

UNDP IN SYRIA

Syria is engaged in a balancing act, in which the need for economic liberalization has been recognized, while at the same time the need for political reform is being debated. Syria faces the challenge of reforming its economy in ways that allow for greater economic diversification and a more solid national economic base, while taking into account fluctuations in net official development assistance flows and eventual dwindling reliance on the oil sector as a major foreign currency earner. The unstable situation in the region affects Syria's ability to focus its

efforts on development issues, however. The influence wielded by various power groups within the Government is clearly related to regional dynamics.

Overall UNDP strategic areas of support included a focus on poverty reduction and sustainable livelihood; sustainable use of natural resources and environmental conservation; and institutional development and good governance. The Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP conducted an independent country programme evaluation that covered UNDP work from 1999 to 2004.

TOTAL PROGRAMME EXPENDITURE, 1997-2006: \$37.67 MILLION

FUNDING SOURCES, 2002-2007



APPROVALS BY STRATEGIC RESULTS GOALS, 2003-2007 (PERCENTAGE)



FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

UNDP in Syria has made significant contributions to a strategic plan for the environment, to placing poverty more explicitly on the development agenda, and to moving towards a stronger focus on good governance and administrative reform. Such achievements indicate the organization's positive role as a neutral partner and promoter of human development.

One key challenge was how to handle the broader processes of development, beyond just programmes and individual projects. UNDP also faced various balancing acts: between a project focus and a policy focus; and between technocratic perspectives and a narrow focus on economic development on the one hand, and advocacy of the human and social dimensions of the same development processes on the other hand.

In general, UNDP responded to national priorities, and as such positioned itself to contribute to national development results. But prior to 2000, it largely took a 'business as usual' approach intent on not courting undue political controversy. New, post-2000 opportunities presented by the Government provided some impetus for change. UNDP attempted to push the boundaries, for example, in the shift from 'economic' to 'good' governance. It continued to promote public discourse on poverty, but could have been more proactive and innovative.

The Jabal Al- Hoss/Phase II project, which focused on providing credit to poor families for income-generation opportunities, was perceived as a success, and will provide a model for the establishment of a Centre of Excellence, which will support replication in other areas of Syria. Preliminary findings, however, showed that the project might be contributing to further indebtedness, and did not target the poorest or empower female beneficiaries. The institutionalization and sustainability of the model was not clear, and might require new mechanisms, such as allowing the establishment of local community-based organizations, which would require reviewing and reforming existing regulatory frameworks. In this, UNDP can and should play a strong advocacy role.

UNDP missed an opportunity to support the judiciary, an area of crucial importance to the reform process. It lacked an effective gender strategy for development interventions. Other gaps were apparent in targeting the poor, mobilizing strategic partnerships, and promoting information and communication technology as a cross-cutting intervention. A primary focus on relationships and links with Government counterparts meant that UNDP did little to engage with emerging non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are trying to stake out a niche in Syria's development process.

A particular weakness related to monitoring and evaluation, which largely focused on the project level and was perceived as a reporting exercise. This had implications for evaluating outcomes to ensure accountability, enhancing learning from programme implementation and developing effective advocacy strategies.

Sustainability and exit strategies remained a general problem. In the environment sector, various projects were initiated some years ago. Discussions with the Government on this issue do not appear to be initiated in a timely manner. Counterparts had not in varying instances committed personnel and resources to continue projects.

Effective advocacy strategies need to be developed. Some efforts related to governance, building on the rights-based approaches emerging in global discourses, and including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), produced varied results. A national report on the goals garnered some coverage in the Syrian press; the 10th Five Year Plan was expected to reflect the MDGs. It was not clear to what extent the goals have been internalized in society in general, however.

Broader advocacy that touches on democratic governance is arguably the most difficult task facing UNDP.

This implies ensuring that a narrow technocratic and economic perspective of reform is not at the expense of advocacy—through demonstration—for broader reform processes conducive to human development.

While UNDP has ‘done the right thing’ in terms of focusing on strategic goals of relevance to Syria’s development needs and priorities, it has not necessarily ‘done things the right way’. A temptation to invest in projects that the Government signaled as important resulted in UNDP spreading itself too thin. Projects need to be re-evaluated with this caveat in mind. While the organization should take note of priorities identified by the State Planning Commission, in choosing among potential projects, it should draw upon past experiences and clarify which interventions are best left to other partners.

Above all, strategic goals need to be more clearly defined in terms of the human dimensions of development. A more strategic approach should also take explicit account of cross-cutting factors linking development interventions both within as well as between pertinent thematic areas. This will be crucial to strengthening UNDP’s profile as a key player in advancing human development in Syria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The current transition phase is opening some space for cautious reform, but checks and balances in place need to be taken into account. This is not the time for a radical change in UNDP strategy in Syria.
- UNDP must continue its focus on strengthening the executive in terms of administrative support and competence-building, as well as improving capacity for coordination.
- A conscious strategy for sharing lessons learned from other countries should be developed.
- UNDP should establish a clearer profile on the basic issues of human development not only within government circles, but also within the expanding private sector and among elements of civil society that are striving to emerge and gain a voice.
- UNDP should improve its advocacy strategy by linking it more clearly to its corporate mandate of promoting human development, given its comparative advantage vis-à-vis other development and donor agencies.
- There is a need to strengthen the focus on the social dimensions of economic growth. UNDP also has an important role to play in advocating for demand-driven data collection, focusing on poverty and gender-sensitive indicators conducive to effective development planning. The reform process also requires advocacy for gender and poverty sensitive labour policies.
- UNDP should further support NGOs as a means for widening the space for civil society and linking this with the concept of democratic governance.
- While UNDP should actively mobilize strategic partnerships to solicit non-core funding for crucial development interventions, it also needs to seek partnerships with key organizations with similar visions.
- A strong national monitoring and evaluation system needs to be developed, including to provide relevant information on UNDP’s contribution to development results.
- A strategic approach to realizing development outcomes requires explicit recognition of the complexity of cross-cutting factors, including information and communications technology and gender mainstreaming.

ABOUT THE ICPEs

Independent country programme evaluations (ICPEs) are the backbone of the work of the Independent Evaluation Office. They capture evidence of UNDP’s contributions to development results and the effectiveness of strategies supporting national development. They enable continued improvement in UNDP programmes, contribute to strengthened national ownership and evaluation capacity, and underpin accountability to national stakeholders and UNDP’s Executive Board. To date, over 100 ICPEs have been conducted worldwide.

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