IN BRIEF

UN WOMEN ALBANIA COUNTRY PORTFOLIO EVALUATION

STRATEGIC NOTE 2022–2026



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Evaluation Background

The Country Portfolio Evaluation was intended to inform development of the next UN Women Albania Strategic Note while promoting accountability for results under the current Strategic Note 2022–2026.

The evaluation covered UN Women's integrated triple mandate (normative, coordination and operational) and its work to deliver on the Strategic Note Outcomes of

1. Strengthening government capacity to design and monitor gender-responsive social protection policies and services;
2. Addressing women's economic empowerment, climate change adaptation and access to productive and financial resources; and
3. Gender-responsive governance, ending violence against women and girls, women's political participation, gender data and UN system coordination for gender equality.

The intended users of this evaluation are the UN Women Albania Country Office and its partners, the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, UN Women headquarters, the United Nations Country Team, donor community and other stakeholders in Albania.

The evaluation used a theory-based, mixed-methods approach. It was conducted in accordance with UN Women and UN system evaluation policies and guidelines.

Evaluation context

Albania is an upper middle-income country with a population of 2.4 million and a very high level of human development (HDI 0.810). It is in the process of accelerated accession to the European Union (EU), with all accession chapters expected to close by 2027.

Albania's gender equality index was 60.4 in 2020. In recent years, there have been positive trends in strengthening gender equality legal and policy frameworks and in women's political participation. Challenges remain in terms of violence against women, women's economic participation and women's care burden. EU accession is a major driver of progress on gender equality.

KEY FINDINGS

Relevance

The Strategic Note and its implementation were well aligned with international frameworks, national and municipal level priorities, and the needs of Albanian women and girls. Work under the Strategic Note addressed pressing gender equality challenges; engaged in emerging areas; and took advantage of opportunities that emerged from legal, policy and institutional reform processes. The Country Office also demonstrated strong flexibility in responding to the emerging challenge of anti-gender backlash. Going forward, there is space for the Country Office to develop stronger alignment with the EU accession process.

The Country Office developed strong partnerships and close collaboration with a wide variety of relevant stakeholders. It had an excellent partnership with its key counterpart, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and good collaboration with other ministries, independent state bodies and local municipalities. However, some relationships – such as with the Commission for Protection from Discrimination and EU integration units within government institutions – could be further strengthened.

The Country Office had extensive partnerships with women's civil society at national and local level, which were perceived as a core added value of UN Women, and good collaboration with donors. Engagement with less traditional partners, such as the media and the private sector, generated promising initiatives but requires greater investment.

Albania's EU accession process will define the coming period and more strategic engagement with this process will be a central priority for the Country Office. The Country Office can play an important role in supporting implementation of new legal and policy frameworks; supporting the development of sustainable capacities within institutions; and countering anti-gender backlash. Given the possibility of different EU accession trajectories; uncertainty over the time frame for UN Women's continued engagement in Albania; and possible funding challenges, it will be important for the next Strategic Note to focus on a limited number of strategic priorities and build in flexibility to respond to different scenarios.

Coherence

The Country Office demonstrated good internal synergies across thematic areas and programmes, with strong cross-programmatic linkages evident in its work at national and municipal level. While these synergies have been strengthened during the Strategic Note period, there is space to further embed them within planning and reporting processes. Country Office work across UN Women's triple mandate also demonstrated strong coherence, with the normative agenda providing clear framing for operational and coordination efforts, and each element of the mandate leveraged to contribute to key achievements.

The Country Office provided leadership and expertise on gender equality within the UN Country Team and was proactive in its UN coordination role. However, coordination was apparently undermined by inter-agency competition and limited engagement on gender from some UN partners. While the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) standalone gender equality outcome provided an anchor for gender equality efforts and UN Women's leadership, its removal may reduce focus for gender equality work (the mainstreaming approach could be leveraged for more strategic engagement on gender by all agencies). Stronger UN system alignment around EU accession priorities is required, with potential for the Country Office to lead on priorities related to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

UN Women's comparative advantage in Albania comes from its unique mandate, strong expertise and valuable coordinating and convening role. The Country Office was perceived as the "go-to" agency for technical expertise on a range of gender equality issues, and its expert inputs have been particularly useful in the context of extensive legal and policy reform. Another strong area of comparative advantage is the Country Office's excellent relationships with and consistent support for women's civil society and the breadth of its civil society partnerships.

Effectiveness

The Country Office's interventions made a substantial contribution to Strategic Note outcomes, with particularly extensive results achieved under Outcome 3 on gender responsive governance. Results were achieved at systemic, institutional, community and individual levels and were realized through multiple pathways, although assumptions about pathways of change were not always valid. However, some opportunities to advance outcomes by embedding gender within key plans and processes were missed, while in some cases interventions were too small in budget and outreach or too dispersed to make a significant contribution.

Albania's EU accession process created a highly enabling context for the Country Office's work. Results were enabled by strong relationships with government institutions at central and local level, civil society and other stakeholders; close alignment with national priorities; the Country Office's expertise and credibility; and the dedicated gender outcome within the UNSDCF. Growing backlash emerged as a major challenge to gender equality progress, while the achievement of results was also hindered by weak capacities and high turnover within government institutions, and the Country Office's limited influence within some key processes.

Efficiency

The Country Office benefitted from strong leadership; effective coordination routines; skilled staff who have successfully managed a rapidly scaling portfolio; and a well-functioning results-based management system, although outcome and impact- level measurement remained challenging. Direct funding of the Strategic Note supported by Sida (The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) was a transformative enabler that filled critical staffing gaps and allowed for investment in some organizational functions that earmarked project funding cannot fully cover. It also allowed for the continuity of programme work in key areas, and investment in new emerging and promising areas of work. Sustaining current capacity levels depends on the continuation of flexible funding, alongside more streamlined corporate procedures and strengthened staff retention conditions.

The Country Office achieved a notable increase in resource mobilization (68 per cent) between 2022 and 2025, enabled by intensified proposal development, strategic positioning and the transformative role of Sida's Strategic Note Direct Funding. However, beyond the resources currently secured until 2027, the outlook is constrained by a deteriorating donor landscape, inter-agency competition for resources and short project cycles. There is a need to further strengthen the Country Office's thematic positioning in relation to evolving donor priorities, such as EU accession-oriented programming, and strategically focus on a selected number of priorities.

Human rights and gender equality

The Country Office achieved increasingly systematic integration of human rights and leave no one behind principles, with tangible outcomes for women with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian women, rural women and survivors of violence through dedicated programming, participatory budgeting and disability-inclusive service pilots at municipal level. However, coverage remains uneven across thematic areas and geographies, with disability inclusion not yet fully mainstreamed beyond work on ending violence against women and social protection; and there is scope for stronger intersectional approaches and more consistent reach to the most marginalized.

The Country Office worked to address the underlying causes of gender inequality through a well-conceived combination of legislative reform, gender-responsive planning and budgeting, youth and school-based engagement, media partnership and capacity-building, and innovative behavioural change approaches, including work with men and boys. At the same time, the depth and persistence of discriminatory social norms — compounded by a growing anti-gender backlash — underscore that sustained, long-term investment in structural and normative change is needed, moving beyond time-bound campaigns towards consistent, community-embedded engagement that reaches the most conservative and remote settings.

Sustainability

The Country Office has invested extensively in capacity development for government, civil society and oversight institutions. Although significant capacities have been built, the sustainability of these gains is undermined by high staff turnover in public administration; continued dependence on UN Women's direct technical inputs; and the slow pace of institutionalizing training through permanent national systems. As capacity and financing are mutually reinforcing, gender-responsive budgeting and EU-aligned financing instruments are the principal levers for addressing both constraints simultaneously. EU accession creates structural demand for the capacities UN Women has been building, offering a powerful sustainability anchor if capacity transfer can be accelerated.

The Country Office has also supported national and local-level ownership, anchored in legal frameworks, budgetary commitments and institutional champions. Key models such as Local Gender Action Plans and gender-responsive budgeting have been scaled up, while other initiatives demonstrate potential for replication. However, ownership remains uneven as smaller municipalities struggle to implement frameworks; women's economic empowerment pilots face uncertain viability; and geographical inequities in service coverage persist. The durability of current positive trajectories depends on embedding gender equality within EU-aligned financing instruments.

CONCLUSIONS

1

EU accession is the main driver of sustainable progress on gender equality in Albania and, while the Country Office has engaged in some important ways with this process, there have also been some gaps. A more strategic and clearly articulated alignment with the EU accession process would be valuable both for advancing gender equality outcomes and mobilizing resources for Country Office efforts.

2

The Country Office harnesses its expertise, credibility and convening power to contribute to gender equality results at multiple levels and across thematic areas. Its close relationships with government institutions and civil society have enabled the Country Office to influence gender-related agendas and reforms. However, there is a risk of overdependence by partners on Country Office support that needs to be addressed, particularly given uncertainties about UN Women's longer-term presence.

3

The Country Office leverages its normative mandate to take advantage of EU accession-related reforms and guide the development of legal and policy frameworks, while employing its operational mandate to help develop the capacities and systems to implement these frameworks. However, the Country Office's ability to provide leadership for coordinated UN system engagement on gender priorities is uneven and strengthening this will be critical in the next strategic period.

4

Anti-gender backlash and misinformation present a growing threat to gender equality progress in Albania. The Country Office demonstrated agility and built credibility with its response to backlash on the Gender Equality Law. It is well placed to build upon this experience to develop expanded coalitions and comprehensive strategies that can counter backlash, promote positive social norms and advance the rights of the most marginalized groups.

5

The Country Office's effectiveness is underpinned by strong internal systems and capacities, and a culture of collaboration. Together with Strategic Note Direct Funding, these factors have enabled the Country Office to respond to stakeholders' high expectations and deliver results. Maintaining sufficient capacities and resources in a challenging funding landscape will require strategic positioning in relation to shifting donor priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 The Country Office should (a) develop a compelling vision of how it can align with and add value to the EU accession process as a key entry point for advancing Albania's international gender equality commitments; and (b) undertake scenario planning for different EU accession trajectories.

2 The Country Office should develop a multi-faceted approach to address backlash, building on corporate guidance and best practices in this area. This must include expanding work on social norms change and integrating a focus on the most marginalized groups across the portfolio.

3 The Country Office should continue to lead on mainstreaming gender equality throughout UNSDCF implementation; strengthen strategic partnerships and joint programming with other UN agencies, including in the context of UN80 reform; and develop coordinated UN system engagement on gender aspects of EU accession and in response to backlash.

4 The Country Office should engage in key strategic areas and critical partnerships, with a focus on consolidating and deepening national capacities and ownership to generate sustainable results at scale.

5 The Country Office should develop a resource mobilization strategy that (a) aligns its thematic positioning with evolving donor priorities; and (b) prioritizes securing Strategic Note funding, while improving outcome and impact monitoring to strengthen the evidence base for donor engagement.