Final Evaluation of Outcome 2 of the Regional Programme Document for Arab States – (2018-2021)

Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), UNDP

Final Report
July 2021

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Outcome Information		
Outcome title	Outcome 2: Strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies	
Region	Arab States Region	
Date project document signed	January 2018	
Outcome dates	**Start**	**Planned end**
	January 2018	December 2021
Total committed budget	37,760	
Project expenditure at the time of evaluation	37,760	
Funding source	TRAC	
Implementing party	UNDP	

Evaluation information		
Evaluation type (project/ outcome/thematic/country programme, etc.)	Outcome	
Final/midterm review/ other	Final	
Period under evaluation	**Start**	**End**
	January 2018	May 2021
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Evaluation dates	**Start**	**Completion**
	February 2021	July 2021

Abbreviations

ACIAC	Anti-Corruption and Integrity in Arab Countries
ACINET	Anti-Corruption and Integrity Network
ADP	Arab Development Portal
AHDR	Arab Human Development Report
AITRS	Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics
ANNHRI	Arab Network of National Human Rights Institutions
ArabEMB	Arab Electoral Management Bodies
AWO	Arab Women's Organization
AYC	Arab Youth Centre
CAWTAR	Centre for Arab Women's Training & Research
CG	Coordination Group of Arab National and Regional Developmental Institutions
CMD	Crisis Management Department (of the LAS)
CO	Country Office
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAAR	Diversity Advancement in the Arab Region
DFATD	Department for Aid, Trade and Development
DLI	Digital Lighthouse Initiative
EAD	Election Affairs Department
EMB	Electoral Management Body
EQ	Evaluation Question
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
II	Individual Interview
IT	Information Technology
KAICIID	King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious & Interfaith Dialogue
KII	Key Informant Interview
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
KP	Knowledge Project
LAS	The Arab League (formerly League of Arab States)
M & E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MBRF	Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NHRI	National Human Rights Institutions
OFID	OPEC Fund for International Development
Prodoc	Project document
PSCAR	Promoting Social Cohesion in the Arab Region
RBAS	Regional Bureau for Arab States
RBM	Result-based Management
RC	Resident Coordinator
ROAR	Result-Oriented Annual Report
RP	Regional Programme
RPD	Regional Programme Document
RRF	Results & Resources Framework
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SII	Siemens Integrity Initiative
TOC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNODC	United Nations Office for Drugs & Crime
US$	United States Dollar
YLP	Youth Leadership Programme
3RP	Regional Refugee Response Plan

Glossary of terms

*Contribution analysi*s is a theory-based approach to causal analysis which utilizes an explicit theory of change, through a step-by-step process designed to test the theory against logic and evidence to confirm that an intervention or initiative has contributed to an observed result.

Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It involves the collection and selection of stories of change, produced by programme or project stakeholders. MSC can be used in projects and programmes where it is not possible to precisely predict desired changes beforehand, and is therefore difficult to set pre-defined indicators of change.

Political missions are United Nations civilian missions that are deployed for a limited duration to support Member States in good offices, conflict prevention, peace-making and peacebuilding. While special political missions vary widely in their functional roles and characteristics, they can be classified into three main categories, or clusters, namely, special envoys; sanctions panels and monitoring groups; and field-based missions.

Process tracing is a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case. The main purpose of process tracing is to attempt to establish whether, and how, a potential cause or causes influenced a specified change or set of changes. A key feature of process tracing is the development and testing of alternative ideas about how and why change might have happened. Process tracing starts by first measuring change and then working backwards to assess contribution. The method involves five steps: 1) Identify the change or changes to be explained; 2) Establish the evidence for the change; 3) Document the processes leading to the change; 4) Establish alternative causal explanations; 5) Assess the evidence for each causal explanation.

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Final Evaluation Outcome 2[1] of the Regional Programme Document for Arab States – (2018-2021)

REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ARAB STATES (RBAS), UNDP

July 2021

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[1] Outcome 2: Strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies

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My special thanks are due to Maya Abi-Zeid, Reporting & Knowledge Management Specialist at the RBAS, without whose continuous support on every aspect of the evaluation, from providing the key documents, identifying the key informants, scheduling interviews and obtaining feedback on draft inputs, through to finalization of the report, this evaluation would not have been possible. Paola Pagliani, Regional Programme Coordinator of RBAS provided the much-needed strategic guidance and support throughout the evaluation, and along with Maya was always at hand to clarify any issues.

My deepest gratitude to all.

Abhijit Bhattacharjee, 15 July 2021

Disclaimer
The views expressed in this report are those of the evaluator. They may not necessarily represent those of UNDP or of any of the individuals and organizations referred to in the report, unless cited from published reports and documents duly referenced.

Executive Summary

Introduction to the evaluation

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the Arab States region commissioned an independent final evaluation of Outcome 2 of the regional programme for the period 2018-2021. The evaluation focused on UNDP's contribution and performance in **strengthening institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies in the Arab region (outcome 2)**. The evaluation was undertaken by an international consultant between February-May 2021. This report brings together the findings, conclusions and recommendations from the various processes of the evaluation.

The regional programme

The Regional Programme document, various progress reports of different projects and a brief outline of contexts presented in the terms of reference (ToR) provide a detailed description of the humanitarian and development challenges in the Arab region. The following major issues are recurring themes in most of the countries in the region: (a) shrinking economies and mounting uncertainty compounded by the increasing vulnerabilities and human rights concerns arising out of the COVID-19 crisis; (b) persistent governance deficit leading to popular discontent and unleashing the forces of conflict; (c) increasing conflict, polarization and forced displacement; (d) gender inequality; and (e) climate change and vulnerability to disasters.

The outcome 2 of the regional programme documents (RPD) focused on several result areas (outputs) which were based on UNDP's strategic plan, as shown in the Box below.

Box 1: RBAS Regional Programme (Outcome 2) Outputs[2]

Governance signature solution
Output 2.2.1: Institutions and systems enabled to address awareness, prevention and enforcement of anti-corruption measures.
Output 2.2.2: Regional platforms for policy dialogue enabled to support civic engagement, constitution-making, electoral and parliamentary processes and institutions to promote inclusion, transparency and accountability.
Output 2.2.3: Regional and sub-regional dialogue and policy space expanded to support national capacities for social cohesion, prevention of violent extremism and durable solutions to displacement.

Resilience signature solution
Output 2.3.1: Sub-regional cooperation and related capacities enhanced for stabilisation, rapid recovery from crises and return to sustainable development pathways.
Output 2.3.2: Regional capacities and multi-country evidence-based assessment and planning tools enable prevention and preparedness to limit the impact of crisis and conflict.

Gender signature solution
Output 2.6.1: Capacities strengthened to raise awareness on and undertake legal, policy and institutional reforms to fight gender discrimination and ensure women's participation in political and peace processes.

Knowledge and thought leadership

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[2] The output numbers correspond to the output numbers in the RPD.

Output 2.5.1: Capacities developed to analyse progress towards SDGs using innovative and data-driven solutions.

Output 2.5.2: Policies, plans and partnerships for sustainable development draw upon UNDP's thought leadership, knowledge and evidence.

(Source: UNDP (2017). Regional programme document for Arab States (2018-2021), 28 November 2017)

The evaluation objectives and method

The evaluation's key objectives were to seek evidence-based assessment of the extent the programme achieved (or is likely to achieve) its intended objectives and identify the factors that contributed to or hindered UNDP's performance and sustainability of results. The evaluation questions outlined in the ToR were assessed for their evaluability and refined during the inception phase using the lens of four key evaluation criteria, namely: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Additionally, the evaluation examined cross-cutting issues related to gender, disability and human rights in the programme. The detailed questions and assessment criteria are presented in the evaluation matrix annexed to this report.

The evaluation process was based on mixed methods involving key informant interviews (KII), desk review of key documents and user/beneficiary survey which enabled the evaluator to triangulate information and perspectives from multiple sources. Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, all KIIs had to be undertaken remotely. In total, the evaluator conducted 42 structured individual interviews with different stakeholder groups and conducted an online survey of user groups for some the regional programme stakeholder groups.

The primary users of the evaluation are the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), UNDP Country Offices (COs) in the Arab States region, relevant regional institutions, government agencies and entities, civil-society organizations and research institutions, other United Nations (UN) agencies, donors, and the private sector, where applicable.

The evaluation had a number of limitations, including the fact that all interviews were undertaken remotely and not all the 20 countries where regional programme is implemented were covered in the interviews. Despite this, through a process of rigorous triangulation, the evaluator has ensured that the data points used here for drawing the findings present a credible picture of the trend in terms of the results and UNDP's contributions, though these may not have captured the full range of outputs and outcomes being produced. The findings are representative of the programme as the data points were purposively selected in consultation with UNDP for their significance to the regional programme.

Major findings of the evaluation

Preventing and addressing anti-corruption

Finding 1: The regional programme has been instrumental in developing anti-corruption institutions, strategies and tools for diagnosis and remedial action in several countries, and has also promoted engagement of civil society and transparent mechanism in these institutions. UNDP regional programme's leadership on the anti-corruption issue is recognised by all stakeholders in the region and this enables the country offices to initiate and sustain a continuous dialogue with the official agencies on anti-corruption which is generally considered a sensitive issue by governments in most of the countries.

Finding 2: Besides building a diverse range of partnership, UNDP's ability to bring in high-quality international experience, new idea and concepts from different parts of the world have been key to creating a momentum on anti-corruption initiatives in the region.

Regional electoral capacity and knowledge

Finding 3: The regional programme has strengthened the capacity of the Election Affairs Department of the Arab League (LAS) and expanded membership of the Arab Electoral Management Bodies (ArabEMBs) to 12 countries. Alongside the ArabEMBs, the Regional Elections programme has worked with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions to promote human rights standards in elections.

Finding 4: The regional elections initiative aimed at encouraging political and civic engagement of youth in the Arab region and supported Youth Leadership Development programme to encourage youths in political participation. This initiative has now hived off and matured into a full-fledged project in itself.

Social cohesion and preventing violent extremism (PVE)

Finding 5: UNDP initiated a regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and promoted dialogue on violent extremism from a holistic perspective, instead of the limited 'securitized' approach to dealing with terrorism and violence as was the standard practice in the region. Using the multi-stakeholder platforms, the regional programme initiated a conversation on hate speech which plays a big role in inciting violence, and introduced a model for analysis of the magnitude of the problem using big data analytics model.

Finding 6: A PVE toolkit was developed that supports practitioners in design, monitoring and evaluation of PVE programmes, drawing on the best practices in PVE programming in complex, conflict contexts. This toolkit is being used by several COs and other practitioners.

Resilience

Finding 7: UNDP played a crucial role in integrating the resilience agenda in the Regional Refugee Response Plan; however, it failed to build on its comparative strengths and organizational expertise for policy engagement at national and subnational level.

Gender equality

Finding 8: The regional programme connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation. While significant efforts have gone into creating an awareness and understanding of gender issues among stakeholders through various projects and activities, progress with regard to making real changes in their functioning, especially within the LAS, has been slow.

Finding 9: The Arab Development Portal (ADP) incorporates gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data to highlight the status of women and gender disparities. All National Statistical Organizations have been trained in use of the SDG tracking tool and collecting sex-disaggregated data, attributable clearly to UNDP interventions.

Finding 10: While UNDP's ability to facilitate dialogue with regional institutions and national governments at multiple levels is considered a key asset in taking forward gender issues, gender is under-resourced in the regional programme, especially as there was no dedicated project in the last 2-3 years.

Knowledge and thought leadership

Finding 11: The ADP has become the single-most important repository of development-related data in the region for official statistical bodies and regional institutions, providing crucial data on SDG indicators and other data considered critical by international financial institutions. Various knowledge products including

the Arab Human Development Report and thematic research reports have provided a strong demand and push for evidence-based discourse on policy debates in the region.

Finding 12: The ADP is playing a key role in popularizing use of data and data visualization on development issues and use of big data analytics for development programmes in the region. Of late, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has developed a data portal which is populated with development and economy related data, including on SDGs, mirroring the ADP portal, with significant duplication and overlaps between the two.

Finding 13: Slow progress on implementing an exit strategy from the ADP project creates an uncertainly for UNDP to move things forward.

Relevance of the regional programme

Finding 14: The regional programme is strongly rooted in the priorities emerging from the regional context, and its focus remains relevant for the region, with a synergistic relationship with country-level programming. Programme delivery has rightly been primarily through the partners and COs, with direct delivery by UNDP only for the knowledge and thought leadership area.

Finding 15: The programme document had a robust articulation on sub-national governance and state building; findings however show that the contribution of the regional programme in this regard may be only indirect due to the fact that specific interventions directly targeting sub-national governance ought to be part of a country programme portfolio, and hence a strong reflection of this is not found in the regional programme.

Finding 16: The evaluation found several examples of COs leveraging the regional programme to develop country-specific programmes. The RP responded swiftly to the demand from various government institutions for increasing their digital capacity for business continuity as well as for remote communication and operations post-COVID 19.

Finding 17: Promotion of gender issues has largely remained confined to increasing participation of women in certain projects/activities. People with disabilities and their inclusion have not been given much attention within programme.

Effectiveness of the regional programme

Finding 18: Good progress has been made on anti-corruption outcomes in terms of development of institutions, policies and strategies for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption. The regional programme (RP) has made distinctive contribution to the capacity of the LAS to support countries on good practices on elections. While the regional programme has put women's political participation and women's agenda on election boards and connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation, at the national level and within the LAS institutional structure, gender remains weak. The work on PVE is facilitating a holistic understanding and actionable strategies by several governments on the nexus between social and economic marginalization, disenfranchisement and extremism.

Finding 19: The ADP and knowledge products are recognized as distinctive contributions of the regional programme which are an important source of development-related data in the region, as well as a technical services provider building the capacities of national statistical bodies on collecting data on SDG indicators and to disseminate official statistics. However, with ESCWA now starting to produce similar data, a harmonization between the two is needed.

Finding 20: The regional programme has built a relationship of mutual trust with the COs which are at the forefront of taking forward some of the activities at the country level. The RP has developed a number of highly relevant and effective partnerships over the years. Partners however appear to have only a limited view of the RP's work, to the extent UNDP chooses to engage with them.

Finding 21: The regional programme's ability to 'think ahead', bringing new ideas and incubating these, where needed, before going out for scaling up, give it a distinctive edge. Several important factors have positioned UNDP in the regional scenario to be able to influence, working with its partners, the development landscape – its diverse partnership, facilitating multi-stakeholder regional platforms and networking, high quality advice and expertise are a few of these factors.

Efficiency of the regional programme
Finding 22: With a modest budget, the regional programme creates significant multiplier effects in terms of COs' capacity to expand into new programme areas and raise additional resources leveraging the tools and standards developed through the regional programme.

Finding 23: Implementation has been generally on time and within budget, except for minor delays in implementation of certain activities due to the COVID-pandemic.

Sustainability of the regional programme
Finding 24: Several outputs related to election practices and standards, anti-corruption institutional framework, PVE tools and capacity of regional networks are likely to sustain themselves, though they require further consolidation.

Conclusions

Strategic positioning and partnership

UNDP regional programme has the unique ability to bring expertise and evidence-based thinking and research into policy discourse with governments and regional institutions. During the current RPD, while continuing to reinforce the work on anti-corruption from the previous RPD cycles, UNDP succeeded in establishing a niche presence in other areas of governance namely, elections systems, participation of women and youths in policy making and implementation of government development programmes, socialization of SDGs into national development planning, conflict prevention and social cohesion. All these have positioned UNDP in the regional scenario in a position where it is able to influence, working with its partners, the development landscape. Additionally, while UNDP's funds may be small, that it has an extensive presence and relationship with governments in the entire region, and the credibility to be able to convene different stakeholders on a common platform, gives it a distinctive edge. In this regard, the crucial partnership built with the League of Arab States has given political space to engage with the governments on sensitive issues like anti-corruption, electoral standards, political participation of women and youths in the region. Through its SDG integration role, the regional programme is supporting governments and country teams (both UNCT and UNDP) in developing their national development plans.

Synergy and complementarity with country programmes

The ability of the regional programme to bring in new ideas and incubate these through supporting country programmes has been of particular value to the country programmes, besides enabling regional networking and dialogue on complex issues. The strong complementarity with country programmes owes to the fact that the regional programme has focused on a limited range of highly relevant issues where a region-wide or cross-country thinking added value, working through either national partners or regional

institutions. Despite the strong complementarity, communication with country offices has not been systematic at times, though this has shown considerable improvement in the past 2-3 years.

Results

The current RPD has realized significant results on several fronts across the region. The LAS EAD now has an expanded membership of national election bodies and is able to facilitate networking and good practices standards among the national election bodies, including bringing on board NHRIs to monitor elections. Participation women and youths in EMBs and electoral processes is another significant contribution in this regard, though the level of engagement in different countries varies. The youth leadership programme has opened opportunities for significant scale-up of youth programmes in some of the countries. The regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society on violent extremism is ushering in a holistic understanding of nexus between social and economic marginalization and extremism, and the PVE tools are helping countries in engagement with the respective governments as well as with civil society to promote grassroots actions on the ground. The anti-corruption work has been further strengthened through significant outcomes in terms of development of national institutions and strategies in several countries. The ADP is recognized as an important source development-related data in the region, as well as a technical services provider building the capacities of national statistical bodies on collecting data on SDG indicators and disseminate official statistics. However, as the ESCWA has also launched a data portal which has some degree of duplication with the ADP portal, harmonization between the two becomes necessary. The capacity of regional institutions to promote gender issues within themselves as well as with national bodies remains limited, though one significant change has been that gender-disaggregated data is now beginning to be collected in several countries by their statistical bodies. People with disabilities and their inclusion have not been given much attention in the regional programmes.

Value for money

Value for money is a function of effectiveness, efficiency and economy. For a modest investment, the regional programme creates significant multiplier effect for the COs' capacity to expand into new programme areas and raise additional resources, besides creating and/or strengthening regional platforms and institutions that are able to facilitate better implementation of development actions at the country level. The regional programme is able to leverage economies of scale by way of investing in new initiatives, incubate innovations for scale up, and invest in institutions which can support national capacities in technical areas. These are difficult for any country office working on its own to achieve.

Emerging issues and lessons

The primary value added by a regional programmes has been through: (a) facilitating regional networking and dialogue on regional issues and matters which are sensitive to be raised directly at country level; (b) research and knowledge development, exchange, sharing and learning within the region; (c) introducing innovative methods and international standards in programming; (d) bringing about a coherence in approach among various countries to addressing some of the globally complex issues and priorities like SDGs, anti-corruption, violent extremism, etc; and (e) advocacy on sensitive issues by mobilizing regional institutions and networks.

Partnerships with the private sector have been leveraged to good effect by the RP. Besides the ADP partnership with the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), engagement with the Morocco Chamber of Commerce showed an alternative approach to establishing an institutional linkage (anti-

corruption) to promote dialogue on a sensitive issue with various stakeholders, including the government. This could be a model to use more widely in contexts where government agencies may be unresponsive or reluctant to engage on crucial issues.

The dispersed approach to partnership with the LAS by different thematic units within UNDP leads to sub-optimal outcomes. UNDP may be failing to leverage its multiple support to the League, through its compartmentalized approach, to create a strategic impact on the overall institutional capacity for providing regional leadership on complex development issues.

UNDP's monitoring and reporting which are heavily activity-oriented could be improved so as to present a clearer picture of the significant outcomes which the regional programme is realizing on the ground. Presentation of evidence of change and analysis of the theory of change in the reports, instead of description of activities, could help in better outcome-reporting.

Recommendations

R1:   Given the slow progress on gender issues in the region and challenges in mainstreaming gender, the RBAS needs to consider well-designed projects with dedicated resources which promote strategic work on gender equality issues bult around specific SDG-5 indicators, implemented through regional networks and partnerships.

R2:   The Coordination Group of Arab National and Regional Developmental Institutions need to urgently develop a plan of action with clear delineation of scope and timelines regarding handover of the ADP, while ensuring that UNDP continues to play the proactive role it plays with governments and official agencies in relation to their capacity building and sharing of experiences which UNDP is uniquely placed to do with its region-wide presence.

R3:   If UNDP continues to manage the ADP, in discussion with the UN ESCWA, UNDP needs to harmonize the ADP with the data portal provided by the former to avoid duplication.

R4:   Building on the work on strengthening digital governance begun in 2020, develop an analytical framework for digitalization strategy which prioritizes areas that directly benefit the poor and marginalized first, so that digitalization works for the latter.

R5:   Improve communication about the scope of the regional programme with senior management in country offices and partners.

R6:   Working with all development partners and UN agencies which support the LAS, develop a joint approach and institutional development plan for the LAS on critical areas of importance for the Sustainable Goals Agenda.

R7:   Introduce result-oriented analytical tools in monitoring and reporting of progress of the regional programme.

Section A: Introducing the evaluation

1. Evaluation purpose, scope and objectives

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the Arab States region commissioned an independent final evaluation of Outcome 2 of the regional programme for the period 2018-2021. The evaluation was undertaken by an international consultant between February-April 2021. This report brings together the findings, conclusions and recommendations from the various processes of the evaluation.

The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess UNDP's contribution and performance in **strengthening institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies in the Arab regio**n, as articulated in Outcome 2 of the Regional Programme Document (RPD) for the Arab States (2018-2021). While fulfilling an important accountability function vis-à-vis the stakeholders, the findings, lessons and recommendations that emerge from the evaluation are expected to help shape the future direction of the next phase of the regional programme starting 2022. The 2018-2021 regional programme (RP) focused on the following two outcome areas: i) accelerate structural transformation of productive capacities and inclusive growth (outcome 1); and ii) strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peace (outcome 2). **The focus of this evaluation has been on outcome 2 only.** The evaluation focused on progress made in relation to the outputs of outcome 2 of the RPD as articulated in the Results and Resources Framework (Annex 1) of the said document.

The scope of the evaluation covers the intended outputs (Box 1 below) under the outcome 2 during the period January 2018 to the current period. It is to be noted that all these outputs emerge from the regional programme theory of change (TOC) and are aligned with UNDP's strategic plan, which is built around six signature solutions.[3] Of these six signature solutions, three are directly addressed by outcome 2, namely: inclusive governance, resilience and gender equality. In addition, the RPD emphasizes knowledge management and thought leadership across the entire programme. The outputs sought through the RPD are presented below.

> **Box 1: RBAS Regional Programme (Outcome 2) Outputs[4]**
>
> **Governance signature solution**
> *Output 2.2.1:* Institutions and systems enabled to address awareness, prevention and enforcement of anti-corruption measures.
> *Output 2.2.2*: Regional platforms for policy dialogue enabled to support civic engagement, constitution-making, electoral and parliamentary processes and institutions to promote inclusion, transparency and accountability.
> *Output 2.2.3*: Regional and sub-regional dialogue and policy space expanded to support national capacities for social cohesion, prevention of violent extremism and durable solutions to displacement.
>
> **Resilience signature solution:**
> *Output 2.3.1*: Sub-regional cooperation and related capacities enhanced for stabilization, rapid recovery from crises and return to sustainable development pathways.
> *Output 2.3.2*: Regional capacities and multi-country evidence-based assessment and planning tools enable prevention and preparedness to limit the impact of crisis and conflict.

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[3] Signature solution 1 - poverty alleviation; signature solution 2 - inclusive and accountable governance; signature solution 3 - resilient societies; signature solution 4 - nature-based solutions for a sustainable planet; signature solution 5 - close the energy gap; and signature solution 6 - strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

[4] The output numbers correspond to the output numbers in the RPD.

> **Gender signature solution:**
> *Output 2.6.1*: Capacities strengthened to raise awareness on and undertake legal, policy and institutional reforms to fight gender discrimination and ensure women's participation in political and peace processes.
>
> **Knowledge and thought leadership:**
> *Output 2.5.1*: Capacities developed to analyse progress towards SDGs using innovative and data-driven solutions.
> *Output 2.5.2*: Policies, plans and partnerships for sustainable development draw upon UNDP's thought leadership, knowledge and evidence.

(Source: UNDP (2017). Regional programme document for Arab States (2018-2021), 28 November 2017)

The evaluation's key objectives were to seek evidence-based answers to the following broad questions:
   i.   To what extent has the programme achieved (or is likely to achieve) its intended objectives at the output level, and what contribution has it made at the outcome level?
   ii.   What factors contributed to or hindered UNDP's performance and sustainability of results?

2. Evaluation criteria, cross-cutting issues and evaluation questions

The above broad questions were addressed through the lens of four key evaluation criteria, namely: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, using the following (Box 2) specific evaluation questions (EQ). Additionally, the evaluation examined cross-cutting issues related to how gender, disability and human rights were incorporated in the programme. It needs to be noted that the terms of reference (ToR, attached as Annex 2) had outlined 35 questions which were examined for their evaluability during the inception phase and, in agreement with UNDP, were amended to the following 24 questions. The amendments were necessitated as some of the questions overlapped and hence were coalesced together.

> **Box 2: Evaluation criteria and evaluation questions**
> **Relevance**
> 1. To what extent does the intended outcome and associated outputs flow from the theory of change (TOC) and address the regional priorities, and to what extent these are aligned with UNDP's mandate?
> 2. Are the initiatives developed to contribute to this outcome addressing the needs and requirements of the identified target groups?
> 3. To what extent did UNDP adopt gender sensitive, human rights-based and conflict-sensitive approach?
> 4. To what extent is UNDP engagement with partners and stakeholders a reflection of strategic considerations, including the role of UNDP in the specific regional development context and its comparative advantage?
> 5. To what extent was the method of delivery selected by UNDP appropriate to the development context? To what extent has the regional programme adapted to changing needs triggered by new developments and/or factors?
> 6. How has the regional programme adjusted to the fallouts of COVID-19, and to what effect in relation to results delivery?
> 7. Which programme areas or approaches are the most relevant and strategic for UNDP to scale up and consider going forward?
>
> **Effectiveness**
> 8. To what extent has progress been made towards outcome 2 achievement? What has been the UNDP contribution to the observed change?
> 9. To what extent have women and men been treated equally, and the programme promoted gender equality, the empowerment of women, human rights and human development in the delivery of the corresponding outputs?

10. What has been the contribution of partners and other organizations to the outcome, and how effective have UNDP partnerships been in contributing to achieving the outcome?

11. Have there been any unexpected outcome-level results? Have outputs produced unexpected externalities which proved beneficial or detrimental towards the outcome?

12. How have UNDP regional initiatives complemented and supported UNDP work at the country office level?

13. To what extent have intended target groups benefitted?

14. To what extent did UNDP engage or coordinate with stakeholders, implementing partners, other United Nations agencies, as well as regional and national counterparts to maximise the contribution to outcome level results?

15. What additional factors should be considered to enhance effectiveness?

Efficiency

16. To what extent have the programme or project outputs resulted from economic use of resources and were delivered on time?

17. To what extent did monitoring systems provide management with a stream of data that allowed it to learn and adjust implementation accordingly?

18. To what extent were partnership modalities conducive to the delivery of regional programme outputs?

19. To what extent have UNDP practices, policies, processes and decision-making capabilities affected the achievement of outcome 2?

20. To what extent have triangular and South-South cooperation and knowledge management contributed to the results attained?

Sustainability

21. To what extent do partners have the institutional capacities, including sustainability strategies and resources in place to sustain the outcome-level results?

22. To what extent are policy and regulatory frameworks in place that will support the continuation of benefits?

23. To what extent do mechanisms, procedures and policies exist to carry forward the results attained on gender equality, empowerment of women, human rights and human development by primary stakeholders? How have these been affected by COVID-19?

24. What could be done to strengthen sustainability?

During the inception phase of the evaluation, an evaluation matrix (Annex 3) with detailed judgment criteria and sources of data and methods was produced which allowed each EQ to be assessed for its evaluability in order to understand the feasibility of addressing the EQs, and the challenges and shortcomings that may be faced during the evaluation.

The results of this analysis showed that the EQs 22 and 23 have wide scope; adequately answering these would require examining policy, mechanism and regulatory frameworks in different countries, something which was beyond the scope and capacity of this evaluation. **Likewise, examining EQ 19 to any credible depth was unrealistic for an evaluation of this nature as this will ideally have required assessment of policies, procedures and decision-making within UNDP**, which was found to be not feasible with the limited resources available for this evaluation. However, wherever feasible, evidence to cover limited aspects of these questions were attempted to be gathered, though these do not provide adequate basis to fully address the wide scope of these questions.

The primary users of the evaluation are the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), UNDP Country Offices (COs) in the Arab States region, relevant regional institutions, government agencies and entities, civil-society organizations and research institutions, other United Nations (UN) agencies, donors, and the private sector, where applicable.

3. Evaluation framework and methodology

3.1 Approach and method

During the inception phase, the evaluator developed a three-pronged approach combining (a) *theory-based* approach, (b) *data-driven* approach based on RPD performance measurement framework, and (c) *evaluation matrix* with a set of evaluation questions based on evaluation criteria, to build a strong evidence-base. The evaluator examined the Theory of Change (TOC) or interventions logic as articulated in the programme rationale of the RPD (*See Annex 4 for a presentation of the TOC*) and its underlying assumptions. As the intervention logic shows, the regional programme aims to deliver several complex outputs and outcomes, evaluation of which required methodologies that took into account the complexities of dealing with different type of data, quantitative and qualitative, often with little or no counterfactuals to compare against. The evaluator used mixed methods, with primary and secondary data gathered from a representative sample of projects supported through the RPD on Outcome 2. To help gather evidence from the regional programme interventions, the evaluator developed a series of judgement criteria for all the 24 evaluation questions; this was done to enable a granular analysis of UNDP-supported work in line with the strategy and results articulated in the RPD. The judgment criteria were based on various outputs and outcomes outlined in the RPD, UNDP/UNEG evaluation guidelines, and these were used to develop appropriate methods for data collection and analysis and collated into an evaluation matrix (Annex 3).

Several intended outputs and outcomes were complex and posed challenges in attribution (for example, capacity building of institutions and changes in policy etc) as (i) there was very little tangible baseline (counterfactual) to compare against; and (ii) multiple actors are often involved in influencing these changes. Wherever applicable, the evaluation used the process tracing method to ensure that the regional programme's distinctive contribution could be traced, as far as possible. This involved tracing the changes *within-case* and then comparing these against alternative cases.[5]

The mixed methods approach combined key informant interviews (KII), desk review of key documents and user/beneficiary survey which enabled the evaluator to triangulate information and perspectives from multiple sources. Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, all KIIs had to be undertaken remotely. Secondary data available in various reports related to outputs and outcomes of the RPD were extracted from Annual progress reports, Result-Oriented Outcome Reports (ROAR), monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports in UNDP's documents repository, and relevant evaluation reports of various programmes and projects that constitute the RPD. The list of key documents is attached as Annex 5. These were supplemented with and validated against data obtained from key individual interviews and survey of individual users/beneficiaries of various activities namely, youth leadership and training, use of Arab Development Portal (ADP, which is a repository of data on development issues in the region), and civic participation and engagement on governance issues.

In order to ensure that gender equality, rights and social inclusion issues were addressed during the evaluation, the judgement criteria against the evaluation questions integrated these issues as can be seen in the evaluation matrix; additionally, where relevant, the interview questions (Annex 6) used as a data collection tool explicitly emphasized these issues. The selection of key informants was also informed by the need for the evaluation to ensure that critical insights were obtained from individuals on gender, human rights and inclusion issues. A full list of key informants can be found at Annex 7. The selection of individual interviewees was done based on a stakeholder analysis carried out at the inception stage, ensuring that the evaluation included all major activities and outputs within outcome 2 of the programme. For KIIs, a non-probability sampling (purposive and snowball) was used for data collection covering the following stakeholder groups:

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[5] For more details on *process tracing*, see Glossary at the beginning of this document

Table 1: Stakeholder groups interviewed during the evaluation

Stakeholder group	No. of KIIs
UNDP RBAS & country offices	23
Governments – anticorruption bodies, national statistical institutions	4
Regional Bodies – League of Arab States, Regional Research & training institutions	2
CSOs /private sector – NGO/CSO networks at national, regional and global levels; Academics;	11
Others - Donor agencies, other UN organizations	2
Total	**42**

(Source: Compiled from list of interviews conducted during the evaluation)

An online survey was administered to 650 individuals using Surveymonkey, of which 54% respondents were women. The selection of the sample was based on a combination of purposive and random sampling – in the first instance a long list of 'users/beneficiaries' of various project and non-project initiatives was obtained from project managers, out of which a number of candidates were randomly selected as potential respondents. The survey tool included 19 questions of multiple choice as well as descriptive types, with some questions requiring respondent to score their answers on a Likert scale.[6] The questionnaire (Annex 8) covered the following areas:

- Awareness & training on Sustainable Development Goals
- Youth Leadership Training
- Awareness & training on youth/women's participation in electoral processes
- Anticorruption /integrity groups related activities
- Promote participation of youth and women in elections
- Participation in peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities.

The response to the survey was underwhelming as only 72 returns (11%) were received, which could be either because the timing of the survey coincided with *Ramadan* celebrations or due to the COVID. The respondents comprising 30 men and 39 women (3 NA/others) were from 18 countries in the region, with nearly 80 percent coming from the 18-35 year age group (Figure 1). A summary report of the survey is attached as Annex 9.
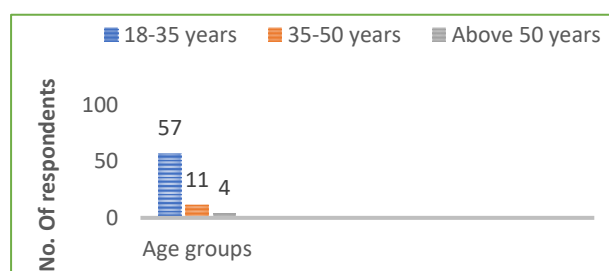
Figure 1: No of respondents in different age groups

3.2 Data mapping, triangulation and analysis

Throughout the evaluation, data collected from both KIIs and documents were recorded systematically for evidence assessment based on the judgment criteria against each EQ defined in the evaluation matrix. A set of 32 keywords based on the judgment criteria was used to classify each piece of evidence and mapped on an excel sheet (Figure 2). All data sources were coded using numeric (1, 2..) and alpha-numeric (A1, An..) characters to differentiate different types of sources, namely a document number from which the data has been obtained and a KII respectively.[7] KIIs were further differentiated between internal (UNDP staff) and

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[6] Likert scale is a psychometric scale where respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree/like-unlikely scale for a series of statements. The range captures the intensity of their feelings for a given item.

[7] Additionally, the use of codes to represent key informants ensures that the latter cannot be directly identified, enabling the evaluator to have an unbiased view of the data.

external (non-UNDP) stakeholders - all codes suffixed by an alpha character "E" denote an external key informant. This method enabled the evaluator to trace the pattern in the data and then cluster these around emerging themes and sub-themes using the sort function in excel. The clustering of data around themes and sub-themes in this manner enabled synthesizing the evidences into findings; the categorization of sources by codes described above also enabled the evaluator to track the strength of evidence (see paragraph 17 below) based on the density of sources and types of sources supporting each evidence. The survey data was not mapped in this excel sheet as this was analysed separately using Surveymonkey's analytical tools, and key findings from the survey added to the findings emerging from the interviews and desk reviews.

Figure 2: Data mapping - interviews and desk review (illustrative)

Key Informant/source code	KII evidence	Keyword
A1	RP has been able to bring the anticorruption agenda from legislations and policy level to sectroal level implementation, with tools and measures to concretise the policies. Tunisia health sector plan is an example. The method is based on risk identification and risk managemnt	Anticorruption
A1	In Jordan, CSOs and the Govt. worked together to review UNCAC compliance, thus bringing the CSOs close to the public administration	CSO-Anticorruption
A5	YLP training coverred fidinng local solutions, SDG consultation. IN some offices they got training on gender as well. Last year we organised training on Covid adaptation.	YLP
A8E	We get support from LAS and Kuwait Fund	AITRS
A9E	Overlap in the work on UNDP, UNWomen and UNFPA. Partnerhsip withUNDP on ad hoc project basis.	Partnership
A9E	CAWTAR is a regional institution, with some 400+ members who are CSOs/NGOs. Intially founded in 1993 with UNDP support. At that point, there were no Minstries in any government with women focus in the region.	Partnership
A9E	Was one of the Advisers for UNDP on women issues in the region	Partnership
A11	PSACR aims were broad and so unrealistic. DAAR leaves an important aspect of social cohesion work out. PSCAR produced social cohesion index, but was not implemented.	PSCAR
34	While this evaluation has found evidence for impact across project outputs, it is challenging to identify such evidence when results have not been tracked over time.	Results
7	Regional capacities to support electoral processes have been strengthened within regional institutions including capacity development in the League of Arab States electoral assistance programming, expanded membership of the Arab Electoral Management bodies to 12 countries	Electoral capacity

(Source: Evidence Assessment sheet developed for the evaluation)

Rigorous data triangulation was done mainly through comparing information gathered through multiple sources and methods. Where discrepancies occurred that could not be resolved, the evaluator did not use such data for drawing findings or conclusions. The evaluation utilized three types of triangulation to highlight any inconsistencies between different data sources. These were:
- *Methods triangulation* - both qualitative (KII) and quantitative (survey, documents) data was used to elucidate complementary aspects of the same subject;
- *Data source triangulation* – involved examining the consistency of different data sources (UNDP internal and external key informants) within the same methods;
- *Theory triangulation* - which involved using multiple theories to interpret and examine the data obtained (process tracing).

All data from the desk review, individual interview notes and survey were systematically assessed for their convergence or otherwise to examine their: (i) representativeness – do the data/information represent the whole or a sizeable picture? (ii) relevance – to the questions in the evaluation matrix; and (iii) attributability – if the data convey a 'state', is it attributable to the intervention/cause being described? The outliers were not rejected outright and, where relevant, additional data was gathered for validation. In weighing evidence, the evaluator imputed higher value to evidence emerging from key informant interviews and survey, and, as far as possible, evidence from documents were used to supplement primary data for triangulation purposes. Validated data from any available

> **Scoring system for rating of evidence**
>
> **4 – Very strong** convergence of data from all sources (desk review, interviews, survey);
> **3 – Strong** convergence of data from all sources (desk review, interviews, survey);
> **2 – Some degree** of convergence of data from all sources (desk review, interviews, survey);
> **1 – Weak** convergence of data from all sources (desk review, interviews, survey) - the evaluator was unable to establish any finding.

independent evaluation reports were weighted higher than self-reported progress reports. The evaluator then assessed the EQ findings for strength of evidence and rated this accordingly, using the scoring system showed in the box.

4. Evaluation ethics and data protection

Protecting personal data is essential in any evaluation so as to respect dignity and ensure security of all stakeholders involved. The evaluator ensured full confidentiality of data provided, accessed and produced during the course of this work, unless information was obtained from sources that are in the public domain. **Any personal data collected has been minimal and anonymized in the report; for online survey, no name(s) or personal details were collected or recorded at all, except for the gender (M/F) and country of residence of the respondents.** For all other stakeholders (individual interviewees), although their names and title (function/role in an organization) were collected by the evaluator for analysis of any trend with regard to information/data collected, their names or any details is not presented in the report in any way that information presented can be traced back to an individual interviewee or organization, unless authorized by the latter in writing, or cited from published documents.

The evaluator followed the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) ethical guidelines[8] throughout the evaluation process. In specific terms, the ET adhered to the following ethical principles at all stages:
   a) *Principle 1: independence and impartiality of the evaluator*;
   b) *Principle 2: Avoiding harm* – evaluator ensured that the basic human rights of individuals and groups (to participate or not to participate) as well as their health and safety (risks related to COVID-19) were protected.
   c) *Principle 3: Voluntary participation* - participation in the evaluation process was voluntary and free from external pressure.
   d) *Principle 4: Informed consent* – the evaluator informed participants how information and data obtained will be used, processed, shared, disposed of, prior to obtaining consent.
   e) *Principle 6: Ensuring confidentiality* – the evaluator respected people's right to provide information in confidence, and has attempted to ensure that information cannot be traced to its source, without authorization by the latter.

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[8] UN Evaluation Group, *UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation,* 2008.

5. Limitations of the evaluation

The RPD document has clear statement of outcomes. However, the outcome indicators defined in the document for outcome 2 seriously limit capturing key elements of progress with regard to the outcome as these emphasize purely on number of 'participants/ products' in particular outputs. A typical example of this is shown using just one output (anti-corruption) in the Box. There are limitations of using this type of indicators for an outcome level evaluation like this as these do not necessarily capture the changes that development interventions bring about. Instead, the evaluation has tracked the outputs in terms of changes as seen by key stakeholder and end-users/beneficiaries, not necessarily reflected in the indicators stated in the RPD.

RPD indicators

RP Outcome indicator for anti-corruption: *"Proportion of persons who had at least one contact with a public official and who paid a bribe to a public."*

The corresponding output is defined as:
"Institutions and systems enabled to address awareness, prevention and enforcement of anti-corruption measures." (RP output 2.2.1). This has the following output indicators:
* Number of proposals adopted by public and private entities to reduce vulnerabilities to corruption in specific sectors and across them.
* Number of regionally supported products and platforms enabling wider participation in transparency and accountability dialogues and reform.

All individual interviews by the evaluator were undertaken remotely as travel wasn't possible due to fallouts from COVID-19. This also contributed to the limitations with regard to gathering sufficient evidence on a few evaluation questions (see subsection 2, paragraph 7 above); hence no findings on these questions have been drawn. The survey had major limitations in that: (a) the response rate was a little more than 10 percent; and (b) the depth of engagement of the respondents with different thematic programmes within the regional programme varied widely, making analysis of patterns and their comparison difficult.

Further, the regional programme covers 20 countries. Because of limited time and capacity of the individual evaluator undertaking this evaluation, it has not been possible to conduct KIIs with stakeholders in all the countries, nor was secondary evaluable data available from all of them. The evaluator has drawn on evidences from a limited number of countries for which data was obtained either through KIIs or through desk reviews and surveys. However, this need not be construed as either the countries not mentioned in this report produced no results, or that the countries /activities whose work is cited as examples are the best or worst ones. The references to work in different countries is included simply because these are the ones the evaluation could find in the process of data collection using the methods agreed at the inception stage. This does mean that while the data points used here for drawing the findings present a credible picture of the trend in terms of the results and UNDP's contributions, this may not have captured the full range of outputs and outcomes being produced. Despite this limitation, the findings are representative of the programme as the data points were purposively selected in consultation with UNDP for their significance to the RP.

Section B: The regional programme context and content

1. Governance challenges and opportunities

The Arab countries present a complex and diverse range of national and ethnic contexts encompassing a cultural diversity that manifests in multiple dimensions: ethnic, tribal, religious, and linguistic, resulting from history, tradition, and immigration. Religious pluralism was embedded in many of the States within their distinct national identities, though this has been undergoing shifts in the past few decades. Most of the modern Arab states have been founded on a social contract through which the citizens forfeited some or most of their political rights in exchange for services provided by the state, including health, education, employment and general welfare. This has enabled a number of countries to attain a high- and middle-income status – especially the oil exporting countries – while a few have been beset by decades of conflict and have either remained, or slipped into, Low Income Country Status.

The Regional Programme document, various progress reports of different projects and a brief outline of contexts presented in the ToR provide detailed description of the humanitarian and development challenges in the Arab region. The following major issues are recurring themes in most of the countries in the region:

- Shrinking economies and mounting uncertainty compounded by the increasing vulnerabilities and human rights concerns arising out of the COVID-19 crisis
- Persistent governance deficit leading to popular discontent and strengthening forces of conflict
- Increasing conflict, polarization and forced displacement
- Gender inequality
- Climate change and vulnerability to disasters.

Shrinking economies and mounting uncertainty compounded by COVID-19: The region has been witnessing a gradual decline in economic growth in recent years even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, according to World Bank data cited in the ToR. The COVID pandemic adds further pressure to this fragile situation. One UN report[9] assessing the impact of the COVID-19 in July 2020 noted that the Arab region's gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to fall by about $152 billion as a result of the forecasted 5.7 per cent contraction in growth between 2019 and 2020.[10] This has negatively affected an already challenging job market, with adult and youth unemployment rates among the highest in the world at 10% and 27%, respectively.[11] The same report estimated the number poor people to rise by 14.3 million people, to more than 115 million, almost a quarter of the total population of Arab states. The report warns that as *"many of the newly poor were recently in the middle-class, if their impoverishment is prolonged, social and political stability might be impacted. Young people were already five times more likely to be unemployed than adults; special attention to their needs will be important."* **These new vulnerabilities and high levels of inequalities may amplify the existing fault lines which have thrown the region into a spiral of violence and conflict leading to increasing radicalization of the disenfranchised due to increasing unemployment, poverty, inadequate social safety nets, human rights concerns, archaic and unaccountable institutions and governance systems.**

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[9] UN, Policy brief: *The Impact of COVID-19 On the Arab Region - An Opportunity to Build Back Better*, July 2020

[10] International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook Update*, available at https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/07/13/regional-economic-outlook-update-menap-cca#report. Another report dated September 20202 projects a similarly bleak picture (https://www.brookings.edu/events/the-economic-impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-middle-east-recession-response-and-recovery/). This projected growth rates to decline by as much as five percent region wide on a per capita basis and six million jobs are assumed to have been lost.

[11] UN ESCWA. *Impact of Covid-19 on Young People in the Region*, 2020.

Increasing youth marginalization and unemployment: Young people in the region have been impacted by high unemployment, discrimination, exclusion, restricted access to services, and the devastating effects of ongoing conflict in some countries, with the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbating these. The social and economic integration of the 110 million youths in the region was an ongoing challenge[12] even before the COVID pandemic. Government policies to contain and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and flatten the contagion curve have triggered further economic crises that threaten hard-won development gains.[13] High dependence on oil resources, tourism and remittances have all been negatively impacted by the pandemic, further aggravating the impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region.[14] Prior to the pandemic, 12.3 percent of employed youth in the region lived in moderate working poverty on less than US$3.10 per day and 13.3 percent lived in extreme working poverty on less than US$1.90 per day.[15] The ESCWA report[16] warns that this situation will worsen with millions of young Arabs, especially in rural areas, as well as young women, at the risk of plunging deeper into poverty. **With limited or no access to social and health insurance or credit facilities, a staggering 85.1 per cent of young working-age Arabs in the informal sector are also at risk of falling into poverty.**

Persistent governance deficit: The Middle East (which includes most of the Arab States and Iran) remains the lowest-scoring region in the world on all indicators linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 and is the least democratic region in the world, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Only 2 out of 12 countries in the region are categorised as democratic, and the only country that has been added to the list in the past five decades is Iraq which transitioned to democracy for the first time in its history in 2010.[17] The region's regulatory practices continue to lack transparency and inclusiveness. Access to information has been limited and the space for civil society severely compressed. Despite reforms in some countries, international perception surveys confirm a prevalence of corruption and governance deficits in terms of rule of law, access to justice, and representation. Citing the Arab Barometer, the ToR notes public distrust in the courts and legal system. All these led to widespread popular discontent, as exemplified in 2019 by social and political upheavals in Sudan, Iraq, Tunisia and Lebanon in protest against deteriorating living conditions and rising corruption. It is also important to bear in mind that the uprisings of the last decade may have altered the landscape as non-violent popular movements have been responded with a counter-revolutionary narrative to curb political protests in the name of stability and security. Peddlers of extremist ideologies and violence then provide a fertile ground for redirecting popular dissent and movements seeking greater popular participation, as was witnessed in the rise of *Daesh* in Syria and Iraq and various extremist groups in Libya and Yemen. **A high rate of youth unemployment increasingly getting worse by the year and lack of good governance make the region an easy prey for all forms of sectarianism and extremist ideologies.**[18]

Conflict and forced displacement: The Arab region has continued to experience severe conflicts and protracted crises causing severe human suffering, massive displacement, and damage to infrastructure and services. Since 2012, conflict-affected countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen have experienced unprecedented declines in their Human Development Index. **Of the 60 million displaced people worldwide, close to 40% originate from the Arab region, mainly Syria and Palestine.**[19] All these diverse forces combined together mean that

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[12] UN ESCWA. *Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in the Region*, 2020.

[13] UNDP, *Compounding Crises. Will COVID-19 and Lower Oil Prices Lead to a New Development Paradigm in the Arab Region?* 2021.

[14] (Draft). Regional Strategic Framework for Young People in the Arab States / Middle East and North Africa Region (2021-2030)

[15] ILO. 2020. *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020. Technology and the Future of Jobs.*

[16] UN ESCWA. *Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in the Region*, 2020.

[17] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019 - Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*, 2019

[18] https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-middle-east-and-north-africa-over-the-next-decade-key-challenges-and-policy-options. Middle East and North Africa over the next decade: Key challenges and policy options, March 3, 2020

[19] https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/21637/only-14-of-all-refugees-from-arab-region-are-in-europe-un-report; https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/18/refugee-crises-in-arab-world-pub-77522

the violence, civil wars (Yemen, Libya, Syria) and forced displacement civilians continue to shows no sign of abating in the coming years. The impact of COVID-19 is likely to be extreme for the 26 million refugees and IDPs hosted in the region, many of whom live in informal settlements or camps, with inadequate access to critical health-care services, water or sanitation.[20]

Gender inequality: Gender equality and participation by women in the labour market lag markedly behind compared to other parts of the world. Women earn on average 78.9 per cent less than men on a per capita basis and they stand to lose 700,000 jobs particularly in the informal sector where they constitute 61.8 per cent of workers due to COVID alone, according to the UN.[21] Despite significant achievements made in closing the gender gap in health and education, female labour force participation rate continues to be the lowest globally, at 18.4 per cent relative to 77.2 per cent among Arab men,[22] and female unemployment in the Arab countries is at 15.6 percent in 2018 compared to a male rate of 5.8 per cent (ILO). In addition, **of all regions in the Global Gender Gap Index, the Arab region has the lowest score (61.1%), hosting seven of the 10 countries with the largest gender gaps in the world, including Iraq and Yemen, which are, the bottom two in the ranking of 153 countries**.[23]

Climate Change and vulnerability to disasters: **Climate change poses a serious threat to the region which already has a highly fragile ecosystem. Climate change will likely intensify water scarcity in an already water-poor region**, bring food shortages and spur further refugee crises. Arab countries have access to only 1% of the global water resources, while hosting 5% of the world population. Despite scaling-up their interest in using renewable energy sources, especially wind and solar power generation, as of 2015, Arab countries have continued to rely heavily on fossil fuel, where electricity production from oil and gas account for 94% of total production, while only 0.5% stem from renewable sources (wind and solar) and 3% from hydro sources.[24] Natural disasters like drought and floods have frequently affected many countries of the region (Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Somalia and Sudan). Syria saw a number of serious droughts in the past decade, contributing to the rural impoverishment that helped provoke the 2011 uprising. Global models predict sea levels rising from about 0.1 to 0.3 meters by the year 2050, and from about 0.1 to 0.9 meters by 2100. Low-lying coastal areas in Tunisia, Qatar, Libya, UAE, Kuwait, and especially Egypt are at particular risk.[25] Ability to adapt to climate change phenomena is likely to depend largely on national incomes, with Gulf states better able to mitigate impacts.

Big data and digital technology: In the Arab region, 45.4 percent of the population lack internet access and, like in other spheres, women are disadvantaged more in this than the men - women users of the internet account for only 47.3 percent in comparison to 61.3 percent for men. In a country like Iraq, internet penetration is close to 100 for men and barely 50 percent for women. Within countries, while the internet penetration rate is above 95 percent in the gulf countries, it is as low as 14.1 percent in Sudan. Additionally, there is a large gap between rural and urban areas in the Arab region, where the percentage of households with access to internet is 38.4 percent in rural areas while it stands at 74 percent in urban areas in 2019, and the percentage of households with access to computer is 34 percent in rural areas in comparison to 66.8 percent in urban areas.[26] The rapid pace of developments in use of big data and **artificial intelligence (AI) globally holds out the promise of rapid transformation in the lives of common citizens when good governance and a commitment to SDGs blend together.** If empowered, citizens (CSOs, academic research networks, etc.) could even leverage AI and big data to push for good governance by producing research and

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[20] UN, Policy brief: *The Impact of COVID-19 On the Arab Region - An Opportunity to Build Back Better*, July 2020
[21] UN, 2020, Ibid
[22] Source: International Labour Organization (https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/employment-policy/lang--en/index.htm, accessed 08 February 2021)
[23] UNDP, *Terms of Reference for the RBAS Regional Programme Evaluation*, 2020
[24] UNDP, 2020, Ibid
[25] https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-middle-east-and-north-africa-over-the-next-decade-key-challenges-and-policy-options. Middle East and North Africa over the next decade: Key challenges and policy options, March 3, 2020
[26] Source: UNDP Internal note

knowledge that holds governments accountable, identify drivers of alienation and distrust among social groups, monitor discrimination against women and other groups, etc. However, in the hands of unaccountable and authoritarian governments, AI may turn out to be yet another weapon of mass repression and used to spread misinformation.

2. Key elements of the regional programme

UNDP's programme in the Arab region covers 20 of the 22 countries[27] which are all part of the League of Arab States (LAS). The regional programme was founded on a robust theory of change (Annex 4) as articulated in the supporting documents in preparation for the RPD, with governance identified as a key sector for the entire Arab region, besides addressing poverty, inequality and exclusion (outcome 1).[28] **The context analysis validated UNDP's work with a regional approach to strengthening regional institutions, mechanisms and processes that could complement the work on major issues like anti-corruption, electoral systems, social cohesion and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) at national levels.** Towards this end, greater awareness and participation of civil society in policy making and resource allocation and, in particular, the full participation of women and youth in policy dialogues, holding the ruling classes more accountable was emphasized. Outcome 2 of the Regional programme thus focused on creating and nurturing space for civic participation, linking this with supporting and strengthening sub-national/local governance structures to facilitate interface between communities, citizens and local governments. It is noted that while preparing the RPD and the associated TOC, the work on anti-corruption constituted one of the main focus areas of the existing regional programme; it was stressed that this RPD will seek to expand work in other governance related areas, including sub-national governance, youths, women and social cohesion.

To address underlying causes of protracted conflict and ensuing exclusion and extremism, the RPD foresaw the need for community-level engagement in conflict-prevention and preparedness on the one end, and strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus on the other. Exclusion of women in economic sphere and political participation also undermines social cohesion, and this was sought to be addressed through legislative and institutional reforms based on best practices drawn from different countries.

The regional programme is founded on UNDP's global Strategic Plan 2018-2021[29] which identifies six "signature solutions" as integral responses to development challenges to support countries to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and related agreements. The six signature solutions are: i) keeping people out of poverty; ii) strengthen effective, inclusive and accountable governance; iii) enhance national prevention and recovery capacities for resilient societies; iv) promote nature-based solutions for a sustainable planet; v) close the energy gap; and vi) strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Of these six signature solutions, three are directly addressed by outcome 2, namely: inclusive governance, resilience and gender equality. In addition, the RPD emphasizes knowledge management and thought leadership as a key area of focus in the entire programme. The outputs sought through the RPD were presented in Box 1 in section A.

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[27] Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Mauritania and Comoros are included in the Regional Bureau for Africa.

[28] The regional programme is focused on two outcomes, namely: Outcome 1: Accelerate the structural transformation of productive capacities in a sustainable and inclusive manner (Related to UNDP Strategic Plan Outcome 2); and Outcome 2: Strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies - this area of work focuses on the root causes of conflict and governance deficits (Related to UNDP Strategic Plan Outcome 3).

[29] UNDP, *UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2021*, 28 November, 2017

The RP requires collaborative approach to use emerging knowledge, technology and data so as to bring evidence and lessons for informed advocacy, policy making and delivery of development activities. This also serves to continuously enhance skills and capacity of individuals to generate and use knowledge and data. The RPD was based on several key assumptions, of which the most crucial are:

- Existence of necessary political will and commitment at national level for institutional changes and reforms
- Political commitment to inclusive political and electoral processes at national levels
- Regional institutions and platforms have ability to leverage national institutions and mechanisms
- Information availability and provision of knowledge leads to learning, change and innovations.

As can be seen from the Table 2 below, the four largest projects accounted for nearly three-quarters of expenditure during the period 2018-2020: (i) Electoral Support, (ii) Anti-Corruption Integrity in the Arab Countries (ACIAC) project, (iii) Arab/ development Portal (ADP) and (iv) Arab Human Development Report (AHDR). Though the scale of expenditure in other projects have been much smaller, a few are strategically important for the regional programme as these address a number of key issues identified in the TOC. UNDP's support towards work on social cohesion, gender issues and preventing violent extremism PVE), as well as engagement involving youths, have been vital for the regional programme as these have laid the foundation for several initiatives at country level, as the findings that follow will show.

Table 2: Resources mobilized, 2018-2021 (US$)

Project	Project Number	Donor Name	2018 Expenditure	2019 Expenditure	2020 Expenditure	Sub total USD Expenditure	Total USD
Anti-corruption Initiative in Arab Countries (ACIAC)	89235	US Gov.	434,876	29,415		464,291	
	89235	Siemens	632,870	381,470		1,014,340	
	97975	Siemens	464,715	356,423		821,138	
	118814	KOICA		253,698	909,889	1,163,587	
	118814	UNDP		253,698	119,868	373,566	3,836,923
Promoting Social Cohesion in the Arab Region (PSCAR)	92814	UNDP	236,637			236,637	
		OFID	108,931			108,931	
		KAICIID				-	345,568
Diversity Advancement in the Arab Region (DAAR)	115174	UNDP		99,999		99,999	99,999
Prevenint Violent Extremism (PVE)	108385	UNDP	91,628	103,846		195,474	
		DFATD	225,550	326,799		552,349	747,823
Youth Leadership Programme (YLP)	115046	UNDP		315,990	88,287	404,277	
		UN Women		60,000		60,000	
		AYC		-	23,772	23,772	488,049
Youth Engagement and. Empowerment Project (YEEP)	122529	UNDP			372,735	372,735	372,735
Arab Youth Arts and Music Initiatigve (AYAMI)	119648	UNDP		189,724	86,991	276,715	276,715
Regional Electoral Support	94744	Sida	2,011,181	1,785,585	985,321	4,782,087	4,782,087
Arab League-Japan partnership	115313	Gov. of Japan		234,104	1,133,502	1,367,606	1,367,606
Mosharaka	91377	UNDP	323,609			323,609	
		UNITAR	215,000			215,000	
		UNFPA	37,800			37,800	
		UN Women	63,462			63,462	639,871
Gender Justice and the Law	119648	UNDP			73,297	73,297	
Arab Development Portal (ADP)	98351	OFID	1,061,769	128,672		1,190,441	
	116151	OFID		822,307	921,539	1,743,846	
	115174	UNDP			40,000	40,000	2,974,287
Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)	109243	UNDP		194,492	247,236	441,728	
		UNDP	258,350	334,622		592,972	
		UNDP	148,459	243,875		392,334	1,427,034
Total			**6,314,838**	**6,114,719**	**5,002,437**	**17,431,994**	**17,358,697**

(Source: UNDP RBAS Finance, 30 June 2021)

Section C: Findings of the evaluation on outcome 2

The RPD structured the outcome 2 *(Strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies)* around a number of signature solutions as intermediary outcomes or outputs, as discussed in section B, sub-section 2 earlier. In this section, evidence is presented and findings drawn against each of the signature solutions.

1. Output: Governance signature solution

1.1 Preventing and addressing anti-corruption[30]

> **Key findings on anti-corruption:**
> 1. The ACINET provides the main platform through which the regional programme engages with the governments in strategic dialogue on anti-corruption, transparency and related issues across the region, and it also provides an incentive for peer-learning. *(4)*
>
> 2. The regional programme enables the COs to initiate and sustain a continuous dialogue with the official agencies on anti-corruption which is generally considered a sensitive issue by governments in most of the countries. *(3)*
>
> 3. Introduction of tools and standards for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption has enabled governments to develop actionable strategies in Tunisia, Iraq and Jordan. *(3)*
>
> 4. The regional programme has been instrumental in development of anti-corruption institutions, strategies in Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and has also promoted engagement of civil society and transparent mechanism in these institutions. *(4)*
>
> 5. The regional programme is recognized for its ability to bring in new ideas and concepts from different parts of the world to help sustain the dialogue on a sensitive issue like anti-corruption. *(4)*
>
> 6. A diverse range of partnership, including with NGOs, CSOs and private sector organizations, besides bringing in high-quality international experience, have been key to creating a momentum on anti-corruption initiatives in the region. *(4)*

1.1.1 Regional network on anti-corruption

In line with the SDG 16, supporting public administration to foster accountability, transparency and citizen trust in institutions is at the heart of good governance, and anti-corruption and integrity represent fundamental entry points for broader governance reforms.[31] **The Arab Anti-Corruption and Integrity Network (ACINET) which was set up over a decade ago with UNDP's support continues to be the main platform through which the regional programme engages with the governments in strategic dialogue on anti-corruption, transparency and related issues across the region.** The ACINET comprises 48 Ministries and official agencies from 18 countries,[32] two observer members (Brazil and Malaysia) and 28 organizations from civil society and private sector, and drives the implementation of the United Nations Convention on Anti-Corruption (UNCAC) in the region. This serves as the region's foremost mechanism for capacity development, information sharing, and policy dialogue in this field. UNDP regional programme acts as the Secretariat of the

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ACINET, working with the current Chair's team. The Chair rotates every two years. All the KIIs on anti-corruption (14) affirmed the vital role of the Network in exchange of ideas, strategy and learning, as well as in creating an indirect peer pressure for countries to move forward on the anti-corruption agenda.

Interviews with UNDP staff at both country and regional level showed that the regional programme enables the former to initiate and sustain a continuous dialogue with the official agencies on anti-corruption which is generally considered a sensitive issue by governments in most of the countries. All the external and internal key informants (14) referred to the value of international experience, knowledge and expertise the regional programme is able to bring to the table make UNDP's support on the issue valuable for the countries. Further, by emphasizing a systems-approach to identification and management of corruption risks, rather than dealing with individual instances of corruption, the dialogue and strategies ensure better buy-in and commitment to addressing the root causes of corruption. UNDP supported Jordan and Lebanon to adopt national anti-corruption strategies for 2020-2025, with Lebanon's strategy being the first in the country's history. Draft strategies in Iraq and Morocco are now awaiting their formal adoption, expected in 2021. Furthermore, UNDP's support enabled the adoption of legislative reforms in Lebanon including amendments to the 2018 whistle-blower protection law and to the 1999 illicit enrichment law, and the introduction of a new law on "fighting corruption in the public sector and establishing the national anti-corruption institution."[33] According to key informants, in Lebanon, the first support started with one Ministry in 2016 which developed an action plan with the regional programme support. Lebanese government was not keen on taking this work forward on a whole-of government approach initially, but sustained campaign by various stakeholders inside and outside the government, including civil society organizations (CSOs) finally encouraged the government to adopt a policy on anticorruption (2020) and a law on access to information in 2017. According to key informants including from the government, there are now task forces working on implementation of the anticorruption strategy in Lebanon, and the European Union and the Government of Denmark are also involved in supporting the strategy implementation.

> "We have always had big political slogans on fighting corruption, without any clue in the past on how we were going to achieve that."
> *-a senior government official to the evaluator*

1.1.2 Systems focus using actionable tools and range of partnership

Evidence from several countries show that while anti-corruption may have been paid lip service to in the past, **the tools introduced by the regional programme for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption enabled governments to develop actionable strategies.** UNDP supported Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia to pilot Framework for Corruption Risk Assessment at the sectoral level.[34] Tunisia was the first country to implement the new framework since 2016, with the introduction of a risk-based approach to corruption prevention in the Health Ministry to begin with. The approach decoupled the discourse on corruption from the role of individuals and focuses on the system; this enabled stakeholder engagement in mapping the risks and

> **Anti-corruption guidelines in Tunisian health sector**
> The Tunisian health sector anticorruption guidelines include: (1) assessing corruption risks and identifying weak points in the system; (2) develop response strategy to address the systemic weaknesses. Multi-stakeholder team in the sector are set up to evaluate risks, standardize principles and practices in identifying and fighting corruption and disseminating these to all stakeholders. Risk maps were produced for the health sector and decision points identified (eg., supply chains of medicines, equipment and provision of services). These were shared with all Ministries and get their validation as well. *"We are able to evaluate the potential end results (savings/fraud avoidance) at different points by comparing with historical data,"* according to one key informant.

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[33] UNDP, *Results Oriented Annual Report - H05 – 2020*

[34] UNDP, *A risk-based approach to tackle corruption in the health sector - Case study, Lessons from Tunisia*, undated

identify the institutional drivers of corruption, rather than look at the issue in subjective terms. The methodology focuses on 'decision points' across the system as the primary unit of analysis, and broke down the health sector into domains such as service delivery, quality regulation, insurance, and supply of medical products, map relationships, and analyze areas in which decisions could be compromised for extraneous considerations.

With support from the Regional programme starting in 2016, Kuwait was able to establish an anticorruption body. The country office (CO) is now developing with support from the regional programme a second phase of the project to build the capacity of the institution. Working jointly with the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), an anti-corruption strategy was also developed in Kuwait in 2019[35] which is now being implemented. In Egypt, progress has been slower – the regional programme started with intervention towards building capacity of the Administrative Control Authority which is the anti-corruption institution in the country in 2017, but adoption of concrete strategies and policies has not yet begun. The CO is now coming on board. In Palestine as well, while the regional programme helped revise anticorruption strategies developed earlier, their implementation has not kept pace. In Jordan, CSOs and the government worked together to review UNCAC compliance, thus bringing the CSOs close to the public administration.

In Iraq, UNDP worked on the customs sector at the request of the Government and made good progress in setting up an anti-corruption institution which included participation of CSOs. In Morocco, there already existed an anticorruption agency set up 10-12 years ago; UNDP tried to bring in CSO networks into this, but progress in this regard has been slow. UNDP then worked with the Confederation of Morocco Business who promote compliance in the private sector. This gives them leverage to influence Government's policy on anticorruption. The Government brought out a draft law on anticorruption which was weak, and the Confederation lobbied to bring in stronger standards.

1.1.3 Partnership on anti-corruption

Besides working with government institutions, the regional programme's approach involves working with NGOs and CSOs as active pillars of work on anticorruption. CSOs are invited to regional networking meetings and training. More than 380 women were engaged in the activities and webinars of the regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (ACIAC), comprising 45% of the total number of beneficiaries, which constitutes a significant advancement compared to 33% in 2019.[36] In Lebanon, one NGO set up in 2018 was supported by the regional programme, working closely with the CO. The NGO monitors the government's transparency and access to information by bringing national statistics and data on budgets, customs and related areas under public scrutiny. This supplements UNDP's successful initiative in supporting the Government in adopting a law on access to information. Besides closely examining national level data, this initiative undertakes analysis of Municipal level data. An example of the kind of innovative way it attempts to bring transparency in government is demonstrated by a baseline study (see Box above) it undertook to create an inventory on how different government agencies provide access to information to public. It has now gathered data on real estate ownership by individual Lebanese Parliamentarians and this information is made available to the public. In Jordan, one of the NGOs was supported through the regional programme to launch a social accountability coalition and promote use of tools like social audit and citizen

> **Monitoring access to information in Lebanon**
> A baseline study to analyse communications with 133 Lebanese administrations and summarised the responses obtained for the following questions and theses were made available to public:
> (1) Are you abiding by the provisions of the Law on information access regarding automatic publication of decisions and financial transactions? (2) Do you have a public electronic platform to publish administrative decisions as per the Law? (3) Did you assign an official employee to receive and respond to requests to access information, the Law requires?

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[35] UNDP, *Results Oriented Annual Report - H05 – 2018*
[36] UNDP, *Results Oriented Annual Report - H05 – 2020*

cards in enabling people to provide feedback to local authorities and municipalities on provision of services. The NGO undertakes detailed analysis of national budget for its transparency and clarity, and facilitates local participation in the budgeting process. The NGO attributes its achievements to the capacity developed through attendance at several training programmes and networking events across the region organised by the regional programme.

Stakeholders felt that they now have the tools to engage in serious dialogue with government on anti-corruption, though corruption is deep-rooted and cannot be eradicated overnight. Where the tools have been combined with strong political will, as was the case in Tunisia, radical changes are already happening. Building on the work on sectoral management of corruption risks in the health sector, UNDP has developed a guide during 2020 for use by countries interested in adopting this approach to combat corruption. The guide incorporates risks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic covering the institutional set-up and corruption risks within national public procurement bodies for medical products in the context of COVID-19.[37] Besides the ability to bring in high level of experience from different courtiers on anticorruption, one of the key factors that has facilitated continuous dialogue and engagement by various parties on anti-corruption has

been the multiple partnerships UNDP regional programme has been able to forge over the years. All the external key informants observed that UNDP's role in bringing the private sector organization, NGOs and CSOs, as well youth groups (Integrity clubs in colleges and Universities), to work together through various networks as well as with the ACINET was key to the achievement
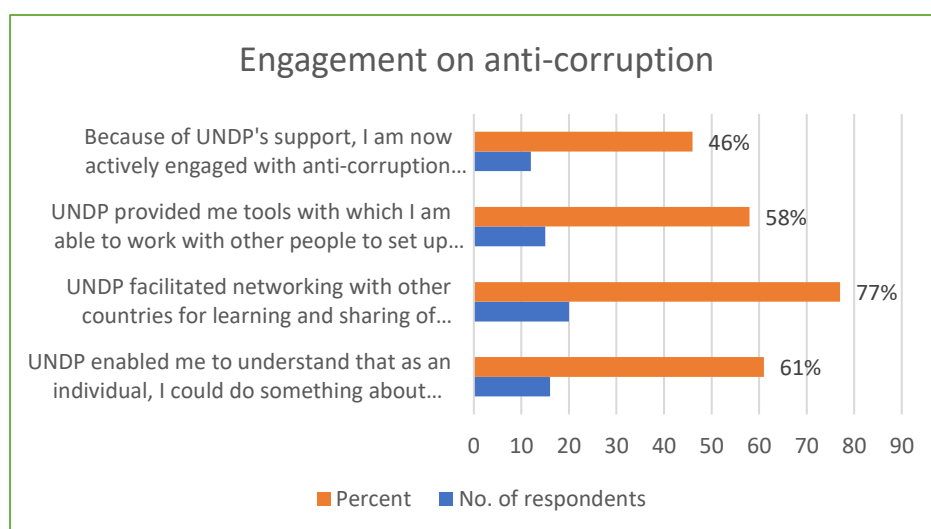

Figure 3:Participation in anticorruption initiatives (n-26); Survey data

of the anti-corruption initiatives in a region where the subject used to be discussed only in hushed tones. At least 26 of the 72 survey respondents acknowledged the positive contribution UNDP's programme is making in empowering them to work on anti-corruption issues in their communities (Figure 3).

The regional programme is valued by the COs and partners for its ability to bring in new ideas and concepts from different parts of the world to help sustain the dialogue. The high-quality expertise and experience the senior staff bring opens doors for dialogue with the government and anticorruption body at a level which the CO staff can often not be able to have. They also facilitate orientation sessions with NGOs/CSOs. This helps position UNDP ahead of several other actors on anticorruption. Discussion is currently on to develop ACINET Centre for Excellence as a hub connecting the different national anti-corruption academies and institutes in the region (already established in Iraq and Egypt by the respective governments and one about to be established in Jordan) to enable them to act as a coordinated network for research and training, including offering joint training programmes for public officials and conducting complementary research on regional trends. The Centre will promote the integration of related materials in universities and national schools of public administrations, and will develop digital learning tools to promote continuous and distance learning, while also having certified training of trainer's programmes, in addition to creating a window to offer global

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[37] UNDP, *Results Oriented Annual Report* - H05 – 2020

knowledge and expertise in partnership with the UN. Its governance structure will be a board composed of prominent academics and practitioners supported by an administrative entity and a network of trainers.

All external key informants confirmed that while there are several other agencies which have been supporting various pieces of work related to anti-corruption in the region, no other agency has as comprehensive a programme as UNDP has, and no other agency has the capacity to engage the governments on policy issues on this on a sustained basis, and UNDP is

> "UNDP certainly can take the credit for creating a sustained focus on anticorruption in the region"
> - *An external key informant*

undoubtedly recognized for its lead role on anti-corruption in the region. All the COs interviewed for the evaluation also confirmed that this owes primarily to the sustained and quality support provided across the region and in various countries by the RP.

1.2 Regional electoral capacity and knowledge[38]

Key findings on electoral capacity:

1. Regional organizations and networks working on elections have been strengthened through UNDP's support. This has included capacity development of the EAD and expanded membership of the Arab Electoral Management Bodies to 12 countries. *(3)*

2. Alongside the ArabEMB, the Regional Elections programme has worked with the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions to promote the role of NHRIs and human rights standards in elections. *(3)*

3. UNDP regional programme has played a proactive role in advocating with Arb EMBs and LAS to ensure gender mainstreaming in the policies and programmes of all stakeholders, supporting women in political and electoral processes, identifying and disseminating standards and good practices for women's participation in the region. At the same time, the project has introduced a new area of focus, aimed at encouraging political and civic engagement of youth in the Arab region. *(3)*

5. The regional elections projects supported Youth Leadership Development programme to encourage youths in political participation. This programme has had an extensive outreach covering some 20,000 youths in the past five years. There is a strong synergy developing between the CO-led programmes and the regional initiatives on youth leadership in the region. In the early years of the YLP, there was weak partnership with youth organizations, but now the programme has direct engagement with youth-led organizations in several countries, with the latter selected by the COs. *(3)*

6. The YLP faced several challenges which are now being attempted to be addressed. One challenge has been that once the youths identify issues and explore solutions, links to institutional apparatus is weak, thus undermining the value of the training and capacity building in terms of end result. *(2)*

Regional organizations and networks working on elections have been strengthened through UNDP's support. This has included capacity development of the Electoral Affairs Department (EAD) of the LAS and expanded membership of the Arab Electoral Management Bodies (ArabEMB) to 12 countries.[39] With progress on representative government, the region remains the lowest-scoring region in the world on all indicators related to this SDG 16, according to the 2019 International IDEA Global State of Democracy index. Elections, where they are held, are infrequent and often lack transparency and impartiality in conducting these.[40] In this milieu, UNDP has rightly targeted the electoral ecosystem through its regional programme to

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[38] Output 2.2.2 as per RPD: Regional platforms for policy dialogue enabled to support civic engagement, constitution-making, electoral and parliamentary processes and institutions to promote inclusion, transparency and accountability.

[39] UNDP, *Result-Oriented Annual Report*, 2019

[40] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019 - Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*, 2019

complement the national level processes the COs support in several countries. Like in the anti-corruption programme, the aim is to provide a regional platform for sharing, learning, networking and building a cohort of champions on electoral best practices and standards. The regional programme has sought to do this through the medium of the LAS. Desk review and KIIs confirm that the EAD of the LAS has been supported to bring together national electoral management bodies on a common platform, the ArabEMB, which promotes coherent good practices and norms for conducting free and fair elections which are inclusive. An impact evaluation[41] conducted in 2020 of the election assistances concluded that UNDP's interventions have been critical to the capacity building of EAD and the ArabEMBs.

EMBs meet every two years; the LAS EAD is now in a position to facilitate the ArabEMB meetings and related processes on its own, according to key informants as well as progress reports.[42] The 2020 biennial meetings had to be rescheduled due to COVID-19 and will be held in June 2021 (likely to be an online event). The 2018 event focused on the key theme of voter registration and the 2021 focus will be on electoral system. Each country EMB organizes and manages its own elections, but the standards are discussed and shared in the regional forum. UNDP regional programme helped LAS to endorse and adopt the Declaration of the Principles of International Election Observation of the UN which outlines the principles and code of conduct for election observers. UNDP supported the EAD in developing a cadre of BRIDGE[43] trainers - now there are 15 accredited BRIDGE trainers and facilitators in the region who can support individual EMBs in training their staff. Additionally, UNDP

> "The League EAD now has enough expertise to undertake election observations. But not enough resources to deploy experts in significant numbers."
> - *An external key informant*

trained "nearly 150 staff" of LAS in election observation process through a number of workshops and training events. LAS EAD sends these staff out to different countries to observe major elections (Presidential or Parliamentary) and referendums on request from the national EMBs; according to key informants, the training provided by UNDP helped them to develop a systematic approach to observing and reporting on the elections. The reports are submitted to respective governments, with recommendations, where relevant.

Alongside the ArabEMB, the Regional Electoral Project has worked with another crucial regional network, the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions (ANNHRI), to promote the role of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) in elections.[44] The regional programme supported ANNHRI in developing a guidebook for monitoring human rights in elections. The guidebook[45] which was developed after extensive consultations with NHRIs and EMBs is meant to provide practical tools to NHRIs in overseeing the rights of people to participate in periodic free and fair elections. UNDP is now working closely with ANNHRI and NHRIs in adopting this guidebook in their election monitoring missions at the national level. NHRI in Jordan piloted this guidebook in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The process involved, besides monitoring the proceedings of the election day, a task force to monitor and observe the entire gamut of activities related to the electoral process to ensure its overall compliance with human rights standards. Specific attention was paid to participation of the most vulnerable groups particularly women, persons with disabilities and the elderly, as well as monitoring the participation of political parties, the media, and analyzing the legal framework governing the electoral process. **The experience revealed that while the guidebook was comprehensive and provided practical tools, it required further development of tools to assess the different forms of impairment and obstacles vis-à-vis the election process faced by the people with disabilities and the elderly.**[46]

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[41] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

[42] UNDP, *Result-Oriented Annual Report*, 2018

[43] BRIDGE stands for Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections, a global network of five agencies: the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), International IDEA, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD). BRIDGE training is a globally recognised modular training programme focused on election processes that is aimed at capacity building of stakeholders. See www.bridge-project.org for more information.

[44] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

[45] UNDP, *Methodology Guidebook for Monitoring Human Rights in Elections (Draft)*

[46] *NCHR Main Observations and Recommendations on the NHRIs Methodical Guide for Human Rights Monitoring in the Context of Elections, Undated*

Several regional partnerships and cooperation were highlighted in the KIIs. Support was provided by the EAD to Somalia in drafting its legislation on elections; similar process has now begun in Sudan. Tunisia national EMB shared ballot boxes with Libya. The regional programme also facilitated a partnership between LAS-EAD and Saint Joseph University in Beirut on developing a course module electoral administration in the region.

1.2.2 Enhancing civic and political participation of women and promoting the role of youth in elections

UNDP regional programme has played a proactive role in advocating with the ArbEMBs and LAS gender mainstreaming in the policies and programmes of all stakeholders, supporting women in political and electoral processes, identifying and disseminating standards and good practices for women's participation in the region.[47] With regards to the SDG#5.5 on political representation of women, the Middle East remains the lowest-performing region on the target of gender equality.[48] The Inter-Parliamentary Union data as of March 2021 puts the percentage of women parliamentarians at 17.5, with several countries have either very low (1 in Yemen, 2%-6% in Oman, Lebanon and Kuwait) representation.[49] Promotion of women's participation in public life therefore remains a crucial need in the region, which the Regional Project has sought to

> **UNDP Mosharaka project (2014-2018)**
> The project aimed at addressing the deficits in participation and citizenship rights of women in the Arab Region. In partnership with a range of stakeholders involved - UN Women, Union for the Mediterranean, Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Arab Women Organization (AWO) and the League of Arab States (LAS), CSOs, governments and regional entities - the project aimed at promoting regional and national actors and institutions to establish measures to advance gender equality, and women's political, social and economic participation.

address.[50] In the first phase of the regional election project, activities on women's participation were made primarily in collaboration with the RBAS *Mosharaka* project[51] which connected a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation. The project also conducted BRIDGE workshops on gender and elections and made available literature on promoting gender equality and women's participation in elections for the EMBs.[52] The regional programme supported the ArabEMBs secretariat to design and conduct a survey of the status of women's representation in EMBs and to examine the impact on women's participation in elections as voters, candidates and electoral administrators. The data generated through this survey triggered the setting up of the Arab Network for Women in Elections in October 2019 which provides a platform to support and promote women's political and electoral participation in the Arab world.

The ArabEMB network brings together governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals that share the same vision. During 2020, the network looked at effect of women's participation arising from COVID in the region; in Palestine, the national EMB undertook a study of violence against women (VAW) in elections. One of the regional intergovernmental organizations (Arab Women's Organization, AWO) which regularly conducts training on women's political participation started training of cohorts on election monitoring and has trained 40 women in 11 countries so far, according to KIIs. However, one of the challenges faced by the network is that no Government has invited it to participate in election monitoring.

The regional election project has introduced a new area of focus, aimed at encouraging political and civic engagement of youths in the Arab region.[53] To respond to both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

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[47] https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/presscenter/events/2019/launching-arab-network-for-women-in-elections.html

[48] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019 - Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*, 2019

[49] Source: https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=3&year=2021

[50] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

[51] Discussed in more detail in sub-section 3 in this section.

[52] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

[53] UNDP, *Youth Leadership Programme – Final Review Report,* 2020

Development and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security, UNDP launched a Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace – Youth-GPS (2016–2020) which focuses on civic engagement and political participation of youths.[54] Low representation of youths in political structures, including EMBs, contribute considerably to the underrepresentation of youth in higher levels of decision-making. The youth-led uprisings in North Africa in 2011 led to some countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt) introduce youth quotas in their elections, though similar uprisings in other Arab countries (Libya, Syria, Jordan, and the GCC countries) did not produce similar outcome.[55] The Regional Electoral Support Project supported networking, training and awareness programmes among youth groups from different countries through *the Youth Leadership Programme (YLP)*. In five participating countries, Morocco, Bahrain, Palestine, Tunisia and Somalia, the YLP partners catalyzed development of youth-led innovative solutions and facilitated civic engagement through SDG implementation, policy-making debates, forums and workshops. YLP training covered finding local solutions and awareness on SDGs. After the onset of the COVID pandemic, YLP's annual training and networking sessions were conducted through virtual platforms.

In the early phase (2018-2019) of this RPD cycle, the youth programme was framed as part of the electoral project, with emphasis on strengthening the participation of youths in elections and local democratic processes. This is now being linked with other programme areas which address crucial issues of youth employment, marginalization and social cohesion in a holistic way.[56] There is a new joint project being developed involving UNDP, UNICEF and International Labour Organization (ILO), which aims at enabling policy and regulatory environment for job-rich, green growth and economic transformation and reinforce capacities for their effective implementation; developing entrepreneurship skills of young people; and helping to connect them to productive youth employment opportunities. This will include, besides policy and regulatory environment, focus on: (i) education and training system, digital literacy and TVET curricula capable of providing quality alternative and remote learning; (ii) decent and productive employment, particularly for marginalized youths and those caught in conflict; and (iii) entrepreneurship ecosystems across countries providing inclusive opportunities for young people.

Starting with the election project initiative, the YLP has now evolved into a full-fledged programme. There is a strong synergy developing between the CO-led programmes and the regional initiatives on youth leadership in the region. In the early years of the YLP (2015-2016), there was no partnership with youth organizations, but now the programme has direct engagement with youth-led organizations in several countries, with the latter selected by the COs. In Lebanon, there is now a very good collaboration at country level. Triggered by the regional programme, the CO developed an extensive range of youth programmes and there is a large number of YLP alumni in the country. The CO has further developed some of the elements of the youth programme – for example, involvement of people with disabilities and mentorship programme. The experiences from Lebanon are also feeding back into further development of the regional programme, according to key informants. One of the Lebanese NGO partners is working on incubator approach for social enterprise. This is now being taken forward in regional programme as well.

As of mid-2020, YLP has worked with over 20,000 youth participants and supported 80 organizations in 15 countries in the Arab region. YLP participants have launched and established successful small businesses, won municipality elections, received recognition and awards for their innovative solutions, and presented their ideas at renowned universities and global platforms. YLP was first launched under the Mosharaka project, with partial funding from the elections project, and in 2019, the programme officially started as a separate component. It has been contributing to building a generation of young leaders, thinkers, innovators and change-makers in the Arab region. An interesting example of the YLP activities was found in Lebanon where partnership was developed with private sector companies. Some three years ago, the regional

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[54] UNDP, *Youth Participation in Electoral Processes - Handbook for Electoral Management Bodies*, March 2017

[55] Jana Belschner, *The adoption of youth quotas after the Arab uprisings, Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 9:1, 151-169, DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2018.1528163, 2021

[56] UNDP, undated, *Concept note - Regional Youth Empowerment project*, 2021

programme developed partnership with one of the companies which provides skills and vocation training to the youths. The company incorporated several elements of development issues namely SDG, gender issues, SDG 16, social cohesion & peace into their training programme. *"SDG was never our focus in the past, but involvement with the YLP helped us incorporate these. Through these, youth entrepreneurs understand social responsibility and they can see the bigger picture in relation to the SDG goals,"* according to a senior official of the company.

According to key informants, the YLP faced several challenges which are now being attempted to be addressed. One challenge has been that once the youths identify issues and explore solutions, links to institutional apparatus is weak, thus undermining the value of the training and capacity building in terms of end result. Secondly, the quality control of YLP programming at the national level was not systematic, depending on the strength of the partners and training offered to youth at the local levels. The training material being offered to youth and partners was not vetted and consistent.[57] Another criticism has been that YLP has slightly elitist bias in that most of the participants are already established in their occupation or would have achieved a qualification and are part of existing youth groups or in contact with UNDP.

UNDP has also engaged with media on elections. This area has included sharing a study of media monitoring conducted by the UNDP country project with the media regulatory body in Tunisia, media monitoring training for regional national human rights institutions, participation of one participant of the ArabEMBs at the UNESCO "Media for Democracy" conference and the organization of a workshop with ArabEMBs on media and elections. Following the workshop, media guidelines and a platform for identifying disinformation are currently being developed.

1.3 Social cohesion, preventing violent extremism and addressing conflict[58]

Key findings on social cohesion and PVE:
1. UNDP initiated a regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and promoted dialogue to examine violent extremism from a holistic perspective, instead of the limited 'securitized' approach to dealing with terrorism and violence as was the standard practice in the region. *(3)*

2. A PVE toolkit was developed that supports practitioners in design, monitoring and evaluation of PVE programmes, drawing on the best practices in PVE programming in complex, conflict contexts. This toolkit which includers indicators for capacity building and monitoring of results of PVE activities is being used by several COs and other practitioners. *(4)*

3. Using the PVE tools developed through the regional project, COs in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon have partnered with the Government to analyze the drivers of extremism - social and economic issues, beyond a narrow security/anti-terror perspective. *(4)*

4. In order to enable stakeholder engagement and thinking on a solution approach, the PSCAR project developed social cohesion index. The PVE indicators were adapted and a social cohesion index was first developed in Tunisia, with support from the regional programme. The Jordan COs used the index to look at refugee-host community relations and supported several CSOs to work at community level using social cohesion approach. *(3)*

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[57] UNDP, *YLP Final Review Report,* 2020
[58] Output 2.2.3 as per RPD: Regional and sub-regional dialogue and policy space expanded to support national capacities for social cohesion, prevention of violent extremism and durable solutions to displacement.

> 5. In Sudan, the CO undertook an in-depth analysis of issues on social cohesion aspects with support from the regional programme. *(2)*
>
> 6. As part of the various PVE initiatives in different countries, using the multi-stakeholder platforms, the regional programme initiated a conversation on hate speech which plays a big role in inciting violence, and introduced a model for analysis of the magnitude of the problem using big data analytics model. *(4)*
>
> 7. The regional programme facilitated strategic dialogue between the Government of Japan and the LAS focusing on key thematic issues in the region, and developed and implemented a comprehensive digital infrastructure strategy for the LAS, including staff training and business continuity services involving remote management. *(4)*

1.3.1   Framework for dialogue and action on violent extremism

UNDP initiated a regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and promoted dialogue on violent extremism from a holistic perspective, instead of the limited 'securitized' approach to dealing with terrorism and violence, as was the standard practice in the region. The regional programme promoted innovative approaches to addressing violent extremism and fostering social cohesion in the region. Through a project, '*Promoting Social Cohesion in the Arab region, PSCAR (2015-2019)*,' governments, civil society actors, journalists and media experts, religious leaders and institutions were brought together to explore various dimensions of trust among citizens, as well as between citizens and the state, including influence of faiths, confessions, ethnic backgrounds, and political ideologies. All the 8 key informants who provided vital evidence on the social cohesion and PVE programme referred to UNDP's convening ability to bring together government actors and civil society on a common platform to talk on sensitive issues. The regional programme brought together about 100 partners, academics, researchers and practitioners of PVE programme to have exchange of experiences. Another enabling factor has been UNDP's ability to bring the best international expertise and knowledge to the table. Through a one-year project '*Impact measurement capacity on prevention of violent extremism (2018-2019)*', UNDP developed a series of tools such as a Guidance Note on Risk Management for PVE and a toolkit that supports practitioners through design, monitoring and evaluation of PVE programmes. The toolkit includes modules, processes and approaches as well as an indicator bank that can be used by UNDP, with national and community-level partners as part of a capacity-building approach around monitoring. KIIs with COs (5) and 3 external interviewees during this evaluation indicated that this tool is rated very highly by all as it has enabled the COs to design and develop country-specific PVE programmes, as well as given the UNDP and civil society partners a common language with which they can engage with the government counterparts and religious leaders on this issue. Some of the COs developed projects on PVE following the regional initiative, and are able to raise funds from donors.

Using the PVE tools developed through the regional project, COs in Jordan and Lebanon have partnered with the governments to analyze the drivers of extremism - social and economic issues, beyond a narrow security/anti-terror perspective. Now the Government of Jordan has produced a national action plan on PVE and radicalization which integrates addressing social exclusion, marginalization, and socio-economic factors in understanding the causes that drive youths into extremism. There is now a PVE unit in the Prime Minister's office. The CO is leading this work, with support from the regional programme. Whether or not all this progress on national action plan and institutional framework on PVE within the Government of Jordan was solely due to UNDP's influence is hard to tell as there have been several NGOs and civils society initiatives in the country in this regard. However, all KIIs (internal and external) establish that UNDP's technical and convening capacity played the most significant role. UNDP has now assisted the Government to develop, with the support of a UNDP partner, a theory of change for its PVE activities. UNDP also supports several CSOs in Jordan to assess PVE issues at local level and develop strategies to take local action with focus on some 12-15

areas of concern which were identified as key elements of violent extremism. Similar work has been initiated by the Lebanon CO with the office of the Lebanese Prime Minister, helping the government to develop a national PVE strategy and action plan; bringing the tools and experiences from other countries has been valuable in getting buy in from the Government on its reform process, according to one key informant. In recent months, the Government of Iraq has been supported in drafting a PVE action plan which is currently being discussed.

In order to enable stakeholder engagement and thinking on a solutions approach, the PSCAR project developed social cohesion index. The PVE indicators were adapted and a social cohesion index was first developed in Tunisia, with support from the regional programme. Cohesion index measures relationship between citizens and Government through a survey which involves citizens and government institutions. The regional programme provided technical and financial support for this initiative. According to key informants, this was not well received in other COs initially as this subject was considered politically sensitive on their country contexts, but since 2018-2019, several COs have started using it. Jordan used the index to look at refugee-host community relations. Tunisia also used the Index to assess social cohesion in a few governorates. Iraq also initiated an attempt to measure social cohesion before the elections in 2019. The index was also highlighted by UNDP Oslo Governance Center as a reference tool that other regions can build on. UNDP identified a number of community groups, youth groups and women's organizations and provided capacity building support while introducing them to PVE/social cohesion model in Jordan. Small grants were provided to these groups to undertake local level activities. These networks are being linked to government at local and national level.

The regional programme through PSCAR invested in designing scalable training modules, whereby analytical tools and training programmes are designed and tested at the regional level but are then contextualized for country-level implementation. This makes it more cost-efficient for countries to access excellent services from leading consultants and distribute this benefit across country offices. For example, PSCAR produced media guidebook on "reporting at times of polarization and conflict" with Thomson Reuters Foundation and provided training to media through this media services house. The guidebook was tested at the regional level by holding regional workshops to refine the content and offer it for CO use. It was then used by Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq COs to design training modules in the respective countries.

In Sudan, the regional programme funded research and data collection and provided technical support to undertake in-depth analysis of issues on social cohesion aspects, with the indicators developed through the PVE project. The CO collaborated with Sudan National Commission for Counter-terrorism to conduct a pilot study covering several regions (Khartoum, White Nile State and Darfour) into factors that motivated people to join extremist groups. This helped Identify some of the root causes related to economic factors and marginalization. Following the study, a response strategy was developed which included: (i) support the Government to develop National Strategy on Counterterrorism in consultation with

> "PVE has a negative connotation, though the PVE lens is useful for analysis of the problem, but interventions need to be designed from a positive perspective - to promote social cohesion. We support local authorities to be better responsive to citizen's needs and create open channels of communication and dialogue."
> *- Key informant*

religious leaders and local authorities - the consultation was suspended during 2020 after COVID (now resuming); (ii) continue research on root causes; (iii) raise awareness among communities through education and campaigns; and (iv) undertake community based interventions like vocational training, support on livelihood activities in selected vulnerable pockets of the country. The CO uses the PVE framework in its monitoring of this work.

1.3.2 Using big data to produce new policy-oriented research on hate speech and grievances

As part of the various PVE initiatives in different countries, using the multi-stakeholder platforms, the regional programme initiated a conversation on hate speech which plays a big role in inciting violence, and introduced a model for analysis of magnitude of the problem using big data analytics model. Within the UN Framework of Action on Hate Speech, it has developed a conceptual framework by: (i) making use of online dictionaries to examine inciteful content on social media platforms; (ii) developing a coding manual for big data annotation around hate speech; and (iii) designing programmatic interventions and draw lessons to inform policies at the country and regional levels.[59] Through *the Digital Lighthouse Initiative project,* the regional programme designed and implemented a big data analytics model and produced a Semi-Automated Interface for Content Annotation (SAICA) to monitor and understand the drivers of hate speech in Tunisia, using Twitter data. The big data anlaytical model is used to monitor hate speech, polarization and core grievances in the Arab region. The tool also looks into whether COVID-19 has further stimulated inciteful content and messaging among various social groups or it has brought societies together. These serve as a toolkit for teams interested in designing a cost-efficient and multidisciplinary model to leverage big data for issues that contribute to identifying trends on polarization and entry-points for peacebuilding and social cohesion.[60] The regional programme also produced media guidebook on hate speech and provided training to media through Reuters. The guidebook was used by Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq COs in their engagement with media in respective countries. With support from the Regional Programme, the Country Offices in Tunisia and Egypt have submitted a joint proposal to mobilize resources for joint research work to monitor hate speech against women.

On conclusion of the PSCAR project in 2019, the regional programme developed a concept note for another initiative, *Diversity Advancement in the Arab Region* (DAAR, 2019), which aimed at policy-oriented research, developing tools and methodologies, knowledge-exchange and networking, and promoting policies that are conducive to advancing "governance of diversity." After initial scoping, this initiative was set aside amidst other emerging priorities, and has not been rolled out.

1.3.3 Capacity building of the LAS for sustaining peace and preventing conflict

The project *'Fostering capacities in the Arab States for sustaining peace and preventing conflict (2019-2021)'* was initially conceptualized in the framework of the LAS's role in promoting peace and preventing conflict; however, the onset of the COVID pandemic revealed the LAS' poor and outdated information technology (IT) infrastructure and its weak capacity to even continue its normal business. The project therefore was recast to focus on LAS' IT infrastructure and policy dialogue on relevant regional issues, with the support of the Government of Japan, according to key informants. **The project developed and implemented a comprehensive digital infrastructure strategy for the LAS. This includes training of 75 IT staff and business continuity services involving remote management.**

Another output under this project has been to facilitate a Japan-LAS cooperation and engagement on policies. UNDP facilitated the first-round table in 2019 which focused on education in the region, and the last roundtable was held in March 2021 (the 2020 roundtable was cancelled due to COVID) focusing on economic recovery/building back better and digital transformation. Senior-level roundtables were co-hosted with LAS and the Government of Japan (GOJ), which marked as one of the first opportunities for LAS member states, UN agencies, specialized organizations in the Arab region, Government of Japan and other experts to discuss the pandemic's impact and explore path for recovery and achievement of SDGs. This led to a launch of a roundtable series on COVID-19 recovery to be continued in 2021 under this tripartite partnership. These meetings served as one of the first major events to connect these partners

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[59] UNDP, *Digital Lighthouse Initiative, Final Progress Report*, Q3 2019-March 2020
[60] UNDP, *Result-Oriented Annual Report*, 2020

digitally, strengthening LAS's capacity to host such meetings in the future, and facilitate regional dialogue in response to the lingering crisis.[61]

The project is also funding papers/think pieces on policy recommendations on issues of importance to the region. KIIs showed that as of now, there is no system to monitor the uptake of these papers in different countries, but it is expected that once there are several position papers agreed by the LAS, UNDP COs may be able to engage in dialogues with different countries on implementation.

2. Output – Resilience signature solution

> **Key finding on resilience:**
> 1. UNDP played a crucial role in integrating the resilience agenda in the 3RP; however, it failed to build on its comparative strengths and organizational expertise for policy engagement at national and subnational level. *(1)*

2.1   Resilience and humanitarian-development nexus[62]

As part of the Regional Refugee & Response Plan (3RP), jointly with UNHCR, UNDP helped bring a development approach to Syrian refugee response, thus contributing to consolidation of the humanitarian-development nexus.[63] For the Syrian refugee crisis response, UNDP supported national and local governments in host countries in a diversity of contexts to address the development impacts of the crisis, in line with the Global Compact for Refugees to progress towards the SDGs in host countries.[64] The key activities of UNDP in response to the Syrian refugee crisis involved support on livelihoods and employment, improving basic service delivery, enhancing social cohesion and peace, promoting resilience-based approaches and the humanitarian development nexus, coordination of 3RP at the regional and country levels and mobilization of resources and advocacy for 3RP.

An evaluation[65] by UNDP late last year found that **the 3RP was successful in bringing together humanitarian and development actors on a single platform at the regional and national levels to address the humanitarian and development needs of Syrian refugees and affected host communities and national systems** in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. UNDP co-led coordination processes with UNHCR at the regional and national levels and led sectoral coordination in livelihoods and social cohesion. The UNDP Sub-Regional Facility for the Syria Crisis (SRF) played an important role in setting the resilience agenda, enabling 3RP deliberations and financial decision-making processes. As was noted in an independent evaluation,[66] UNDP however is yet to build on its comparative strengths and organizational expertise for policy engagement at national and subnational levels, according to key informants. Though evidence gathered is thin, this limitation may have been caused by two important factors: (a) at the regional level, the UNHCR leads on the Syria refugee issue and controls most of the funds-flow on this; and (b) funding and programming on resilience primarily takes place at country levels.

Through the European-funded project, "*Strengthening the capability in the League of Arab States Secretariat and its member States to provide early warning and effective responses to impeding regional crises, conflicts and post conflicts situations (2015-2019)",* institutional set up and capacity of the LAS Crisis Management

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[61] UNDP, *Result-Oriented Annual Report*, 2020

[62] Output 2.3.1 as per RPD: Sub-regional cooperation and related capacities enhanced for stabilization, rapid recovery from crises and return to sustainable development pathways.

[63] UNDP IEO*, Evaluation of UNDP Support to the Syrian Refugee Crisis Response and Promoting an Integrated Resilience Approach*, 2020

[64] UN, *Regional Strategic Overview – 3 RP*, December 2020.

[65] UNDP IEO, *Evaluation Of UNDP Support to the Syrian Refugee Crisis Response and Promoting an Integrated Resilience Approach*, 2020

[66] UNDP IEO, Ibid

department (CMD) was sought to be enhanced. A series of training workshops on early warning, crisis response and gender issues were conducted for staff in various departments as well as for officials from different Member States. The project initially envisaged establishing an Arab cooperation framework on early warning and crisis response, but this had to be dropped on account of lack of buy-in from the Member States.[67]

Major initiatives are currently underway on climate change adaptation and resilience under outcome 1 of the RPD which are outside the purview of this evaluation.

2.2   Prevention and preparedness[68]

Working with the LAS crisis management department, UNDP RP supported its capacity development for crisis management and response until 2019. The project, funded by the European Union, aimed at creating capacity within the LAS and its member states to provide crisis-related early warning, supported by two dedicated task forces/working groups. The project provided human resources to the unit and organized dedicated trainings to improve LAS technical skills and prepare LAS for post-crisis deployment, when necessary. **This evaluation could not obtain sufficient evaluable data on the current situation regarding how effectively the early warning capacity at the LAS is able to support the national governments in early warning of disasters and conflicts.**

3. Output - Gender signature solution[69]

Key findings on gender: 1. The *Mosharaka project* (2014-2018) was the first regional programme on gender equality and empowerment. It focused on women's political participation and put women's agenda on election boards. It connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation. *(3)* 2. The Arab Development Portal (ADP) incorporates gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data to highlight the status of women and gender disparities. All NSOs have been trained in use of the SDG tracking tool and collecting sex-disaggregated data, attributable clearly to UNDP interventions.   *(4)* 3. While significant efforts have gone into creating an awareness and understanding of gender issues among stakeholders through various projects and activities (YLP, ArabEMB), progress with regard to making real changes in their functioning, especially within the LAS, has been tardy. *(3)* 4. While UNDP's ability to facilitate dialogue with regional institutions and national governments at multiple levels is considered a key asset in taking forward gender issues, gender is under-resourced in the regional programme, especially as there was no dedicated project in the last 2-3 years.   *(2)*

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[67] UNDP, *LAS Crises response – Final progress review report to the Delegation of the European Union*, 2015-2019

[68] Output 2.3.2 as per RPD: Regional capacities and multi-country evidence-based assessment and planning tools enable prevention and preparedness to limit the impact of crisis and conflict.

[69] Output 2.6.1 as per RPD: Capacities strengthened to raise awareness on and undertake legal, policy and institutional reforms to fight gender discrimination and ensure women's participation in political and peace processes.

Gender discrimination and inequality remains a significant issue in the region with high rate of sexual violence and exploitation, unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public office. On SDG#5.5 (political representation of women) target, the region remains the lowest-performing in the world.[70] Despite witnessing a slow decrease in women's unemployment rate over the last 15 years from 22.4 percent in 2000 to 19.96 percent in 2015, it is more than double that for men in the region. Among young women, unemployment rates are the highest in the world, almost double the rates among young Arab men, 48 percent versus 23 percent respectively.[71] In line with UNDP's gender equality strategy 2018-2021, all COs in the region integrate gender equality into all aspects of UNDP's work to reduce poverty, build resilience and achieve peace in communities and territories, helping to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The regional programme focuses on strengthening the regional ecosystem comprising regional institutions, processes, research and knowledge products and advocacy at regional level which complement, as well as enable COs and other country-level institutions to undertake concrete programmes on the ground.

The *Mosharaka project* (2014-2018) was the first regional project on gender equality and empowerment. It focused on women's political participation and put women's agenda on election boards. It connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation, including the Arab Women's Organization (AWO), the Arab Network of NGOs in Development and the LAS. The project conducted BRIDGE workshops on Gender and Elections and made available in the publication "Inclusive Electoral Processes: A Guide for EMBs on promoting Gender Equality and women's participation".[72] The regional platform and partnerships the *Mosharaka* project facilitated provided the foundation for several subsequent initiatives in the region after 2018. In partnership with the UN WOMEN, UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), the regional programme produced a Regional Gender Justice Study that provides a comprehensive assessment of laws and policies on gender equality before the law and protection from gender-based violence (GBV) in 18 Arab countries. This study provides a baseline analysis assessing whether certain laws in penal codes, family law and labor law are equal for men and for women and protect women from violence in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recommendations and international human rights law. A regional network, Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), worked with UNDP and other UN agencies to document all national laws in Arab States on gender equality issues. Each country report highlights the main legal barriers preventing women's access to justice and legal protection from GBV in the Arab States. Furthermore, country level findings are summarized to highlight the deficits between national laws and international standards and the steps that will be needed to achieve many of the targets agreed upon in the Sustainable Development Goals.[73]

The Arab Development Portal (ADP)[74] which brings together relevant data and analysis from all countries in the region on social and economic parameters, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Agenda, incorporates gender indicators and sex disaggregated data to highlight the status of women and gender disparities in the Arab region. The SDGs Tracking Tool and dynamic database developed as part of the ADP includes sex disaggregated and gender indicators based on international and national sources under the Gender thematic page with around 1608 unique indicators as of December 2020. The COVID-19 policy mapper developed last year as part of ADP looks into the impact of the pandemic on the lives of women across the various dimensions and development themes and offers gender-disaggregated data and gender-targeted measures.[75] **All National Statistical Organizations (NSO) have been trained in use of the SDG tracking tool**

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[70] Source: UN Women (https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation), accessed 18 May 2021

[71] Source: UNDP (https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html)

[72] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

[73] https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/presscenter/events/2018/launch-of-the-report--gender-justice---the-law-.html

[74] Details discussed in sub-section 4.1 below

[75] UNDP, *Result-Oriented Annual Report*, 2020

and collecting disaggregated data. KIIs with 3 NSOs during this evaluation confirmed that they attempt to ensure that all data collected from different Ministries and Departments are gender-disaggregated.

According to key informants, **various projects and initiatives undertaken by the regional programme ensure that gender issues are integrated into these.** One of the YLP's three pillars focuses on gender equality, with the aim to introduce participants to SDG 5 and its importance for achieving Agenda 2030.[76] The survey response showed strong positive feedback by participants in various awareness and training sessions on citizens' and women's rights related to elections and various democratic processes (Figure 4). Through the provision of tailored gender awareness training to partner organizations in Syria, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and Libya, the capacity of YLP trainers and partners to encourage inclusive participation of women was attempted to be strengthened. LAS is organizing a workshop for EMBs in April-May 2021 to look at gender issues in elections. The ArabEMBs secretariat was supported in the development of a survey of the EMBs which took a deeper look into women's representation in EMBs from the legal framework to the impact of temporary special measures on women's participation in elections as voters, candidates and electoral administrators. As a result, disaggregated data and insights into women's political and electoral participation were produced, paving the way for the Arab Network for Women in Elections to address challenges and gaps evidenced.[77]

Figure 4: Participation in democratization processes (n=40)   (Source: Survey data)

KIIs with external key and internal informants who are knowledgeable about the work of the LAS voiced their dissatisfaction about the progress made by the latter in taking forward gender issues within the institution itself, let alone its ability to provide any meaningful leadership on this issue in the region. In this regard, it is understood that UN Women had supported the LAS with the services of a gender expert for a number of years, but had to subsequently discontinue this support as **the absorption capacity and commitment within the LAS on gender issue remained weak as gender issues remain on the periphery.**

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[76] UNDP, 2020, *ibid*

[77] UNDP, 2020, *ibid*

According to key informants, UNDP was not a key player on gender issues in the past – it was focused on anticorruption and elections, SDG and Rule of Law. But increasingly in the past few years, UNDP has been taking an active role in promoting gender issues in the region. While UNFPA and UN Women are seen to have greater technical capacity on gender issues, **UNDP's ability to facilitate dialogue with regional institutions and national governments at multiple levels is considered a key asset.** KIIs with youth-focused organizations showed that while greater participation of women may have been an achievement, more could be done in engaging youth groups on gender and women's equality issues. Most youth organizations have mixed groups; there are very few organizations which are focused on women's rights issues. This is

> "Most projects don't do good a gender analysis. How does a project impact on women's lives as opposed to counting how many women targeted? Lack of solid gender analysis stops this from happening."
> - *Key informant*

partly attributed by a small number of internal key informants to **gender being under-resourced in the regional programme, especially as there was no dedicated project in the last 2-3 years (after *Mosharaka* ended). Most of the interventions are now ad-hoc or one-off.** For example, the global initiative on '*Women's participation in political and economic decision-making in conflict and post-conflict situations,*' undertaken in partnership with the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), brings together women from different countries to share experiences through online discussion, but fails to provide an outlet to move the dialogue beyond that. It is understood that this project which was so far led by the RP is now being taken up by the gender and crisis facility in the UNDP headquarters, and follow up actions in different crises countries will be bult into the next phase of the project.

4. Knowledge and thought leadership

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Key findings on knowledge and thought leadership

1. The ADP has become the single-most important repository of development-related data in the region for official statistical bodies and regional institutions, providing crucial data on SDG indicators and other data considered critical by international financial institutions in the region. *(4)*

2. ADP plays the role of a technical services provider for the national statistical offices in the Arab region, aiming to assess and improve their capacities and needs on reporting on the SDGs and to disseminate official statistics in the Arab region. *(4)*

3. Awareness among some of the key stakeholders within UNDP as well as other regional networks about what ADP can offer is low. *(3)*

4. ADP is playing a key role in popularizing use of data and data visualization on development issues and use of big data analytics for development programmes in the region. *(2)*

5. Slow progress on implementing an exit strategy from the ADP project creates an uncertainly for UNDP to move things forward. *(3)*

6. Various knowledge products including the AHDR and thematic research reports have provided a strong demand and push for evidence-based discourse on policy debates in the region. *(2)*

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4.1 Arab Development Portal and SDG[78]

The Arab Development Portal (ADP), an online bilingual data warehouse and knowledge platform, is an initiative of the Coordination Group (CG) of Arab National and Regional Developmental Institutions,[79] the Islamic Development Bank, and the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID) to create a knowledge platform to improve the scope, reliability, and availability of high-quality development knowledge in the Arab region. Since its inception in 2016, UNDP has been developing and executing this initiative on behalf of the CG. It currently hosts 15 thematic web-pages on key developmental topics (banking and finance, demography, education, energy, gender, labor and employment, macroeconomy, poverty, health, environment, trade, water and food security, ICT, governance and youth), 22 country web-pages and a dynamic database that offers advanced tools for data browsing, data extraction and data visualization.[80] **The database currently includes around 8,500 indicators, which are extracted from the datasets published by international organizations and national statistical offices (NSOs) in the region**. The first regional SDGs Tracking Tool was launched in 2018 with the aim to simplify the seemingly complex nature of the SDGs monitoring framework through its quantitative analysis and report builder.[81] UNDP supports various national NSOs and LAS who produce data and thus the producers of information and consumers. Besides the members of the CG, the main consumers are statistical bodies, development practitioners, researchers, academics and youths. The project runs training events where Youths are trained in data cleaning, analysis, storytelling and visualization. These processes stimulate demand and through feedback loops provide valuable inputs for further development of the ADP. UNDP also works with journalists as well, sensitizing them on use of data and with a network of media outlets to advance data journalism.

ADP plays the role of a technical services provider for the national statistical offices in the Arab region, aiming to assess and improve their capacities and needs on reporting on the SDGs in a user-friendly manner on the one hand and to disseminate official statistics in the Arab region on the other. ADP's technical services include assessing the national statistical capacity to design and manage SDGs databases, facilitate exchange among all producers of SDGs data, report on SDGs and disseminate SDGs data and develop national data portals and SDGs tracking platforms using open-source technologies. The first regional multi-source and multi-level SDGs Tracking Tool was launched in 2018 to monitor the status of countries with respect to the global list of 232 indicators and also against the targets set out in Arab countries' national strategies.[82] A customized version of the tool was successfully implemented in Syria in 2019 and in Jordan in 2020; this is also being developed for Egypt (to be presented at the 2021 High-Level Political Forum) and with discussions are ongoing to roll this out in Kuwait as well.[83]

The regional programme has an ongoing partnership with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS) which is a regional intergovernmental body that provides training and research support to NSOs. UNDP works with this body and provides inputs into the course design to ensure that SDG indicators are integrated in the training. In 2020, a series of e-learning workshops to strengthen the capacities of NSOs were conducted, gathering 340 participants from 20 countries in the region. The project has also developed a COVID-19 Policy Mapper for Arab countries, including COVID-19 policy measures and contextual indicators,[84] which presents information and data that help to monitor the government response on COVID-19 and help identify the areas of vulnerabilities and structural deficits and the pillars of resilience

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[78] Output 2.5.1 as per RPD: Capacities developed to analyse progress towards SDGs using innovative and data-driven solutions.

[79] There are ten members of this Coordination Group: Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Arab Gulf Programme for Development (AGFUND), Arab Monetary Fund, Islamic Development Bank, Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), Qatar Fund for Development, Saudi Fund for Development.

[80] UNDP, ADP *Annual Project Review Report,* 2019

[81] UNDP, *Result Oriented Annual Report*, 2018

[82] UNDP, *Result Oriented Annual Report*, 2019

[83] UNDP 2019, *ibid*

[84] UNDP, *Result Oriented Annual Report*, 2020

in the country. This is now being piloted in the UNDP Jordan Country Office.[85] In the Jordan Department of Statistics, a SDG unit was established in 2019 with UNDP support. According to sources, the Department has been able to gather data on 60% of the indicators, coordinating with various Ministries. Each Ministry has a focal point for compiling data on. They have also developed a mobile app to publish SDG data on the ADP platform. A data portal for of Syria was redesigned by ADP which invested in open-source technology and encouraged national bodies to move to open-source platforms. The training includes use of open-source data and data visualization.

ADP is now one of the very few knowledge portals in the region putting big data technologies to use and offering the latest technology in data browsing and visualization, and it also designs regional tools and training programmes that achieve economies of scale and are easily (and with minimal cost) scalable for country programmes. The SDGs Tracking Tools and other training programmes that aim to improve the demand side of data by investing in data users is one of the main value-added of the ADP. UNDP runs an annual Visualize-2030 data camp which brings together youth from the region to express their creative ideas using data and technology for devising SDGs innovative solutions. The ADP has also designed data-driven debates and launched these debates in Lebanon in 2019. More recently, and in partnership with the Jordan CO, the ADP launched the Jordan Youth Data-Driven Debates which will be implemented by the Jordan Economic Forum (affiliated with Ministry of International Cooperation) in Jordan.

In 2019, an independent end-user survey of ADP was carried out which found that at least 72% of the respondents rated the ADP a 'relevant' initiative meeting a critical gap in the region. An interesting aspect of the overall finding was that while respondent liked the platform for what was on offer, the 36-60 year age-group were skeptical of some of the data, when these were provided by government.[86] The survey (Annex 9) conducted among youths during this evaluation showed weak awareness about the platform, though it needs to be noted that the survey group may not have been the main target of the ADP. **KIIs showed a mixed picture regarding use of ADP portal by key stakeholders within UNDP as well as by other regional networks. Within UNDP, while staff at technical/mid-level programme implementation were generally aware of what the ADP has to offer, at senior management level awareness of how it is or can be used was low.** At least two senior leaders from amongst the external stakeholders were aware of ADP's existence, but were unsure how their organizations could engage in or utilize what ADP offered.

The current phase (April 2019-March 2022) of the ADP project signed between the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID) and UNDP envisages a gradual handover of its implementation responsibilities to one of the CG members so that by the end of the project, the latter can take over full responsibility for continuation of the ADP initiative in a manner that ensures its sustainability and financial independence. Discussions were initiated in 2020 to develop a concrete action plans, but KIIs indicate that **the CG is yet to take a formal decision as to which of their members will be in a position to take it over. This leaves the current status of ADP in a state of limbo as on the one hand there is a formal commitment on both sides (CG and UNDP) to ensure a proper handover, but on the other hand there is no concrete plan yet due to competition among CG members to take over the ADP, which shows the value of the ADP to various members. Additionally, the ADP is the only project that has remained operational as a joint and collective effort of the ten members of the CG.** Ideally the process ought to have started now so that there is about a year of hand-holding, accompaniment and coaching period before UNDP can fully withdraw from operational responsibilities of ADP and the commitments made to its pool of users and partners.

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[85] UNDP, *Arab Development Portal, Annual Project Review Report*, 2020
[86] Triangle, *Evaluating the Usability and Functionality of the Arab Development Portal in the Arab Region* - Final Report, 2020

4.2 Knowledge project and Arab Human Development Reports[87]

The Knowledge project is an off-shoot of the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR).[88] In partnership with the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF) since 2007, the Knowledge Project (KP) has produced quantitative and qualitative evidence on the state of knowledge and knowledge-based development in the Arab States region and beyond. The AKP seeks to ensure that information and data on knowledge for development across multiple sectors are easily accessible for policymakers, researchers and the public alike. The indices produced capture improvements made in the areas of education (pre-university, higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), economy, ICT and research, development and innovation,[89] helping reflect countries' commitment to achieving the SDGs set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several knowledge products were developed in this regard, including a series of Arab Knowledge Reports, the Arab Knowledge Index, and the Global Knowledge Index.[90] The project has now been extended for another ten years (2021-2030). The project supports MBRF in the organization of the Arab Knowledge Summit and the launch of knowledge-based reports and indexes.

Another crucial knowledge product which UNDP produces periodically is the Arab Human Development report (AHDR) which were rated highly by external key informants for their quality and evidence-base. One was intended to be produced in 2020 on the theme of inclusive citizenship, linked to the Agenda 2030 principle of leaving no one behind. However, in the wake of COVID-19, it shifted research priorities to topics around the pandemic, and UNDP produced short papers related to the impact of COVID-19, and a full AHDR is scheduled to be produced by the end of this year. Using COVID-19 as an entry point, the policy element of the research done investigated opportunities to ensure inclusion is considered in building greater resilience to future crises. The research has a special focus on responsiveness, accountability and coordination of public measures in response to the pandemic, as well as the impact on select SDGs and a particular focus on the impact on women. The aim is to help shape the thinking around what sustainable development will look like in a post-COVID 19 world. Webinars have also been conducted focusing on public health and political economy aspects linked to the COVID effects.[91]

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[87] Output 2.5.2 as per RPD: Policies, plans and partnerships for sustainable development draw upon UNDP's thought leadership, knowledge and evidence

[88] In the RPD, the Knowledge Project now contributes to Outcome 1 (Accelerate the structural transformation of productive capacities in a sustainable and inclusive manner)

[89] UNDP, *Arab Knowledge Project (AKP), 2019: Project Annual Progress Report* 2019

[90] The Global Knowledge Index was introduced in 2017, and is the only index that measures knowledge on the global level as a broad concept that is directly related to sustainable development.

[91] UNDP, *Fostering Knowledge for Human Development in the Arab Region - Arab Human Development Report*, Annual Project Progress Report, 2020

Section D: Findings and analysis based on evaluation criteria

1. Relevance[92,93]

Key findings on relevance:

1. The regional programme is strongly rooted in the priorities emerging from the regional context, and its focus remains relevant for the region, with a synergistic relationship with country-level programming. Programme delivery has rightly been primarily through the partners and COs, with direct delivery by UNDP only for the knowledge and thought leadership area. *(4)*

2. Lack of social protection and growing inequality will continue to be important issues in the region and the pandemic has exacerbated these issues in an already volatile, conflict-ridden context, with increasing social exclusion leading to further polarization within the Arab society. Climate change compounds the scenario with increasing vulnerability of people. In this context, the upcoming joint project on youth employment is highly relevant. *(3)*

3. The TOC had a robust articulation on sub-national governance and state building; findings however show that the contribution of the regional programme in these regards may be only indirect due to the fact that specific interventions directly targeting sub-national governance ought to be part of a country programme portfolio, and hence a strong reflection of this is not found in the regional programme. *(3)*

4. To continue to be relevant in the context, the regional programme has used both reactive approach in response to needs expressed by its key stakeholders (regional networks, institutions, COs) for support, as well as proactively initiated new areas of work which responded to gaps identified in the development /governance landscape. *(3)*

5. The evaluation found several examples of COs leveraging the regional programme to develop country-specific programmes. The RP responded swiftly to the demand from various government institutions for increasing their digital capacity for business continuity as well as for remote communication and operations post-COVID 19. Besides facilitating the use of digital platforms for day-to-day functions, the emphasis on digital governance since last year is timely and needs scaling up, with complementary policy measures promoting greater transparency and accountability. *(4)*

6. The work being carried out on social contracts in Iraq is another area that has potential to lead to be leveraged for pro-people policies. In this regard, social protection may need to become an important toolkit in governments' social contracts with the citizens. *(2)*

7. Promotion of gender issues through the programme has largely remained confined to increasing participation of women in certain projects/activities. People with disabilities and their inclusion have not been given much attention within UNDP programme, as well as by the partner agencies. While the RP has been delivering good social cohesion and PVE programmes, integration of conflict-sensitivity in the programmes is weak. *(4)*

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[92] *Questions addressed*: 1. To what extent does the intended outcome and associated outputs flow from the theory of change (TOC) and address the regional priorities, and to what extent these are aligned with UNDP's mandate? 2. Are the initiatives developed to contribute to this outcome addressing the needs and requirements of the identified target groups? 3. To what extent did UNDP adopt gender sensitive, human rights-based and conflict-sensitive approach? 4. To what extent is UNDP engagement with partners and stakeholders a reflection of strategic considerations, including the role of UNDP in the specific regional development context and its comparative advantage? 5. To what extent was the method of delivery selected by UNDP appropriate to the development context? 6. How has the regional programme adjusted to the fallouts of COVID-19, and to what effect in relation to results delivery? 7. Which programme areas or approaches are the most relevant and strategic for UNDP to scale up and consider going forward?

[93] The question on partnership (question 4 above) is closely connected to a similar question under effectiveness criterion. In order the avoid any repetition, this question addressed in the effectiveness section

8. The COVID pandemic has presented challenges as well as opportunities for better programming. While some activities were carried out online (training, research and workshops), several strategic engagements (anti-corruption, elections, for instance) on politically sensitive discussions where face-to-face discussions and ongoing dialogue are necessary, programme implementation had to be postponed for some time, causing some delays in a few activities. *(3)*

1.1 Alignment with UNDP mandate, regional priorities and theory of change

UNDP's mandate is encapsulated in its Strategic Plan for 2018-2021,[94] which is anchored in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The aim is to help countries achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, accelerating structural transformations for sustainable development and building resilience to crises and shocks. The two regional programme outcomes[95] are framed around this strategic aim and, as discussed in section A, it also articulates the outcomes through the six signature solutions outlined in the Strategic plan document. The Outcome 2 (addressing conflict, governance deficits and resilience) is founded on three of the six signature solutions, in addition to a very specific regional priority on knowledge and thought leadership.

As discussed in section B, the regional programme is strongly rooted in the priorities emerging from the regional context. A solid context analysis involves both trends analysis and horizon scanning – the former remains focused on factors and forces that are currently dominant, while the latter looks at incipient issues that may potentially become critical in the coming years. Unaccountable governance, social exclusion, alienation, and social inequality, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, violence and the prevailing trend of both voluntary and forced migration and internal displacement are still at play. The COVID pandemic, especially its socio-economic impact, which has heavily affected those who are most vulnerable and deprived of solid social safety nets, is likely to accentuate this social exclusion and lead to further polarization within the Arab society. This could also come at a time when the global economic forces and business environment are also likely to undergo significant transformation owing mainly to forces of increasing nationalism, impact of the pandemic and a greater emphasis on green economy. **Lack of social protection and growing inequality will continue to be some of the most important issues in the region and this is gaining a sense of urgency. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated these issues in an already volatile, conflict-ridden context. These are also linked to nexus and climate change which increase vulnerability of people.**

Built into the regional programme TOC (Annex 4) was a strong emphasis on: (i) evidence-based policies with increased availability of information, research, data and statistics at the national and regional level; (ii) south-south and triangular cooperation to inform policy making, building on good practice and lessons learned; and (iii) availability of data, statistics and policy documents in Arabic.[96] As the findings in section C show, the regional programme, in the course of implementation of the governance outcome, had a strong focus on these. The TOC was founded on several key elements of the regional context that were identified at the time of the RPD formulation. The ones for the governance portfolio were:
*   Strengthening capacity of regional institutions
*   SDG operationalization

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[94] UNDP, *UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2021*, November 2017

[95] Outcome 1. To assist partners in advancing regional cooperation and policy dialogue on inclusive and sustainable growth, while tackling climate change and environmental protection; Outcome 2. To focus on the root causes of conflict and governance deficits, facilitating stakeholders' cooperation to counteract fragilities, promote democratic reforms and fostering resilience.

[96] UNDP, *Summary of Key Discussion Points - UNDP Regional Conference "Development Challenges and Priorities in a Changing Arab Region"*, Amman, Jordan, 22-23 May 2017

- Strengthening civil society networks
- Multi-stakeholder dialogue on vision of society, norms and culture
- Innovation in participatory practices
- Strengthening sub-national systems of governance
- Crisis prevention and response at national and sub-national levels
- State building of collapsed states.

The TOC had a robust articulation on sub-national governance, with stronger emphasis placed on support to the emergence of *strong sub-national institutions with decentralized structures* as the interface between local government and community. As this evaluation shows, the findings in this regard are at best tenuous, through strengthening civil society networks, youth and women's groups working at sub-national and grassroots level. This may be due to the fact that specific interventions directly targeting sub-national governance ought to be part of a country programme portfolio, and hence a strong reflection of this is not found in the regional programme, at least at the level of outcomes. The same applies to the last two elements (crisis prevention and response at national and sub-national levels, and state building) mentioned above. **This may serve as a reminder that while articulating the regional TOC, a clear analysis of the precise role and potential value added of a regional programme vis-à-vis the country programmes needs to underpin it.**

1.1.1 Responding to needs and priorities

The Regional programme is anchored in country priorities as SDGs are delivered at country level. The value added by regional programme is in facilitating experience-sharing across countries, networking and South-South cooperation which is at the heart of the regional programme. Regional platforms create a peer pressure within countries, bringing best practices from different countries. As emphasized in the RPD, the regional programme covers "*regional public goods and services, cross-border externalities and spillovers, sensitive cross-country or emerging issues, innovation and knowledge exchange, as well as south-south cooperation through regional partnerships and networks*".[97] In this sense, **its modus operandi includes both reactive approach in response to needs expressed by its key stakeholders (regional networks, institutions, COs) for support, as well as proactively initiating new areas of work which respond to gaps identified in the development /governance landscape.** An example of this approach is seen in the way the regional

> "The main driver for ACINET was UNDP. It is a key forum where you bring different States to work together on UNCAC to build some peer pressure. In the early years it was not easy to talk about anticorruption as governments were sensitive on this."   *- External key informant*

programme began working on the use of big data for analysis of social media context with focus on hate speech, as this was also prioritized by the UN Secretary General, besides being a key issue in the region's conflict scenario. The regional programme developed in-house capacity to undertake this analysis, with support from the UNDP headquarters. Subsequently the COs were approached to see if there was any interest in taking this forward at country level. Tunisia volunteered first and started working on this, and by the end of 2019, Iraq also volunteered to be part of this. Egypt did not join initially, but they have reportedly expressed interest in looking into hate speech against women, according to key informants. The Iraq CO is starting to engage with the big data initiative for a research into social contract process and core grievances in the country to determine various expectations and perspectives of citizens and businesses on good governance and societal trust. The CO is being supported on designing such research and collecting necessary data. Big data analysis will help the CO to understand how society thinks about governance and their priorities. If useful, this methodology can become an analytical tool for wider use. As an example of 'cross-pollination' between the CO and regional initiatives, the regional programme is now undertaking an analysis of social contracts in different contexts in the Arab region.

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[97] UNDP, *Regional programme document for Arab States (2018-2021)*, 28 November 2017

The unfolding of the COVID pandemic in 2020 created a big demand from various stakeholders for increasing their digital capacity for business continuity, as well as for remote communication and operations. The regional programme is now working on supporting digital transformation the COs in the region. This will also support national counterparts' digital systems, enabling them to move towards e-governance. A digital maturity assessment of each country is being undertaken in partnership with a specialized European agency. Digital maturity assessments are being conducted in Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Palestine, Morocco and Tunisia, including assessing the countries' policies on data management.

The evaluation found several examples of COs leveraging the regional programme to develop country-specific programmes. In Lebanon, some 3-4 years ago, one of the key Ministries requested the UNDP CO for support in developing an anti-corruption strategy. As the CO did not have technical capacity, it brought in the regional programme to support this. Now the CO has initiated an anti-corruption project (Anti-corruption Trust) within the country, with support from the regional programme. The PVE initiative which developed practical tools for programming was found, during this evaluation, to have been used by most of the COs and some partners to develop programmes at community and national level (Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia, Lebanon). Likewise, as discussed in section C, the YLP which started as part of the elctions project hived off to incorporate other priority areas such as business and entrepreneurship development, social cohesion and participation in local development issues.

1.1.2 Gender, human rights and conflict-sensitivity in programming

As discussed in earlier (sub-section 3 in section C), promotion of gender through the programme has largely remained confined to increasing participation of women in certain projects/activities. There is some progress being made on issues of gender inequality through engagement with regional forums (LAS, Arab EMBs, Arab Network for Women in elections, regional youth forums). There are dozens of organizations, both international and regional/national, working on gender issues in the region, lacking their power to crystallize a synergy that takes the form of issues-focused movement, rather than mere projects. A question that needs to be asked is whether UNDP has leveraged its convening power in the region and sought to find a synergy, using these technical agencies' capacity to move things forward with the regional and national institutions. **While the experience of both UN Women and UNDP in the past working with the LAS on gender issue may not have been encouraging, it still remains vital that this weakness is addressed and the former find ways of working together with the top leadership of the LAS to move forward on gender issues.**

People with disabilities and their inclusion have not been given much attention within UNDP programme as well as by the partner agencies, as KIIs with both UNDP and external sources revealed. Interviews showed that while NSOs gather sex-disaggregated data on SDG indicators, disability is not a focus. On human rights, law on access to information in Lebanon reinforces a fundamental right of all people for transparent information to be shared by the governments. UNDP has supported election monitoring with a human-rights perspective to ensure that the elections are free and fair and all politically marginalized groups are included in the process.

Working in a volatile and live-conflict situation demands that development and humanitarian organizations demonstrate conflict sensitivity throughout all stages of project cycle to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions.[98] The term 'conflict sensitivity' encompasses ability of an organization to: (i) understand the context in which it operates; (ii) understand the interaction between its interventions and the context; and (iii) act upon this understanding in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts on conflict.[99] UNDP's PVE and social cohesion activities underscore an understanding of the conflict dynamics. Besides this, there may be other areas where a deeper analysis of conflict factors may enrich the programme.

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[98] Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, *How to Guide Conflict Sensitivity*, February 2012.
[99] Overseas Development Institute, *Applying conflict sensitivity in emergency response*. HPN Network paper, Number 70, October 2011

The YLP in its current form tends to be biased in favour of what may be called 'elitist' constituents, leaving out a large section of disenfranchised youths from the frame. This may only exacerbate the conflict factors in the long term. As discussed in section C, these challenges are now being attempted to be addressed through new projects under development.

1.1.3   Method of programme delivery

Programme delivery has rightly been primarily through the partners and country offices, with direct delivery by regional programme mostly for the innovative tools like the PVE monitoring framework, knowledge and thought leadership area. Capacity building of partners has been appropriately a key element of this approach to delivery. As the evidence shows, at the country level, programme delivery has been generally demand-driven, at the request of the COs. KIIs indicate that 2-3 years ago, sometimes the regional programme was implemented in countries without keeping the COs in the loop; however, this has changed now and the COs feel that they are fully in the loop when activities are undertaken in the countries by the regional programme.

1.1.4   Effect of COVID-19 on results delivery

The COVID pandemic has presented challenges, as well as opportunities for better programming. For some activities (anti-corruption, elections, for instance) which are politically sensitive, face-to-face discussions and ongoing dialogue are necessary. COVID affected some of these work as staff could not travel. Since 2020, as travel became almost impossible, the anti-corruption work focused more on knowledge production and research than on policy development as the latter requires person-to-person engagement on sensitive issues. Likewise, some of the regional networking events ideally require face-to-face meetings and workshop to facilitate learning and exchange; virtual meetings are no substitute for in-person relationship building, though some of the training could be delivered through digital platforms. The Regional EMB had planned to involve youth networks in their discussions, but his has not progressed in 2020 due to COVID.

As UNDP moved its training and workshops online immediately after the COVID erupted, youth groups were trained in the use of online platforms to run their events. Groups were also encouraged to share learning on how they adapted to COVID. UNDP invested heavily on IT and e-platforms, and encouraged some of the partners to do the same. At least two regional networks interviewed for this evaluation confirmed that, taking support of the ADP, they moved their training and networking meetings online. This increased the number of participants in most countries and made their constituency wider and diverse, as participants from all parts of the countries could participate, while for in-person events there was a high concentration of participants from capital cities. People without access to computer or internet and those most vulnerable however are likely to continue to be excluded.

Previously the ADP team responded to the demands and needs of the knowledge platforms, the COs and NSOs usually in a reactive manner. The COVID pandemic provided impetus and a sense of urgency for digital capacity development in different institutions within the Governments as there is greater need for e-governance. **The ADP team has been proactively engaging with stakeholders and facilitate use of digital platforms for day-to-day functions.** The elections team worked during the last one year to support EMBs in adapting elections processes in a pandemic scenario. Nearly a dozen remote workshops and webinars were held to create awareness among EMB officials about various measures that can be deployed to conduct elections in the COVID-scenario. KIIs suggest that countries such as Jordan, Palestine and Kuwait, in particular, adapted their election processes taking some of the tips from these webinars. The effect of the pandemic also gave an impetus for redesigning the youth programme (section C, sub-section 1.2.2).

1.1.5   Strategic relevance of programmes for scaling up

On the whole, the regional programme has focused on the right issues that still remain relevant for the region, and has pitched its programming in a synergistic relationship with country-level programming. The new emphasis on digital governance since last year is timely and certainly needs scaling up, with complementary policy measures that promote greater transparency and accountability (for example, the access to information law in Lebanon). The work being carried out on social contracts in Iraq is another area that has potential to lead to be leveraged for pro-people policies. As discussed in sub-section 1.1 above, **the changing regional and global context that is likely to aggravate social exclusion, conflict and displacement; in this regard, social protection may need to become an important toolkit in governments' social contracts with the citizens.**

2. Effectiveness[100,101]

> **Key findings on effectiveness:**
>
> 1. Strong evidence of anti-corruption outcomes in terms of development of institutions and strategies in Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq in particular, besides some limited progress made in Egypt and Palestine. These have included: development of policies on anti-corruption, transparency and information access; introduction of tools and standards for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption; and engagement of civil society in these institutions. *(4)*
>
> 2. The regional programme has made distinctive contribution to the capacity of the LAS EAD which now has an expanded membership (12) of national election bodies. The regional forum of EMBs has developed good practices guidelines which are now being adopted by national bodies. The work with NHRIs to promote human rights standards in elections (now being piloted in Jordan) is another contribution of UNDP, besides encouraging participation women and youths in EMBs and electoral processes. *(3)*
>
> 3. The platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and violent extremism has shifted the dialogue from a 'securitized' approach to dealing with extremism to a holistic understanding of nexus between social and economic marginalization, disenfranchisement and extremism. The PVE tools developed through the regional project is being extensively used in several countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia) in engagements with respective governments and civil society to foster grassroots actions on the ground (Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan). *(4)*
>
> 4. The ADP and knowledge products are recognized as distinctive contributions of the regional programme and the ADP has become an important source of development-related data in the region, as well as a technical services provider building the capacities of national statistical bodies on collecting data on SDG indicators and to disseminate official statistics. Of late, however, the ESCWA has also launched a data portal which mirrors some of what ADP provides. *(4)*

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[100] *Questions addressed*: 1. To what extent has progress been made towards outcome 2 achievement? What has been the UNDP contribution to the observed change? 2. To what extent have women and men been treated equally, and the programme promoted gender equality, the empowerment of women, human rights and human development in the delivery of the corresponding outputs? 3. What has been the contribution of partners and other organizations to the outcome, and how effective have UNDP partnerships been in contributing to achieving the outcome? To what extent is UNDP engagement with partners and stakeholders a reflection of strategic considerations, including the role of UNDP in the specific regional development context and its comparative advantage? 4. Have there been any unexpected outcome-level results? Have outputs produced unexpected externalities which proved beneficial or detrimental towards the outcome? 5. How have UNDP regional initiatives complemented and supported UNDP work at the country office level? 6. To what extent have intended target groups benefitted? 7. To what extent did UNDP engage or coordinate with stakeholders, implementing partners, other United Nations agencies, as well as regional and national counterparts to maximise the contribution to outcome level results? 8. What additional factors should be considered to enhance effectiveness?

[101] The question 7 above on coordination and partnership is closely linked to question 3, and hence have been addressed together.

5. While the regional programme has put women's political participation and women's agenda on election boards and connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation, at the national level and within the LAS institutional structure, gender remains weak. Gender-disaggregated data are now beginning to be collected as the NSOs have been trained in use of the SDG tracking tool and collecting sex-disaggregated data. On human rights, the regional programme's support to national HRIs in election monitoring has been a good beginning and it is expected that as tools are further refined and developed, this initiative will become grounded in all the countries in the region. Though refugee rights are not core to the mandate of UNDP, its work with UNHCR on 3RP focusing on resilience and the Global Compact on Refugees takes a rights-based approach.   *(3)*

6. The RP has developed a number of highly relevant and effective partnerships over the years. Partners however appear to have only a limited view of the RP's work, to the extent UNDP chooses to engage with them, and they may not be aware of other connected issues where engagement could be of mutual benefit. The regional programme has built a relationship of mutual trust with the COs which are at the forefront of taking forward some of the activities at the country level.   *(4)*

7. The regional programme's ability to 'think ahead', bringing new ideas and incubating these, where needed, before going out for scaling up, give it a distinctive edge. Several important factors have positioned UNDP in the regional scenario to be able to influence, working with its partners, the development landscape – its diverse partnership, facilitating multi-stakeholder regional platforms and networking, high quality advice and expertise are a few of these factors.   *(3)*

2.1 Results achieved and UNDP's contributions

Evidence presented on various outputs in section C show what is being achieved at the level of outputs contributing to the outcome 2 ("Strengthen institutions to promote inclusive participation, prevent conflict and build peaceful societies"). **Very clear evidence emerged on anti-corruption outcomes in terms of development of institutions and strategies in Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq in particular, besides some limited progress made in Egypt and Palestine. These have included: development of policies on anti-corruption, transparency and information access; introduction of tools and standards for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption; and engagement of civil society in these institutions.** All evidence suggest that these results are clearly attributable to the regional programme, including the capacity of the CO programmes which have now been deepening their engagement on anti-corruption in various countries. The extensive range of partnership and regional networking processes which have created a peer-pressure of their own for different countries to move forward on anti-corruption agenda are uniquely UNDP's contributions.

On electoral capacity, the regional programme has made distinctive contribution to the capacity of the LAS EAD which now has an expanded membership (12) of national election bodies. The regional forum of EMBs has developed good practices guidelines which are now being adopted by national bodies. The work with NHRIs to promote human rights standards in elections which is now being piloted in Jordan is another contribution of UNDP, besides encouraging participation women and youths in EMBs and electoral processes. Clear attribution of results on electoral issues however poses slight challenge in that within UNDP or for external stakeholders, it is difficult to distinguish the support provided by Regional Advisers as part of the regional hub technical assistance from the regional programme, on the one hand, and from the UN Electoral Affairs Department (UNEAD) with which the Advisers work closely, on the other. Additionally, in countries with special political missions (Iraq, Yemen, Libya, for example), the latter take the lead, making a clear attribution of all outcomes realized through the regional programme difficult.

The regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and violent extremism has shifted the dialogue from 'securitized' approach to dealing with extremism to a holistic understanding of nexus between social and economic marginalization, disenfranchisement and extremism. The PVE tools developed through the regional project is being extensively used in several countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia) in engagements with respective governments as well as civil society to foster grassroots actions on the ground (Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan). All the COs interviewed during this evaluation singled out the PVE tools as one of the significant contributions of the regional programme which enabled them to develop country programmes on a complex set of issues and successfully raise funds for. While there are a number of organizations working on various dimensions for addressing violent extremism in the region, the PVE monitoring framework is UNDP's unique contribution, according to all key informants. The work on hate speech using big data as part of this PVE initiative is considered an innovation in this regard.

The ADP and knowledge products are recognized as distinctive contributions of the regional programme, working closely with the COs. The ADP has become an important source of development-related data in the region, as well as a technical services provider, building the capacities of national statistical bodies on collecting data on SDG indicators and to disseminate official statistics in the Arab region. Additionally, ADP's role in popularizing use of data and data visualization and use of big data analytics for development programmes is uniquely recognized. It was noted during the evaluation that the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has developed a data portal which is populated with development and economy related data, including on SDGs, mirroring the ADP portal, with significant duplication and overlaps between the two. This may require some harmonization between the two so as to avoid any duplication.

2.2 Gender equality and human rights in the regional programme

The regional programme has had modest success when it comes to promoting gender equality issues in the region, especially in the regional institutions. Process tracing indicates that while the regional programme has put women's political participation and women's agenda on election boards and connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation, at the national level and within the LAS institutional structure, addressing gender inequality issues remain weak in their core business. KIIs indicated that gender-disaggregated data are now beginning to be collected as the NSOs have been trained in use of the SDG tracking tool and collecting sex-disaggregated data. On human rights, within UNDP's mandate and focus, the regional programme's effort in promoting national HRIs in election monitoring has been a good beginning and it is expected that as the tools are further refined and developed, this initiative will become grounded in all the countries in the region. Though refugee rights are not core to the mandate of UNDP, its work with UNHCR on 3RP focusing on resilience and the Global Compact on Refugees takes a rights-based approach.

2.3 The role of partnerships in contributing to the outcome

A crucial element of the UNDP Strategic Plan is for it to "enhance multi-stakeholder partnerships" to address the 2030 Agenda. As has been discussed throughout this report, UNDP regional programme created, facilitated and nurtured several regional platforms and networks that *"strengthen collaboration with Governments as well as with civil society and the private sector"* (UNDP Strategic Plan). The findings on outputs on ADP, anti-corruption and elections in particular, presented in section C, show that the regional programme was instrumental in facilitating and strengthening several key networks which have created a dynamic on addressing a number of SDG priorities in the region involving government and intergovernmental actors, private sector organizations and NGOs/Civil society.

The generally-positive feedback from most of the interviewees and clear examples of successful outputs discussed in section C is attributable in part to some of the highly relevant and effective partnerships UNDP has been able to develop over the years. The partnership with the CG and its members on ADP, the NSOs and AITRS on statistical capacity and SDG indicators, the LAS and EMBs on electoral capacity, the ACINET on anti-corruption, International Alert on PVE and social cohesion, CAWTAR, the AWO on gender equality issues, Arab Youth Centre (AYC) on youth delegates, UN ODC on anti-corruption strategy in Kuwait, and various international and regional research and academic organizations on regional and human development issues have been central to the regional programme. Among the UN agencies, UNHCR, UN Women and UNFPA have been significant partners. UN Women and UNDP have worked together on peace and security and PVE for the past few years, besides the gender and justice dashboard which is a repository of information on gender rights and legislation in the region. The newly developing partnership with UNICEF and ILO on the upcoming youth project is another example of leveraging the competence and resources of different organizations within the UN system. Besides these, *ad hoc* partnerships are also established from time to time on different activities, for example, with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) for facilitating webinars and online forum on gender and justice issues. A partnership has also been developed with the American University in Beirut to develop courses in digitization and building digital skills and services in the country.

Partnership with the LAS reflects a slightly disjointed approach by different parts of UNDP regional programme as each thematic area has tended to interact with the respective departments within the former, losing potential opportunity for synergy that could forge a holistic institutional partnership where broader strategic issues could be discussed (gender, for example). Beside the thematic discussions, the only other forum for engagement with the LAS is at the very highest level which is usually undertaken at political level between the UNDP headquarters and the former. Thus opportunity for engagement at a strategic programme and development issues within the region remain limited.

Overall, UNDP has partnered with the key institutions in the region. Good partnerships demand investment in time, resources and perseverance. The regional programme has been able to demonstrate a consistency over the years in this regard, and some of the programmes and partnerships have been going on for several or more years. Equally importantly the regional programme appears to have built a relationship of mutual trust with the COs which are at the forefront of taking forward some of the activities at the country level. **Partners however appear to have only a limited view of the RP's work, to the extent UNDP chooses to engage with them, and may not be aware of other connected issues where engagement could be of mutual benefit.**

As mentioned before, **the regional programme's ability to 'think ahead', bringing new ideas and incubating these, where needed, before scaling up, give it a distinctive edge.** Several important factors have positioned UNDP in the regional scenario in a position where it is able to influence, working with its partners, the development landscape. Its expertise and ability to bring cutting-edge ideas and international experience on crucial issues, and ability to follow through on an idea for a consistent period of time gave it credibility and space to navigate the complex development landscape in the region.

2.4 Externalities and unintended results

The YLP as a full-fledged programme emerged out of the elections project. Subsequently, a new partnership emerged with the Arab Youth Centre (AYC) during 2019 as an offshoot of their participation in the 2018 YLP edition. AYC has been providing funds for UNDP to employ youth delegates in its offices, as part of developing youth cadres working on sustainable development issues in the Arab region. The current YEEP project which is in its inception phase has also evolved from the YLP and is building an evidence base for a comprehensive youth programme for the future. Another example of externality was that of the demand for digitization driven by the fallouts of the COVID pandemic which required the regional programme to rapidly scale up its capacity to provide support on this.

2.5 Regional and country programme links

In the past two years, the regional programme has developed strong links with the CO programmes as country level senior management teams are brought on board. Several examples of synergistic relationship were noted – as discussed in section C, work on anti-corruption in Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia; PVE and social cohesion in several countries; NSO capacity building and big data analytics; YLP and engagement of youths at sub-national level; COs' engagement with national EMBs, to mention a few. However, communication flow between the regional programme and country teams often remains limited to technical or thematic teams, giving a

> **Lebanon CO programme of anti-corruption**
> UNDP Lebanon now has a project 'Anticorruption Trust'. Initially the CO had no programme on anticorruption. The regional programme used to support initiatives in the country directly through the CO. Now the CO is directly managing it, with support from the regional programme. Partners see regional experts coming regularly and this reassures them that the CO is able to bring in the best expertise available. "The government now considers UNDP as central to anticorruption work in the country as UNDP does similar things in other countries of the region which are also moving ahead on anticorruption added to our credibility", according to one key informant.

blinkered view of the regional programme. The COs are aware of only a discrete part of the regional programme which is implemented in their respective countries, but do not have a full picture, according to key informants. From a cross-section of the KIIs with UNDP COs, it appears that there is greater awareness and understanding of the anticorruption and digitization work of the regional programme, but country staff have only a sketchy view of other activities. This may sometimes mean that opportunities for greater synergy is missed out as the COs cannot deepen their engagement with the regional dimension if they are not aware of the existence of the opportunities that may be there.

The evidence presented earlier indicated that while the RP needs to be in synergy with CO programmes, the former needs to proactively lead on sensitive issues where the COs may initially hesitate to step up as the latter has a day-to-day business relationship to nurture. As was seen in the case of social cohesion, PVE or hate speech, several countries which were initially lukewarm to these constructs in programming, slowly came on board. The concepts and ideas introduced by the RP give the COs tools for engagement with the governments at a pace the latter feel comfortable with.

2.6   Effect on intended target groups

The following Table (Table 3) summarizes how the intended target groups have benefitted through the RP interventions and where there may have been challenges.

Table 3: Results for intended target groups of the RPD

Stakeholder group targeted	Results/effects on the target group	Challenges and limitations
LAS	As the premier intergovernmental body, LAS CMD and EAD have acquired capacity to coordinate support on crisis response and elections respectively across the region. Staff capacity development particularly in election observations has already improved observations and reporting by LAS staff; so has the LAS' capacity to coordinate the EMBs in the region. The CMD has also been equipped with up-to-date IT infrastructure to be able to operate remotely.	Gender equality issues have not attracted much traction yet within the institution of the LAS
EMBs	All EMBs in the region meet every two years and share their experiences and best practices. This is enabling introduction of	Involvement of civil society in election

	several best practices in election bodies – participation of youths and women; monitoring of election processes by national HRIs; elections observation by LAS EAD.	monitoring (AWO, Arab Women's Network on elections) has not yet begun.
NSOs	Regular training and orientation on data collection on SDGs through SDG indicators; Active contribution on national statistics for ADP by several countries; Providing guidance to all Government agencies on collecting disaggregated data. The process of developing SDGs database management systems and platforms in Syria, Jordan and Egypt aimed to facilitate open access to statistical content produced by governments.	Uneven progress on NSO capacity in different countries, particularly with regard to SDG tracking and advanced SDGs database management tools to produce and publish disaggregated data.
National anti-corruption bodies	Tools and standards for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption through actionable strategies in Tunisia, Iraq and Jordan; development of anti-corruption institutions, strategies in Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and promoted engagement of civil society and transparent mechanism in these institutions.	-
Regional youth networks	YLP has contributed to development of business and leadership skills among youths from all countries in the region; also expanded space for youths to engage in development issues, SDGs and democratic representation processes in their countries.	Links to institutional set up for trained youths is weak
Regional women's network	Facilitated networking among women's groups and put women's agenda on election boards; gender & justice dashboard provides a comprehensive inventory of national law related to key gender issues in the region; countries are beginning to produce gender-disaggregated data on key development parameters.	Gender is under-resourced in the RP
National governments & development agencies	Regional platforms for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society actors and promoted dialogue on violent extremism; COs in Jordan, Sudan and Lebanon have partnered with the Governments to analyse the drivers of extremism using PVE and social cohesion tools; national election bodies introduced standards and good practices.	-
Researchers, academics, youths	Use data and analysis from ADP, AHDR and other research studies produced by the regional programme.	Difficult to track outcome
COs	Support on anti-corruption programming at country level; Capacity for PVE programming, including ability to mobilize funds on this; ADP data used for developing proposals and country contexts; ability to engage with Government on SDG and PVE strategies; placement of youth delegates enabled dedicated youth programming; innovative programing in use of big data in Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq.	-

3. Efficiency[102],[103]

> **Key findings on efficiency:**
> 1. With a modest budget, the regional programme creates significant multiplier effects in terms of COs' capacity to expand into new programme areas and raise additional resources leveraging the tools and standards developed through the regional programme. *(3)*
>
> 2. Implementation has been generally on time and within budget, except for minor delays in implementation of certain activities during the COVID pandemic. *(2)*
>
> 3. The use of regular monitoring to review programme activities and take corrective measures presents a mixed picture. Monitoring and results tracking are complicated in regional programmes as the results are potentially obtained several layers downstream. *(3)*

3.1 Resource utilization

The RP outcome 2 budget is modest, with an annual average spend of $5.5 million. The precise cost-effectiveness of the programme is difficult to measure because of the complex nature of outputs and contributions it makes at the level of policies and institutional transformations that lead to capacity downstream for key stakeholders to deliver on their mandates on development issues. The ADP, for instance, with a budget in the region of $1 million annually is able to create significant value for all the countries in the region through enhancing their ability to move forward on the Sustainable Development Agenda using the SDG tracking indicators. The PVE framework is another example – with an investment of less than three-quarters of a million US dollars, the initiative has created spinoffs in different countries, enabling CO programmes to raise additional resources. The electoral support project and the anti-corruption work creates values for the regional and national institutions that are difficult to measure in financial terms. As mentioned earlier, the regional anti-corruption work has opened door for COs for mobilizing donor resources for their national anti-corruption work. In terms of timeliness which is an important element of resource utilization efficiency, implementation of various projects has generally followed the time-line as planned when projects were launched. There were minor delays in a few projects (LAS capacity building, for example) which warranted no-cost extensions, but these were probably appropriate as the RP had to ensure that the project implementation kept pace with the stakeholders' absorption capacity. While the COVID-pandemic last year caused certain delays, as well as warranted initial plans to be modified in some instances, there were also savings on some activities which were then utilized for supplementary activities. For example, significant savings were made on travel budget in the LAS-Japan cooperation project which was then used for extending the duration of support to the LAS as well as for investing in research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The YLP faced similar challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic which delayed or affected the level of engagement with partners or support to Country Offices, as well as strengthening of capacities within planned timeframe and thus slowed progress towards achievements.[104] In countries such as Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Palestine the unpredictability of internet connection, low connectivity issues and

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[102] *Questions addressed*: 1. To what extent have the programme or project outputs resulted from economic use of resources and were delivered on time? 2. To what extent did monitoring systems provide management with a stream of data that allowed it to learn and adjust implementation accordingly? 3. To what extent were partnership modalities conducive to the delivery of regional programme outputs? 4. *To what extent have UNDP practices, policies, processes and decision-making capabilities affected the achievement of outcome 2?* 5. To what extent have triangular and South-South cooperation and knowledge management contributed to the results attained?

[103] As explained in section A (Methodology and evaluability), the Question 4 above was difficult for an evaluation of this nature to address as these would require in-depth review of various policies and practices within UNDP, which was beyond the scope of this evaluation.

[104] UNDP, *YLP – Final Review Report* 2020

limited access to electronic devices for YLP participants have affected youth's attendance in online events and training, resulting in lower number of participants as well as on-time schedule of session delivery.

3.2 Use of monitoring for adaptive management

The use of regular monitoring to review programme activities and take corrective measures presents a mixed picture. Monitoring and results tracking are complicated in regional programmes as the results are potentially obtained several layers downstream. This often increases time-horizon over which results may be realized. However, there are some projects which demonstrate better capacity to track results and adapt their implementation than others. The implementation of the ADP project reflects an agile way of responding to feedback and emerging needs on an ongoing basis (see sub-section 4.1 in section C). The anticorruption results are defined in concrete terms where changes can be tracked – for example, legislation adopted as per UNCAC; integrating anticorruption measures at sectoral level that show the returns from investment; fostering political pressure for reform. These milestones enable monitoring of progress. The project has established focal points in each government to update on progress. An interesting element of incentive is introduced for such updates on progress - any significant progress is showcased and shared with other countries; this acts as an incentive and builds peer pressure to show progress. The project has also set up NGO groups/CSOs also working on anticorruption in different countries who are part of a Whatsapp group that keep updating on progress and challenges.

The elections project is more complex for results monitoring, as sometimes the breadth of the programme is too wide to be captured in terms of concrete results, according to key informants. For example, effect of training of EMBs on good practices may not show up in terms of results (national policy, procedures or practices) for some time to come. The progress reports and ROARs thus tend to be heavy on activity reporting and relatively thin on outputs and outcomes, with some exceptions. An evaluation last year found evidence for impact across project outputs, but noted that results were not tracked over time; nor were lessons learned identified and applied to improve the quality of programming. The project document provides a clear goal, but it does not lay out a clear theory of change that traces the causal pathway and demonstrate how the activities contribute to achieve the higher-level objectives.[105] This affected tracking even interim outputs. In this regard, the use of the TOC for periodic review of projects and the assumptions underpinning these could provide a good starting point. However, according to key informants, **TOCs are usually developed during the proposal stage and not reviewed after that, with some exceptions in one or two projects.**

Within UNDP, the practice of periodic reflection and lessons learning is not systematic, according to at least six internal key informants. At best, some attempt is made to get consultants to come in and document lessons; but the downside of this approach is that these are not assimilated by the staff internally and remains confined in the reports. Not unique to it, the YLP for instance undertook a lessons-learning exercise last year after four years of implementation, and course correction measures are now being undertaken in specific areas

> "People in UNDP are preoccupied with doing things, leaving little time for reflection and analysis."
> *- Internal key informant*

where the lessons showed weak-spots, raising the question as to why similar processes are not encouraged every year. Within the programme, cross-team interactions and opportunities for sharing are also limited as the thematic functional teams remain focused on the tasks in their domains, with little time and space to explore cross-programme linkages and synergy. This is partly structural within UNDP as each programme is a business unit in itself.

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[105] UNDP, *Regional Electoral Support for Middle East North Africa Impact Evaluation – Phase I and Phase II*, 7 December 2020

3.3 South-South cooperation

As discussed throughout the report, the entire regional programme is premised on regional networking, sharing and exchange. Besides exchanges within the region, attempts were also made to link up with African networks, particularly on PVE.

4 Sustainability[106,107]

Key finding on sustainability
1. There is strong ownership of the ADP by the CG, but a clear plan of action regarding its handover is yet to emerge. *(4)*
2. Several outputs related to election practices and standards, anti-corruption institutional framework, PVE tools and capacity of regional networks are likely to sustain themselves, though they require further consolidation. *(3)*

4.1 Institutional capacity and sustainability

As mentioned earlier, the management of ADP is expected to be handed over to one of the CG members. All the organizations which comprise the CG are well-resourced financially; however, KIIs indicated that they may not yet be fully equipped with technical capacity and may require UNDP's support for some more time. The CG does have a sense of ownership of the ADP portal as they have continued to provide strategic and management guidance to the ADP since its inception. One important consideration, however, to bear in mind in the handover process is that, besides being a data portal, ADP facilitates a number of processes involving government agencies in the region, tasks which UNDP is uniquely placed to perform and cannot be replaced – for example, capacity building on NSOs, SDG integrator function and pulling together official data from various countries. UNDP will need to continue with these roles, while the CG lead agency may manage the backroom management of the portal and its dissemination.

The LAS has acquired capacity to facilitate and support the EMBs. However, the institution does not have the required access to funds to sustain the work without external support. The partnership being developed with the Government of Japan is a good start and, if successful, LAS may be able to leverage this relationship to being other development partners on board. Election Laws, standards and practices are slowly beginning to change in some of the countries. Likewise anti-corruption institutions and Laws are being strengthened in several countries. These are likely to continue beyond the life of the RP. The various CSOs, NGOs, youth groups and women's groups are capable of continuing to use the tools and knowledge they have acquired through various processes facilitated through the RP. The Governments' understanding of dealing with violent extremism is beginning to shift so as to take into account the links between social and economic marginalization, disenfranchisement and extremism. Though early, this is likely to bring about change in the long run. These outcomes are likely to sustain themselves.

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[106] Questions addressed: 1. To what extent do partners have the institutional capacities, including sustainability strategies and resources in place to sustain the outcome-level results? *2. To what extent are policy and regulatory frameworks in place that will support the continuation of benefits? 3. To what extent do mechanisms, procedures and policies exist to carry forward the results attained on gender equality, empowerment of women, human rights and human development by primary stakeholders?* 4. What could be done to strengthen sustainability?

[107] As explained in section A (Methodology and evaluability), the Question 2 and 3 above were difficult for an evaluation of this nature to address as these would require in-depth review of regulatory frameworks, policies and procedures in different countries, which was beyond the scope of this evaluation.

The COVID-19 has had its effect on the programme delivery as well as the intended outcomes within the timeframe of this RPD. The RBAS strengthened its risk management with continued progress on business/operational clustering, risk management and audit, implementation of the People 2030 Strategy, including through women's mentoring and inclusion of professionals with disabilities, diversification of partnerships, thought leadership and advocacy, and increased engagement on "new frontier" issues of financing, digitalization, and innovation.

Section E: Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

1. Conclusions

1.1 Strategic positioning and partnership

There is an increasing appreciation of the fact that UNDP regional programme has the unique ability to bring expertise and evidence-based thinking and research into policy discourse with governments and regional institutions. By the end of the previous cycle of the regional programme, UNDP had already positioned itself as a leading agency on anti-corruption, capable of facilitating strategic dialogue and providing technical support to those governments which were prepared to move forward on strengthening their anti-corruption institutions in accordance with the UNCAC. During the current RPD, while continuing to reinforce the work on anti-corruption, UNDP succeeded in establishing a niche presence in other areas of governance namely, elections systems, participation of women and youths in policy making and implementation of government development programmes, socialization of SDGs into national development planning, conflict prevention and social cohesion. All these have positioned UNDP in the regional scenario in a position where it is able to influence, working with its partners, the development landscape. Additionally, while UNDP's funds may be small, that it has an extensive presence and relationship with governments in the entire region, and the credibility to be able to convene different stakeholders on a common platform, gives it a distinctive edge. In this regard, the crucial partnership built with the League of Arab States has given political space to engage with the governments on sensitive issues like anti-corruption, electoral standards, political participation of women and youths in the region.

UNDP has also positioned itself across the region as the lead on SDGs. Through its SDG integration role, the regional programme is supporting governments and country teams (both UNCT and UNDP) in developing their national development plans through adapting the global SDG indicators to specific national contexts. In this regard, the ADP, through which UNDP identified some 8,500 indicators across the region has played a key role, working with the NSOs in the region.

1.2 Synergy and complementarity with country programmes

The ability of the regional programme to bring in new ideas and incubate these through supporting country programmes has been of particular value to the country programmes, besides enabling regional networking and dialogue on complex issues. The regional programme exists to complement and reinforce the country programmes through which UNDP strategy is operationalized. The evaluation found several examples of COs leveraging the regional programme to develop country-specific programmes on anti-corruption, PVE and social cohesion, youth leadership development, digital capacity. The support to NSOs through the regional programme has been crucial in operationalizing SDGs at the country level.

The strong complementarity with country programmes owes to the fact that the regional programme has focused on a limited range of highly relevant issues where a region-wide or cross-country thinking added value, working through either national partners or regional institutions. Despite the strong complementarity, communication with country offices has not been systematic at times, though shown considerable improvement in the past 2-3 years. The country offices, while being aware of programmes and activities supported by the regional programme in their respective countries are not aware of the full range of the regional programme in the region, thus potentially missing out opportunities where the COs could proactively establish linkages.

1.3 Results

The current RPD has realized significant results on several fronts across the region. The LAS EAD now has an expanded membership (12) of national election bodies and is able to facilitate networking and good practices standards among the national election bodies, including bringing on board NHRIs to monitor elections. Though still at an early stage, the NHRIs' participation in election process is significant as this has the potential to create a strong oversight mechanism on election practices, particularly with a view to promoting voting rights of the vulnerable sections of population and minorities. Participation women and youths in EMBs and electoral processes is another significant contribution in this regard, though the level of engagement in different countries varies. The youth leadership programme has opened opportunities for significant scale-up of youth programmes in some of the countries. The regional platform for knowledge sharing and advocacy between governments and civil society on violent extremism is ushering in a holistic understanding of nexus between social and economic marginalization and extremism, and the PVE tools are helping countries in engagement with the respective governments as well as with civil society to promote grassroots actions on the ground. The anti-corruption work has been further strengthened through significant outcomes in terms of development of national institutions and strategies in Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq in particular, besides limited progress in Egypt and Palestine. Specific results included: development of policies on anti-corruption, transparency and information access; introduction of tools and standards for diagnosis, prevention and remedial actions to manage corruption; and engagement of civil society in the national anti-corruption institutions. The ADP is recognized as an important source development-related data in the region, as well as a technical services provider building the capacities of national statistical bodies on collecting data on SDG indicators and disseminate official statistics. However, as the ESCWA has also launched a data portal which has some degree of duplication with the ADP portal, harmonization between the two becomes necessary.

The capacity of regional institutions to promote gender issues within themselves as well as with national bodies remains limited, though the regional programme has put women's political participation and women's agenda on election boards and connected with a wide network of advocacy groups working on women's participation. One significant change has been that gender-disaggregated data is now beginning to be collected in several countries by their statistical bodies. People with disabilities and their inclusion have not been given much attention in the regional programmes.

1.4 Value for money

Value for money is a function of effectiveness, efficiency and economy. For a modest investment, the regional programme creates significant multiplier effect for the COs' capacity to expand into new programme areas and raise additional resources, besides creating and/or strengthening regional platforms and institutions that are able to facilitate better implementation of development actions at the country level. The regional programme is able to leverage economies of scale by way of investing in new initiatives, incubate innovations for scale up, and invest in institutions which can support national capacities in technical areas. These are difficult for any country office working on its own to achieve.

2. Emerging issues and lessons

Lack of social protection and growing inequality will continue to be important issues in the region, and the pandemic has exacerbated these issues in an already volatile, conflict-ridden context, with increasing social exclusion leading to further polarization within the Arab society. Climate change compounds the scenario with increasing frequency of droughts and floods in particular, further aggravating the vulnerability of people. This could come at a time when the global economic forces and business environment are also likely to undergo significant transformation due to several forces at work. The forces of increasing nationalism are

leading to sealing off borders, making migrants and refugees unwelcome across countries and regions, made worse by the impact of a raging pandemic. A greater thrust on green economy globally is likely to have implications for governments in the region which are reliant on fossil fuels for their revenues as they may find it hard to adjust to a global economy powered by alternative fuels. Greater and lingering destabilization in the region may be a consequence. An in-depth research on this may be warranted to understand the implications of these forces for governance programming in the region. The decline in energy revenues is likely to continue into the future, straining the existing social contracts the oil-producing States have with their citizens whereby the former provides welfare and financial benefits to the latter in exchange for loyalty. In this regard, the new initiative by the Iraq CO to deep-dive into the existing social contract and the government's responsiveness to it could provide significant learning for the entire region.

The primary value added by a regional programmes has been through: (a) facilitating regional networking and dialogue on regional issues and matters which are sensitive to be raised directly at country level; (b) research and knowledge development, exchange, sharing and learning within the region; (c) introducing innovative methods and international standards in programming; (d) bringing about a coherence in approach among various countries to addressing some of the globally complex issues and priorities like SDGs, anti-corruption, violent extremism, etc; and (e) advocacy on sensitive issues by mobilizing regional institutions and networks.

Partnerships with the private sector have been leveraged to good effect by the RP. Besides the ADP partnership with OFID, engagement with the Morocco Chamber of Commerce showed an alternative approach to establishing an institutional linkage (anti-corruption) to promote dialogue on a sensitive issue with various stakeholders, including the government. This could be a model to use more widely in contexts where government agencies may be unresponsive or reluctant to engage on crucial issues.

The dispersed approach to partnership with the LAS by different thematic units within UNDP leads to sub-optimal outcomes. UNDP may be failing to leverage its multiple support to the League, through its compartmentalized approach, to create a strategic impact on the overall institutional capacity for providing regional leadership on complex development issues.

UNDP's monitoring and reporting which are heavily activity-oriented could be improved so as to present a clearer picture of the significant outcomes which the regional programme is realizing on the ground. Presentation of evidence of change and analysis of the theory of change in the reports, instead of description of activities, could help in better outcome-reporting.

3. Recommendations

R1: **Given the slow progress on gender issues in the region and challenges in mainstreaming gender, the RBAS needs to consider well-designed projects with dedicated resources which promote strategic work on gender equality issues bult around specific SDG-5 indicators, implemented through regional networks and partnerships.**

Rationale: Gender issues have been difficult to push forward with governments and regional institutions across the region. In this regard, the LAS and other regional platforms have a crucial role to play through advocacy and promotion of standards across the region. In this regard, working in partnership with UN Women and UNFPA, strategic dialogue with the LAS senior management team on realistic approach to develop institutional capacity on gender issues may also be explored, besides other initiatives. Though the League does not have any executive authority, as a collective voice of the region its proceedings and agreements do carry weight and create a peer-group pressure, and hence its own capacity on and commitment to gender issues are vital to move forward on gender equality issues.

Scope of the recommendation: While the COs, through the country programmes, continue to encourage their respective governments to move forward on SDG 5 in which the region is the lowest achiever, the regional programme needs to leverage the influence the outreach of regional institutions and gender networks to reinforce this work.

R2:   **The Coordination Group of Arab National and Regional Developmental Institutions need to urgently develop a plan of action with clear delineation of scope and timelines regarding handover of the ADP, while ensuring that UNDP continues to play the proactive role it plays with governments and official agencies in relation to their capacity building and sharing of experiences which UNDP is uniquely placed to do with its region-wide presence.**

Rationale: The current state of uncertainty is likely to affect further development of the ADP and its strategic directions. Given the strategic role UNDP performs in the region, especially with regard to SDGs, the ADP needs serious commitment and longer time horizon for its planning. Further, the handover process needs to be smooth so that the CG agency which takes responsibility for it can be supported by the UNDP team for a reasonable transition period until the former acquires capacity to run the portal on its own.

Scope of the recommendation: ADP facilitates a number of processes involving government agencies in the region, tasks which UNDP is uniquely placed to perform and cannot be replaced – for example, capacity building of NSOs, SDG integrator function and pulling together official data from various countries. UNDP will need to continue performing these roles, while the CG agency may manage the backroom management of the portal and dissemination of data. This recommendation

R3:   **If UNDP continues to manage the ADP, in discussion with the UN ESCWA, UNDP needs to harmonize the ADP with the data portal provided by the former in order to avoid duplication.**

Rationale: The ESCWA data portal closely mirrors the data presented in the ADP. If ESCWA has the resources to continue providing these data, and if these also meet the needs of the CG members, there may be opportunity for collaboration here, with UNDP focusing on its unique role as SDG integrator and capacity building of NSOs.

Scope of the recommendation: This recommendation is closely linked to R2 above and both need to be addressed simultaneously, in consultation with the CG and ESCWA.

R4:   **Building on the work on strengthening digital governance begun in 2020, develop an analytical framework for digitalization strategy which prioritizes areas that directly benefit the poor and marginalized first, so that digitalization works for the latter.**

Rationale: Digitalization can be used to bring about greater participation and decentralization, as well as centralization and exercise of greater control by the State. The RP needs to ensure that its support on digitalization, wittingly or unwittingly, does not empower the States at the expense of the poor and marginalized. In this regard, a litmus test will be to ensure that digitalization is directly linked to improving the provision of services and benefits for the latter.

Scope of the recommendation: The digital maturity assessment in each country, while looking into technical parameters of feasibility, needs to take into account its state of governance and commitment to governance reforms, particularly in relation to transparency, accountability and civic participation in local governance and development.

R5: **Improve communication about the scope of the regional programme with senior management in country offices and partners.**

Rationale: Communication is currently limited to the activities COs or partners are involved in, without the latter getting a total perspective on the regional programme. This may often limit the ability of the stakeholders to fully engage or leverage the regional programme in their activities.

Scope of the recommendation: It needs to be acknowledged that people everywhere have a surfeit of information, documents and meetings. Hence the communication strategy needs to be thought through carefully so that COs are not put off by more papers and meetings. The improved communication could be in the form of (a) a substantive briefing session during Annual Regional meetings to share the key elements of the regional programme's progress and scope across the region; and (b) a brief (2 page) quarterly newsletter with highlights of significant progress on different projects. The newsletter could provide opportunity for COs to showcase significant progress in their respective countries of programme activities supported through the regional programme.

R6: **Working with all development partners and UN agencies which support the LAS, develop a joint approach and institutional development plan for the LAS on critical areas of importance for the Sustainable Goals Agenda.**

Rationale: In areas where the LAS as an institution is failing to demonstrate a strong commitment (for example, gender) and capacity, a scattered approach by individual technical departments of institutions is unlikely to be of much value, unless all development partners who support the institutions make a concerted effort.

Scope of the recommendation: UNDP has made a good start through the triangular Japan-LAS-UNDP platform. Leveraging this initiative, it may be able to bring on board other key development partners to agree on a common plan of action on a few areas where institutional capacity of the League has proven to be intractable.

R7: **Introduce result-oriented analytical tools in monitoring and reporting of progress of the regional programme.**

Rationale: The complex outcomes sought through the regional programme do not render themselves to be adequately tracked through conventional M&E tools. While there is significant evidence of outcomes in the programmes, the annual reports and ROARs do not capture the ***contributions and changes*** the programmes is bringing about. Instead, the reporting is heavily tilted towards activities and at best, short-term outputs.

Scope of the recommendation: There are several tools which are increasingly being used in development programmes to track outcomes. While conventional impact assessment and randomized control trial-based studies are popular, but these have major drawbacks in that the costs of undertaking such exercises are high, as well as the fact that these are *ex-post* tools require sufficient time to elapse before these can be undertaken, making any course-correction for the ongoing programmes impossible. Instead, tools like most-significant-change (MSC) stories, process tracing and contribution analysis can be cost-effectively deployed in tracing outcomes related to qualitative changes is systems. These can easily be done internally by staff trained in used of these tools. A rigorous use of theory of change in periodic reviews of programmes also complement these tools.

ENDS