

Briefing Note to the Executive Board

UN-Women Mid-Term Review Background Paper

First Regular Session 2020

I. Background to the MTR

In paragraph 7, decision 2017/5, the Executive Board of UN-Women requested the Executive Director to undertake a Mid-term Review of the Strategic Plan (MTR), and present the findings in the annual report to the Executive Board in 2020. Decision 2017/5 further specified that the MTR should include “an assessment of results achieved, cost effectiveness, evaluations, and progress made in achieving the vision of the Strategic Plan”.

Occurring at the mid-point of the UN-Women 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, the MTR represents an opportunity to take stock of the achievements to date, reflect on lessons learned and recalibrate the Entity’s strategic direction, programming and business processes to strengthen its efforts for the full realisation of envisioned results within the second half of the time frame of the Strategic Plan, in light of, inter alia:

- the **repositioning of the UN development system**
- the **Beijing+25 review and appraisal process**
- findings and recommendations from **independent evaluations** that have taken place since the start of the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and other assessments, such as the **2018 MOPAN**
- analysis of **results to date**
- lessons learned from the implementation of the **common chapter** with UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF

II. MTR Process

The MTR is a systematic, transparent and consultative endeavour under four strands:

1. Review of existing data and evidence on progress towards 2021 targets
2. Desk review of existing relevant evidence and lessons learned
3. Linkages with complementary processes and workstreams (both internal and external)¹
4. Consultations to answer remaining identified gaps in the MTR process

The MTR examines four core questions:

Question 1. What are the **implications of UN development system reforms** and other key developments, such as the Beijing+25 review and appraisal process, for UN-Women’s corporate strategy and implementation modalities?

Question 2. How and where does UN-Women’s **programmatic focus** need to be further improved to make greater impact?

¹ E.g. 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+25), UNDS reform, Generation Equality Forum, UN-Women Change Management process, Common Chapter evaluation, stronger articulation of results on *leaving no one behind*

Question 3. Within limited resources, how can UN-Women **leverage its partnerships approach** and **UN coordination mandate** to boost its contribution to the 2030 Agenda?

Question 4. What adjustments are needed to the **Integrated Results and Resources Framework** (indicators, targets, resources, etc.) to better articulate the changes UN-Women generates, including its efforts to *leave no one behind*?

Preliminary findings under the four core questions from the desk review and internal consultations²

A. Question 1: What are the implications of UN development system (UNDS) reform and other key developments, such as the Beijing+25 review and appraisal process, for UN-Women’s corporate strategy and implementation modalities?

Since the adoption of UN-Women’s Strategic Plan (2018-2021), a number of new and ongoing developments and processes have reshaped the environment in which the Entity operates. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the emphasis on *leaving no one behind* have been more strongly embedded across the UN development system and different workstreams of the UNDS reform have taken shape. The Beijing+25 review and appraisal process, assessing progress on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action 25 years since its adoption, will shed light on opportunities to accelerate the gender equality and women’s empowerment agenda in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Decade of Action. At the same time, the world has experienced erosions in democracy and new civil society movements have emerged or expanded around the world, some seeking to advance and others seeking to rollback progress on gender equality and women’s empowerment. All of these developments will have direct impacts on the implementation of UN-Women’s 2018-2021 Strategic Plan.

Globally, #MeToo and other movements have built momentum for decision makers of all kinds to listen and act. New opportunities are emerging from young and intersectional feminist movements that are expanding and invigorating pathways to gender equality. Digital and data revolutions have transformed the landscape for gender equality, including in terms of movement-building, access to knowledge and transparency/accountability. UN-Women’s longstanding and deep experience engaging with civil society organisations represents a comparative advantage in this regard.

The UNDS reform’s new ways of working and new structures provide opportunities for UN-Women to leverage its triple mandate in support of greater results for women and girls. These include a foreseen increased demand to UN-Women for cross-cutting thought leadership and expertise on gender equality and women’s empowerment within the UN system as well as support to the implementation of system-wide commitments on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

As a small agency with a broad and universal mandate, the new ways of working created by the UNDS reform also pose new challenges to UN-Women. UN-Women has ongoing workstreams aimed

² Please note that contents of this Background Paper in large part include original language from UN-Women evaluations, analyses and assessments (as listed in the bibliography) so as to retain their original intent

at rightsizing the Entity's field presence and capitalizing on opportunities to better leverage UN Country Teams (UNCTs), including in countries where UN-Women is not a resident agency. The entity is also more strategically engaging across the UN and with other key partners to respond to the backlash against gender equality and human rights, including by reinvigorating relationships with feminist and grassroots women's rights organisations through the Generation Equality Forum and Action Coalitions.

Moving forward, UN-Women is using the MTR to examine and refine how corporate priorities and strategies can enable the Entity to further internalise the UNDS reform, as well as global trends and recommendations identified through the Beijing+25 review and appraisal process to unlock greater success under the Entity's current Strategic Plan. More specifically, UN-Women is assessing its responsiveness to-date to the UNDS reform and identifying additional opportunities for alignment vis-à-vis the new generation of UNCTs, the strengthened role of the Resident Coordinator (RC) and the centrality of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) (previously UN Development Assistance Frameworks).

B. Question 2: How and where does UN-Women's programmatic focus need to be further improved to make greater impact?

Evidence shows that UN-Women's interventions remain relevant and effective overall and the Entity can claim achievements across all Outcome areas in the current Strategic Plan. In particular, evaluations note UN-Women's clear contributions to gender equality and women's empowerment by strengthening normative frameworks. The Entity's interventions meet target groups' needs and increasingly align with national priorities and global frameworks, including priorities set by targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Nonetheless, evaluations also point towards challenges in ensuring the sustainability of results as well as in achieving sufficient scale for greater impact on the lives of women and girls. Relatedly, some evaluations note the Entity's challenges to systematically ground programming in evidence and theories of change. These evaluations also point to the need for the Entity to strengthen its resource allocation and prioritisation methodology, in order to realign resources and design programmes for greater impact, including *leaving no one behind*.

Based on conclusions and recommendations from the literature review and preliminary consultations, the following opportunities arise for UN-Women to strengthen the Entity's programming towards more sustainable and impactful results:

- a better articulation of key areas of UN-Women's comparative advantage within each thematic area of UN-Women's work;
- a sharpened focus on holistic (multi-level) and integrated strategies that link different thematic areas, both within UN-Women and across the UN system;
- an improved focus on key cross-cutting strategies such as social norms change, *leaving no one behind* and capacity building in a systematic manner throughout its programming; and

- a stronger emphasis of programme sustainability, including through well-defined exit strategies.

In response to evaluation findings and opportunities noted above, UN-Women is exploring the launch of new thematic funds to channel resources towards strategic programming priorities. The Entity is strengthening its knowledge management strategies and approaches and more systematically using evidence to prioritize and ground programming, including through the development of country Gender Equality Profiles, updating its guidance on programme design, as well as revisiting Theories of Change for different thematic areas. Moving forward, the MTR will continue to examine how UN-Women can better assess and articulate its comparative advantage to focus its work in an effective, efficient and strategic manner. More evidence will also be gathered to strengthen the links between the Entity's resources and achieved results.

C. Question 3: Within limited resources, how can UN-Women leverage its partnerships approach and UN coordination mandate to boost its contribution to the 2030 Agenda?

Evidence shows that UN-Women has been a key player to mainstream gender perspectives in UNCT actions and joint programming and has effectively coordinated and built support for gender equality and women's empowerment. The Entity has a reputation for high-quality and valued inputs to policy dialogue and advice at the country, regional and global levels.

UN-Women's strategic partnerships have, to a great extent, led to important results. Through the strategic engagement of a diverse range of partners, and despite relatively limited resources, UN-Women leverages its institutional expertise and triple mandate to foster a stronger enabling environment for gender equality. UN-Women often acts as a bridge-builder between different stakeholders and many partners recognize that the Entity has been and remains instrumental in ensuring that gender perspectives are more systematically mainstreamed in development and humanitarian efforts. Given that greater civil society engagement is an immediate priority for the UNDS reform, UN-Women is uniquely placed to support the UN system in strengthening its engagement with civil society to achieve results for women and girls.

However, evidence gathered to date has also shown that there is scope for strengthening and diversifying UN-Women's reach in order to achieve more sustainable results while *leaving no one behind*. Evaluations demonstrate a lack of clarity on the UN system coordination component of UN-Women's mandate, occasionally leading to missed opportunities and duplication of efforts. Global assessments point to UN-Women needing to work more effectively with partners thereby unlocking the Entity's ability to achieve results through building on partner synergies and harnessing their capacities for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Efforts are needed to develop a clear organisational approach to strengthening civil society, including local civil society organisations (CSOs) and youth organisations, particularly as CSOs are key partners to ensuring no one is left behind. UN-Women also needs to invest more in strengthening national women's machineries while simultaneously engaging beyond them with other line ministries. At the same time, the tension between organisational ambition and capacity, a fundamental challenge exacerbated by the changing external context and resource realities, needs to be addressed.

Acknowledging persistent funding constraints and challenges, the MTR will seek greater insight on how UN-Women can more effectively catalyse other UN entities and non-UN partners around advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, including by reflecting on the first two years of implementation of the common chapter of the Strategic Plans of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN-Women. Furthermore, the MTR will aim to more systematically and strategically capture the results of UN-Women's partnerships and coordination work.

Ongoing work on the Generation Equality Forum and related Action Coalitions are anticipated to inform these efforts and help UN-Women programme differently in this regard. The Action Coalitions are a set of global, innovative, multi-stakeholder initiatives, launched by the Generation Equality Forum, that will mobilise governments, civil society and the private sector to collective action and deliver concrete, yet game-changing results to advance equality for women and girls.

D. Question 4: What adjustments are needed to the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (indicators, targets, resources, etc.) to better articulate the changes UN-Women generates, including its efforts to leave no one behind?

The above considerations, along with evidence gathered during the MTR process to-date, mean that some adjustments will likely be proposed to UN-Women's Integrated Results and Resources Framework in order to better articulate the changes UN-Women generates, including its efforts to *leave no one behind*.

Evidence gathering to-date has included a review of progress on further operationalisation of *leave no one behind* approaches, a diagnostic on whether indicators have an ongoing lack of data availability, indicators for which UN-Women's changing field configuration will impact our milestones and targets, and indicators where operationalization has proved problematic. This work will be revisited in light of the 2019 results once available in the coming months.

There is increasing clarity on the fact that UNDS reform influences how UN-Women can best plan for, monitor, achieve and report on results under the current Strategic Plan and through till 2030. UN-Women has workstreams underway to strengthen and better articulate:

- the contributions it makes to the SDGs and *leaving no one behind*, including how UN-Women's results across the SDG framework can be reported
- planning, monitoring and reporting in a harmonised way across agencies
- aggregate and high-level changes it achieves
- how results in one area can unlock results in another; and
- results from UN-Women's coordination and partnerships work

Data availability and quality with regard to *leaving no one behind* are expected to improve in 2019 reporting and beyond. The Entity is also working to strengthen its integration of environmental sustainability considerations in the implementation of its programmes. The selection of any new indicators will be informed by capacities to measure them and alignment with system-wide efforts.

III. Moving Forward

The MTR will continue building on complementary workstreams, both internal and external, to gather comprehensive information under its four core questions, including through consultations with the cross-divisional MTR Reference Group and all other relevant stakeholders. The progress in these workstreams, as well as evidence from upcoming evaluations and assessments, will be monitored and integrated. External experts are also being engaged throughout the process to complement and enrich the final product.

Upcoming milestones:

- January 2020: Executive Board informal on preliminary MTR findings
- February 2020: Update on MTR at first annual session
- February-April 2020: Validation of 2019 results, drafting and finalisation of the Executive Director's Annual Report/MTR
- March 2020: Joint Executive Board informal on the MTR with Common Chapter partners
- May 2020: Executive Board informal on the Executive Director's Annual Report/MTR
- June 2020: Presentation of the Executive Director's Annual Report/MTR at annual session of the Executive Board

Annex: Bibliography

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