

COUNTRY OFFICE AUDIT

UN WOMEN COUNTRY OFFICE IN LEBANON

Internal Audit Report



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Internal Audit Report

Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS)

Internal Audit Service (IAS)

UN Women

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Audit objective and scope

The UN Women Internal Audit Service (IAS) of the Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) conducted an internal audit of the UN Women Country Office in Lebanon from January to March 2025.

At the time of the audit, Lebanon had been suffering from military conflict since October 2023. Personnel experienced a range of personnel and professional challenges during this time, and the situation continued to affect UN Women's work in Lebanon. In addition, this internal audit was postponed from 2024 to 2025 as a result.

Country Office funding has grown steadily since 2023. In 2023, the Country Office mobilized US\$ 7.2 million, or 72 per cent of its total target budget of US\$ 10.0 million (lower than its 2022 resource mobilization rate of 90 per cent). However, in 2024, the Country Office was able to increase resources mobilized to US\$ 9.4 million, or 108 per cent of the target. In 2025, the Country Office had already mobilized 107 per cent of its target of US\$ 8.7 million by April 2025. Nonetheless, the Country Office has identified funding and resource mobilization as a high-risk area in its risk register due to various challenges including difficulties obtaining long-term, flexible funding aligned with the Strategic Note.

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 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, 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 audit covered the state of governance, risk management and internal controls based on a sample of Country Office activities related to strategic priorities and Programme and Operations controls from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2024. Expenditure for the Country Office totalled US\$ 6.2 million in 2023 and US\$ 9.4 million for 2024 (as per Quantum).

The audit was conducted in conformance with the *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing* of The Institute of Internal Auditors. The audit included an anonymous survey of personnel, which had 13 responses.

Audit opinion and overall audit rating

IAS acknowledges the following achievements and good practices:

- The Country Office worked with key government stakeholders to design, implement and monitor activities for National Action Plan 1325.
- Most ProDocs clearly highlighted target populations, selection criteria and targeted numbers, which were mostly women and girls.
- The Country Office generally adhered to projects' visibility requirements as stated in donor agreements and demonstrated this visibility in the narrative reports shared with donors.
- The Country Office signed agreements on the Women's Empowerment Principles with the private sector.

IAS assessed the overall state of governance, risk management and internal controls in the Country Office as **Satisfactory** meaning that *“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.”* Notwithstanding this, IAS noted **some improvements needed** for the monitoring and reporting framework and linkages to projects and partners, organizational structure and partner audits.

IAS identified areas for enhancement to consolidate good practices and lessons learned; and advance the Country Office’s mandate and priorities. IAS made five recommendations to address the areas for improvement, all of which are ranked as medium priority. The 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:

- Implementing stronger quality assurance processes during the design and further project approval process, including adequate results frameworks with exit and sustainability strategies, where feasible, as mandatory requirements, which should be monitored during project implementation.
- Strengthening project management and oversight processes and ensuring adherence to donor agreements by enhancing the monitoring and tracking of projects’ progress against agreed targets and milestones; and organizing project steering committee meetings according to the frequency, participation and terms of reference agreed with donors for the timely identification of impediments.
- Enhancing programme partner management by monitoring progress through the timely submission of narrative and financial progress reports; consistently addressing capacity assessment and Project Appraisal Committee recommendations; tracking and resolving the follow-up actions and recommendations arising from monitoring visits; and ensuring value for money assessments prior to increases in budgets of partner agreements.
- Revising the office’s organizational structure as part of the new Strategic Note development process.
- Strengthening tracking, implementation and reporting on partner audit

recommendations and using the audit findings to reinforce risk-based capacity assessments, especially of programme partners that have been used several times.

Management comments and action plan

The Country Representative accepted the above recommendations and provided action plans which are included in this report. Implementation of some of the 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.

Lisa Sutton
Lisa Sutton, Director
Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

IAS	Internal Audit Service
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEAIS	Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services
LTA	Long-Term Agreement
RMS	Results Management System
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

I. BACKGROUND

UN Women’s Lebanon Country Office is based in Beirut. The Country Office mainly focused on the following key thematic areas: women, peace and security; women’s economic empowerment; and women’s political participation. The Country Office also implements the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund in Lebanon.

Since October 2023, Lebanon had been suffering from an ongoing armed conflict. The conflict directly affected UN Women personnel and activities. Personnel experienced a range of personnel and professional challenges during this time, and the situation continued to affect UN Women’s work in Lebanon.

The Country Office’s Strategic Note 2023–2025 aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2025 and is informed by the United Nations Common Country Analysis from 2020. The Strategic Note’s four key outcomes are:

- Enhanced protection for the most vulnerable.
- Strengthened diversified income opportunities to promote social and economic inclusion.
- Strengthened inclusive social contract grounded in human rights and justice to enhance good governance, effective and accountable institutions, and women's participation.
- Strengthened security, stability, justice and social peace.

According to the OneApp HR dashboard, as of 24 January 2025, the Country Office employed 8 personnel with staff contracts (P, GS, NO); engaged 15 personnel on Service Contracts; engaged 23 consultants on Special Service Agreements and Individual Contractor Agreements; 5 United Nations Volunteers; and 1 expert on mission.

The Country Office’s budget and expenditure are summarized in Table 1.¹

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

Total resource requirements	2022	2023	2024	2025 (as of 13 April)
Total budget target, US\$	7,930,749	9,976,485	8,688,641	8,154,381
Total actual budget, US\$	7,140,265	7,181,156	9,394,661	8,690,265
Resource mobilization	90%	72%	108%	107%
Total expenditure, US\$	6,583,196	6,210,869	9,327,814	1,298,210
Financial implementation	92%	86%	99%	15%

Source: Budget target used RMS Plan; Actual budget 2022 used the Project Delivery Dashboard from Legacy data on OneAPP; Actual budget 2023-2025 used the Project Utilization Dashboard on OneAPP; Total expenditure 2022 used the Project Delivery Dashboard from Legacy data on OneAPP; and Total expenditure 2023-2025 used the Project Utilization Dashboard on OneAPP but only the expenses, not "total utilization". Total 2025 expenditure data is as of 13 April 2025.

In 2024, the latest full year of data, the country field programme comprised 22 non-core funded projects with a total budget of US\$ 6.4 million, funded by a range of donors (some projects attracting multiple funding sources), including:

- Donor government or organization funding for 14 projects (US\$ 3.8 million).
- United Nations funding for four projects, sourced from multi and bilateral donors (US\$ 1.3 million).
- Multi-Partner Trust Fund funding for four projects (US\$ 1.3 million).

Quantum-recorded expenditure for the Country Office totalled US\$ 6.2 million in 2023 and US\$ 9.4 million for 2024. Overall, this consisted of non-staff personnel costs (30 per cent); staff costs (29 per cent); learning and recruitment costs (19 per cent); support costs (4 per cent); common costs (4 per cent); travel costs (3 per cent); communication costs (3 per cent); rent and maintenance costs (3 per cent); consumables (2 per cent); contracts with service companies (2 per cent); and other costs (5 per cent).

¹ OneAPP RMS as of December 2024 (planned budget), as of December 2024 (actual budget).

II. AUDIT RESULTS

A. Strategic priorities, programme planning and implementation

The Country Office has a Strategic Note for 2023–2025 and is in the process of developing its new Strategic Note. Overall, the Strategic Note’s impacts, outcomes and outputs, and activities were coherent. The Country Office does not have a dedicated Partnerships or Resource Mobilization function, but key activities are assigned across a range of senior and support personnel, including the Representative, Programme Specialists and Analysts, the Operations Analyst and Communications personnel, with support from personnel in their teams and other personnel as needed. Stakeholders confirmed that UN Women performed valuable and relevant work on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Lebanon.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 1: Stakeholder feedback and coordination

Stakeholder feedback

The stakeholders interviewed by the audit team shared largely favourable impressions of the Country Office, recognizing the relevance of UN Women’s mission in Lebanon and expressing appreciation for the collaborative and communicative working relationship with its personnel.

There was a strong call for UN Women to broaden its efforts, especially in combating violence against women and advancing women’s economic empowerment. Some stakeholders emphasized the importance of more clearly demonstrating the tangible impact and results of UN Women’s work.

In complex, multi-stakeholder settings, interviewees encouraged UN Women to ensure transparent and timely communication with all parties involved. This would help streamline coordination and logistics, particularly in joint initiatives where roles and responsibilities may overlap or be perceived as such.

The Country Office’s role in coordination was particularly valued, with stakeholders recognizing its leadership in uniting actors around gender equality and women’s empowerment in Lebanon. However, many also expressed the need for deeper engagement with civil society and grassroots organizations, as well as more inclusive platforms to connect stakeholders across national and subnational levels.

Donor feedback

Donors acknowledged the important role UN Women plays in advancing gender equality and women’s rights. They noted the encouraging progress seen in recent initiatives and praised the Country Office for its active engagement and collaborative spirit.

The Country Office’s coordination efforts – particularly through structured forums such as Programme Steering Committee meetings – were commended for fostering clear communication and shared direction. Donors also highlighted UN Women’s monitoring and evaluation efforts, which offered insights into project performance.

Nonetheless, some donors voiced concern over disruptions in leadership caused by staff transitions. These shifts were perceived to have slowed decision-making and affected continuity in some areas. While UN Women remains a trusted and committed partner, donors emphasized the importance of consistent leadership and stronger coordination during periods of transition.

Programme partner feedback

Programme partners reported positive collaboration with UN Women, particularly in strengthening women-led organizations, supporting grassroots movements and ensuring that project activities resonate with local contexts and needs. Many partners praised the technical expertise and capacity-building support provided by UN Women, which helped improve their implementation approaches. However, challenges were noted, especially delays in the release of funds.

Some partners flagged ongoing difficulties in maintaining momentum due to safety concerns and limited resources. They advocated for more flexible project timelines to better accommodate unforeseen challenges. Despite these issues, partners expressed a strong sense of satisfaction with UN Women's support, underscoring the positive influence the Country Office has had on their work and community impact.

Advisory Note: IAS advises the Country Office to consider this feedback as part of developing current programming and the new Strategic Note.

Observation 2: Resource mobilization

Shifts in global United Nations funding may affect how UN Women raises and secures financial resources. Country Offices must adapt their resource mobilization strategies in response to align with both the evolving funding landscape and their specific goals and capacities.

In Lebanon, the Country Office has identified funding and resource mobilization as a high-risk area in its risk register. Key challenges include difficulties in obtaining long-term, flexible funding aligned with the Strategic Note; reliance on short-term, smaller-scale project funding; and a limited number of channels for resource mobilization. These factors may constrain the availability of resources and affect programme delivery.

Country Office funding has grown steadily since 2023. In 2023, the Country Office mobilized US\$ 7.2 million, or 72 per cent of its total target budget of US\$ 10.0 million (lower than its 2022 resource mobilization rate of 90 per cent). However, in 2024, the Country Office was able to increase resources mobilized to US\$ 9.4 million, or 108 per cent of the target. In 2025, the Country Office had already mobilized 107 per cent of its target of US\$ 8.7 million by April 2025. This indicates that, despite operating in a

challenging and conflict-affected environment with strong funding pressures, the Country Office is growing in financial size, which is mirrored by the growth in its programme and number of personnel.

Although the Country Office does not have a dedicated position for resource mobilization, multiple staff members contribute to these efforts, including the Country Representative and programme managers.

The Country Office developed a Resource Mobilization Strategy for 2023–2025, aligned with the current Strategic Note period. This strategy offers a high-level framework for guiding resource mobilization efforts, encompassing a contextual analysis, funding landscape overview, articulation of the Country Office's value proposition and a general action plan with guidance on monitoring progress.

This existing strategy provides a solid foundation for developing a new resource mobilization strategy for the upcoming Strategic Note period beginning in 2026. The next iteration would benefit from more detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of donors and funding sources to better understand the total funding landscape in Lebanon and to assess the likelihood of securing available funds. These insights could inform the development of realistic, measurable targets, enhancing the action plan with clearly defined outcomes and key performance indicators.

Given the Country Office's matrixed approach to resource mobilization (rather than a centralized role) the new strategy could also clearly define roles and responsibilities, aligning them with staff job descriptions and integrating them into the annual goal-setting and performance review process.

Advisory Note: IAS advises the Country Office to devise a new resource mobilization strategy as part of the Strategic Note development process taking into account the opportunities for improvement noted.

Observation 3: Project design

Based on a sample of 10 projects reviewed, generally the Country Office's projects were well designed and supported by ProDocs, workplans, detailed budgets, results frameworks and indicators, clearly articulated management structures and arrangements (which was also ideal for joint programmes) and had adapted the projects

to respond to emerging needs, e.g. crisis response when the armed conflict in Lebanon escalated in September–October 2024. The Country Office worked with key government stakeholders to design, implement and monitor activities for National Action Plan 1325. Notwithstanding the above, there are several areas of improvement with regards to project design. IAS noted several inconsistencies in the application of policies and procedures, which might be indicative of weak quality assurance mechanisms before and after creation of projects. Therefore, the Country Office could benefit from tools such as checklists to ensure effective implementation of controls.

Project sustainability and exit strategies: To ensure the effective demonstration of project impact, the Country Office needs to assure that its projects' sustainability and exit approaches are feasible or identify needed improvements. IAS observed that 9 of 10 projects did not have clear exit/phase-out strategies: only one project had a clear exit approach. Four of 10 projects did not have sustainability strategies or principles. Without adequate emphasis on sustainability and exit strategies, target populations and institutions may not be prepared to take over projects from UN Women and projects may fail to build upon initial successes or capitalize on momentum, leading to missed opportunities for long-term impact. This occurred because exit strategies are not mandatory elements of ProDocs; therefore, they are not consistently included in project documents.. IAS is aware that Headquarters PSMU is working on corporate guidance on sustainability and exit strategies, and IAS highly encourages the Country Office to align once promulgated.

The Country Office informed IAS that the absence of clear sustainability and exit strategies in several projects is largely attributable to the highly volatile context in Lebanon during the implementation periods of projects. Since 2019, the country has faced overlapping and compounding crises, including a severe economic and financial crisis that has significantly weakened the government's ability to sustain basic services, prolonged political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut Port explosion, and multiple escalations of violence, including the most significant escalation of protracted conflicts. Given this protracted state of emergency and uncertainty, many UN-led interventions, including those by UN Women, focused on immediate response and humanitarian interventions, often without the conditions necessary to plan for a long-term exit or transition to national ownership.

The Country Office acknowledges the critical importance of integrating sustainability and exit strategies from the outset. In addition, several projects were either humanitarian interventions - by nature, timebound - or receiving very little amount of funding. At the same time, as part of its work across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus, UN Women's mandate also includes building the capacities of the organizations it works with which ideally should help sustain them after projects end. As the political context is changing towards more stability after years of compounding crises, the nature of UN Women's interventions in Lebanon will also change. With the situation in Lebanon showing signs of stabilization and overall improvement since late 2024/early 2025, with the election of a President and formation of a new government, and in light of anticipated reductions in donor funding across the UN system, the Country Office is taking steps to ensure that sustainability and phase-out strategies are systematically included into all new project designs. This will include strengthened capacity development of national counterparts and identifying pathways for handover of responsibilities to national institutions to make interventions sustainable without UN involvement.

Inception phase of projects: IAS noted that not all projects had a requirement to undertake an inception phase, but for those that did, the inception phase usually lasted for approximately three months on starting the project. IAS noted that a multi-million USD project planned for three years with an expected end date of August 2025 had the inception phase report (prepared by an external vendor) issued in January 2024, 17 months after the start of the project (the project was also delayed). Furthermore, in January 2024 only 2 of the 6 planned deliverables had been completed and some baselines for measurement of performance indicators were still not completed. As several result indicators did not have clear baselines and targets for more than half the duration of the project, this makes objective monitoring and reporting of progress difficult for the donor and other stakeholders.

The Country Office informed IAS that the delay in finalizing the inception report is linked to two main factors: 1) delays in onboarding of programme partners and procurement processes, and 2) political challenges in Lebanon that directly affected the project.

As this is a joint programme led by UN Women with another UN Entity, initial activities, especially those assigned to the other UN Entity, faced delays. In parallel, the challenging political context significantly impacted the roll-out of main project components, such as

capacity building training for local candidates which were paused until there would be clarity on the election date. While the inception report was finalized only in January 2024, the project has nevertheless taken into account the delays to properly adapt to the political and operational context. A no-cost extension was approved by the donor to extend implementation until end of 2025, allowing sufficient time to complete all components of the project and take stock of the political environment.

Recommendation 1 (Medium):

The Country Office to implement stronger quality assurance processes during the design and further project approval process, including adequate results frameworks with exit and sustainability strategies, where feasible, as mandatory requirements, which should be monitored during project implementation. Project reviews, endorsements and approvals should ensure prudent calculation of projects' durations given the challenging operating environment which should be validated during inception phases.

Observation 4: Project portfolio management

The Country Office managed the project portfolio relatively well. However, there were instances of inconsistent project oversight and monitoring, and donor reporting. Management of project team meetings and steering committee meetings was ineffective. In many cases not performing these activities meant that some requirements of the donor agreements were not being fully met.

Monitoring of projects: To track progress, identify and address any impediments to project implementation, the ProDocs and donor agreements clearly stipulated the requirements for project monitoring, e.g. establishment of monitoring and evaluation frameworks and plans, monitoring tools, monitoring visits, etc. However:

- 6 of the 10 projects sampled did not have monitoring plans.
- None of the 10 projects IAS sampled for review had monitoring reports.
- One project's monitoring requirements included a need to conduct baseline and endline surveys, and annual learning review meetings to identify promising practices and challenges, and these was not completed.

Not meeting requirements of donor agreements may result in donor dissatisfaction, reputational risks that can potentially increase future funding challenges, and the project objectives might not be met.

The Country Office informed IAS that it takes note of the gaps identified in the development and documentation of project-level monitoring plans across several projects. However, for many of the projects listed with exceptions, the requirement to develop a dedicated monitoring plan was not in place at the time of project design or signing. Moreover, the teams conduct regular monitoring visits but may sometimes document their observations through emails rather than formal reports. For ongoing and future projects, the Country Office will make sure that an overall monitoring plan is developed at the onset of the projects and programme teams will consistently document monitoring results via reports. Furthermore, for the project without baselines and annual learning review, since the start of the war's escalation in 2024, actual data collection proved difficult to conduct and, as a result, the annual learning review meetings were not conducted. However, the endline survey is still planned to take place, as the project ends in December 2025. The Office also highlighted that it will continue to regularly collaborate with the Arab States Regional Office on monitoring and data collection via the tool Track-It!, a flagship initiative which was well received by programme/project managers in Lebanon and will continue to be routinely used.

Late submission of donor reports: The Country Office generally complied with its donor reporting requirements. The submitted narrative and financial reports were comprehensive, providing details of successes, progress against the results indicators, challenges, dependencies, etc. However, IAS noted that in 4 of the 10 projects reviewed, the Country Office had missed the due dates for submission of donor reports. Delays in submitting donor reports might result in donor dissatisfaction and non-compliance with the reporting requirements contained in donor agreements.

The Country Office informed IAS that one project was a regional project implemented by 6 countries and the office had submitted its inputs to the consolidated report on time, but the Regional Office experienced delays in consolidation that affected the entire project. For the other 3 projects, the Office informed the donors that there would be some delays in the submission of the reports. Furthermore, the Country Office recognizes the importance of not submitting late reports to donors, as it affects the credibility and reputation of the Office. For this reason, in December 2024 a table summarizing

upcoming reports due in 2025 was shared with all project managers for feedback, so that continuous and timely follow-up could be possible and reduce any possible delays.

Project steering committee meetings: Project steering committees are supposed to meet regularly according to the specifications, agenda and terms of reference contained in ProDocs and donor agreements to review and appraise a project's progress. IAS noted that 6 of the 10 projects reviewed did not have steering committee meetings/minutes, despite being required as per the donor agreements and ProDocs. This was due to weak oversight in ensuring adherence to project governance arrangements and could result in reduced dialogue between donors and the Country Office; donors' inability to contribute constructively to a project's strategic direction; and affect donors' ability to take timely decisions to address any risks and challenges that arise during project implementation. The Country Office informed IAS that it recognizes the importance of adhering to the terms of the ProDocs and donor agreements by forming the related project steering committees and will make sure to abide going forward.

Furthermore, for another 2 projects unrelated to the 6 above, IAS noted that the terms of reference for the project steering committees had explicitly included certain organizations as mandatory participants. However, during the implementation of projects, they did not attend the committee meetings because of changes in operating context in Lebanon that no longer enabled their participation. The Country Office did not update the terms of reference of the steering committees to exclude these organizations. Outdated terms of reference might raise expectations of stakeholders, therefore, it is paramount that the pertinent changes are formally reflected. However, the Country Office objected, indicating that amending the terms of reference of the steering committees may not necessarily be required, as long as the steering committee members are aware of its functioning.

Recommendation 2 (Medium):

The Country Office to strengthen project management and oversight processes and ensure adherence to donor agreements by enhancing the monitoring and tracking of projects' progress against agreed targets and milestones; and organizing project steering committee meetings according to the frequency, participation and terms of

reference agreed with donors for the timely identification of impediments.

Observation 5: Programme partner management

The programme partners IAS interviewed highlighted their good experience in working with the Country Office and the level of communication was felt to be generally satisfactory. Programme partners indicated their appreciation of UN Women's flexibility in allowing the partners to adapt their activities to address emerging needs during and after the war escalated in late 2024.

The partner agreements were signed by the Country Representative, Regional Director or headquarters within the delegation of authority limits. The Selection of Programme Partners Procedure requires that partner agreements are signed in the local currency. However, Lebanon has experienced a prolonged economic crisis which resulted in the depreciation of the Lebanese Pound and a move towards greater use of US\$ as the operational currency. Therefore, the Country Office signed all partner agreements in US\$ instead of the local currency. The Lebanon Operations Management Team has provided guidance to UN entities on how to issue partner advances in US\$ and UN Women has aligned with this guidance. Based on the sample of 10 programme partners, IAS noted that the Country Office had adequate implementation modalities for programme partner agreements, although they were not always applied consistently.

Project Appraisal Committee reviews and endorsements for programme partners: The Selection of Programme Partners Procedure states the role of the Project Appraisal Committee is to assess the selection process, and review and quality assure the proposed partners, including budgets and capacity assessments. IAS noted that all 10 partner agreements had undergone Local, Regional or Global Project Appraisal Committee review and endorsement, which is exemplary. However, in 3 of the 10 partner agreements, there were instances whereby the Local, Regional or Global Project Appraisal Committee endorsed the selection of the programme partners subject to programme/project managers addressing several recommendations/conditions before or after signing the partner agreements or during implementation. The Country Office did not have a clear process or control to ensure that these recommendations/conditions are duly addressed according to the time frame stipulated by the Project Appraisal Committee. These related to topics such as prior partner audit findings; emergency plan

and risk assessment policy, etc. This occurred because once partner agreements are signed, the programme/project managers often focus on implementation without full regard for the risk or control elements highlighted by the Project Appraisal Committee. This could result in critical governance issues going unaddressed throughout the duration of the partner agreements, increasing the risk exposure for UN Women.

The Country Office informed IAS that it agrees with the observation and that where the project appraisal committees recommend partner agreements pending revisions, follow-up actions will continue to take place with the acknowledgement of project appraisal committee members. This will continuously be monitored by the project appraisal committee chair and the project appraisal committee's secretariat going forward.

Risk-based capacity assessments: The Selection of Programme Partners Procedure requires that risk-based capacity assessments are undertaken for all partners whether selected competitively or through sole sourcing. IAS noted that for six partner agreements sampled, the Country Office commissioned the same external audit firm to conduct the capacity assessments as UN Women generally uses for partner audits. This was not identified by the external firm or UN Women to enable review of any potential conflicts in independence or interest in using the same firm for both activities. This has been raised with the Headquarters PSMU to review the processes for use of the same external firm for both capacity assessments and external audits of programme partners going forward. Additionally, using an external firm incurs additional cost, which may need to be considered.

The current management considers that this practice was adopted when the Lebanon Country Office had a limited number of staff and limited expertise. However, these conditions no longer apply and, as such, the Country Office is committed to carry out capacity assessments in-house going forward.

IAS also noted that, sometimes, the Country Office did not adequately ensure that programme partners had addressed the issues identified during the capacity assessments. Again, the Country Office did not have a clear process or control to ensure that these issues/actions are duly addressed. Examples include: absence of fundraising strategy; lack of policies for data privacy and data protection, bank signatories, and end-to-end grant management cycle; and new capacity assessment that was not conducted 5 months after the start of the partner agreement to update the old version. The Country

Office informed IAS that it agrees with the IAS observations and will continue to encourage and work with the programme partners to address these gaps as the partner agreements are still ongoing.

IAS observed that some of the partner audit findings were issues that had been identified by the capacity assessments at the time the programme partners were selected, but the Country Office and partners had not ensured they were adequately addressed before or after signing the partner agreements. See observation 8 for further detail.

Monitoring of programme partner agreements: The Planning, Monitoring and Reporting Policy section 5.49 requires that Country Offices monitor project results on a quarterly basis, and update risk registers to accurately reflect the changing situation and context. IAS noted that 2 out of the 10 partner agreements reviewed had no indication that potential risks and mitigation measures had been identified.

The Country Office developed monitoring plans for all 10 programme partners. All partner agreements except one had monitoring reports or field visit reports with clear indications of the objectives for the monitoring activities and results. All the monitoring reports identified follow-up actions or recommendations for the Country Office and programme partners. However, IAS observed that the Country Office did not systematically ensure that actions were addressed and tracked for completion. Sometimes similar recommendations were raised on multiple reports, which might be indicative that they had not been addressed for a long time, and the Country Office might not be able to holistically leverage its monitoring efforts to improve the work undertaken by all programme partners.

The Country Office informed IAS that it agrees with IAS observation and will work towards ensuring that monitoring plans are properly implemented going forward. It also underscored that partnership with Arab States Regional Office and use of Track-It! has significantly improved the quality of data collected and the monitoring of projects and will continue to use it to improve the monitoring process for programme partners.

Increase in partner agreement budgets: The Selection of Programme Partners Procedure identifies that project plans and budgets form a part of ProDoc and this is considered as a part of the capacity assessment. Following set up of the partner agreement and budgets, IAS noted in 9 of 10 partner agreements there were several instances whereby

the Country Office had amended the partner agreements once or several times with significant budget increases, sometimes shortly after signing the partner agreements, during implementation or close to the end date of the agreements with an intention to also extend the duration of the agreement. The increments were either initiated by the programme partners or internally by the programme managers, which were approved by the Country Office Representative and Regional Director per the signed amendments to the agreements.

IAS noted that the Country Office justified the increments in partner agreement budgets. However, the Country Office might not achieve value for money in the utilization of limited project funds by increasing partner agreement budgets. When partner agreements are issued with low budget amounts but then exponentially grow, there might be a perception that some programme partners deliberately indicate lower budget amounts in their financial proposals to win the calls for proposals, then subsequently increase their budgets, which may then not be reflective of a fair competitive selection process.

The Country Office informed IAS that it acknowledges that several partner agreements were amended during implementation to increase the budget for various reasons, including additional funding from donors for extension of projects into multiple phases; increase in scope of activities; external context issues beyond the office's control; delivery of humanitarian assistance during the most intense period of the war escalation (October-December 2024); rapid response to the 2024 displacement crisis, etc. All amendments were in compliance with UN Women's procedures. The decision to increase partners' budgets is guided by cost-effectiveness considerations, evolving project needs, and strong performance by selected partners. In a fragile and shifting context such as Lebanon, scaling-up with reliable partners enables timely delivery and optimizes the use of available resources. These considerations were also crucial to implement a gender-sensitive and far-reaching humanitarian response during the 2024 escalation.

Extension of partner agreements: The Country Office decides on the duration of partner agreements when launching calls for proposals and commits to these timelines with partners when signing the partner agreements. It is imperative that programme partners abide by legally binding partner agreement timelines. However, IAS noted that 8 of 10 partner agreements had one-time or several cost or no-cost extensions. Multiple

extensions might be indicative that the Country Office was too ambitious with project timelines and did not provide programme partners with sufficient time from the beginning, or that programme partners did not adequately manage their deliverables. Furthermore, the monitoring of the partners might be inadequate. Although there were often justifications for the extended end dates, the extension of partner agreements may increase associated operational costs and directly results in delays in the completion of projects and might not consider the full cost of the extensions to UN Women projects.

The Country Office informed IAS that while the reasons for cost extensions are explained above, no-cost extensions, while not ideal, also reflect the reality of work in Lebanon, where delays may be caused by external factors, including escalation of conflicts or other serious instances. UN Women's continuous monitoring also make sure that no-cost extensions are processed on time, minimizing the risk of post-facto approvals.

Clearance of advances and submission of reports by programme partners: Cash advances and other cash transfer policies require programme partners to submit narrative reports and FACE forms within 20 days at the end of every three-month period. These policies stipulate that the Country Office must then review the narrative reports and FACE forms within 15 days of receipt from programme partners. IAS inspected FACE forms for the 10 partner agreements (one for each agreement). In general, programme partners submitted good quality and comprehensive narrative reports. However, IAS noted:

- 5 of the 10 FACE forms reviewed were submitted late.
- For 7 of the 10 forms reviewed, the Country Office review had delays ranging from 17 days to three months.
- FACE forms for two programme partners did not have certification of expenditure detailing the review and sample size carried out by programme/project managers.

The Country Office informed IAS that it takes note of the observation and should be noted that, while UN Women tries to duly abide to the letter of the partner agreements, contextual realities may cause delays.

IAS conducted a holistic review of the timeliness of all the narrative reports and FACE forms submitted by the 10 programme partners throughout the duration of the partner agreements by analysing the reporting schedules captured on PGAMS for each partner

agreement. Most or all partners had submitted several reports late to the Country Office. The Country Office highlighted that delays in the submission of FACE forms by partners sometimes occurred due to partners' long internal processes, which resulted in finalization of reports 20 days after the end of the reporting period, despite regular reminders from the Country Office. Sometimes, partners took a long time to finalize the report and address the review comments from the Country Office. The Country Office stated that these delays in reporting did not cause a material impact on the progress of the projects. However, IAS is of the view that continued delays in implementation and reporting by programme partners ultimately negatively affects overall implementation of projects.

The Country Office informed IAS that it takes note of the observation and the reflection on partners' long internal processes, combined with UN Women's, may also spark considerations whether some of UN Women procedures related to financial reporting could be streamlined without jeopardizing quality control or increasing risks.

Termination of a partner agreement: As part of the sample, IAS reviewed one partner agreement in place for 12 months from 1 April 2024. IAS noted 43 per cent of the budget spent in the seven months up to October 2024, which was liquidated through FACE form submissions and review even though the partner could not demonstrate any achieved results as per their last narrative report. Almost all the indicators under-performed. The Country Office informed IAS that the agreement with the partner was terminated as of 11 October 2024 based on a request from the partner. Because the project was terminated earlier than the planned project period, the partner underperformed across all indicators. Since the partner delivered only for the instalments already provided and fully spent these instalments, there were no outstanding funds owed to UN Women. IAS noted that this is one of the cases whereby the Local Project Appraisal Committee endorsed and approved the partner selection subject to the Country Office addressing its 10 recommendations. Although the agreement officially started on 1 April 2024, when the Country Office undertook a monitoring field visit on 24 May 2024, the partner had still not yet started the activities. This might be indicative of weak contract management by the Country Office.

The Country Office informed IAS that it agrees with the observation, noting that the termination of the agreement may likely reflect the difficult operational environment of

southern Lebanon. In their official communication to UN Women, the programme partner reported that they were operating as a first responder to humanitarian needs arising from the ongoing conflict in south Lebanon. The organization faced overwhelming demand for medical and emergency services for internally displaced persons across its community and health centres. Notably, two of its health centres sustained severe damage due to nearby strikes. As a result, the partner's emergency response efforts were significantly intensified, which led to the de-prioritization of activities under the UN Women project and, eventually, inability to implement the project.

Recommendation 3 (Medium):

The Country Office to enhance programme partner management. This should include:

- Monitoring progress through the timely submission of narrative and financial progress reports;
- Consistently addressing capacity assessment and Project Appraisal Committee recommendations;
- Tracking and resolving the follow-up actions and recommendations from monitoring visits; and
- Ensuring value for money assessments prior to increases in budgets of partner agreements.

As a consideration, unresolved capacity assessment and Project Appraisal Committee review recommendations/suggestions could be included in the partner agreements as part of the deliverables for the partners. Additionally, formal tracking of all actions can be performed by Programme and Project Managers throughout the duration of the partner agreements.

B. Governance, risk management and internal controls

According to the latest organization chart, the Country Office comprised 61 positions (with seven vacancies at the time of the audit). Eleven positions were part of Operations (18 per cent of the workforce). Thirty-four positions were part of the Programme team (56 per cent of the workforce). There was a separate Communications function with eight personnel. There was also a Coordination and Planning function with six personnel. The office management structure includes the Representative, Programme Management Specialist and Operations Analyst. The organization chart also includes a Deputy Representative position, but the role was currently vacant. As consistent across UN Women, the Country Office has a reliance on consultants as they make up 41 per cent of the structure (25 personnel). Consultants were on a mixture of short-term, long-term and retainer contracts and mainly work on programmes, communications, coordination and planning.

Requirements for evaluating projects were included in donor agreements and ProDocs. According to the GATE system, the Country Office completed one evaluation in 2022 with eight recommendations and another in 2023 also with eight recommendations, both in the Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area. The completed evaluations were captured in the GATE system with recommendations, key actions and management responses. IAS noted that, at the time of the 2025 audit, all 16 recommendations completed had been completed for both evaluations.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 6: Organizational structure

The Country Office is relatively new and its organizational structure is under development. IAS observed what it considered to be some inconsistency in role titles and levels across different roles and functions. This variability can create confusion and lack of clarity in the organizational structure. It can also impact the effectiveness of personnel performing the same or similar functions at different levels. As the Country Office grows, with a strong Strategic Note and resource mobilization strategy, there will be opportunities to strengthen and stabilize the organizational structure.

Recommendation 4 (Medium):

The Country Office to revise the office's organizational structure as part of the new Strategic Note development process.

Observation 7: Control environment

UN Women's Anti-Fraud Policy states that all personnel are strongly encouraged to report allegations of wrongdoing. IAS noted that, while most personnel appeared aware of this, some were not or did not know how to do so.

In addition to the various training required of all personnel on the topic, as part of its audits, the IAS entry meeting presentation includes a section on reporting requirements and how to report wrongdoing. However, Country Offices should also ensure their personnel are periodically reminded of this requirement.

IAS noted feedback from the personnel survey and elsewhere that risks related to fraud and other types of misconduct are not regularly discussed in Country Office or other team meetings.

While refresher sessions were conducted in May 2024, IAS advises the Country Office to periodically (for example once a quarter) discuss fraud and misconduct-related risks as they pertain to personnel's programmatic and operational responsibilities during Country Office and team meetings (as well as during the fraud risk assessment activities) and ensure that colleagues are reminded to report allegations of wrongdoing

as well as how to do so.

Observation 8: Follow-up of oversight recommendations

The Assurance of Programme Partners Procedure section 5.2 highlights that assurance of programme partners is essential to determine whether the funds transferred to partners are used for the purposes intended and in accordance with the signed partner agreements and partner project documents; and that risks are reduced. Six of 10 partner agreements in its sample were audited during 2021–2023 for the Lebanon Country Office.

All the audit opinions were “unmodified”, and only one of the five audited partner agreements had a financial finding (1.1 per cent of audited expenditure). Notwithstanding this, the audit reports highlighted several management control findings related to inadequate policies for procurement, human resources, and cost allocation methodology. IAS observed that some of the audit findings were issues that had been identified by the capacity assessments at the time the programme partners were selected, but the Country Office and partners had not ensured they were addressed before or after signing of the partner agreements. In some instances, some partners were audited in both 2022 and 2023, and there were repeat findings from one year into the next, indicating that the programme partners had not adequately addressed/prioritized findings when they were first raised by the external audit firm and/or that the support the Country Office provides through action plans might require improvement to improve ways of working with existing and future partners. As a result, programme partners may continue to have control weaknesses for several years while the office continues to work with these partners leading to potential inability to deliver on partner agreements.

The Country Office informed IAS that it remains committed to fully addressing the programme partner audit findings (and issues highlighted by IAS) and will continue to do so in the future. Moreover, by conducting capacity assessments in-house moving forward, it will be more in control and accountable of the actions to be taken via the capacity building plans following the capacity assessments of partners. Some challenges arose because some partners’ position is that they do not have internal capacities to do so; therefore, UN Women recommended to hire an external consultant to conduct the revision and structuring of the partners’ internal policies.

Recommendation 5 (Medium):

The Country Office to strengthen tracking, implementation and reporting on partner audit recommendations and use the audit findings to reinforce risk-based capacity assessments, especially of programme partners that have been used several times. Furthermore, improve the process for utilization of past partner audit findings and recommendations as lessons to better manage existing and future partner agreements.

C. Operations

The Operations team is led by an Operations Analyst based in Beirut. The team also includes an Administrative Assistant, HR Associate, Finance Associate, Procurement Associate, Operations Clerk, Driver and Administrative Clerk. The Country Office also has an Executive Associate and Programme Finance Associate, which were vacant at the time of audit. The office had identified the need for a Security Associate and ICT Assistant positions and was exploring options for resourcing at the time of audit.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation 9: Human resources management

A lack of diversity in desk review panels can increase the risk of bias and reduce independent oversight. IAS reviewed eight sampled consultant recruitments, all conducted via desk reviews, and noted: (a) two personnel were involved in all eight recruitments; (b) they consistently conducted desk reviews when either one was the hiring manager; and (c) a third person participated in four of the eight desk reviews.

The Country Office should expand the pool of panel members by rotating membership and including staff from different teams, functions and seniority levels. Ensuring representation from various departments will help bring diverse perspectives to the recruitment process.

IAS advises the Country Office to expand the pool of desk review panel members considering the availability and responsiveness of potential members, to avoid delays in the recruitment process as well.

Observation 10: Procurement management

Micro-canvassing procurement processes allow for a simplified selection process for purchases below US\$ 5,000. These purchases do not require a formal evaluation committee; instead, informal assessments by the requesting unit are permitted.

The audit noted five purchase orders awarded through micro-canvassing. In these cases, the bid offers received were shared with the requesting units which conducted an informal evaluation and selection process. Limited documentation of the selection processes was maintained. In IAS's view, basic documentation such as the offers/quotes

received should always be maintained. Where the lowest offer was not selected, additional records as a bid comparison summary and rationale or justification for the selection should also be maintained to ensure transparency, accountability and value for money.

The Country Office leverages long-term agreements (LTAs) held by other United Nations agencies and maintains participation-level agreements with vendors for event management services. As a good practice, it issues call-off orders on these agreements to ensure best value for money. In one case, two offers were received but the selection process was not documented, and minimum documents were not maintained. Without clear documentation, the selection process may be perceived as unfair or influenced by subjective preferences.

IAS advises the Country Office to maintain basic documentation for all procurements, including those conducted through micro-canvassing and under LTAs. Where the lowest offer is not selected, the documentation should also include details of the evaluation process, such as a bid comparison summary and the rationale and/or justification for the selection.

The Supplier Performance Management Procedure section 5.1.3 requires that the Country Office to continually monitor supplier performance for all procurement contracts and no invoices shall be paid without such performance evidence or confirmation of satisfactory performance completion. IAS reviewed 15 procurement samples, of which only four vendors received a performance evaluation. The lack of consistency in completing performance evaluations may make it difficult to identify high-performing and low-performing vendors for future procurement, which could have an impact on delays and costs. The Country Office should conduct periodic vendor performance assessments and involve key stakeholders, such as procurement teams and

end users, for comprehensive feedback. Such assessment should be proportionate to the value and complexity of the goods or services procured. For low-value or less complex procurements, a simple confirmation of satisfactory performance is sufficient, while for higher-value or more complex procurements, a complete evaluation report should be prepared.

IAS advises the Country Office to conduct a consistent process of vendor performance evaluations proportionate to the value and complexity of the goods or services procured. To facilitate this process, Quantum has embedded supplier performance evaluations into the procurement workflow, allowing business units to record the evaluations directly in the system. The Office should take advantage on this new system enhancement.

Observation 11: Travel management

The Country Office piggybacks on a Frame Agreement between UNHCR and a supplier for local transportation services. Rides from the designated service provider, are requested through a taxi application. The application displays the requester's name for signature rather than the actual passenger's name. As a result, passengers sign under the requester's name. Misaligned passenger names hinder expense tracking. Without accurate documentation, there is a risk of unauthorized trips being charged to the office.

While the Country Office informed IAS that it monitors the use of the transport services and include their names as part of the overall event packages, IAS advises the Country Office to seek ways to capture actual passenger names upon booking and sign-off on the system/application in addition to recording the requestor's name.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

Observation	Recommendation	Responsible Unit	Priority	Action Plan	Implementation date
Observation 3. Project design	Recommendation 1. The Country Office to implement stronger quality assurance processes during the design and further project approval process, including adequate results frameworks with exit and sustainability strategies, where feasible, as mandatory requirements, which should be monitored during project implementation. Project reviews, endorsements and approvals should ensure prudent calculation of projects' durations given the challenging operating environment which should be validated during inception phases.	Country Office	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Country Office will organize refreshers regarding key policies on project design, including the Planning, Monitoring and Reporting (PMR) policy, and the Appraisal and Approval of Project Documents (ProDocs) by end of Q2 2026. - Create a checklist for developing project documents and providing training on Results-Based Management, including the preparation of logical frameworks and monitoring plans for each project. 	30 June 2026
Observation 4. Project portfolio management	Recommendation 2. The Country Office to strengthen project management and oversight processes and ensure adherence to donor agreements by enhancing the monitoring and tracking of projects' progress against agreed targets and milestones; and organizing project steering committee meetings according to the frequency, participation and terms of reference agreed with donors for the timely identification of impediments.	Country Office	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Country Office will continue to conduct programme manager meetings to discuss improvements in project management and oversight processes on a regular basis. - The Country Office will develop a clear workflow for the drafting, review, and approval of donor reports by the end of Q1 2026 and circulate to all staff. 	31 March 2026
Observation 5. Programme partner management	Recommendation 3. The Country Office to enhance programme partner management. This should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring progress through the timely submission of narrative and financial progress reports. • Consistently addressing capacity assessment and Project Appraisal Committee recommendations. • Tracking and resolving the follow-up actions and recommendations from monitoring visits; and • Ensuring value for money assessments prior to increases in budgets of partner agreements. <p>As a consideration, unresolved capacity assessment and Project Appraisal Committee review recommendations/suggestions could be included in the partner agreements as part of the deliverables for the partners. Additionally, formal tracking of all actions can be performed by Programme and Project Managers throughout the duration of the partner agreements.</p>	Country Office	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project and Programme Managers to continue to coordinate closely with partners to ensure the timely submission of financial and progress reports and promptly review and validate these submissions. The Finance Associate will then ensure timely processing of payments, under the oversight of the Operations Manager. - A refresher on the standard operating procedure on the Project Appraisal Committee work modalities will be conducted by end of Q1 2026. - Submitting officers will clearly indicate the rationale behind increasing the budget of Partner Agreements in Note to the Records, highlighting value for money, for the consideration of Head of Office and Project Appraisal Committees. 	31 March 2026
Observation 6. Organizational structure	Recommendation 4. The Country Office to revise the office's organizational structure as part of the new Strategic Note development process.	Country Office	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organizational structure will be updated. 	30 June 2027* *Depending on the extension of the current Strategic Note period
Observation 8. Follow-up of oversight recommendations	Recommendation 5. The Country Office to strengthen tracking, implementation and reporting on partner audit recommendations and use the audit findings to reinforce risk-based capacity assessments, especially of programme partners that have been used several times. Furthermore, improve the process for utilization of past partner audit findings and recommendations as lessons to better manage existing and future partner agreements.	Country Office	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Country Office will conduct risk-based capacity assessments in-house as a standard practice. By Q2 2026, all relevant staff should be able to conduct risk-based capacity assessments. - The Country Office will continue to monitor and follow up on partner audit recommendations via SharePoint and other relevant mechanism. 	30 June 2026

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 the management of the audited entity/area, either during the exit meeting or through a separate memo subsequent to the fieldwork. Therefore, low priority recommendations are not included in this report.

UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead UN entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviors and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations translate progress into lasting changes. We make strides forward for women and girls in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and women, peace and security as well as humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.



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