**Executive Board of the
United Nations Entity for Gender
Equality and the Empowerment
of Women**

Second Regular Session of 2015
15-16 September 2015
Item 3 of the provisional agenda
Evaluation

What can we learn from UN Women evaluations?

A meta-analysis of evaluations managed by UN Women in 2014

Summary

As part of the effort to improve and strengthen learning from evaluations, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) undertook a meta-analysis of evaluations managed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) in 2014.

This meta-analysis constitutes the second synthesis of UN Women-commissioned evaluations since the adoption of the current Strategic Plan (2014-2017).

To enhance utilization, annual meta-analyses alternate between a focus on accountability and learning. As last year's focus was on accountability, this year the focus is on learning.

The analysis considered the evaluation insights based on selected United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) evaluation criteria of (a) relevance; (b) effectiveness; (c) efficiency; and (d) sustainability.

I.   Background and purpose

1.   Since the coming into effect of the Evaluation Policy in 2013, UN Women has made an increasing effort to strengthen its evaluation function as a key accountability and learning tool to enhance progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

2.   In the current Corporate Evaluation Plan (2014-2017), annual meta-analyses are scheduled to ensure that the body of evidence produced by evaluations, including those managed by field offices, can be synthesized and inform corporate-level policies and strategies. To serve the dual purpose of accountability and learning, annual meta-analyses alternate between a focus on accountability and learning. As last year's focus was on accountability, this year the focus is on learning.

3.   This meta-analysis is based on evaluation reports from 2014 that were submitted to UN Women's Global Evaluation Reports Assessment and Analysis System (GERAAS)[1]. GERAAS has two main components: meta-evaluation[2] and meta-analysis. Whereas the meta-evaluation provides an assessment of the quality of evaluation reports according to UNEG evaluation standards (reported within the Annual Report of the Evaluation Function presented every year at the Annual Session of the Executive Board), the meta-analysis synthesizes the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of evaluation reports that meet UNEG quality standards.

4.   The intended primary users of the meta-analysis are the UN Women Executive Board and management, as well as staff at headquarters, regional and country levels. The intended uses of the meta-analysis are to inform UN Women strategies, programmes and operational systems.

II.   Methodology

5.   Evidence from the totality of 2014 evaluation reports that met UNEG quality standards (a total of 21 evaluation reports) from across UN Women regions and Headquarters was included in the analysis, covering 51 countries (some reports were multi-country, regional or corporate). Additional evidence was drawn from GERAAS 2013, which included 23 evaluation reports.

6.   The approach taken is that of realist synthesis: distilling all relevant existing evidence in order to draw out relevant programmatic and operational evidence. Since the included reports met UNEG evaluation quality standards, all clearly stated findings, conclusions and recommendations, and lessons presented in the evaluation reports have been analysed through three progressive rounds of text analysis using thematic coding.

7.   This process resulted in 1135 coded pieces of evidence (an average of 283 per criterion) and 144 unique lessons learned. These 'clusters' of evidence were reviewed and synthesized into 17 major insights, presented by UNEG evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Five conclusions were derived from these insights.

III.   Limitations

8.   The qualitative synthesis process applied a structured analysis. Nevertheless, the process, by its nature, requires judgements to be made on: 1) how to interpret findings and

---

[1] For additional information on GERAAS, visit http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/evaluation/decentralized-evaluations
[2] The 2014 meta-evaluation is available at https://gate.unwomen.org/Evaluation/Details?EvaluationId=6024

lessons, and their implications; and 2) what combinations of findings and lessons from different reports represent a reliable pattern.

9.   In recognition of these judgements, the report attempts to identify those lessons emerging most strongly about what works and does not work without necessarily analysing specific issues in great depth.

IV.   Major insights

A.   Relevance

Insight 1: Focus on macro level, while building links between micro, meso and macro levels

10.   While normative and macrolevel work enhance UN Women's impact, microlevel work is often necessary to gain the credibility that is associated with tangible results in different contexts. UN Women's operational work can thus make the greatest contribution where it identifies context-specific structural barriers to gender equality, draws linkages between work at the micro, meso and macro levels, and supports stakeholders to collectively address those barriers at normative and policy level.

Insight 2: Focus the strategic scope of interventions and partnership, while conceptualizing them within a holistic understanding of the context

11.   Multidisciplinary and integrated programme designs that facilitate active linkages between different thematic areas have emerged as good practice in ensuring relevance. Regional approaches can enhance this even further by also facilitating cross-country linkages and learning.

12.   While holistic programme design is considered a good practice, UN Women's work has been particularly effective where it has taken a highly disciplined approach to focusing the strategic scope of interventions and partnership (within a holistic understanding of the context).

B.   Effectiveness

Insight 3: Achieving gender equality requires long-term investments and flexible programming

13.   The long-term process of women's empowerment and shifting attitudes at the societal level is a principal determinant of programming effectiveness. Short-duration interventions are associated with significant challenges to programme effectiveness and sustainability, in addition to practical challenges with delays to fund disbursement and implementation. By contrast, initiatives are most likely to succeed where there is long-term vision, continuous investment in capacity development, and plans and budgets developed with extended time horizons.

14.   Resourcing and work planning need a longer time-horizon if many of the envisaged outcomes are to be realized within the lifetime of interventions. Nonetheless, long-term programme planning, particularly in complex environments, requires frequent adaptation to align with ever-changing priorities to ensure interventions remain relevant to the evolving programme context.

15.   The combination of UN Women's normative legitimacy and pragmatic flexibility in working with partners has emerged as a significant comparative advantage. UN Women's normative mandate provides it with the influence needed to convene, coordinate and advocate stakeholders around operational objectives. Since grounding programmes in local needs is critical to achieving relevance and effectiveness, this flexibility allows for national and subnational adaptation of global and regional strategies. It also enables strategic capacity development through the provision of continuous support over multiple programming cycles.

16.   The potential downsides of flexibility (such as fragmented programmes) have best been overcome through: 1) establishing strong theories of change, 2) grounding interventions clearly in women's rights, and 3) organizing effective mechanisms for multi-stakeholder dialogue between stakeholders.

Insight 4: Risk- and resilience-based programming minimize negative unintended outcomes

17.   Evaluations highlighted that fragile and less egalitarian contexts carry particularly high levels of political and sociocultural risks. Adhering to the principle of "Do No Harm" requires interventions that are designed on the basis of risk and resilience approaches that take into consideration: a detailed understanding of intra- and inter- group dynamics; a comprehensive risk analysis; the inclusion of specific protection and monitoring mechanisms for vulnerable groups of people; maximizing inclusion and dialogue between groups; and mechanisms that aim to enhance women's individual and collective resilience.

Insight 5: Enhancing the visibility of women's voice increases the political will supporting programmes

18.   Strategic communications capabilities – including the use of social media – increase the visibility of women's voice and political will behind thematic issues. More importantly, it can draw attention to sensitive issues by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups – an ability that aligns with UN Women's other comparative advantages around institutionalizing spaces for multi-stakeholder dialogue (see insight 14).

19.   Another complementary strategy to increase political will is to facilitate exposure and participation of key stakeholders to international forums and global programmes, including through south-south cooperation.

Insight 6: Reducing reliance on short term contracts for staff will enhance UN Women's capability to deliver high-quality technical support

20.   One comparative advantage of UN Women in country-level operations and coordination is its substantive technical knowledge on gender, especially given UN Women's financial constraints. While having skilled, knowledgeable, passionate and committed staff members is an organizational asset for UN Women's capability to deliver relevant and high-quality technical advice and assistance, reducing the reliance on short term human resources solutions will enhance the effectiveness of this capability.

Insight 7: Include explicit strategies to engage men as champions of women's empowerment

21.   Social norms that hamper women's empowerment and gender equality are best addressed through creating collective social responses based on community-owned and led initiatives. Such community cohesion has been more effectively achieved where

programmes have opened up to men, both allowing them to participate as beneficiaries of services as well as engaging them as champions of women's empowerment.

C.   Efficiency

Insight 8: Making the time available to get details right at the planning phase pays dividends later

22.   Time spent planning programme details at the outset of interventions – such as the synchronization (timing) of different activities, and explicitly addressing capacity gaps in national gender machinery, among others - have paid dividends in terms of improved implementation.

23.   Being realistic about expected results, financial disbursement mechanisms and implementation scheduling is key to preventing implementation delays. The most frequently cited factors that inhibit efficiency included under-estimating multitudes of challenges – cultural, political, financial, capacity etc.; setting of unrealistic programme objectives relative to the level of funding available; and short lifespan of interventions.

24.   These factors reportedly led to reprogramming, no-cost extension requests, return of unspent funds to donors and reduced the quality of some outputs as there was insufficient time to carry out the activities which had been designed for a longer period of time. In line with this, multi-year funding arrangements were cited as one facilitating factor to ensure achievement of a more sustained and empirically demonstrable impact.

Insight 9: Having a strong theory of change is central to ensuring a common shared vision and effective implementation

25.   When interventions do not establish a clear theory of change and performance monitoring system because of cost, time or other resources constraints, a much higher price is paid later on in terms of ineffective implementation, missed opportunities to adjust programme implementation or identifying chances to leverage opportunities. The absence of a clear theory of change led to programmes that were either very ambitious or unclear in terms of what they sought to achieve and how.

26.   Another useful lesson arising is that even when there is a coherent corporate theory of change, it is essential to develop country-level versions to ensure that the intended results are relevant in that specific context. Developing explicit country-level theories of change (even as part of regional or global programmes) helps to ensure that different levels of expected results (outputs, outcomes, impacts) are logically and strategically aligned.

Insight 10: Keep fund management arrangements as simple as possible while ensuring accountability

27.   The simplest possible arrangements for managing funds and approving disbursements should be adopted by programmes in order to avoid delays and ensure a high implementation rate. Arrangements for managing and approving disbursements should be as decentralized as possible. Every additional approval requirement appears to have a disproportionate effect on delays experienced in fund utilization.

28.   Applying higher standards of accounting also leads to delays in funding and raises the bar for organizations seeking to access UN Women grants (many of whom are community-based). Decentralization of authority – combined with an efficient knowledge management link to Headquarters – appears to be one approach to mitigating this. However,

the greatest efficiency has been achieved where UN Women fund management has been combined with deliberate efforts to assess and strengthen the capacity of partner and government systems.

29.   The pace of implementation and the effectiveness of joint programmes vary considerably across evaluated programmes. A common theme, however, is that programmes that require complex pass-through funding arrangements or extended chains of approvals for disbursements experience greater delays in implementation.

Insight 11: Knowledge management offers the greatest value when it is mainstreamed across thematic boundaries

30.   Knowledge management has been found to best support results when it works across thematic boundaries, both within and beyond UN Women. Particular success has been found with specialized studies that help to understand and 'unpack' the underlying causes of disempowerment and inequality. Successful examples include: the Progress of the World's Women Report, viewed as a seminal contribution to the rights-based approach to women's economic empowerment; the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality (EDGE) statistics, considered by United Nations Statistical Development (UNSD) as a major contribution and driving force behind moves to consolidate and unify gender statistics; and country-level time-use surveys and engendering modules of demographic and labour-force surveys.

31.   Supporting the generation of, and access to, gender-responsive statistics – at the national, regional and global level – is already helping UN Women to influence public policies and plans. Effective programme design is associated with knowledge generation around the local and regional sociopolitical contexts.

Insight 12: Joint Programmes are promising in the long-term, but they do not automatically lead to "quick wins"

32.   UN Women's combination of coordination, normative and operational mandates enables it to leverage joint programmes to create new forms of cooperation. While joint programmes have emerged as a long-term investment, and can potentially realize both economies of scale and help establish important alliances, they do not appear to automatically lead to 'quick wins'. Joint Programmes appear to be most effective when they: 1) are designed together from the 'ground-up', 2) fully integrate both management and funding into joint mechanisms, 3) promote horizontal accountability between partners, and 4) align with government systems and promote national ownership.

D.   Sustainability

Insight 13: National ownership is key to sustainable policy implementation

33.   Securing political support at the highest level of government has been found to not only help foster national and subnational ownership of the gender equality agenda, but also to act as an important attractor for other strategic partners. Nurturing national ownership has worked best in terms of enabling policy implementation when:

a)   The awareness and capacity of responsible state parties is strongest, particularly when there are respected gender advocates with capacity inside national institutions
b)   Interventions are anchored in existing national laws and priorities, and international commitments
c)   The prominence of the Ministry of Gender enables ministry-to-ministry advocacy
d)   Capacity of parliamentarians is combined with cross-party coordination of the women's caucus on strategic issues and

e)   UN Women aligns to national systems while preserving its independence, integrity, universality and diverse relationships with civil society

Insight 14: Spaces for multi-stakeholder dialogue enable local problem solving and the emergence of locally-driven initiatives

34.   There is a strong indication that supporting the institutionalization of forums for multi-stakeholder dialogue between rights holders and duty bearers is a crucial role for UN Women. These platforms have been shown to enhance the understanding and appreciation of women's priorities in policymaking, and promoting social cohesion by addressing the fear of losing real or perceived privileges. Engaging civil society in such dialogue is particularly important given that many stakeholders also have their own direct links with influential actors in domestic politics.

35.   Sustainability is most enhanced by multi-stakeholder platforms as they provide a forum for local problem solving, the emergence of locally-driven initiatives, and scaling up what is proven to work best in a given context. Multi-stakeholder spaces also help to create trust between UN Women and its partners, and UN Women gains significant political capital from its convening role.

Insight 15: Strengthening networks is a powerful step towards sustainability

36.   Sustainability can be strengthened through supporting networks between people and organizations at different levels. These can be loose networks, self-help groups, community funds or formal cooperatives. Networks enhance collaboration, provide peer-support and sustain motivation. However, ongoing financial and facilitative support from UN Women is often required, as the value of networks is not always immediately obvious to participants.

37.   It is important to highlight that a number of evaluations underlined that, rather than creating new networks, sustainability of results is found to be higher when supporting existing capacity and networks.

Insight 16: Reaching the excluded requires working with the limitations of organizations on the ground

38.   UN Women's roots in the women's movement and links to civil society have proven to be essential in establishing legitimacy in representing the rights of excluded groups. At the same time, excluded groups are highly diverse and frequently require individualized approaches to be successful. In many cases, these approaches need to address basic needs and offset the opportunity cost of participating in empowerment processes. This implies the use of bottom-up approaches, which have experienced some success through the use of carefully designed small grants mechanisms that reach community-based organizations