

## IN BRIEF

# COUNTRY PORTFOLIO EVALUATION AND AUDIT VIET NAM

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This brief presents the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Country Portfolio Evaluation and Audit (CPE+A) of the UN Women Viet Nam country office (CO) conducted between February and August 2020. The CPE+A was jointly led by the UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) and Internal Audit Service (IAS). A CPE is a systematic assessment of the normative, coordination and operational aspects of UN Women's contribution to development results relating to gender equality and women's empowerment at the country level. A risk-based internal audit of a CO aims to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls in planning and implementing strategic priorities, programme and project management, organizational structure and control environment, and operational processes.

### CPE+A purpose

The purpose of this CPE+A is to support: strategic learning and decision-making for the CO's current Strategic Note (SN) 2017–2021; design of the next SN 2022–2025; the CO's strategic positioning and challenges in the context of UN reform and overall country context; enhanced accountability, governance and cost-effectiveness of CO programmes and interventions; and capacity development and mobilization of national stakeholders to advance gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE).

### CPE+A objectives and intended audience

The CPE+A had the following objectives:

- Assess the **relevance** and **coherence** of UN Women programmes vis-à-vis the UN system; the added value of UN Women; and identify contributions to the One Strategic Plan (2017–2021) outcomes.
- Assess **governance, risk management, effectiveness** and **organizational efficiency** in progressing towards the achievement of GEWE results.
- Analyse how a **human-rights approach** and **gender equality principles** are integrated in the design and implementation of UN Women's work in Viet Nam and contribute to the sustainability of efforts.
- Provide **actionable recommendations** to support UN Women strategic positioning in Viet Nam for the future.

The scope of the CPE+A covered UN Women's normative, coordination and operational work across all thematic areas of engagement during the current SN. The geographic coverage of the CPE+A spanned Viet Nam, with field visits

to Phu Yen and Da Nang. The primary target audience and intended direct users of this evaluation are UN Women personnel (including the CO, the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific [ROAP], headquarters units and IEAS), government partners, the UN Country Team (UNCT), civil society representatives and funding partners.

### CPE + A methods

The CPE+A employed a **non-experimental, theory-based gender-responsive approach**. In consultation with the CO, a reconstructed theory of change (ToC) was developed and used as the basis for contribution analysis. Evaluation questions were developed using the ToC and assessed against the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee's (OECD DAC) criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, gender equality and human rights. UN Women evaluations are gender-responsive and apply the key principles of a human rights-based approach: they are inclusive, participatory, ensure fair power relations and are transparent; and analyse the underlying structural barriers and sociocultural norms that impede the realization of women's rights.

The CPE+A followed UN Women procedures to ensure high-quality evaluation processes and products and ethical conduct as outlined in the UN Women Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Handbook. All evaluation products were subject to quality review by IEAS, a peer reviewer, the Evaluation Reference Group and the Evaluation Management Group. IAS followed the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing in contributing to this CPE+A.

## Conclusions

### CONCLUSION 1



The CO has been able to use various funding modalities including regional and global to grow its portfolio and enhance its partnerships, and these efforts are recognized as relevant in contributing to gender equality and women's empowerment in Viet Nam. Yet, it has been challenging to mobilize resources in a middle-income country (MIC) with decreasing Official Development Assistance, despite the continuing need for dedicated investments and GEWE as a priority in MIC context to ensure progress towards the sustainable development goals. A reduced operating space for development partners – COVID-19 and its economic effects may only further complicate this situation in the longer-term. Current reliance on regional and global funds presents a risk to the sustainability of the office. Given these uncertainties, this is an opportune time for UN Women to determine its strategic vision for its small office presence in the region of Asia and Pacific, such as the CO, for the next four years. The vision should take into consideration reduced traditional funding options and assess possibility of new funding through different collaborations, e.g. high quality and relevant technical support to the government and other partners enabling gender-responsive investment in other sectors such as climate actions, sustainable development financing and others.

### CONCLUSION 2



Gender-responsive programming and policy advocacy is needed in all areas and at a much larger and deeper scale to stimulate the type of change required for achieving gender equality in Viet Nam, but UN Women cannot do it alone. Due to funding challenges, the current Strategic Note was implemented through individual short-term projects without a coherent theory of change for umbrella programmes tying them together. The CO would benefit from the opportunity to consolidate and prioritize its areas of focus, so it is not spread too thinly. Revisiting its thematic areas of focus and having a more strategic integrated approach in line with local needs, national priorities and UN system work would help to ensure that the new Strategic Note is relevant, impactful and cost-effective. Moreover, technical expertise of partner agencies should be leveraged during its specific interventions and conversely the CO should advocate for its inclusion with appropriate resourcing as a gender subject matter expert in UN agency initiatives to ensure gender mainstreaming.

### CONCLUSION 3



The CO's work was in line with the Leaving No One Behind principle: the CO's efforts directly supported knowledge and evidence generation on underrepresented groups; inclusion of gender into policies on HIV/AIDS, ethnic minorities and women migrants; and engagement of youth and LGBTIQ as GEWE champions. Nevertheless, in terms of community-level interventions, UN Women's work did not always provide evidence of reaching those most in need and addressing underlying causes of gender inequality. Prioritizing efforts to change informal norms and exclusionary practices and measure social norm change along with enhanced practices related to engaging rights holders will be required to ensure progress.

### CONCLUSION 4



The CO has proactively led UN system efforts to mainstream gender. The CO's ability to leverage networks and reach and amplify the voices of diverse groups representing the most marginalized in society is UN Women's added value within the context of the UN system in Viet Nam. Recognizing that coordination requires the collective and collaborative engagement of all actors, there are opportunities for both strengthening UN Women's role in coordination and advocating for integrated gender responsiveness of the United Nations and Government of Viet Nam One Strategic Plan.

### CONCLUSION 5



UN Women's ability to engage with civil society and strategic partners has enabled it to remain relevant and enhanced its reach, yet efforts have remained without a strategic focus on how to leverage and more effectively build partners' capacities in a long term. As a core strategy for implementation, capacity building requires a coherent, long-term and strategic approach to ensure cost-effective and sustainable efforts. An overarching capacity development plan for the CO's strategic partners would lead to more sustainable results, increased national ownership and better value for money in terms of the funds invested in capacity development across projects. Integrating and systematic tracking of results from capacity building would help to ensure the CO's efforts are cost-effective and impactful.

### CONCLUSION 6



The impact of the field programme could be enhanced by systematically improving data collection, validation and reporting, focusing on results and milestones, and prioritization and control of key risks and opportunities in its project management and operations. The office could benefit from a dedicated monitoring and evaluation resource to systematically design solid results frameworks at the project design stage and collect and report result-focused evidence against those results frameworks. Systematic measurement of results and reporting would contribute to demonstrating a stronger impact and, accordingly, adjust programmes based on lessons learned. Moreover, using it as a tool for partnership development and resource mobilization represents another benefit, as the CO would be able to showcase the impact of its work in Viet Nam through results-focused reporting.

### CONCLUSION 7



An effective and efficient Operations team complements field programme / projects through the timely acquisition of key human resources and programme supplies necessary to deliver programme activities. The CO was proactive in managing procurement and travel by taking advantage of the long-term agreements in place between the UN and suppliers for most of its procurement and travel needs. There is still a need for better coordination between Operations and Programme teams to properly align the CO's priorities and effectively plan for human resource, procurement and programme-specific requirements.

These conclusions were developed based on the key findings and in consultation with members of the Evaluation Reference Group.

## Main recommendations

The presentation of the preliminary CPE+A findings and discussion on the way forward took place with members of the Evaluation Reference Group in August 2020 and fed into the final recommendations presented below. The recommendations were reviewed by the Evaluation Management and Reference Groups and subsequent changes were integrated as appropriate in a transparent manner. The main report prioritizes and identifies the key target audience for the recommendations. IEAS will track the implementation of the recommendations through the management response tracking systems.

### RECOMMENDATION 1



ROAP and CO management, in consultation with Change Management in headquarters, to define a vision for the CO's sustainability and footprint in the country for the next SN cycle, considering the external and internal context, particularly the impact and opportunities of COVID-19. Based on this vision the CO should conduct a functional analysis to review its office structure and necessary skill set to fulfil this vision.

### RECOMMENDATION 2



The CO should prioritize the thematic areas and the related activities with a view to building a coherent theory of change, identifying possible areas of duplication with development partners, and leveraging partners expertise. This should be done through the Strategic Note, with the aim of advancing GEWE in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and ROAP priority areas and within the context of MIC and COVID-19 to ensure that the Strategic Note is relevant, impactful and cost-effective.

### RECOMMENDATION 3



Building on the existing plans of the UN system and development partners for strengthening synergies and coordinating efforts to leave no one behind, the CO should prioritize the needs of the most disadvantaged groups of populations through timely and participatory engagement of rights holders and duty bearers in project design, monitoring and reporting (i.e. in needs analysis, target group selection and validation, feasibility assessment and value for money analysis). The CO should also strengthen its analysis and data collection of intersecting forms of inequality and its approach for measuring social norm change, including through its partners.

### RECOMMENDATION 4



In line with UN reform, under the Resident Coordinator's overall guidance, the CO to

- Leverage its mandate for UN system coordination for GEWE and urge for integration, coherence and synergies between UN system actors to further amplify impact.
- Develop a CO coordination strategy and success indicators that are regularly measured, consolidating key stakeholders' expectations and addressing potential overlaps between different existing forums to ensure that coordination mechanisms are leveraged for strategic issues.
- Within the context of the new UNSDCF planning process, advocate for a dedicated gender outcome and gender responsive indicators across the next UN-Government One Strategic Plan for Viet Nam and a review of the coordination architecture to ensure coherence of results and working groups.

### RECOMMENDATION 5



The CO should establish an integrated strategic partnership and capacity building approach based on its thematic priorities and programmes:

- Integrate work across thematic areas, projects (horizontally) and different levels of the partner organization (rather than on a siloed project basis), consolidating established partnership principles and building upon existing efforts. The strategy should specify how the CO will specifically engage in strengthening civil society through its convening role and platform which offers a bridge between civil society and the government on issues related to GEWE.
- Develop a capacity building strategy for those strategic partners with performance indicators so that its cost-effectiveness can be measured over time. This strategy should be based on principles for capacity building, partner needs/capacity assessment, followed by an implementation plan with measurable indicators and collaborative review.

### RECOMMENDATION 6



The CO should strengthen its RBM practices, and identification, prioritization and control of key risks and opportunities in its project management and operations.

- Develop an integrated M&E framework consolidating strategic priorities and annual workplans cascading into project and partners results frameworks and consolidate efforts of all relevant stakeholders involved in monitoring. During planning/inception phase conduct a needs assessment, feasibility analysis of interventions, value-for-money analysis and provide for the sustainability of CO initiatives (including projects, communications, and coordination efforts) and regularly monitor these aspects during implementation.
- Ensure that data in the reports is independently validated from those who collect those data, including validation on a sample of reached beneficiaries compared to targeted ones.
- Establish a knowledge management system that captures monitoring, evaluation, and reporting information in a systematized manner to facilitate learning both internally and externally.
- Depending on available resources (budgeted and pooled from different projects), consider establishing a dedicated M&E post. If not available, the monitoring function could be shared between project managers with monitoring and data validations protocols and training. The M&R Officer from RO could provide technical support in establishing this.

### RECOMMENDATION 7



The CO should strengthen its risk management and controls in key operational areas to ensure cost-effectiveness and to avoid unnecessary delays in implementation. In particular:

- Strengthen its management of consultant recruitment by designing clear ToR with well-defined deliverables, timely recruiting and managing performance, and by ensuring competition, transparency, and fairness. Proactively use procurement plans to ensure timely procurement, justifying significant deviations from planned procurement actions.
- Ensure that field travels are consolidated and limited to necessary ones focusing on results and demonstrating cost-consciousness. Creating a network and/or roster of potential partners for future competitive selection.