

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVALUATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE AMERICAS AND CARIBBEAN

Photo: ONU Mujeres/Lina Etchesuri

This brief summarizes the independent thematic evaluation of UN Women’s engagement with civil society in the Americas and Caribbean region covering the period from 2018 to 2023. As a stakeholder group central to achieving UN Women’s mission, the exercise aimed to provide a holistic assessment of the Entity’s work with civil society across the range of programmatic, consultative and strategic partnership modalities.

CONTEXT

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of women in the Americas and Caribbean. Women’s movements have led efforts to address systemic issues such as violence against women and shaped landmark regional and global agendas, notably since the first world conference on the status of women in Mexico in 1975. Women’s and feminist CSOs engage in a range of mission-driven actions such as monitoring policies, fostering political participation, delivering services and advocating for transformative social change. Despite their central role in addressing societal inequities, civil society’s space to defend women’s rights in the region has faced constraints with regressions in human rights.

UN Women’s 2022-2025 Strategic Plan underscores the imperative of deepening its civil society partnerships. Civil society was the most common stakeholder group for UN Women partnerships in the Americas and Caribbean: 88 per cent of all formal partnerships were with CSOs. UN Women aims to enable more women and girls to exercise their voice, agency and leadership within an environment supportive of women and youth organizations. In practice, collaboration with civil society is realized through several engagement modalities as shown below.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the evaluation was to enhance accountability, support learning and guide organizational decision-making. Accordingly, the exercise sought to assess implementation modalities, identify challenges, map civil society initiatives and recommend improvements for more impactful alliances. Intended users included UN Women management and staff, civil society partners and other United Nations entities in the region.

The scope included UN Women’s portfolio in the Americas and Caribbean from 2018 to 2023 across the Entity’s triple mandate. The evaluation adopted mixed methods using a theory-based and participatory approach, and focused on assessment of UN Women’s efficiency, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability. A gender-responsive and human rights lens was integrated along with the leave no one behind principle to understand engagement with a variety of priority groups, including persons with disabilities.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MODALITIES



Direct implementation through executing projects and programmes.



Institutional strengthening and capacity-building of CSOs through grants and partnerships.



Knowledge partnerships collaborating on research, analysis and evidence-based advocacy.



Multi-stakeholder dialogue to foster linkages between CSOs, governments and others.



Civil Society Advisory Groups (CSAGs) and other participatory or consultative spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

1

The strength of UN Women’s partnerships with feminist and women’s organizations in the Americas and Caribbean region has been and will continue to be the bedrock for effectively achieving the Entity’s mission of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Strategic prioritization has helped UN Women consolidate its engagement with CSOs, although contextual shifts have posed important challenges to the effectiveness and sustainability of such partnerships.

UN Women’s long-standing partnerships with civil society groups in the region have been instrumental to the success of its work. Near unanimous stakeholder feedback confirmed the Entity’s value to women’s and feminist organizations. An increased prioritization of civil society engagement over the evaluation period through dialogue at the regional level, as well as organizational strategic frameworks, has shown a deepening of its focus. Challenges posed by significant contextual shifts have nonetheless tested the resilience of these partnerships and underscored areas for systematic improvement. Acknowledging the increasing threats to funding, status and the safety of partner organizations, stakeholders emphasized the urgency of a more structured and deliberative approach to sustain organizations facing challenges from anti-rights or anti-feminist groups.

2

UN Women used engagement modalities for its partnerships with civil society organizations in a complementary manner across its integrated triple mandate to achieve policy results, agenda-setting and network-building.

The range of complementary modalities for partnerships with CSOs helped achieve results. First, programmatic work contributed to normative gains; and technical and financial support in disaster and humanitarian crises responded to the urgent needs of survivors of gender-based violence and human-rights defenders. Second, the facilitation of participatory spaces helped to amplify women’s voices, including on indigenous women’s rights and parity democracy. This strategy supported CSOs’ increased role in decision-making spaces. UN Women also expanded its reach to civil society online through coordinated campaigns. Management and use of content developed by CSOs could further boost engagement with relevant partners.

3

UN Women effectively reached the CSO representatives of priority groups facing greater discrimination and vulnerability through agreements and other forms of engagement. There was a clear opportunity across the regional portfolio to scale support to other groups that had comparatively limited coverage. Capacity-building initiatives had systemic challenges in terms of their effectiveness.

There was a robust focus on UN Women’s partnerships with civil society in the region, particularly on priority groups which aligned with the United Nations principle of leaving no one behind. Most agreements with CSOs were directed at groups experiencing heightened vulnerability and discrimination, often with a focus on survivors of gender-based violence. However, there were institutional challenges to extend reach to certain populations facing multiple vulnerabilities through an intersectional lens, which presents an opportunity for UN Women to further enhance the conceptualization and targeting of certain groups. Furthermore, as a key modality for supporting civil society, capacity-building and institutional strengthening had important gaps that required better quality institutional management and knowledge tools.

4

The policy and procedures for managing UN Women’s formal partnerships with CSOs hindered the Entity’s efficiency and broader reach to civil society. Consequently, UN Women’s readiness for achieving impact at scale with civil society remained low.

Formal partnership modalities allowed UN Women to reach feminist and women’s organizations. The introduction of the small grant modality was recognized for providing added flexibility for UN Women to create partnerships with smaller organizations, and was credited with enhancing responsiveness to CSO demands in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While following a risk-management approach through UN Women’s partnership frameworks, internal and external feedback nonetheless highlighted the inefficient nature of the processes and procedures. This was seen as hindering the timely implementation of CSO partnerships and indicated the need for the Entity to further streamline its processes in this area for a more responsive, agile and efficient organization.

5

UN Women’s role in convening civil society with other actors produced notable achievements through conferences, movements and normative processes linked to the regional gender agenda in the Americas and Caribbean. Support to movement-building and the specialized role of CSAGs were valued but not fully utilized.

UN Women effectively managed flagship multi-stakeholder events that showcased the Entity’s ability to convene civil society, government representatives and other relevant actors. The Regional Conference on Women (2022) exemplified key achievements in agenda-setting and advocacy, notably regarding the care agenda. In this respect, UN Women was recognized for its distinctive ability to engage in policy advocacy by leveraging its integrated triple mandate. Moreover, civil society participation in normative intergovernmental forums, particularly at the Commission on the Status of Women, was firmly established through UN Women’s facilitation efforts. Participatory and consultative mechanisms such as CSAGs were considered useful for facilitating dialogue, although stakeholders indicated there was scope for stronger linkages with UN Women initiatives to leverage their advocacy role and enhance management.

UN Women made efforts to form coalitions and foster movement-building. Challenges in building ownership of multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Generation Equality Forum remain, and UN Women has taken steps to strengthen dialogue channels through open meetings, events and reinforcing links to Action Coalitions. CSO partners expressed a clear and strong demand that UN Women continue to enhance and invigorate its support, emphasizing UN Women’s role as a strategic and valued partner.

RECOMMENDATIONS¹



1. UN Women should produce a **suite of internal guidance and tools** for UN Women offices to support civil society engagement in common areas of challenge and opportunity.



2. UN Women should **consolidate the technical assistance** provided for civil society’s use in areas of joint advocacy, agenda-setting, research and communications.



3. UN Women should deepen its focus on **priority groups facing greater discrimination and vulnerability** through all engagement modalities with civil society by strengthening its intersectional approach.



4. UN Women should enhance the **corporate policy framework and systems** for partnerships with civil society to increase the efficiency, accessibility and reach of its partnerships.



5. UN Women should reinvigate **movement-building, participatory spaces and alliances** to forge greater linkages between networks of feminist and women-led organizations at country and regional levels, including by leveraging guidance on CSAGs.

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION APPROACH



DESK REVIEW

Analysis and synthesis of key UN Women documentation
Portfolio analysis using feminist frameworks with a sample of 8 offices



PRIMARY DATA

Interviews and focus groups
Survey of 376 partners
Observation of Regional Conference on Women in 2022



CASE STUDIES

Case studies of Civil Society Advisory Groups in the region, and online campaigns using big data analysis with UN Global Pulse

518

stakeholders consulted

66

interviewees

16

focus groups

1

online survey of civil society partners

376

survey respondents

2

case studies

570

documents reviewed

¹ Section 7 provides the suggested Cronogramas, prioritization and steps for implementation of the recommendations.