INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

UN WOMEN COUNTRY OFFICE IN AFGHANISTAN

UN WOMEN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Audit objective and scope.

The UN Women Internal Audit Service (IAS) of the Independent Evaluation and Audit Services (IEAIS) conducted an internal audit of the UN Women Country Office in Afghanistan from June to July 2024, including an audit mission to Afghanistan. The Independent Evaluation Service of IEAIS also conducted an evaluability assessment of three key projects in the office. The actual evaluation of these projects is expected to be carried out in the first and second quarters of 2025.

UN Women management is responsible for adequately designing and effectively maintaining governance, risk management and control processes to ensure that UN Women's objectives are achieved. IAS is responsible for independently assessing the adequacy and effectiveness of these systems and processes.

The internal audit aimed to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance arrangements, risk management practices and control processes relating to the following areas and subareas:

- **Strategic priorities, programmes, and project management:** strategic positioning, priorities setting, coordination of gender mainstreaming, advocacy and resource mobilization, programme and project management, and management of programme partners.

- **Governance, risk management and internal control system:** office structure and delegations of authority, control environment, risk management, data quality and implementation of recommendations from prior oversight reports.

- **Operations:** management of procurement, human resources (HR), finance and budget, information and communication technology (ICT), travel, assets, and safety and security.

The internal audit covered the current state of governance, risk management and internal controls based on a sample of Country Office activities related to its Strategic

Note. For operations controls, the sample covered transactions from January 2023 to January 2024 for its operational sample; and the Transitional Framework 2022 and the duration of the Strategic Note 2023–2025 for the review of Strategic Note design, implementation and related field programmes.

The audit was conducted in conformance with the *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing* of The Institute of Internal Auditors.

Audit opinion and overall audit rating.

IAS acknowledges several good practices at the Country Office, for example:

Leadership in advocacy: UN Women is recognized for its leadership on gender equality within the UN Country Team (UNCT), maintaining these issues at the forefront of programming efforts despite challenging circumstances.

Gender equality coordination: The Country Office plays a leading role in gender-responsive work, coordinating through groups such as Gender in Humanitarian Action and the UNCT to strengthen gender equality efforts across Afghanistan.

Robust resource mobilization: The Country Office has consistently achieved high resource mobilization targets, demonstrating resilience and alignment with donor priorities, as seen by the office exceeding its budget target by 137 per cent in 2022.

Proactive risk management: The Country Office has a strong risk management framework, including regular fraud assessments, a detailed risk register and collaboration with UNDP for partner assessments.

Structured procurement process: The Country Office conducts competitive bidding with well-organized procurement plans, utilizing Long-Term Agreements for essential services to ensure compliance and cost-efficiency.

Commitment to capacity-building: UN Women supports programme partners with

training in fraud prevention, monitoring and compliance, enhancing operational transparency and alignment with local needs.

Monitoring and evaluation enhancements: The Country Office has made significant strides in establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework, with most outputs meeting or exceeding targets. The office uses third-party monitors for project monitoring.

Effective security measures: The Country Office has comprehensive security protocols in place, including a dedicated Security Specialist and coordination with UNDSS to protect staff in high-risk environments.

Well-planned learning programmes: The Country Office has a structured learning and development plan, with targeted training sessions across departments, supporting continuous skill-building and workforce improvement.

IAS assessed the overall state of governance, risk management and internal controls in the Country Office as **Satisfactory** meaning that "**T**he assessed governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls were adequately established and functioning well. Issues identified by the audit, if any, are unlikely to affect the achievement of the objectives of the audited entity/area**.**"

IAS identified the following key areas for enhancement to consolidate good practices and lessons learned and to advance the Country Office's mandate and priorities.

Strategic priorities, programmes and project management: The Country Office should map and continue to manage divergent stakeholder expectations; finalize the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard assessment; strengthen the monitoring and evaluation function by ensuring data validation is conducted before results are reported; ensure more detailed and formalized monitoring plans for projects. Programme partner budgets should be more detailed to demonstrate accountability, and to ensure maximum resources reach and translate into results for women and girls.

Governance, risk management and internal control system: A governance framework is required to integrate field sub-offices into the Country Office structure.

Operations: Improved coordination between the HR and other units is needed to streamline recruitment and HR decisions. Enhanced staff training on procurement

practices and facilitating supplier registration will help attract more quality vendors.

IAS made seven recommendations to address the areas for improvement ranked as medium (Important) priority recommendations mean that *"action is required to ensure that UN Women is not exposed to risks. Failure to take action could result in negative consequences for UN Women"*. These recommendations are focused on ensuring completion of the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard assessment; strengthening the monitoring and evaluation function, especially in terms of data collection and validation; projects should have a clear theory of change, formalized monitoring, streamlined processes and adhere to UN Women's guidelines, with transparent budget reporting and regular updates in the Donor Agreement Management System to ensure continued accountability and donor confidence; conducting detailed budget reviews with partners to maximize impact for women and girls, and incorporate an adequately timed inception phase in terms of reference to align with project timelines and objectives; ensuring establishment of a governance framework to integrate sub-offices into the Country Office structure and providing some operational flexibility for these offices; and ensuring staff are trained on Quantum to effectively implement standardized procurement practices.

Management comments and action plan

The Special Representative accepted the audit recommendations and provided action plans which are included in this report. Implementation of some recommendations has already begun. Management comments and additional information provided have been taken into account in this report, where appropriate. Low priority issues are not included in this report but were discussed directly with management, and actions have been initiated to address them. These included data management, results-focused travel, risk management and asset management.

Lisa Sutton

Lisa Sutton, Director
Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

HR	Human Resources
IAS	Internal Audit Service
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IEAIS	Independent Evaluation and Audit Services
IST	Information Systems and Telecommunications Team
LTA	Long-Term Agreement
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
PGAMS	Partner and Grants Agreement Management System
UN	United Nations
UNCT	UN Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
US$	United States Dollar

I. BACKGROUND

The IAS 2024 workplan considered the operating context of Afghanistan as a high-risk area due to the deteriorating political and humanitarian situation, while the Country Office had successfully mobilized significant funding. IAS conducted a risk assessment of the office in 2023, while assurance-related work was carried out in June 2024.

UN Women (previously UNIFEM) has been working in Afghanistan since 2002. The Afghanistan Country Office reports to the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. The main office in the country is in Kabul, with field sub-offices in Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Balkh provinces. The Country Office has supported the development, monitoring and implementation of policies that both protect and promote the rights of women. During the Republic era, these included, but are not limited to, development of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan; the adoption of a quota in the national constitution; laws and policies at the national and local level to combat violence against women and girls; and mainstreaming gender in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.

After August 2015, UN Women in Afghanistan had to reposition itself and restructure the office to support a stronger results-based programmatic approach and to promote its national implementation. Most of the progress made in policies has been almost nullified since the Taliban's takeover of the country in August 2021. At the same time UN Women stayed in Afghanistan and continued its work, adapting its programming to respond to the crisis due to the takeover and subsequent bans.

The One UN for Afghanistan 2018–2021 Framework was originally set to be succeeded by a new One UN for Afghanistan 2022–2025. However, in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, the UN opted for a Transitional Engagement Framework for Afghanistan in 2022. This was later extended until 30 June 2023, primarily due to pending assessments related to the bans on women working for international non-governmental organizations issued in December 2022. In June 2023, the new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for 2023–2025 was launched.

Aligned with these developments, the Country Office had initially planned to develop a new Strategic Note for 2022–2025 during 2021. However, this process was paused following the Taliban takeover, leading to an extension of the existing Strategic Note throughout 2022 to match the duration of the Transitional Engagement Framework. The Country Office then commenced development of a new Strategic Note for 2023–2025 in 2022. By the end of 2022, a draft Strategic Note was available, forming the basis of the Biennial Work Plan for 2023–2024. Finalization of the Strategic Note 2023–2025 was temporarily halted when the Transitional Engagement Framework was extended by six months to June 2023, as it required the overarching One UN planning framework. Upon finalization of the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan for 2023–2025, the Country Office's Strategic Note also received endorsement.

The workplan includes the following thematic areas:

- Elimination of Violence Against Women
- Women's Economic Empowerment
- Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action
- Coordination and normative functions
- Women's Leadership (support to women civil society organizations).

The 2023–2024 Biennial Work Plan included four Outcomes under the Development Results Framework and eight outputs under the Organizational Efficiency and Effectiveness Framework.

As of November 2024, as per the OneAPP personnel dashboard, the Country Office employed 79 personnel with Fixed-Term Appointments; engaged 33 individuals on Service Contracts; 34 consultants on Special Service Agreements (SSAs); and 16 United Nations Volunteers.

The Country Office's budget and expenditure are summarized in Table 1. (source RMS and UN Women Project Delivery Report)

Table 1. Office target and actual budget, total expenditure and delivery rate 2

Total resource requirements	2021	2022	2023	2024 (upto November	Total
Total budget target (US$)	16,701,969	17,762,102	49,527,192	66,239,661	150,230,924
Total actual budget (US$)	14,805,840	24,342,968	34,731,949	56,951,011	130,831,768
Resource mobilization	89%	137%	70%	86%	87%
Total expenditure (US$)	10,254,857	16,373,495	22,162,957	33,476,883	82,268,192
Financial implementa-tion	69%	67%	64%	59%	63%

As per project delivery reports for the period under review, the country field programme comprised 46 non-core funded projects with a total budget of US$ 93 million, funded by a range of donors, including.

- Multi-Partner Trust Funds and Multi-Donor Trust Fund projects amounting to US$ 7.1 million.
- United Nations agency-funded projects US$ 0.3 million.
- Other bilateral donor funding amounting to US$ 85.5 million.

As per PGAMs data on 4 November 2024, the Country Office has 78 programme partner agreements with 70 programme partners amounting to US$ 34.12 million.

Quantum-recorded expenditure for the Country Office totaled US$ 30.4 million for the period under review. Overall, this consisted of staff costs (38 per cent); other personnel costs (13 per cent); contracts with service companies (14 per cent); maintenance, utilities and common services (6 per cent); personnel travel (5 per cent); reimbursement to UNDP (5 per cent); grants (5 per cent); communication costs (3 per cent); non-capitalized tangible and fixed assets (3 per cent); and miscellaneous costs of accounting fees, United Nations Volunteers and consumables (8 per cent).

II. AUDIT RESULTS

A. Strategic priorities, programme planning and implementation

The Afghanistan Country Office initially aimed to develop a new Strategic Note for 2022–2025 but paused the process after the Taliban takeover, in alignment with the UN's Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) introduced in 2022. The TEF was extended to June 2023 due to assessments related to restrictions on women working in national and international non-governmental organizations and the UN, which delayed the Country Office's new Strategic Note. In 2022, the Country Office prepared a draft Strategic Note for 2023–2025, which informed the Biennial Work Plan for 2023–2024. The final Strategic Note was endorsed once the new UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan 2023–2025 was established in mid-2023.

IAS reviewed the Country Office's strategic positioning, including its approach to setting priorities, managing programmes and projects, overseeing programme partners and coordinating initiatives related to gender mainstreaming, advocacy and resource mobilization.

IAS identified some areas for improvement, including clearer stakeholder communication, enhanced coordination of gender mainstreaming and a strengthened monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework with realistic targets and regular risk assessments. Improved data validation, a risk mitigation strategy for potential resource reductions and streamlined processes would support operational sustainability. Additionally, clear project theories of change, structured monitoring from project inception and thorough budget reviews are essential to maximize resources and ensure the long-term impact of UN Women's work in Afghanistan.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 1: Advocacy and communications

IAS interviewed an extensive range of external stakeholders, including representatives of UN system agencies, donors, programme partners and members of the target population on their expectations of UN Women's role in the country in advancing women's empowerment during the period under review.

Generally, stakeholders appreciated the role of UN Women in Afghanistan and noted that UN Women understood its roles and responsibilities in the country context.

UN partners

UN agencies commended UN Women for its strong presence and leadership within the UN Country Team (UNCT). The organization's consistent advocacy for gender equality and women's rights has helped ensure these issues remain at the forefront of programming efforts. UN Women's role as a co-chair in coordination groups such as Gender in Humanitarian Action was particularly valued for fostering inclusive discussions on women's issues. UN agencies appreciated UN Women's visible leadership and commitment to advancing the Entity's mandate in challenging circumstances.

UN Women's collaboration with various UN agencies has also facilitated valuable partnerships that improve the reach and impact of projects aimed at supporting Afghan women, such as those focused on health, empowerment and gender equality.

Some UN partners suggested some potential opportunities and areas for improvement, particularly in operational flexibility and data management. The need for more consistent and clear communication on complex projects was noted, to improve alignment and overall coordination. One agency highlighted the need for

better data management practices, particularly in terms of verification or target populations, to ensure accuracy and reliability in reporting. The challenging operational environment in Afghanistan has prompted UN partners to recommend that UN Women adopt a more adaptable approach to project timelines and structures, as the Entity's standard timelines occasionally limit its ability to respond quickly to sudden changes on the ground. Addressing these issues would support a more cohesive approach to programming and enhance the efficiency of collaborative efforts across UN agencies.

Donors

Donors expressed high levels of trust in UN Women, viewing it as a reliable and dedicated partner in programme delivery. The Entity's ability to coordinate strategically with other UN agencies to prevent duplication and optimize resources has strengthened its credibility among donors. UN Women's adaptability to Afghanistan's unpredictable and often restrictive environment has also garnered praise: the Entity's agility in adjusting to evolving circumstances is seen as crucial to maximizing impact in Afghanistan. Donors also highlighted the Country Office's strong visibility on the ground and its direct engagement with programme target populations, which enhances its reputation as an organization committed to impactful change and one that is effectively aligned with donor priorities.

Donors noted some challenges with data consistency and financial transparency, which they felt hindered optimal resource allocation. Several donors raised some questions regarding potential discrepancies in reported target population figures and emphasized the need for more stringent data verification processes to ensure consistency in results reporting. Donors are also seeking more comprehensive financial reporting, especially for projects with multiple funding sources, to improve their oversight of how funds are allocated and spent. The high personnel turnover in the Country Office was also flagged as a concern, affecting continuity in programme implementation and putting a strain on donor relationships due to changing points of contact. Addressing these areas would help to enhance transparency and reinforce donor confidence in UN Women's programme management.

Programme partners

Programme partners appreciated UN Women's proactive approach to capacity-building and hands-on involvement in project set-up, which have greatly improved operational transparency and alignment with local needs. UN Women's provision of training in areas such as fraud prevention, programme monitoring and safeguarding has been particularly beneficial, as it equips partners with essential skills for maintaining programme integrity and compliance. One partner, for example, praised UN Women's commitment to ensuring programmatic safeguards, which is critical in Afghanistan's sensitive context. UN Women's support for partners during project assessments and capacity evaluations has also enabled organizations to better align with UN Women's objectives and standards.

Partners indicated that more efficient operational support, especially with approvals and monitoring, would significantly enhance project effectiveness. Delays in obtaining necessary approvals have said to at times hindered partners' ability to meet implementation timelines, affecting reporting and compliance. There were also concerns regarding the clarity of roles in monitoring processes, with some partners highlighting some confusion over the division of monitoring duties between Kabul-led initiatives and field sub-offices. Third-party monitoring arrangements managed by Kabul occasionally lacked coordination with field sub-offices, complicating oversight efforts. Partners also expressed a need for increased training in risk management and fraud prevention to help them align more effectively with UN Women's compliance requirements. Improving these areas would enhance the efficiency of partner collaborations and allow for more seamless implementation of shared programme objectives.

The above feedback reflects the Country Office's strengths in coordination, capacity-building and adaptability, while highlighting areas where greater flexibility, transparency and communication would improve partnerships and operational success.

Advisory Note:

The Country Representative to continue to enhance and manage stakeholders' expectations by clear, consistent communication across UN agencies, donors and programme partners, particularly in terms of project requirements, timelines and monitoring roles.

Observation 2: Coordination efforts

The takeover by the Taliban has significantly affected the operational environment in Afghanistan, requiring the Country Office to rebuild its processes, partnerships and resources from a limited baseline. One major assessment under way is the UNCT-SWAP Gender Equality Scorecard, a tool to help UN teams evaluate and improve their planning, programming and coordination around gender equality. Initially planned for 2021, the assessment was delayed by the political situation but resumed in 2024 with support from the Country Office and a consultant to assist the Inter-Agency Assessment Team. However, the absence of an internationally recognized government and the limited availability of Inter-Agency Assessment Team members have slowed finalization of the scorecard. Completing this assessment is crucial, as it will provide the Country Office with a structured action plan to guide UN agencies in strengthening gender equality efforts across Afghanistan.

The Country Office has taken a leading role in coordinating gender-responsive work within the UN system. The Country Office has a strong presence in coordination bodies such as the UNCT and the Humanitarian Country Team, bringing much-needed visibility to gender equality issues. UN agencies have expressed trust in UN Women to lead advocacy efforts, and stakeholders commended the Country Office's senior leadership for their active role, including chairing key coordination groups and assigning senior gender advisers to support both the Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator's offices. However, some stakeholders noted the need to revisit the structure and effectiveness of certain groups, such as the Women's Advisory Group and the UN Gender Theme Group, to ensure they fully meet the country's complex and evolving needs. Additionally, with multiple gender-focused working groups, stakeholders suggested conducting a "who does what" mapping exercise to identify each group's role, strengths and areas for collaboration, and recommended including UN Women in the Steering Committee of Pooled Funds for Gender Mainstreaming.

Despite coordination achievements, the Country Office faces challenges due to limited human resources dedicated to coordination activities and high staff workload, which make it difficult to sustain such active engagement. Stakeholders emphasized that the Country Office's tools and strategies should be practical and feasible within the current context, suggesting that outsourcing certain tasks could help relieve some pressure on staff. In a complex political environment with limited control over local policies, the Country Office's primary challenge remains finding ways to make a meaningful impact on gender equality within the constraints it faces.

Recommendation 1 (Medium):

The Country Representative to:

- Finalize the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard assessment.

- Once the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard Assessment is finalized, proactively and continuously engage and advocate with UN system organizations to implement action plans.

Observation 3: Design and implementation of strategic priorities during 2018–2023

Development of the Strategic Note

The Country Office has developed an ambitious Strategic Note for 2023–2025, demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing the needs of women and girls in Afghanistan under challenging conditions. Donors recognize the Country Office's critical role and have expressed confidence in the office's priorities as outlined in the Strategic Note. However, donors also highlighted areas for improvement to strengthen delivery and maximize impact, suggesting that careful planning, setting realistic targets and adaptable processes are essential for success in Afghanistan's complex environment. The Country Office's expanded field presence and attempts to focus on value for money are seen as positive steps.

Donors have welcomed the Country Office's efforts to build a robust M&E framework and expressed support for ongoing improvements. They recommend continued focus on measurable targets, regular risk assessments and streamlined project processes to enhance effectiveness. The Country Office's emphasis on localization and collaboration with local communities, authorities and private sector partners is also valued. Moving forward, donors suggest expanding partnerships with international non-governmental organizations and ensuring practical integration of the triple Nexus approach to deliver comprehensive and sustainable support. This feedback reflects a

collaborative commitment to strengthening the Country Office's impact in Afghanistan.

<u>Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)</u>

IAS' analysis of UN Women's 2023 Annual Report indicators in the Results Management System and review of outputs and outcomes reveals a generally positive trend in terms of progress made. Among the 67 outputs, a substantial number (37) have, according to management, already reached or surpassed their targets, demonstrating effective performance in these areas. Additionally, eight outputs are reported as "On Track," and seven have shown "Significant Progress," indicating that most outputs are progressing well towards their objectives. However, there are also some areas of concern: 11 outputs report "No change", suggesting that these areas may require additional attention or resources to move forward, and four outputs have made only "Some Progress," which could benefit from targeted support to help meet their goals.

For the 16 outcomes, progress appears more varied. Only two outcomes are reported to have reached or surpassed their targets. However, one outcome shows "No change," and another has only "Some Progress," both of which may indicate potential barriers or challenges that need to be addressed. Most outcomes (12) are listed under the "(blank)" category, which may imply either a lack of available data or unassigned progress status. Addressing these gaps could improve clarity and ensure that all outcomes are properly monitored and supported. Overall, while many outputs and some outcomes are reported as progressing well, there is room for improvement in those areas that have seen limited or no progress.

<u>Data accuracy and validation</u>

IAS reviewed nine data points from the Country Office's Annual Report, including metrics such as the number of civil society organizations with enhanced capacity to deliver gender-based violence services; the number of women and girls receiving gender-based violence support through UN Women projects; engagement with cluster members to integrate gender in humanitarian response; women mobilized into voluntary savings and loans associations; and women supported with livelihoods through multi-purpose women centers. While most reported figures were validated, some source data were unavailable, and certain figures did not align due to unclear documentation of the methodology or basis for calculations. Such inconsistencies in

reporting could harm the Country Office's reputation and risk eroding donor confidence and support.

Recommendation 2 (Medium):

The Country Representative to ensure that the Strategic Note in Afghanistan sets realistic and adaptable targets to reflect achievable goals within the country's complex environment.

Recommendation 3 (Medium):

Improvements are needed in the M&E framework to ensure all targets are measurable, with regular risk assessments to address emerging challenges. Strengthening data validation processes is essential to maintain accuracy and transparency, ensuring that all reported figures are backed by reliable sources.

Observation 4: Resource mobilization

The Country Office has demonstrated strong performance in resource mobilization over the past four years, successfully attracting donor funding to support its programmes. Notably, in 2022, the Country Office managed to exceed its budget target by 137 per cent, an impressive achievement given the challenging operational environment. Although resource mobilization rates were slightly lower in 2021 (89 per cent), 2023 (70 per cent) and 2024 (86 per cent), the overall average of 87 per cent underscores the Country Office's resilience and strategic efforts to align with donor priorities. Approximately 27 per cent of funding in 2024 was secured through the Strategic Note, highlighting its effectiveness as a fundraising tool. The Country Office also engaged in donor mapping and regular communication with donors, reinforcing relationships and building confidence.

However, while the Country Office has been successful with resource mobilization, financial implementation rates have decreased from 69 per cent in 2021 to 59 per cent in 2024 (up to October 2024). This gap suggests challenges in fully deploying funds within the planned time frame, which could impact programme outcomes and stakeholder confidence. Given the high operational costs associated with the Country Office's expanded structure and field presence, there is a need for sustained resource mobilization to maintain this set-up. Without continued funding at current levels, it

may become challenging to support the office's extensive structure. To address these concerns, the Country Office could focus on enhancing operational efficiency, addressing implementation bottlenecks and exploring scalable models to optimize resource use in line with available funding.

> **Advisory note:**
>
> The Country Representative should prepare a risk mitigation strategy in case resources were to be significantly reduced. This includes identifying core programmes that can be prioritized, reducing non-essential activities and reallocating resources to maintain key operations if funding is reduced.

Observation 5: Project management – governance, design, risk management and oversight

The Country Office has a wide-ranging project portfolio, implementing 46 projects across the country with a substantial multi-year budget of US$ 93 million, sourced from various donors, including multi-partner trust funds, UN agencies and bilateral donors. These projects span diverse areas aimed at humanitarian assistance and sustainable development in one of the world's most challenging operational contexts. While the Country Office has laid a strong foundation for project design and implementation, there are areas where improvements could help to enhance impact, donor trust and programme sustainability.

Project design

The Country Office generally crafted well-structured project documents that include clear objectives, comprehensive workplans and adequate budgets, supported by logical frameworks and strong management structures. However, the ambitious scope of some projects, such as one, which was originally designed for implementation across all 34 Afghan provinces, poses challenges beyond the Country Office's full control given limited resources and the complex operating environment. Originally set for two years, this project required an extension due to funding gaps.

Additionally, theories of change – a foundational framework that outlines how and why a project will achieve its desired outcomes – were not consistently included in projects. Without a clear theory of change, it becomes difficult to establish a direct link between activities and outcomes, limiting the ability to communicate anticipated impact and ensure alignment with broader strategic goals. At the same time, IAS acknowledges the extremely challenging and constantly changing environment in which the Country Office operates and has noted the dedication and flexibility of its personnel to adapt to these circumstances.

Exit and handover strategies, crucial for sustainability, were lacking in certain projects. At the same time, the logic of some projects factored in elements aimed at building sustainability. Part of this is expectable in a volatile and challenging context such as Afghanistan, but defined exit strategies, to the extent possible, are vital to ensure the continuity of outcomes after project closure, as they help target populations and local partners build capacity to sustain efforts independently.

Project implementation

Implementation has been challenging primarily due to delays in project start-up and internal procedural bottlenecks. For instance, some projects did not include an inception phase – a preparatory period that allows for setting up critical aspects such as staffing and partner agreements. This oversight delayed project delivery hampered the onboarding of partners and restricted the Country Office's flexibility in meeting initial programmatic demands. The introduction of a new corporate ERP system, Quantum, also contributed to early delivery delays, impacting the smooth flow of operations. To accommodate these setbacks, some projects, such as the "Supporting Afghan Women and Girls: Nexus Programming," required no-cost extensions. Unrealistic timelines without adequate planning for start-up activities may have compromised project outcomes and donor expectations.

Project risk management

Operating in Afghanistan exposes the Country Office to high levels of risk, primarily due to security concerns, governmental restrictions and an evolving socio-political environment. The Country Office has adapted its risk management practices to mitigate these risks, including localized project-level risk registers and the establishment of risk mitigation strategies. For example, the Country Office has undertaken low-profile operations, engaged diplomatically with local authorities, and modified project scopes to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. However, even with these adaptations, the environment remains volatile, requiring frequent adjustments to ensure both staff safety and project continuity. The high level of oversight from the

de facto authorities adds complexity, presenting ongoing risks to staff and potentially undermining the broader goals of Country Office initiatives.

Project monitoring

The Country Office has made strides in establishing a Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Plan, but inconsistencies were found in how individual projects are monitored. Only two of the ten projects reviewed had formalized monitoring plans, while others initially relied on informal monitoring that was only formalized post-extension. The lack of structured monitoring plans may lead to inconsistent tracking of project progress and reduced accountability for results. Additionally, logistical challenges such as limited field access and restricted partner capacity make data validation difficult for Country Office staff. In response, the Country Office has utilized third-party monitors to verify data and ensure that project activities align with reported outcomes. Continuous support to build partners' M&E capacities remains essential to improve data quality and ensure effective project oversight.

Value for money

Donors raised some questions about value for money, which has emerged as a key area for improvement. Despite high resource mobilization levels, ensuring efficient fund utilization remains challenging in Afghanistan due to high operational costs and frequent project delays. Donors are increasingly interested in transparent budget management and expect value-for-money outcomes, where resource expenditure is directly linked to impactful results. While the Country Office aims to maintain a 30:70 ratio between management costs and direct support to target populations, maintaining this balance demands optimized processes and reduced inefficiencies in project execution. Balancing operational costs with the direct delivery of benefits will maintain and reinforce donor confidence and improve project outcomes.

Evaluations

UN Women's Policy, Procedures and Guidance Framework (PPG) recommends evaluations for projects exceeding US$ 1 million and mid-term evaluations for those over US$ 3 million. Despite this, IAS found that no evaluations had yet been conducted for such projects. This gap indicates missed opportunities for learning and accountability, as evaluations offer a critical feedback mechanism to assess project effectiveness and address performance issues. Although the Country Office has

developed a Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Plan to guide evaluations, several projects are only scheduled for evaluation in late 2024 or 2025.

In connection with the PPG, the audit team understood that Programme Support Management Unit is in the process of updating the PPG related to evaluations.

Reporting and transparency

Effective reporting is essential for transparency and accountability: gaps in this area can affect donor trust. Some donor reports lacked comprehensive financial insights, such as budget-to-cost comparisons, which has led to additional requests from donors for clarification and risks donor confidence.

As noted earlier, IAS also found some inconsistencies in the data reported in annual reports, with some figures lacking source data or clear documentation on calculation methods. Additionally, some required documents were not uploaded to the Donor Agreement Management System, which is essential for maintaining transparency and accountability. By enhancing the accuracy and completeness of reporting, the Country Office could strengthen its relationships with donors and provide clear evidence of project impact.

Recommendation 4 (Medium):

The Country Representative to ensure:

- Projects have a clear theory of change, realistic timelines and, to the extent possible, defined exit strategies to support sustainability post-completion.
- Projects have formalized monitoring plans at the project start and build partner M&E capacities to enhance data accuracy and accountability.
- Processes are streamlined to reduce operational costs and provide transparent budget reporting to reassure donors of efficient use of funds.
- Conformity to UN Women's PPG for evaluating programmes and projects.
- All project documents are regularly updated in the Donor Agreement Management System.

Observation 6: Programme partner management

As per PGAMs data on 4 November 2024, the Country Office has 78 programme partner agreements with 70 programme partners amounting to US$ 34.12 million.

Implementation and monitoring of responsible parties

The Country Office applied appropriate implementation strategies, selecting responsible parties such as UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations to carry out project activities. These parties were monitored consistently through FACE forms and quarterly reports. However, implementation timelines often faced delays due to Afghanistan's complex environment, particularly given the restrictions affecting Afghan women working with international non-governmental organizations and later the UN. These restrictions, imposed in December 2022 and April 2023, severely impacted women-led organizations and programme partners, limiting their ability to deliver services promptly.

Adaptation to operational challenges

In response to these challenges, the Country Office collaborated closely with responsible parties to adapt programme delivery methods. A programme pivoting exercise led to the creation of a strategy document in May 2023, outlining alternative entry points and partnerships. This included closer collaboration with other UN agencies to leverage their specialized capacities for service delivery in a safe and feasible manner. However, some donors raised concerns that these partnerships might dilute resources. Between January 2022 and May 2024 five UN-to-UN agreements were signed, totaling US$ 5.7 million. The audit also noted variability in cost structures among partners, with UN agencies generally closer to the 70/30 benchmark for programme and operational costs, while international non-governmental organizations had different ratios.

Programme partner capacity-building and operational support.

Programme partners appreciated UN Women's proactive approach to capacity-building and support in project set-up, which improved operational transparency and alignment with local needs. UN Women's training in areas such as fraud prevention, programme monitoring and safeguarding equipped partners with critical skills for maintaining programme integrity. For instance, one international NGO commended UN Women's commitment to programmatic safeguards, essential in Afghanistan's sensitive context. UN Women's assistance during project assessments and capacity evaluations further enabled partners to align with organizational objectives and standards.

Despite these strengths, partners indicated that operational support, especially for approvals and monitoring processes, could be improved. Delays in necessary approvals have, at times, hindered implementation timelines, impacting reporting and compliance. Partners also noted a lack of clarity in monitoring roles between Kabul-led initiatives and field sub-offices. Occasional coordination gaps between third-party monitoring managed by Kabul and field sub-offices further complicated oversight efforts. Partners expressed the need for enhanced training in risk management and fraud prevention to meet UN Women's compliance requirements more effectively. Addressing these challenges would improve the efficiency of partner collaborations, ensuring smoother implementation of programme objectives.

Duration of partner agreements and cost-efficiency

The audit found that partner agreements typically had durations of less than one year, with half requiring extensions due to external challenges, such as Taliban-imposed registration and approval processes, which caused significant delays. Extensions ranged from three months to nearly two years. Delays in project activities due to these external factors risk cost overruns and disruptions to overall timelines, impacting the effectiveness of Country Office initiatives.

Recommendation 5 (Medium):

The Country Representative should:

(a) when working with responsible partners, including UN agencies, ensure that budgets are detailed and thoroughly reviewed to ensure maximum resources reach and translate into results for women and girls.

(b) when developing related terms of reference and calls for proposals for partners, and based on lessons learned since the takeover, ensure that partners allocate sufficient time to the project "inception phase," aligned to the project's main timeline and workplan.

B. Governance, risk management and internal controls

See Background Section for Detailed Country Office data. As of 5 November 2024, and as per HR data on OneAPP, the Country Office employed 79 personnel with 7 Fixed-Term Appointments; engaged 33 individuals on Service Contracts; 34 consultants on Special Service Agreements; and 16 United Nations Volunteers and interns.

The Country Office should further develop a clear governance framework with defined roles, integrating field sub-offices into the main office structure for consistent communication and alignment with Country Office objectives. Operational flexibility streamlined travel planning and budget guidelines will enable quicker local responses and reduce delays. Implementing a unified monitoring and evaluation framework, involving sub-offices in partner selection and clarifying third-party monitoring, is also essential. To maintain strong risk management, the Country Office should update its risk register, conduct fraud assessments and enhance the Country Office's Programme Support Management Unit's focus on emerging risks. Collaboration with UNDP for partner assessments and adherence to standard operating procedures, especially for money service providers, would reinforce compliance and ensure operational continuity and trust.

Based on the audit work performed, IAS raised recommendations and advisory notes for areas requiring improvement.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 7: Field office management

The Country Office is one of the largest UN Women offices. It operates out of its main office in Kabul and has five field sub-offices located in Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar. This has brought opportunities, but also some challenges in governance, coordination and programme delivery, requiring a more coherent approach to ensure effectiveness and efficiency across these diverse locations.

Key challenges

Complex governance structure: The rapid growth in staffing and geographical spread has highlighted the need for a clear accountability framework and robust coordination mechanisms to align activities across offices. Without this, the risk of fragmented programme delivery increases, potentially reducing overall effectiveness and efficiency.

Sub-office integration: Although the Country Office has opened five field sub-offices, a comprehensive strategy for integrating these offices within the broader Country Office framework is lacking. Sub-office heads report limited budget availability, challenges with decision-making processes and infrequent communication with Kabul, which hinder efficient operations and programme effectiveness.

Resource and staffing constraints: Many sub-offices operate with minimal staff and resources, with some regions facing strict limitations, such as security bans on female staff members attending the office. Additionally, strict procedural requirements, e.g. UN Women's 10-day advance travel planning rule, is said to limit the flexibility needed to respond to local needs promptly.

Monitoring and evaluation: Sub-offices report significant challenges in monitoring programme partners effectively. Limited involvement in partner selection; reliance on third-party monitoring without sufficient coordination; and logistical constraints have led to confusion and inefficiencies in tracking programme outcomes.

Capacity for strategic coordination: The absence of a permanent Programme Coordinator affects Country Office's ability to achieve seamless coordination across its programmes. Temporary arrangements limit the sustainability of institutional knowledge and the capacity for cohesive strategic oversight, making it difficult for the Country Office to align efforts across teams and ensure a focused approach to programme delivery.

The Country Office has taken steps to address some of these challenges, including implementing a new organizational structure and developing draft sub-office

strategies to improve integration. However, more comprehensive guidelines, refined definitions of roles and a strategic vision for all offices are essential to ensure effective governance and to realize the full potential of the Country Office's operational and programmatic efforts across Afghanistan.

Recommendation 6 (Medium):

The Country Representative to:

- Establish a governance framework with clear roles and responsibilities, integrating field sub-offices into the Country Office structure, ensuring consistent communication and aligning field activities with the Country Office's main objectives.

- Provide greater operational flexibility to sub-offices by streamlining travel planning and budget guidelines, enabling quicker local responses and reducing administrative delays.

- Implement a unified M&E framework that includes sub-offices in partner selection and clarifies third-party monitoring processes.

Observation 8: Risk management and risk-based decision-making

The Country Office has developed a robust risk management framework that supports proactive and consistent risk management across operations. Key components of this framework include:

Enhanced risk management structure: The Country Office has strengthened its approach by appointing a Deputy Country Representative for Operations and designating operational focal points across thematic areas and sub-offices. This set-up enables proactive risk management and ensures consistency throughout the office. The Country Office also maintains a detailed risk register and conducts regular fraud risk assessments, fostering a collaborative approach to addressing risks in a challenging operational environment.

Fraud risk management and prevention: To manage fraud risks, the Country Office has implemented standard operating procedures and established a restricted-access SharePoint to track concerns. Regular fraud prevention training is provided, and the Country Office collaborates with UNDP to share intelligence on partner risks. This inter-agency cooperation allows for more comprehensive risk oversight and strengthens preventive measures.

Participation in the UN Risk Management Team: Through active involvement in the UN Risk Management Team, the Country Office participates in a unified approach to risk assessment, monitoring and mitigation. This collaboration focuses on high-priority risks, such as aid diversion, diverse donor compliance requirements and partner capacity issues. The Country Office also benefits from UNDP's Risk Management Unit, which performs vendor assessments on high-value contracts, enhancing due diligence.

Strategic compliance and donor expectations: While the Country Office's Programme Support Management Unit focuses on compliance, adopting a more strategic, risk-informed approach would improve responsiveness to emerging challenges. To meet donor expectations for rigorous monitoring and control of aid diversion, the Country Office has implemented standard operating procedures when using money service providers and integrated third-party validations. This approach helps mitigate financial risks linked to Afghanistan's limited banking infrastructure, ensuring financial security and operational continuity.

Advisory Note:

To maintain strong risk management, the Country Office should continue its proactive, collaborative approach, regularly updating its risk register and conducting fraud assessments. Enhancing risk focus within the Country Office Programme Support Management Unit will improve responsiveness to emerging challenges and meet donor expectations. Ongoing collaboration with UNDP for partner and vendor assessments will reinforce due diligence, while strict adherence to standard operating procedures, particularly for money service providers, will support compliance and financial security. These actions will help the Country Office ensure operational continuity and stakeholder trust.

Observation 9: Control environment and internal controls

Based on the review of the Country Office's Internal Control Framework; review of documentation in different areas of the office; the survey conducted as part of the IAS risk assessment; and meetings held during the audit exercise, IAS was pleased to note that Country Office personnel showed a high level of awareness of fraud reporting and exhibited a commitment to programme impact, resilience and adaptability. However, staff expressed the need for enhanced capacity in Quantum, i.e. further training, procurement, project management and stronger community engagement, indicating areas for targeted capacity-building initiatives that the office has already started to address.

Resource mobilization remains a critical focus, with the Country Office successfully leveraging its Strategic Note and engaging in donor mapping, although sustainability and cost-efficiency considerations were highlighted. Effective adaptations and risk management practices, including monthly operational meetings and proactive issue escalation, showcase the Country Office's thoughtful response to complex operational risks. Continued improvements in monitoring, governance structures and streamlined workflows will further enhance the Country Office's alignment with UN Women's objectives and operational effectiveness.

Advisory note: The Country Representative should continue to actively pursue best practices to streamline and strengthen the Country Office's control environment, enhancing operational efficiency, compliance and impact across key areas.

C. Operations

See Background Section for Detailed Country Office data. IAS reviewed management of procurement, human resources (HR), finance and budget, information and communication technology (ICT), travel, assets, and safety and security. According to Quantum, between January 2023 and May 2024 the Country Office raised 584 purchase orders for goods and services totaling US$ 27.3 million; 307 purchase orders for travel-related expenses totaling US$ 476,000; and 46 purchase orders for short-term consultants totaling US$ 7.2 million. Ninety-nine per cent of purchase orders were within the US$ 50,000 request for quotation limit, effectively facilitating micro-purchasing and Request for Quotation processes.

The Country Office has established controls in financial, asset, ICT and travel management, with some improvements needed in procurement and HR. For HR, recruitment is guided by a detailed matrix, but documentation gaps (e.g. missing Contract Review Board and Procurement Review Committee approvals) and data accuracy issues in the Quantum system suggest the need for stronger compliance and record-keeping in some areas. High turnover rates of personnel have been met with an increased use of fast-track recruitment Despite the Country Office achieving an impressive 93 per cent completion rate for mandatory staff training, further supervisory engagement would help to ensure full compliance.

The Country Office's annual procurement plans are not consistently reviewed throughout the year, leading to fragmented processes and data inaccuracies in Quantum and Atlas. The low number of vendors participating in tenders has limited competitive options, and incomplete Participation Level Agreements have delayed the use of LTAs for essential services, occasionally resulting in direct awards. Addressing these areas, to the extent possible in the complex and challenging environment, with improved procurement planning, comprehensive Quantum training and stronger documentation practices would enhance compliance, efficiency and the Country Office's overall operational effectiveness.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 10: HR and recruitment management

Based on IAS's review, the Country Office had generally effective HR practices. However, a few improvements would help to increase efficiency, compliance and inclusivity.

HR planning and recruitment

The Country Office uses a structured, detailed annual recruitment matrix that is prepared with each business unit based on budget and staffing needs. While this matrix helps align staffing needs with resources, it is a lengthy process that can slow down recruitment. Given the challenges of recruiting in the country context, the Country Office has implemented a fast-track recruitment process for crucial roles. It also collaborates with other UN agencies to promote diversity and includes initiatives, such as partnering with the UN Volunteers programme, to recruit female national staff.

Recruitment of fixed-term and contract staff

To reduce turnover among locally recruited staff, the Country Office began fast-tracking recruitment in 2022 for Fixed-Term and Temporary Appointments. This sped up job advertising and interviews, allowing roles to be filled more quickly. However, IAS identified instances of incomplete recruitment documentation for specific appointments, including three Contract Review Board approvals for Fixed-Term Appointments. Additionally, approvals for certain high-value contracts, such as Special Service Agreements, were not consistently documented. This highlights the importance of more robust and consistent documentation practices to enhance transparency and mitigate potential risks. Ensuring strict adherence to established approval protocols would strengthen the recruitment process and demonstrate

accountability.

Data accuracy in Quantum

The corporate migration to the Quantum system has brought some challenges in ensuring data accuracy in both Quantum and Agora systems. HR staff have expressed a need for more training in Quantum, especially in areas such as leave management, to prevent data discrepancies and improve accuracy. Enhanced training in Quantum would support smoother operations and improve data reliability.

Performance management

The Country Office follows UN Women's performance management policy, requiring staff self-assessments and supervisor reviews. The Country Office's HR team monitors performance management closely, achieving a 76 per cent completion rate for annual evaluations as of July 2024. To maintain high compliance, continued follow-up with staff and supervisors is recommended to ensure all evaluations are completed on time, aligning staff development with organizational goals.

Learning and development

The Country Office has a well-planned learning and development programme for 2023–2024, offering 32 specific training sessions across departments. This plan is organized with clear training objectives, target attendees, methods, schedules, costs and completion tracking. Monitoring training completion helps the Country Office adjust plans as necessary, promoting continuous learning and skill-building within the workforce.

Advisory Note:

The Country Representative to:

- Schedule regular meetings between HR and business units for faster recruitment decisions and provide resource planning training for managers.

- Encourage regular data checks, especially during transitions to new corporate systems. Organize Quantum training for HR staff to strengthen data management capabilities.
- Encourage supervisors to prioritize mandatory training completion and communicate its benefits.
- Establish regular documentation reviews and clarifying standard operating procedures for PRC approvals.
- Provide performance management training and set dedicated time for reviews to better align individual and organizational goals.

Observation 11: Procurement planning and documentation

The Country Office has a well-structured procurement unit. The Country Office has put in place organized procurement and contract management processes. Based on the review of documents, IAS noted that contracts were awarded through competitive bidding where possible, and when sole sourcing was applied it was justified with reasoning. Procurement planning, including the use of LTAs and supplier performance reviews, is also in place to support both operational and programmatic needs. However, there are some areas that require improvement to optimize efficiency, enhance data accuracy and ensure and demonstrate robust compliance.

Procurement planning and fragmentation of processes

The Country Office develops annual procurement plans to meet its needs, but these plans are not regularly reassessed throughout the year. This lack of ongoing review contributes to a fragmented procurement process, where limited communication and coordination across departments complicate tracking and reporting. With most of the procurement workload handled by a small team, the fragmented approach can increase costs, reduce process efficiency and raise risks for the organization. To manage capacity constraints, the Country Office has engaged three external firms for assistance with partner capacity assessments and third-party monitoring.

Accuracy of procurement data

The management of procurement data in Quantum and Atlas has several challenges, particularly with records from 2022 and earlier. Key issues include missing or

inaccurate data, which can create challenges to demonstrate compliance and accountability. Budget settings in both systems were sometimes incorrect, causing programme managers to miss budget expirations.

<u>Low number of vendors participating in tenders</u>

The Country Office has experienced low vendor participation in tenders, with instances of single bids received for Requests for Proposals and Requests for Quotations. This low participation limits competitive options and may lead to higher costs and limited quality assurance. Supplier challenges – such as suspensions, expired licenses and delays in registration due to compatibility issues with the Afghan context – have further restricted the pool of vendors available for bidding. Centralized advertisement processes at headquarters also limit the Country Office's ability to reach local vendors, contributing to low response rates and delays in meeting procurement needs.

Inconsistent use of Long-Term Agreements and Participating Level Agreements

While the Country Office benefits from Long Term-Agreements (LTAs) brokered by other UN agencies, it lacks Participating Level Agreements with some suppliers, resulting in inconsistent use of LTAs. The lack of Participating Level Agreements has at times, delayed access to services covered under LTAs. For instance, a pending Participating Level Agreement led to an emergency direct award for armored vehicle maintenance under Delegation of Authority when the required maintenance could not be delayed. Although compliant, this situation underscores the need for timely planning and complete Participating Level Agreements to avoid emergency procurement actions.

Recommendation 7 (Medium)

The Country Representative to:

- Provide training for staff on standardized procurement practices, Quantum (ERP system).
- Streamline registration for local suppliers, and actively encourage new suppliers to join UN Women E procurement system, with a focus on increasing local advertising and competition.

- Develop clear Participating Level Agreements for each LTA to ensure all procurement actions are aligned with policies and expectations.

Advisory Note

The country office could offer workshops or information sessions for local suppliers to help them understand procurement requirements and improve their participation in tenders.

Observation 12: Travel management

The Country Office has effective travel management procedures in place, as shown by the thorough authorization and documentation of all reviewed travel samples, including travel claims and expenses. The operations team ensures that no travel is approved without the required security clearances, and most travel expenses, including tickets, are efficiently managed through LTAs with UN agency-approved vendors, promoting cost-efficiency and policy adherence.

However, personnel in Afghanistan face several travel-related challenges. The 10-day advance travel planning requirement restricts their ability to respond promptly to urgent programme needs, especially given the unpredictable security environment. Additionally, the field sub-offices operate with limited personnel and resources, making it challenging to accommodate frequent visits from the Kabul office. For example, the Herat office struggles with overlapping missions, which strain the team's capacity to focus on their local projects. Strict security protocols also require international staff to be accompanied by security teams on all missions, adding time and complexity to travel planning.

Further logistical constraints, such as limited access to vehicles and drivers in sub-offices, reduce the frequency of essential field visits. Restrictions in certain regions also prevent women's participation within UN compounds, requiring alternate training venues and added arrangements. Addressing these issues with more flexible travel policies, enhanced resources and streamlined procedures would support UN Women's field operations in high-risk areas, improving personnel safety and responsiveness.

> **Advisory Note**
>
> To improve responsiveness and support personnel in Afghanistan's challenging environment, the Country Office in consultation with HQ business process owner should consider relaxing the 10-day advance travel planning requirement, where possible, allowing staff greater flexibility to address urgent needs.
>
> The Country Office should also consider providing extra vehicles in field sub-offices, particularly in remote areas such as Bamyan, which would help personnel conduct essential field visits more frequently and efficiently. These adjustments would strengthen operational effectiveness, enhance staff mobility and improve support to beneficiaries across the region.

Observation 13: Safety and security management

The Country Office has implemented comprehensive security measures to ensure the safety of its personnel, despite a challenging operational environment marked by political instability, internal security threats and frequent policy changes. A dedicated International Fixed-Term Security Specialist works in close coordination with United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), and the main office is located within the secure UNAMA compound, with field sub-offices co-located with other UN agencies.

However, the Country Office faces critical challenges due to delays in the receipt of essential security equipment, including armored vehicles, personal safety gear and security cameras, exacerbated by local restrictions on importing these items, which are classified as military equipment. These delays heighten security risks by limiting timely access to vital protective resources, placing additional strain on the Country Office's risk management efforts.

Afghanistan's susceptibility to natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and droughts also poses an extra layer of risk, potentially diverting resources away from critical programmes.

The Country Office remains committed to safety, with the Country Representative actively participating in Security Management Team meetings to stay updated on security developments.

> **Advisory Note:**
>
> To enhance the safety and security of personnel and assets, the Country Office should actively engage with UNDSS and local authorities to expedite the approval and receipt of critical safety equipment and armored vehicles. Timely access to these resources is essential to ensure the continued protection of personnel and to support the effective implementation of UN Women's mission in Afghanistan.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

Observation	Recommendation	Responsible Unit	Priority	Agree yes/no	Action Plan	Implementation date
2. Coordination efforts	**Recommendation 1.** The Country Representative to: • Finalize the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard assessment. • Once the UNCT-SWAP Scorecard Assessment is finalized, proactively and continuously engage and advocate with UN system organizations to implement action plans.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	**Action already taken:** UNCT Afghanistan SWAP Scorecard Assessment report and Action Plan have been finalised and uploaded in the global SWAP dashboard (November 2024). **Action planned:** The Action Plan envisages actions for UNCT and various Inter-Agency bodies. ACO, through the function of GTG Chair and the Secretariat, will monitor and support the implementation of the Action Plan and provide annual updates on the status of implementation to the global SWAP dashboard.	December 2025
3. Design and implementation of strategic priorities during 2018–2023	**Recommendation 2.** The Country Representative to ensure that the Strategic Note in Afghanistan sets realistic and adaptable targets to reflect achievable goals within the country's complex environment. .	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	In 2025, UN Women ACO will undertake evaluations that will inform the mid-term review/adaptations of the SN to ensure that the targets set are realistic and achievable in the country's complex environment. Further, the UNSFA has been extended for another two years. Modifications/adaptations of the SN results framework will be informed also by UNSFA related reviews/assessments.	December 2025
	Recommendation 3: Improvements are needed in the M&E framework to ensure all targets are measurable, with regular risk assessments to address emerging challenges. Strengthening data validation processes is essential to maintain accuracy and transparency, ensuring that all reported figures are backed by reliable sources.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	The ACO acknowledges this recommendation. We will review the indicators, and their means of verification included in the Strategic Note (SN) results framework to ensure these are measurable despite the general absence of recent and reliable Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) specific statistics in Afghanistan. Where updates are indicated, these will be incorporated in the results framework for the extended Strategic Note, noting that the Strategic Note will be extended from 2025 to 2027 in alignment with the extension of the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan. The ACO will furthermore strengthen its data validation processes, and the documentation thereof, as part of the overall strengthening of its M&E frameworks. Corresponding processes will be outlined in the Country Office M&E strategy.	November 2025 July 2025
5. Project management – governance, design, risk management and oversight	**Recommendation 4.** The Country Representative to ensure: • Projects have a clear theory of change, realistic timelines and, to the extent possible, defined exit strategies to support sustainability post-completion. • Projects have formalized monitoring plans at the project start and build partner M&E capacities to enhance data accuracy and accountability. • Processes are streamlined to reduce operational costs and provide transparent budget reporting to reassure donors of efficient use of funds. • Conformity to UN Women's PPG for evaluating programmes and projects. • All project documents are regularly updated in the Donor Agreement Management System.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	**Action planned:** ACO wishes to acknowledge the recommendations, with the following comments. **1. Theory of Change** We will ensure that all projects have a well-defined theory of change and realistic timelines. Exit strategies will be integrated from the outset to promote sustainability post-completion. This will include engaging stakeholders in the planning phase to align project goals with long-term community needs. **2. Monitoring Plans and M&E Capacities:** At the initiation of each project, formalized monitoring plans will be established. We will also invest in building the capacity of our partners in Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) to ensure data accuracy and enhance accountability. Regular training sessions and workshops will be conducted to keep our partners updated on the latest M&E methodologies. **3. Operational Efficiency and Budget Transparency:** To streamline processes and reduce operational costs, we will conduct a thorough review of our current operations and identify areas for improvement. Transparent budget reporting mechanisms will be implemented to provide our donors with clear insights into how funds are being utilized efficiently. **4. Conformity with UN Women's Guidelines:** ACO will ensure compliance to UN Women's PPG on evaluation and will continue to leverage thematic evaluations to inform programming to the extent possible. **5. Donor Agreement Management System:** We will ensure that all project documents are regularly updated in the Donor Agreement Management System. This will involve setting up a dedicated teams within Programme Units to oversee document management and ensure timely updates, enhancing accountability and transparency. A refresher training session will be conducted to capacitate responsible focal points.	Dec 2025
6. Programme partner management	**Recommendation 5.** The Country Representative should: • when working with responsible partners, including UN agencies, ensure that budgets are detailed and thoroughly reviewed to ensure maximum resources reach and translate into results for women and girls. • when developing related terms of reference and calls for proposals for partners, and based on lessons learned since the takeover, ensure that partners allocate sufficient time to the project "inception phase," aligned to the project's main timeline and workplan.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	ACO employ a meticulous approach to ensure that the budgets associated with responsible partners, including UN agencies, are detailed and thoroughly reviewed. This process involves several critical steps. First, each proposed budget undergoes a rigorous initial assessment by financial experts to verify its comprehensiveness and alignment with project goals. Next, a collaborative review is conducted, involving both programmatic and financial teams, to cross-check and validate all budgetary elements. This happens as part of the evaluation process. This ensures that all financial allocations are justified and directly contribute to the anticipated outcomes for women and girls. The Project Appraisal Review process also ensures all critical elements have been addressed, including budget elements reasonableness and value for money considerations. Furthermore, periodic audits and continuous monitoring mechanisms are established to oversee the implementation phase, guaranteeing that the allocated resources are utilized effectively and transparently. Finally, any discrepancies or inefficiencies identified during these reviews are promptly addressed through corrective measures, reinforcing our commitment to maximizing the impact of our resources on the ground. As part of periodic monitoring, any changes in activities and / financial needs are timely addressed through relevant revisions.	In place

Observation	Recommendation	Responsible Unit	Priority	Agree yes/no	Action Plan	Implementation date
					The ACO acknowledges this recommendation on the development of Terms of Reference on Partner management and will integrate provisions for programme inception phases into partner selection planning and partner project documents, in alignment with the timelines of the underpinning project workplans and timelines.	April 2025
7. Field office management	Recommendation 6. The Country Representative to: • Establish a governance framework with clear roles and responsibilities, integrating field sub-offices into the Country Office structure, ensuring consistent communication and aligning field activities with the Country Office's main objectives. • Provide greater operational flexibility to sub-offices by streamlining travel planning and budget guidelines, enabling quicker local responses and reducing administrative delays. • Implement a unified M&E framework that includes sub-offices in partner selection and clarifies third-party monitoring processes.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	A strategy for the management of the sub office is in place and this was synthesized through a Sub Office Retreat which was conducted from 26-29 November 2023, and sought to, among others, address the challenges in terms of roles/integration. The strategy reinforces the following. • Sub-offices shape the future for UN Women work, in terms of programme planning and expansion, and identifying opportunities at the local level. • Ensure mutual understanding and synergies between the thematic pillars and the sub-offices, and full engagement of the sub-offices in the planning process from the beginning to the end. • It is important to ensure synergies between UNW programmes and operations including in annual work plans, budget planning and risk management. Various mechanisms have therefore, been stablished to ensure clarity in the Governance of the Sub Offices, among them. • Fortnightly sub office meetings with Senior Management at Kabul. • Provision of critical updates/challenges/opportunities during the aforesaid meetings, in which key asks from Kabul Thematic leads are also reflected for timely action. • Strengthened monitoring /oversight of the Sub Office operations through dedicated sub office trainings by Operations teams, and office missions. • Operations focal points in Sub Offices participate in the crucial Operations meetings at Kabul – for example Business Continuity and Operations Management meetings. Operational flexibility • Sub Office trainings have been conducted by Finance, Budget and Procurement Units at Kabul to ensure full understanding of policies and workflows. • Sub Offices have been given authority to manage a $50,000 budget allocation for operational activities within allowable workplan activities, giving them flexibility and latitude. The ACO acknowledges this recommendation on the implementation of a Unified M&E and will develop a M&E framework that clarifies roles and responsibilities of different ACO units and third-party monitoring services.	July 2025
11. Procurement planning and documentation	Recommendation 7. The Country Representative to: • Provide training for staff on standardized procurement practices, Quantum (ERP system). • Streamline registration for local suppliers, and actively encourage new suppliers to join UN Women E procurement system, with a focus on increasing local advertising and competition. • Develop clear Participating Level Agreements for each LTA to ensure all procurement actions are aligned with policies and expectations.	Afghanistan CO	Medium	Yes	• ACO will organize GRP workshop for suppliers and potential suppliers, the content of the training will focus on GRP principles, UNGM platforms, and participation in procurement negotiations of UN Women. The audiences will be WOBs, CSOs and SMEs. • Procurement team will maintain the on-site trainings related to procurement and travel activities on bi-weekly basis to ensure staff are updated on the policy & procedures, workflow process and SOPs. Extensive Procurement training was conducted on a variety of topics. • ACO will continue active participation in the Procurement Working Group of UN Agencies in Afghanistan in optimizing the use of LTAs, this also includes the use of Contractor Information Management System (CIMS) platform for cost analysis and contract managements as one UN. • ACO will make suggestion to DMA on decentralization PLA signing from HQ to RO or field offices to ensure efficiency and timely response. It's important to highlight that currently, all PLAs are signed by HQ, which creates a bottleneck.	Implemented

Annex 1: DEFINITIONS OF AUDIT TERMS, RATINGS AND PRIORITIES

A. AUDIT RATINGS

Satisfactory	The assessed governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls were adequately established and functioning well. Issues identified by the audit, if any, are unlikely to affect the achievement of the objectives of the audited entity/area.
Some Improvement Needed	The assessed governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls were generally established and functioning but need some improvement. Issues identified by the audit do not significantly affect the achievement of the objectives of the audited entity/area.
Major Improvement Needed	The assessed governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls were established and functioning, but need major improvement. Issues identified by the audit could significantly affect the achievement of the objectives of the audited entity/area.
Unsatisfactory	The assessed governance arrangements, risk management practices and controls were either not adequately established or not functioning well. Issues identified by the audit could seriously compromise the achievement of the objectives of the audited entity/area.

B. PRIORITIES OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

High (Critical)	Prompt action is required to ensure that UN Women is not exposed to high risks. Failure to take action could result in major negative consequences for UN Women.
Medium (Important)	Action is required to ensure that UN Women is not exposed to risks. Failure to take action could result in negative consequences for UN Women.
Low	Action is desirable and should result in enhanced control or better value for money. Low-priority recommendations, if any, are dealt with by the audit team directly with management, either during the exit meeting or through a separate memorandum subsequent to the fieldwork. Therefore, low-priority recommendations are not included in this report.

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.
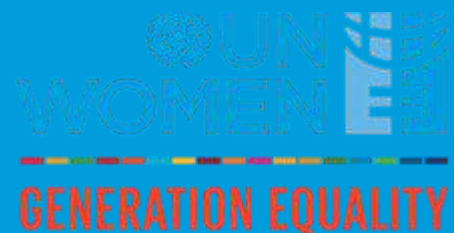
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