

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **SUBPROGRAMME EVALUATION: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES DIVISION**

Period: January 2014 - December 2017

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the Final Evaluation Report of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia's (ESCWA) Subprogramme on Integrated Management of Natural Resources for Sustainable Development, the Sustainable Development Policies Division (SDPD), covering the 2014-2015 and 2016-2017 biennia.

This internal discretionary evaluation was commissioned by ESCWA to an independent international evaluator who examined the overall performance of Subprogramme. Based on the evaluation ToRs, the evaluator assessed the Subprogramme's work against the criteria of relevance, effectiveness and impact. She examined the strategy (visioning and planning for policy influence), the knowledge products (outputs, publications, reports, papers and other documentation), the engagement with stakeholders and partners, and focused on the transformational changes that the Subprogramme has produced or is likely to produce. The evaluation was carried out as forward-looking exercise aimed at providing useful findings and recommendations for the future work of the Subprogramme.

The following implemented projects were assessed separately as case-studies, and informed the overall evaluation:

- The Development Account project on "Developing the capacity of the countries members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia to address the water and energy nexus for achieving Sustainable Development Goals";
- The Development Account project on "Promoting Renewable Energy Investments for Climate Change Mitigation and Sustainable Development"; and
- The extra-budgetary project on "Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region."

The evaluator also included some flagship initiatives implemented by the Subprogramme that were frequently referenced by stakeholders during interviews. Documentation of these initiatives was reviewed in depth by the evaluator as part of the exercise.

The evaluation adopted a gender lens in each step of the evaluation process in line with the guidelines of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

The findings in this report are based on an in-depth review of key documents provided by ESCWA on the Subprogramme and on relevant information available through its website. The findings also benefitted from field visits to Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. They enabled the evaluator to attend four events related to the Subprogramme's project activities, meet many stakeholders involved in the Subprogramme, and meet ESCWA staff at headquarters in Beirut. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face during the field visits or remotely with approximately 100 representatives of different stakeholder groups, of whom 39 were women. As part of a concise e-survey aimed at reaching a wider geographic audience, the evaluator sent 63 questionnaires to individuals working in governmental institutions, universities/research centers, private sector, civil society organizations, including NGOs and media across the region. Of the 63 questionnaires, the evaluator obtained 17 responses.

The collected findings underwent a process of triangulation before conclusions could be drawn to formulate lessons learnt and recommendations for the implementation of the Subprogramme.

A draft evaluation report was prepared in accordance with the TORs and submitted to ESCWA for review. The report was finalized on the basis of consolidated comments received.

## **Conclusions**

An impact assessment of the Subprogramme proved to be complex. This is partly due to the nature of the Subprogramme's stated objectives that focus on intermediary means at the regional level rather than a change of state, making it difficult to measure tangible change at the national level.

Overall, the Subprogramme was found to be fully relevant. Over the last two biennia, it addressed the priorities of the Arab region as reflected in declarations and resolutions adopted by member States in the intergovernmental mechanisms of the League of Arab States and ESCWA. Issues of global importance, as defined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, were also integrated in the Subprogramme's regional agenda. The design of the Subprogramme considered national concerns primarily through the country representatives in intergovernmental committees with limited consultation on needs and priorities with national level end beneficiaries and users.

The Subprogramme was very successful in achieving most of the expected outputs, within the time allocated and in accordance with the pre-set indicators.

Regarding outcomes or induced changes, the results to date remain modest. Capacity building activities represent an intermediate development stage. They are necessary, but not sufficient, to generate tangible results in the field. To deliver results, they need to be systematically followed up with projects that apply the new tools and methodologies and with sustained efforts of member States to translate the knowledge acquired into policies or strategies. The relatively limited number of capacity building activities, which targeted only a few individuals per country, represented another limitation. Given the normative nature of the Subprogramme's work, its limited resources (in terms of budgets, and programme and project time-frames), as well as the fact it is one of many actors in this sector, it was difficult to measure the Subprogramme's actual influence on member States to adopt an integrated natural resources management approach.

Nonetheless, the interviewees often voiced the view that the Subprogramme has played a catalytic role which has pushed a number of member States to build upon the knowledge and tools provided. In the example of the MDG+ initiative it was stated that the results *"would have never been achieved without SDPD's support which offered an excellent partnership framework at the regional level"*.

Throughout the two biennia, gender and human-rights considerations were applied by the Subprogramme but often in a limited way. Overall guidance in ESCWA strategic programme documents on how to mainstream gender and human rights has been limited. Nonetheless, there is evidence that suggests the Subprogramme publications were made more gender-sensitive with sex-disaggregated data and with advice to member States to adopt gender and human-rights considerations and to mainstream them into their policies and strategies.

## Lessons learnt and Key recommendations

**Lesson learnt 1:** National consultations with member States on specific projects have been very effective at identifying country level needs, and enhancing stakeholder ownership. These efforts should be pursued and extended at the level of the design of the sub-programme. This will ensure that member States have a better appreciation of the relevance of ESCWA's Subprogramme to their needs thereby strengthening their commitment.

**Recommendation 1a:** In addition to the existing formal consultative processes, ESCWA should ensure during the sub-programme design a deeper involvement of the final beneficiaries/users, at both the national and sub-regional levels, and obtain a more formal commitment of member States.

**Recommendation 1b:** Given the region's heterogeneity in terms of development and capacities, SDPD should take a more far-reaching approach and address development issues by groups of countries with similar challenges or level of advancement.

**Lesson learnt 2:** Combining normative work with field applications and demonstrating how theoretical concepts can be successfully applied has been very effective in influencing positively decision makers to enact relevant policy and programme reforms.

**Recommendation 2a:** SDPD should pursue and extend this approach whenever relevant.

**Recommendation 2b:** Resource mobilization should be considered early in the planning and implementation stages of SDPD projects to secure necessary resources for follow-up field projects. This would increase the impact of SDPD's normative efforts.

**Lesson learnt 3:** Under conditions of limited human and financial resources, designing a programme that is integrated and focused is more effective than undertaking a large number of small scattered projects.

**Recommendation 3a:** SDPD should continue its efforts to follow an integrated approach and should more than ever consider renewing its focus on the niches where it has comparative advantage, and to which all three sections can contribute.

**Recommendation 3b:** In order to enhance the effectiveness of SDPD, the resources provided by the Regular Budget, the Regular Programme for Technical Cooperation, the Development Account Programme as well as the extra-budgetary funding should be used more creatively and in a more clearly interlinked manner to complement one another.

**Lesson learnt 4:** A clearer vision and a results-based approach would help to achieve transformational changes contributing to the achievement of the expected impact.

**Recommendation 4a:** ESCWA should adopt a theory of change approach to translate its vision and its underlying intervention strategy in an operable framework. The theory of change should describe the outputs resulting from the activities and the different levels of outcomes, including the most immediate outcomes that ESCWA could realistically achieve and for which it should be held accountable. This approach would contribute to bringing about more significant changes and impact.

**Recommendations 4b:** ESCWA should consider revising its M&E system to also include indicators at the outcome level to better inform both the decision-making process and member States on any progress made in respect of achieving an impact.

**Lesson learnt 5:** Building long-term partnerships with donors to secure funding is a good way to ensure the sustainability and consolidation of project results.

**Recommendation 5a:** SDPD should ensure that relationships with all its donors are long-term, and maintain efforts to develop further strategic partnerships.

**Recommendation 5b:** SDPD should work with its partners on the development of an exit strategy early enough before the end of projects to ensure the sustainability of its achievements beyond the projects' lifetime.

**Lesson learnt 6:** Recommendations on gender and human rights-related issues in publications are necessary but not sufficient to contribute to the reduction of inequalities and to ensure sustainable development.

**Recommendation 6a:** SDPD should systematically include gender and human rights issues in all its future interventions, awareness-raising and capacity-building activities to challenge cultural resistance and address the widespread ignorance surrounding these two concepts.

**Recommendation 6b:** Whenever relevant, SDPD should systematically carry out a gender analysis at the beginning of projects, i.e. establishing a brief diagnosis of gender equity, assessing problems, objectives and potential of women and men to determine the expected impact of the projects on gender equity.