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 simi-
lar objectives appear under different outcome areas, with
improved governance as an underlying factor for prog-
ress 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 cur-
rent 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 demo-
cratic governance institutions have enhanced institu-
tional 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 lim-
ited 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 reduc-
ing the role of the United Nations. The lack of coor-
dination 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 develop-
ment 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 proj-
ects 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 objec-
tives to resources which can be realized.
The practice of inflating objectives and tar-
gets 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 devel-
opment 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 essen-
tial for the phased transfer from direct to
national implementation. UNDP approaches
to capacity-building need to become more
targeted and results-oriented so that prog-
ress 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 col-
laboration can strengthen the quality of
technical support and maximize use of lim-
ited resources.