

Evaluation Brief: ICPE Bangladesh



Country context and UNDP programme

Amid strong economic growth over the last decade, Bangladesh has steadily reduced the number of its citizens living below the poverty line and in extreme poverty. Bangladesh attained lower middle-income status in 2012 and met the criteria for graduation from least developed country (LDC) status in 2018. The country will likely be recommended for LDC graduation if, as predicted, it meets these criteria again in the next triennial review in 2021. Bangladesh has moved up world rankings for the size of economy to 41 and is predicted to rise to 24 on this list by 2033.¹ There are good grounds for optimism that this accelerated rate of social and economic development will continue.

If it is to continue its current momentum, Bangladesh will need to address some enormous challenges. Some 40 million Bangladeshis still live below the national poverty line, and around 30 percent of the people live just above that line, highly vulnerable to shocks that can tip them back into poverty. The country is highly exposed to natural hazards, which are a constant threat particularly in the extensive coastal areas. Around 26,000 people lose land to flooding and erosion each year.

UNDP's country programme addresses these challenges in three areas. First, it seeks to address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, including projects targeting communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and urban poverty. Second, it focuses on improving democratic governance, including access to justice, local governance, and digital service delivery. Finally, the country programme has a major focus on disaster risk reduction (DRR), including strengthening policies and procedures for emergency response and external assistance coordination and promoting adaptation to climate change.

Findings and conclusions

UNDP has a well-regarded and wide-ranging development programme in Bangladesh which has produced some good outcomes. In DRR, e-service delivery, informal justice, and the CHT, UNDP is recognized as having made some major contributions to Bangladesh's development progress. UNDP has played a constructive niche role in other areas, such as social protection, acting in concert with other donors. Overcoming significant challenges, UNDP has established the foundations for a useful role in the international response to the Rohingya crisis, focused on the long-term development implications of the crisis, and its impact on host communities.

The United Nations system – and UNDP as a key part of it – has continued relevance to Bangladesh. Universally, government partners expressed appreciation for the support UNDP provides in many different areas and emphasized that UNDP and the United Nations system are still highly relevant in Bangladesh. Donors recognized that UNDP has close relationships at the highest levels of the Bangladesh Government and that its neutrality enabled it to work in areas that would be difficult for them to support directly through bilateral projects. This includes, for example, work in areas of human rights strengthening, and support provided in the CHT.

While UNDP is still valued, its relevance and influence have declined. This decline in influence is the inevitable outcome of the increasing scale of the Bangladesh Government's own development resources. It also reflects the fact that UNDP's programme and capability within the office has shrunk substantially in recent years. UNDP's core regular funding has declined and the organization has found it increasingly difficult to mobilize funding from donors at the level it has historically.

¹ Centre for Economics and Business Research, 'World Economic League Table 2019', 2018.

A key challenge UNDP will need to address if it is to preserve its relevance and influence is the progressive fragmentation of its support. Over a period where both delivery and staffing resources have declined, the number of projects in the country office's portfolio has continued to increase. The combination of a declining budget and pressures from many different agencies and geographical regions means that the UNDP programme includes many very small initiatives that operate in widely scattered locations. Arguably, many are too small to be relevant or useful. Many others provide only limited short-term benefits and lack a plausible approach to generating real learning and influence beyond project boundaries.

The outcome is that UNDP staff and programme resources are being spread increasingly thinly across the areas covered by the country programme document, stretching the country office's management

capacity and undermining quality. This is evident in the fact that UNDP has been struggling to provide adequate performance reporting to donor partners, who expressed concern about the openness and frequency of communication from UNDP on key performance issues. Concerns were also expressed about a lack of openness and proactivity to coordination and collaboration with key actors in the areas UNDP works in. A large number of UNDP's most important new programmes have been affected by lengthy delays in receiving government approvals, which underlines the importance of more regular and proactive communication.

The country programme needs to strengthen its focus on promoting gender equality in the context of the projects it delivers, and in modelling its commitment to gender equality.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The country office should address fragmentation in its portfolio by minimizing the number of small projects that rely mostly or exclusively on core funding; reducing the number of projects it manages; and developing larger, more integrated and more flexible programmes.

Recommendation 2. The country office should improve the quality of project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) by: increasing investment in ensuring high-quality M&E expertise is available for supporting implementation across the programme; ensuring all projects have results frameworks that reflect approved funding allocations, to provide a basis for monitoring and accounting for results; establishing a standard format for performance reporting that clearly

distinguishes between inputs and activities, and the outputs, outcomes and impacts they underpin, and only includes results that can be reasonably attributed to UNDP's contributions; and ensuring appropriate attention is paid to the quality of outcomes achieved, rather than simply numbers of results achieved (i.e. people trained), and to challenges.

Recommendation 3. To maximize the potential impacts of programme interventions, especially pilots or geographically delimited interventions, UNDP should avoid engaging in small pilots of untested interventions that have limited prospects of influencing Bangladesh Government policies or programmes. Relatedly, it should increase attention to the feasibility of increasing the scale of proven interventions, reflecting on

institutional capacity to replicate them at a larger scale.

Recommendation 4. The country office should increase its focus on promoting gender equality in its programmes, and in its business environment. To ensure it has a foundation for doing so, the country office should: increase the resources it commits to ensuring appropriate attention to gender equality in programme design and delivery and in its business environment; ensure active measures are taken to address the imbalance in staffing, and marked differences in the satisfaction of male and female staff evident in staff survey results; annually review and update gender marker coding so that the data provides an accurate picture of the level of focus on gender equality of the country programme.