

TRANSFORM



Evaluating UN Women's Approach to Innovation

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Dear Readers,

Recent years have seen an increased focus on the role of innovation in international development. The aid community is increasingly “doing development” in a digital world, and interventions reflect this. Within innovation, technology can act as a powerful catalyst, supercharging the impact and reach of development initiatives and accelerating progress towards sustainable development outcomes. Gender equality is a key component in these efforts, as women are disproportionately affected across the development spectrum, from economic opportunity to health care to climate change. As development efforts increasingly seek innovative approaches to accelerate progress, it is important to pay close attention to persistent gender inequalities to ensure that rather than exacerbating or maintaining the status quo, these efforts are gender responsive and result in more equitable lives for women.

As part of its implementation of the UN Women Corporate Evaluation Plan, the Independent Evaluation Service (IES) conducted the Formative Evaluation of UN Women’s Approach to Innovation to assemble information and provide a package of recommendations for devising a UN Women strategy and approach to innovation that includes both social and technological innovation. The evaluation was conducted in parallel to the work of the management-led Project Team on Emerging Priorities for the development of the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

The rapid move towards digital access to work, education and services that has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world has highlighted how critical it is that innovation and technology is gender responsive and offers opportunities for women, rather than exacerbating existing patterns of exclusion. At this time, it is crucial for UN Women to look critically at its approach to innovation for gender equality to draw on important lessons to enhance organizational learning, reinforce programmatic priorities and adapt to a dynamic and challenging external landscape.

We hope you find this new TRANSFORM issue engaging and the information within useful for strengthening the work of UN Women and its partners in its pursuit of transformative results and further advancement to better deliver on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Inga Sniukaite

Chief, Independent Evaluation Service
Independent Evaluation and Audit Services (IEAS)

Think Beyond. Stay Ahead.

EDITORS

Inga Sniukaite
Soo Yeon Kim
Christina Sollitto

EVALUATION TEAM

Florencia Tateossian
Clare Castillejo
Catherine Hight
Christina Sollitto

COPY EDITOR

Catherine Simes

DESIGN

Yamrote Alemu Haileselassie

UN WOMEN

Independent Evaluation and Audit Services
220 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017
ies@unwomen.org
www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/evaluation
Twitter: @unwomen_eval

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ON THE COVER

Senegal - Buy from women, UN Women's e-commerce platform that links women farmers and entrepreneurs to market, information and finance.

Photo ©UN Women Africa



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Why evaluate UN Women's approach to innovation?

Innovation, technology and the identification of new solutions are critical to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, innovation is increasingly being prioritized within the development work of the United Nations system and the wider international development community.

Within this context, UN Women has sharpened its focus on innovation in recent years, based on the recognition that innovation and innovation in technology, which frequently do not benefit men and women equally, can potentially be leveraged for women's empowerment. This effort has involved engaging in normative and coordination activities to advance gender equality goals within global, regional and national frameworks and initiatives on innovation, as well as developing innovative programming to trial new solutions to address gender equality at the national and regional levels.

Although there is no overarching innovation strategy within UN Women, work to more systematically integrate innovation within the organization's activities is currently under way as part of the strategic planning process. The UN Women Strategic Plan 2018–2021 and the draft Strategic Framework for the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 both highlight the growing influence and opportunity that innovation and technology offer for UN Women's work.

EVALUATION PURPOSE

Define, assess and provide forward-looking recommendations on:



what innovation means for UN Women



value added of UN Women's normative and coordination work in the area of innovation for gender equality



results of UN Women's innovative initiatives



systems, processes and culture of UN Women to support innovation

The evaluation covered the period 2017-2020 and was formative in nature to support ongoing strategic decision-making regarding how UN Women can drive innovation for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It was also intended to inform and strengthen organizational learning and accountability in this area.

The findings presented in this report should support strategic decision-making and organizational learning and accountability. The findings should also inform UN Women's approach as management solidifies innovation as a key emerging mechanism to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

The key objectives of the evaluation were:

- ➔ To provide key learning and input to managers and programmatic personnel on what has been achieved in innovation to date.
- ➔ To provide recommendations for operational improvements and suggestions on how UN Women can best drive innovation for gender equality.
- ➔ To inform the next UN Women Strategic Plan and UN Women strategies and internal governance in the area of innovation.



Photo: UN Women/Dzilam Méndez

What methods and tools are available to advance gender-responsive evaluation?

What can we learn from successful gender-responsive evaluation approaches?

How can we empower rights holders and maximize their participation?

GOOD PRACTICES IN GENDER-RESPONSIVE EVALUATIONS



 UN WOMEN



Findings and conclusions: What does the evaluation tell us?

1 **The absence of a clear definition and vision for innovation within UN Women has hampered the organization from developing a coherent and strategic body of work in this area.**



As a result of this situation, innovative work within UN Women is currently a disparate and disconnected set of activities, often driven by individual interests or in response to *ad hoc* opportunities, with widely different strategies and approaches. These innovative activities do not add up to a broader and coherent body of work. Instead, initiatives are categorized as innovative in an *ad hoc* fashion, based on individual interpretations. Furthermore, innovative initiatives vary widely in the extent to which they adopt a genuinely innovative or experimental approach and offer new solutions, and there is no framework for measuring results

from innovative work, or for sharing and building on lessons learned.

There is a strong demand among personnel for a clear definition, vision, strategy and guidance on innovation that can help inform choices at all levels about what innovative work to invest in, what strategies and approaches to adopt, and how to understand and measure success in this area. In particular, personnel would like to see a definition of innovation that encompasses both ways of working and the nature of solutions that are developed, and that is relevant for both technological and social innovation.

There is a strong demand for a clear definition, vision, strategy and guidance on innovation that can help inform action and measure success. It would be useful to develop a definition of innovation that encompasses both ways of working and the nature of solutions.



2

UN Women has not yet clearly identified its niche or how it can best add value in the area of innovation for gender equality.



The organization could best add value by developing and incubating innovative solutions to the most challenging problems in gender equality and the empowerment of women, and by informing and influencing wider work on innovation within the United Nations system and beyond.

The evaluation concluded that the organization has potential to add most value by fostering new solutions to gender equality challenges and by informing and influencing the innovative work of other actors, and that it should focus its efforts in these two areas.

The innovative initiatives that appear to have the greatest potential for impact are those where the organization has developed and incubated an experimental new solution to a gender equality problem, has accompanied this with rigorous

learning and documentation, and has influenced other, larger actors to adopt and scale up this solution. This incubation role is appropriate in terms of the organization's limited resources and its in-depth expertise on gender equality. UN Women can also add significant value by leading normative and coordination work on innovation for gender equality and acting as a knowledge provider for others on these issues. This role fits well with the organization's mandate.



3

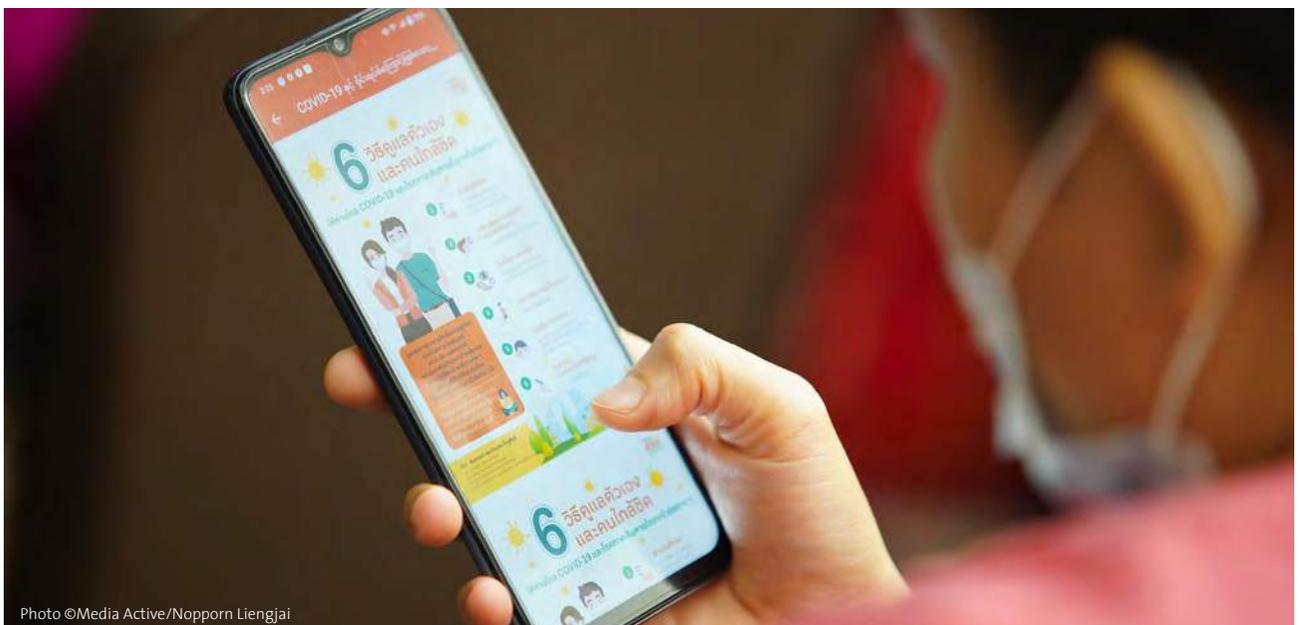
UN Women's innovative work is not yet having a significant impact because the organization is not building in scale up plans to build upon or learn from this work.



Critically, while some innovative initiatives are generating intermediate outcomes at programme level, they are not contributing to higher level outcomes at organization-wide level.

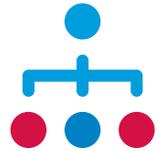
The organization's ability to scale up innovative programmes has been constrained by a lack of capacity, resources and strategy, resulting in limited impact from most innovative initiatives. While innovative initiatives are generating a variety of outcomes at programme level, these intermediate outcomes do not clearly contribute to higher level outcomes at organizational level because learning from this innovative work is not being used to inform wider UN Women strategies.

To ensure maximum value from UN Women's innovative work, it is critical that the organization puts in place measures that will enable intermediate outcomes from innovative programmes to contribute to wider results and goals. This requires organization-wide systems to capture, document and share lessons from innovative projects and to ensure that these lessons inform future programming, coordination and influencing activities.



4

There are internal barriers to innovation within UN Women that need to be addressed in order for the organization to work more efficiently in this area.



These include barriers related to organizational systems and to risk-averse organizational culture around innovation.

At almost all levels of the organization, innovative work is hampered because organizational systems and processes are not adapted to support innovative ways of working. In particular, these systems lack the agility to support innovation. Moreover, UN Women's organizational culture is not conducive to innovation. With some exceptions,

there is little experimentation or acceptance of smart risk-taking and the possibility of failure, little space for innovation-related dialogue and collaboration, and limited innovation mindset among personnel. In this context, innovation is not fostered, and there is no space for a frank discussion and learning when experimental work fails.

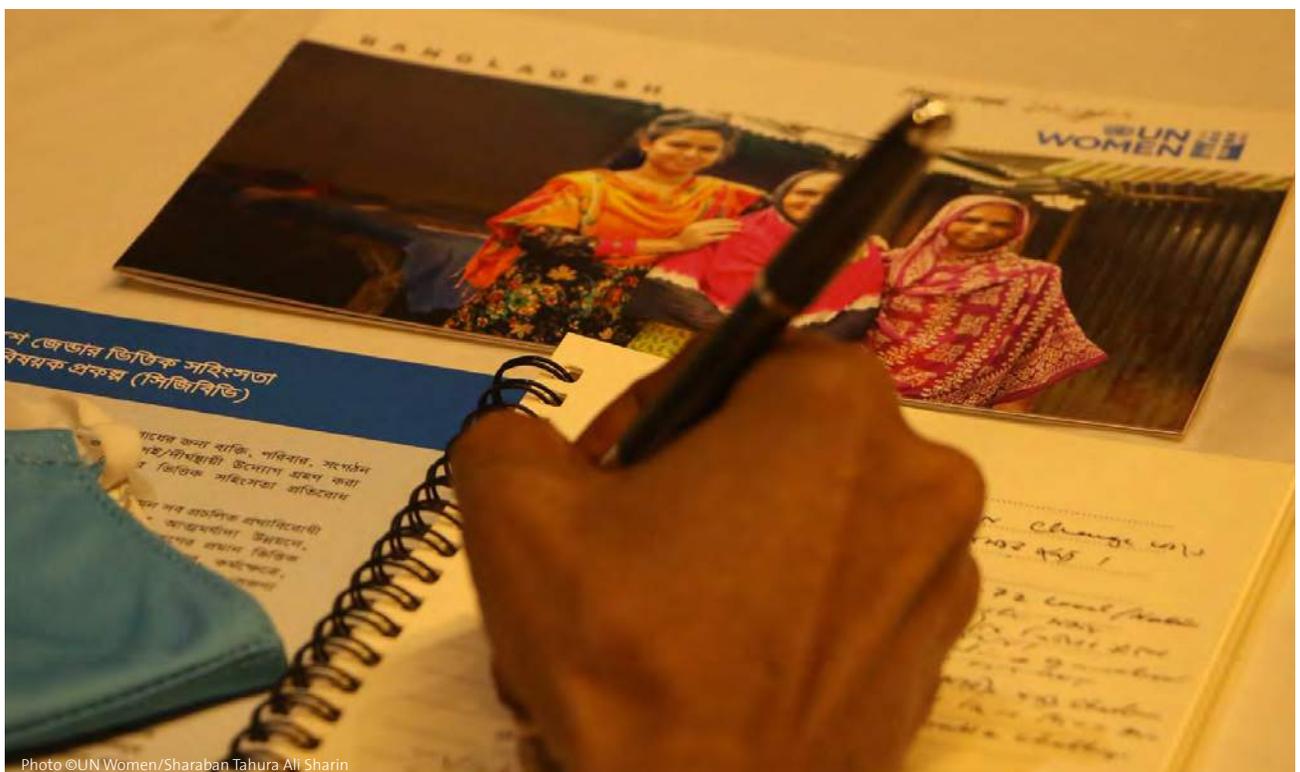


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5

Innovative work can generate new types of partnerships for UN Women, involving both different categories of partners and different models of collaboration.



While such partnerships currently exist within certain innovative programmes, there is potential to develop these at an organizational level.

Innovative initiatives within UN Women have involved new types of partnership arrangements with traditional and non-traditional partners. Innovative work has also involved partnering with a wider range of actors, in particular with the private sector, which can provide valuable ideas, expertise and resources for innovative work on gender equality at scale.

There is potential to move beyond programme-level partnerships and develop organizational-level, long-term partnerships with the

private sector that can generate new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up. This will require investing in the organization's capacity to engage and build relationships with private sector actors in the innovation field. UN Women therefore will need to invest in internal expertise, tools and procedures in this area, as well as dedicate significant time and resources to building trust, credibility and strong relationships with private sector actors in the innovation field.

Photo ©UN Women/Paola Garcia





EVALUATING IMPACT IN GENDER EQUALITY

Guidance note to evaluate impact in gender
equality and women's empowerment



Download the Guidance Note [here](#)

Opportunities for improvement and the way forward



Recommendation 1

Develop and disseminate a clear definition of innovation

The organization should develop a clear definition of innovation that is relevant to UN Women's strategic plan and mandate. This should cover both what innovation is (what constitutes an innovative solution) and how innovation happens (innovative ways of working). This should be accompanied by the development of a concrete strategy and priorities as they relate to innovation, and an accountability framework for roles and responsibilities. The organization should develop a clear structure with allocated resources for leadership and accountability on innovation.

This definition should be widely disseminated within the organization as part of a broader process of socializing organizational strategy and priorities on innovation. It should also be used in external communications, to build clarity and visibility on UN Women's role in innovation for gender equality.

Based on this definition, the organization should develop categories of innovation, with clear criteria to guide the grouping, so that these can be captured correctly in the RMS.

Recommendation 2

UN Women should focus on identifying the concrete value added of its work in the normative and coordination space related to innovation.

UN Women should ensure that innovation is thoughtfully integrated into gender equality initiatives and that UN Women's work in innovation is positively influencing the normative sphere. This should be accompanied by a method of measuring UN Women's valuable efforts and impact in the innovation coordination space.

UN Women should draw on the lessons learned regarding the challenges and opportunities that have

emerge in the development and implementation of gender-responsive innovative initiatives in order to build a knowledge base that gives the Entity the credibility to influence actors in the international development space. By taking these steps, UN Women will have the opportunity to establish itself as a thought leader and authority in the area of best practices in innovation for gender equality and women's empowerment.



Recommendation 3

UN Women should focus on developing, trialing and documenting innovative solutions for the most challenging problems and those that might have great potential impact in gender equality and women's empowerment and the most marginalized women, including women with disabilities, and on influencing other actors to adopt and scale up solutions that prove effective.

Given UN Women's mandate and its limited resources, the organization should focus its innovation work on trialing, documenting and influencing in order to:

- Build up a body of evidence about what works in addressing the most difficult gender equality and women's empowerment problems, as well as those that might have the potential to have great impact, which can be used to inform the work of UN Women, its partners and wider stakeholders working on gender equality.
- Influence and support other larger actors to adopt and scale up new solutions that prove to be effective, in order to ensure maximum impact.

This requires UN Women to invest in more comprehensive and organized systems and practices for capturing and sharing lessons learned in the process of piloting/testing innovative initiatives.

Documenting and reporting lessons from innovative projects – including successes and failures – will help foster organizational learning; allow best practices to be replicated; avoid errors being repeated and ensure that unsuccessful initiatives are recognized and discontinued; and provide UN Women with the knowledge and credibility to influence other actors in the area of innovation for gender equality.

In choosing which problems to address through innovation, and which innovative approaches to trial, UN Women should prioritize developing needs-based solutions for marginalized women that can potentially be taken to scale. In doing so UN Women should consider a bottom-up approach to identifying and designing innovative initiatives that respond to locally identified challenges. Where digital solutions are being trialed, it is particularly important to develop realistic, accessible, and sustainable strategies to ensure these are accessible to groups that are most often left behind.

Recommendation 4

UN Women should develop long-term, strategic partnerships with the private sector that support innovation through the transfer of ideas, expertise and resources.

The private sector is a potential source of ideas, expertise and resources for innovative work on gender equality. UN Women should invest in developing organizational-level, long-term partnerships with private sector actors that can generate both new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up.

This will require stronger expertise, tools and procedures. At the country and regional levels, UN Women should identify opportunities to engage the private sector in innovative programmes and to connect traditional partners such as civil society organizations and government to private sector support and expertise.

Recommendation 5

UN Women should invest in more comprehensive and organized systems for capturing and sharing lessons learned in the process of piloting/testing innovative initiatives.

Challenges in the piloting of innovative projects should be reported based on an open and robust measurement of concrete results. This will foster organizational learning. It will also allow capturing and reporting on lessons learned in the process of implementing prototypes of innovative initiatives, which would give UN Women the

knowledge and credibility needed to inform and influence other development actors in the area of innovation for gender equality.

As the term “innovation” implies undertaking something that has not been done before, UN Women needs to allow for the sharing of both successes and shortcomings related to innovative initiatives.

Recommendation 6

UN Women should decide on the best structure that would support innovation, match it with appropriate systems (policy, procedures, measurement frameworks) and embrace a culture of innovation.

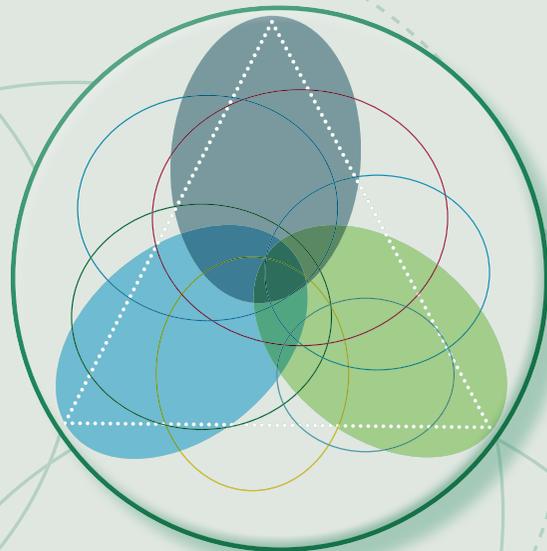
UN Women should decide on what the best structure for supporting innovation should be based on, and on the availability of human resources and evidence from current pockets of working arrangements supporting innovation. This can help elaborate a landscape of what works, and how to best structure this area. It should be accompanied by implementation of an appropriate policy, procedures and accountability matrix that can best support innovation in the areas of social and technological innovation.

This should also serve as a framework for general risk and legal considerations when incubating or starting an initiative.

The overall structural arrangements should also include measurement and monitoring tools to allow UN Women to capture data on how innovation is contributing to UN Women’s goals. UN Women should embrace a culture of innovation with supportive leadership and knowledge exchanges between regions, which would help UN Women identify what works and what does not work.



What is systems thinking and how is it applied to evaluations?



How can we bring “nature’s perception” into our analysis?

How can we include marginalized voices in evaluations?

ISE4GEMs: A NEW APPROACH FOR THE SDG ERA

Evaluation Guide Book



The Inclusive Systemic Evaluation for Gender equality, Environments and Marginalized voices (ISE4GEMs) guide is written in two parts:

Part A presents the theoretical background on systems thinking and Part B provides practical steps and tools to conduct an Inclusive Systemic Evaluation.

Find the guide here: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/9/ise4gems-a-new-approach-for-the-sdg-era>





Photo ©UN Women/Amanda Voisard

Perspectives from Management

This article is developed based on UN Women's management response presented to the UN Women Executive Board..

The evaluation systematically captures many of the issues and shortcomings of the overall organizational approach to innovation since 2017. It also provides a useful assessment of some innovation initiatives that have been considered promising but require a serious review and stock-taking of effectiveness before further expansion. The recommendations are well received and well taken.

The evaluation came at a good timing to learn from and apply the insightful findings to the future of the Innovation programming. UN Women's Strategic Plan 2022-2025 offers several opportunities to integrate digital transformation and social innovation as a cross-cutting lever to help us deliver on our normative, programmatic and coordination work. Innovation and technology can play a key role in accelerating results across the Strategic Plan's seven Systemic Outcomes, including on social norms change.

The management response acknowledges as per the evaluation that UN Women has not invested in a systematic approach to innovation or in the human and financial resources and organizational

structures necessary to provide a cohesive framework across the organization. Innovation efforts have been sporadic and often driven by individuals, a few interested offices or donor priorities. UN Women will invest in driving clarity on UN Women's comparative advantage in technology & innovation, alongside the appropriate organizational structure that brings together country, regional offices and headquarters under a clear responsibility framework address the recommendations of the IEAS team. UN Women will develop systems to capture lessons learned and generate evidence-based guidance for offices grappling with designing and implementing innovation solutions, including through digital technology.

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Management recognizes the critical need to advance a common and actionable definition of 'innovation', and how that is differentiated from 'digital technology' and integrated within a strategy that clarifies UN Women's approach to both of these often overlapping yet distinct areas of work. Further, UN Women recognizes the value of advancing a concrete strategy, clarifying UN Women's strategic advantage and concrete priorities, alongside an accountability framework aligned with our Strategic Plan. This will equip UN Women to not only to set our objectives and priorities but also to be more effective and efficient

and better measure our results. By clarifying the value add of UN Women's work in the normative and coordination space related to innovation & technology, it will likewise clarify which areas UN Women is best poised to advance, with a bias towards digital technology given its strategic value. While the organisation acknowledges the importance of social innovation initiatives highlighted by the evaluation, the rapid development and ubiquity of digital technologies in every aspect of socio-political and economic life, make it paramount for UN Women to clarify our role, both to capitalize on and address the risks brought by the digital revolution.

UN Women aligns with the IEAS Evaluation findings on the potential role that UN Women can play to focus on incubating innovative solutions, and on influencing other actors to adopt and scale up the solutions that present the greatest opportunities for impact at scale. Research and evidence will be core to this effort. Consequently, the innovation & technology strategy will clarify the long-term, strategic partnerships that would be best poised (including from the private sector) to complement our role to generate solutions for gender equality and scale up. The UN Secretary General's framework outlined in his "Our Common Agenda", which includes innovation and digital transformation, behavioural science and strategic foresight as critical drivers of progress, offers an opportune framework for UN Women to shape its innovation approach.



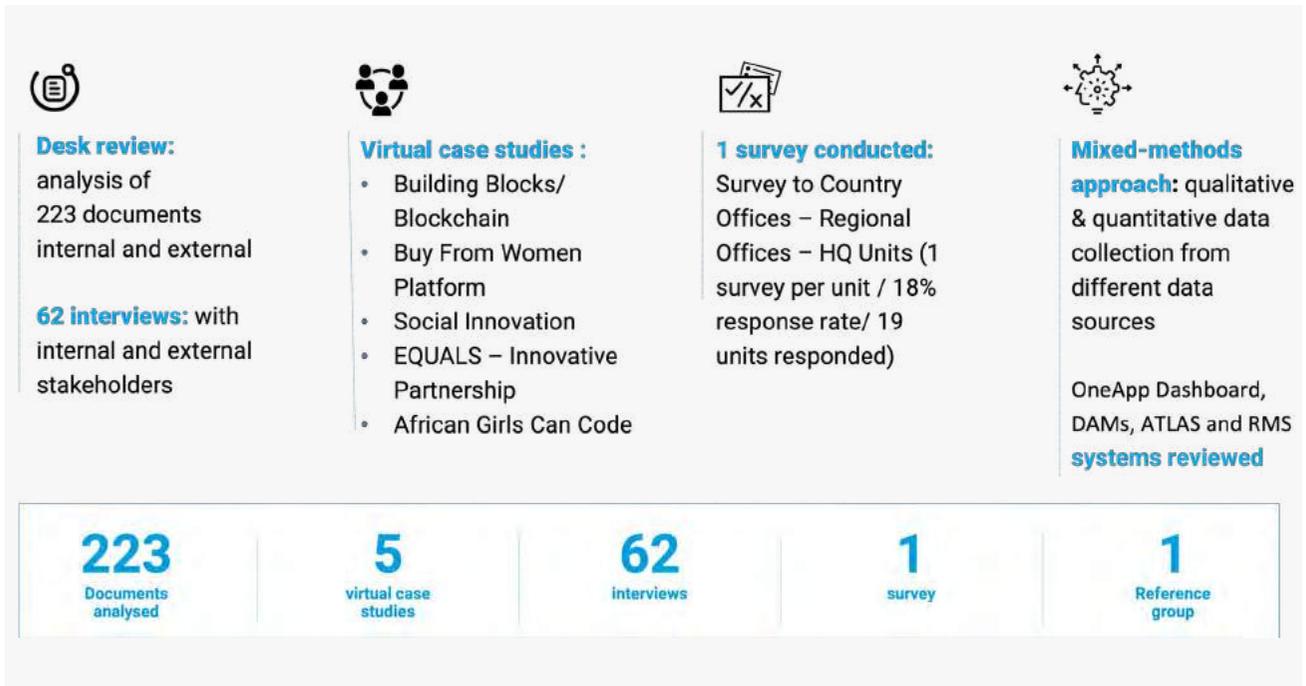
True innovation and transformational change require the capabilities to modify processes, systems and collective mindsets.

This necessitates a whole-of-organization effort, starting from a clear leadership commitment and direction. PPID looks forward to engaging with different parts of the house in implementing this evaluation's recommendations so that we can do things differently and leverage innovation and digital technology to drive more impactful results across our Strategic Plan.

Through clarifying UN Women's concrete value addition of our work related to innovation & technology will then dictate the funds to be mobilized, and to ensure that UN Women is ready to undergo its own digital transformation. This entails the use of digital technologies to respond to gender equality and women's empowerment challenges, in service of efficiencies and higher impact and scale. It also requires to be accompanied by organizational culture shifts around strategy, human resources, internal processes, programming and partnerships, adopting non-linear, iterative, co-creative and human-centered approaches. Sufficient resources should be devoted to problem diagnosis and analysis, programme design and testing phases as well as to regular monitoring for iterative adaptation.

UN Women can also leverage existing partnerships and platforms in service of this purpose. This includes the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation, which offers a platform for multi-stakeholder coordination on gender and digital innovation; the many inter-agency bodies that address issues around new and emerging technologies (such as the HLCP Interagency Working Group on Artificial Intelligence) and the informal UN Innovation Network – all of which UN Women is an active member.

Comprehensive methodology for evaluation



UN Women evaluations are gender-responsive, meaning that both the process and analysis apply the key principles of a human rights-based approach, including disability perspectives.

The evaluation was utilization-focused and employed a theory-based and outcome-harvesting approaches through case studies of initiatives that target innovation. It was carried out in accordance with United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards and Ethical Code of Conduct and UN Women Evaluation Policy and Guidelines.

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods data collection and analysis, driven by the evaluation questions and selected to provide the best evidence to UN Women. Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic complicates in-person data collection, the evaluation relied on virtual data collection. This was also constrained by the availability of stakeholders to participate in virtual interviews.

The evaluation used different qualitative data collection methods, including document review and analysis of over 220 documents, 62 interviews (56 women and 18 men), a rapid survey (one survey sent to each headquarters unit and field office to collect an aggregate response from unit personnel) (18 per cent response rate/19 units responding) and 5 light-touch case studies of innovation initiatives. The case studies included: the Building Blocks/Blockchain programme, the Buy from Women platform, four initiatives in social innovation, the EQUALS Global Partnership and the African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI). A theory of change was reconstructed at the inception phase and validated during data collection.

LEARN MORE ABOUT GENDER-RESPONSIVE EVALUATION

