Executive Board of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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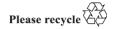Item 4 of the provisional agenda
Evaluation

Effectiveness and Efficiency Assessment of UN-Women Flagship Programme Initiatives and Thematic Priorities of the Strategic Plan 2018–2021

Summary

This report summarizes the Effectiveness and Efficiency Assessment of UN-Women Flagship Programme Initiatives and Thematic Priorities of the Strategic Plan 2018–2021.

The purpose of the evaluation was to: i) analyse whether and how the Flagship Programme Initiatives (FPIs) have achieved their stated intent and objectives; ii) inform organizational learning and accountability for past performance; iii) provide useful lessons to feed into future corporate programming and serve as key inputs to the development of the UN-Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

The evaluation is intended to be used primarily by the UN-Women Executive Board, senior management and staff at headquarters and at the regional and country levels.

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I. Background

1. The UN-Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) conducts corporate evaluations to assess UN-Women's contribution to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE). In fulfilment of the UN-Women corporate evaluation plan, this evaluation focused on the programmatic effectiveness and efficiency of the UN-Women Flagship Programme Initiatives (FPIs) and the Thematic Priorities (TPs) of the Strategic Plan 2018–2021. The IES carried out the evaluation over a six-month period from April 2020 to October 2020, involving a wide range of stakeholders from UN-Women headquarters and regional and country offices, as well as external partners.

2. The FPIs were developed in 2015 with the goal of creating high-impact, scalable initiatives that would build upon and supplement UN-Women's ongoing programmatic work. The FPIs represent both operational and programming instruments, as well as a road map for the implementation of the Strategic Plan's TPs. The FPIs were envisioned as a new programming modality that would enable UN-Women to shift from numerous, small-scale and fragmented interventions towards strategic, multi-year engagement frameworks delivered coherently across regions and countries, and at the scale needed to achieve transformational changes in GEWE. The FPIs also aimed to further boost UN-Women's resource mobilization and strategic partnership endeavours.

3. While undertaking this evaluation, the evaluation team remained conscious that UN-Women is a relatively young entity undergoing a process of change that is typical of a developing and maturing organization. When initially launched, UN-Women intended the FPIs to serve as a programming modality that would help define its position within the larger United Nations system and focus its work on impactful, scalable initiatives with greater results effectiveness. In this regard, the FPIs can be seen as UN-Women's first corporate endeavour to test new programmatic approaches and strengthen the organization's strategic orientation towards a new generation of larger-scale, better-funded projects and programmes that could lead to the desired levels of impact.

II. Purpose and objectives of the evaluation

4. The purpose of this evaluation was to:

(a) analyse whether and how the FPIs achieved their stated intent to ensure that UN-Women fully leverages its triple mandate in an integrated manner so that it can become 'fitter and funded for purpose' to deliver against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the ideals of United Nations system reform

(b) inform organizational learning and accountability for past performance

(c) provide useful lessons to feed into future corporate programming and practice and serve as key inputs to the development of the UN-Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

5. Specifically, the evaluation answers these five overarching questions:

(a) To what extent have the FPI and TP approaches improved and focused strategic programming?

(b)   To what extent has the FPI approach strengthened governance, quality assurance, monitoring and knowledge management?

(c)   To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced partner engagement around common GEWE goals?

(d)   To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced collaboration and system-wide coordination on GEWE among United Nations organizations at the global and country levels?

(e)   To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced resource mobilization and donor relations, and provided flexible and predictable funding?

6.   The evaluation is intended to be used primarily by the UN-Women Executive Board, senior management, policy thematic divisions and other headquarters divisions that support different aspects of UN-Women's programme implementation at the global, regional and country levels, as well as staff at headquarters and regional and country offices.

III.   Evaluation approach and methodology

7.   To analyse the FPIs from an organizational effectiveness and efficiency perspective, the evaluation brought together models and methodologies for organizational effectiveness assessment, theory-based evaluation approaches and appreciative inquiry. A multidisciplinary team comprising evaluators and an auditor from the Internal Audit Service (IAS) conducted the evaluation. Multiple streams of information were used to provide and validate evidence against the evaluation questions and to reach conclusions. The evaluation team consulted over 268 internal and external stakeholders who were involved in the conceptualization, development and implementation of the FPIs. The interviews were supplemented with e-surveys of 156 UN-Women staff, five focus group discussions, and an extensive desk review of UN-Women management systems and portfolio analysis.

8.   The evaluation adhered to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) ethics and standards and applied gender and human rights principles. The evaluation approach was adapted to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and used appropriate remote data-collection methods. The evaluation also involved five in-depth case studies[1] on FPIs that were considered to have an appropriate scale and maturation, and from which useful lessons could be learned.

IV.   Key conclusions

Conclusion 1: The FPIs were a much needed and significant corporate initiative to strengthen UN-Women's programmatic focus, thematic coherence and operational effectiveness to attain the Strategic Plan's GEWE-related objectives. The FPIs represented a way to consolidate UN-Women's previously fragmented

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[1] Making Every Woman and Girl Count; Climate-Resilient Agriculture; Women's Access to Justice; Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces; and Women's Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection (LEAP) in Crisis Response.

and subscale programming using coherent approaches that could be scaled up and combined for corporate results monitoring and reporting.

9.   The FPIs were introduced when UN-Women was a newly structured entity, and followed a long tradition of managing and supporting numerous small initiatives, most of which were implemented by civil society partners. The FPIs represented UN-Women's first corporate endeavour to test transformative programmatic approaches and provide opportunities for corporate learning and adaptation. Nonetheless, the success of the 12 FPIs varied considerably: those developed based on pre-existing global programmes tended to thrive organically, whereas those that were newly developed struggled to take off quickly and gain traction.

Conclusion 2: FPI implementation during 2016–2017 and under the Strategic Plan 2018–2021 revealed successes and challenges, as well as results-based adjustments and adaptations. However, as the FPIs represented UN-Women's first experiences with transformative programming, both successes and challenges hold valuable lessons in programming and change management for the next Strategic Plan.

10.   The FPIs contributed to a greater awareness and adoption of focused and strategic programming approaches within UN-Women across all areas of work. They provided a coherent framework to operationalize the organization's five Strategic Plan outcomes across regions, and to package and brand UN-Women programming in ways that could be consistently marketed and communicated to donors and other stakeholders.

11.   While there was a fair degree of consensus that the FPIs have had modest success as programmes, they have had definite success as programming structures to guide UN-Women field programmes.

       (a) FPI elements that delivered well: organization-wide shifts in mindset towards programmatic approaches; unifying theories of change; and global and regional policy support mechanisms.

       (b) FPI elements that were less satisfactory: pooled funding and resource mobilization; inadequate systematic higher-level review and guidance mechanisms to ensure some level of standardization and use of good practices and processes; monitoring of FPI operational efficiencies; and results from economies of scale.

Conclusion 3: The FPIs were highly successful in shifting the corporate mindset towards programmatic approaches, and also demonstrated the scalable impact of focused and standard approaches unified by clear theories of change and facilitated by global and regional policy support. Generally, these approaches are now used in UN-Women's programming.

12.   The FPIs' singular biggest achievement has been their success in bringing about an organization-wide appreciation of the necessity and benefits of more focused and impactful programming through consolidation. This represented a big shift from a tradition of fragmented and somewhat disjointed and subscale interventions to more strategic, medium-term results-focused approaches and programme instruments, underpinned by clear theories of change that enabled standard and scalable (yet customizable) implementation. These elements are now applied in programming irrespective of a programme's classification as an FPI or otherwise. Strong support from headquarters and regional policy support were crucial in designing the FPIs to ensure coherent and consistent implementation, as was the sharing of knowledge and

good practices. FPIs that were successful in mobilizing resources for global and regional policy support benefited significantly from these components, which enabled effective delivery at scale and at the global level. Donor advocacy and recognition of the effectiveness of such mechanisms played a major role in securing predictable funding for global and/or regional specialists in FPIs such as Making Every Woman and Girl Count (global, regional and country levels), Climate-Resilient Agriculture (two regions) and Women's Access to Justice (one region).

13.   However, there was ambiguity over the FPIs as distinct programming instruments in the Strategic Plan 2018–2021. Since 2018, the FPI concept has been somewhat quiescent, with several FPIs lacking dedicated programmatic infrastructure to implement their transformative goals. This was partly due to waning support, as well as a degree of disillusionment resulting from the failure to secure pooled funding and significant resources for most FPIs, which belied the initial attractiveness of the FPI approach. There was also considerable variance in the success of the 12 FPIs, partly reflecting the inconsistent approaches deployed for their operationalization. Some stakeholders consulted as part of this evaluation also argued that 12 different FPIs was too large a number for a small organization such as UN-Women, paired with the expectation of pooled funding for each of them.

Conclusion 4: Elements that were weak and constrained several FPIs from performing to their potential included: quality assurance mechanisms; resource mobilization; financial tracking and reporting; corporate performance monitoring against FPI differentiator metrics; and initiatives around structured partnerships.

14.   Since 2016, multi-year funding and larger-value donor agreements for UN-Women have generally increased. Although not entirely attributable to the FPIs, this trend correlates to the narratives and campaigns for multi-year and larger funding commitments espoused and promoted by FPIs and Strategic Notes. However, no FPIs were able to mobilize pooled funding, and most were unsuccessful in mobilizing substantial resources.

15.   Factors affecting corporate resource mobilization for FPIs included: inadequate investment in formulation phases to pre-test the acceptability of FPI resource mobilization modalities and funding instruments; a lack of adequate donor understanding of the FPI architecture and additionality over pre-existing donor modalities, including already existing pooled trust funds; and the overwhelming prospect of donor engagement on 12 additional instruments, which represented new transaction costs for donors.

Conclusion 5: UN-Women has developed a cogent approach of collaborative and comparative advantage in delivering its mandate over the years. However, several factors shape the organization's strategic position for United Nations system coordination, such as the extent to which the United Nations and other partners recognize its added value as well as demand for its thematic United Nations coordination efforts.

16.   Although the extent and depth of partnerships with different stakeholders varied across the FPIs, the evidence broadly shows that individual FPIs established strategic partnerships at the country level. Nonetheless, United Nations system coordination on GEWE faced specific challenges that were rooted outside FPI engagements, and there was no clear strategy to support the FPIs' development into the partnership or

coordination vehicles they were primarily set up to become. Evidence of inter-agency coordination in relation to the FPIs was mostly anecdotal.

17.   Inhibiting factors for United Nations coordination included: overlapping mandates and programming around GEWE; FPIs being considered as UN-Women signature offerings rather than as multi-agency partnership vehicles; some organizations perceiving the FPIs as forays into their established areas of work; and issues of acceptability over the system-wide coordination of GEWE (especially at the country level) being bestowed on UN-Women.

18.   Inhibiting factors for partnership included: the inability to secure buy-in for the FPIs from the beginning and to build structured partnerships based on theories of change; the FPIs being considered and implemented as 'UN-Women' initiatives rather than as partnership vehicles.

Conclusion 6: The FPIs were not stand-alone, independent modalities and their success largely depended on the overall enabling environment and business processes. Although much emphasis was placed on substantive programmatic aspects of the FPIs, a similar degree of emphasis was not placed on corporate-level monitoring of their performance and in turn on drawing lessons and adapting from implementation experiences. Clear accountabilities for business processes and overall leadership of the FPIs as corporate programming instruments were not established.

19.   Although the FPIs were a major corporate initiative, most were implemented in a stand-alone and uncoordinated manner, with limited external stakeholder engagement, appropriate governance, risk assessments (including pilot testing) and mitigation plans. Corporate mechanisms were not sufficiently followed up, especially since 2018, to ensure uniform operationalization, accountability, ownership and authority for quality assurance and thematic coherence.

20.   Despite acknowledgement of the potential for cross-learning, aggregation and synthesis of results, no systematic knowledge management strategies were established for the FPIs. However, individual FPIs developed their own knowledge-sharing mechanisms and communities of practice with their available resources.

21.   Other key factors affecting the operationalization of the FPIs included: insufficient higher-level direction and monitoring of the FPIs' efficacy as a leading corporate modality; capacity and skills gaps in programme management; limited success for resource mobilization and inadequate processes and controls to ensure complete and accurate recording of FPI funds for management purposes; the lack of dedicated operational performance indicators and inadequate knowledge management and learning/feedback loops to test and improve the cost-effectiveness of individual FPIs, and the FPI modality as a whole.

Conclusion 7: The performance, results and early impacts of the FPIs varied greatly. However, the common success factors across the FPIs validated their logic and rationale of coherence and standardization, programming and scale, predictable funding, strong partnerships and effective monitoring and knowledge management.

22.   Some individual FPIs, such as Making Every Woman and Girl Count, Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces, and Women's LEAP in Crisis Response, posted consistently good results across regions, while others such as Climate-Resilient Agriculture and Women's Access to Justice had results in fewer regions. The five case

studies identified a number of common factors explaining their success or challenges, including: coherence through standard (yet customizable) approaches; predictable funding thanks to strong alignment with donor priorities; strong partnerships; programming at scale; and effective monitoring and knowledge management systems. These are strong endorsements of the strength and potential of FPIs as a corporate programming modality to be mainstreamed across regions and thematic areas. In addition to common factors previously cited, individual FPIs had specific elements that contributed to their success, which could be replicated or adapted to other FPIs.

Conclusion 8: In summation, the FPIs were a bold and ambitious corporate initiative and carried risks associated with any major corporate change endeavour. The FPI intervention logic remains highly relevant to UN-Women's Strategic Plans, and their experiences provide valuable lessons for the continuation and reinforcement of programmatic approaches.

23.   UN-Women has made significant corporate investment in embedding the FPIs into its corporate culture, with some essential adjustments based on lessons learned over the past four years of implementation. The FPIs hold tangible value as a corporate programming instrument for scalable impact, which are becoming even more necessary for all development actors.

V.   Key recommendations

Recommendation 1: UN-Women should explicitly state its thematic programme focus and field delivery footprint, and reaffirm 'second-generation FPIs' as a programmatic instrument based on field capacity and resource mobilization targets in its Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

24.   UN-Women's revenue levels and programmatic reach continue to necessitate effective programming instruments and modalities in order to deliver scalable impacts and enhance operational efficiencies. The lessons learned from implementing the FPIs could be used to design improved second-generation FPIs with better features and controls to serve the aims and targets of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025. UN-Women therefore needs to explicitly reaffirm the importance of programmatic approaches in its Strategic Plan and define appropriate corporate programming instruments, which could either remain as FPIs or adopt an alternative name. In this regard, due attention could be given to optimize (reduce) the FPIs to a more pragmatic and transaction-light number that are grounded in an evidence-based theory of action to ensure that programming is impactful and effective, with high-quality results measured and reported in major areas of work.

Recommendation 2: UN-Women senior leadership should drive accountability for implementation of agreed corporate programmatic approaches and supporting business processes by clearly anchoring oversight and supervisory responsibilities for the next generation of FPIs in the Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division (PPID).

25.   To ensure that headquarters and field offices communicate and coordinate on corporate programming modalities, UN-Women should strengthen management arrangements, including the use of effective matrix management elements to enhance programme delivery, knowledge management and results accountability for strategic programmes. The matrix structure should clarify accountability, oversight and

supervisory responsibilities at the global, regional and country levels. This would include the responsibilities for supervision and monitoring of the next generation of FPIs according to established indicators (see Recommendation 5).

Recommendation 3: UN-Women should clearly define how it will leverage its United Nations coordination mandate and United Nations reform to amplify GEWE results through its programming and establish its own programmatic footprint, to ensure that UN-Women is recognized as the key thematic programme leader.

26.   The high priority given to GEWE among all United Nations organizations and the increasing emphasis of United Nations system-wide approaches reinforce the need for structured partnerships and joint programming modalities to attain global GEWE outcomes. Notwithstanding past challenges in structuring corporate partnerships with other organizations, UN-Women should embark on early engagement with both donors and other United Nations organizations to explore and secure consensus over structured partnerships for the key GEWE pillars/impact areas foreseen in the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 and common to most organizations. This should include exploring common results frameworks, governance structures, resource mobilization plans and joint programming modalities, at least with organizations that have already worked with UN-Women on the FPIs, albeit in an ad hoc or unstructured manner. Partner organizations would need to be highlighted in such arrangements, which should not be perceived or overly identified as UN-Women-led and thus undermine common objectives.

Recommendation 4: Develop global, regional and country-level second-generation FPI modalities for each of the planned GEWE pillars, with theories of change and analysis of actions that link normative support, United Nations system coordination, and operational activities of UN-Women's integrated mandate. Actions and results should also be differentiated at the global, regional and country levels.

27.   Building on the lessons learned from the FPIs, it would be beneficial to further delineate the criteria for global, regional and country-level modalities and how they are integrated, interlinked and coordinated. Having distinct templates for the three levels would enable differentiated branding, communications and resource mobilization strategies. While taking into consideration local and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) priorities, country Strategic Notes could be structured around the proposed modalities and templates. Recognizing that it may not always be possible to implement the recommended corporate programming modalities, UN-Women should designate programmes as 'second-generation FPIs' based on clear criteria and with specific authority and accountability. Given the need for corporate monitoring of the modalities as a whole, a programme coordination unit should be established at headquarters to monitor various progress of the second-generation FPI programme architecture. This unit should include positions for lead roles in five areas: United Nations engagement coordination in relation to programmes; donor relations; results monitoring and analysis; knowledge management; and communications.

Recommendation 5: UN-Women should establish clear responsibilities and an accountability framework for each planned GEWE pillar/impact area across the whole organization.

28.   UN-Women should conduct a comprehensive skills and capacity gap assessment in respect of the key elements of the programmatic approach and develop appropriate human resource strategies, including resourcing, in conjunction with the ongoing change management process. UN-Women should track the uptake of programmatic focus through indicators measuring multi-year funding, average agreement values, and the increase in the share of FPI value in country, regional and global programming, among others.

Recommendation 6: UN-Women should fully integrate its strategic planning, budgeting, results monitoring and financial systems so that planning, resource mobilization, budgets and expenditure of Strategic Plan initiatives are clearly reported through the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system.

29.   UN-Women should operationalize its upcoming Strategic Plan as part of its planning process, including its adaptation in UN-Women's new ERP system, so that planning, results (corporate and project level), resource mobilization, budgets, revenue and expenditure of Strategic Plan initiatives are clearly identified, tracked and reported through the audited ERP system (rather than through other tools not subject to end-to-end process and quality controls). UN-Women should implement its new corporate results-based budgeting and financial ERP system, fully integrating Strategic Plan planning, resource mobilization, budgeting and expenditure into the system with end-to-end process and quality controls, to ensure unambiguous tracking and allocation of Strategic Plan initiatives and results, both at the corporate and project levels.

ANNEX I

Evaluation findings and overarching questions

Overarching Q1. To what extent have the FPI and TP approaches improved and focused strategic programming?

Finding 1 – The FPIs contributed to greater awareness and adoption of focused and strategic programming approaches across all areas of UN-Women's work. They also provided a coherent framework through theories of change to operationalize UN-Women's five TPs across regions, and to package and brand UN-Women's programming in ways that could be consistently communicated to donors and other stakeholders.

Finding 2 – The FPI development process was largely consultative and participatory, involving headquarters divisions and field offices. However, opinions were divided about the extent of consultation, especially with field offices and external stakeholders such as United Nations organizations, governments and civil society organizations.

Finding 3 – Although several guidance materials were developed, a significant proportion of staff perceived operational guidance on FPIs to be insufficient.

Finding 4 – Despite the conceptualization and formulation of the FPIs receiving significant investment, there was no systematic operationalization in their roll-out, especially for the FPIs without inbuilt global and regional support components. This resulted in various implementation models within and among FPIs.

Finding 5 – The integration of the FPIs into TPs was without sufficient consultation, especially for those outside the Strategic Plan's official development process.

Overarching Q2. To what extent has the FPI approach strengthened governance, quality assurance, monitoring and knowledge management?

Finding 6 – UN-Women embarked on a number of business and operational processes to facilitate the FPIs, but limited improvements and economies of scale were achieved.

Finding 7 – FPI revenue data retroactively and approximately estimated by the Strategic Planning Unit (SPU) varied greatly from FPI revenue data (audited data of UN-Women) provided by the Financial Management Section (FMS). This was mainly due to the different interpretations applied to classifying interventions as (potentially) FPI projects, but also to the subjective tagging of project activities to FPIs.

Finding 8 – The design and roll-out of the FPIs did not have inbuilt elements to address skills gaps and strengthen capacity in programme management and resource mobilization, as well as some thematic areas that were outside UN-Women's usual expertise.

Finding 9 – Despite acknowledgement of the potential for cross-learning, aggregation and synthesis of results, no systematic knowledge management strategies were established for the FPIs. However, individual FPIs developed their own knowledge-sharing mechanisms and communities of practice with their available resources.

Finding 10 – The evaluation did not find evidence of corporate review mechanisms to monitor the performance of the FPI programming modality as a whole. FPI-specific process indicators were not part of the Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency (OEEF) section of the Integrated Results and Resources Framework included in the Strategic Plan 2018–2021, although their theories of change were formally included in the narratives.

Finding 11 – Despite the FPIs' low share of overall non-core resources, the FPI principles and guidance represented a major corporate narrative that coincided with the inflection point in resource growth trajectory and trends in multi-year and larger-value agreements and programming.

Finding 12 – Although not entirely attributable to the FPIs, the steady improvement in management ratios at country offices correlates to the FPI focus on larger threshold programming.

Finding 13 – The FPIs were initially formulated with their own individual results chains and indicators. However, this changed following the transition to the Strategic Plan 2018–2021, with the introduction of common results indicators for all UN-Women programming. As a result, corporate reporting for FPIs as a separate class of instrument was no longer formally carried out, except to donors for specific contracting requirements.

Finding 14 – There is clear evidence that the gender equality principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are built into the FPIs' comprehensive theories of change and monitoring frameworks, which place strong focus on intersectionality and the principle of leaving no one behind. However, given the challenges related to monitoring and reporting FPI indicators, it is difficult to determine the extent to which FPI programming directly affected certain marginalized and vulnerable beneficiary groups.

Overarching Q3. To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced partner engagement around common GEWE goals?

Finding 15 – The FPIs fostered strategic partnerships with United Nations organizations and formed other multi-stakeholder partnerships, although most were within the remit and scope of the programmes themselves rather than longer-term institutional arrangements. The expectation that the FPIs would primarily be partnership vehicles was not met. However, FPIs supported substantive coordination, especially with governments, machineries for women's advancement and other multi-stakeholder alliances.

Overarching Q4. To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced collaboration and system-wide coordination on GEWE among United Nations organizations at the global and country levels?

Finding 16 – The FPIs did not have an explicit operational plan for United Nations system coordination components and evidence of inter-agency coordination in relation to the FPIs was mostly anecdotal. However, United Nations system coordination of GEWE faces specific challenges that fall outside of FPI engagements.

Overarching Q5. To what extent has the FPI approach enhanced resource mobilization and donor relations, and provided flexible and predictable funding?

Finding 17 – There has been distinct growth in revenue, multi-year commitments and average donor agreement sizes since 2016. However, the FPIs had a minor share of

these trends and have experienced a steady decline since 2017, even though overall non-core resources grew for UN-Women during this period.

Finding 18 – Inadequate investments were made during the formulation phases to pre-test the acceptability of FPI modalities and funding instruments, which had an effect on donor engagement. Resource mobilization strategies for the FPIs did not sufficiently communicate the differentiation from pre-existing pooled funds at UN-Women. The prospect of 12 FPI funds may also have been somewhat overwhelming and transaction intensive for donors.