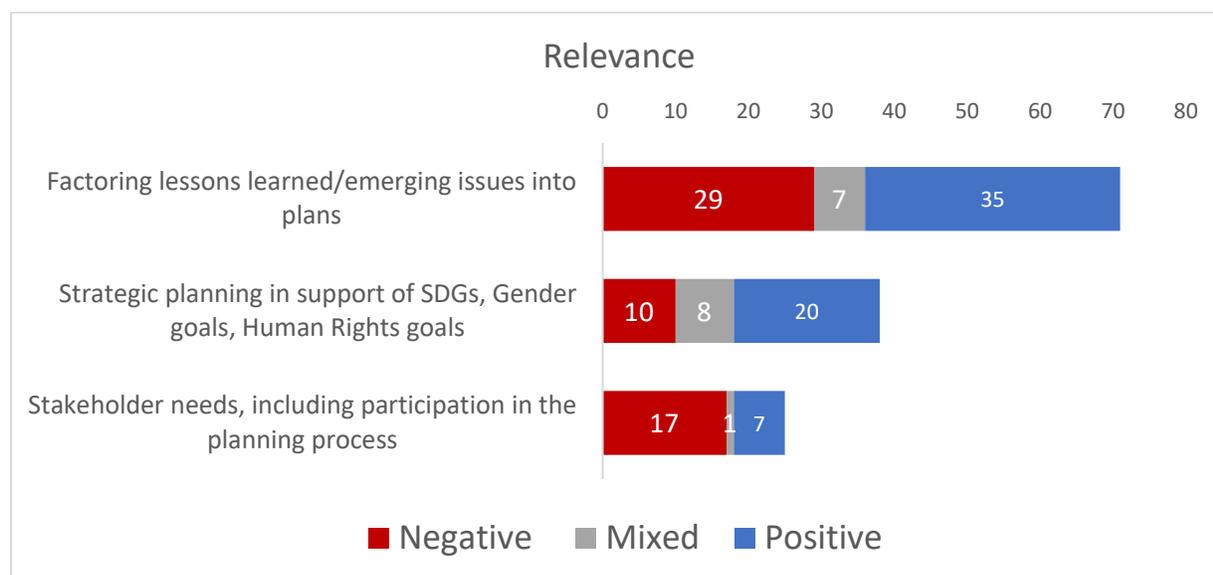
## 2. Detailed Results by Strategic Planning Dimension

### 2.1 Enabling Programmatic Relevance

Programmatic relevance was bolstered by strategic planning processes which factored in lessons learned, emerging issues, SDGs, gender and human rights goal considerations, as well as stakeholder needs; however, in many instances, these factors were not sufficiently incorporated

16. A total of 134 IED report references related to strengthening the relevance of United Nations Secretariat entities through strategic planning. These references focused on: (i) factoring lessons learned and emerging issues into strategic planning (71 references); (ii) strategic planning which supported Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) achievement, as well as gender and human rights goals (38 references); and, (iii) factoring in stakeholder needs, including participation in the planning process (25 references). See *Figure 5* below.

**Figure 5: Relevance result statement references by associated dimension and assessment**



#### Factoring lessons learned and emerging issues into strategic plans

17. As shown in *Figure 5*, there were 71 specific references which discussed the degree to which strategic planning factored in lessons learned or emerging issues. Many of the positive references related to strengthening planning assumptions. For example, Regional Commissions used the lessons learned while implementing capacity development projects to strategically refine and enhance subsequent capacity development work plans that would enable Member States to strengthen their statistical capacities to track national level SDG achievement. In

another example the Department of Political and Peacekeeping Affairs (DPPA)<sup>17</sup> identified the increasingly regional dimension of conflict and then used the identification of this emerging issue to develop several regional strategies, which were subsequently used in facilitating more cohesive regional approaches. There were other examples of positive references which indicated that lesson learning identified in the context of evaluations was utilized to develop a strategic direction and for planning.

18. The most common area for improvement was the need for strategic planning mechanisms to systematically capture lessons learned to support effective future planning. For example: peacekeeping mission staff raised concerns that, because proper assessment and planning mechanisms were not in place, lessons learned from past challenging re-hatting exercises were not being properly factored into subsequent planning. The need for better recording and utilization of lesson learning information was also highlighted in other areas. For example, human rights officers identified shortcomings in their ability to record, maintain and utilize the organization's key data on human rights trends effectively for strategic planning purposes.

19. The need to re-visit planning assumptions and perform needs and gap analysis was another common area identified for improvement. Some entities were unable to adjust plans to support emerging issues, including new requests from Member States. This included, for example: the inability to adjust plans related to strategic deployment of stocks to be more responsive to the changing requirements for start-up of peacekeeping operations; and the inability to simultaneously be responsive to donor requirements and to the entity's over-arching strategic plan.<sup>18</sup>

### Strategic planning in support of SDGs, Gender and Human Rights goals

20. As shown in *Figure 5*, 38 result references focused on issues associated with strategic planning in support of United Nations organization-wide goals; specifically, strategic planning to support the SDGs (26), to support gender goals (9) and with a focus on supporting human rights goals (3). Across this area, there were more positive references (20) than negative (10) or mixed (8). On the positive side, SDG strategic planning references pointed to some early successes. For example, positive references to Regional Commission planning for SDG-focused outputs, including the re-alignment of their overall strategies to address the SDGs; OOSA organizing some of its work around a "Space 2030 Agenda process," and OHRLLS aligning its strategic framework and work planning to the 2030 Agenda.

21. At the same time, additional cross sector analysis was needed regarding strategic planning in support of SDG achievement. Citations included examples of strategic planning underway but with much of the necessary work still outstanding. Data also contained numerous

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<sup>17</sup> Entity title changed subsequent to initial evaluation report publication.

<sup>18</sup> All these examples had associated financial and mandate achievement implications.

references to important SDG planning work not yet begun, or in a very nascent form, as 2030 continues to get closer. IED evaluation reports indicated that a large body of work in-progress still needs to be translated into concrete action plans for supporting Member States working to achieve the SDGs.

### Factoring in stakeholder needs

22. Twenty-five result references related to factoring stakeholder needs into the development of strategic plans. There were 17 negative references that illustrated the limited factoring in of stakeholder needs. These revealed that strategic planning across evaluating entities and with other United Nations entities were often developed in isolation from key stakeholders. Insufficient exchange of information resulted in strategic plans which did not adequately capture and prioritize stakeholder needs and consider emerging issues, which rendered plans less relevant or focused. On the positive side, some results evidenced a trend toward increased consideration of national government needs during, for example, capacity development project planning.

### Overview of Enabling Programmatic Relevance recommendations

23. Recommendation references related to enabling programmatic relevance focused on:
- Enhancing the integration of more strategic and forward-looking prioritization into planning processes; particularly in the context of emerging issues and unplanned requests
  - Enhancing articulation of how a given entity will support the 2030 Agenda rooted in a robust assessment of that entity's comparative advantage
  - Grounding strategic planning on a robust mapping of entity activities
  - Developing strategic plans with stronger integration of activities at the global, regional and country levels, including better targeting of where and how entities plan to engage
  - Broadening strategic planning consultation to include relevant internal and external stakeholders

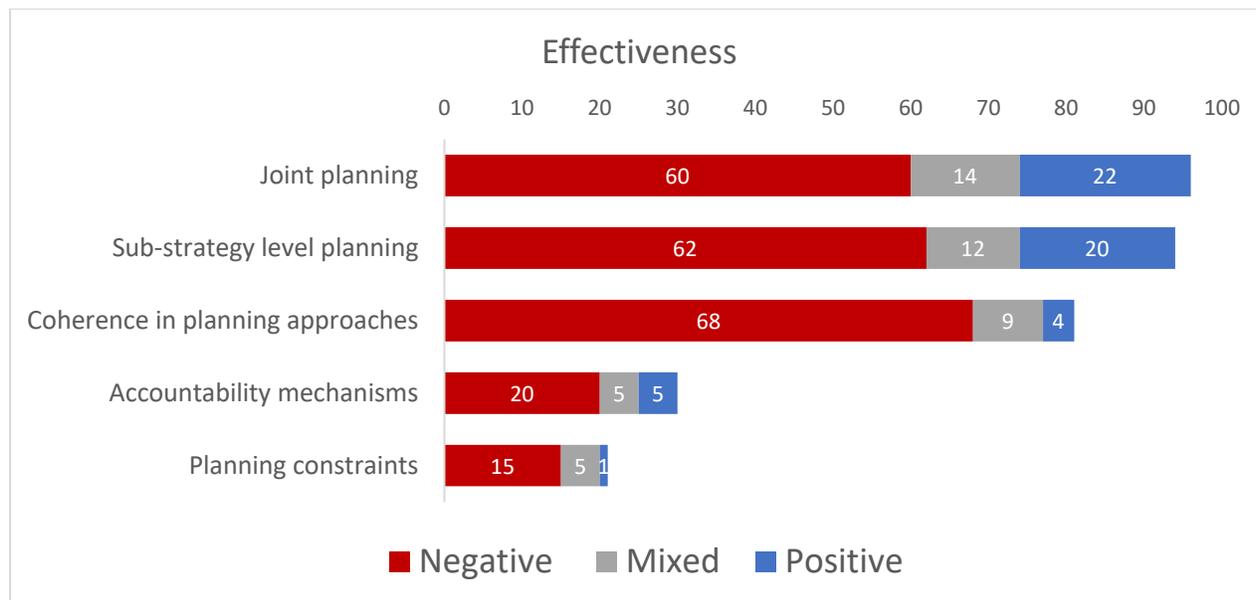
## 2.2 Enabling Programmatic Effectiveness

**Programmatic effectiveness was hampered by a lack of joint planning, insufficient sub-strategy development, lack of coherence in planning approaches and weak accountability mechanisms, further exacerbated by planning constraints**

24. A total of 322 IED report references related to strengthening the effectiveness of United Nations Secretariat entities through strategic planning. These focused on: (i) joint planning (96

references); (ii) sub-strategy level planning (94 references); (iii) coherence in planning approaches (81 references); (iv) accountability mechanisms (30 references); and planning constraints (21 references).

**Figure 6: Effectiveness result statement references by associated dimension and assessment**



### Joint planning

25. References indicated different joint planning issues at three levels – (i) joint planning with other United Nations entities (58 references), (ii) joint planning across entity (30 references), and (iii) joint planning with non-UN entities (8 references). A total of 32 IED reports discussed joint planning, with 96 specific results references, as shown in *Figure 6*. Out of the total 96 references under joint planning, the majority dealt with joint planning among multiple United Nations entities. Most of these references related to:

- Entities working in silos to deliver activities;
- Ad hoc approaches to coordination among United Nations entities leading to duplication and inefficiencies; and,
- Lack of institutionalized joint strategic planning among subprogrammes delivering a common programme.

Though fewer, there were also mixed and positive instances of joint planning among United Nations entities. One such positive example related to the development of a common chapter in the strategic plans of UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA, which provided relatively comprehensive information on intended common strategic approaches, outlining tangible joint

actions to be taken in support of the 2030 agenda, shared indicators, and the collaborative advantage of each entity and a collective accountability for shared results.<sup>19</sup>

26. Planning across the divisions or units in an entity was the second most referenced level of joint planning. Some examples pointed to structural issues resulting in the creation of silos and less coherent entity priorities leading to overlaps in functions and duplication of work, with many unexplored opportunities for streamlining. Due to the absence of an overarching entity strategy, there were few interlinkages and limited exchange of information between different divisions, which had implications for programme design and implementation, hampering the entity's ability to maximize the achievement of results.

27. However, there were also positive examples, such as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) effectively supporting the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) after it was established as an entity-wide priority to which all divisions contributed; and OHCHR introducing a common framework for the planning and reporting of its activities, thus increasing coherence among its broad mandate, thematic priorities and field presences.

28. Specific results on joint planning with other stakeholders outside the United Nations were fewer and mixed. While some references noted effective approaches to planning and collaborating with industry and regional entities, others highlighted an ad hoc approach to engagement with civil society organizations and regional organizations.

### Sufficiency at sub-strategy level

29. The term "sub-strategy" refers to documents which provide more focused and specific details and guidance to facilitate the implementation of distinct areas of work in support of an entity's formal overarching strategic plan. Examples of sub-strategies include advocacy, fundraising or communication strategies. As can be seen in *Figure 6*, 62 of the 94 references associated with strategic planning at the sub-strategy level were negative; these pointed to insufficient sub-strategies to support the delivery of a component of an entity's programme of work. One example was an entity not having a community engagement strategy, despite the recognition that successful community engagement was vital to the effective implementation of its overarching strategic plan. In another example, an entity was found to be without "specific strategies, targets or benchmarks for social media outlets," despite a recognition that this level of detailed social media planning and dissemination was important in the context of the objectives it sought to achieve. In addition, a group of sub-strategy references identified instances where sub-strategies were in place, however, they were identified as significantly

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<sup>19</sup> See OIOS IED - Inspection of UN Women evaluation function – Report IED-19-012. United Nations Entity for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); United Nations Development Fund (UNDP); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

under-developed in relation to the complexities of the work they sought to provide guidance on. Often these references involved entities with significant United Nations reform operationalization roles related to the coordination of Secretariat-wide networks but without robust and detailed sub-strategy documentation to guide those reforms. Finally, in the area of peacekeeping, references identified entities without sufficiently tailored strategies to address the complexities of the specific conflict situations which the organizations were seeking to impact.<sup>20</sup>

30. IED reports also included 20 positive references (*Figure 6*) related to the development and utilization of sub-strategy level planning. Most of these references discussed the benefits which had resulted from investments in strong sub-strategy development. For example, DPPA had established a Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention which received positive feedback from a variety of stakeholders. They indicated that the 2018 programme reconfiguration provided “a more coherent and strategic approach to conflict prevention, as well as improved knowledge sharing in the context of peace and security and development reform and ensured a continuous link to Resident Coordinators.” Another example highlighted the public health strategy of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which provided country operations with a good framework, as well as flexibility for necessary local adaptation. A few positive references also cited effective linking of sub-strategies to entities’ overarching strategic plans. For example, the integration of Headquarter and field office level plans with respect to work to support a decent standard of living which was undertaken by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). This included integration of associated performance monitoring plans.

### Coherence in planning approaches

31. Data from reviewed evaluation reports indicated 81 references related to coherence in planning approaches. There were 4 positive references, and 9 references were mixed. The large majority (68) of references were negative and pointed to areas in need of improvement, including:

- The absence of a strong, well equipped “lead department” for strategic planning as the key factor contributing to an incoherent planning process;
- Planning approaches which were more reactive than proactive, with some referencing activities undertaken without the establishment of priorities or targets;

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<sup>20</sup> Another group of report references associated with insufficient sub-strategies related to reliance on ad hoc planning in scenarios where an investment in more strategic planning was warranted. These references highlighted the adverse impacts of having unclear priorities and roles relative to key partners.

- The inability to bring disparate strategic plans together. These circumstances were identified as having led to planning documentation that varied greatly across a given entity making comparability and avoidance of duplication a significant challenge. For example, detailed country and regional workplans largely missing within the context of entities for which partnerships with other United Nations entities were critical for success; and,
- Lack of harmonization of planning approaches. An example was an entity that “had a variety of separate work planning processes reflecting its complex streams of work; however, the lack of a comprehensive strategic planning mechanism hindered subprogrammes’ ability to effectively interlink their functional work.”

### Accountability mechanisms

32. The accountability mechanisms dimension focused on the availability of monitoring mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of strategic plans and to ensure accountability. This included references to results frameworks, monitoring and evaluation practices and strategies, and the development of indicators to monitor and evaluate the strategic plan. A total of 30 specific result references were identified, as shown in *Figure 6* above. Assessments of accountability mechanisms were mostly negative (20), alluding to a lack of strategy for collecting outcome data or monitoring work programmes. Poorly developed or narrowly defined indicators were also identified as challenges to ensuring accountability in monitoring strategic plan implementation. Positive references (5) highlighted entities effectively operationalizing their strategic plan through the development of indicator frameworks, and effectively monitoring and reporting on programme outcomes.

### Planning constraints

33. Planning constraint references related to limitations identified with respect to the development and effective implementation of strategic plans. A total of 21 specific result references were identified, as shown in *Figure 6*. Out of the total 21 references under this dimension, the majority (15) were assessed negatively. The planning constraints identified included a wide variety of limitations that entities faced in developing or effectively implementing their strategic plans. For example, a few noted that programmes of work were proposed and discussed years in advance, leaving little room to respond to newly emerging priorities and unforeseen demands. Other references pointed, inter alia, to the following constraints:

- An accumulation of mandates constraining entities’ ability to respond strategically;
- The reliance of entities with field presence on staff and decisions made at Headquarters;
- Frequent leadership changes within entities;
- Financial and administrative systems hampering the disbursement of funds;

- Duplicative integrated planning documents;
- The subprogramme-level orientation of the strategic planning process in the Secretariat encouraging siloes and hampering integrated planning; and,
- Reliance on Member States reaching consensus to progress on critical issues.

### **Overview of Enabling Programmatic Effectiveness recommendations**

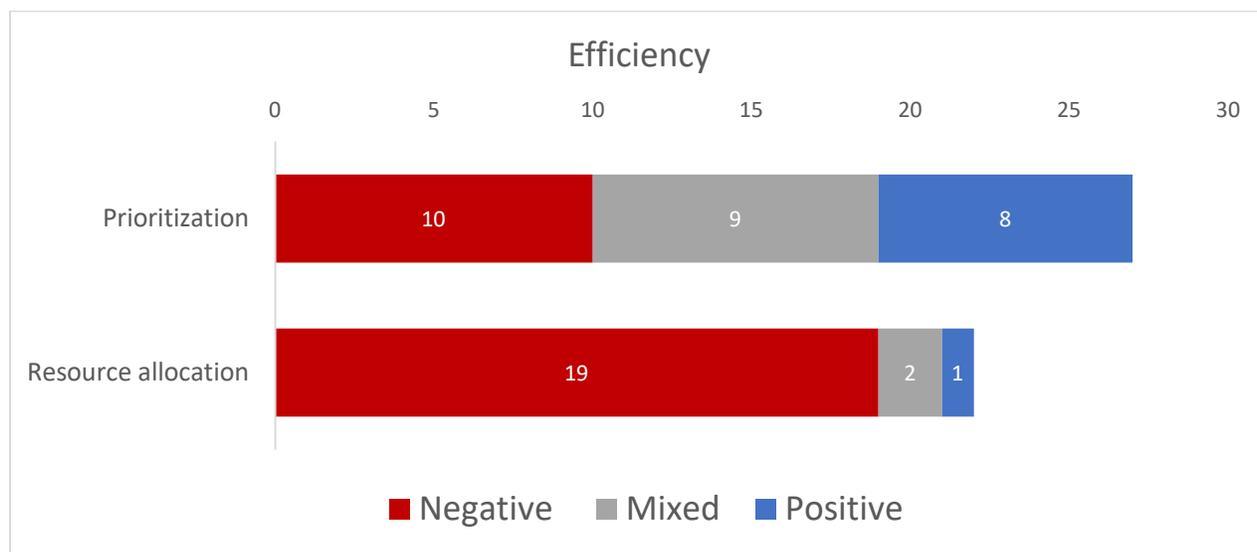
34. Recommendation references related to enabling programmatic effectiveness focused on:
- Strengthening accountability mechanisms including monitoring frameworks, tools and guidelines
  - Establishing performance targets
  - Embedding stronger accountability through the establishment of workplans and detailed action plans; for example, in terms of activity coverage and the means of implementation
  - Strengthening and formalizing joint planning processes within entities as well as with other stakeholders
  - Further enhancing advocacy, communication and partnership strategies and sub-strategy plans, and follow-up on them

## **2.3 Enabling Programmatic Efficiency**

### **Programmatic efficiency suffered from inadequate links between strategic plans and resource allocation**

35. A total of 49 IED report references related to strengthening the efficiency of United Nations Secretariat entities through strategic planning. These focused on: (i) prioritization (27 references), and (ii) resource allocation (22 references). Whereas the assessment for the resource allocation references was primarily negative, references to prioritization issues were mixed. See *Figure 5* below.

**Figure 5: Efficiency result statement references by associated dimension and assessment**



### Prioritization

36. Prioritization references were mixed and touched on several priority-setting issues. Negative references noted that while division workplans were aligned with Department goals and targets, division-specific priorities for contributing to these targets were not clear. Positive references, however, pointed to effective practices; for example, UNHCR needs-based approach to planning and budgeting helped to ensure the financing of refugee responses. Other positive examples included entities engaging in activities to define and implement new sets of priorities, as well as entities using their strategic plans to identify key priorities for programming.

### Resource allocation

37. Resource allocation references mostly (19 of 22 references) highlighted inadequate links between resource allocation and strategic plans. This included concerns that in some entities there was significant competition for funding, without consideration for the strategic positioning of the organization’s work; that the allocation of resources was isolated from strategic planning; or, that reliance on donors for certain programmes resulted in entities aligning themselves with donor priorities, instead of country needs or organizational priorities as identified in the strategic plan.

### Overview of Enabling Programmatic Efficiency recommendations

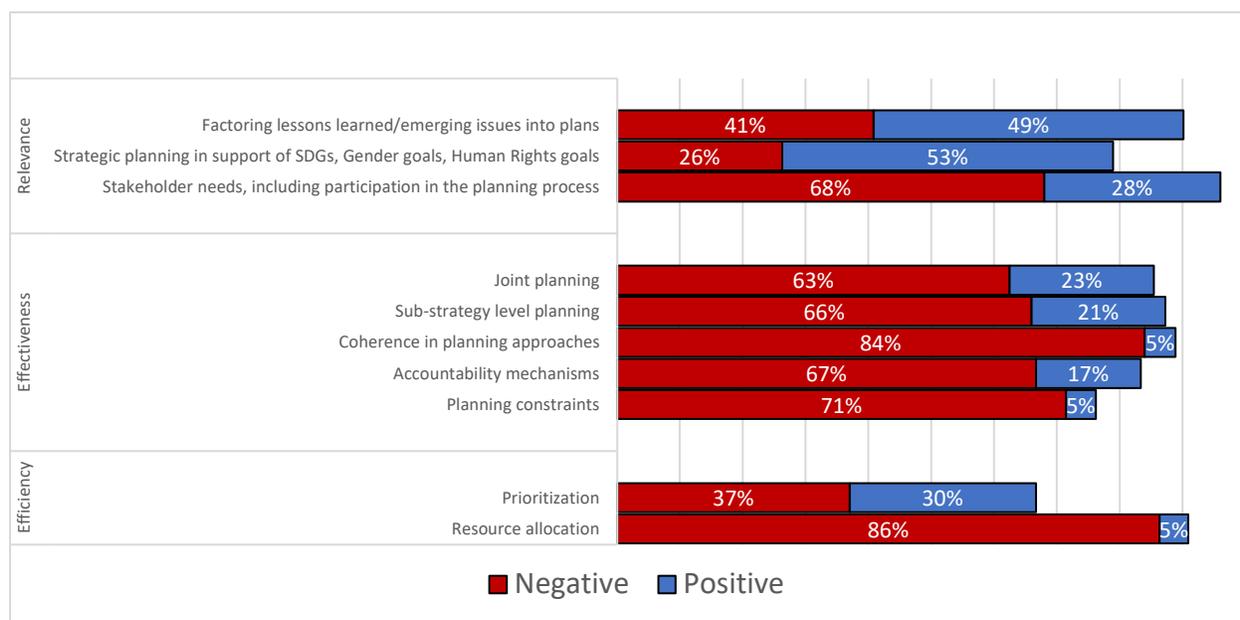
38. Recommendation references related to enabling programmatic efficiency focused specifically on developing or updating prioritization guidelines, as well as mechanisms for more effective linking of the overarching strategic plan to work planning in real time, including reassessment of resource allocations.

### 3. Conclusion

39. This synthesis review provided an over-arching assessment of strategic planning as an enabler of programmatic relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency. *Figure 8* provides an overview of how the different dimensions identified have constrained (negative references) or enabled (positive references) programme performance. Noting the earlier limitations of this synthesis report (para. 15) related to the representativeness and possible research bias of the evaluation reports, the majority trend of negative references in eight out of ten dimensions indicates the overall weaknesses of the Organization in several aspects of strategic planning.

40. Across the different strategic planning dimensions identified, the reports reviewed pointed to weak coherence in planning approaches and planning constraints, followed by weak accountability systems and insufficiency of joint and sub-strategy planning that stifle the effectiveness of programme performance. Properly addressed, these have the potential to strengthen prioritization and contribute to a more effective allocation of resources. On enabling programme relevance, it is clear that strengthening the response to stakeholder needs would allow the Organization to build on the positive trends reported under strategic planning for SDGs, Gender and Human Rights goals and on incorporating lessons learned and emerging issues into current plans as enablers of programme relevance.

**Figure 8: Results statements by dimension, with positive and negative percentages (\*)**



(\*) Percentages shown do not add to 100 because mixed references are not included in this graphic

41. Encouragingly, the recent Organizational reforms across the three interlinked pillars of management, peace and security and sustainable development address some of the weaknesses in strategic planning identified by this synthesis.

42. The management reform proposal addresses:

- **Streamlining programme planning, budget and finance**
  - Ensuring that plans and budgets are formulated closer to the period to which they relate (*Relevance: Factoring lessons learned/emerging issues into plans*)
  - Giving managerial discretion to redeploy resources within budget parts (*Efficiency: Prioritization and Resource allocation*)
  - Broadening of the mechanism for the commitment of unforeseen and extraordinary expenses (*Efficiency: Resource allocation*)
- **Enhancing accountability and transparency**
  - Aligning programme planning and resourcing to lessons learned from past performance (*Relevance: Factoring lessons learned/emerging issues into plans*)
  - Strengthening the self-evaluation capacity of the Secretariat to better inform programme planning and reporting on programme performance (*Effectiveness: Accountability mechanisms*)

43. The development reform proposal addresses:

- **Delivering coherently through strengthened and accountable leadership at the country level**
  - Redesigning the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAFs) now renamed the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) to become the main strategic instrument to respond to national needs and priorities. (*Relevance: Stakeholder needs, including participation in the planning process*)
- **Funding trends to deliver one agenda together**
  - Shifting donor funding towards more predictable and flexible resources, that allow, in turn, for the United Nations development system to tailor its support, enhance results delivery, and provide greater transparency, accountability and visibility for resources entrusted to the system. (*Efficiency: Resource allocation*)

44. The peace and security reform proposal addresses:

- **Establishing a single regional political-operational structure**
  - Enhancing coordination mechanisms to ensure the provision of coordinated support to the field and conduct joined-up analysis and planning. (*Effectiveness: Joint planning*)

- **Addressing other priority areas**
  - Reinforcing planning through the development of regional strategies. *(Effectiveness: Sub-strategy level planning)*
  - Building planning capacities regarding integrated planning and system-wide engagement. *(Effectiveness: Joint planning)*

45. However, there remain gaps in strategic planning that are not fully covered by the United Nations reform agenda. These include:

- Inadequate information-sharing platforms for joint planning across entities, which results in insufficient and siloed planning; *(Effectiveness: Joint Planning)*
- Accumulation of mandates, which constrain entities' ability to respond strategically to emerging needs; *(Effectiveness: Planning constraints)*
- Inconsistent approaches to the planning process, leading to a lack of alignment and conflicting priorities often based on funding arrangements; *(Effectiveness: Coherence in planning approaches)*
- Lack of guidance on how to achieve integrated planning within and across entities given the subprogramme-level orientation of the strategic planning process in the Secretariat, and an associated lack of demonstrated planning capacity; *(Effectiveness: Joint planning)*
- Continued shortcomings in monitoring and evaluation, including insufficient results orientation, inadequate performance frameworks and resources and limited capacities to deliver on these; *(Effectiveness: Accountability mechanisms)*
- Frequent leadership changes within entities constraining the strategic vision and implementation of plans; *(Effectiveness: Planning constraints)* and,
- Inadequate development of supplementary strategy documents *(Effectiveness: Sub-strategy level planning)*

### 3.1 Implications for United Nations response to COVID-19 pandemic

46. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive global suffering and will have far-ranging health, social, economic and environmental implications, including for the achievement of the SDGs. The pandemic has underscored the world's fragilities and exacerbated inequalities within and among countries, especially for vulnerable populations.

47. This synthesis has identified good practices that can strengthen strategic planning to support the system-wide United Nations response to the pandemic and enable programme relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. These include:

- Integration of lessons-learning in the context of planning exercises; (*Relevance: Factoring lessons learned into plans*)
- Developing strategies focused on specific issues (such as coordination in support of the SDGs or COVID-19 response), which are effectively linked, and which are complementary to each entities' over-arching strategic plans; some prominent examples include the UN Framework for the socio-economic response to COVID-19<sup>21</sup> and the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Global Humanitarian Response Plan;<sup>22</sup> (*Effectiveness: Joint planning*)
- Enhancing coordination through common chapters in strategic plans across United Nations entities; (*Effectiveness: Joint planning*) and,
- Operationalizing strategic plans through the development of indicator frameworks, and effective monitoring and reporting of project outcomes (*Effectiveness: Accountability mechanisms*).

48. Despite the above promising progress, at the broad and strategic level, coherent and mutually accountable joint planning and effective coordination will be particularly important moving forward to avoid duplication of efforts as entities adjust to their new reality and re-visit planning assumptions as necessitated by the need to respond to new demands created by the pandemic. At the operational level, the importance of agile, flexible and responsive plans that consider emerging issues has come into stark relief as a result of the pandemic. As entities have been compelled to rethink priorities and workplans, they will also need to continue to strengthen their results-based management and accountability mechanisms to navigate the environment created by the pandemic.

### 3.2 Key take-aways for programme managers

49. Considering the most prevalent issues related to strategic planning as discussed above, there are several areas that programme managers may want to consider as they continue to strive to produce even stronger results for the United Nations. Programme managers can:

- **Enhance programmatic relevance** by:

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_framework\\_report\\_on\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_framework_report_on_covid-19.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf>.

- Ensuring that strategies and plans at all levels are aligned with entity-wide and UN-wide organizational goals;
  - Broadening strategic planning consultations to include relevant internal and external stakeholders in the process; and,
  - Ensuring that lessons learned, and emerging issues are integrated in the strategic planning development process.
- **Enhance programmatic effectiveness** by:
    - Developing sub-strategies to effectively plan and deliver a given area of an organization's programme of work;
    - Formalizing joint planning processes within entities as well as with external stakeholders;
    - Streamlining approaches and clarifying roles and responsibilities to improve coherence in the planning process; and,
    - Strengthening accountability mechanisms by introducing and integrating robust results-based plans, monitoring tools and frameworks.
- **Enhance programmatic efficiency** by:
    - Prioritizing resource allocation with a view to meeting strategic objectives rather than reactively responding to donor priorities; and,
    - Developing strategies to mobilize non-earmarked resources that can be allocated in a flexible way to respond to emerging needs.

## 4. Annexes

### 4.1 List of IED evaluations and inspections reviewed

The 37 IED reports below published as final or in draft since 2017 comprise the evidence base reviewed for this synthesis report. Reports still in draft at the time of this synthesis analysis are identified as such.

#### Reports Universe: Included in the Content Analysis:

	Issue Date	Entity**	Report No	Title
1.	Draft*	DPO	IED-20-XX	Evaluation of organizational culture in peacekeeping operations
2.	10-Jun-20	DESA	IED-19-015	Evaluation of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
3.	28-May-20	UN Women	IED-19-012	Inspection of UN Women evaluation function
4.	04-May-20	UNODC	IED-19-016	Evaluation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
5.	25-Mar-20	NEPAD	IED-19-018	Evaluation of NEPAD/OSAA
6.	16-Mar-20	DPPA	IED-20-001	Evaluation of DPPA early warning and conflict prevention
7.	09-Mar-20	OHRLLS	IED-20-003	Evaluation of OHRLLS
8.	13-Jun-19	Thematic	IED-19-001	Evaluation of United Nations entities' the preparedness, policy coherence and early results associated with their support to Sustainable Development Goals
9.	26-Apr-19	DPO	IED-19-007	Evaluation of the contribution of the UNMISS Civil Affairs Division to the reduction of local conflict in South Sudan
10.	25-Mar-19	OLA	E/AC.51/2019/9	Evaluation of the Office of Legal Affairs
11.	25-Mar-19	UNHCR	E/AC.51/2019/8	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
12.	22-Mar-19	UNEP	E/AC.51/2019/7	Evaluation of the United Nations Environment Programme
13.	20-Mar-19	Thematic	A/74/67	Strengthening the role of evaluation and the application of evaluation findings on programme design, delivery and policy directives
14.	14-Mar-19	OSRSGs	E/AC.51/2019/6	Evaluation of the Offices of the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, on Sexual Violence in Conflict and on Violence against Children
15.	13-Mar-19	DGACM	E/AC.51/2019/5	Evaluation of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management
16.	08-Mar-19	OOSA	IED-19-003	Evaluation of the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs
17.	08-Mar-19	Thematic	IED-19-004	Evaluation of the effectiveness of human rights monitoring, reporting and follow-up in the United Nations multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations

18.	07-Mar-19	UNODA	E/AC.51/2019/4	Evaluation of the Office for Disarmament Affairs
19.	25-Feb-19	DMSPC	E/AC.51/2019/3	Evaluation of the Office of Human Resources Management
20.	22-Feb-19	DGC	E/AC.51/2019/2	Evaluation of the Department of Public Information
21.	08-Mar-18	IRMCT	S/2018/206	Evaluation of the methods and work of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals
22.	12-Feb-18	DPO	IED-18-002	Evaluation of re-hatting in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)
23.	02-Oct-17	DPO	IED-17-013	Evaluation of the effectiveness of United Nations peacekeeping operations in deterring and confronting armed elements in the DRC, Mali and the Central African Republic
24.	07-Apr-17	DPO	IED-17-001	Evaluation of DPKO/DFS Planning during the Force Generation Process and Related Engagement with the Security Council and Troop-Contributing Countries
25.	21-Mar-17	OCHA	E/AC.51/2017/11	Evaluation of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
26.	17-Mar-17	Thematic	A/72/72	Strengthening the role of evaluation and the application of evaluation findings on programme design, delivery and policy directives
27.	17-Mar-17	OHCHR	E/AC.51/2017/9	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights
28.	17-Mar-17	Thematic	E/AC.51/2017/8	Thematic evaluation of the regional commissions
29.	17-Feb-17	DPO	A/71/798	Activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services: review and evaluation of strategic deployment stocks
30.	17-Feb-17	EOSG	E/AC.51/2017/7	Evaluation of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General
31.	12-Jan-17	UNRWA	E/AC.51/2017/3	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
32.	12-Jan-17	DPPA	E/AC.51/2017/6	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs
33.	12-Jan-17	UNHCR	E/AC.51/2017/2	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
34.	12-Jan-17	ESCWA	E/AC.51/2017/4	Evaluation of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
35.	12-Jan-17	ECE	E/AC.51/2017/5	Evaluation of the Economic Commission for Europe
36.	06-Oct-16	DPO	IED-16-015	Evaluation of the Integration Between Peacekeeping Operations and the United Nations Country Teams in Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo
37.	12-May-16	ICTY	A/70/873-S/2016/441	Evaluation of the Methods and Work of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia

\* This report is still a draft

\*\* Revised for analysis and consistency based on structural changes since 2019

Source: [oios.un.org/inspection-evaluation-reports](https://oios.un.org/inspection-evaluation-reports)

### Reports Universe: Not included in the Content Analysis:

	Issue Date	Entity**	Report No	Title
1.	30-Jul-18	DPO	IED-18-010	Inspection of the performance of missions' operational responses to Protection of Civilians (POC) related incidents
2.	21-Mar-17	UNHCR	E/AC.51/2017/10	Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 2017
3.	29-Sep-16	DPO	IED-16-014	Evaluation of the Results of National Police Capacity-Building in Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo by United Nations Police in MINUSTAH, UNOCI and MONUSCO

\*\*Revised for analysis and consistency based on structural changes since 2019

Source: [oios.un.org/inspection-evaluation-reports](http://oios.un.org/inspection-evaluation-reports)

## 4.2 List of acronyms

DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
DGACM	Department for General Assembly and Conference Management
DGC	Department of Global Communications*
DMSPC	Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance*
DPO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations*
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*
ECE	Economic Commission for Europe
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
EOSG	Executive Office of the Secretary-General
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IRMCT	International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals*
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Office for Disarmament Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OHRLLS	Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States
OIOS	Office of Internal Oversight Services
OLA	Office of Legal Affairs
OOSA	Office for Outer Space Affairs
OSAA	Office of the Special Adviser on Africa
OSRSGs	Offices of the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, on Sexual Violence in Conflict and on Violence against Children

UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UN Women	United Nations Entity for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

\*Office/entity title changed from initial report publication