

Executive Board First Regular Session 2019

Background Note on Operational Response in Iraq

1. Summary

UN-Women, operating in Iraq since 2003, is supporting the country for progress towards the goal of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women in line with the commitment of the country's leadership and people's aspirations.

With the recent new political context and the liberation of the state from ISIL; the State of Iraq has been moving from a conflict phase towards a recovery, nation building and reconciliation.

During 2018, many developments have happened, especially with the parliamentary elections conducted in May 2018, the development of Iraq vision 2030 and the appointment of a new government in November. With the dynamic and changing environment, the Iraq Country Office (ICO) has been closely monitoring the national context, comprehensively reviewing and assessing the progress, challenges and potential opportunities for the office to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq.

UN-Women's engagement in Iraq has been growing and expanding in the country to date. The office started as a programme presence with several projects to advocate the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda. It later grew towards a standalone country office with a delegation of authority and a diverse portfolio of programmes for provision of holistic intervention packages to its beneficiaries and partners.

The year 2018 has been marked by a solid partnership and continuous dialogue with all stakeholders and partners; the Government, the different political blocs, the civil society and women's organisations in particular. On all occasions, the women's empowerment agenda has been promoted firmly as a means to attain inclusive growth, political stability and social justice.

On the programmatic and policy levels, the role of UN-Women's ICO has been continuously evolving as both a "convener" and a "one stop shop" providing demand-driven substantial advice to the government, women machineries, the donor community in the form of policy & programmatic advice, research & evidence-based data and knowledge products.

On the operational and implementation levels, ICO's role was also evolving as both a "doer and implementer". Progress has been achieved on many domains, creating more opportunities for the office to act and drive the GEWE agenda in Iraq. ICO has successfully implemented three years of its current Strategic Note (SN) 2016–2019 and is currently embarking upon the development of its upcoming Strategic Note 2020–2022.

To ensure a participatory and inclusive planning process, the upcoming SN is currently being preceded and informed by a series of national consultations bringing diverse national actors together, including line ministries, women

machineries, civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations, political parties and UN agencies, to discuss and agree on a coordinated approach to deliver the national priorities.

The briefing note at hand is structured around (i) Highlighting the key thematic areas and country level operational response to meet the current context, (ii) Highlighting current approaches and business processes as regards to partnerships, coordination and outreach.

2. UN-Women's country level operational response in Iraq

2.1 On the humanitarian and peace building front:

Since 2013, the Iraqi political scene has been affected by many developments at the national and regional level. In response to the appalling humanitarian crisis, which has caused millions to flee their homes, mostly women and children, UN-Women has been collaborating with sister agencies to assist refugees and internally displaced women providing protection, GBV and legal services, cash for work and support of livelihood, and setting up income generation projects in the north and central Iraq. To complement the humanitarian efforts provided, UN-Women has been advocating for the participation of women and the inclusion of gender perspectives in peace negotiations and reconciliation building; ensuring that such perspectives are supported and sustained by the entire country. As a result, Iraq was the first country in the Arab region to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) on the implementation of the SCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and is currently embarking upon developing its second NAP in close coordination with all stakeholders. These efforts have been fully coordinated with the Government of Iraq, the Regional Government of Kurdistan, UN agencies, and CSOs operating at the grassroots level.

2.2 On the political participation front:

In meeting the new political developments especially following the post ISIL phase, efforts have also been extended during the elections and post-election period through implementing programmes aimed at enhancing the technical capacities of women in leadership positions. In ensuring buy-in at the highest political level, ICO has been continuously engaging with the Iraqi leadership and regularly meeting with heads of political blocs to emphasise the importance of supporting gender equality and women's empowerment, including women's participation in leadership roles. In a recent development to support newly elected women in parliament, ICO has been supporting the creation of a women's parliamentarian caucus that unites the efforts of Iraqi women across party lines and within a clear framework of action to promote women's interests and defend their fundamental rights in Iraq.

2.3 On the economic empowerment front:

The office considers women's economic empowerment as key to promoting gender equality and addressing violence against women and girls. During the early phase when the State of Iraq was a country in conflict, the focus was to provide swift livelihood and economic opportunities for empowering women and enhancing their resilience under conflict. With the stabilisation of the situation, ICO has been engaging with a wider array of national stakeholders at the legislative and policy level to develop a national economic empowerment national action plan in partnership with the World Bank (WB). This work is consistent with Iraq's Second Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Social Protection Strategic Framework.

The total current budget for ICO in the year 2019 is around USD 10 million. With continued restructuring and upscaling, the ICO is well placed to deliver on this increased 2019 budget for implementation across the UN-Women's triple mandate.

3. Partnerships, coordination, advocacy & outreach

UN-Women's programmatic activities in the above areas capitalise on its role as broker of strong partnerships. Since 2018, the office has been well positioned as a credible partner of choice; reaching out to the different blocs of the Iraqi society and regions, the donor community, UN sister agencies, the media and the wider civil society.

The office recently started implementing an outreach strategy and, with time, the UN-Women Iraq office has evolved to position itself as a trusted partner of choice. Progress has been achieved on many domains and thus created more opportunities for the office to act as a "one stop shop" and a "knowledge broker" providing demand-driven substantial advice to the government, Women machineries, the donor and international communities in the form of policy & programmatic advice, research & evidence-based data and knowledge products.

Capacity building for national, sub-national and local partners (especially women's organisations) has started during 2018 and will continue throughout 2019. The office is currently focusing on documenting its success stories and business best practices as regards to promoting the gender equality agenda in Iraq. Under UN system coordination, the office is building on its enhanced capacity on coordination across both the development and humanitarian spheres (refugees, returnees and IDPs), the ICO will ensure sustained engagement in the implementation of the current UNDAF while providing technical support on the development of the upcoming one, as well as the provision of cross-sectoral gender mainstreaming expertise (such as research, data and evidence based policy advice on gender mainstreaming) to other UN agencies as well as the international community. Communicating with One UN voice on GEWE, including in support of the 2030 Agenda, will remain a priority for the Iraq office in line with the UNSG reform agenda to establish UN Common Premises and UN Common Back office functionality – a first in the region.

On the policy and advocacy level, ICO has been effectively supporting the development of national legislations in line with the GEWE agenda. One of the key outcomes was supporting the development of the domestic violence bill. Advocacy has been also intensified to call for the restoring of a Ministry of Women's affairs, the strengthening of Iraqi women's machineries, and the application of a 25% women's representation quota at the highest executive levels.

ICO will continue to provide technical expertise and capacity development support to national women's mechanisms, including women machineries (the Supreme commission on the advancement of women, the Department of Women empowerment and the High commission for women affairs). It will strengthen strategic partnerships with key stakeholders at the national, sub-national and local levels, including grass-roots women's and youth movements, through its two main offices in Baghdad and Erbil and field presence in several governorates.