**End Term Evaluation Report**

**Improving Planning Capacities**

**for Social and Economic Local Development**

 January 2024

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

AICS : Italian Agency for Development Cooperation

FGDs : Focus Group Discussions

GIS : Geographical Information System

MoSA : Ministry of Social Affairs

NUA : New Urban Agenda

SC : Steering Committee

SDCs : Social Development Centers

ToC : Theory of Change

UN-Habitat : United Nations Human Settlements Programme

UNSDCF : United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

UoMs : Union of Municipalities

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Commissioned by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the evaluation report was conducted by an external consultant and covers the project “Improving Planning Capacities for Social and Economic Local Development”. Funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and implemented in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social affairs (MoSA), this Euro 1.2 million project aims at “improving the socio-economic conditions of local population through strengthened planning capacities at the unions and cluster of municipalities' level using participatory approaches”.

The report is structured along five main sections. Section one provides the background of the evaluation assignment and describes the project under evaluation. Section two provides a broad explanation on the evaluation approach and methodology. The key findings of the evaluation assignment are thoroughly presented in section three, which focuses on assessing the project relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The conclusions drawn from the assignment as well as the main takeaways and the overall recommendations are covered respectively in sections four and five.

To implement this assignment, the evaluation approach relied on:

* + - 1. The use of the project log frames and Theory of Change (ToC) as tools to structure the questions and develop indicators.
			2. The use of the five evaluation criteria of: Relevance, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Impact and Sustainability to assess the project performance.
			3. Addressing cross-cutting social inclusion and environmental issues.

The methodology for carrying out this evaluation assignment relied on a mixed methods approach encompassing: i) desk review of relevant reports, ii) conducting virtual interviews with key informants, and iii) implementing virtual Focus Group Discussions. The mission was implemented according to the six following stages:

* Stage one: Desk review.
* Stage Two: Developing and finalizing an inception report.
* Stage Three: Developing the data collection tools.
* Stage Four: Identification of key informants.
* Stage Five: Data collection.
* Stage Six: Data processing, analysis, and report writing.

The findings of the evaluation are summarized as follows:

* The project is aligned with global and national frameworks.
* All project planned results and related outputs were duly completed[[1]](#footnote-2). Although drastically affected by the successive events and crisis (which are still on-going) hitting the country, the project was able to achieve strategic breakthroughs at various levels. Challenges were carefully overcome by UN-Habitat, which strived to keep the project momentum and securing the full and continuous engagement of MoSA, the UoMs, SDCs and the local communities in the ten targeted geographical areas. The project outcome was achieved and ten plans with strategic directions and clear priorities are developed at the level of the unions based on learning and participatory processes.
* The project is highly relevant to the Lebanon context, it addresses national and local needs and, in its revisited content, responds to the multi-faceted challenges compounded by the 2019 crisis. At the local level, the project comes to address the challenges of poor municipal resources and limited capacities to respond in an inclusive manner to deteriorated local socio-economic conditions. At the central level, the project is of relevance to MoSA guiding policy to enhance the role of SDCs and secure their linkages with local stakeholders and particularly, local authorities.
* From the perspective of effectiveness, the evaluation shows that project has successfully implemented planned activities. This is due to a number of factors, mainly: i) adopting participation and capacity strengthening as a cross-cutting approach, ii) Designing and implementing a comprehensive and systematic approach, iii) the sound technical planning, implementation, evaluation and documentation of each activity, iv) adopting a bottom-top approach in local planning and v) securing synergies through the establishment of central – local coordination mechanisms.
* Despite the challenges encountered during the implementation process, the evaluation concludes that the project used efficiently financial and human resources. This was made possible through: i) the sound project management, ii) the high proficiency of UN-Habitat staff, their continuous field presence and technical backstopping, iii) the sound planning and implementation of project activities and iv) the established coordination mechanisms, which allowed for enhanced participation and community engagement as well as promoting central-local linkages and synergies.
* The project produced significant impacts at various levels.
* At the level of UoM, the project allowed municipalities and unions to: i) enhance linkages with the local community by forming the local field team, ii) update or building a database, which includes locally collected and verified data covering various sectors, iii) shift the strategic thinking and work approach from the individual/municipal scale to a joint and common work lead by the UoM, iv) increase the collaboration between municipalities and unions and the SDCs, v) improve knowledge about the local context, which was thoroughly analyzed in the produced booklets, vi) have at their disposal the produced booklets that will be used as planning and fundraising tools.
* At the level of the community in general, the project made significant changes in: i) strengthening the local capacities and ii) creating a space of dialogue between community representatives, SDCs and municipalities.
* At the level of the MoSA, the project tested approach comes to re-confirm the importance of the ministry’s strategic vision to link the SDCs with municipalities and UoMs. By playing the role of mediators and catalysts, SDCs involvement in the project was crucial serving the dual purpose of: i) providing technical support to local stakeholders and ii) mobilizing and gathering all concerned actors around a common goal and a joint programme.
* The project has laid the foundation for securing the long-term benefits produced by the project. To implement the produced plans, the evaluation concludes that prospects for resource mobilization are high. All concerned stakeholders (UoMs, UN-Habitat, AICS and MoSA) are fully engaged to implement their plans and secure funding for plan implementation.
* Acknowledging the importance of the established horizontal coordination mechanisms, the UoMs representatives are committed to sustain them. In addition to, stressing on the importance of the continued close coordination with the SDCs, the interviewed UoMs are committed to sustain the work of the formed local team.
* According to conducted interviews, the benefits of strengthened capacities shall sustain. Unions and their relevant municipalities shall continue making full use of these capacities in their current or future programmes.
* Potentials for project upscaling shall be promoted by MoSA. This falls in the frame of: i) MoSA mandate, which stresses (among others) on its integrated development role across humanitarian, development, private sector, and government agencies to provide social protection and assistance and ii) MoSA overall approach to promote sustainable development, which entails among others enhancing the role of SDCs and promoting their linkages with municipalities and UoMs.
* As a normative project involving only soft components, all cross-cutting issues were not equally addressed. Considering the context of the project, the issue of urban resilience was thoroughly addressed and to a lesser extent the social inclusion issues (with focus on women and youth). Other issues of relevance to climate change were not addressed by the project.

By building on five conclusions drawn from the project, the evaluation summarized takeaways stress on the following:

* When elaborating local plans, interventions focusing on systems strengthening are crucial. As such, issues related to governance and municipal performance should go hand in hand with the local planning process. This would help adapting the recommendations to (limited) existing capacities.
* Bearing the brunt of the multi-layered crisis, the continued support to municipalities is crucial to secure the transition between humanitarian and development support.
* Establishing coordination mechanisms between the central and local level is fundamental to lay the foundation for proper local planning processes.
* The involvement of an external actor with sound technical expertise and national credibility would facilitate creating bonds and building trust between the central and the local levels.
* When local collaborative mechanisms are successfully tested, municipalities and unions would better understand the produced benefits and would most likely continue with these mechanisms and possibly expand them.
* The triangular involvement (implementing partner - donor – national counterpart) of the relevant partners in the project overall guidance and planning is central for sound project implementation.
* The engagement of the project national counterpart is essential and serves the three purposes of: i) aligning the project with the ministry’s overall vision, policies and programmes. ii) increasing project ownership process and iii) securing project sustainability.
* Options for the institutionalization of local plans should be explored since the early stages of project implementation. These options could derive from the findings of the governance and municipal performance assessment (see above takeaway conclusion 1).
* As implemented by the project, the involvement of permanent staff at the municipal or union level would facilitate the institutionalization of the planning processes.
* To secure its implementation, the local planning exercise should be accompanied with capacity building initiatives addressing issues related to: developing project feasibility studies, proposal writing and fundraising.
* Municipalities and their unions should be exposed to all available municipal finance opportunities, including diversifying funding sources, expanding their own source revenues, broadening access to external finance, public private partnership, cooperation between different levels of governments, etc.

In light of the evaluation findings, the report concludes with the following four guiding recommendations:

Focus on Municipal Finance: The conducted interviews concluded that municipal finance represents a priority topic for municipalities and unions, particularly amid the prolonged country multi-layered crisis. Among other crucial finance modalities, municipalities should be guided towards the diversification of their funding sources and advancing innovative financing instruments. In this context, UN-Habitat Lebanon office can make use of a wealth of normative works that have been produced globally by UN-Habitat, notably the 2023 publication entitled [“Unlocking the Potential of Cities: Financing Sustainable Urban Development”](file:///G%3A%5CBackUP-coordinamento-09-04-2024%5C2-Multilaterale%5CUN-Habitat%5C2018-AID-11744-UN-Habitat%5C7-Rapporti%5C2024-03-05-Final%20Report-Evaluation%20Report%5CAICS%5Cunlocking_the_potential_of_cities_-_financing_sustainable_urban_development_-_06-min.pdf). Additionally, it is suggested to disseminate and advocate for the implementation of recommendations synthesized in the UN-Habitat Lebanon publication on “[Municipal Finance Assessments](file:///G%3A%5CBackUP-coordinamento-09-04-2024%5C2-Multilaterale%5CUN-Habitat%5C2018-AID-11744-UN-Habitat%5C7-Rapporti%5C2024-03-05-Final%20Report-Evaluation%20Report%5Cmunicipal_finance_policy_advocacy_report_-_lebanon_-_june_2022_-_en%20%281%29.pdf)”. This report offers a set of recommendations that would allow local governments in Lebanon to move forward on a path of enhanced good governance to increase the revenues base.

Project Upscaling: The vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms established by the project was reported as a successful model that UN-Habitat should build on to design future programmes. As emphasized during the interview with AICS, UN-Habitat approach not only contributed to building trust between municipalities and unions and the central government (represented by MoSA) but succeeded in data collection and mapping of a significant number of municipalities. In this context, it is recommended to capitalize on the success story to upscale the project and work on the alignment of existing local plans with central level development and sectoral plans.

Turning crisis into an opportunity – A step towards reforming the municipal sector? Municipalities in Lebanon are standing at the forefront of the prolonged compounded crisis. While for decades, municipalities have been advocating for a decentralization reform, the multilayered humanitarian needs have placed them as one of the primary local agents to address the rising needs of vulnerable people. The crisis allowed municipalities to mobilize local human and financial resources and to increase networking with various actors to tap on all available opportunities. This dynamic process contributed (in some cases) to improved municipal governance with increased resilience and more empowerment. Based on that, it is recommended to document this un-intended positive impact of the crisis on the strengthened role of municipalities. The aim is to document best practices, synthesize lessons learnt for wide dissemination and experience sharing and lay the ground for proper decentralization reforms.

A Resilient UN-Habitat – A Resilient Project: As mentioned above, and despite the outbreak of successive crisis causing delays and months of interruption, the UN-Habitat, AICS and MoSA were committed to continue with the project implementation. To promote experience exchange, it is recommended to document this successful practice showing the UN-Habitat used approach and the adaptation measures that were implemented to cope with the repercussions of the successive crisis.

**BACKGOUND AND CONTEXT**

Commissioned by UN-Habitat Lebanon Country Programme to an external evaluator consultant, the present end-term evaluation covers the project entitled “Improving Planning Capacities for Social and Economic Local Development”. Funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and implemented in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social affairs (MoSA), the project aims at “*improving the socio-economic conditions of local population through strengthened planning capacities at the unions and cluster of municipalities' level using participatory approaches*”.

Since its approval in early 2019, and due to series of shocks the country has faced, the project went through necessary adaptations to accommodate to new realities. During its design stage in 2019, the project was initially developed to address the weak financial, human and technical capacities hampering local authorities in Lebanon from developing and implementing, in a participatory manner, sound local plans. As originally designed, the duration of this Euro 1.2 million was planned for a period of two years (Oct 2019 – Sep 2021).

October 2019 was a turning point in Lebanon history. The country is faced with a multilayered humanitarian crisis compounded by multiple socio-economic, financial and health crisis. Following the collapse of the banking sector in October 2019, Lebanon's multi-layered humanitarian crisis has exacerbated since April 2021 by the increased devaluation of the local currency pushing hundreds of thousands of families below the poverty line. Consequently, the crisis has significantly impacted the lives of all residents in the country, mainly the poor and the vulnerable populations. With the lack of electricity, fuel, cash flow restrictions and unsubsidized medical items, the quality of life has dramatically decreased, and the majority of the families are not able to secure anymore their basic needs.

The prolonged economic depression is just one of the mutually reinforcing crises in Lebanon, which is reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the massive August 2020 Beirut Port explosions, as well as long lasting pre-existing development challenges and persistent political instability. Adding to this, the influx of more than one million Syrian refugees in 2011, which came to add more strain on Lebanon, further impacted political, social, economic and security situations. The presence of these population groups has placed significant additional strain on the already weak urban systems, poor governance, inadequate infrastructure and lack of affordable housing.

The project was directly affected by changing local contexts and, in cooperation with AICS, relevant modifications were made to adapt to the overall changing context:

* In terms of project duration, an agreement was reached to re-launch the project in November 2020, it was again postponed to June 2021, with a planned closure date January 2022, which was once more postponed until June 2023.
* Due to the capital controls and total collapse of the local currency, and overall economic and financial situation in the country, the initial plan of MoSA receiving an amount of Euro 1.8 million to channel the funding of interventions to UoMs, has been deemed no longer feasible, in addition, the agreement with MoSA was not signed.
* The initial number of targeted UoMs was decreased, and an agreement was reached between UN-Habitat, MoSA and AICS to limit the number to 10 UoMs.
* The project moved from focusing on developing strategic plans to supporting the identification, planning and development of socio-economic road maps to respond to the current evolving needs and priorities of UoMs.

Based on the above, the evaluator with the UN-Habitat team agreed to review the project logical framework matrix and adapt it to the changing context (**Annex 1: Original and modified logical framework**). The modifications primarily touched upon the re-formulation of outcome (1) as well as the two outputs and corresponding indicators and means of verification. For this evaluation, the below revised version of the logical framework shall be adopted, detailed as follows:

**Table (1): Revised version of the logical framework**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Intervention Strategy** | **Indicators**  | **Means of verification**  |
| **Objective**  | Improve the socio-economic conditions of local population through strengthened planning capacities at the unions and cluster of municipalities’ level using participatory approaches. | Long-term and solid collaboration framework between MoSA and MoIM is established at the local level to implement the findings of the developed roadmap | * Progress and final reports
* Project evaluation
 |
| **Specific Purpose**  | Outcome (1): The strategic socio-economic potentials in 10 Union of Municipalities are unlocked using a bottom-up evidence base-process. | 10 road maps with strategic directions and clear priorities are developed at the level of the unions based on learning and participatory processes. | * Printed booklets.
* Minutes of meetings.
 |
| **Expected Results**  | Output 1.1: The participatory planning capacities of municipalities, SDCs, and other local actors in 10 UoMs are strengthened.Output 1.2: Strategic socioeconomic needs and directions in ten UoMs are defined and validated. | Number of representatives from municipalities, SDCs andmain local actors taking part in trainings – a local team is formed.UoMs and local stakeholders recognize the relevance ofthe defined strategic directions | * Workshop reports Attendance sheet – local team engagement in data collection.
* Project Evaluation
 |
| **Activities**  | **Activities related to output 1.1:**1. Mapping and matching with SDCs the Unions of municipalities/non-municipal localities by UN-Habitat and MoSA.
2. Conduct introductory meetings with Unions of municipalities.
3. Conduct a rapid capacity assessment to categorize all unions of municipalities based on pre-determined criteria.
4. Selection of unions and clusters that would take part in the project.
5. Developing the training materials that will be used for the training and for the compilation of data to be used for the local plans.
6. Conduct the training program. Involve representatives from unions, SDCs, civil society, etc. in series of training and learning session for the elaboration of local strategies.

**Activities related to output 1.2:**1. Launching the data collection process in ten UoMs.
2. Data analysis, identifications of strategic sectors elaboration of main findings.
3. Completing the mapping exercise for the ten UoMs (UoM boundaries, context, topography and land cover/land use of each UoM)
4. Compilation – Booklet production
5. Sharing the findings with local stakeholders – validation and content finalization.
 |

The project was aligned with several global and national frameworks. As illustrated in the Figure 1 below, from a global perspective, the project was in conformity with the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2023 (extended until 2025) the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA).

**Figure (1): Project Alignment with Global Frameworks**

DoC (1): Reduced spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban-rural continuum; and DoC (4): Effective urban crisis prevention and response.

Sustainable urban development for social inclusion and ending poverty: clauses 26, 27, 28, 29, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, & 42

Under “Sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all”: clauses 44, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, & 57.

Under “Environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development”: clauses: 63 through 80.

Goal 11: Target 11.1, Target 11.2, Target 11.3, Target 11.7

Goal 8: Target 8.6

At the national level, the project is linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023-2025 (UNSDCF), particularly Goals 1, 2 and 4:

**Table (2): Project alignment with the UNSDCF**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Goal** | **Outcome**  |
| Goal (1): Improved lives and well-being for all people in Lebanon | Outcome (2): Strengthened provision of and equitable access to quality services, including basic services. |
| Goal (2): Improved resilient and competitive productive sectors for enhanced and inclusive income-generating and livelihood opportunities | Outcome (2): Strengthened diversified income opportunities to promote social and economic inclusion |
| Goal (4): Restored rich nature and ecosystem of Lebanon for inclusive green recovery | Outcome (1): Strengthened stabilization and green recovery to reduce climate change vulnerabilities and environmental risks |

The project is also anchored in the Habitat Country Programme Document (currently under review to align with the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023-2025), and particularly the Focus Areas (1): Inclusive and Sustainable Urban Development and (2) Disaster Risk Mitigation and Effective Urban Crisis Response.

**EVALUATION FRAMEWORK**

**1. Significance of the Evaluation**

The evaluation will provide the agency, its governing bodies and donors with an independent and forward-looking appraisal of the agency’s operational experience, achievements, opportunities and challenges. Findings and recommendations from the evaluation are expected to play an instrumental role in:

* Shaping the focus of UN-Habitat in planning and programming future projects, influencing strategies,
* Adjusting and correcting as appropriate,
* Exploiting opportunities,
* Replicating and up scaling the implementation approach used, and
* Generating credible value for targeted beneficiaries and addressing national priorities.

**2. Evaluation Objectives**

The objectives of the final evaluation are the following:

* Assess achievement of results made at the outcome and outputs level of the implemented project.
* Assess the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of the project in promoting local and national urban sustainable development by focusing on early recovery and sustainable reconstruction, beyond emergency relief interventions, this will entail analysis of delivery of actual outcomes against expected outcomes, in terms of delivery of outputs, achievement of outcomes and long-term effects toward beneficiaries.
* Assess the extent to which UN-Habitat has incorporated cross-cutting issues of gender, climate change, youth, disability, human rights in the design, planning and implementation, reporting and monitoring within its projects. This should include an analysis of participation, social transformation, inclusive and empowerment toward gender equality.
* Assess the extent to which partnerships have added value to the Country Programme and bring forward programming opportunities that indicate potential for long-term partnership between UN-Habitat and other organizations working in Lebanon.
* Make recommendations on what needs to be done to effectively implement future projects.

**3. Evaluation Approach**

To implement this evaluation assignment, the approach relied on a three-pronged approach:

* + - 1. The use of the project log frames and Theory of Change (ToC) as tools to structure the questions and develop indicators.
			2. The use of the five evaluation criteria of: Relevance, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Impact and Sustainability to assess the project performance.
			3. Addressing cross-cutting social inclusion and environmental issues.

The evaluation approach relies on the ToC approach as a framework describing the building blocks required to bring process change. The approach helps to better assess the projects’ relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and likelihood of sustainability and impact. The ToC developed for the assignment is detailed as follows:

**IF INPUTS** for the project “Improving Planning Capacities for Social and Economic Local Development” including the resources of Euro 1.2 million UN-Habitat was timely disposed and used efficiently for the project,

**THEN** activities and actions, including mapping and matching with SDCs and the Unions of municipalities localities by UN-Habitat and MoSA, conducting introductory meetings with Unions of municipalities, conducting a rapid capacity assessment to categorize all unions of municipalities based on pre-determined criteria, selecting unions that would take part in the project, developing the training materials that will be used for the training and for the compilation of data to be used for the local plans, carrying out the training program, launching the data collection process in ten UoMs, data analysis, identifications of strategic sectors elaboration of main findings, completing the mapping exercise for the ten UoMs (UoM boundaries, context, topography and land cover/land use of each UoM), data compilation and production of booklets, sharing the findings with local stakeholders – validation and content finalization, would have taken place to produce,

the two desired **OUTPUTS** of 1) The participatory planning capacities of municipalities, SDCs, and other local actors in 10 UoMs are strengthened, 2) Strategic socioeconomic needs and directions in ten UoMs are defined and validated.

**THEN** the use of outputs would have likely resulted and lead to the project outcome of “the strategic socio-economic potentials in 10 Union of Municipalities are unlocked using a bottom-up evidence base-process”.

The evaluation considers a set of four indicators to measure the contribution to the project objectives and whether they have been achieved or otherwise. Those indicators include:

* Long-term and solid collaboration framework between MoSA and MoIM is established at the local level to implement the findings of the developed roadmap.
* 10 plans with strategic directions and clear priorities are developed at the level of the unions based on learning and participatory processes.
* Number of representatives from municipalities, SDCs and main local actors taking part in trainings – a local team is formed.
* UoMs and local stakeholders recognize the relevance of the defined strategic directions.

Key evaluation questions were developed, analyzed and synthesized as per the five criteria set out in the ToR: Relevance, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Impact and Sustainability. Questions also covered cross-cutting issues dealing with resilience, safety, social inclusion (gender, human rights, migrants/refugees, youth, older people and disabled people) and environmental concerns.

**4. Evaluation Methodology**

The adopted evaluation methodology was developed in an inception report (**Annex 2: Inception Report**) that was reviewed and approved by UN-Habitat. As described in this report, the methodology for carrying out this evaluation assignment relied on a mixed methods approach encompassing i) desk review of relevant reports, ii) conducting virtual interviews with key informants and iii) implementing (virtually) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

The mission was implemented according to the six following stages:

**Stage one:** **Desk review** of key documents of relevance to UN-Habitat Lebanon and its related projects. Document included among others: national planning documents and frameworks, project progress and monitoring reports; financial records; publications and assessment reports (**Annex 3: Bibliography**).

**Stage Two:** Developing and finalizing an **inception report** following feedback from UN-Habitat Lebanon.

**Stage Three:** Developing the **data collection tools** including questionnaires **(Annex 4: Evaluation questions)** and guiding questions to conduct focus group meetings and finalized with feedback from UN-Habitat Lebanon.

**Stage Four: Key informant identification was completed with support provided by** the UN-Habitat project team. As a result, a total of 7 stakeholders were identified to engage in the evaluation process **(Annex 5: List of interviewed stakeholders)**.

**Stage Five: Data collection,** which was implemented virtually during the period 26 December 2023 – 17 January 2024 and included:

* Conducting (virtually) six structured interviews with UoMs and SDCs representatives.
* Holding one virtual meeting with the minister of Social Affairs and one virtual meeting with AICS representative.
* Implementing (virtually) one focus group discussion with six selected UoMs presidents and/or staff.
* Holding virtual follow-up meetings with UN-Habitat project team.

**Stage Six: Data processing, analysis, and report writing**, this included:

* Further review of available documentation and reports.
* Report draft compilation and finalization after review from UN-Habitat.

**5. Limitations of the Evaluation**

During the early inception stage of the assignment, the overall security situation became precarious. With the launch of the “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood”, the Israeli authorities declared a state of war and began a campaign of heavy bombardments on Gaza. In Lebanon, daily clashes have started along the southern borders with the Palestinian Occupied Territories, with increased intensity. As a result, an agreement was reached between the evaluator and the UN-Habitat team in Lebanon to restrict movements to Lebanon and carry out the interviews virtually. Field visits to the project site and in-presence community interviews were unfortunately not implemented, which represented a main limitation to the overall assignment.

Additionally, during the compilation of the present report, UN-Habitat was carrying out necessary preparations to hold the project closing ceremony in February 2024. The evaluation report, which was submitted end January 2024, was unable to capture the outcome results of the ceremony.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that during the elaboration of the evaluation report, UN-Habitat was still in the finalization stages of the booklets (content review, layout and printing). Samples of these booklets were shared by UN-Habitat in English and Arabic versions.

**MAIN FINDINGS**

**1. Expected Results and Project Achievements**

By relying on the gathered and analyzed data extracted from the project reports as well as virtual interviews, this section assesses the project achievements at the level of the expected result/outcome level. As summarized in the below table, by implementing varied approaches and activities, the project succeeded in achieving the pre-determined outcome, as illustrated in Table (3) below:

**Table (3): Project Achievement at the outcome level**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Project Outcome** | **Indicators** | **Level of Accomplishment** | **Notes** |
| Outcome (1): The strategic socio-economic potentials in 10 Union of Municipalities are unlocked using a bottom-up evidence base-process. | 10 road maps with strategic directions and clear priorities are developed at the level of the unions based on learning and participatory processes. | Achieved | As per:* The progress reports.
* The produced booklets.
* The conducted interviews.
 |

The review and analysis of produced documents allow for the formation of the following conclusions:

* The project proposal included all the required details. Although the project went through necessary adaptations and downsizing in agreement between the donor and UN-Habitat, a thorough review of the logical framework was not accomplished. Modifications were only included in the project activities whereas the project outcome and outputs and relevant indicators were not re-visited.
* It should be emphasized that the implementation phase falling under outcome (2), which should have been initially implemented by MoSA and the UoMs was cancelled. As initially designed, the project two outcomes were strongly connected, the implementation of projects come to respond to the road maps developed under outcome (1).
* As mentioned in the table above, the project achieved the pre-determined indicators at the outcome level and succeeded in developing plans detailing the socio-economic pathways in ten UoMs. Although, the final printed version of the booklets was not yet ready during the evaluation process of the project, it should be emphasized that the produced booklets offer a high-quality analysis of the socioeconomic strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of each UoM, and provide a baseline that can be used to guide further resource investment by UoMs, municipalities and external stakeholders. The produced booklets provide insight into which specific sectors UoMs should focus on advancing, based on pre-existing efforts made, availability of natural resources, and feasibility.
* From the perspective of the project overall reporting and documentation processes, the evaluator concludes that a systematic and consistent approach has been adopted. By submitting two progress reports (November 2020-May 2021 and June 2021-april 2023) and one final report, it can be concluded that UN-Habitat has well documented the entire project process, focusing on the accomplishments, and encountered challenges.
* With respect to project communication and visibility, the available reports show the significant efforts invested by UN-Habitat throughout the project implementation process. In this context, since the early inception stages of the project, UN-Habitat produced a project visual identity. Other visibility tools were produced for specific project events and workshops. Those included among others: the design of invitation letters as well as roll-up banner and presentation templates. By focusing on communication, UN-Habitat succeeded in securing a highly satisfactory media coverage to organized events, in addition to publishing posts on social media.

Although affected by the successive events and crisis (which are still on-going) hitting the country, the project was able to achieve strategic breakthroughs at various levels. Challenges were carefully overcome by UN-Habitat, which strived to keep the project momentum and securing the full and continuous engagement of MoSA, the UoMs and SDCs. The project outcome was achieved and ten plans with strategic directions and clear priorities are developed at the level of the unions based on learning and participatory processes.

To conclude and given the multilayered humanitarian crisis Lebanon has been witnessing since the early inception stages of the project, the introduced changes in the project components should have been clearly reflected in a modified version of the logical framework. This would have allowed an improved project reporting and evaluation procedures.

**2. Project Relevance**

“Project relevance” represents a key area of concern of this evaluation as it assesses the extent to which the objectives of the project were consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, country needs and partners policies.

As mentioned previously, in addition to its alignment to global and national frameworks, policies and plans, the project is also responsive to the country’s needs and challenges as well as demands that arise from the beneficiary cities. The analysis of data in secondary sources, and feedback drawn from conducted interviews, allow us to conclude that the project is consistent with the ten targeted UoMs requirements.

Project Relevance to Municipal Planning Needs

As per the municipal legislation, municipalities are expected to play a key role in promoting local development. From a planning perspective, the law also specifies that unions of municipalities should undertake the development of plans, preparation of technical studies and consultancies through their engineering Units. Furthermore, it identifies the unions’ councils as the stakeholders in charge of the endorsement of the development plans that have been prepared. In line with these responsibilities, many UoMs taking part in the project with UN-Habitat reiterated the relevance of this project not only to their own mandate but also to the already existing plans and database. For some interviewed partner UoMs (such as Zgharta and Iqleem el Touffah UoM), this project came to update the plans, maps and data they already have within their unions.

Response to Municipal Challenges

As initially designed, the project came to address several challenges of relevance to the municipal sector in Lebanon. Although these challenges date back to decades of limited and inadequate human and financial resources, they are not only still valid amidst the financial and socio-economic crisis but became more significant and acute.

Municipalities and unions of municipalities are standing at the forefront of providing and maintaining minimum basic services to their local communities. Investing in those local structures are of significant importance to strengthen their resilience and support in laying the foundation for long-term socio-economic development. Amid the economic collapse and despite their weak capacities, municipalities have come to bear more responsibilities to compensate for fading central government services (sanitation, water, electricity etc.), which already had a poor track-record and have even worsened due to the subsequent crisis.

Shifting from Relief to Long-Term Development

From the donor perspective, although it underwent changes, the project was kept within its development-focused scope. During the interview with AICS representative, it was emphasized that the work of UoMs should go beyond responding to the immediate needs in order to address long-term and strategic development. This point was also emphasized during the interviews held with concerned stakeholders (the minister of Social Affairs, UoMs and SDC representatives) who reiterated the importance of this strategic thinking exercise to identify viable sectors that could contribute to future local socio-economic development.

Strategic Partnership with MoSA: Connecting SDCs and UoMs

By connecting the SDCs with UoM, the project came to respond to the MoSA strategic approach to promote sustainable development in all regions. As emphasized during the meeting with the minister of Social Affairs, by testing this approach, the project succeeded in engaging SDCs representatives with UoMs in joint development endeavors. This demonstrated the added value of this collaborative approach and re-confirmed the need to make full use of all available local resources, and notably the highly qualified human resources available in SDCs.

Community Engagement

The interviewed UoM representatives reiterated the strategic importance of the local team that was formed and trained by the project. They also noted that the establishment of this local team serves the dual purpose of i) bridging the gap between the municipalities and the local community and ii) addressing the challenge of limited human resources within municipalities. It was emphasized that the engagement of the local teams goes beyond the project duration to make use of their acquired knowledge and expertise in other tasks of relevance to the work of the UoMs.

In general, it can be concluded that, despite the necessity to adapt the project to the changing contexts, the conducted interviews came to re-confirm the high relevance of the project. Conclusions drawn from the interviews showed that the project objectives were still relevant and consistent with partners and beneficiaries’ policies and requirements.

**3. Project Effectiveness**

According to the interviews conducted and the analysis of available reports, it can be concluded that, from the perspective of project effectiveness, the project has been successfully implemented. As detailed below (Table 4), the project two outputs and corresponding activities were duly accomplished, contributing to the achievement of the expected results.

**Table (4): Project accomplishments at the outputs and activities level**

|  |
| --- |
| **Outcome (1): The strategic socio-economic potentials in 10 Union of Municipalities are unlocked using a bottom-up evidence base-process.** |
| **Outputs** | **Activities** | **Level of Achievement** | **Notes** |
| Output 1.1: The participatory planning capacities of municipalities, SDCs, and other local actors in 10 UoMs are strengthened. | 1. Mapping and matching with SDCs and the Unions of municipalities localities by UN-Habitat and MoSA.
2. Conducting introductory meetings with Unions of municipalities.
3. Conducting a rapid capacity assessment to categorize all unions of municipalities based on pre-determined criteria.
4. Selecting unions that would take part in the project.
5. Developing the training materials that will be used for the training and for the compilation of data to be used for the local plans.
6. Conducting the training program. Involve representatives from unions, SDCs, civil society, etc. in series of training and learning session for the elaboration of local strategies.
 | Achieved | As per:* The project interim and final reports.
* The conducted interviews.
 |
| Output 1.2: Strategic socio-economic needs and directions in ten UoMs are defined and validated. | 1. Launching the data collection process in ten UoMs.
2. Data analysis, identifications of strategic sectors elaboration of main findings.
3. Completing the mapping exercise for the ten UoMs (UoM boundaries, context, topography and land cover/land use of each UoM)
4. Compilation – Booklet production
5. Sharing the findings with local stakeholders – validation and content finalization.
 | Achieved | As per:* The project interim and final reports.
* The conducted interviews.
* The produced booklets.
 |

To evaluate the project from an effectiveness perspective, the need arises firstly to examine the project life cycle, which was challenged by delays and interruptions that affected the entire project approach and implementation process.

January 2022 was a turning point in the project life cycle, a new kickoff process was re-launched. Although the project activities as included in the logical framework correspond mostly to the post-January 2022 period, the activities that were implemented prior to this date are fundamental, considering that they prepared the ground for sound project kickoff and dissemination.

During the project kickoff stage, UN-Habitat laid the foundation for project inception. This included establishing the project Steering Committee (SC) comprising representatives from UN-Habitat, MoSA and AICS and holding series of meetings. As a result, SDCs representatives were nominated and successive meetings were held to agree on the project implementation procedures, including steps and requirements to mobilize the UoMs and engage them project briefing meetings to take place afterwards. a training workshop gathering the 12 nominated SDC representatives and UN-Habitat coordinators. The workshop aimed at fostering the knowledge and skills of participants to support the development process of the local socio-economic strategic plans.

During this inception stage, the two following activities related to output (1) have been accomplished:

* Activity 1:

Holding ten on-line meetings gathering a total of 54 UoMs (out of 60 invited UoMs). During these meetings, UoM representatives were introduced to the project, its objectives, and main activities, including the benefits, their role and envisioned participation. Expression of Interests (EoI) were shared with UoMs to fill it in and return it to UN-Habitat.

* Activity 2:

48 out of 54 UoMs submitted the EoI, which included information on the status of respective unions’ existing strategies or action plans. A focal point was nominated to follow up on project activities on behalf of the UoM.

After its interruption during seven months, the project was re-launched (from June 2021 until January 2022). with some adjustments and modifications. During the re-launch process, and to re-gain the commitment of relevant stakeholders to the project, the following key actions were accomplished: i) holding meetings with the members of the SC, ii) communicating with the governors, updating them on the project and iii) conducting visits to the UoMs to re-confirm their willingness to take part in the project. Out of the 60 UoMs, 38 UoMs showed interest and replied by nominating a representative from their behalf.

These fundamental actions allowed for continuation of the remaining project activities, as described below:

Activities under output 1.1

* Activity 3:

UN-Habitat carried out an analysis of the 38 UoMs that showed interest in taking part in the project. The aim of this activity was to ensure limited or no duplication of interventions of similar scope within the same UoMs. Out of the 38 interested UoMs, 21 UoMs were identified to not have been previously supported, and 17 UoMs were identified to have been supported by other projects[[2]](#footnote-3). As a result, and jointly between UN-Habitat, AICS and MoSA, it was decided not to include these UoMs and to open opportunities for other UoMs with urgent needs, that did not previously benefit from similar support as offered by the project.

* Activity 4:

After carrying out the evaluation of the 21 short-listed UoMs based on a set of criteria (Box 1: UoMs Short-listing criteria), the Steering Committee selected 10 UoMs distributed in the eight governorates (**Annex 6: List of the 10 selected UoMs**). Due to the protracted socio-economic crisis in the country, where the allocated budget was not sufficient to cover all the UoMs, it was agreed within the steering committee to focus only on 10 UoMs. A “new” project kickoff event (July 2022) followed by a workshop was organized as a result of the final selection process. Attended by the ten UoMs as well as thirty-three coordinators from UoMs, SDCs and UN-Habitat the event also recapped on the project. The workshop’s sessions focused specifically on project presentation (activities, results, outputs, and work plan), project management and structure, roles and responsibilities of coordinators, creation of field teams (selection criteria, objective, role).

**Box 1: UoMs short-listing criteria**

* UoM population density.
* High percentage of refugees.
* High poverty index according to recent studies published by the United Nations (332 localities).
* Low municipal budgets or financial plans for the upcoming year that show the forecast expenditure and income for the municipality.
* Absence of any previous external assistance and support provided to these UoMs.
* Activity 5:

UN-Habitat staff developed the training materials to allow SDCs and UoMs representatives including UN-Habitat coordinators along with trained field teams to carry out the field assessment and collect necessary local data. The training included topics focusing on the research plan, the tools and surveys, and the techniques to be used for data collection.

* Activity 6:

After forming the field teams in the respective UoMs, the SDCs and UoM representatives and UN-Habitat coordinators took part in a Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop organized and delivered internally by UN-Habitat staff. In addition to discussing the field assessment plan, the tools and the techniques to be used for data collection, the workshop ensured that adequate knowledge and skills were imparted to participants to allow them to deliver the same training to the formed field team. As a follow up, between September and October 2022, the trained participants delivered ten training workshops to the formed field team in the ten UoMs.

Activities under output 1.2

* Activity 1:

The data collection process was launched in the ten unions involving the SDCs and UoM representatives as well as a field team of ten recruited members in each union. To gather general information about municipalities under the 10 UoMs (e.g. population, resources, projects), survey questionnaires were filled with each of the 142 municipalities that are part of the 10 targeted UoMs. Additionally, after filling the surveys, the project team conducted 52 focus group discussions, 61 consultative sessions, and 20 individual meetings with UoM presidents. The purpose of these activities was to collect additional data from different relevant stakeholders and to discuss the situation and challenges of different sectors in the UoMs. Two meetings were held to follow up on the data gathering process and discuss challenges and weaknesses.

* Activity 2:

In May 2023, by attending a workshop, the coordinators and UN-Habitat team formulated the vision for each Union and the corresponding strategic directions. During this event, the attendants were also trained on the principles of writing proposals. Additionally, strengths, weaknesses and available opportunities within all sectors were assessed. Depending on the existing resources and opportunities within each UoM, specific sectors were identified in each UoM, for which clear future directions were defined. During this event, the attendants were also trained on the principles of writing proposals.

* Activity 3:

To support the elaboration process of the UoM strategic directions, UN-Habitat team produced necessary maps which included relevant geo-data covering various issues: the geographical location and boundaries, the topography and elevation, satellite image as well as land cover and land use.

* Activity 4:

The draft report compilation process for the ten UoM followed was internally completed by UN-Habitat team. The outline of the ten reports were unified and the content presented the findings of the field assessment included a thorough analysis outlining the road maps towards future socio-economic development.

* Activity 5:

To finalize the reports, the draft version was shared with UoM for feedback and content validation. Following this step, the ten reports were finalized in Arabic and translated into English. During the production of this evaluation report, ten reports were in the last stages of finalization and printing for dissemination purpose.

In general, and based on the findings of conducted interviews with key informants, the project succeeded in achieving high effectiveness due to the following five factors:

* **Participation and capacity strengthening** were two key pillars of the intervention. The project succeeded in engaging a plethora of actors, involving representatives from SDCs, UoMs and communities. The participatory approach adopted by the project was instrumental to engage communities, local and national stakeholders in the decision-making process. Capacity building was a main project component, which was realized through holding workshops, meetings as well as practicing the acquired skills and know-how through a “learning by doing” and coaching process. Figure (2) below shows the list of some 16 training workshops that were delivered to members of the formed local team.

**Figure (2): Number and types of capacity building workshops conducted with the local team**

* **Designing and implementing a comprehensive and systematic** **approach** that involved carefully examined and designed methodology and steps for each of the planned activities. For instance, to accurately select the 10 beneficiaries/UoMs, the project adopted a systematic approach that involved four key steps, as illustrated below (Figure 3).

**Figure (3): A four-step approach to select the ten UoMs**

* It is worth noting that **each activity was carefully planned and technically well implemented, evaluated and documented**. As a normative project, the project involved the implementation of various activities, including virtual and in-presence meetings, training workshops, consultations and main events, which required systematic planning and organization. These activities contributed to project dissemination, better information exchange and capacity strengthening, which resulted in the production of locally-embedded plans, owned by UoMs, municipalities and community representatives.
* By adopting a **bottom-top approach in local planning processes**, UN-Habitat played the role of a catalyst, linking the UoMs with the central level (mainly the MoSA). Locally, the conducted field assessments and analysis of the findings resulted in the development of socio-economic pathways and specific sectors that were identified in each UoM, for which clear future directions were defined. Shared with MoSA, these plans were seen as instrumental planning tools to improve policy and programme formulation and better guide funding channeling.

**Figure (4): Central and local Coordination Mechanisms**

* **Central and local coordination mechanisms** were established since the early inception stages of the project. At the central level, with UN-Habitat, the involvement of MoSA and AICS in the project steering committee was considered as a strategic decision to increase the project effectiveness. By holding regular meetings, the three stakeholders were engaged in a joint decision-making process that facilitated the implementation of the project various stages. Similarly, at the local level, three-pillar coordination mechanisms were established comprising the UoMs, SDCs and Municipalities/community representatives (Figure 4).
* The interviewed stakeholders confirmed **the high-quality of the produced plans**. Not only were the challenges thoroughly analyzed, but also the identified sectors to promote the future socio-economic development of the regions were of high relevance to the interviewed UoMs. The formation of local teams was reiterated by the UoMs as an effective approach that facilitated this high-quality project end result.

**4. Project Efficiency**

Project efficiency is assessed in terms of the extent to which the achievement of results was performed with good use of resources (financial, human, etc.). Overall, the use of financial and human resources was satisfactory as reported by project partners and different stakeholders.

From an organizational point of view, UN-Habitat established an organizational structure composed of the following (Figure 5):

* Project Steering Committee comprising representatives from UN-Habitat, MoSA and AICS (as mentioned above). Established since the early inception stages of the project, the establishment of this SC came to enhance coordination mechanisms between the three involved parties. Its main function is to discuss and agree on the various project overall policies and implementation modalities.
* A team of 7 members was established by UN-Habitat country office composed of: a programme planning, a project manager, GIS Officer, Procurement Assistant, Drivers (2) and Media and Communication Officer.
* At the Union level, a mixed team of 26 members was established to lead, implement, and monitor project activities and progress. This team was composed of: 7 SDCs coordinators nominated by MoSA, 8 UN-Habitat coordinators and 11 UoM Focal Points.
* At the field level, a total of 110 members from the 10 UoMs were recruited to carry out the field assessment exercise in each municipality within the 10 UoMs.

**Figure (5): Project Organizational Structure**

**Project Steering Committee**

**UN-Habitat Country Team**

**8 UN-Habitat Coordinators**

**11 UoMs Focal Persons**

**7 SDCs Coordinators**

**10 Field Teams in each UoM (total 110)**

Financially, and according to UN-Habitat reports, more than 75 percent of the total project budget was allocated to cover staff and personnel costs. This re-confirms what was previously mentioned that the entire project implementation process relied fundamentally on UN-Habitat available capacities and staff, with minimum out-sourcing. The remaining 25 percent was allocated to cover other general operation costs, contractual services as well as procurement of supplies, commodities, materials and equipment.

Conclusions drawn from the conducted interviews with key informants stressed on the following aspects of project efficiency:

* Equipped with high knowledge and expertise, the UN-Habitat project team played a crucial role throughout the project process. The continued field presence of the project team did not only facilitate easy and smooth communication with UoMs, municipalities and local stakeholders but also contributed extensively to providing day-to-day support, necessary backstopping and closely monitoring every step of the project planned activities.
* The various implemented workshops, meetings and events were timely and well structured. The training workshops were well designed, allowing for exchange of information and experience between the participants from different Lebanese regions.
* The creation of the mixed team composed of UoMs and SDC as well as community representatives (the field team) was acknowledged as an innovative approach that contributed to enhancing local coordination and promoting the efficient involvement and participation of a plethora of local stakeholders widespread in a relatively large geographical area.
* A “resilient” agency, this is how some interviewed informants labelled UN-Habitat agency, re-confirming its efficiency. Even though the project process was affected by the successive country crisis causing numerous delays and interruptions, the UN-Habitat persistent and resilient approach to continue with the project indicates its commitment and full engagement to deliver as initially planned. Additionally, the informants emphasized UN-Habitat flexibility which succeeded in i) making necessary adjustments to adapt to changes and ii) addressing promptly emerging challenges (Box 2: Country crisis and impact on the project).

**Box 2: Country crisis and impact on the project**

The project was severely affected by the overall sudden changes. Shortages in fuel and electricity have also drastically impacted the ability of the private person, the household, municipality, and national level ministries to undertake basic tasks, service provision or even attend and ensure functional workplaces. This has resulted in the minimal functionality of many official offices, including UoMs and social development centers (SDCs) – who had to reduce their working days to 1-3 days per week, due to inability to cover transportation and running costs of the institutions. This in turn had a severe impact on project implementation process, due to the inability to UoMs and SDCs focal persons to undertake necessary tasks and activities in a timely manner.

*Source: Final Project Report, 2023, UN-Habitat*

* The collaboration with UN-Habitat was perceived by the Minister of Social Affairs as an added value and a success model that should be applied by other agencies working with the ministry.

Notwithstanding these positive aspects, the project efficiency was challenged by un-controlled factors that came in the context of a force majeure. As mentioned earlier, since its early inception stages, the project kickoff was delayed numerous times, then as soon as launched, it was again interrupted to re-start again after months of pause. Due to the banking sector crisis and the capital control measures, the project was not able -as planned- to disburse grants to UoMs to implement priority projects. This was perceived by the interviewed UoMs as a main drawback and a lost opportunity for their regions.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the project used available resources efficiently. This was made possible through the following:

* The sound project management.
* The high proficiency of UN-Habitat staff.
* The rigorous planning and implementation of project activities, mainly events, workshops and meetings.
* The established coordination mechanisms, which allowed for enhanced participation and community engagement.

**5.Project Impact**

According to the interviews held with key informants, the evaluation concludes that the project produced impact at various levels: the UoMs and municipalities, the community as a whole and the MoSA.

**At the level of the UoMs and municipalities,** the project direct impact includes the following:

* **Forming the local field team:** **a strategic approach for enhanced connections between the municipalities and the UoMs.** The interviewed UoMs and SDCs representatives emphasized that the formation of the local field team was a pivotal project component that produced a significant local impact. By engaging the formed field team members in data collection and field assessment, the project has contributed to strengthening their capacities and gaining a better understanding about the context of their localities. Additionally, as reiterated during the interviews, the establishment of this field team enhanced linkages and connections between municipalities and the umbrella Union they belong to.
* **Updating or building a database.** On one hand, the collection of locally verified data allowed some UoMs to update the already existing database and linking it with the available Geographical Information System (GIS), while, on the other hand, the data collection process equipped other UoMs with a new database that was not available. This updated or new database was acknowledged by interviewed UoM representatives as a strategic tool for improved decision-making and policy formulation.
* **The project reinforced the collaborative work between all municipalities/members of the UoM**. Interviewed informants emphasized that the project contributed to a positive change in the work approach between municipalities and their UoMs**.** By fostering unity and bonds, the project was able to present a model for enhanced collaborative work, shifting the strategic thinking from the individual/municipal scale to a joint and common work lead by the UoM.
* **Increased collaboration between the UoMs and the SDCs, which created synergies between the two parties.** Interviewed stakeholders emphasized the strategic approach of engaging the SDCs in a collaborative work with the UoMs. By capitalizing on available resources, the UoMs benefited from the thorough field expertise and know-how of SDC representatives. Additionally, as mentioned during the interviews, through the engagement of SDCs in the project, community increased awareness about the existence of SDCs in their region (which was in some cases un-known to some local residents).
* **Improved knowledge about the overall context of the region.** The data collection process and analysis of key findings allowed municipalities and community representatives to gain more knowledge about the existing potentials of the region, as well as the strengths, weaknesses and available opportunities within all sectors. This is mostly applicable to big UoMs covering large geographical areas.
* The produced booklets provide a wealth of information that inform strategic socio-economic development pathways in the respective unions. Interviewed unions representatives acknowledge the **importance of the produced booklets, which represent an “Identity Document” for the Union that shall help them in the programming, decision-making and fundraising endeavors**.
* **Ownership of the end product.** The inclusive and participatory approach adopted by the project enhanced the sense of local ownership of the produced plans. As described above, the formulation of the strategic directions followed a bottom-top approach involving various types of stakeholders and community representatives as assessors or as information providers. In this context, the project end-product was locally owned and informally endorsed by the communities. As local partners, the UoMs and municipalities were actively engaged in the project various phases in general and in the formulation and validation of the content of the plans.

Additionally, as concluded by the conducted interviews, **the project produced significant impact at the level of the community in general**:

* Recruited from the local community, **the capacities of the field team members were enhanced.** As mentioned earlier, by taking part in a series of training workshops, the skills and know-how of the local team members were strengthened and consolidated during the field assessment where the acquired skills have been tested and applied concretely.
* **Creation of a space of dialogue,** which was mostly significant during the data collection project phase. By using various tools and techniques, the field assessment was able to reach a significant number of individuals and institutions in the 10 targeted UoMs. According to UN-Habitat reports, survey questionnaires were filled with each of the 142 municipalities that are part of the 10 UoMs. Additionally, 52 focus group discussions and 61 consultative sessions were conducted with community representatives and key stakeholders. Additionally, 20 individual meetings were held with UoM Presidents.

**From MOSA perspective**, the project came to re-confirm the importance of the ministry’s strategic vision to link the SDCs with municipalities and UoMs. The project demonstrated how a similar collaborative work can be done and the various impacts it can produce. SDCs existing capacities were leveraged, creating a collaborative space with UoMs. By playing the role of mediators and catalysts, SDCs involvement in the project was crucial serving the dual purpose of: i) providing technical support to local stakeholders and ii) mobilizing and gathering all concerned actors around a common goal and a joint programme.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that during the project implementation process, UN-Habitat collected and analyzed a wealth of data and information covering a substantive number of UoMs. This data is instrumental for UN-Habitat future programming and operational endeavors.

**6. Project Sustainability**

According to the conducted interviews, it can be concluded that the project has laid the proper foundations to secure its sustainability. This is envisaged to be achieved according to the three following reasons:

* **Resource mobilization: from planning to implementation**

Due to several factors listed below, the evaluator concludes that funding prospects are high. All involved actors, mainly MoSA, UoMs, AICS and UN-Habitat are committed to invest the required efforts to mobilize the needed financial resources:

* MoSA engagement: By acknowledging the importance of the produced plans, MoSA is engaged to support in resource mobilization efforts and help UoMs implement relevant projects. During the evaluation meeting with MoSA minister, he emphasized his commitment to disseminate the produced booklets to donor agencies and guide them to invest their funds within the frame of the produced plans and the proposed roadmap.
* UoM engagement: They expressed their commitment to move forward with the plan implementation and initiate necessary contacts to mobilize the required resources. Some interviewed UoMs proposed innovative approaches to mobilize resources such as soliciting the private sector to invest in viable projects that would promote local economic development.
* AICS engagement: A call for proposals (to NGOs) focusing on socio-economic development will be shortly launched by AICS. To benefit from this funding opportunity, the UoMs are invited to take part in the call for proposals and include the areas of intervention as prioritized in the produced plan.
* UN-Habitat engagement: As part of the project exit strategy, UN-Habitat is planning to hold on February 20th, 2024, a closing ceremony. Gathering a wide range of national and local stakeholders, the event shall contribute to disseminate the produced plans and facilitate the interaction between aid agencies and UoMs on potential support and funding needs for projects emanating from the developed plans.
* **Sustaining the established horizontal collaborative frameworks**

By acknowledging the positive impact produced by the field-tested participatory and inclusive approach, the interviewed stakeholders stressed on the importance of sustaining collaborative mechanisms established through the project. In addition to stressing on the importance of the continued close coordination with the SDCs, the interviewed UoMs are committed to sustain the work of the formed local team. This is serving several purposes:

* Assigning a local focal person at the level of the municipality who is regularly contacted to support in union-municipalities matters.
* Promoting the continued community participation - and youth in particular - in local development. One UoM representative stated that the formation of the field team helped the union to establish a youth-lead shadow municipal council.
* **Locally anchored capacities**

By following a systematic capacity-building process, the planning knowledge and skills of local stakeholders and community representatives have been locally anchored. According to conducted interviews, the benefits of strengthened capacities shall be sustained. Municipalities and their unions shall continue making full use of these capacities in their current and future programmes. By involving community members in the data collection exercise, their capacities have been strengthened to carry out in the future similar assessment assignments using varied methodologies and tools.

* **Upscaling and replication**

The upscaling and replication of this model project was reiterated during the evaluation interview with the minister of Social Affairs. This falls in the frame of:

* MoSA mandate, which stresses (among others) on its integrated development role across humanitarian, development, private sector, and government agencies to provide social protection and assistance.
* MoSA overall approach to promote sustainable development, which entails (among others) enhancing the role of SDCs and promoting their linkages with municipalities and UoMs.

To conclude, the project has laid the foundation for securing the long-term benefits produced by the project. An exit strategy has been developed by UN-Habitat entailing the organization of a closing ceremony on February 20th, 2024. Completed before this date, the current evaluation could unfortunately not capture the impact of this exit activity.

**7. Cross-Cutting Issues**

This section analyzes the extent to which issues related to resilience, safety and social inclusion have been addressed by the project.

Based on UN-Habitat definition of **urban resilience[[3]](#footnote-4)**, it can be concluded that, due to the various crisis-related challenges it encountered throughout the entire implementation process, the project is in itself a “resilient” project. As mentioned above, the project kickoff process coincided with the eruption of successive financial, security, social unrest, and health crisis, which caused interruption and delays in delivering. Despite these events and their dramatic repercussions (that are still on-going), the implementation of the project continued - with some modifications. Obviously, this would not have been possible without the resilience of partner municipalities and UoMs as well as SDCs who despite all challenges, showed commitment to maintain and continue with the established partnership with UN-Habitat. Faced with the repercussions of post-2019 multi-layered humanitarian crisis, the project came to build the resilience of a wide range of stakeholders (partner municipalities and their unions as well as SDCs and community representatives) and engage in a planning journey amidst drastic shortages of human and financial resources. By adopting a participatory and community-based approach, the produced plans and strategic directions in 10 UoMs came to respond to the local repercussions of the country’s 2019 economic and financial crises, contributing indirectly to socio-economic resilience of targeted local communities.

From a **social inclusion perspective**, issues of relevance to women, youth, children and elderly were briefly addressed in the produced plans. These issues were solely included in the sections of relevance to demography and some proposed interventions where youth and women were suggested as the primary targets. It is worth mentioning that women and youth were well represented in the formed local teams as well as the team of coordinators at the SDCs and UoMs level. By taking part in various training workshops, the capacities of participating women and youth are strengthened. During the evaluation meetings, some UoM representatives reiterated on the important aspect of youth participation in the project.

To conclude, as a normative project involving only soft components, all cross-cutting issues were not equally addressed. Considering the context of the project, the issue of urban resilience was thoroughly addressed and to a lesser extent the social inclusion issues (with focus on women and youth). Other issues of relevance to climate change were not addressed by the project.

**CONCLUSIONS AND TAKEAWAYS**

The following conclusions and takeaways can be drawn from the evaluation:

Conclusion 1: Limited municipal capacities - need for extended technical support

The produced booklets identified practical follow-up steps recommended to UoMs to move forward with the plan. These steps include among others: establishing local committees, creating partnerships and identifying entities supporting the preparation of the sector strategy. Notwithstanding the importance of these steps, it was reported during the interviews that municipalities and UoM are in need for further training and capacity building to coach them during this critical transition path. With long-lasting limited human and financial resources, Municipalities and UoMs overall situation has further deteriorated after the 2019 crisis. Overwhelmed with their daily problem-solving issues to provide a continued access to basic services, the UoMs reported that they are in urgent need for continued support to allow them to implement the necessary follow up steps and move forward with the implementation of much needed projects.

Main Takeaway:

* When elaborating local plans, interventions focusing on systems strengthening are crucial. As such, issues related to governance and municipal performance should go hand in hand with the local planning process. This would help adapting the recommendations to (limited) existing capacities.
* Bearing the brunt of the multi-layered crisis, the continued support to municipalities is crucial to secure the transition between humanitarian and development support.

Conclusion 2: Enhancing vertical and horizontal coordination

The project was successful in building a model for promoting vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms. Vertically, as mentioned above, the project succeeded in aligning national policies and programmes with locally adapted interventions (e.g: the strengthened cooperation between the SDCs and UoMs). Horizontally, by adopting the inclusive and participatory approach, the project leveraged on available resources and engaged a wide range of stakeholders throughout the project’s different phases. In this context, the engagement of UN-Habitat as a mediator and a catalyst contributed to bridging the gap between the central and the local levels.

Main Takeaway:

* Establishing coordination mechanisms between the central and local level is fundamental to lay the foundation for proper local planning processes.
* The involvement of an external actor with sound technical expertise and national credibility would facilitate creating bonds and building trust between the central and the local.
* When local collaborative mechanisms are successfully tested, municipalities and unions would better understand the produced benefits and would most likely continue with these mechanisms and possibly expand them.

Conclusion 3: Active involvement of donors and national counterpart

The establishment of the Steering Committee involving MoSA, AICS and UN-Habitat was emphasized as one of the project best practices. A continued dialogue platform was created, which contributed among others to enhancing the vertical coordination (central to local). The involvement of MoSA and AICS throughout the project implementation process was instrumental to agree on the project continuity amidst the eruption of multiple crisis.

Main Takeaway:

* The triangular involvement (implementing partner - donor – national counterpart) of the relevant partners in the project overall guidance and planning is central for sound project implementation.
* The engagement of the project national counterpart is essential and serves the three purposes of: i) aligning the project with the ministry’s overall vision, policies and programmes. ii) increasing project ownership process and iii) securing project sustainability.

Conclusion 4: Enhancing Project Sustainability

As concluded by the evaluation, the project succeeded in laying the foundation for project sustainability. A well-elaborated institutionalization plan would have increased the efficiency of the project closure procedures. The institutionalization process of developed plans is of strategic importance. It would secure the plan continued ownership disregarding changes in UoMs presidents that could occur due to elections or to resignation.

Main Takeaway:

* Options for the institutionalization of local plans should be explored since the early stages of project implementation. These options could derive from the findings of the governance and municipal performance assessment (see above takeaway conclusion 1).
* As implemented by the project, the involvement of permanent staff at the municipal or union level would facilitate the institutionalization of the planning processes.

Conclusion 5: Plan implementation for increased accountability and credibility

For increased accountability and credibility, there is an urgent need to implement the plan. Interviewed UoMs emphasized the need to create and implement a model project that involves several municipalities. This requires UoMs to develop proper project proposals for financial resource mobilization. However, the municipalities and unions do not have the capacities and know-how to deliver such tasks.

Main Takeaway:

* To secure its implementation, the local planning exercise should be accompanied with capacity building initiatives addressing issues related to: developing project feasibility studies, proposal writing and fundraising.
* Municipalities and their unions should be exposed to all available municipal finance opportunities, including diversifying funding sources, expanding their own source revenues, broadening access to external finance, public private partnership, cooperation between different levels of governments, etc.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The evaluation allows for the synthesis of a set of recommendations that may guide UN-Habitat, in their future programming and operational endeavors.

Recommendation (1): Focus on Municipal Finance

The conducted interviews concluded that municipal finance represents a priority topic for municipalities and unions, particularly amid the prolonged country multi-layered crisis. Among other crucial finance modalities, municipalities should be guided towards the diversification of their funding sources and advancing innovative financing instruments. In this context, UN-Habitat Lebanon office can make use of a wealth of normative works that have been produced globally by UN-Habitat, notably the 2023 publication entitled [“Unlocking the Potential of Cities: Financing Sustainable Urban Development”](file:///G%3A%5CBackUP-coordinamento-09-04-2024%5C2-Multilaterale%5CUN-Habitat%5C2018-AID-11744-UN-Habitat%5C7-Rapporti%5C2024-03-05-Final%20Report-Evaluation%20Report%5CAICS%5Cunlocking_the_potential_of_cities_-_financing_sustainable_urban_development_-_06-min.pdf). Additionally, it is suggested to disseminate and advocate for the implementation of recommendations synthesized in the UN-Habitat Lebanon publication on “[Municipal Finance Assessments](file:///G%3A%5CBackUP-coordinamento-09-04-2024%5C2-Multilaterale%5CUN-Habitat%5C2018-AID-11744-UN-Habitat%5C7-Rapporti%5C2024-03-05-Final%20Report-Evaluation%20Report%5Cmunicipal_finance_policy_advocacy_report_-_lebanon_-_june_2022_-_en%20%281%29.pdf)”. This report offers a set of recommendations that would allow local governments in Lebanon to move forward on a path of enhanced good governance to increase the revenues base.

Recommendation (2): Project Upscaling

The vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms established by the project was reported as a successful model that UN-Habitat should build on to design future programmes. As emphasized during the interview with AICS, UN-Habitat approach not only contributed to building trust between municipalities and unions and the central government (represented by MoSA), but succeeded in data collection and mapping of a significant number of municipalities. In this context, it is recommended to capitalize on the success story to upscale the project and work on the alignment of existing local plans with central level development and sectoral plans.

Recommendation (3): Turning crisis into an opportunity – A step towards reforming the municipal sector?

Municipalities in Lebanon are standing at the forefront of the prolonged compounded crisis. While for decades, municipalities have been advocating for a decentralization reform, the multilayered humanitarian needs have placed them as one of the primary local agents to address the rising needs of vulnerable people. The crisis allowed municipalities to mobilize local human and financial resources and to increase networking with various actors to tap on all available opportunities. This dynamic process contributed (in some cases) to improved municipal governance with increased resilience and more empowerment. Based on that, it is recommended to document this un-intended positive impact of the crisis on the strengthened role of municipalities. The aim is to document best practices, synthesize lessons learnt for wide dissemination and experience sharing and lay the ground for proper decentralization reforms.

Recommendation (4): A Resilient UN-Habitat – A Resilient Project

As mentioned above, and despite the outbreak of successive crisis causing delays and months of interruption, the UN-Habitat, AICS and MoSA were committed to continue with the project implementation. To promote experience exchange, it is recommended to document this successful practice showing the used approach and the adaptation measures to cope with the repercussions of the successive crisis.

**Annexes**

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| Annex 1: Original and Modified version of the Logical Framework |  |
| Annex 2: Inception Report  |  |
| Annex 3: Bibliography |  |
| Annex 4: Evaluation Questions  |  |
| Annex 5: List of Interviewed Stakeholders and FGDs |  |
| Annex 6: List of the 10 selected UoMs |  |

1. As per the modified version of the logical framework that was revisited by the evaluator in consultation with UN-Habitat [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Economic and Social Fund for Development (ESFD), Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project (MERP), Maintaining Strength and Resilience for Local Governments (MASAR) etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “The measurable ability of any urban system, with its inhabitants, to maintain continuity, through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming towards sustainability” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)