



# **Innovation in the Arab region**

**IMAGINE. IDEATE. INNOVATE**

***To ensure rights and choices for all***





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## Foreword

The greatest asset in the Arab region is our people.

With a young, vibrant and growing population, the Arab region is brimming with talent, drive and energy. And, at UNFPA, we know that innovation is key to unlocking an Arab world of opportunity.

By empowering women and girls, unleashing the potential of youth, harnessing creativity to boost reproductive health, rights and choices, and leveraging knowledge and data, our innovation portfolio propels progress in building peaceful and prosperous societies.

Across the Arab region, we see sparks of progress in people's lives each and every day.

From Iraq, where UNFPA tackles the scourge of gender-based violence through Safe YOU, a safe online space where women and girls connect with peers, service providers and authorities.

To conflict-hit Sudan, where UNFPA reaches pregnant women in remote areas through the innovative Sandouk initiative that boosts access to healthcare through community-led funding.

From Tunisia and Palestine to Jordan and Morocco, thousands of young people can now access crucial, accurate and real-time information on sexual and reproductive health through mobile apps and innovative digital tools.

In nine countries, UNFPA has launched the GenF mentorship programme to support a growing cadre of female social entrepreneurs working to transform lives and futures.

At UNFPA, we know that women and girls must drive all innovation that serves and empowers them. They must be the ones piloting, testing and evaluating innovations. They must be in the driver's seat, as only solutions that are rooted in their needs can shape a better world for us all.

Yet, a vast well of potential still remains untapped. To accelerate change for millions more women, girls and young people, we need yet more bold investments, groundbreaking ventures and new ways of envisioning partnerships and collaboration.

Our proven and pioneering portfolio of innovations needs support to scale, and we look to you to join us on our journey to co-create a future of boundless possibilities for women, girls and young people, propelling progress in the Arab region and transforming countless lives for the better.

**Laila Baker**  
Regional Director UNFPA Arab States



# UNFPA innovations in the Arab states

Across 13 countries, UNFPA reaches women and girls with innovation and digital solutions to achieve the three transformative results.



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UNFPA has reached approximately 1.6 million women, girls and youth in the Arab region through more than 20 initiatives leveraging innovation, communications and social media.

## **Djibouti:**

Elle & Elles network

## **Egypt:**

Social Innovation Incubator; Cash for gender-based violence case management

## **Jordan:**

Safe Delivery App; Ashartash web series; Darby; Dignity for All; Cash for GBV case management; Amaali App

## **Iraq:**

Safe YOU App

## **Lebanon:**

Reach4Health; Safe Delivery App; Cash for GBV case management

## **Morocco:**

SexPrime; SAGA App; SHAMA

## **Somalia:**

Dalbile Youth Fund; Rise Centres; Using Open Cinema to End FGM

## **Palestine:**

Mostashari App; Integrated midwifery counseling; Cash for GBV case management; MAJD

## **Sudan:**

Sandouk Fund Initiative

## **Tunisia:**

Netopoly; SexoSante App

## **Syria:**

Safe Delivery App; Cash for gender-based violence case management

## **Oman:**

Shamsaha App

## **Yemen:**

Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM); Cash for GBV case management

## **Arab States region:**

GenF Mentorship Programme; Sehetna App

# An Arab world of opportunity

The Arab states are brimming with innovation. The region has a vibrant start-up scene, with one in three startups led or founded by women. A growing innovation ecosystem is delivering social impact and changing lives for the better, and startups in the Middle East and North Africa region raised almost 4 billion dollars in 2022 alone. With a young, vibrant and growing population - 30 per cent of people in the region are under age 29 - the opportunities for creative progress are huge.

Arab governments and businesses understand the importance of innovation for economic growth and development. A number of Arab states have national Science, Technology and Innovation policies in place, including Libya, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom

of Saudi Arabia. The United Arab Emirates has risen up the ranks of the World Intellectual Property Organization's Global Innovation Index to 31st place in 2022.

Globally and in the region, technology is a crucial avenue for innovation. The Arab region is one of the highest in terms of connectivity and mobile uptake. Half of all people in the middle-east and North Africa could access the internet by smartphone in 2022. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are home to some of the highest concentration of mobile internet users globally, and are in the top ten worldwide for social media engagement. Yet, some estimates indicate that the region's economy has only realized eight per cent of its overall digital potential.

Despite progress, large inequalities persist in the region, both in physical and virtual spaces. Poverty and unemployment remain high. Gender norms and a lack of information and resources affect women and girls disproportionately. The Arab region has one of the largest gender gaps with regards to internet access, with nearly 75 per cent of men and under 65 per cent of women having access to the internet. For the women and girls that are online, new risks emerge in the form of online harassment, bullying and technology-facilitated gender-based violence. When it comes to innovation, the region faces numerous challenges, including insufficient financial support, limited research and development, and political uncertainty.



The Arab region, with its vibrant intellectual and cultural history, has the potential to become a major player in the global innovation economy. By investing in innovation, Arab states can accelerate progress towards a more prosperous and sustainable future.

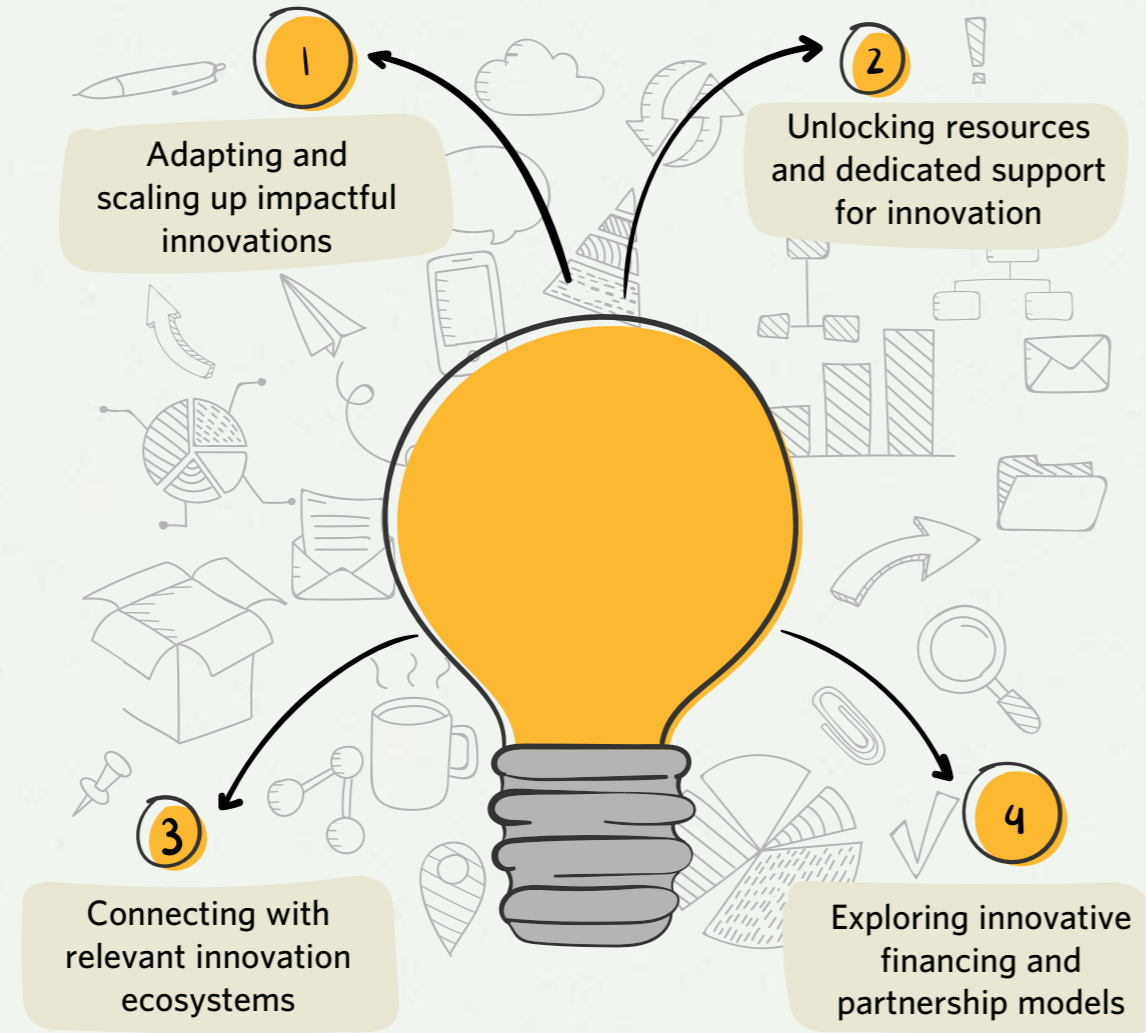
UNFPA harnesses innovation to boost impact and build better lives, ensuring that every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

“ Innovation is doing different things, and doing things differently. ”

United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres

Through UNFPA's strategic plan 2025-2022, UNFPA leverages innovation to scale and invest in pioneering ideas that can transform women and girls' lives.

We do this by:





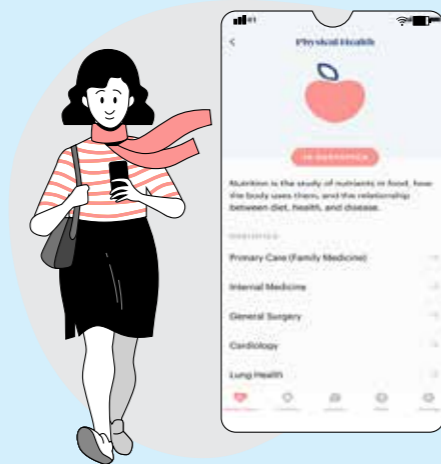
## Regional newsflash



In **Iraq**, UNFPA launched the **Safe YOU App** to address gender-based violence. The App provides a virtual safe space where women and girls can connect with service professionals, peers, and local authorities. If a person is subject to violence, they can use the App's emergency button that records the surroundings and connects to trusted family and friends and to local authorities. The Application has 1000 active users and is growing.



In December 2022, UNFPA in **Tunisia** launched **Netopoly**, an awareness-raising online board game targeting adolescent boys, girls and young adults to address Technology-Facilitated gender-based violence. Netopoly introduces adolescents to the gravity of online harassment, including cyberbullying, and promotes respectful online practices. Netopoly is available in three languages.



In partnership with the Ministry of Public Health and the school of nursing at the American University of Beirut, **UNFPA Lebanon** developed the **Reach4Health** Application to promote access to sexual and reproductive health information and to help users access health services. The Application was designed hand-in-hand with users, using a community based participatory action research framework.

Operating through eight associations in **Djibouti**, UNFPA established the **Elle & Elles network** to raise awareness about reproductive health among women and girls. The network has reached over 1,100 people through door-to-door visits to young people by young people. These visits open crucial dialogue about HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, gender-based violence and contraception.



“ Helping to develop SexPrime has boosted my confidence and leadership skills. Collaborating with other young leaders and contributing to such an important initiative has allowed me to step outside my comfort zone, take on responsibilities, and actively participate in decision-making processes. This experience has nurtured my sense of agency and belief in my ability to make a difference. ”

Basma Oumaima, 20 years, Khémisset, Morocco about co-designing SexPrime, the first platform for sexual education for youth in Morocco.





# Innovating to end the unmet need for family planning

Nearly 14 million of the 91 million women of reproductive age in the Arab region wish to avoid or delay pregnancy but cannot access contraceptives. In two-thirds of the countries in the region, contraceptive prevalence is below 60 per cent. Young people constitute around 30 per cent of the population in the region and face serious challenges in accessing crucial sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services, including age-appropriate family planning.

While this remains a challenge across the globe, sexual and reproductive health is a particularly culturally sensitive topic for many societies in the Arab region. Young people, particularly unmarried youth, face additional barriers to accessing appropriate information and services.

Only a handful of countries provide comprehensive sexuality education in schools, and a reluctance to inform young people of issues around sexuality has meant that young people often rely on the internet or their peers for information, which often leads to misconceptions.

**UNFPA delivers digital solutions and innovative platforms that provide accurate, real-time information for women, girls and young people ensuring safe referrals and knowledge about access to contraception and other crucial sexual and reproductive health related services.**

## SexoSanté in Tunisia

SexoSanté is a mobile application that meets the needs of youth in Tunisia in their quest for information regarding their sexual and reproductive wellbeing. It provides a reliable, culturally appropriate comprehensive sexuality education platform, with access to curated online and offline resources that covers critical subjects like menstruation, puberty, consent, sexual violence, contraception and abortion. SexoSanté features online counseling services, providing a secure and confidential channel to discuss concerns and seek expert advice from Tunisia's National Board on Family and Population. As of 2021, SexoSanté has been downloaded over 50,000 times.

Read more [here](#). The App is available at [Google play](#) and on [the App Store](#).



© UNFPA/ Jordan

## Reaching youth with vital information online



Digital, mobile tools and virtual platforms are a crucial source of information for young people to learn about their sexual and reproductive health. As of 2023, over 62,000 women and youth in the Arab region have access to information on sexuality and reproductive health through digital and mobile tools curated by UNFPA. These include [Mostashari](#) (Palestine), [Sexprime](#) (Morocco), [Sexosante](#) (Tunisia), and [Darby](#) (Jordan). In Somalia, an App called Baro will be released in 2023.

## Ashartash web series in Jordan

In Jordan, UNFPA launched the 'Asher Taash' TV show in 2021. Featuring the prominent actor Rania Kurdi. The show, which translates as 'Tens and Teens,' uses science and humor to raise awareness of sexual and reproductive health among young people. Rania Kurdi plays the roles of five women. Each character interacts differently with a sexual and reproductive health expert. The show covers topics like the menstrual cycle, puberty, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, child marriage, peer pressure and sexual harassment. With 2.5 million views, Asher Taash has garnered high interest, proving its effectiveness in engaging adolescents and their parents or guardians.

**Partners:** Gray Scale production company, Aramram Media, Jordanian artist Rania Kurdi

Read more [here](#).



# Innovating to end preventable maternal deaths

Despite huge progress, 162 women still die per 100,000 live births in the Arab region. Many women and girls cannot access quality sexual and reproductive health services. Poor and marginalized women and girls caught up in conflict and crises are the worst affected, with their challenges exacerbated by fear, restrictions on their movement, as well as stigma and taboos.

UNFPA uses innovation to help reach the most vulnerable women and girls with life-saving interventions, including delivering services to women and girls through mobile health teams and family clinics, and by harnessing technology to provide instant access to clinical information for health workers in remote locations.

## Sanduk Fund initiative: Increasing women's access to health care facilities through community-led funding in Sudan

Access to quality healthcare is scarce for many women and girls in Sudan due to poverty, civil unrest and long distances, especially in rural areas. Delay in care is a key factor in approximately 80 per cent of registered maternal deaths in the country.

The Sanduk Fund supports communities in Kassala and Blue Nile states to self-finance timely maternal health referrals. Sanduk is a "box" in Arabic, and community members contribute small

amounts to the sanduk each month which is used for women in need. Women in the communities manage the funds together, which builds community ownership and resilience and ensures sustainability and self-reliance. As of 2023, over 1000 women have accessed life saving obstetric health services through over 120 Sandouk Funds in eight states. Looking forward, UNFPA plans to integrate gender-based violence prevention services within the Sanduk framework partners: Kassala States Ministries of Health and Social Development, Gadaref town authorities, and local NGOs and communities.

Watch more [here](#).

## Integrated midwifery counseling and psychosocial support in the Gaza strip, Palestine

The women of Gaza, caught in a protracted humanitarian crisis, face a severe lack of access to services, including access to midwifery counseling and psychosocial support.

UNFPA Palestine deploys an innovative combination of midwives and social

workers that provide holistic support to women in their homes. The programme targets pregnant or lactating women, women at menopause, adolescents and young girls. Based on their needs, women and girls may receive a range of services including psychosocial support, midwifery counseling, supplements such as vitamins, designated kits, simple drug items, medical referrals and referrals to specialists in dealing with gender-based violence. Conditional cash is also offered to the most vulnerable women. The

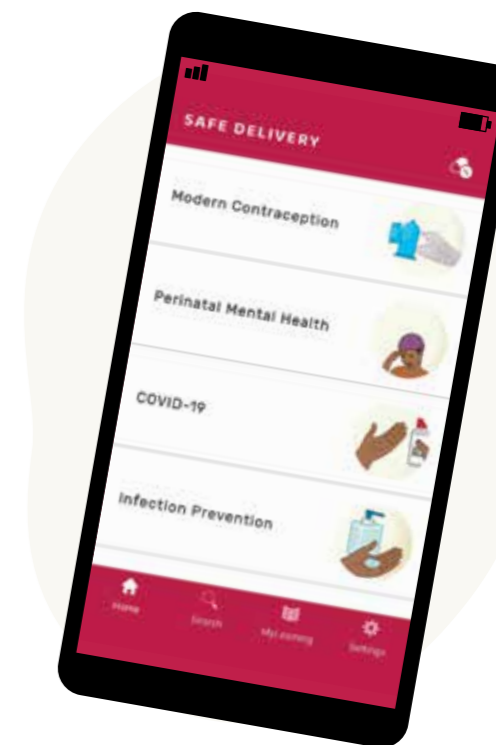
programme also provides customized psychosocial support and counseling to family members. 12,000 women and girls, including those with disabilities, received individual midwifery counseling in 2022, 95 per cent of which received supplements and simple drug items.

**Partners:** The Palestine Family Planning and Protection Association, the Palestinian Medical Relief Society

Read more [here](#).

## The Safe Delivery App: Empowering midwives to save lives through digital technology

UNFPA and the Maternity Foundation launched the Arabic version of the digital health tool, the [Safe Delivery App](#), in 2022. The App empowers midwives and health workers to ensure safer births for women and newborns in low-resource settings. As of 2023, over 270,000 health workers have downloaded the Safe Delivery App globally. The App in Arabic is being piloted by UNFPA and partners in Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.





# Innovating to end gender-based violence and harmful practices

Gender-based violence, including harmful practices such as child marriage, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, are among the gravest human rights violations that affect millions of women and girls in the Arab region, especially those caught up in crises.

Technology is playing an increasingly crucial role, by providing safe virtual spaces where women and girls can seek counseling and report cases to local referral systems.

## Shamsaha App in Oman

Women and girls in Oman and in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council are experiencing an increase in violence and harmful practices, coupled with insufficient crisis response programmes. In Oman, UNFPA promotes the protection and empowerment of women through [Shamsaha](#), a mobile App that provides free and confidential support to victims of domestic and sexual violence through telephone and in-person services. The App

also provides education through outreach and training programmes. Since June 2022, Shamsaha has provided assistance to over 1700 women and served 27,000 beneficiaries, providing resources, referrals, hotlines, information and psychosocial support. The upcoming version of the App will facilitate links to crucial services such as protection and shelter as well as transport, legal, food and beverage services.

**Partners:** Shamsaha, Dar karama, Dar Aman, American Mission Hospital, Albani legal, MMA Law Firm, Insights Therapy, Good Word Society

The App is available at [Google play](#) and on the [App Store](#).

## Social innovation incubator for young women to tackle female genital mutilation in Egypt

More than nine in ten women and girls aged 49-15 have undergone some form of female genital mutilation in Egypt.

The [social innovation incubator](#) empowers young women to build businesses that turn a profit and help eliminate the harmful practice. The programme was piloted in the Sohag governorate in Upper Egypt, and seven solutions were selected to receive technical and financial support.

Innovations include an Art Therapy Hub where drawing allows survivors of violence to heal and express themselves while raising awareness of female genital mutilation. Al-Khair Kitchen, where vulnerable women cook and sell food while receiving awareness training, and the 'Be a pioneer' initiative that empowered young students and graduates of vocational training with skills and knowledge about gender-based violence

as part of their curriculum. In 2022, the seven women-led teams piloted their business models to partners and pitched their ideas to experts, as well as potential partners and donors.

**Partners:** The Royal Norwegian Embassy, Life Makers Foundation, Innovety

Watch [more](#)

UNFPA supports young people to champion their rights and stand up against gender-based violence and harmful practices. We work with young innovators and pioneers to strengthen services and information to prevent and respond and to break the harmful norms and practices that underpin them.

### Life-changing cash for gender-based violence case management

Cash can be discreet, dignifying and flexible. It helps women and girls break free of violence, access emergency services, secure safe shelter and regain their independence.

In Jordan, Lebanon, north-western Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Yemen and through Türkiye's refugee programme, as part of a coordinated response to gender-based violence in emergencies, UNFPA and partners provide cash assistance within gender-based violence case management to ensure the safety of survivors and help facilitate a full recovery.



Asmaa Ajjaj, entrepreneur from UNFPA social innovation incubator and Anti FGM advocate from Sohag governorate in Upper Egypt.



# Innovating to ensure every young person can reach their full potential

Young people are tomorrow's leaders yet they rarely get the support they need to grow, succeed and create positive change in their communities. This is especially true for adolescent girls.

UNFPA supports youth in the Arab region by equipping them with the skills, tools, resources and networks they need to reach their potential and with the means to ensure they are less likely to miss out on education and crucial learning opportunities.

## Dalbile Youth Fund in Somalia

The [Dalbile Youth Fund](#) offers a range of opportunities to empower Somali youth to break free of poverty and unemployment. It supports youth-led businesses and social enterprises. It helps young people develop their skills in innovation and entrepreneurship, and it aids them in entering local markets. Dalbile Youth Fund had 2,716 applicants and 29% of them were living with a disability. So far 265

startups and social enterprises have been created through the Dalbile Youth Fund.

**Partners:** The European Union, the Government of Netherland, iRise Hub, Shaqodoon, Y-PEER.

“My biggest motivation is that I want to inspire people living with disability to start their businesses, people don't hire us and they discriminate against us and that's why I want to pursue the alternative of working for myself.” Adno, 23 years, Somalia living with a disability.

## Did you know?



Sports and recreational activities can give a big, positive boost to young people's learning and well-being. Through a new initiative called RISE in Somalia, five youth one-stop centres have been established by UNFPA and partners to promote youth resilience and empowerment through learning and development. Across the country, 7,500 young people, including adolescent girls and youth with disabilities, have benefitted from RISE youth centre services.



GenF mentees Asmaa Ajaj (Egypt) and Anisa Mahamud (Somalia) on the stage advocating to end FGM in regional innovation summit, Nairobi 2023



## GenF: Boosting women-led social businesses



The UNFPA [GenF programme](#) is a new women-led social businesses mentorship programme that provides tailored coaching to female entrepreneurs working on the UNFPA mandate across the Arab region.

Launched in collaboration with Startups Without Borders in 2023, GenF matches young and emerging female leaders with local female experts and professional mentors to support the growth and impact of their businesses and accelerate progress in ensuring rights, choices and dignity for all.



# Innovating to leave no one behind

UNFPA is committed to ensuring programmes and access to essential services leave no one behind. This means ensuring that all individuals, no matter who they are, where they are or how they identify, can access the critical and life-saving services they need to survive and thrive.



## Innovation to reach the most vulnerable

UNFPA leverages innovation to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized people, including women, girls and youth with disabilities.

UNFPA in **Jordan** provided refugee girls and girls with disabilities with 276 electronic bracelets to purchase menstrual products in local shops and pharmacies in 2022.

In **Morocco**, UNFPA will launch the SAGA App to provide sexual awareness and guidance for autistic, blind, and deaf persons in late 2023.

In 2023, UNFPA **Iraq** won the UNFPA Innovation Fair in the category Dare to Dream with their mobile phone App "Limitless Abilities". The disability-inclusion App will be customized for the user's type of disability and include features for support to ensure more freedom and independence e.g. "Your Eyes" and "Your Voice".

Further, the [Sehetna App](#) has been piloted by UNFPA regionally to provide basic sexual and reproductive health information for young people with visual or hearing difficulties in the Arab region.

“When the fighting got worse in our area, we left our home with nothing but hope for a better life. Through the help of the rapid response mechanism kit, our life has been changed. We have gone from a very difficult life to one where we can make a living with our small business.”

Safa'a, 28 years, Yemen, together with her husband, who was ill, and three kids she fled Majz District in Sa'ada Governorate when fighting erupted in the area.







© UNFPA/ Yemen

## Rapid Response Mechanism: An offline and online reporting tool to coordinate humanitarian action in Yemen

Limited data, poor data management and limited capabilities can make it hard to meet the urgent needs of displaced people in fast-moving humanitarian crises.

In 2018, UNFPA took the lead on an interagency innovation to respond to the needs of newly displaced people by providing life-saving relief items within 72 hours of their displacement.

Through the [Rapid Response Mechanism](#), UNFPA distributes ready to eat food provided by the World Food Programme, basic hygiene kits from UNICEF and female dignity kits that include menstrual supplies and abayas from UNFPA. As an added innovation, to improve response times and allow for easy referral to cash assistance and other services provided by humanitarian agencies, UNFPA initiated an enrollment and data collection mechanism in 2020.

This new digital tool contributes to a dashboard that allows for easy referral to services that include gender-based violence response services, reproductive health services, shelter and legal assistance. Since 2018, the Rapid Response Mechanism has registered and provided support to over 4.4 million people displaced through conflict or natural calamities.

**Partners:** USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, European Union Humanitarian Aid, Yemen Humanitarian Fund, CARE International, CERF, Deem for Development Organization, Norwegian Refugee Council, Yemen Red Crescent, Building Foundation for Development YARD Foundation, Yemen Development Foundation, Vision Hope International.

# UNFPA: Powering innovation worldwide

## The Equity 2030 Alliance

As the world's population reached 8 billion in late 2022, UNFPA launched the [Equity 2030 Alliance](#) to build an equitable future for all by closing gender gaps in science, technology and financing. The Alliance works to harness data, mobilize resources, influencers and expertise to empower women and girls, and create a world of equal opportunities to ensure all 8 billion people can exercise their rights and choices and realize their full potential.

## UNFPA Equalizer Accelerator Fund

Launched in 2021, UNFPA's [Equalizer Accelerator Fund](#) has nine official innovation partners powering innovation for women and girls worldwide. The fund enables the acceleration of positive impact through targeted investment in evidence-based transformative ideas. The Fund draws on UNFPA's deep and diverse global network of partners, service providers, activists and governments, and supports three stages: piloting, testing for impact, and transitioning innovations to scale.



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# Partner with us

UNFPA Arab States Regional Office is expanding our network of global and regional partners. We are working to boost our real-world impact through new forms of partnership, including:

**Brainpower partners**, including academic institutions or think tanks, can contribute expertise and talent to identify innovative solutions to accelerate and grow UNFPA's impact in boosting rights, choices and dignity for all.

**Alliance partners** can build political and qualitative support for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Reach partners** can endorse and highlight the innovative work of UNFPA, providing crucial and powerful platforms for advocacy and outreach.

**Resource mobilization partners** can grow UNFPA's impact through innovation, providing vital financial support or the donation of goods and services.



## Global innovation partnerships

UNFPA's partners are instrumental to delivering impact for women, girls and youth. UNFPA currently has nine official global innovation partnerships as part of its catalytic equalizer fund, and our innovation network is growing.

Resources and financial support to UNFPA innovation contributes to:

- Piloting new solutions and technologies in UNFPA programmes
- Accelerating the impact of promising interventions
- Investments in companies using technology to address UNFPA's key goals of ending preventable maternal deaths, ending the unmet need for family planning, and ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.







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