

COUNTRY PORTFOLIO EVALUATION

KAZAKHSTAN

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This Country Portfolio Evaluation of the UN Women Country Office Kazakhstan Strategic Note (2016–2020) was conducted during the period April 2020–February 2021. The UN Women Strategic Note evaluated in this report covers the period 2016–2020. However, it is important to note that in 2018, in the middle of Strategic Note implementation, the UN Women Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Kazakhstan was transformed into a Country Office (CO) covering only Kazakhstan.

Context and capacities of the UN Women Office in Kazakhstan during 2016–2020

With the change from Multi-Country Office to Country Office, there was also a change in thematic priorities. In 2018, a new thematic area (“Women’s Economic Empowerment” (WEE)) was added to the existing two: Thematic Area 3 “Women and girls live a life free from violence (Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW))” and Thematic Area 5 “Governance and national planning fully reflect accountability for gender equality commitments and priorities (Leadership and Governance)”. In 2018, the UN Women global Strategic Plan was renewed with slight but important changes in its strategic priorities. Thematic Area 5 was combined with Outcome 2 “Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems” in the new Strategic Plan 2018–2021. This change was reflected in the annual work plans (AWPs) but not in the Strategic Note 2016–2020.

The shift to a Country Office also introduced major changes with regard to human resources. The number of programme personnel in the office was reduced from 15 to 6 in 2018, but in 2020 the personnel increased to 16. This is important to acknowledge to ensure that the progress made by UN Women in Kazakhstan over the period 2016–2020 is seen through the prism of the limited capacities of the Country Office and a largely unaligned theory of change as defined in the Strategic Note 2016–2020.

Evaluation approach and methodology

This Country Portfolio Evaluation was conducted by the UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) in close collaboration with the Kazakhstan Country Office as a primarily formative (forward-looking) evaluation. It is geared to support the Country Office and national stakeholders’ strategic learning and decision-making for the next

Strategic Note. The evaluation had a secondary summative (retrospective) perspective, to support enhanced accountability for development effectiveness and learning from experience.

The evaluation was framed under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) evaluation criteria, including relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The evaluation was guided by the principles of gender-responsive evaluations and used a “utilization-focused lens” to generate forward-looking and actionable recommendations to ensure the information needs of the Country Office and stakeholders were met. A mixed-methods approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data was used to triangulate and verify data, increasing the internal reliability and consistency of findings. More specifically, a desk review of 180 resources was carried out, 25 interviews were held, a case study on a Country Office funding modality was implemented, and a survey was administered amongst key United Nations partners in the country.

The inception phase included an evaluability assessment and a stakeholder mapping exercise. The results of these exercises were used to design evaluation questions and support analysis.

Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a major limitation, making it impossible for the evaluation team to visit the country and requiring all consultations to be moved to the virtual space. Another important limitation was the low responsiveness of the informants, which limited consultations for an evaluation of this scope. The lack of a theory of change required the evaluation team to explore the progress of the Country Office without agreed commitments in terms of outcomes and outputs to be delivered.

MAIN EVALUATION FINDINGS

RELEVANCE

FINDING 1

The portfolio of activities of the Kazakhstan Country Office was largely consistent with the two impact areas prioritized for 2016–2017 and the three impact areas prioritized for 2018–2020 as reflected in its AWP.

However, since 2018, there has been a mismatch between the impact areas identified in the Strategic Note 2016–2020 and the actual impact areas prioritized by the Country Office. The theory of change that constituted the foundation of the Strategic Note 2016–2020 and the measures of progress towards expected outcomes had limited relevance and therefore were not largely adhered to by the Country Office.

FINDING 2

The portfolio of activities of the Kazakhstan Country Office remains largely relevant to national and international priorities on ending violence against women (EVAW), women's economic empowerment (WEE) and Governance and Leadership.

However, some of the interventions of the Country Office had a shortened lifespan, with little room to observe expected high-level outcome due to

- dependency on State funding;
- the way in which gender equality is conceptualized in the national strategy on the family; and
- limited capacities of the State authorities.

FINDING 3

The portfolio of activities of the Kazakhstan Country Office remains largely relevant to the implementation of UN Women's integrated triple mandate of normative, coordination and operational work.

However, the Country Office has demonstrated more progress in its normative and regulatory work and less in the coordination and operational programming areas.

COHERENCE

FINDING 4

The Kazakhstan Country Office demonstrated some degree of coherence and a targeted approach to partnering with the country's gender mechanism as a coordinating agency on the gender equality and empowerment of women agenda in Kazakhstan.

However, it would benefit from more strategic engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs) and a strengthened role as a coordinator of gender equality and the empowerment of women among United Nations agencies in the country.

FINDING 5

The organizational coherence of the Kazakhstan Country Office has shifted focus in terms of office coverage and has limited strategic direction.

Extending the programme portfolio beyond the Country Office – the Spotlight Initiative Regional Programme for Central Asia and Afghanistan, nationalization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Central Asian countries – emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the Country Office has effective convening power, institutional capacities and governance mechanisms.

FINDING 6

While the Kazakhstan Country Office has a unique mandate with regard to coordination of gender equality and the empowerment of women across the United Nations system, its convening power as a coordinating agency in Kazakhstan is limited.

This is explained not only by its own capacities but also by the capacities, approach and perception of other United Nations agencies based in the country.

FINDING 7

UN Women has fostered limited strategic engagement with CSOs in Kazakhstan.

The CSOs demonstrated strong interest in cooperating with UN Women in Kazakhstan, and the few engagement avenues provided for such a cooperation resulted in heightened expectations to cooperate, which is impacting the role and position of UN Women.

EFFECTIVENESS

FINDING 8

The shifting priorities of national Government counterparts and lack of a strong voice from the Country Office in its partnership with State authorities resulted in sporadic focus across several interventions and limited systematic efforts in its chosen priorities.

FINDING 9

During 2016–2020, the Country Office made good efforts in its work on ending violence against women, with clear focus on improving the normative framework in Kazakhstan. However, this has not been translated into actual enhancement of normative frameworks.

FINDING 10

Positive results were achieved in the Leadership and Governance thematic area through strengthening the institutional performance of State authorities with regard to gender-responsive budgeting.

FINDING 11

The investment of the Country Office in women's economic empowerment was less systematic and demonstrated limited contribution towards achieving progress in this area in Kazakhstan.

EFFICIENCY

FINDING 12

Limited and stretched institutional capacities during the life cycle of the Strategic Note 2016–2020 prevented balanced attention to the implementation of UN Women's integrated triple mandate by the Country Office.

FINDING 13

The Country Office portfolio indicates some constraints related to the prevailing funding modality. Implementation of this modality demonstrates important efficiency challenges and constraints.

FINDING 14

High dependency on State funding of the whole United Nations Country Team (UNCT) creates internal competition among United Nations agencies in Kazakhstan, in which large offices have a stronger comparative advantage for resource mobilization.

The Country Office would benefit from more strategic resource mobilization through diversification of its donor base and investment in strategic partnerships with United Nations agencies and relevant ministries.

SUSTAINABILITY, GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

FINDING 15

The sustainability of the portfolio of interventions of the Country Office is affected by a high dependency on State funding. Unpredictability of funding and shifting national priorities on gender equality and the empowerment of women represent potential risks to the sustainability of UN Women's work in Kazakhstan.

FINDING 16

The long-term positive impact of interventions by the Country Office is set to be observed through strengthened normative and regulatory frameworks as instruments for rights holders and through enhanced capacities of State counterparts as duty bearers, which can have an impact on the root causes of gender inequality in Kazakhstan.

FINDING 17

The programmatic portfolio of the Kazakhstan Country Office includes some elements of the "leaving no one behind" principle; however, its strategy to address the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups is not clear. There is no clear evidence of gender-transformative changes that can be attributed to the interventions by the Country Office.

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATION 1: Strategically define the theory of change, focusing solely on Kazakhstan and carefully balancing it with the organizational capabilities and ambitions of the Country Office, and enhance the Country Office's analytical basis towards the realization of its triple mandate through its portfolio of interventions.



RECOMMENDATION 5: Advocate for stronger gender mainstreaming across United Nations programming through supporting the Gender Thematic Group by mobilizing strategic guidance of the UNCT and through strengthening the functioning of the Gender Thematic Group.



RECOMMENDATION 2: Mobilize evidence-based arguments and strategies to advocate for gender equality and empowerment of women priorities and promote a gender equality path in the Concept of Family and Gender Issues pursued by the national Government.



RECOMMENDATION 6: Strategically define the role of the presence of UN Women in Kazakhstan when leading multi-country/ regional initiatives or implementing joint regional initiatives.



RECOMMENDATION 3: Define the portfolio accountability mechanism with a clear monitoring and evaluation framework and adequate reporting according to the defined indicators both at the output and outcome levels.



RECOMMENDATION 7: Invest in resource mobilization and in diversification of the Country Office's donor base with primary focus on gender equality and equity for United Nations-wide socioeconomic recovery efforts from COVID-19, thereby finding a niche for UN Women in Kazakhstan to partner with other United Nations agencies and key strategic partners.



RECOMMENDATION 4: Improve the balance of efforts across implementation of UN Women's integrated triple mandate by strengthening the Country Office's focus on partnerships to create a strong alliance and enhance UN Women's role as a coordinator of gender equality and empowerment of women issues and improve its convening capacity.



RECOMMENDATION 8: Raise the reputation of the Country Office among its United Nations and external partners in the country and strengthen its portfolio of activities by strategically aligning with existing and emerging partners from the national authorities, the United Nations, CSOs and other national and international stakeholders.

Scope of the evaluation



UN Women Kazakhstan CO Development Results Framework



3 key result areas
Leadership and Governance,
EVAW and Women's
Economic Empowerment



Organizations Efficiency and **Effectiveness and Efficiency** Framework



SN 2016-2020
Evaluation was conducted between April and December 2020



US\$ 8M budget
including Core and Non-core resources