



Spotlight Initiative

ANNUAL NARRATIVE PROGRAMME REPORT

PROGRAMME TITLE: AFGHANISTAN SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE PROGRAMME

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UPDATE REPORT: EU-UN Spotlight Programme/Afghanistan

I. Context and Country Programme Document Development

The political, security and, therefore, operational context in Afghanistan has been fluid over the past two years, during which the Afghanistan Country Programme Document (CPD) was designed and the programme launched. Violence, conflict, and COVID-19 all conspired to delay the process as the agencies strove to create a programme that was both responsive and resilient to the context. The killing of a UNDP international colleague in Kabul in late 2019 resulted in strict security protocols limiting staff movements, particularly in Kabul. As a result, the programme's consultations on the CPD design were limited to bilateral discussions between the agencies and their counterparts in government and civil society mostly in Kabul, with the results brought into the design through the Technical Team comprised of the focal points in each of the Responsible United Nations Organisations (RUNOs). These challenges were amplified when COVID-19 hit Afghanistan in early 2020, leading to localized lockdowns, telecommuting, and reduced international presence. Consequently, the Technical Team had to shift its approach and methods of working, and to reassess modalities of engagement with partners. However, they were able to conduct consultations in the target provinces, but the process took time, due to the COVID-19 related constraints, which delayed the start of implementation.

Women and girls in Afghanistan have faced violence regardless of the environmental changes, but COVID-19 in particular magnified the violence, as a result of the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on their lives, particularly during lockdowns, including decreased access to services and increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in homes where women were the caretakers of COVID-19 victims. Not only were women and girls more likely to contract the virus due to their close proximity due to care-giving to stricken family members, but the stress of shattered livelihoods, and restrictions of mobility due to lockdowns created tensions that often led to domestic violence.

At the same time, the efforts to launch the peace process while the Government also was launching its new/second iteration of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF-2) led to limited stakeholder engagement, as all eyes were on these two processes. Strong advocacy to ensure that women's rights and gender equality were prominent in the ANPDF-2 took precedence, resulting in Women's Economic Empowerment visible in the document. Shifts in ministerial counterparts continued to be a challenge, combined with the continued restrictions surrounding meetings with counterparts. These changes resulted in new counterparts sometimes having different priorities and requiring renewed orientation and creating buy-in. In the next reporting period, the Afghanistan programme will continue to elevate the issue of violence against women and girls on the national agenda, with particular focus on bringing the Acting Minister of Women Affairs more concretely into the leadership of the Spotlight Initiative.

These factors, while not new to the country, were having increased impact, while the catalytic nature of the Spotlight Initiative needed to be leveraged, to raise greater awareness and to take advantage of rather than be hindered by COVID-19 and the ongoing political processes. In consultation with the Spotlight Initiative technical team in HQ, the Afghanistan Technical Team proposed a revision of the CPD design that would apply a COVID-19 lens to the programme, through mainstreaming awareness of the virus and its social impacts throughout the activities, as well as increasing engagement with the COVID-19 response mechanisms established by the UN Country Team and the Humanitarian Country Team, such as the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group. This ensured the programme responded to the context and operational constraints and avoided





duplication, while ensuring gender was mainstreamed more strongly, thereby maintaining the principle of “leaving no one behind”. The Resident Coordinator’s Office (RCO) worked closely with the European Union Delegation to ensure that this new direction was acceptable to the EU, and that the programme maintained its original intention of eliminating violence against women and girls, even with this new lens.

This was successful to a great degree because, in 2020, the new RCO Team Leader accelerated engagement with the UN Technical Team and the EU Delegation focal points, to ensure there was buy-in across agencies and with the programme’s key partner during the CPD finalization period. Regular meetings promoted greater awareness of the scope for integrated programming, particularly with the COVID-19 lens applied. Although there continued to be challenges for the UN technical team to connect with civil society, these were resolved by conducting a series of meetings in the three target provinces through partners. These consultations served not only to validate the design of the programme, but also to identify any emerging issues that could be integrated into the programme. With the arrival of the new Resident Coordinator, combined with the endorsement of the ANPDF-2 during the Afghanistan Conference 2020 in Geneva, the Afghanistan team accelerated the engagement of the government counterparts through the Government’s own meetings on the ANPDF-2, during which the issues of women’s rights, gender equality, the importance of elimination of violence against women and girls, combined with the need for increased participation of women and girls in all three of the ANPDF-2 pillars (State-building, Market-building and Peace-building) as central to social change, stability, and national development.

Although the CPD process was lengthy and faced several setbacks, it has resulted in stronger and practical engagement by and with programme partners, ensuring that Government counterparts have a better understanding of exactly how the Spotlight Initiative contributes to the Government’s vision regarding women’s empowerment as stated in the ANPDF-2. It is anticipated that Quarter Two of 2021 will see the official launch of the Afghanistan Spotlight Initiative Programme, following additional and focused engagement with the Ministry of Women Affairs to validate with the Acting Minister the design of the CPD.

The CPD was approved by the Spotlight Initiative Operational Steering Committee on 9 November 2020, and the funds were transferred to UN agencies in mid-December. Consequently, in 2020, the programme was focused on the foundational processes of the Spotlight Initiative, building interagency coordination within the team and strengthening partnerships with the EU, Government, and civil society. Moving forward, the programme will work to quickly recruit a full staff and accelerate implementation in 2021. The CPD was fully signed by all partners as of 07 December 2020.

II. Contribution to UN Reform

One of the key benefits of the foundational Spotlight Initiative process has been to promote amongst the RUNOs the importance of taking a multi-sectoral and interagency approach to the issue, coherently leveraging the capacity and expertise of each RUNO to deliver an integrated programme to eliminate SGBV. In particular, the Resident Coordinator leveraged his newly empowered role to ensure close cooperation across agencies throughout the CPD development process.

In order to facilitate the oversight of the technical team, a joint Spotlight Initiative UN country team (SI-UNCT) was formed, chaired by the RC and comprised of the Country Representatives of the four RUNOs and the Head of the RCO. This team meets bi-weekly to discuss strategic issues and general oversight, while also enhancing communications between the RUNOs at the representative level.





Another interagency working group is comprised of the security advisors of the RUNOs, working together to share intelligence and identify mitigation measures that will allow for the delivery of the programme, as well as advise alternatives where circumstances dictate a change of project location or modification of activities.

The Afghanistan programme hopes to serve as an example for other UN entities, as the UN country team engages in the development of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework throughout the first half of 2021, as well as for government institutions, encouraging them to take a multi-sectoral approach to women's issues in Afghanistan. More specifically, it is hoped that it will help ensure that gender is mainstreamed while the rights of women and girls are highlighted as one of the strong workstreams that links all of the Strategic Priority Areas and support to the 2030 Agenda.

III. Governance Structures and Integrated Coordination Mechanisms

The formation of the National Steering Committee (NSC) and the Civil Society National Reference Group (CSNRG) has been negatively impacted by changes in the government, with members withdrawing without replacements available. There was an effort to merge the Spotlight Initiative NSC with the NSC for the Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), to promote the coherence between the two initiatives, and a hybrid approach recently has been endorsed by the EU. It is hoped that the NSC and CSNRG membership will be finalized in April 2021, once all stakeholders are available to participate in the initial meeting. Similarly, it is anticipated that by the end of Quarter One 2021, there will have been a series of meetings, co-chaired by the Resident Coordinator and the Minister of Women Affairs with participation of the EU delegation in Kabul, bringing together the Deputy Ministers of the partner ministries to further deepen the cohesion of the programme with the planning of these ministries, and build towards the finalization of the National Steering Committee.

To ensure continued information sharing and coordination with the EU delegation in Kabul, bi-weekly meetings are held with the UN Technical Team and a team from the EU representing the Head of Cooperation. This has been a strong platform for consultations and consensus building on key issues in the rolling out of the programme, and it is expected to continue through the life of the programme as a technical level mechanism for addressing emergent issues swiftly, and for raising to the principals those issues that require a policy decision. It is greatly appreciated that the EU delegation colleagues have been able to join these meetings consistently and with a commitment to support the programme's implementation.

IV. Recruitment

Most of the recruitments were activated as soon as the funds were received in mid-December. The recruitments are at different stages for each entity, with most expecting to have completed the process by mid-March of 2021, although international recruitments are taking a bit longer, given the difficulty in finding candidates willing and qualified to work in the context of Afghanistan. Lack of qualified candidates as well as the intensification of security incidents, which has led to some key candidates to refuse employment offers, have required readvertisements for some entities. As a result, the RUNOs and the RCO have been filling the capacity gaps with existing personnel, to ensure that the progress of rolling out the programme is not unduly impeded.

As of end March 2021, three of the four RUNOs (UNFPA, UNDP, and UNICEF) have completed their recruitment, while recruitment of international and national positions is underway for others (UN Women), and RCO



recruitment is partially complete, with readvertisement of the international post due to a last-minute rejection of the offer by the candidate.

V. Procurement, contracting and implementing partner selection

In 2020, the Afghanistan team worked together, sharing the same selection criteria, jointly selecting the programme locations, and formulating joint workplans to ensure a coherent and One UN approach, thereby allowing for the meaningful implementation of the principle of “leaving no one behind” in programming.

The RUNOs were able to swiftly identify their implementing partners, based on previous experience and partnerships. Each are providing the initial orientation for them, to ensure they have full understanding not only of the activities but the longer-term impact that is expected to be promoted by the programme. Emphasis has been placed on the local impact as well as the catalytic potential of the programme to develop models that the government and other UN entities could take forward to deepen the social change needed to eliminate violence against women and girls.

Similarly, leveraging the impact of joint awareness raising and mobilization of civil society, the RUNOs regularly share across their networks announcements for vacancies, calls for proposals for the governance mechanisms, and joint presentations for the various meetings with stakeholders.

Given the anticipated target locations, national implementing partners from civil society, and the directorates of the various ministries under the programme will be leading the initiatives. In some cases, they may be existing implementing partners, while in other locations, where a particular agency has not worked previously, new partnerships are being developed. Here are a few details for each of the RUNOs:

- For UNFPA, the implementing partners are selected and orientation meetings conducted to explain the scope of work and modality of the implementation for the Spotlight Initiative in Afghanistan and linkages to existing GBV initiatives. The annual work plan for the UNFPA related outcomes and outputs has been developed in close coordination with the implementing partners and is currently on hold pending the review and endorsement of the National Steering Committee for the entire SI.
- UNICEF has selected two CSOs with experience in gender programming in Herat through a competitive process, while the selection process for implementing partners for Paktia and Kandahar is underway. A Communications for Development (C4D) consultant has been hired to develop communication and information materials for mobilisation and awareness raising on GBV/ child marriage prevention, including available services.
- UN Women has developed a procurement, contracting and implementing partner plan, mapping all the different processes to be undertaken, in order to facilitate and fast track those processes.
- UNDP is in the process of developing Terms of References for the procurement of consultants, while the procurement of equipment for Spotlight Initiative staff, including those under the RCO, is being initiated.



VI. Initial engagement of partners

As mentioned, in 2020, the Afghanistan team conducted bilateral consultative and orientation meetings (see Annex I for provincial meetings) with relevant counterparts in the government, including key line ministries, and with civil society members. As mentioned earlier, the platform provided by the ANPDF-2 consultations led to support from the then-Acting Deputy Minister of Finance in raising the Spotlight Initiative profile. Similarly, meetings between the RC and the First Lady were held periodically and provided insight into the potential of the programme.

Key ministry and civil society actors were consulted, including 29 women’s civil society organisations and groups as well as the Ministries of Women’s Affairs; Education; Public Health; Youth, and; Hajj and Religious Affairs. Provincial consultations were held in the three provinces in May 2020 to ensure localization and ownership of provincial stakeholders. It should be noted, however, that there is currently, in 2021, a request from the Acting Minister of Women Affairs to reconsider the selection of provinces, and ongoing consultations with her and the counterpart ministries are ongoing to ensure that the selection is neither overshadowed nor misinterpreted by the changing political landscape.

Towards the end of 2020, the RUNOs decided to conduct a joint field mission to introduce the programme in the target provinces, but due to the security situation, this plan has been suspended for the moment while a security assessment is being undertaken. The SI-UNCT determined that it is important to ensure “do no harm” is front and center in the roll-out of the programme, and that the programme will progress as context allows. The RUNOs also agreed to initiate the Kabul-based activities to maintain the visibility of the programme and move forward with the work on the elimination of violence against women and girls (EVAWG), despite the challenges.

A Stakeholder Meeting was convened on 01 February 2021, co-chaired by the then Deputy Minister of Finance and the RC, attended by Deputy Ministers from three of the four partner ministries, the RUNOs, and civil society representatives. This was the first time that all of the government counterparts had met on the programme, and were given the opportunity to hear each other’s plans for addressing SGBV in their ministerial programming. This meeting also allowed the SI Team to present the programme, including the rationale for the selection of target provinces and the modalities of delivering the programme. It was an enlightening session for all, as each ministry was impressed with each other’s presentations, and gave the Spotlight Initiative important visibility that brought support from all stakeholders. Unfortunately, the hybrid modality dictated by COVID-19 made discussions difficult at times, but the overall success was evident by the enthusiasm of the participants. A follow-up meeting was held on 03 March, with the Deputy Minister of Women Affairs co-chairing (on behalf of the Acting Minister) with the RC, and the EU delegation and counterpart ministries again in attendance. It was at this meeting that the request for revision of the target provinces was tabled.

The Spotlight Initiative was considered launched by the Government, as the programme was announced in the regional launch of the Central Asia and Afghanistan Regional Spotlight Initiative Programme on 08 December 2020. Therefore, a slightly modified local launch will be conducted in 2021 once the new Government counterparts are in place and sensitized to the programme.

VII. Conduct of the baseline study

The baseline study Terms of Reference have been finalized jointly by all the RUNOs. As UNFPA is leading this activity and the estimated cost of this baseline study was exceeding the threshold for country office approval, the TOR was shared with the UNFPA headquarter for approval. After approval from the Procurement Service Branch



(PSB) of the headquarter, the TOR and Request for Proposal (RFP) was posted in the RUNOs' agency websites as well as the UN Afghanistan website on 20 January until 17 February 2021. A committee comprised of technical representatives from the RUNOs has been established to conduct the technical review of all the proposals submitted. After completion of the procurement procedures and signing of the contract with the selected firm, the field work will start, once risk mitigation measures are identified and in place.

VIII. Challenges/mitigating measures

A few challenges have been indicated in the preceding paragraphs, mostly reflecting the transitional environment in Afghanistan, both within the UN and the Government, as well as the changing security dynamics as the peace process unfolds. COVID-19, while undoubtedly creating challenges in terms of implementation and access, also pushed the RUNOs to assess the design of the programme through the lens of the pandemic. This led to further creative and more integrated thinking, embracing the catalytic nature of the Spotlight Initiative.

There will continue to be security challenges for the rest of the year that will stretch the capacity of the RUNOs to continue to deliver the programme. Against this background, there may be a need for flexibility to identify different target provinces, to mitigate any danger that may be faced by staff, partners and beneficiaries.

IX. Next Steps

The governance structure, notably the Civil Society National Reference Group and the National Steering Committee, will be established by April 2021 through an inclusive and open process, in line with Spotlight Initiative guidelines.

RUNOs will finalise a joint 2021 Annual Work Plan (AWP) for approval by the National Steering Committee. The AWP process will provide opportunities for the RUNOs to identify practical opportunities to work and implement jointly, utilising each other's comparative advantages. It will also provide opportunities for key stakeholders, including government and civil society organisations, to be meaningfully engaged and to guide the implementation of the Spotlight Initiative, through the NSC and CSNRG participation in the final review and endorsement of the AWP.

A joint field mission to the three target provinces is under planning to formally introduce the programme to provincial government and CSO stakeholders in the provinces. During this field mission, the Afghanistan team will also conduct provincial level planning informed by a collaborative process with provincial stakeholders. The timing of the mission will be determined once there is a new assessment of the security situation in those locations as well as the final determination with the Ministry of Women Affairs and other government partners regarding the three target provinces.



ANNEX I: List of Participants in Provincial Consultations

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