# Final Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2010-2015 in Turkmenistan

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## I. Introduction

After more than 20 years of international isolation, Turkmenistan is slowly integrating more with the world, and is facing an important opportunity to realize its national ambitions and furthering sustainable development. The country experienced extremely high economic growth in recent years, propelled by significant hydrocarbon wealth.

Overall, Turkmenistan is counting on this new prosperity to help it address all development challenges. Yet it still faces significant constraints, particularly with regard to human development: Pockets of poverty are believed to exist, although poverty is not officially recognized by the Government. Infant and maternal mortality rates remain high for an upper-middle-income country.  Equity remains a particularly critical issue despite overall progress, with wide disparities still found between rural and urban areas, regions, wealth quintiles and genders, among others.

At the same time, Government authority continues to be highly centralized, with more opportunities required for open, participatory governance, and continuing international concerns over the protection of human rights.  Turkmenistan also has a very fragile environment, along with intensive agricultural practices that are dependent on irrigation, which in turn exacerbates the natural scarcity of water in a largely desert nation. Critically, an absence of reliable and accessible data in numerous sectors remains a fundamental challenge overall.

As an operational framework, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) is a significant product of United Nations reform, aimed at harmonizing programme and financial interventions in order to achieve greater coherence among United Nations Agencies, Funds and Programmes. In this respect, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT), led by the Resident Coordinator, endeavours to formulate collaborative interventions that will enhance the United Nations System's comparative advantages, increase efficiency and effectiveness in management and delivery of programmes, and improve the potential for impact through appropriate coordination mechanisms.

A United Nations Country Analysis in 2008 identified key thematic outcomes, and was the platform on which the UNDAF 2010-2015 was based. In part, the CA was formulated bearing in mind the Government's specific request to the United Nations at that time for support in six key areas, namely, human rights, education, economic development, local governance, electoral reform, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Drawing upon this as well as the United Nations' areas of core normative strength, an UNDAF Design Workshop, involving primarily UN and Government partners, identified four main thematic priority areas as essential for the country's development prospects (<u>Strengthening Democratization and Rule of Law; Strengthening Human Development to Achieve the MDGs; Improving Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth; Promoting Peace and Security</u>). Design Workshop participants also highlighted six crosscutting issues (human rights, enhancing legal frameworks, data strengthening, conservation of national heritage, environment and climate change, and gender, age and diversity mainstreaming) to be applied across all priority areas.

As this UNDAF Evaluation makes clear, results of the UNDAF 2010-2015 have been mixed. Related to this, it is crucial to note the context under which this Evaluation was undertaken. Perhaps most important, the

Government of Turkmenistan did not agree to the UNDAF Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework that was developed, which has had profound effects on all aspects of UNDAF implementation. Because of this, the UNCT opted to include a brief evaluation as part of the Country Analysis for the upcoming UNDAF 2016-2020, covering the relevance of the current UNDAF's design, efficiency of its indicators, implementation challenges, monitoring and lessons learned. The Evaluation was unable to benefit from the views of Government partners, but United Nations staff and key international partners were interviewed to complement a desk review of relevant documents. Without agreed baselines and targets, no specific outcome-by-outcome evaluation was conducted.

## II. Key Findings

### 2a. Relevance: Assessing the Design of the UNDAF

It is critical to note that the formulation of the UNDAF was set against a national political backdrop considerably different than the one that exists currently. The year 2008 was deeply influenced a surge of optimism within the international community that momentous, and potentially swift, political change was on the horizon for Turkmenistan following the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov in late 2006. A strong, albeit cautious, hope existed that the election in 2007 of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov would lead to increased Government openness, allowing for more genuine collaboration and, ultimately, more effective national planning and development. Initial reforms by the new Government further underlay this expectation, so that this optimism is reflected in the content of the UNDAF document on many levels; for example, most of the outputs look to be highly collaborative among Agencies.

In the intervening years, however, the heady optimism of the planning stage of the UNDAF has been largely tempered, and the collaborative spirit often unrealized, within the United Nations itself as well as with the Government. Few would question the fact that it is extremely challenging to work in development in Turkmenistan – and that making a six-year projection in any development context is highly challenging. Moreover, while some important national development progress has occurred, the fundamental underpinnings of the milieu in which Government operates remain firmly in place.

Not all of these dynamics could have been anticipated in 2008, but the key point is that, in any case, an UNDAF should remain adaptable to changing circumstances. The United Nations thus needs to plan in the future in such a way that it takes into account the very governance challenges it seeks to address, rather than planning that the issue will no longer be present. This means undertaking a greater degree of scenario planning and careful monitoring of assumptions throughout the cycle, so that a strategic planning document can be more than a reflection of the particular moment in which it was written. However, this has not occurred with regard to the UNDAF 2010-2015; while most outcomes were found to be relevant if not fully realistic, some, such as Outcome 2.2 ("National and local authorities create equal opportunities for all people to receive continuous quality education at all levels, with priority on preschool and secondary education and a special emphasis on vulnerable children"), were considered very optimistic indeed but have been left in place.

Overall, an important ingredient of the UNDAF process is the shared leadership that must be fostered between the United Nations and the Government. In Turkmenistan, this aspect has not been diligently observed, despite initial Government involvement in the formulation of the UNDAF priorities. Yet with this

being the case, a "domino" effect ensues: without clarity and genuine collaboration, working groups lose their rationale for meeting; when this occurs, M&E of the impact becomes problematic; and when measuring impact is impossible, it is extremely difficult to articulate the value of the process. At the end, if a process is seen to have little value, it becomes a burden, not informing programming and resource allocation decisions.

Engendering a sense of national ownership thus represents a fundamental issue that has seriously constrained UNDAF implementation. All processes under the UNDAF are driven by United Nations Agencies: For example, all UNDAF Annual Reviews are organized by the United Nations and are seen as a "UN event" by the Government. This formal approach has not allowed both the Government and the United Nations to introduce required changes to UNDAF outcomes and outputs. Yet this is not solely the UNCT's responsibility: Critically, no programme and operational issues, as well as challenges raised by the United Nations during Annual Reviews, have been followed up by the Government; examples given include proposals for joint UNDAF M&E, absence of a Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT) to reduce transaction costs, strict communication channels with Government (through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only), and regulations on United Nations publications.

Interviewees generally felt that UNDAF had largely identified key development issues, even without in-depth analysis of underlying causes, assessment of different options for entry points for support, and sequencing and prioritization of outcome areas to address these issues. UNDAF outcomes were generally found to be relevant overall in terms of the MDGs as well as international human rights treaty bodies. Moreover, a close look at the document reveals that a vast amount of effort went into producing it.

In contrast, however, some key Agencies within the UNCT view the current UNDAF as neither results-oriented, coherent nor focused, with unrealistic outcomes and indicators that were not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) or conforming to DOPA criteria (direct, objective, practical and adequate). For example, monitoring all indicators of Outcome 3.1 ("Men and women of all social groups effectively contribute to Government's policy development and implementation processes to achieve inclusive growth and social equality") does not show if the expected output results are achieved or even if they are all monitored. Critics also pointed out that indicators from different levels are mixed, with some appropriate for outcomes and some for activities. Many indicators do not have sources for verification, or simply list overall documents; more fundamentally, there exists no plan of financial resources for monitoring.

Therefore, some Agencies do not consider UNDAF to have been a strategic process or document, understood as a tool that informs or guides choices and/or a document that clearly articulates United Nations positions on key development issues in Turkmenistan (see also Section 2b, Effectiveness). In a small UNCT, this raises critical issues about the extent to which inter-Agency teamwork has actually been fostered.

At the same time, interviewees also acknowledged that a certain gap in relevance also has existed, given that most national development goals are more oriented toward economic and industrial development, whereas UNDAF is oriented by the MDGs and the concept of human development. UNDAF has been seen to contribute in particular to MDGs 2, 4, and 5, based on international estimations of key data and studies undertaken in these areas.

Nonetheless, nearly all interviewees pointed out that there had been no substantive revision of the UNDAF during the cycle, even when some Agency priorities also have changed. While this can be valid because of the heavy process it entails, it should have been paramount for Agencies in a changing country context. Moreover, the Government announces its development priorities annually, through the yearly statement of the President, providing important guidance for potentially re-shaping the framework. However, there has been no formal analysis of these national priorities in terms of their linkages to UNDAF, which also may have led within the Government to a perception that UNDAF is not fully relevant to activities planned and implemented by line Ministries.

Although as a process UNDAF did not meet all expectations, one view within the UNCT is that it has been an effective "retrofitting" exercise that focuses United Nations programming initiatives and resources on priorities identified at early stages in the Country Analysis process. In terms of individual Agency interventions, a considerable number of well-structured initiatives have effectively delivered policy advice in crucial legislative areas, technical assistance in building institutional capacity, and advocacy in advancing global issues.

In this respect, the UNDAF process has been acknowledged as a useful facility for presenting a panoramic view of the United Nations' so-called intersection of interests in addressing the country's development challenges. From another perspective, meanwhile, the United Nations' contribution is generally well-recognized and highly valued for setting international norms and standards and utilizing advocacy to champion specific issues.

## 2b. Effectiveness: Ensuring Realization of UNDAF Outcomes

At the UNDAF 2016-2020 Roadmap Workshop in February 2014, United Nations and Government participants identified broadly what has worked well during the current UNDAF. This included:

- It is the official document signed by the Government according to which the activities of the United Nations are implemented

- Providing best methods, expertise and practices

- Combining the efforts of national and international agencies for their achievement and collegiality in decision-making

- Conducting regular reviews and presenting the UNDAF reports to the national counterparts

- Flexibility of UNDAF

- Cooperation of UN Agencies in different fields according to their comparative advantages

- Coordination of actions allows to plan further actions

- Distribution by thematic groups, contributions and achievements
- 4 components as a result of UNDAF

However, workshop participants also found a significant number of things that they felt need improvement:

- Results Based Management (RBM) training for experts

- Unified approach analysis

- Goal setting training and RBM

- Use of international methodology for indicators

- Obstacles in planning and execution
- Annual Meeting on the results achieved and explanations of failure to achieve
- Fewer  indicators of UNDAF
- Improving the monitoring mechanism
- Lack of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the UNDAF
- Steering committee  (Working Group on UNDAF)
- Coordinating mechanism to monitor progress and the results (Terms of Reference and Working Group on Coordination)
- Duplication
- Isolation
- Lack of awareness about the results and the process
- Lack of awareness of the UNDAF with national partners
- Need a meeting / discussion in the UNDAF Thematic Groups
- More and better exchange of experiences and information on the results
- There are no discussions of provided reports and results with the Government
- Greater involvement of national technical experts in the discussion of the results
- Active involvement and participation of national partners in the development of the UNDAF (complete process)

Examining and summarizing these general observations more closely gives a more detailed and comprehensive picture of what has, or has not, occurred. On the positive side, the United Nations recorded a number of notable breakthroughs in overall results during the UNDAF cycle, although not necessarily because of the UNDAF itself. In particular, capacity development appears to be an area in which significant progress has been made, in part because such initiatives are very much welcomed by the Government. The big challenge in capacity development remains in how to translate the capacity improved at individual level into institutional capacity development. UNDAF also has helped to an extent in prioritizing support for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, for whom significant progress has been made.

Other key results have built on the Government's commitment to fulfil its international treaty reporting obligations, including on the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In addition, United Nations support to the first National Climate Change Strategy, announced by the President at the global Rio+20 meeting in 2012, has led to further development of two Action Plans on mitigation and adaptation of climate change to operationalize the national strategy. National legislation in relevant fields such as countering drug trafficking and money laundering also are being regularly revised to bring laws closer into alignment with international standards.

Modest achievement has been made in building synergies and developing joint programmes in the current cycle. For example, joint programmes have been implemented on strengthening the national capacity to promote and protect human rights (UNDP, OHCHR, EU), and to conduct the national census (UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF). Successful joint advocacy for development of a National HIV Prevention Programme also has occurred, and WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF have been collaborating effectively with regard to issues of mother and child health, demonstrating achievements at policy level. In 2013, meanwhile, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and WHO developed a proposal for a joint programme on the rights of people with disabilities, which is awaiting approval from the funding source.

Four Outcome Groups were established, led by one United Nations Agency and with relevant Agencies' participation. With the contribution of relevant participating Agencies, 6-month and annual progress UNDAF reports have been prepared and submitted to the Government, which appears to have been the main responsibility of the groups. As one interviewee succinctly put it, when asked how the UNDAF M&E system was organized: "It didn't work." Many interviewees expressed disappointment at the absence of interest in the Working Groups, and lamented a lack of Agency leadership around these structures. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that a meeting must have substance to have meaning. Furthermore, the Resident Coordinator can exercise leadership but cannot dictate: Agencies need to be proactive for coordination, structures and processes to succeed. Overall, the UNDAF instrument itself failed to create the incentives for sustained collaboration; indeed, collaboration appears to have been strongest when it has been issue-driven.

By and large, therefore, UNDAF appears to have been used as a joint framework for the UNCT to report Agency-specific results, rather than as an actual strategic programming tool. It is unclear whether the UNDAF was widely distributed among donors and national partners to raise awareness, so that broader partnerships and strategic alliances around the main outcome areas also were not effectively promoted.

Constraints to the implementation of UNDAF thus have resulted from a number of factors. Among these, lack of genuine political commitment by national partners, for issues such as governance, disaster management and HIV/AIDS, must be mentioned. For example, under Outcome 4.3, generally limited results have been achieved in disaster risk preparedness and management, because relevant national partners tend to be part of the national defense system, which is largely inaccessible to others. In many of these areas, it appears that the Government was not ready to receive substantive international support; national capacities also remain in need of significant strengthening.

Other constraints arising from the overall environment – and to a great extent linked with a continuing need for capacity development – encompass the insufficient availability of reliable data, as noted above. This includes gender-disaggregated data and monitoring systems, which are needed for gender-sensitive and equity-based analysis. National planning and budgeting also remain in need of more effective and efficient practices, with particular attention to strengthening capacity in governance and public finance management as well as human resource development strategies in the social sectors. Lastly, national decision making is protracted, as is inter-Ministerial coordination, so that proposed initiatives frequently are implemented only after a considerable delay.

Among Agencies, in addition to the lack of effective M&E, a limited commitment to UNDAF outcomes exists, with priority given to Agency-specific activities; it was noted that sometimes this may have stemmed from limited human resources within Agencies, particularly with regard to appropriate knowledge and skills for M&E. Lack of a consolidated approach among Agencies to UNDAF review also was highlighted as creating significant obstacles to progress. In addition, over the UNDAF cycle, implementation of United Nations activities has become increasingly driven by Agencies' ability to mobilize resources, which may exclude commitments made in 2008. The gap between UNDAF outcomes and national development strategies also bears some responsibility for non-realization of UNDAF objectives.

Perhaps the critical missing link in the monitoring and oversight of the UNDAF process, as noted above and in Section 2a, was the absence of the necessary partnership with the Government and, to a limited extent, with other stakeholders, which had been introduced during the UNDAF preparatory stage. Coherence is thus limited: In particular, without a structured Steering Committee, a key component of oversight was undermined.

Significantly, different Outcome Groups hold different views on the necessity of reviewing the outcomes and outputs, again in part arising from Agencies' own priorities. While any of them may independently decide to launch a review process within the respective UNDAF Outcome, this may not necessarily be replicated by other groups. In turn, a lack of consistently effective mechanisms and tools has resulted in constrained interest in organizing or convening regular joint United Nations-Government discussions on UNDAF outcomes and outputs. Progress toward outputs remains generally summarized by the Outcome Groups – basically United Nations entities – and Government counterparts comment only before the Annual Review meeting. Moreover, while working-level contacts are regularly maintained by United Nations Agencies, most discussions take place through the exchange of emails. This again demonstrates the challenges to achieving a cohesive approach.

Better coherence among Agencies would obviously illustrate that (1) a regular information-sharing mechanism exists; (2) regular meetings provide opportunities to discuss progress and priorities; and (3) planning takes place in accordance with the UNDAF document. With limited coherence, meanwhile, Agencies tend to report on their activities in a straightforward manner, with no strategic analysis of whether the United Nations' contribution is aligned with current Government priorities.

Among crosscutting issues under the UNDAF, some remain difficult because of a lack of awareness and political commitment, particularly with regard to gender, even as progress was seen in such areas as advocacy for development of a National Gender Equality Action Plan. Mainstreaming environmental sustainability in "non-environment" areas also is representative of crosscutting issues that have been more problematic. Furthermore, non-resident United Nations Agencies were found to have demonstrated limited commitment to UNDAF implementation and M&E. Activities carried out by non-resident Agencies have not necessarily been fully aligned with UNDAF Outcomes and outputs, and contributions to reporting and monitoring can be significantly strengthened. Lastly, cross-sectoral collaboration between Agencies also has been deemed as requiring further strengthening.

**2c. Efficiency: Reducing Transaction Costs**

Efficiency in terms of reducing transactions costs for both Government and United Nations Agencies is very difficult to assess, given that HACT has not been implemented. However, it is worthwhile to note again that Turkmenistan is not a country relying on Official Development Assistance (ODA), and that the donor base is very limited. Cost-benefit analysis may be useful when considering the establishment of a coordination mechanism. Meanwhile, the distribution of roles and responsibilities among different UNDAF partners was deemed to be well-defined.

**2d. Sustainability: Will UNDAF Benefits Continue?**

Although UNDAF does not include specific strategies to ensure sustainability, its strong reliance on the capacity development paradigm offers considerable encouragement in terms of promoting sustainable results, particularly if enhanced capacities are embedded at institutional level. However, the situation appears to be uneven among outcome/output areas; for example, in the area of human rights, the Government still emphasizes the fulfillment of its reporting obligations, but less on implementation of relevant laws and programmes. With regard to climate change, however, the results of United Nations support in developing the National Strategy are being sustained through further development of the climate change mitigation and adaptation Action Plans, as noted above. Even so, non-Government organizations and civil society organizations generally have not benefited from a number of capacity development initiatives because of the local context, and risks to sustainability are present because of the limited alignment of UNDAF outcomes with the current national development agenda.

**III. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Bearing in mind the lack of genuine "evaluability" of an UNDAF missing a key component (i.e., M&E), overall conclusions reached thus include the following:

- *Relevance*: How did the UNDAF respond to the needs of the broader context? The UNDAF responded broadly to the needs of Turkmenistan as articulated at the time of its writing (alignment in theory, but assumptions were overly optimistic); these needs have since changed, given the evolving dynamics on the ground. However, UNDAF was not enabled to help the United Nations to (re)position itself, not did it evolve with the situation, remaining a static rather than a "live" document.

- *Effectiveness*: Has the UNDAF reached its objectives? Since the objectives of this particular UNDAF were not clearly able to be monitored, it is difficult to state whether they were reached or not. Similarly, given the absence of baselines and reliable indicators, it is not possible to ascertain the extent of the impact of the UNDAF on its own, and separate from activities that would have been implemented by individual Agencies even in the absence of the UNDAF. However, if the UNDAF is meant to help the United Nations System be more than the sum of its parts, then it would appear that the UNDAF was not particularly effective, a combination of both its optimistic assumptions and sub-optimal follow-up.

- *Efficiency*: How have the costs of the UNDAF related to its benefits? As noted above, this component in particular is difficult to assess. However, in a broad sense, it would appear that costs were substantial to articulate an UNDAF that basically wound up "on the shelf."

- *Sustainability*: Will the benefits of the UNDAF continue? Some positive aspects appear to have the potential to be sustained – but will continue to require substantial investments during the next UNDAF cycle. Moreover, without major changes in the local context, including in the national political commitment to some priorities, the continuing challenges may prove to be daunting.

In terms of recommendations:

**Articulating Focus and Engaging National Counterparts**

- First and foremost, it will be necessary to continue to consult extensively with the Government to reach agreement on the tenor and extent of collaboration throughout all phases of UNDAF preparation and implementation. While a good start has been made toward this as a result of the UNDAF Roadmap Workshop and Country Analysis Workshop, the ball ultimately will be in the Government's court in terms of fostering genuine political commitment to the UNDAF 2016-2020.

- At the same time, the UNCT may need to engage in its own internal discussions that seek clear answers to such questions as: What do we want out of our UNDAF, and would it be useful? Should the UNDAF represent all development activities of all United Nations Agencies? Or should it only present results requiring joint action between two or more entities? Or should it set rules for how to achieve priorities, with the emphasis being more on the *how* than the *what*? All this offers an important opportunity to move beyond programme "retrofit" toward reinforcement of an interaction of interests.

- Despite the difficulties of the local context, the UNCT also should make a concerted effort to reach out to a broader set of national actors in the preparation of the next UNDAF. This includes NGOs, private sector actors, academia and regional organisations.

- A collaborative, lighter and more strategic UNDAF that allows more programmatic space for flexibility to adapt faster, innovate more, and respond better to new and changing realities and priorities at country level. This may be achieved through fewer outcomes and outputs as well as, critically, through an agreed set of indicator baselines and targets and more collaborative UNDAF M&E mechanisms.

- UNDAF Outcomes will need to be more aligned with national development priorities and oriented to support the achievement of national development goals. In addition, as noted above, translating the capacity improved at individual level into institutional capacity development will be critical. Again, much depends on Government will as well as proactive United Nations participation.

- The equity focus of cooperation can be strengthened in light of the Government's commitments vis-à-vis various international treaty bodies, which calls for better understanding of protection and welfare systems to address gaps in accountability, capacities and functions.

- Strategically, more focus also may need to be given to the provision of tools that help to generate knowledge and skills required for change, rather than offering a blueprint for reform. In addition to policy advice and building the capacity of systems to deliver, this will involve participatory work in designing standards, implementing actions plans, and monitoring systems. Overall, "learning by doing" is a strategy that has proven to be particularly effective.

## Coordination

- Each Outcome/Thematic Working Group should have clear deliverables, beyond simple reporting requirements; expectations for the groups should be formulated in clear Terms of Reference. The groups should serve as problem-solving entities, and not just information sharing meetings; in particular, internal United Nations members of the groups should focus on agreeing on the most effective ways to engage with the Government (who, when, how), which also will improve internal coherence and discipline.

## M&E Processes

- The UNCT will need to make a significant commitment to developing baselines for each of the key strategic focus areas, including *at the outcome level*, and will need to fully engage national statistics authorities and relevant national institutions. The need for reliable statistical data should, therefore, be made an essential component of each of the strategic outcome areas, rather than an area in and of itself.

- The M&E process of the UNDAF should be made as simple and transparent as possible. Each outcome should have only two or three indicators, which should be constructed as capable of measuring impact. Clarity should be sought on *what* is being monitored, and for *what purpose*. National counterparts must be an inherent part of the M&E process in order to reinforce mutual accountability.

## Communications

- The UNDAF document should be as short, concise and "high-level" as possible, as well as flexible enough to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. A brief summary should be made available and widely distributed among national counterparts, donors, the private sector and others. All Agencies should make the document available on their websites in English and in Turkmen.

- Although proactive engagement with the media is likely to be constrained by the local context, the UNCT should make a more concerted and sustained effort to communicate *United Nations activities as a whole* to the people, including joint United Nations initiatives.