Executive Summary

OBJECTIVE OF THE ASSESSMENT OF DEVELOPMENT RESULTS IN SYRIA

The Evaluation Office (EO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducts a series of country evaluations—the Assessment of Development Results (ADR)—in order to capture and demonstrate evaluative evidence of UNDP's contributions to development results at the country level. The ADR in Syria was initiated in April 2004 and concluded in November 2004. The methodology is based on guidelines issued by the UNDP EO. The main purpose of the evaluation was to assess the difference that UNDP's efforts have made to development in Syria, in particular whether UNDP is doing the right things in the right manner. Specific questions addressed by the evaluation included the following:

- How relevant was UNDP's response to the challenges of the transition process in Syria?

- What were the key results from UNDP partnerships, taking into account programme innovation, indicators of performance and national ownership?

- What were the results of UNDP measures to alleviate poverty and vulnerability of the poor?

- How effective were UNDP partnerships to address unemployment and social vulnerability?

- How was UNDP support used to leverage Syria's reform process in the area of governance?

- How successful was UNDP support to policy dialogue, aid coordination and brokerage in delivering development results?

- What are the most significant challenges for Syria and, by implication, for UNDP efforts to contribute to achieving national development priorities in the future?

NATIONAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION IN SYRIA

The situation in the country since 2000 is best described as one of cautious reform. Various quarters of Syrian leadership have recognized the need for economic reform, particularly in the unwieldy public sector. This sector can no longer be financed by an economy where a high percentage of revenue income derives from sectors that are stagnating or shrinking. Syria thus faces the challenge of reforming its economy in ways that allow for greater economic diversification and a more solid national economic base, while at the same time taking into account fluctuations in net official development assistance (ODA) flows and eventual dwindling reliance on the oil sector as a major foreign currency earner.

However, this process of change appears to lack clear direction and a timeline. Although there are signs of conditions improving for the private sector, it is still unclear what the process of economic liberalization really means in the Syrian context and how it will relate to broader issues of political reform. Rather, the Government continues to remain an important player in the economy.

The reform process and transition phase in Syria is not only relatively limited, but also appears to be rather precarious. The unstable situation in the region affects Syria's ability to focus its efforts on development issues. The influence wielded by various power groups within the Government is clearly related to regional dynamics and any dramatic developments in the region can thus affect the strength of the various players. Indeed, regional developments may turn attention away from internal reform and focus it instead on issues of national security. In such a situation the need to ensure stability and the status quo would necessarily override the need for any far-reaching economic reforms. Thus, Syria today is engaged in a balancing act, in which the need for economic liberalization is recognized, while at the same time the need for political reform is also being debated.

GROWTH WITH EQUITY

It is within this space that UNDP and the international community in Syria are operating. The overall strategy for UN agencies and multilateral as well as bilateral donors appears to focus on developing strategies that can positively support a gradual movement towards broader reforms, but without upsetting and destabilizing the current status quo.

For UNDP this strategy has been, and indeed should be, pragmatic and based on a step-by-step approach. Pragmatism implies an understanding and acknowledgement of the importance of national independence and national ownership of future developments to both Government and society in Syria. It should also include an understanding that even those actors in the Syrian arena who may appear less interested in reform may have legitimate concerns about the uncontrolled opening up of the Syrian economy to trade liberalization in particular, and to the forces of globalization in general. Lessons learnt from other regions and countries affected by the processes of transition must be taken into account when formulating strategies for contributing to national development results in Syria.

A strategy that favours liberalization and economic growth must contain a clear element of concern for human development, as well as address the challenge of ensuring equitable social distribution. In short, the overall UNDP strategy must be to support a process characterized by 'growth with equity'. But such a focus will also imply major challenges in terms of a multitude of pressing needs. Though Syria is a middle income country, which by 2002 ranked 106th on the human development index (HDI) out of a total of 177 countries, with a HDI value of 0.710,[1] large disparities exist between geographical regions within Syria, as well as between urban versus rural areas. Experiences from processes of transition in other regions and the impact of globalization indicate that economic development may result in greater socio-economic inequalities. There is thus the challenge of balancing economic growth with effectively implemented poverty reduction strategies that are also gender equitable.

Major challenges also exist in the fields of government reform and decentralization, including a shortage of skills and capacities at all levels of the public administration. In spite of public expenditures on health and education, the quality of these services must improve significantly if they are to meet the future needs of the population. The lack of a concrete agenda and timetable for policy and institutional reforms in the judicial, economic and social arenas also constitute a problem for the future direction of reform.

In general, in spite of promising openings that UNDP has and should support actively, there is a need to develop strategies that will ensure that UNDP plays a key role in supporting Syria's ongoing move towards a more democratic system and also enable UNDP to strengthen its comparative advantage as a key promoter of human development. This process needs to include public participation, a sense of inclusion and ownership, transparency and accountability, as well as effective support to civil society and promotion of a development-oriented and independent non-governmental organization (NGO) sector.

NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING OF UNDP

The overall UNDP strategic areas of support where intended outcomes are planned in Syria include focus on poverty reduction and sustainable livelihood; sustainable use of natural resources and environmental conservation; and institutional development and good governance.

These strategic goals are and will remain relevant to the major challenges faced by Syrian society and economy. UNDP has generally responded to Syrian national priorities, and as such has positioned itself strategically to

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[1] Source: Human Development Report, UNDP 2004. The average HDI value for Arab States in 2002 was 0.651.

contribute to national development results.

However, it is clear that UNDP's strategic position during the years 1997-2000 was largely affected by a 'business as usual' approach intent on not courting undue political controversy. The new, post-2000 opportunities presented by the Government have provided some impetus for change. The implications of and reactions to the signals inherent in the new President's July 2000 inaugural speech have been mixed. Although after 2000 UNDP did attempt to push the boundaries, which is reflected for example in the shift from 'economic' to 'good' governance, and continued to play a major role in promoting a public discourse on poverty, it could have been more proactive and innovative in seizing new opportunities.

Since early 2004, UNDP has demonstrated a more proactive management approach to the post-2000 transition phase in Syria, an approach conducive to further strengthening UNDP's strategic position in the areas of governance and poverty. This indicates that UNDP's ability to operate in Syria is not only dependent on what at any given time is deemed to be politically acceptable, but also on the development of clear long-term plans and policies.

However, there have also been missed opportunities. UNDP's primary focus continues to be on relationships and links with Government counterparts and stakeholders, and minimally if at all with the emerging NGOs that are trying to stake out a niche in Syria's development process. UNDP has thus largely missed an opportunity to promote civil society through such NGOs. Civil society is a relatively new concept in Syria, where the prevailing official attitude tends to be based on caution, if not suspicion. Linked with the above is the missed opportunity to support the judiciary in Syria, an area explicitly singled out in the President's July 2000 inaugural speech and one of crucial importance to the reform process.

Similarly, UNDP has missed the opportunity to stake out a strategic position in gender mainstreaming, which is an integral part of the organization's core mandate on human development. The post-2000 openings as well as the current more proactive approach pursued by UNDP Syria have not led to efforts on the part of the country office (CO) to explicitly address the lack of an effective gender strategy for development interventions in the country.

CONTRIBUTION TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESULTS

An overview of various UNDP projects and related outputs clearly indicates that UNDP's contribution to development results in the thematic areas of poverty, governance and environment has been mixed. The evaluative evidence suggests that while the UNDP Syria CO has 'done the right thing' in terms of focusing on strategic goals of relevance to Syria's development needs and priorities, it has not necessarily 'done things the right way' in its efforts to implement its strategic interventions in the thematic areas of its focus. To some extent this is linked to the reality that UNDP appears to be pursuing a project and sector specific approach to development interventions, rather than an approach focusing on the process of human development *per se.*

UNDP's approach to implementing its strategic goals requires what the Evaluation Mission has defined as specific 'adjustments'. These adjustments pertain to the need for the CO to develop a strategic approach that takes explicit account of the cross-cutting factors linking development interventions both within as well as between pertinent thematic areas. This strategic approach is crucial to strengthening UNDP's profile as a key player in promoting human development in Syria, a profile that does not appear to be always clear to various counterparts and stakeholders.

These adjustments are also required in terms of addressing a number of crucial issues and cross-cutting factors with implications for intended outcomes, such as improving targeting of the poor; timely exit strategies and more effective mobilizing of strategic partnerships; addressing weaknesses in data collection as well as monitoring and evaluation systems; mainstreaming gender; strengthening administrative reform interventions; promoting information and communication technology (ICT) as a cross-cutting intervention; and strengthening the efficiency of project management. These are imperative if the CO is to strengthen its strategic positioning as well as maximize its contribution to development results in Syria.

UNDP is faced with the 'double' agenda of supporting the Government's development priorities while at the same time promoting a process that ensures that its core corporate mandate of supporting human development is central to the development agenda in Syria. There is a temptation to invest efforts in developing and implementing projects that the Government signals as important, resulting in UNDP spreading itself too thin at the expense of focusing on its strategic strengths and expertise. Projects in the pipeline need to be re-evaluated with this caveat in mind, while the decision to continue or otherwise with ongoing projects should not be influenced by whether or not they are problematic to implement.

UNDP's advocacy strategy for projects and programmes clearly has limitations, which is reflected in an apparent ad hoc approach. Developing an effective advocacy strategy closely linked to development interventions is also imperative given that in terms of resources, and in spite of the commendable increase in the share of non-core funding and Government cost-sharing, UNDP is a 'small player' compared with the financial resources of other agencies and donors in Syria, in particular the European Union (EU).

UNDP is making laudable efforts to develop the organizational structure of the CO through team-building. Though this process has just begun, it can be expected to strengthen the CO's efforts to promote human development. Meanwhile, the CO needs to address the implications of the workload shouldered by staff, competence requirements and the link with recruiting external short-term expertise. The latter in particular needs to be more explicitly focused on recruiting skills specifically relevant to strengthening UNDP's strategic position and results-orientation.

A particular weakness relates to the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, which is largely informed by an ad hoc approach focusing on the project level and is largely perceived as a reporting exercise. These shortcomings need to be seriously addressed not only in terms of their implication for evaluating outcomes to ensure accountability, but particularly also in relation to using M&E to enhance learning from programme implementation. An effective M&E system is also relevant to developing effective advocacy strategies for promoting gender sensitive poverty reduction and democratic governance.

LESSONS LEARNT

Since 1997 UNDP in Syria has made significant contributions to processes leading to a strategic plan for environment, to placing poverty more explicitly on the Syrian development agenda, and moving towards a stronger focus on good governance and administrative reform. Such achievements indicate the positive role of the UNDP as a neutral partner in Syria, and as a promoter of human development. However, there are a number of challenges concerning the long-term maintenance of this position. The Evaluation Mission found that the new management in UNDP is already taking steps in the right direction to address these challenges.

Effective advocacy strategy There is a need to develop effective advocacy strategies in relation to project and programme interventions that calls for identifying and nurturing strategic partnerships in support of such efforts.

One apparent result of this pertains to the opportunity for agencies to more directly address the issue of income and capability poverty, compared with the recent past when the political leadership tended not to officially acknowledge the problem of poverty as a Syrian concern, but rather focus more narrowly on unemployment.

Similar advocacy processes are being sought in the field of governance, building on the rights-based approaches emerging in global discourses, and including human rights and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Yet results appear to be rather varied. A national report on MDGs has been produced and given some coverage in the Syrian press and the 10th Five Year Plan is expected to reflect the MDGs. However, it is not clear to what extent the MDGs have been internalized in the society in general. Also, the national human development report (NHDR) has not been endorsed and a new one is being prepared.

The field of broader advocacy that touches on democratic governance is arguably the most difficult task facing UNDP in Syria, where a clearer focus needs to be developed to address the challenge of how to improve performance. As indicated earlier, this entails ensuring that the requirements of focusing on specific projects do not preclude pursuing a broader human development related policy perspective. In other words, it implies ensuring that a narrow technocratic and economic perspective of reform is not at the expense of advocacy—through demonstration—for broader reform processes conducive to human development.

Defining clear strategic goals In selecting interventions that UNDP aims to develop or support in the near future, its strategic goals need to be more clearly defined in terms of stronger emphasis on the human dimensions of development. This includes focusing on crucial issues such as income and capability poverty and the links with unemployment, as well as the social and gender dimensions of economic growth. By implication there is a need to move beyond a narrow focus on economic growth limited to concerns over trade liberalization. Parallel efforts are required to effectively advocate for and promote awareness of crucial issues such as social policies in the context of rapid economic transformations; securing social and legal conditions that support gender equitable access to the labour market; and securing access of the poorest segments of the population to affordable resources and services.

Spreading UNDP interventions 'too thin' The issue of spreading projects 'too thin', reflected both in the number and diversity of projects, is generally evident and needs to be addressed as part of UNDP's effort to strengthen its strategic positioning. Obviously, UNDP needs to take note

of priorities identified by the State Planning Commission (SPC). However, in choosing among potential projects proposed by the SPC, the UNDP should draw upon its past experiences with successful and less successful projects. Such a strategic awareness should guide not only the choice of type of projects to engage in, but also the choice of projects that are best left to other strategic partners operating in Syria. The limited strategic awareness of earlier experiences is clearly related to the weak M&E system currently in place.

Exit strategies and sustainability Sustainability and exit strategies remain a general problem. For example, there is a need to look at UNDP's involvement in the environment sector, where various projects were initiated some years ago. Discussions with the Government on this issue do not appear to be initiated by UNDP in a timely manner, and furthermore, in various cases, counterparts do not commit personnel and resources for the continuation of projects.

UNDP is also piloting efforts such as the Jabal Al-Hoss/Phase II project, which focuses on providing credit to poor families to promote income-generation opportunities. The project is perceived to be a success, and will provide a model for the establishment of a Centre of Excellence, which will support its replication in other areas of Syria, such as Zeyzoun. This success should be further consolidated before any extension is initiated. Preliminary findings show that the project does not lead to a decrease in resorting to private credit sources, and might be contributing to further indebtedness. Moreover, evidence indicates that the credit schemes do not reach the poorest among the poor, nor have female target beneficiaries been empowered. In addition, the institutionalization and sustainability of the model is not clear and might require new mechanisms, such as allowing the establishment of local community-based organizations, or alternatively, registering the local *sanadiq* (village development funds) and according them legal status, all of which requires reviewing and reforming existing regulatory frameworks. The latter is an area where UNDP can and should play a strong advocacy role.

Managing processes One of the key strategic challenges facing UNDP Syria is how to handle the broader processes of development beyond just programmes and individual projects. UNDP also faces the challenge of various balancing acts: between a project focus and a policy focus; and between technocratic perspectives and a narrow focus on economic development on the one hand, and advocacy on the human and social dimensions of the same development processes on the other hand.

The CO needs to decide which programme area of activities it will expend its human and limited financial resources on. This is critical if UNDP is to effectively address a multitude of challenges including: balancing the available financial and staff resources of the CO against effective programme implementation leading to intended outputs and outcomes; balancing the need for a broader perspective on management and on M&E that includes counterparts as well as beneficiaries against the different dynamics inherent in the technical execution of projects; and balancing the broader political dimensions of projects, including potentially controversial political issues, against the need to strengthen the mechanisms of national execution (NEX).

FORWARD-LOOKING RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting the reform process It is important to note the precariousness of the current transition process in Syria. Regionally, there are several political problem areas that, should they develop in negative directions, can directly affect internal dynamics in Syria. The Government is trying to consolidate and address competing demands and expectations in the country. Thus, while it seems that the current transition phase is opening up some space for cautious reform, there are checks and balances in place that need to be taken into account.

Given this situation, this is not the time for a radical change in UNDP strategy in Syria. Since a new UNDP country programme will begin in 2007, the intervening time should be spent on consolidating the strategy of the relatively new Resident Representative (RR), and concluding the formulation of the new Common Country Assessment (CCA) and United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), as well as on the launch of the NHDR. The latter, together with the Syria MDG Report, are important advocacy tools for UNDP Syria.

Addressing the challenges of transition UNDP must continue its focus on strengthening the executive. This implies supporting the SPC in terms of administrative support and competence-building, as well as improving its capacity for coordination. This strategy should also be extended to include other ministries pertinent to UNDP's strategic goals, an approach with potentially positive implications for promoting inter-ministerial coordination. However, in addressing these challenges there should be a clearer focus on team building, both at the top leadership as well as middle management levels.

Parliament as a legislative assembly is a strategic institution that UNDP is supporting through increasing the capacity of various committees to make informed decisions. Continuing to support the legislative is of interest to

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UNDP's strategic position in Syria, given the Parliament's key role in passing legislation relevant to economic and social reform. Since members of the Assembly represent social forces operating in Syrian society, there is also a basis for UNDP to relate to emerging leaders and new voices through an effective advocacy strategy.

The judiciary is of crucial importance to the reform process and to promoting the rule of law, and thus the CO needs to identify opportunities to contribute to this area. Partnerships with ongoing French-supported interventions, as well as soliciting Arab legal expertise from the region, are possible UNDP points of intervention.

Integrating regional perspectives and transition experiences UNDP is in a unique position to help raise awareness of lessons learnt from countries that face similar challenges to those of Syria, both from within the Arab region and beyond. A conscious strategy on how to make such comparative examples relevant to Syrian development should be developed.

Consolidating UNDP's strategic goals A major issue of relevance to UNDP's strategic position and implementation of its strategic goals is the establishment of a clearer profile for the CO on the basic issues of human development not only within Government circles, but also within the expanding private sector and among elements of civil society that are striving to emerge and gain a voice. Such a profile requires building on existing as well as developing new strategic partnerships with relevant international and national organizations; highlighting UNDP's comparative advantages; and including lessons learnt from a human development perspective.

UNDP as key advocate for human development UNDP should improve its advocacy strategy in Syria by linking it more clearly to its corporate mandate of promoting human development, in which it enjoys a comparative advantage vis-à-vis other development and donor agencies operating in the country. Indeed, an effective advocacy strategy needs to build on UNDP's capacity and capability to provide policy advice and upstream engagement in legal and judicial reforms, areas that have hitherto not been accorded much attention, although they are of crucial importance to the reform process and supporting the rule of law.

The field of broader advocacy that touches on democratic governance is arguably the most difficult task facing UNDP in Syria, and a clearer strategy needs to be developed to address this challenge. This also entails ensuring that requirements for focusing on projects do not contradict pursuing a sustained broader policy perspective towards development effectiveness. In other words, it implies ensuring that a narrow technocratic and economic perspective of reform does not ignore advocacy for broader reform processes conducive to human development.

At the same time, UNDP needs to further consolidate its strategic position as a key contributor to macroeconomic discourses evolving in Syria, both among Government counterparts as well as with pertinent UN and donor organizations. This entails consistently advocating for the 'human face of development', while promoting and supporting policies conducive to economic growth with equity in Syria.

Stronger focus on social aspects of national poverty reduction There is a need to strengthen the focus on the social dimensions of economic growth, and to avoid limiting the public discourse to narrowly defined economic issues. Social dimensions must include a focus on issues such as the risk of increasing child labour—both boys and girls—in the context of rapid economic transformation and the possible erosion of social safety nets; promoting equitable employment conditions for men and women in the labour market; and ensuring access to basic social services and income generation opportunities for the poorest segments of the population irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation, gender or age group, rural or urban background.

UNDP also has an important role to play in advocating for demand-driven data collection, focusing on poverty and gender sensitive indicators conducive to effective development planning. Appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators provide the information essential to strengthening UNDP's advocacy messages, and support efforts to mobilize strategic partnerships.

The reform process also requires advocacy for the development of gender and poverty sensitive labour policies, if the narrow focus on economic growth is to be avoided. This is also relevant to the informal sector where income and capability-poor labour, and also child labour, is more likely to seek employment and income-generating opportunities. Such labour policies are also relevant to ensuring that both women and men in the private sector enjoy equitable opportunities and are equally protected by social security laws; and providing for equal opportunities for men and women in the civil service and public enterprises. Linked to this is the crucial need to develop a labour market information system, the outputs of which are relevant to a developing market economy where the State is not the main employer.

Strategic support to civil society initiatives UNDP should further support the NGO sector as a means for widening the space for civil society and linking this with the concept of democratic governance. This is where the development of strategic partnerships becomes particularly crucial, since it increases opportunities for UNDP's cooperation with NGOs with similar outlooks on development 'with a human face'.

Strategic partnerships focused on ideas and values Partnerships around ideas and values are as important to UNDP's corporate mandate to support human development as is securing funding for supporting the reform process in Syria. Thus, while UNDP should actively mobilize strategic partnerships to solicit non-core funding for crucial development interventions, it also needs to seek partnerships with key organizations with visions similar to those of UNDP.

Generally and at the political level, the partnership with the EU is deemed important and can be further consolidated through the recent corporate agreement between UNDP and the EU (signed in June 2004). But UNDP should stretch this partnership further by raising issues like human rights and democratic governance, however sensitive they may be. Similarly, strategic partnerships should be forged with key organizations that are promoting, or can be encouraged to promote, social concerns relating to, for example, the labour market, the general policy of privatization and trade.

Supporting effective national M&E systems A strong M&E system needs to be developed at the national level to ensure clarity and relevance of programme outputs and outcomes, which can provide relevant information to assess UNDP's contribution to development results in Syria. There is a need, however, to be realistic and flexible about what indicators of results are appropriate in a given context. There is also a need to keep in mind what measures are critically required for the CO to substantially strengthen its M&E approach as well as it's mechanisms for programming. Effectively addressing these issues can also lead to greater coherence in CO actions, providing the opportunity for continual learning and necessary adaptation for future interventions and strengthening UNDP's support to programme and project implementation.

Addressing crucial issues cross-cutting UNDP's thematic areas and intended outcomes While UNDP's strategic goals are relevant to Syria's national development priorities, the CO needs to develop a strategic approach to implement its development objectives and achieve intended outcomes. This requires improving UNDP's implementation of its development interventions, based on an explicit recognition of the complexity of cross-cutting factors. ICT is one such factor.

UNDP must not only view ICT-related interventions as a technical means, but must also use ICT tools for promoting the dissemination of the concept of democratic governance and the link with a rights-based approach to development. This also includes linking concepts of transparency and accountability with both citizens' rights as well as citizens' responsibilities, an important dimension of a vibrant civil society. Last but not least, such an approach can support widening access to information and knowledge conducive to improving male and female citizens' labour market opportunities. A cultural change of this order takes time and commitment; even in industrialized countries, the realization of the productivity benefits of ICT has taken a generation. Problems of security and confidentiality have to be tackled. The very high costs of e-connectivity and the very low-level of Internet use in the Arab states, including Syria, have to be tackled aggressively if the digital divide is to be converted into digital opportunities.

Another cross-cutting factor is gender mainstreaming, which not only addresses gender gaps reflecting bias against girls and women and promotes more equitable gender relations, but also addresses the gender needs and priorities of boys and men affected, for example, by income and capability poverty, lack of social security, and/or socio-economic marginalization of certain groups in the society. In view of UNDP's holistic approach to development, where human needs and priorities are central to the development agenda, it is necessary for UNDP to develop an effective gender mainstreaming strategy, which is currently missing.

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