

Executive Summary: Evaluation Report

ESCWA Social Development Sub-programme

**Commissioned by the United Nations Economic & Social Commission for
Western Asia (ESCWA)**

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Executive Summary

The Social Development Sub-Programme of ESCWA was subject to an extensive evaluation covering the period from January 2014 to December 2018. The evaluation was commissioned to an independent evaluation expert, Kassem El Saddik, who designed a utilization-focused evaluation designed to capture the complex scope and processes of the Sub-programmes that aims at influencing social development and population policies in a politically sensitive context.

To that end, the evaluation re-constructed the Sub-programme's Theory of Change (ToC) and relied on a mixed data collection approach based on the four evaluation criteria set in the evaluation's Terms of References, namely: relevance, effectiveness, sustainability and impact. Each criterion was further elaborated to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis, while considering the Sub-programme's responsiveness to human rights and gender considerations. Given the nature and scope of the sub-programme that aims at influencing policy change (to ensure right-based, inclusive, equitable and participatory social development) in a policy dynamic context that is shaped by various external determinants, the evaluation was designed to (a) question the underlying assumptions/ logic of the sub-programme, (b) provide an impartial assessment of the usefulness, effectiveness, quality of the different SDD outputs and (c) examine the extent to which these outputs were conducive to induce the expected changes in skills, knowledge and capacities of the government officials and other partners.

The evaluator followed a rigorous methodology which included (a) an extensive document review, including reports, agreements, projects and policy papers; (b) series of interviews with 93 stakeholders (representing 11 member States, 5 partners, 5 experts and 23 ESCWA staff); direct observation of regional SDD events; one case study of DA project (*Strengthened National Capacities for Integrated, Sustainable and Inclusive Population and Development Policies in the Arab Region*); and an e-survey with a 10% response rate.

Relevance: The Social Development Sub-programme relevance in addressing the regional needs on the social inclusion, protection, justice and population issues proves to be "Satisfactory" over the last five years. It is aligned with global and regional mandates and declarations, and its Strategic Framework clearly illustrates a shift of focus toward the sustainable development agenda while maintaining to key principles of inclusiveness, equity and participation. The Sub-programme has successfully delivered on all these functions. It has produced 112 knowledge products and responded to 41 requests for technical support, in addition to executing 7 DA projects. However, the Sub-programme lacks an explicit vision and strategy aimed at influencing policy changes, hence limiting its swift adaptability to emerging priorities in a region characterized with abrupt and dramatically changing context.

Effectiveness: Relying on the reported Assessment of Programme Performance, the Social Development Sub-programme was found to have met (and sometimes exceeded) the set targets for the EAs over the biennia under review. However, a scrutinized examination of the Sub-programme Expected Accomplishments (EAs) showed some nuanced findings. In fact, the evaluation could not trace the contribution of SDD to advancing social and population policy issues at the national

and regional levels. There has been less clarity on achieving the Expected Accomplishments (EAs) and challenges in keeping track of the Expected Changes (ECs). However, the core functions of SDD have been commended for the effective implementation of the (a) high quality and useful evidence-based research and policy-oriented think tank function, (b) strategic and multi-stakeholder platforms for dialogue, networking and consensus building and (c) demand-driven advisory services and technical cooperation that could have magnified the Sub-programme's impact, should the partnerships been fostered.

Efficiency: The evaluation asserts that the Social Development Sub-programme PoW, similar to other ESCWA Divisions, is implemented with an embedded hypothesis (considered a success recipe) that presumes that the three strategic functions, emphasized in ESCWA strategy, are coherent; and if the Sub-programme implements them, results are likely to be achieved. The evaluation proves that these functions are necessary but not sufficient to efficiently and effectively trigger a policy change in the regional social agenda. Five institutional factors were identified to limit such coherence and hinder the possibility for the Sub-programme to achieve its ECs and EAs, namely: (a) the intra-divisional siloed implementation approach, (b) the weak design of the strategic frameworks over the biennia, (c) the inadequate monitoring with heavy reliance on proxy reporting, (d) the loose inter-divisional collaboration, associated with low staff morale, (e) the inadequate dissemination of knowledge products and follow up on the technical cooperation and (f) the inadequate management of the XB and DA projects.

Impact: The Sub-programme's efforts focus on producing knowledge, building capacities and facilitating consensus meetings, but have limited impact at the policy level, unless it coincides with a conducive political climate or "policy window".

The evaluation concluded ten areas of improvements that were discussed with the Social Development Sub-programme when presenting the findings. They were refined, clustered into and endorsed by the Sub-programme. Three recommendations were identified as "SDD Priority 1" to require immediate attention and action by the Social Development Sub-programme. Three recommendations were identified as "ESCWA Priority" and three other recommendations were identified as "SDD Priority 2".

- **SDD Priority 1 Recommendations**

- 1) **Recommendation 1:** SDD should consider developing a medium-term Strategy to guide the proposed annual programming and enhance the coherence between its three functions; it should be complemented with institutionalizing a robust M&E framework (result-based or Theory of Change approaches) that can track, collect, analyze and report on the Sub-programme's outputs and evaluate the Expected Accomplishments and Changes.

- 2) **Recommendation 2: SDD** should strengthen the inter-governmental session by (i) exploring the possibility to influence the MS representation to the CSD, (ii) enhancing the follow up function, and (iii) linking it to the regional social development political platforms (managed by LAS)
- 3) **Recommendation 3: SDD** should foster inter-divisional collaboration more systematically on cross-cutting issues, namely gender, statistics, among others.

- **ESCWA Priority Recommendations**

- 4) **Recommendation 4: ESCWA should consider implementing the recommendations of the various recent evaluations including the Meta evaluation, the 2017 OIOS report and the 2017 Evaluation report on the publications.**
- 5) **Recommendation 5: ESCWA and SDD** should examine the dissemination practice of the knowledge products to ensure wider outreach and targeted publications. They should consider producing concise policy briefs with clear messages and policy pointers targeting policymakers.
- 6) **Recommendation 6: ESCWA** should reconsider the institutional setup of the Unit for 2030 Agenda, beyond the division level, given its cross-cutting inter-divisional scope, in line with the proposal put forward in the 2015 ESCWA strategy.

- **SDD Priority 2 Recommendations**

- 7) **Recommendation 7: SDD** should foster and leverage on partnerships in order to boost ECs and EAs, amplify the policy influence and sustain policy change beyond SDD interventions. Particular attention should be given to managing the relationship with LAS.
- 8) **Recommendation 8: SDD** should re-examine the complexity of the policy processes at the national and regional levels, nurture more effective policy tools beyond the conventional ones in order to successfully influence the social policies in the region.
- 9) **Recommendation 9: SDD** should, driven by its medium to longer term strategy, attract further resources (XB and DA projects) with the aim to complement its technical and normative scope and magnify its impact.