UN WOMEN

PROJECT LIFE CYCLE GAP ASSESSMENT
AS OF OCTOBER 2019

The Independent Evaluation and Audit Services (IEAS) conducted an advisory assignment to support UN Women management's efforts in development of the Project Cycle by reviewing the gaps in project management and recommending improvements in governance, risk management and controls, drawing on both its internal audit and evaluation team experience. This brief presents the main findings, key conclusions, and recommendations.

The aim of the advisory assignment was to assist the management to develop an adequate and effective Project Cycle for the organization. The assessment consisted of a desk review of purposively selected projects from 2014 to 2018, country audits, evaluation meta-synthesis and interviews with key stakeholders.

Assessment objectives

The assignment had the following objectives:

- Identify the gaps between UN Women's current Project Cycle/management approach and internationally accepted project management principles and best practices.

- Propose feasible actions that address the identified gaps to advance the organization to a higher level of maturity.

IEAS assessment team noted that progress has already been made in the following areas:

- PSMU was in the process of engaging senior management on the draft business case for considering Project Cycle development as a stand-alone, properly resourced corporate project.

- As part of ongoing project management awareness and training across the organization, PSMU had started the process of establishing its own project management principles.

- Upstream and downstream dependencies had been articulated across existing policies. However, taking the opportunity presented by UN reform, PSMU was advocating to further align and clearly define upstream dependencies.

- Roles and responsibilities of key contributors in the Project Cycle Framework were clarified (these had not yet been formalized and shared with all stakeholders).

- Risk management had been embedded in the Project Cycle to some extent, but further work was needed on risk profiling of projects.

- Project Documents will be strengthened by introducing standard templates. These were being finalized.

Key Conclusions
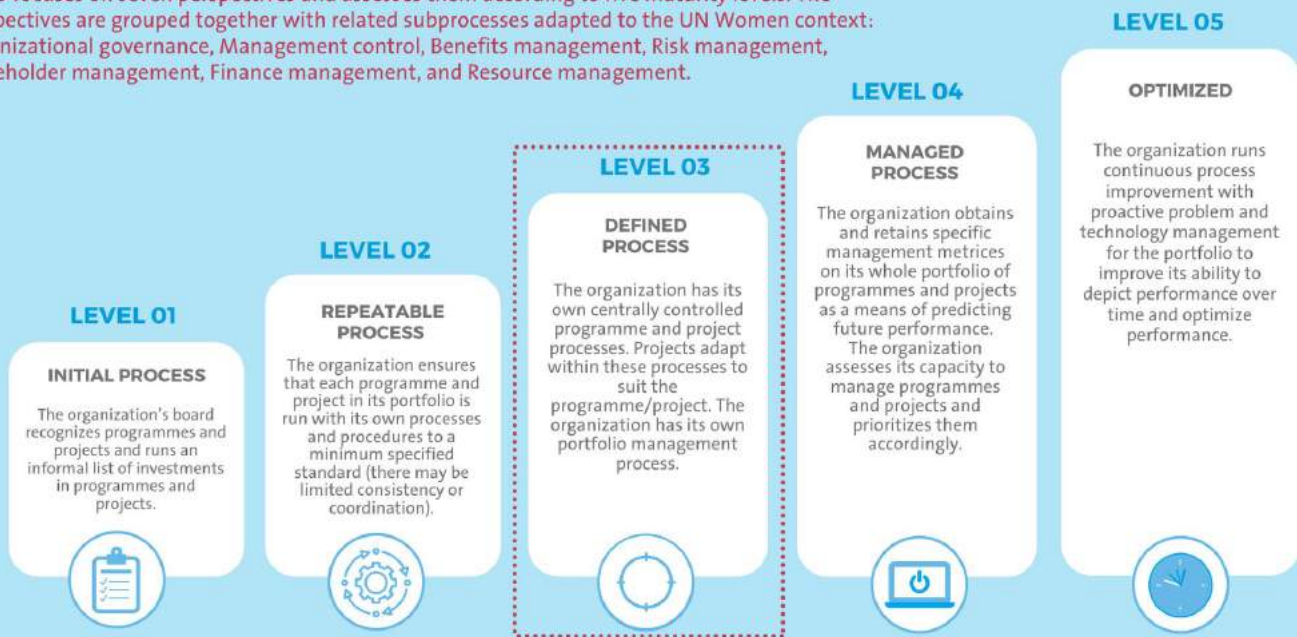
Overall, IEAS assessed that the Project Cycle discipline and framework within UN Women was between *Level 1* (awareness of the process) and *Level 2* (repeatable process) of the *Portfolio, Programme, Project Management Maturity Model (P3M3),* with some variation in maturity levels among the different elements of governance, risks and controls.

- **GOVERNANCE OF THE PROJECT CYCLE:** Opportunities for improvement related to establishing clear definitions for programmes versus projects; project types; upstream and downstream dependencies to the Project Cycle; roles and responsibilities of key internal stakeholders responsible for quality assurance during project design, formulation and implementation of project results; as well as standardizing requirements for timely and efficient project implementation and monitoring, including supporting systems, tools, manuals and embedding risk management discipline.

- **PROJECT DESIGN AND FORMULATION:** Areas to be strengthened related to ensuring a solid Theory of Change behind projects; Business Cases (Concept Notes) based on beneficiary needs assessments, anticipated benefits and possible risks; Project Documents (ProDocs) with clear arrangements for monitoring, exit strategy, environmental and social safeguarding and sustainability. The above elements should be ensured by streamlining a *quality assurance process* which starts as early as the project design phase.

- **PROJECT APPRAISAL AND APPROVAL:** This phase needs to be strengthened to ensure *process and workflows for appraisal and approval* are based on clearly defined criteria for confirming a project's technical, operational, legal and financial feasibility, project relevance and the sustainability of project results. This phase should define the *risk-profile* of each key project and consequently how it will be managed and monitored.

- **PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING:** The key element of this phase is *an integrated system* that captures implementation progress in terms of programmatic and financial delivery compared to the workplan and that supports an *effective monitoring framework* which validates the reported results via feedback from policy, programme and operation backstopping missions, donor visits, internal audits and evaluations. It is also important to maintain communication channels through reporting and feedback with external stakeholders, including adopting a *grievance and feedback mechanism* for beneficiaries.

- **PROJECT CLOSURE, EVALUATION AND POST-CLOSURE MONITORING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT:** This phase requires ensuring project results are sustainable and anticipated benefits have materialized through ex-post monitoring and evaluation. This phase provides good opportunities to collect best practices from both challenging and successful projects for corporate Knowledge Management.

MATURITY LEVEL

For this assessment, IEAS used Portfolio, Programme, Project Management Maturity Model (P3M3) P3M3 focuses on seven perspectives and assesses them according to five maturity levels. The perspectives are grouped together with related subprocesses adapted to the UN Women context: Organizational governance, Management control, Benefits management, Risk management, Stakeholder management, Finance management, and Resource management.

LEVEL 01

INITIAL PROCESS

The organization's board recognizes programmes and projects and runs an informal list of investments in programmes and projects.

LEVEL 02

REPEATABLE PROCESS

The organization ensures that each programme and project in its portfolio is run with its own processes and procedures to a minimum specified standard (there may be limited consistency or coordination).

LEVEL 03

DEFINED PROCESS

The organization has its own centrally controlled programme and project processes. Projects adapt within these processes to suit the programme/project. The organization has its own portfolio management process.

LEVEL 04

MANAGED PROCESS

The organization obtains and retains specific management metrics on its whole portfolio of programmes and projects as a means of predicting future performance. The organization assesses its capacity to manage programmes and projects and prioritizes them accordingly.

LEVEL 05

OPTIMIZED

The organization runs continuous process improvement with proactive problem and technology management for the portfolio to improve its ability to depict performance over time and optimize performance.

Way Forward

The mid-term goal for UN Women should be to achieve *Level 3* ("Defined Process") of the P3M3 uniformly across all components of the Project Cycle. *Level 3* ensures that "UN Women has its own centrally controlled programme and project processes and projects flex within these processes to suit the programme / project and the organisation has its own portfolio management process".

The action plan includes several proposals for advancing the organization to *Level 3*. It requires action to be taken by several divisions and sections. Together, these proposals provide a framework for improving the Project Cycle to deliver sustainable and inclusive results in the most effective and efficient way to enhance organizational impact in alignment with the broader UN context.

PROPOSAL 1:

Creating a stand-alone corporate project to develop UN Women's Project Cycle. Such a project would communicate a vision for the Project Cycle Framework within which to establish Project Cycle governance and accountability; project management principles, systems and definitions, embedding risk and knowledge management and a revamp of criteria for approval, funding allocations and quality assurance.

PROPOSAL 2:

Developing a comprehensive and accessible project management and monitoring system to implement the final Project Cycle Framework and project principles that provides up-to-date information on the field programme to all UN Women taff and utilizes definitions of projects and their results and resource frameworks.

PROPOSAL 3:

Strengthened and more efficient project quality assurance processes, especially related to formulation, design, appraisal and approval processes by adopting a two-phased approach that involves Concept Note development and approval before moving forward to develop a Project Document. Additional formulation support may be required to ensure quality, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and improved targeting and identification of beneficiaries.

PROPOSAL 4:

Improving project implementation, monitoring and reporting through the inclusion of a mandatory inception phase, stakeholder communication strategies, grievance mechanisms and monitoring frameworks that track progress towards outcomes and allow for input to UN system-wide reporting as well as standard reporting templates within UN Women.

PROPOSAL 5:

Strengthening project reporting with templates focused on results progress and challenges rather than activities, to be validated by a monitoring function and including feedback from participating stakeholders. This would support knowledge management, communications and advocacy for UN Women's mandate and sustainability of long-term results.