This article examines the experience with the new Country Portfolio Evaluation (CPE) approach that UN Women (UNW) introduced in 2015 to assess the contributions to gender equality results at country level. It explains the key elements of the theory-based CPE design and methodology, which focuses on a participatory process geared towards learning and strengthening evaluative thinking amongst UNW staff and partners. The article confirms the importance of evaluation governance arrangements and the value of a standardized evaluation approach for improving evaluation quality and for using the evaluation process as an opportunity to strengthen capacity for gender-responsive evaluation.
**Introduction**

Since their introduction in 2015, UN Women has conducted nine Country Portfolio Evaluations (CPEs) in the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region: Mozambique, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Malawi, Sudan, South Sudan, Rwanda, Kenya and Burundi. The article explores how far the CPE evaluation approach has been effective with regard to the following two dimensions: (a) assessing gender equality results at country level and (b) the experience with applying the CPE approach and methodology in the different countries.

**Gender-Responsive Evaluation in UN Women**

**Characteristics of a Gender-Responsive Evaluation**

The UNW Evaluation Policy (2012) lays out the purpose of evaluation in UN-Women and the principles and standards that guide its practice. The UNW evaluation principles are: National ownership and leadership; UN system coordination and coherence; Innovation; Fair power relations and empowerment; Participation and inclusion; Independence and impartiality; Transparency; Quality and credibility; Intentionality and use of evaluation; and Ethics.

According to UN Women, a gender responsive evaluation includes looking at two dimensions: (1) What is evaluated. This is done through the assessment of results and power relations, which may give rise to change in inequities, discrimination and unfair power relations as result from an intervention; (2) How the evaluation is being undertaken. This requires that the evaluation process is inclusive, participatory and respectful to both rights holders and duty-bearers.

The application of these principles requires:

1. the application of an analytical framework that helps to understand the underlying structural and cultural barriers to achieve gender equality and the realization of human rights, fair power relations and access to resources and agency;

2. the development of gender-responsive evaluation questions and indicators that go beyond sex disaggregation and the use of gender-responsive data collection techniques i.e. mixed methods;

3. an evaluation team that has experience with human rights and gender analysis, is gender balanced and possesses experience in the specific cultural context;

4. evaluation governance and management arrangements that allow for effective stakeholder engagement during the evaluation process.

**Country Portfolio Evaluation Design and Methodology**

CPEs are designed to ensure both the accountability of UNW to donors and partners and to facilitate learning about what works in different contexts to improve the performance of UNW interventions over time. As explained in the UNW Guidance on Country Portfolio Evaluations (2016), CPEs assess all aspects of the UNW triple mandate that is (a) Policy and normative work; (b) Coordination of UN inter-agency work on gender equality and (c) Programmatic work to advance gender equality. UNW Strategic Notes (SNs) are the multi-year programming...
Assessing Gender Equality Results at Country Level: The Experience with UN Women Country Portfolio Evaluations in Eastern and Southern Africa
instruments at country level which usually cover a four-year cycle aligned with the respective country-level UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). CPEs evaluate SN’s achievements during this four-year period and consider both developmental and organizational results. CPEs are conducted in the last year of a given UNW SN to inform the next programme cycle. They are focused on the medium to higher level results, beyond project level evaluations.

CPEs follow a standardized evaluation approach and management arrangements while being flexible enough to adjust to specific contexts. They are based on a default evaluation design and methodology that calls for the explicit use of Theory of Change, a partnership analysis and a contribution analysis.

The scope of the CPE analysis includes both the assessment of organizational effectiveness results and development results. The underlying question is: ‘How well is UNW strategically positioned at country level to create results for gender equality and women’s empowerment?’. The evaluation methodology utilizes elements from the Outcome Mapping approach (2001) taking into account that UNW does not produce results directly but through partners. The analysis of UNW partnerships at country level hence becomes essential for understanding how change happens. The combined evidence on organizational effectiveness, relationships with partners and development results help assess to what extent the original Theory of Change for the UNW programme has worked in a given country. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The UNW Guidance on Country Portfolio Evaluations (2016) provides a list of 37 generic evaluation questions structured under the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, human rights and gender equality.

A consultative process is applied in the beginning of the evaluation process to contextualize and filter this initial set of generic questions. Following this, the evaluation team applies a reduced number of questions during primary data collection for an in-depth analysis of fewer selected topics. The UNW Guidance on CPEs also provides templates for the evaluation TOR, evaluation inception report, evaluation report as well as analysis tools i.e. tables for the evidence and contribution analysis.

**CPE Governance and Participatory Approach**

CPEs are co-managed by the respective Country Office and the UNW Independent Evaluation Service (IES) through the Regional Evaluation Specialist (RES) who is based in the Regional Office. The RES co-manages the evaluation process, provides methodological guidance, participates in data collection and quality assures the CPE during all stages of the evaluation. To ensure independence the RES can approve evaluation products including the final evaluation report without approval of the Country Representative.

There is strong emphasis on a participatory evaluation approach through the purposeful engagement of stakeholders from the beginning of the evaluation process. The evaluation reference group is key in this and serves as sounding board for feedback during all stages of the evaluation process. Its members include UNW staff, national governments and civil society representatives, UN Country Team representatives, donors and other relevant partners. The evaluation inception workshop at the beginning and the debriefing workshop at the end of the evaluation mission provide important opportunities for the reference group to reconstruct the UNW Theory of Change for achieving Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) results at country level and validate the initial evaluation findings.

**Findings**

**Understanding Gender Equality Results, Organizational Effectiveness and Partnerships**

This section illustrates some key findings from CPEs carried out in ESA region between 2015 and 2018. They are structured around the key questions underlying the CPE design explained above.

**Contribution of UNW interventions to gender equality results at country level**

The CPEs in several countries (e.g. Mozambique 2015, Ethiopia 2016, Kenya 2018) have found that the UNW portfolio has contributed to addressing the root causes of gender inequality and changing the dynamics of power relations. However, gaps remain to achieve long-term results because root causes are intrinsically related to social norms and contextual factors e.g. cultural barriers and patriarchy. The analysis of the Theory of Change in the Rwanda CPE (2018), for example, revealed the importance of involving men for addressing attitudes and behaviors in the family milieu. It also showed that UNW contributions are limited by the length of engagements in the context of a 4-year programming cycle. In countries such as Ethiopia (2016), Tanzania (2016), South Sudan (2018) and Kenya (2018), CPEs have confirmed the role of UNW in providing effective leadership for positioning gender issues at national level and amongst UN agencies, coordinating gender work and contributing to a stronger GEWE enabling environment. However, efforts are sometimes constrained by limited partner capacity in terms of human and financial resources and a weak gender machinery which is likely to affect the sustainability of results.
UNW organizational effectiveness for delivering results

Looking at the question of organizational effectiveness, CPEs in Ethiopia (2016), Tanzania (2016) and Rwanda (2018) have established that despite small teams, the offices managed to achieve substantive results through deploying competent and motivated staff. Several offices, however, are yet to develop or strengthen their Results-based Management (RBM), M&E and Knowledge management systems. This has implications not only on donor and results reporting but also on the ability to document lessons on ‘what works’ and establish UNW as knowledge hub at country level for issues around GEWE. CPEs in Mozambique (2015), South Sudan (2018) and Rwanda (2018) have identified limited financial resources and/or a single-source funding base with dependency on a specific donor as constraints to a long-term engagement with partners and the full realization of GEWE results.

Role of UNW partnerships for delivering results

CPEs have confirmed that UNW has been effective in creating a wide range of strategic partnerships with UN agencies, the Government, civil society organizations (CSOs), private sector, universities etc. For example, in Ethiopia (2016), Tanzania (2016) and South Sudan (2018) UNW has been strong in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between partners and bringing them together around GEWE related topics. The multi-pronged partnership approach has been a significant enabler of results for gender equality through pulling together diverse and often limited resources and leveraging them for better outreach and impact. Effective relationships with strong partners were also regarded as key factors for sustainability to continue GEWE initiatives in the country beyond UNW support. At the same time the CPEs illustrated potential risks with regard to engaging with a large number of partners. First, the transaction cost for managing partnerships can become very high for UNW and with limited staff available UNW may spread itself too thin, as illustrated in Tanzania (2016) and Kenya (2018). Second, national and local partners sometimes lack institutional, human and financial capacity. In the context of short UNW funding cycles there may be limited scope for UNW to effectively strengthen their capacity. In such cases CPEs have called for a more rigorous partnership review to select fewer partners who can be instrumental in delivering long-term GEWE results at country level.

Experience with applying the CPE approach and methodology

Participatory evaluation approach

The number of CPE reference group members varied between 10 to 30 members and is composed of representatives from government, civil society, UN agencies, donors etc. The experience with CPEs in ESA region confirms the importance of an effective evaluation reference group during the evaluation process. Evaluation teams involved in the CPEs highly appreciated the evaluation reference group as a sounding board and key resource for information during the evaluation process. The engagement of the evaluation reference group was essential to fill data gaps during the evaluation. It facilitated the
understanding of partner relationships and dynamics and ensured that evaluation recommendations were relevant, grounded in reality, feasible and useful.

**Evaluation governance and evaluation team composition**

The methodological advice provided by the UNW Regional Evaluation Specialist (RES) and his/her participation in the evaluation data collection during the field mission proved to be essential to guide the evaluation team and ensure the consistent application of key elements of the CPE methodology. Experience shows that evaluation consultants are not necessarily familiar with applying Theory of Change and a gender analysis in an evaluation that assesses different dimensions of policy, coordination and programmatic work, as well as organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Feedback from CPE evaluation teams indicates that the RES helped to understand the building blocks of the CPE methodology and ‘take away the fear’ that might result from just reading the CPE guidance. In addition, and given CPEs are commissioned and funded by UNW Country Offices, the RES played a key role in safeguarding the independence of the evaluation process.

**Use of Theory of Change in the evaluation**

The default agenda for the participatory evaluation inception workshop includes a group discussion on indicators for effective partnerships and the validation of the reconstructed UNW Theory of Change including its assumptions. This discussion with partners was considered very useful for a critical reflection amongst partners on how change happens for achieving GEWE results at country level. The analysis around the Theory of Change helped to understand the key pillars for an effective GEWE programme at country level. It also helped the evaluation team to develop a relevant analytical framework for assessing progress in the different areas of the UNW triple mandate that includes normative, coordination and programmatic work.

The refined Theory of Change is used again in the debriefing workshop as framework to present initial evaluation findings and validate them with partners. The debriefing workshop also includes a participatory group discussion on potential recommendations for UNW and partners to improve future GEWE initiatives at country level.

Feedback from the different CPEs on this participatory process indicates that it is perceived as very effective for creating ownership of evaluation findings and recommendations. In addition, and very importantly, it helps to strengthen critical and evaluative thinking amongst UNW staff and partners. This demonstrates the potential value of the CPE approach for capacity building on gender-responsive evaluation both within the organization and amongst partners. The co-management arrangement of CPEs by the Country Office and the UNW IES through the RES allowed for a collaborative learning process as opposed to a ‘top-down’ and less participatory evaluation process.

Experience shows that a few hours discussion on the Theory of Change during the evaluation inception workshop was not always sufficient to comprehensively unpack the UNW Theory of Change and its assumptions. CPE evaluation teams have indicated that more time to validate the UNW Theory of Change, i.e. at least one full working day, should be factored in at the beginning of the evaluation mission for a participatory reflection exercise with UNW staff and partners. The process requires an evaluation team with explicit expertise in Theory of Change and with strong facilitation skills.

**Evaluation methodology and quality of the CPE**

Feedback from the evaluation teams involved in CPEs indicates that the templates for the evaluation
Assessing Gender Equality Results at Country Level: The Experience with UN Women Country Portfolio Evaluations in Eastern and Southern Africa
inception report and evaluation report in the CPE guidance are very useful to structure the thinking and overall approach of the evaluation. Evaluation consultants also pointed out that their exposure to the CPE methodology allowed them to learn and use some of the CPE analysis tools such as evidence and contribution analysis tables in other non-UNW evaluation assignments.

In terms of CPE quality, all UNW completed evaluation reports go through an external evaluation quality assessment based on the GERAAS (Global Evaluation Report Assessment and Analysis System) methodology (2015). This results in a rating on a scale from “Unsatisfactory” to “Very good”. Amongst the nine completed CPEs in the ESA region, three were rated “Very Good” and two were rated “Good”. The external quality assessment for recent CPEs will only be available in Q1 of 2019. In terms of evaluation utilization, UNW Strategic Note documents show that the evidence from CPE recommendations and lessons has systematically been used to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quality Rating</th>
<th>Use of CPE</th>
<th>Highlights from GERAAS assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>SN 2016-20</td>
<td>A CPE report with a clear methodology and evaluation framework that follows a coherent logic and rigorous data analysis. The section on Conclusions can be improved through providing deeper insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>SN 2017-20</td>
<td>A very good quality report that can be used with confidence. Unexpected findings should be more clearly identified and the Executive Summary needs to be further synthetized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>SN 2017-21</td>
<td>A good quality report which however has weaknesses in presenting the Theory of Change, and quantitative methods are not included in the CPE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>SN 2018-21</td>
<td>A strong report that is technically complete. The CPE could provide more information on how evaluation ethics standards were implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>SN 2018-21</td>
<td>A CPE report with a good quality theory-based and participatory methodology. It would be useful to complete the information in the Annexes and in the Evaluation Matrix.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>SN 2019-21</td>
<td>Forthcoming in Q1 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>SN 2019-23</td>
<td>Forthcoming in Q1 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SN 2019-22</td>
<td>Forthcoming in Q1 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SN 2019-23</td>
<td>Forthcoming in Q1 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNW GATE system
inform UNW interventions in the subsequent programming cycle.

**Conclusions**

The CPEs carried out by UN Women in the ESA region since 2015 demonstrate the value of the CPE approach for analyzing both the contribution of UNW to gender equality results at country level as well as the challenges related to changing social norms and cultural barriers that hinder progress on GEWE. The CPEs also confirm the validity of the analytical framework that systematically looks at dimensions of organizational effectiveness and the role of partnerships for delivering GEWE results. Assessing changes in gender and power relations can be challenging and the application of a Theory of Change approach has proven useful to understand how behavioral change happens. The CPE methodology can be considered innovative as it integrates different analytical frameworks and tools in a comprehensive and standardized evaluation approach. In terms of timing and content, all CPEs analyzed have proved valuable for providing evidence and lessons for the next UNW programming cycle.

The experience with CPEs in ESA region ascertains that evaluation governance arrangements have important implications on evaluation quality, levels of stakeholder engagement and the potential use of the evaluation findings. It also shows that the evaluation process is as important as the final evaluation product. The CPE approach, which calls for an active engagement of evaluation stakeholders, has shown the potential of using the evaluation process as a learning opportunity. For example, the participatory reflection on the Theory of Change during the inception and debriefing workshops has proven effective for introducing evaluative thinking amongst UNW staff and partners, which ultimately should contribute to strengthening national evaluation capacity. The active engagement of national governments and civil society representatives in the evaluation process is hence an important opportunity to strengthen national ownership, demand and capacity for gender-responsive evaluation. Finally, the theory-based evaluation design is useful for broadening the evaluation analysis and explicitly looking at unexpected results and medium to long-term changes instead of short-term changes only.

However, to add value the CPE approach requires considerable evaluation team expertise combining experience and familiarity in gender analysis, Theory of Change, organizational assessment etc. Default evaluation tools provided in the CPE guidance, such as the tables for the evidence and contribution analysis, undoubtedly help to enhance the methodological and analytical rigor of CPEs. The use of a standardized evaluation approach and templates facilitates comparison across evaluation reports. The fact that elements of the CPE methodology are being replicated by evaluation consultants is very encouraging. This finding and the positive external quality ratings confirm the overall credibility and utility of the CPE methodology for assessing GEWE results at country level.

---

**Endnotes**

1. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in this paper lies entirely with the author. The content of this paper does not reflect the official opinion and position of UN Women.

2. Gender machinery is the institutional governmental structure set up to promote women’s advancement.
References


Caspar Merkle works as Regional Evaluation Specialist with the UN Women Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa. He brings 16+ years of experience in Strategic Planning, RBM and M&E across different UN agencies including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Volunteers (UNV). Current responsibilities include the strengthening of decentralized evaluation systems, leading M&E capacity building initiatives for staff and partners and UN coordination on gender-responsive evaluation methods and processes. Caspar has published various articles on experiences with developing evaluation systems, enhancing evaluation quality and on measuring the contribution of volunteering to development. He has a background in Geography with specialization in Development Studies and Demography.