

Evaluation Brief: ICPE Timor-Leste

Since 2003, the Government of Timor-Leste and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have had a partnership, formalized in country programmes of cooperation, aimed at advancing the country's aspiration for sustainable human development. The current programme, covering the period 2015 to 2019, establishes a framework for supporting the Government's Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 and related five-year plan 2012-2017. Employing strategies including policy advocacy and advisory services, technical assistance, operational support, knowledge exchange and transfer, and piloting new initiatives and models, the programme has three components—resilience-building, sustainable development and governance and institutional strengthening—with an indicative budget of US\$75 million.

The Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP conducted an Independent Country Programme Evaluation (ICPE) in 2018 prior to the scheduled completion of the country programme in 2019. The primary purpose of the evaluation is to inform the development of the next UNDP country programme and to strengthen accountability to national stakeholders and the UNDP Executive Board. This is the second ICPE of the UNDP programme, with the previous evaluation having covered the period 2004 to 2011.

Findings and conclusions

The country programme reflects national priorities vis-à-vis resilience, climate risk and environmental management, and strengthening institutional capacities of key democratic governance institutions. The programme has provided institutional capacity-building support to public institutions and worked at community level, with mixed results. UNDP has contributed to developing the capacities of democratic governance institutions to implement government reforms through the adoption, utilization and implementation of improved systems, management practices and institutionalized capacity

development and training. UNDP played an important role in developing capacities and an enabling framework to support decentralization and local governance. The country programme also delivered substantial amounts of small-scale infrastructure, including clean water systems and irrigation, check dams, slope stabilization and reforestation under the resilience portfolio. However, the upstream policy-oriented interventions under this portfolio have been delayed by political uncertainty and government changes. The sustainability of the community-level infrastructure is challenged by limited subnational budgets and resources.

Because the country office faces a disconnect between its ambitions and available resources, it needs to focus its objectives in terms of support and coverage which can be delivered with the resources available. There have been major changes in the external operating environment since the last ICPE. Following the departure of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste in 2012 and the country's transition to middle-income country status, many traditional development partners have left or are changing their strategies. The UNDP Regional Office has envisaged an increasingly "upstream" role for the country office, focused on high-level policy advice and a "think tank" role. Concurrently, UNDP regular resources and staffing have been reduced consistent with the country's middle-income status, with unintended consequences for the design and sustainability of project interventions. Shorter-term funding will mean shorter-term projects that tend to favour "low hanging fruit" interventions at the expense of projects requiring the longer implementation timeline that many development outcomes require.

Outside the governance programme, the country programme is overly dependent on Global Environment Facility (GEF) funding and focuses mainly on poverty-environment linkages. GEF-funded projects tend towards provision of services and social infrastructure with a sometimes tenuous

connection with global environmental benefits. The country office's broader intentions with regard to youth and self-employment, strengthening peace and supporting sustainable development are marginal to the programme. Given the scarcity of donors and their tendency to implement their own programmes, there is no obvious solution to this challenge.

Given the programme's concentration around one set of interconnected issues, the current division into three outcome areas is unnecessary. Projects with similar objectives appear under different outcome areas, with improved governance as an underlying factor for progress in all areas. UNDP support to decentralization, seen by national partners as a major comparative advantage, could provide an overarching approach to the delivery of sustainable development, incorporating all three current outcomes under one coherent programme.

Capacity-building, the underlying justification for the continuing engagement of UNDP in Timor-Leste, needs to be approached more systematically.

Following years of technical support, relevant democratic governance institutions have enhanced institutional capacities for governance reforms. However, the rest of the portfolio did not demonstrate a well-designed approach to capacity development. Although written into virtually every project, it is often at a generic level without specific objectives and results indicators, which would enable performance to be assessed. There is limited knowledge transfer and no requirement for those trained to develop concrete plans to use this knowledge to improve the operations of their institutions.

Collaboration among United Nations bodies is not sufficient to maintain the status of the United Nations system as a major development partner in Timor-Leste. The declining human and financial resources affecting all United Nations organizations in the country is seen by government partners as reducing the role of the United Nations. The lack of coordination among agencies exacerbates this situation, creating an impression of competition which is seen as a weakness by national stakeholders.

Recommendations

The next UNDP country programme should have one outcome area, focused on contributing to sustainable development through support to decentralized and area-based local governance. This would concentrate limited resources around a programme with limited and attainable objectives that makes a clear contribution to national development. The outcome should incorporate critical elements of existing projects to ensure long-term sustainability. In governance and institutional strengthening, these include improving access to justice at the local level, strengthening integrity and accountability of local public administration and strengthening the institutional capacity of Oecusse Special Administrative Region.

The programme should align its objectives to resources which can be realized. The practice of inflating objectives and targets on the basis of "aspirational" funding

from unknown sources and completely unrealistic GEF co-funding estimates should be halted. Future country programmes should be realistic, with clearly identified contributions to nationally-owned development policies and programmes.

Future country programmes should be built around a specific capacity-building strategy with clear objectives, realizable targets and concrete plans for increased national ownership and management. While government bodies recognize their capacity limitations, they feel that these could be overcome more quickly through a more consistent and effective approach to capacity-building from UNDP. Enhanced technical and operational capacities of the government and private sector are essential for the phased transfer from direct to national implementation. UNDP approaches to capacity-building need to become more

targeted and results-oriented so that progress can be measured and the transition to national implementation can begin as soon as possible.

In the context of the integrator role defined in the Strategic Plan, 2018-2021 and of United Nations system reform, UNDP should systematically consider and map the best opportunities for enhanced results through improved United Nations Country Team collaboration and work with the Resident Coordinator to bring these to fruition. National stakeholders have observed a lack of complementarity and coordination among United Nations bodies. Given overlapping interests and expertise across United Nations agencies, joint programmes or other focused collaboration can strengthen the quality of technical support and maximize use of limited resources.