

Evaluation Brief: ICPE China

The Independent Evaluation Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted an Independent Country Programme Evaluation in China in 2019, covering the period from 2016 to mid-2019 (three-and-a-half years of the current 2016-2020 cycle).

China has achieved significant economic development in the past 40 years and has become an upper-middle-income country. Accompanying its economic success, China achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and achieving a high rate of human development. However, China still faces many challenges, including increased inequality and disparity and challenges around environmental sustainability. China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) highlights the development of services and measures to address environmental and social imbalances, setting targets to reduce pollution, increase energy efficiency, improve access to education and healthcare, and expand social protection. Internationally, while being actively engaged in global issues, China is expanding its international partnerships and significant efforts have been made vis-à-vis South-South and triangular cooperation.

UNDP's country programme was informed by the national context and development priorities and has three main interlinked components: (i) A greater proportion of the population enjoys improved living conditions and increased opportunities for economic, social and cultural development; (ii) More people enjoy a cleaner, healthier environment as a result of improved environmental protection and sustainable green growth; and (iii) The effectiveness of China's engagement in international cooperation is enhanced for the mutual benefit of China and the world.

Findings and conclusions

UNDP systematically responded to national development needs in a fast-evolving country context,

and its country programme was well aligned with national development priorities. UNDP is viewed as a neutral and legitimate multilateral partner and is considered well-placed to bring in international networks, expertise and standards, and to pilot test new ideas and initiatives for potential transformational effect. However, China has become an upper-middle-income country, which leads to a major decrease in core resources being allocated to the country programme. As further changes are forthcoming, with UNDP China currently being in a two-year grace period until January 2020, after which the Chinese government will be expected to contribute more to the funding of local office costs, it is important to clarify and agree with the government on UNDP's future presence and working modality in China.

UNDP has been able to leverage its partnership and work closely with government partners on upstreaming policy work and innovative and demonstration pilot projects. As the UNDP country programme depends largely on Global Environment Facility and Montreal Protocol funding, important results have been achieved mostly in environment-related areas. For example, among others, UNDP's environment, energy, climate change and ozone layer protection projects are well on track to achieve, and in some cases exceed, the set targets. Its support in the area of climate change mitigation/renewable energy/energy efficiency has achieved noteworthy results through the revision and inclusion of new policies, and the demonstration of new tools and applications. Due to small-scale interventions, there were limited results in poverty reduction, broadening access to justice and social services, supporting public sector reform and the development of civil society. With its expertise in integrating multidisciplinary development areas, UNDP has a comparative advantage in supporting government efforts to localize the Sustainable Development Goals.

In recent years, UNDP has been a key partner supporting China on its aid policy. In the context of

China continuing to invest in strengthening its global partnerships and engagement, UNDP was able to mobilize resources from China to promote sustainable development beyond its borders through South-South cooperation and global partnership programmes. By leveraging its global network, UNDP support is valued by many government partners, although future arrangements for this support need to be clarified.

UNDP was successful in mobilizing considerable financial resources for its programme, mainly through vertical trust funds, but also government and third-party cost-sharing. However, the decreasing core resource as a result of China graduating to upper-middle-income country status and the decreasing proportion of government cost-sharing contributions may have a significant impact on UNDP's future presence. Mobilizing resources through government cost-sharing will be increasingly important, especially if UNDP is to work outside of the sphere of environment and climate-related work.

The country office's capacity for monitoring and evaluation improved over the last years due to significant efforts in training and reporting standardization. However, the current monitoring and evaluation sys-

tem is still more oriented towards delivering activities and meeting financial targets and there is insufficient analysis of the quality of results or unintended consequences. Complementarities between the knowledge management and evaluation functions of the country office are weak. UNDP China's communication function actively contributed to enhancing the office's visibility and public awareness on several key issues.

Some interventions consciously worked to promote gender equality by targeting women beneficiaries and other vulnerable groups. In particular, UNDP's efforts to work with marginalized groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and people living with HIV/AIDS who face strong social stigma, are to be commended. Notwithstanding, except for some dedicated projects, the integration of gender principles in the programme was generally limited. Its approach lacked a comprehensive analysis of gender factors and dynamics that go beyond access to resources and opportunities. The country office formed a gender and diversity focal team and is developing a strategy and action plan to strengthen its focus on gender equality in the office and in its programmatic work.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The new country programme document should clearly define UNDP's positioning and roles in China. To remain relevant, UNDP should continue to be agile, both in its thematic offerings and its modalities. Its work needs to be underpinned by clear theories of change, developed in consultation with key stakeholders and applied using a reflective approach. UNDP should consider establishing an advisory group to provide strategic feedback and advice on its work and interactions within the broader policy and institutional context in China.

Recommendation 2. Building on lessons learned from previous work and UNDP comparative advantages, UNDP should focus on where it can offer most value for China and global development and how to optimize its comparative advantages. For development work within China, this should include continuing to support China's transition to a green, low-carbon economy, promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals, and advocacy for the needs of poor and marginalized groups of society. Sustainable Development Goal localization could serve as an entry point for UNDP programmes in China.

Recommendation 3. UNDP should continue its support to China's global development engagement. Expectations around the global development engagement funded by China should be clarified, and further corporate guidance would be useful.

Recommendation 4. To facilitate the scaling out and scaling up of its successful pilots and demonstrations, UNDP should continue to strengthen knowledge management, monitoring and evaluation, policy advocacy and resource mobilization.

Recommendation 5. UNDP should further strengthen the gender aspect of its programme to achieve more gender-responsive and gender-transformative results.