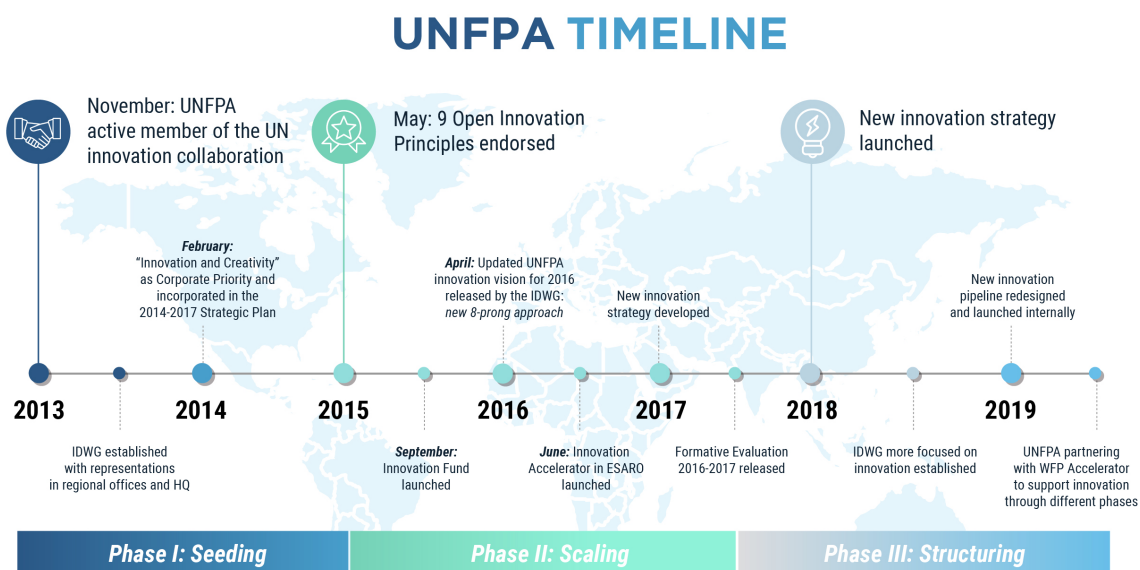




United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA): The UNFPA Innovation Fund

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is the UN agency for sexual and reproductive health. Established in 1969, UNFPA’s mission is “to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.” The organization’s headquarters are in New York. UNFPA has six regional, three sub-regional, six liaison and 122 field offices.¹ The operating budget was 1 billion USD in 2018.

The Organizational Innovation Journey



Phase I: Seeding

At UNFPA, innovation became a topic of discussion in 2013 when the organization started to address and explore innovation through corporate approaches. One year later, “innovation and creativity” became a corporate priority and incorporated in the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan, which views innovation “as a key element to becoming a more adaptable, flexible and nimble organization.”²

The UNFPA Innovation Fund, established in 2014 as an Innovation Inter-Divisional Working Group (IDWG) with an initial contribution from the Government of Denmark, aimed to generate a cultural shift within UNFPA and to motivate staff to generate and implement innovative ideas for women. It has two main streams: culture and projects. About 80 percent of the projects are geared towards UNFPA’s programme priorities. The remaining 20 percent focus on organizational effectiveness and culture change.

In 2015, in the context of the Joint Meeting of the Executives Boards of the six UN agencies, programmes and funds leading humanitarian action (UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP, UNOPS, WFP and UN-Women), leaders highlighted

¹ <https://www.unfpa.org/worldwide>

² Evaluation report, p.13.



the potential of innovation (in terms of solutions, products and approaches) to achieve their respective mission. “We must not forget that the people we serve must always remain at the center of everything we do. Innovation is one of the means through which we can achieve a greater impact in that mission,” stated former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. In the same year, UNFPA endorsed the nine UN Open Innovation Principles, a set of principles guiding the work on innovation pursued by multiple organizations.

Phase II: Scaling

With innovation being recognized intrinsic to the organization’s processes and programmes, in 2015, the newly-established IDWG delivered the “Updated Vision of Innovation at UNFPA for the Period 2015-2017.” UNFPA’s new eight-prong approach³ represented the shift to a more systemic approach to innovation within the organization.

The IDWG’s Innovation Fund issued five open internal calls of proposals through 2017. In total, 67 field offices (of 121 UNFPA offices) submitted proposals to be supported. A total of 30 projects were awarded financial support during these five rounds.

At the same time, the organization was keen to assess and learn what was working and not working as well on innovation, and hence conducted a formative evaluation on innovation during 2016-2017. The purpose was to conduct an evidence-based, highly consultative and participative formative evaluation of the UNFPA Innovation Initiative, including a mid-term evaluation of the Innovation Fund. The scope of analysis included the Innovation Fund’s performance (with a view towards improvement); the links between the Innovation Fund and the Innovation Initiative (inclusive of other innovation activities within UNFPA); the links between the Innovation Initiative and mainstreaming innovation in UNFPA; and how other UN agencies approach and implement innovation for comparative analysis to generate insights.

Key recommendations from UNFPA’s formative evaluation on innovation included:

- UNFPA should make critical strategic decisions in order to frame the foundations for its corporate approach to innovation (areas, internal and external positioning, forms and stages of innovations)
- The Innovation Fund should evolve from the current internal 360-degrees experimental fund focusing on creativity and on nurturing a culture of innovation, to a selective, co-funding based, leverage-driven mechanism focusing on solutions aimed at solving the core problems UNFPA has decided to innovate for;
- Readjust the innovation model towards a more outward-looking approach based on partnerships;
- Activate a functional feedback exchange mechanism between the Innovation Initiative and relevant UNFPA business units;
- Develop a learning-for-impact framework.

³ UNFPA’s new eight-prongs approach: 1) Establish a “Go-To” group on innovation, 2) empower UNFPAS’s staff to innovate, 3) communicate innovation internally and externally, 4) promote new partnerships, 5) manage and promote risk-taking, 6) create physical spaces/innovation Lab, 7) demonstrate results, and 8) mobilize resources/promote innovative financing.³



Overall, the evaluation found that the Innovation Initiative and the Innovation Fund have helped position innovation and generate drive for UNFPA to motivate innovation at all levels, creating awareness and jump-starting the process toward nurturing a culture of innovation. It has also lifted the profile of innovation in the corporate UNFPA agenda.

Phase III: Structuring

In 2017, a new innovation strategy was developed following the key recommendations, as well as to coincide with the development and start of the organization's new Strategic Plan 2018-2021. The revised Strategy was presented and endorsed by UNFPA's Executive Committee, then launched at a side event co-organized with Denmark and Finland, which also featured partners' work on innovation on the margins of the September 2017 Executive Board. The timing was opportune as it paved the way for a launch and roll-out for the Strategy to coincide with the inauguration of the new Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

Launched in 2018, the revised Innovation Strategy articulated the way forward for a new second phase, building on UNFPA's experiences during its first two phases of innovation (2013-2017) and the findings from a formative evaluation on innovation conducted in 2017. The revised Strategy channels and consolidates efforts towards: (1) creating and sourcing new innovations to address longstanding programmatic bottlenecks; (2) scaling up proven and successful innovations; (3) partnering with innovators from the public and private sectors, and (4) institutionalizing a culture of innovation within UNFPA. It identifies four thematic areas for immediate action: (1) mHealth for adolescents and youth; (2) last mile SRH commodities; (3) data for development; and (4) innovative financing.



With the launch of the revised Innovation Strategy in 2018, the Innovation Portfolio took a more purposeful approach to supporting projects aligned with its four thematic priorities and key actions. This third phase of innovation has consolidated relevant experiences from the first two phases, brought more technical rigor and support toward innovative programming, established a learning agenda, and established a systematic process for sourcing and supporting promising innovations through a pipeline and mainstreaming in thematic areas. As Sylvia Wong, Innovation Lead at UNFPA pointed out, "Our vision for the future of innovation is to find and test that "sweet spot" between our core programming and the promising or future-forward solutions, not yet dreamed nor tried – that today's innovations will eventually become part and parcel of everything we need to do to reach more women, girls, and young people tomorrow."



Moreover, to respond to the new direction of UNFPA's Innovation Initiative, a more focused IDWG was established in 2018 to strengthen the work of the Innovation Initiative, support the implementation of different components of the Innovation Strategy, and provide more efficient mentorship, substantive guidance, and monitoring support to innovation projects and activities at the various levels of the organization. The composition of a more focused IDWG also reflects UNFPA's innovation priorities. In this way, the IDWG can be positioned to provide thematic guidance and strengthen technical linkages in these areas with other innovation activities supported by UNFPA. This innovation community serves as the "go to" hub within UNFPA to support: a culture of innovation; a stronger orientation toward learning, monitoring, scaling and evaluating for impact; communities of practice; communications; and new partnerships in the innovation ecosystem.

Led by the Innovation Secretariat and with the involvement of the IDWG, the new innovation pipeline was redesigned and launched internally in 2019 as part of the organization's portfolio approach to constantly source and support innovations throughout different stages. It follows a five stage process: (1) identifying bottlenecks (e.g., identifying the challenge and pain points to be solved); (2) calling for innovations; (3) curating and selecting the most promising; (4) conducting a design sprint; and (5) learning, failing fast or transitioning to scale.

Committed to strengthening capacity and supporting a culture of innovation to do things differently, UNFPA is partnering with WFP's Innovation Accelerator to support these teams through a design sprint. Selected teams can participate in a boot camp and design sprint to learn and apply innovative approaches to problem solving and access mentorship from industry leaders in design thinking, technology, marketing and communications, and the start-up world. Promising concepts and teams would then access catalytic seed support to rapidly test and iterate their innovations in 2019. By the end of the process, a set of teams and solutions will have gone through this innovation cycle, with promising ones poised toward ongoing implementation and scaling in 2020. To take the priorities of the strategy forward, the UNFPA Innovation Portfolio has taken a purposeful approach in the following ways:

- **Aligning investments to the four thematic priorities**, thereby strengthening our innovation narrative on consolidated results in these areas, and their contributions to our corporate transformative goals;
- **Diversifying our portfolio** by balancing big signature initiatives to create "global goods" and smaller ventures for testing and iterating new solutions and approaches through a revamped innovation pipeline;
- **Contributing to a stronger UN innovation ecosystem** through partnering with other sister agencies and contributing expertise and experience to the UN Innovation Network (UNIN).

UNFPA has come a long way since the work on innovation was started at the end of 2013. It has embraced innovation as a corporate priority that is absolutely essential to tip the balance in favor of women, girls, and young people's sexual and reproductive health. Based on its learning, UNFPA has adopted the following approach to innovation: "to inclusively create and scale-up data-driven, sustainable and open solutions that accelerate the achievement of transformative results in the lives of women, adolescents and youth."



Current Challenges and Looking Ahead

UNFPA Innovation Fund benefited from a broad engagement of UNFPA staff which proposed and pursued a range of activities during its first phase. Many innovations addressed the substantive aspects of the mandate, such as data, adolescents and youth, sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as humanitarian action. Several initiatives also focused on processes and structures. This inclusive approach to taking up innovative ideas has helped to broaden UNFPA staff engagement and advance the culture of innovation in the organization, but it also meant that the efforts to drive innovation were wide and thinly spread.

As UNFPA moves towards the newly developed strategy, the engagement with other UN organizations such as WFP's Innovation Accelerator and UNHCR's Fellowship Programme, are promising steps on the journey towards developing a more cohesive approach to innovation in the UN System and reducing redundancies while taking advantage of the experience and expertise created by sister organizations.