

Evaluation of WHO 13th General Programme of Work

Evaluation Brief

Purpose

The WHO 13th General Programme of Work (GPW 13) focuses on achieving measurable impact at the country level and outlines the Organization's approach to implementing it. It also serves as a framework to measure progress towards health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In April 2023, WHO celebrated its 75th anniversary and initiated planning for GPW14. In response to a Member State's request during the Executive Board's 150th session in February 2022, an evaluation of GPW13 was commissioned to provide forward-looking recommendations for GPW14's development.

Focus

The evaluation aimed to serve several purposes, including learning from GPW13 implementation, providing valuable insights for GPW14 formulation, and enhancing the results framework. To achieve these objectives, it focused on four main areas:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of GPW13's results framework in achieving the Triple Billion targets and organizational goals.
- Identifying areas where countries made progress and encountered challenges in meeting GPW13 targets and intended outcomes.
- Assessing WHO's ability to prioritize GPW13 goals and analysing factors that facilitated or hindered achievements.
- Extracting lessons and recommendations from the analysis for both the WHO Secretariat and Member States to sustain results and guide GPW14's development and implementation.

Methods

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, gathering primary and secondary data. This involved an extensive desktop and literature review, engagement with over 300 internal and external stakeholders through key informant interviews, focus-group discussions, and semi-structured questionnaires. Six remote country assessments in Bahrain, India, Rwanda, Solomon Islands, Sudan, and Tajikistan were conducted to review GPW13 implementation at the country level. Statistical data on GPW13 indicators were also utilized to assess Member States' progress and achievements.

Key Findings

1. Appropriateness of the results framework of GPW13 and theory of change:

The evaluation highlighted the need for clarity in positioning GPW13, whether as a corporate strategy for the Secretariat, an institutional strategy for Member States and the Secretariat, a global health strategy, or a combination. It is essential to define GPW's duration and alignment with the Director-General's term, considering implications for Member States' oversight. The GPW13 theory of change is incomplete, mainly focusing on the Secretariat for triple billion objectives.

Robustness of the results framework: Healthy life expectancy (HALE) is vital in GPW13, measuring WHO's health and well-being vision. Setting specific HALE improvement targets and enhancing tracking would improve its utility. The triple billion approach innovatively aggregates progress across three priorities, but challenges in making it relatable at the country level persist. Impact is measured using SDGs and approved indicators, with acceptable outcomes, outputs, and indicators design. Issues regarding coherence, consistency, and methodology persist. Qualitative case studies effectively communicate WHO's work but are time-consuming and lack critical assessment. The GPW13 results framework addresses gender, equity, and human rights issues and allows some data disaggregation, with potential for further exploitation.

Results accounting and reporting: Some monitoring and evaluation activities occur, but they lack a comprehensive and integrated strategy, leading to misalignment and gaps. Data availability, currency and result reporting practices have been inconsistent throughout the GPW period and stakeholder feedback is that they are burdensome.

Country-level data capabilities: Efforts to improve Member States' data capabilities under GPW13 are ongoing, with dedicated support from the Secretariat under the Survey, Count, Optimize, Review, Enable (SCORE) programme. But substantial challenges remain and additional investment by the Secretariat and Member States is a prerequisite to enable data-driven and impact-oriented approaches.

Utility of results reporting: GPW13 reporting at the country level relies on aligning with country office needs and national health strategies. Despite Secretariat efforts to enhance reporting and promote data-driven decision-making, it currently mainly serves communication and advocacy, with limited support for accountability, decision-making, and learning.

2. Progress and challenges in achieving GPW13 targets

Universal health coverage (UHC): The global service coverage index remained stagnant between 2019 and 2021, with declines in specific regions and nations, revealing unequal health service coverage progress. Recent evidence highlights rising financial hardships, particularly among the poorest, with an uneven recovery after 2020/2021. A significant concern is the prioritization of national debt over health in developing countries.

Health emergencies: Despite progress in preparedness at various levels post COVID-19, many systems remain inadequate or weakened, with a narrowing window for political action. The pandemic caused significant disruptions in immunization and surveillance. Recovery has been strong but uneven globally. The continuous occurrence of acute and protracted health emergencies highlights the need for improved systems and governance, despite resource limitations.

Healthier populations: Progress has been made on water and sanitation, household air quality, tobacco, and, to a lesser extent, on stunting and wasting. However, challenges persist in addressing obesity in children and nutritional issues, with a significant part of the world population unable to afford a healthy diet. Millions of people die annually due to inadequate water supply, sanitation, and hygiene services, necessitating a significant increase in efforts to achieve universal coverage by 2030. The scale of the impact of environmental change on health is underestimated and is not well captured in GPW13 indicators.

Secretariat strategic and operational shifts

Stepping up leadership: Stakeholders acknowledged the Secretariat's leadership at the global, regional, and country level during the pandemic. There were reservations about Secretariat effectiveness in fostering collaboration between Member States and in addressing challenges like politicization and financing.

Driving public health impact in every country: The country-focused approach is evident, e.g., through the piloting of results-oriented approaches or the work of the Action for Results (ARG) group. Progress has been delayed and changes have yet to be institutionalized. The increase in country-level expenditure is more the result of overall budget growth than of the roll-out of a new organizational model. Satisfaction of WHO Representatives and Member States on actual effectiveness of regional offices and headquarters in supporting countries is mixed.

Focus global health public goods (GHPG) on impact: The Secretariat has made strides in organizing the delivery of GHPGs, through increased transparency on the pipeline of GHPGs, clearer quality assurance processes across the life cycle of technical products and some level of prioritization. Consistent with a recent evaluation of the normative function at country level, the evaluation found that there is room for improvement in prioritization, timely delivery of agreed GHPGs, integration between production of GHPGs and their implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of their adoption at the country level.

3. Extent of focus on the goals of GPW13, and analysis of factors that facilitated or hindered achievements:

GPW13 prioritisation challenges: The global and comprehensive nature of GPW13 makes prioritization challenging. Cascading mechanisms and planning frameworks exist. They help balance focus and flexibility in response to varying country contexts and circumstances.

Flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic: Flexibility in implementing GPW13 during the COVID-19 pandemic varied among country offices. While the Secretariat adapted to meet Member States' urgent needs, balancing GPW13 and emergency response amid funding constraints and organizational rigidity were challenging. The pandemic spurred progress in preparedness and demonstrated the value of integrated approaches, advancing UHC and healthier population goals. However, the shift towards emergency response impacted core programmatic activities and other strategic priorities.

Challenges leading to deviations from planned implementation impacting achievements: Member States' and the Secretariat's achievements, challenges, and deviations from planned implementation are shaped by external contingencies, notably the COVID-19 pandemic. They are also influenced by factors within their control, including governance, financing, collaboration, capacity, communication, and equity. Addressing these factors is crucial for informing the theory of change for future GPWs, requiring targeted interventions such as enhancing political commitment, improving funding mechanisms, resolving conflicts, providing comprehensive public health education, and strategic resource allocation.

4. Draw lessons for development and implementation of GPW14:

Alignment and commitment: The evaluation highlights the need for better alignment between WHO, Member States, and partners at the country level, noting a lack of formal commitment mechanisms.

Data's importance: Timely and reliable data are crucial for evidence-driven decision-making, but challenges in data availability must be addressed.

Balancing continuity and disruption: GPW13 objectives remain relevant but adapting to post-COVID-19 dynamics and aligning commitments is essential.

Short-term/long-term focus: Immediate pandemic impacts and future preparedness frameworks should be prioritized, along with addressing megatrends affecting global health in the long term. Flexibility and result orientation: Balancing flexibility in response with achieving measurable health outcomes is key.

Aligning ambitions with means: Sustainable financing aligned with goals and addressing funding imbalances is crucial.

Conclusions

The evaluation acknowledges GPW13's ambition and room for improvement. Progress varies across areas, with some showing positive strides despite challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of flexibility in global health strategies. In preparation for GPW14, WHO can enhance adaptability, governance, and data availability, emphasizing high-impact areas. Opportunities include commitment alignment, data-driven decision-making, balancing continuity and adaptation, and securing sustainable financing for global health initiatives.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. To obtain closure on COVID-19 and reset progress towards GPW13 objectives, WHO Secretariat and Member States should prioritize the following short-term actions:

- By latest Q2-2024, seek to bridge the data gap on outcome indicators for which no recent global reporting is available.
- In the next two years Member States and the Secretariat need to address immediate and most severe impacts of the COVID-19.
- Get adequate closure on the COVID-19 pandemic before the political window to do so expires.

Recommendation 2. WHO should build on GPW13 and its learnings to ensure that GPW14 will be an effective results-based strategic instrument:

- Ensure GPW14 is positioned as an effective instrument to foster increased coherence and collaboration in global health.
- Consider the following areas as possible priorities for inclusion in GPW14: building resilient health systems; global health equity and access; climate change and health; and preventive health, chronic disease management and public health education.
- Strengthen results framework, accountability for results and managing for results by implementing recommendations already formulated in the 2023 evaluation of results-based management.
- Ensure that reporting is useful, usable, and used at country level.
- Member States and the Secretariat should strengthen the data foundation, focusing on improvements for data collection and data management.

Recommendation 3. Renew efforts to institutionalize changes and reap benefits of strategic and operational shifts

- Scale up, mainstream, and integrate approach to delivery of results.
- Improve the prioritization, production, and integrated delivery of technical products.
- Align the operating model to ensure it is fit for purpose to enable strategic shifts.
- Ensure organizational development is deliberate, systematic, well architected and coordinated.
- Renew efforts to improve the quality, predictability, and alignment of financing to strategic priorities.
- Prior to the formulation of GPW15, establish a phased strategic planning process.