

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVALUATION OF THE STRATEGIC NOTE: UN WOMEN REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

This report presents the key findings, conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation of the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia's Strategic Note. The evaluation provides a systematic assessment of UN Women's contribution to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in the region, covering the Entity's normative, coordination and operational mandates. The evaluation was carried out between April 2025 and September 2025

BACKGROUND

This evaluation of the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO) Strategic Note is primarily formative (forward-looking), designed to assist ECARO and its partners in strategic learning and decision-making as they prepare a new Strategic Note. The evaluation also takes on a summative (backward-looking) role, aimed at strengthening accountability, assessing development effectiveness and drawing lessons from past experience. The evaluation offers an independent, systematic review of UN Women's contribution to advancing its mandate at the regional level and in supporting country presences. Its findings will highlight which strategies have been effective, which areas require improvement and how these insights can inform future work. The assessment focuses on the current Strategic Note cycle (2022–2025) and will directly shape development of the upcoming Strategic Note (2026–2030).

UN WOMEN IN THE EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION

ECARO provides support to **18 countries and territories** across the region.¹ The Strategic Note serves as the primary planning framework guiding UN Women's normative, coordination and operational work. Its aim is to ensure that women and girls in all their diversity are able to engage with and benefit from normative standards and gender-responsive laws, policies and institutions, gaining improved access to opportunities, resources and services and fully enjoying their fundamental rights and freedoms.

Within the diverse context of Europe and Central Asia, ECARO functions as a knowledge hub, delivering oversight, quality assurance, technical support and policy services. ECARO also manages regional and multi-country programmes designed to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. The ECARO Strategic Note (2022–2025) aligns with six systemic outcomes of the UN Women Strategic Plan to drive progress across thematic priorities: Inclusive Governance; Ending Violence Against Women and Girls; Women's Economic Empowerment; Women, Peace and Security; Climate Change; and Humanitarian Action and Disaster Risk Reduction.

¹ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a theory-based approach and contribution analysis, considering ECARO's bridging role between headquarters and Country Offices; UN Women's integrated mandate; and its programmatic and operational scope. A revised theory of change guided the process, with evaluation questions assessed against the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, sustainability, gender equality/human rights and efficiency). Data collection engaged 138 people through interviews, focus group discussions, surveys and case studies. The evaluation team reviewed more than 100 documents as part of the secondary data review. Contribution analysis was strengthened by qualitative data coding in NVIVO and Excel, ensuring robust findings through triangulation.

The evaluation was guided by UN Women's principles for gender-responsive evaluation and by the United Nations Evaluation Group's standards. The process adhered to UN Women's established procedures to guarantee rigorous evaluation practices, ethical standards and high-quality outputs, as set out in the UN Women Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Handbook.

All deliverables underwent quality assurance by IES management, an external peer reviewer, as well as the Evaluation Reference Group and the Evaluation Management Group.

CONTEXT

Countries across the Europe and Central Asia region² have diverse and complex political, economic, social, environmental and legal landscapes, and are home to an estimated 253.6 million people.³ The Strategic Note 2022–2025 period has been marked by significant contextual changes across the region, including to peace and security, migration patterns, climate change, technological advancements, and political and economic priorities. Although advances towards the 2030 Agenda have been recorded, the pace of change remains insufficient, leaving the region off track to achieve gender equality by 2030.⁴ Of the 18 countries and areas in the Europe and Central Asia area where UN Women works, only three have met or are close to meeting the gender equality target in at least half of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 indicators and sub-indicators.⁵ Unless structural barriers to gender equality and discrimination are removed, women and girls will continue to be left behind.



² This section covers the 18 countries and territories where ECARO maintains a presence: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

³ UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Regional Gender Snapshot: Europe and Central Asia, April 2025 ([Link](#))

⁴ UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Regional Gender Snapshot: Europe and Central Asia, April 2025 ([Link](#))

⁵ UN Women calculations using United Nations Statistics Division. 2025. Global SDG Indicators Database. ([Link](#))

⁶ References to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

FINDINGS

The evaluation of the ECARO Strategic Note 2022–2025 found that its strategy effectively reflected UN Women’s integrated mandate and alignment with regional priorities, while highlighting opportunities for a clearer long-term vision and strategic differentiation. ECARO played a central development-focused role, providing valued thematic, technical and operational support to Country Offices, particularly in resource mobilization, compliance and knowledge generation. However, the evaluation noted that the Strategic Note’s relevance and timeliness varied across contexts and, without a clear accountability and results framework, its overall impact on performance was difficult to measure. ECARO’s adaptation to emerging risks –such as the gender backlash, shrinking civic space and funding volatility –was found to be reactive, with stronger engagement in the Women, Peace and Security and humanitarian domains emerging only after the invasion of Ukraine. Despite these challenges, ECARO enhanced internal coherence through planning support, knowledge management and promoting standardized approaches across thematic areas.

At the coordination and partnership level, ECARO contributed to regional UN coordination mechanisms, particularly through the Regional Collaborative Platform and in advancing gender mainstreaming within United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) and United Nations Country Team System-Wide Action Plan (UNCT-SWAP) Gender Equality Scorecards. Despite this, participation in regional joint programmes remained limited, constraining opportunities for system-wide impact. Engagement with civil society and the private sector produced promising but uneven results: private-sector initiatives, such as those promoting women’s entrepreneurship and gender-responsive business practices, offered strong potential for impact; while civil society engagement lacked a consistent framework following the discontinuation

of the regional Civil Society Advisory Group. The evaluation also noted progress in areas such as gender-responsive budgeting, elimination of violence against women and data-driven policy work; however, integration of marginalized groups in the programmatic portfolio was uneven.

While ECARO has made progress in strengthening its resource mobilization and donor engagement processes, the office’s overall financial sustainability remains under pressure. ECARO has professionalized its fundraising efforts through donor mapping, action plans and a structured community of practice, resulting in multi-year Strategic Note funding from Denmark and engagement with the European Union (EU). However, the funding base remains narrow, with Denmark and the EU contributing nearly three quarters of non-core resources, leaving ECARO vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities. This poses risks to institutional continuity, long-term knowledge retention and ECARO’s capacity to sustain a consistent strategic advisory role and guidance across the region.

The Strategic Note’s results framework remains activity-oriented and lacks outcome-level indicators linking to ECARO’s core functions of coordination, technical support, knowledge generation and resource mobilization. Challenges were identified in monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. Finally, the evaluation noted divergent views on ECARO’s strategic direction: some staff favour a broad thematic approach for flexibility and visibility; while others, along with most external partners, called for a sharper focus on UN Women’s comparative strengths –normative leadership, data and knowledge generation, and capacity development. Clarifying this strategic identity will be essential for the next Strategic Note, ensuring a sustainable, focused and coherent regional role within an evolving UN development landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSION 1:

ECARO is uniquely positioned to drive strategic influence, knowledge leadership and cross-country collaboration, but this potential can only be fully realized through clear articulation of its distinct value, stronger accountability for results and an adaptive model that supports the responsiveness of regional functions to country-driven demands. Catalytic work is essential for ECARO to maximize limited resources, generate multiplier effects and position gender equality at the centre of broader regional and national agendas.

CONCLUSION 2:

ECARO's experience during the 2022–2025 Strategic Note period highlights the need for greater agility, clarity and focus in navigating a complex and fast-evolving regional context. While its mandate and alignment with regional priorities are recognized, sustaining relevance requires moving beyond existing programmes and reactive responses towards proactive leadership, needs-based programming, sharper prioritization and stronger coherence across regional and country levels.

CONCLUSION 3:

ECARO's role in advancing UN Women's coordination mandate, along with ensuring internal and external coherence and synergies, is becoming increasingly critical in the context of UN reform and limited funding. There is a need to focus partnerships on programmatic work, beyond current convening and the provision of knowledge and data. To maximize impact and efficiency of resources, ECARO needs a theory of change for coordination with diverse regional stakeholders, along with a long-term vision that outlines how coordination and partnerships contribute to higher-level results.

CONCLUSION 4:

ECARO contributed to gender equality and the empowerment of women in the region by complementing country-level efforts with catalytic regional programming, knowledge generation and communications. Initiatives such as on gender-responsive budgeting demonstrate how subregional programmes can leverage expertise, scale results and initiate new projects across multiple contexts. However, the benefits of regional interventions remain uneven, with stronger engagement in countries with direct programme presence and limited benefits for non-presence countries, underscoring the need for tailored modalities of support.

CONCLUSION 5:

ECARO's financial sustainability remains a critical challenge. While one donor has provided some stability through Strategic Note funding, shifting donor priorities and declining development aid create significant uncertainty for the current model, which relies heavily on maintaining a full cadre of thematic advisers and support to Country Offices. Moving forward, ECARO will need to adapt its structure and explore more cost-effective modalities. This could include drawing on personnel in Country Offices who have strong subject-matter expertise to provide advisory support to the region. The current modality for non-physical representation countries also requires rethinking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

ECARO should **SHARPEN ITS STRATEGIC FOCUS AND CONSOLIDATE ITS EFFORTS**, ensuring that interventions are strongly driven by needs assessments, grounded in comparative advantage and deliver depth and quality without overstretching limited resources. Development of the next Strategic Note offers a timely opportunity to refine this direction and embed greater coherence and impact.

2

ECARO should **CONSOLIDATE EXISTING EFFORTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**, and adopt a proactive strategy to prevent and counter the growing backlash against gender equality and protect achieved rights. Aiming to position ECARO as a reference point, the strategy should include situation monitoring and analysis; risk assessments; strategic and tailored communications; and the building of alliances and advocacy coalitions, integrating backlash resilience into programming and strengthening advocacy coalitions.

3

ECARO should **CONTINUE TO BUILD AND CONSOLIDATE ITS ROLE AS A REGIONAL KNOWLEDGE HUB**, both internally (to support country-level offices) and externally (to inform and influence regional actors and institutions). This role should be pursued in a more strategic, needs-based and long-term manner, ensuring that knowledge generation, dissemination and uptake go beyond ad hoc events and workshops, and respond to the concrete needs of stakeholders.

4

ECARO should **FURTHER DEVELOP AND DEEPEN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS** with key regional actors to amplify impact, mobilize resources and strengthen advocacy for gender equality beyond short-term activities. This requires the development of a clear theory of change for each partner category, clear results and accountability frameworks.

5

ECARO should **ENHANCE AND DIVERSIFY ITS RESOURCE MOBILIZATION EFFORTS** by creating stronger synergies between thematic expertise and fundraising strategies. Resource mobilization should be systematically embedded in programmatic and technical work, ensuring that funding approaches are directly linked to priority areas of comparative advantage, while also broadening the donor base beyond traditional partners.

6

ECARO should **SYSTEMATICALLY EMBED INTERSECTIONALITY, DISABILITY INCLUSION AND THE LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND PRINCIPLE** across all regional interventions. All facets of UN Women's triple mandate should address overlapping forms of discrimination faced by marginalized women and girls, while also leveraging collective power with other actors to build intersectional approaches that link women's rights with the rights of diverse vulnerable groups, disability inclusion, climate and green solutions, and other cross-cutting agendas.

7

In the face of the global funding crisis, ECARO (in coordination with headquarters and other Regional and Country Offices) should consider the possibility of **STRATEGICALLY NARROWING ITS SCOPE TO FEWER THEMATIC PRIORITIES AND SHIFTING FOCUS TO GEOGRAPHIC AREAS WITH THE GREATEST NEED** and/or where it can achieve the greatest impact. ECARO should reassess its business model, considering decentralizing technical support to strong Country Offices with clear comparative advantages. Country Offices should also receive guidance on managing funding cuts, adapting programming and maintaining quality.