

Assessment of Development Results – Mauritania

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a country evaluation called an Assessment of Development Results (ADR) in Mauritania in 2015. An ADR evaluates UNDP's contribution to development results and its strategic positioning in the country. The ADR covered the previous country programme 2009-2011 and the ongoing country programme 2012-2016 to the extent possible. The ADR gave particular attention to the themes covered by the UNDP programme over both periods: poverty reduction, environment and climate change, and governance.

The evaluation consists of two main parts. Firstly, the ADR examined UNDP's strategy and performance from two perspectives. The ADR assessed the effectiveness of UNDP's contribution to development results by programme area. Specific attention was given to UNDP's overall vision of helping countries achieve poverty eradication and reduce inequalities and exclusion, in addition to furthering gender equality and women's empowerment. Secondly, the ADR assessed the quality of UNDP's contribution, using the criteria of relevance, efficiency and sustainability. The ADR also analysed UNDP's strategic positioning from the perspective of the organisation's mandate and the agreed and emergent development needs and priorities in the country.

The evaluation used a mix of data collection methods, including desk reviews, individual and group interviews, with representatives from the government, civil society, United Nations agencies, development agencies, donors and country programme beneficiaries, as well as direct observations during site visits which allowed direct observation of some of project achievements. Interviews were also held with local authorities and beneficiaries of UNDP projects. The evaluation team comprised of two evaluators from the IEO, an international governance expert, three national experts and a research assistant.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1: overall, UNDP interventions between 2009 and 2015 were relevant, and aligned with both national priorities and UNDP's mandate. Generally, UNDP has used its comparative advantages – neutrality, capacity for advocacy, and the technical capacity offered by its presence of a global network - to support achievement of program outcomes. However, the lack of political support for UNDP outputs has been an issue, which brings into question the extent of UNDP's influence, the quality of its advocacy, national ownership of UNDP efforts, and thus of UNDP's strategic positioning in the Mauritanian development landscape.

In the context of Mauritania, a least developed country where poverty rates remain high and geographic and social inequalities considerable, where democratic institutions are still weak, and where the environment is extremely vulnerable to climatic extremes, the presence of UNDP and its interventions in the areas of poverty reduction, governance and environment respond to clear needs.

UNDP is recognized as a long-standing, responsive and capable development partner. Given its mandate, UNDP has access to political decision makers and thus a capacity for policy advocacy that is appreciated by certain partners. However, over the course of the period 2009 to 2015, challenges frequently emerged in terms of political ownership of UNDP projects and their results. Several strategies remained pending for a long time without political approval (e.g. the national strategies for mainstreaming gender, for microfinance, and for small and micro-enterprises). Other strategies or legal instruments were never adopted (such as the national strategy for social cohesion, the coastline ordinance, and five draft laws related to the information society drawn up since 2010). In addition, policy documents that were adopted have not been implemented.

Conclusion 2: UNDP undeniably contributed to development results in Mauritania, yet these results remain ad hoc rather than transformational. In the absence of an overall strategy or vision, UNDP has tended to support specific actions or processes or the setting up of small infrastructure without strengthening capacities or addressing structural issues.

UNDP has made notable contributions at the strategic level. For example, UNDP's support to the formulation and monitoring of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has been greatly appreciated. UNDP's advocacy, along with that of its partners, has resulted in the integration of environmental concerns in strategic planning documents such as the PRSP and the development of a second National Plan of Action for the Environment that is more precise and more pragmatic than the first version. UNDP has also accompanied actors in the environmental sector in the creation of a full Ministry for the Environment and Sustainable Development in 2014. UNDP also contributed to the advocacy effort that finally led to the approval of the national strategy for mainstreaming gender.

However, UNDP often supported actions and processes, notably planning and development of strategies, without strengthening capacities or creating the conditions for implementation. For example, UNDP supported the preparation and the monitoring of the PRSP, but at the ground level, results of the strategic framework are yet to be felt. UNDP supported the translation of the PRSP into regional poverty reduction plans, but these have not been implemented due to lack of capacity and resources. UNDP supported the preparation of Agenda 21 plans, but these were disconnected from other planning documents and processes at the local level, and have not been implemented. ART GOLD has supported the creation of regional thematic groups and guidelines for investment in regional development, but after the completion of these documents, the groups lost their dynamism. In other cases, UNDP contributed to progress in some aspects of capacity development of the civil service, but without bringing about any real changes. For example, UNDP helped put in place technical platforms and software applications with the goal

of modernizing the civil service, but appropriation of these tools has been limited, limiting in turn any real change in operations. The evaluation found that many support initiatives for development rarely produced any real development.

With respect to interventions at the community level, innovative solutions such as the multifunctional solar energy platforms or support to early recovery, both of which targeted women and vulnerable populations, have effectively contributed to an improvement in living standards in remote rural areas. Early recovery interventions provided support to particularly fragile communities. However, the quality of outputs remains variable, and the scattering of activities limits their visibility and their potential for multiplier effects, as well as UNDP's capacity to regularly monitor and extract lessons learned. In addition, these UNDP interventions address immediate causes of poverty and vulnerability but not the root causes, such as unequal access to services and natural resources, and thus do not bring about fundamental changes in development conditions. For example, in the case of Afro-Mauritanian returnees whose property rights have been violated and to whom UNDP has provided multifunctional platforms, or in the case of communities in the areas surrounding the Mberé refugee camp who have been provided with small market gardens while the surrounding pastures and water sources are over-used by the refugees coming from Mali.

UNDP's work does not appear to be guided by a strategy or clear overall vision. The Strategic Unit is directly involved to support the economic strategy of the country, but the links between the interventions on the ground designed to reduce poverty and inequalities and those at the strategic level are not clearly articulated. The PRSP and its translation into regional poverty reduction plans could have provided such a framework for field level action, but there was a lack of capacity to implement and oversee the PRSP and the regional plans as well as weak collaboration between the different units in UNDP that work on the PRSP (Strategic Unit), the regional poverty reduction plans (Poverty Unit) and early recovery (Environment Unit). In the environment area, the Small Grants Programme (SGP) pilot activities at the community level did not feed into strategic discussions at the central level, and the two components of the MDG-F environment project – the strategic and the operational – had few links between them. With respect to governance, the country office did not delve into substantive issues, but rather focused on support to tools and instruments without a guiding approach, model or conceptual framework. This has resulted in interventions which responded to requests from the administration rather than fostering a dialogue aimed at transformation of the governance system.

Conclusion 3: UNDP interventions contribute, to a certain extent, to the reduction of inequalities and exclusion and the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the reduction of inequalities and exclusion has not been systematically integrated across the whole programme.

UNDP's downstream interventions clearly target women and vulnerable populations. Thus, these interventions have contributed directly to a reduction in drudgery, to financial autonomy and the

household economy as well as to a greater awareness by women of their own capacities. Small infrastructure such as wells, surface water catchments, fences around vegetable gardens and forested areas, solar panels and solar freezers installed in particularly vulnerable communities contributed at least to some degree to a reduction of inequality in these rural areas. At the strategic level, UNDP contributed indirectly to the reduction of poverty and exclusion through its support to the formulation and implementation of the PRSP, and the development of the national strategy for the institutionalisation of a gender approach.

These dimensions – gender and other forms of inequality – are taken into account especially in the interventions designed to reduce poverty. A gender dimension has been incorporated in some governance projects with some important results, but an emphasis on the reduction of inequalities is almost absent in the environment portfolio, apart from SGP. There is a lack of a program level strategy for the integration and monitoring and evaluation of these dimensions. It is noted that in creating a gender committee and volunteering for the Gender Seal Assessment, the country office has started to put into place mechanisms to improve the mainstreaming of gender in programming.

Conclusion 4: The set-up of the country office and the NIM modality - as it is applied in Mauritania - negatively affect the effectiveness and efficiency of UNDP.

While most people interviewed agree that UNDP is an appreciated development partner, it must also be acknowledged that there are weaknesses in implementation modalities and management of the country office and its programmes. Within the country office, there is a lack of communication and synergy between the programme units, resulting in missed opportunities for the sharing of expertise and knowledge which impact on results. Issues in governance, poverty reduction and the environment all have implications for the other domains and require an integrated approach even if specific interventions are led by different actors.

Weak communications between the programme and operations divisions result in delays in recruitment and procurement, which has a negative impact on development results. The hybrid NIM modality practiced in Mauritania which relies heavily on direct payments by UNDP, takes up a considerable amount of programme staff time, leaving them little time for more strategic work.

Conclusion 5: Sustainability of UNDP interventions and their results is weak, due to an absence of exit strategies or plans to capitalize on successes, a lack of national ownership and the weak capacities of partners.

The absence of an exit strategy is one of the main weakness of UNDP interventions, in all thematic areas. At the community level, interventions often target the most vulnerable. These groups do not necessarily have the human or financial capacities for the upkeep of new technologies or equipment requiring maintenance and periodic repairs (such as pumps or solar freezers). Mechanisms for follow-up or additional mentoring are not incorporated in project design. Interventions that improve or build on traditional production techniques (for example, protecting

forest areas from grazing animals, water catchment systems, or preparing couscous for sale) are potentially easier for the communities to manage on their own.

With respect to capacity building, in the design of projects, the focus is often more on the production of outputs with outside expertise rather than building capacities of the stakeholders to produce the outputs themselves, with implications for sustainability. For example, the regional thematic groups, despite their involvement in the preparation in the guidelines for investment in regional development, do not have the capacity to revise the documents without external assistance. Similarly, in the work with the Parliament, provision of external expertise has not translated into acquired in-house skills.

At the strategic and regulatory level, an arsenal of strategies and legal documents have been developed or revised with UNDP's support, but these new texts, policies and strategies will not have any lasting impact unless they are approved by the government and action plans developed and implemented. Support to development of tools and processes without sufficient capacity development – which occurs in the absence of a real strategy or vision for the UNDP programme – results in tools and strategies that are not taken up and that cannot thus be sustainable.

Conclusion 6: The absence of a clearly articulated and effectively communicated strategic vision, the lack of team spirit, and bureaucratic delays affect the image of UNDP as well as resource mobilization.

UNDP, according to many stakeholders in Mauritania, is an essential development partner, appreciated for its mandate, its international network, its neutrality, its responsiveness, and its coordination mandate. However, UNDP's lack of strategic vision, the absence of team spirit which is noted even by outsiders, weaknesses in communication, bureaucratic delays and lack of attention to detail, have tarnished UNDP's reputation and image. This does not facilitate resource mobilisation, which is becoming a critical issue for the country office.

RECOMMENDATIONS & MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Recommendation 1: UNDP should develop a strategic medium- to long-term vision for its programme. UNDP should identify niches where it has recognized comparative advantages. Within the framework of its new strategic vision, UNDP should strengthen its advocacy with the government. The formulation of the new strategic framework post-PRSP 2001-2015 offers an entry point to identify and then work to address structural issues.

Considering its limited resources, UNDP should articulate a medium- to long-term vision for its programme, and identify a central thread to tie together all its interventions and advocacy. UNDP should then choose a limited number of priorities, with a view to « doing less » but « doing better » in the next programme cycle.

UNDP should identify and articulate its comparative advantages, considering its limited financial and human resources, and identify niches where it can bring real added value. At the same time,

UNDP needs to analyse the comparative advantages of its partners to identify potential synergies and avoid duplication.

The formulation and implementation of the new strategic framework post-PRSP 2001-2015 offer a new opportunity to identify and address structural constraints to development, hence the importance of a medium- to long-term vision for UNDP which may extend beyond the framework of a single country programme. UNDP should strengthen its advocacy with the government with regards to both immediate issues and its longer-term vision.

While developing its next country programme, UNDP should articulate one or more theories of change to explicitly identify the specific development problems being targeted; develop options for interventions; and test the assumptions upon which the design is based. In tracing, expected paths from activities to outputs to outcomes, these theories of change should consider the challenges of national ownership and institutional capacity, to sharpen intervention strategies and produce better results.

At a practical level, UNDP should avoid spreading its work across multiple themes and small projects, as this stretches UNDP's management capacity and results in a focus on administrative and operational issues rather than on strategic support and advice.

Management Response: *UNDP Mauritania will (i) conclude the alignment of its current programme with UNDP's 2014 – 2017 Strategic Plan; (ii) provide support to the government as it draws up its new Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity Strategy (SCAPP). In this context, UNDP will be able to provide recommendations and substantial assistance on the key themes to be adopted, such as including the SDGs in the SCAPP, sustainable development, resilience and humanitarian questions, climate change, gender and human rights, and will be able to develop a long-term vision.*

Recommendation 2: UNDP should deepen its analysis specifically of risks and of potential political obstacles, and develop strategies to more effectively counter these challenges.

While developing a new long-term vision, and preparing and implementing the next country programme, UNDP should deepen its analyses, notably of risks and potential political obstacles. This analysis should be carried out in collaboration with UN partners (for example during the CCA) and with other donors, in view of sharing knowledge and providing mutual support in advocacy efforts with national partners. Within UNDP, internal collaboration should be strengthened, bringing together staff expertise, knowledge of the context, national institutions, opportunities, present or potential challenges, and ideas to counter these challenges. The country office should develop and implement a viable risk management plan.

Management Response: *UNDP will identify and implement actions to improve its capacity to anticipate and attenuate risks and potential political blockages.*

Recommendation 3: UNDP should ensure an appropriate balance between upstream and downstream interventions, as well as appropriate links between the two levels. Interventions

must be based on national commitments for implementation and follow-up. Dialogue on development change should be structured and continued. Field level interventions should be geographically concentrated for more impact.

Following the constitutional crisis in 2009, UNDP strengthened its community-based actions while also maintaining many advisory activities at the political level. The results of the strategic support were often slow to appear, limiting the real changes in development conditions. During this time, the UNDP programme produced visible effects at the community level. However, these “one-off” outcomes did not bring about transformational changes. In addition, the links between upstream and downstream interventions were weak, and successes on the ground often were not used to guide policy. In the next programme cycle, UNDP should strive to balance its upstream and downstream work and ensure a coherent approach at different levels (macro-meso-micro). Field level interventions should be pilots serving not only to improve living standards for a certain number of communities, but also designed to support advocacy at the political level. These interventions can also be demonstrations for the implementation of an approved strategy or action plan, carried out in collaboration with the concerned national institutions, designed in such a way as to refine the model and facilitate replication by the national partners. The dialogue for change should be structured and carried out on parallel fronts – at the strategic and regulatory level and at the field level.

With specific reference to the community level interventions, the next UNDP country programme should refocus its interventions for greater effectiveness and sustainability. A concentration of efforts should allow for greater demonstration of the value-added of the interventions and thus better support advocacy efforts. Zones of concentration should be based on a certain number of criteria of vulnerability (social cohesion, social diversity, degree of degradation of environmental resources, sanitary conditions, access to water and sanitation, poverty levels, etc.). In addition, the areas of intervention should be shown on a geo-referenced map in order to better understand the cumulative effect of the projects.

***Management Response:** The UNDP office readjusted its Action Plan for Alignment with UNDP’s 2014-2017 Strategy, while taking all these concerns into account. The 2015 audit also produced similar recommendations, and they were also considered in the monitoring plan. Considerations for the 2018-2022 CPD should be based on these recommendations.*

Recommendation 4: UNDP should strengthen its efforts to mainstream gender and human rights in its programme.

UNDP should continue its efforts in view of obtaining the Gender Seal and ensure that gender is integrated into all thematic areas. The country office should develop a gender mainstreaming strategy specific to the Mauritanian context, considering the needs not only of men and women, but of vulnerable groups (children, victims of slavery or similar practices, persons with disabilities, minorities, and displaced peoples). The strategy should include a plan to develop the capacity of the office for mainstreaming gender and other dimensions of inequality in both its programmes

and operations. The country office should also take steps to improve the gender balance within its own staff.

Management Response: *UNDP will recruit the necessary human resources and will identify pertinent activities to be able to provide adequate responses to this concern.*

Recommendation 5: The country office should reenergize its team, strengthen internal communications and create a culture of collaboration focused on results.

UNDP should organize the country office in line with its new vision to strengthen project management and synergies. It would be desirable to create a post for a senior governance advisor to complement the senior economist, either within the country office or in the office of the Resident Coordinator, in order to guide UNDP's governance team and strengthen the links between UNDP and other agencies in the efforts to build capacities of national institutions, the civil service and civil society. The regional bureau may wish to review the classification of country office posts.

The UNDP country office management, with support from the Regional Bureau for Africa, should take steps to motivate the country office team in line with the vision for the new programme and strengthen internal communications to develop a sense of team spirit and common cause. Interactions should be organized per the theme at hand, and not necessarily according to formal management structures. It is recommended to delegate more project management responsibility to the programme assistants to allow the programme officers to invest more in substantive areas of work.

The country office should also strengthen its monitoring and evaluation. There is a need to go beyond output level indicators and engage in internal and external dialogue on monitoring outcome level change. For example, the country office could put in place a quality assurance team that would work on the continued strengthening of projects throughout the project cycle. With respect to field level work, better monitoring is essential for learning, improving pilot initiatives, communication of results, and in turn for advocacy. A small team of UNVs could be created for continuous monitoring of the field level projects and regular communication of challenges and results to the central level.

Strengthening the results culture also implies improved risk analysis at all levels and greater focus on exit strategies at the time of intervention design. The monitoring system should include regular monitoring of risks and their evolution to inform adjustment of implementation and exit strategies in line with realities faced during the programme cycle.

Management Response: *UNDP will (i) improve synergies between the sections of the country office and between the Programme and Operations units/divisions; (ii) ensure that a learning culture continues to develop; (iii) establish regular discussions between units when projects are being drawn up, implemented and monitored.*

Recommendation 6: UNDP should develop a strategy for a careful transition to a full national implementation modality.

UNDP should re-examine its support to national implementation partners, analyze the needs and justifications for UNDP support services in the framework of NIM projects, and develop a strategy for capacity development with a view to transferring ownership and responsibility for implementation to national partners, as recommended by the 2015 OAI audit report. UNDP may also incorporate discussions on the implementation modality in its structured and continued dialogue on development results. This transfer of responsibilities should also be accompanied by a strengthening of financial oversight mechanisms, to monitor financial risks in addition to other programmatic risks as noted above. The ADR recognizes that in some cases the direct payment modality will remain preferable, and in such cases the country office should ensure that it recovers the real cost of its services.

***Management Response:** The Office expresses its reservations with regards to this recommendation. The implementation of a true NIM approach is conditioned by several institutional factors that are beyond the remit of UNDP: the internal organization of national institutions, the capacity of these institutions to carry out transactions (recruitment, acquisitions) the slow pace of existing procedures, etc. UNDP will support the strengthening of national implementation structures, including the strengthening of human capacity and, via training, will support the gradual adoption of the HACT (Harmonious Approach to Cash Transfers to national partners).*

Recommendation 7: UNDP should improve its external communications and implement a partnership and resource mobilization strategy.

UNDP needs to make significant efforts to revitalize its image and create sustainable alliances with solid partners, not only in view of mobilizing resources but also to strengthen complementarities and synergies for greater effectiveness. Notably, UNDP should improve external communications at all levels, whether it be at the practical, administrative level with technical partners or advocacy at the highest political levels. Improving communication and the image of UNDP should be the responsibility of all staff members. The country office should develop a communications strategy which is not limited to publications and formal presentations of UNDP results, but which also includes simple strategies for improving daily communications and the quality of service to clients.

With respect to resource mobilization, UNDP in Mauritania is already in possession of a strategy, which the office should start to implement. The strategy can be updated in line with the new strategic vision of the country office and the new country programme.

***Management Response:** The existing partnership and resource mobilization strategy will be translated into a realistic action plan with a strong communication component.*