

IN BRIEF

EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The evaluation of UN Women's contribution to Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in West and Central Africa (WCA) seeks to assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of WEE programmes in the region, as well as human rights and gender equality considerations. The evaluation covers the exercise of UN Women's integrated mandate in the implementation of WEE interventions in the WCA region between 2018 and the third quarter of 2022.

The evaluation serves a dual purpose: it looks back to assess the overall successes and challenges of WEE programming since 2018, including experience in climate-resilient agriculture; it also looks forward to evaluate the thematic area's new direction towards policy and normative work and to formulate recommendations based on lessons drawn from UN Women's WEE programming between 2018 and 2022.

Users of this evaluation are primarily expected to be decision makers and UN Women personnel at country, regional and headquarters' levels. Additional users of this evaluation are actors directly working on, or with an interest in, WEE. Once approved by IEAS, this report will be disseminated among UN Women stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and development partners, and uploaded on the GATE system for global learning.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS



To what extent are WEE initiatives **relevant to the WCA region's context and priorities**? In particular, to what extent are recent initiatives (2020 onwards) relevant to the region's context and priorities?



To what extent is UN Women WCA Regional Office **strategically positioned** to enhance WEE?



Are WEE interventions at country level strategically **consistent and aligned with approaches recommended regionally and globally** by UN Women?



How has UN Women implemented its **operational, normative and coordination mandate** to advance WEE in the WCA region?



Are UN Women's **organizational structures and mechanisms** related to WEE conducive to the achievement of results in the region?



To what extent are **lessons from initiatives implemented in the field** feeding into the regional approach and vice versa?



What is the likelihood of **long-term results** or programme continuation after UN Women support has ended and, in particular, what innovative WEE approaches have potential for replication and scaling up?



To what extent have **gender and human rights** considerations been integrated into programme design and implementation?



Were the processes and activities implemented during interventions **free from discrimination for all stakeholders**, including those living with disability?

EVALUATION APPROACH

The evaluation was led by the Independent Evaluation Service (IES) under the leadership of the Regional Evaluation Specialist for WCA. The evaluation team used a gender-responsive and human rights-based approach, as prescribed by the UN Women Evaluation Policy which is aligned with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation.

A qualitative method was applied in this evaluation using oral and written information obtained from multiple sources to consider or triangulate different viewpoints, including by asking open-ended interview questions to a small but representative population of respondents.

The desk review at inception stage helped understand the context and narrow down the main sources for the evaluation.

The evaluation analysed results using a detailed evaluation framework, taking into account people's perceptions of over time. Reported changes were assessed against planned result pathways, as sketched in a reconstructed theory of change. Non-numerical information allows for a more nuanced assessment of both internal and external factors that influence performance.

The evaluation was conducted in compliance with UNEG Ethical Guidelines, UNEG Guidance on Integrating Disability Inclusion in Evaluation and the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation.

DATA COLLECTED



The evaluation primarily used **qualitative methods**: the evaluation team analysed results using a detailed evaluation framework



Portfolio analysis and desk review: written information on program results was collected from several sources



A total of 67 participants responded to an **online survey** targeting UN Women personnel



Most interviews took place virtually, while face-to-face sessions for focus groups and interviews were held with participants at the Regional Office and three Country Offices (Liberia, Niger and Senegal).



Case study on the Climate Smart Agriculture flagship programme, which is prevalent in the WCA region

HIGHLIGHTS BY EVALUATION CRITERIA

RELEVANCE

WEE programming in the WCA region is well-suited to the region's needs. Specifically, UN Women's work supporting women's income-generating activities are predominantly focused on the agricultural sector, which is a significant contributor to both employment and GDP in the region. A considerable proportion of livelihood support interventions are integrated into broader programmes addressing thematic impact areas, such as Ending Violence against Women and Peace and Security. Interestingly, these thematic combinations arose from the volatile security and climate conditions prevalent in the Sahel region and its surroundings. UN Women demonstrated agility in responding to contextual challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there is a growing emphasis on normative and policy change in WEE programmes implemented in the WCA region, the majority of the WEE portfolio is linked to UN Women's operational mandate, primarily consisting of income-generation interventions in the agriculture sector.

A key aspect of economic interventions is that they are often integrated into programmes belonging to other impact areas such as *Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action*, *Elimination of Violence against Women* and *Governance*. These impact areas use WEE interventions to enhance women's protection and rehabilitation.

The second most frequent WEE initiatives in the region are *digital inclusion*, *climate-resilient agriculture*, *women cooperatives* and *policy-normative-institutional* approaches. The rights-based commitment to women's economic well-being (Beijing 1995) is explicitly reflected in normative priorities in the WCA Regional Office's strategy that are well represented in country office portfolios, namely: *gender affirmative procurement*, *gender-responsive social protection* and *gender and fiscal stimulus*. The *policy, normative and institutional approaches* area of work aligns with the Regional Office's new programmatic emphasis on norms, laws and policies. However, while the WCA region clearly intends to work on macro-policies, the monetary component of macroeconomic policies is not clearly articulated. Furthermore, the WEE portfolio currently lacks a specific intervention focused on influencing policies and laws that regulate decent work for women.

COHERENCE

Coherence within WEE programming in the WCA region is facilitated firstly by the pivotal role played by the WEE team at the Regional Office, which provides technical assistance on WEE interventions; produces innovative knowledge products; and cultivates partnerships at the regional level for policy action. Secondly, the Climate Resilient Agriculture Initiative has been a crucial factor in harmonizing practices, as every country in the region has opted for at least one component of the initiative.

Country Offices rely on the guidance received from the Regional Office WEE unit on programme management and new macroeconomic policy analysis. The UN Women Flagship Programming Initiative has significantly contributed to the internal coherence of WEE programming in the WCA region. Flagship programming by UN Women headquarters has not only reduced reliance on small-scale micro-programming but has also enhanced the overall coherence of WEE programming in the region. The five most frequent types of interventions chosen by Country Offices are also key components of the Climate Smart Agriculture Flagship Initiative: strengthened marketing strategies; improved agriculture productivity using improved technology and seeds; enhanced capacities of women farmers cooperatives; and access to land tenure and finance. Every Country Office in the region has opted for at least one of the components of the Climate Resilient Agriculture Initiative.

EFFECTIVENESS

Not all programmes were effective in securing women's access to land and the demand for increased access to income and finance remains much higher than programme budgets can afford. However, evaluative evidence shows that the capacity building targets for reaching women were achieved or exceeded. Regarding normative work, UN Women has made contributions to creating policy environments that remove structural barriers to women's economic empowerment at local, national and regional levels, albeit at a fairly modest level.

A major part of UN Women's direct support for WEE in the region has been with women in rural communities through a series of funded projects, large and small, in a context of growing concern about the impact of climate change on agricultural production and livelihoods. Stakeholders and beneficiaries reported positive advancements in their skills and livelihoods. However, they also highlighted the need for further progress in terms of access to land, income, finance and markets.

This could be attributed to UN Women's relatively recent focus on normative work in this area. In particular, the Gender Affirmative Procurement Initiative initiated in 2022 has used access to procurement opportunities to strengthen women-led small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) in Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal. The project relies on political will to leverage government control over public procurement and reduce discriminatory practices to achieve the target of 400 women-led SMEs accessing new women-friendly procurement opportunities in these four countries within three years. Similarly, a project on Unpaid Care Work implemented in Senegal has contributed to the incorporation of equitable care and domestic work in the development of Community Development Plans in six municipalities. However, both the Affirmative Procurement and the Unpaid Care Work initiatives are still too new to show legal or regulatory change at national level.

EFFICIENCY

The planned transition towards macroeconomic interventions is hindered by existing capacities; and there has been a notable increase in demand for support from the regional WEE unit. A key challenge arises from employment arrangements: most WEE personnel are currently employed under the Service Contract modality. This raises concerns about the effective management of complex programmes, especially considering the Regional Office's new emphasis on normative change, which requires a multi-year strategy for successful implementation. This situation is further compounded by the potential loss of experienced personnel.

According to current practice, the Regional Office leads on oversight, policy advice, technical support and knowledge development, and Country Offices lead on programme implementation. According to feedback from several respondents to the evaluation, this arrangement works well for regular programme implementation. However, when it comes to long-term policy vision, there are limited human resources available in the region.

The evaluation noted that, as the majority of Country Office personnel were recruited based on their project management experience, UN Women's increased emphasis on creating a gender-responsive policy and legal environment did not align with Country Office capacities. This situation, coupled with the high proportion of personnel with short-term contract arrangements is likely to lead to a substantial strain on regional support and the knowledge management system, which, as highlighted by a previous regional evaluation, has room for improvement.

SUSTAINABILITY

UN Women's efforts in rural community mobilization, capacity building and policy advocacy have established a good foundation for creating a sustainable and enabling environment for women's economic empowerment.

The establishment and reinforcement of women's cooperatives has served as a stable foundation where project funding was not sustained. This, together with the establishment of local savings and loans associations and the acquisition of land for women's access and/or ownership and their formalization in national economies through a number of projects in the region, has provided a strong basis for sustainability. Regarding the normative component of WEE, the evaluation acknowledges that the practice of targeting government actors for training, consultation and advocacy can contribute to the sustainability of newly introduced policy interventions.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

UN Women and its partners have adopted a thoughtful approach to WEE in the WCA region, considering the specific context and characteristics of the women being targeted. Interventions designed for women farmers prioritize collective agency, while programmes such as the Affirmative Procurement Initiative and Second Chance Education focus on enhancing individual agency. However, the evaluation revealed a need to further address the diverse layers of identity that may hinder the enjoyment of economic rights among the targeted women. Specifically, disability inclusion was found to be insufficient in economic empowerment programmes; and the concerns of domestic workers have not been adequately accounted for in WEE programming in the region.

UN Women's WEE interventions in WCA are guided by principles of gender equality and women's empowerment, as outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. UN Women and its partners have adopted various approaches to addressing structural barriers to economic empowerment, taking into consideration the context and the profile of women being targeted by particular initiatives. While collective agency was successfully leveraged for the benefit of women farmers and entrepreneurs, there is scope to recognize the potential for action which benefits domestic workers, disabled women and, to a lesser extent, women survivors of violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The West and Central Africa Regional Office should continue to **focus on research and advocacy for policy change** to address structural obstacles to women's economic empowerment. This should also include women's rights to decent work and social protection, macroeconomic monetary and fiscal policies, gender-responsive budget mechanisms, and women's participation and leadership in climate change policies and implementation.



The West and Central Africa Regional Office should **elaborate an explicit typology of countries in the region**, based on their profile using different parameters such as their economic and security situations, the prevalence of displaced persons, and whether they are a destination or a country of origin for migration. By taking these factors into account, the Regional Office can facilitate more deliberate, customized and integrated WEE programming, particularly in countries with state fragility facing conflicts and a high prevalence of refugees.



The West and Central Africa Regional Office should progressively aim to **improve contractual arrangements for their economic empowerment personnel and strengthen their capacities** in the area of gender-responsive, macroeconomic policy. While the regional WEE team's contribution of knowledge products is unique and significant, the team could improve its role as a knowledge hub on WEE and provider of policy advice through good knowledge management practices.



The West and Central Africa Regional Office should **provide local organizations and institutions with the necessary skills and knowledge** to ensure long-term viability. It is essential to assess programmes that have experienced a decline, marked by a decrease in their scope and funding despite their continued relevance and need in the region. This review could facilitate the generation of innovative ideas to revive such programmes within the current context, either as stand-alone initiatives or integrated components of ongoing interventions.



The West and Central Africa Regional Office should go beyond being non-discriminatory by **ensuring its economic empowerment policy and programme proposals refer explicitly to disability and under-privileged groups** to facilitate inclusiveness at the implementation stage for the poorest and more marginalized communities. UN Women could leverage its convening power with other UN organizations to jointly advocate for the economic rights of domestic workers.