

Introduction

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UNWOMEN), with funding support from the Government of Japan Supplementary Budget (JSB) implemented a 1-year project titled, "Prevention of COVID 19 infection among vulnerable women and girls in drought-affected districts (Guruve and Mbire) of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe". The project was implemented during the period April 2022 – March 2023 in collaboration with the Government of Zimbabwe, academic institutions, civil society and the community, with a generous funding support from the Government of Japan amounting to USD740 740.00. In this regard, this is an end of project evaluation conducted by an independent consultant for the project "Prevention of COVID 19 infection among vulnerable women and girls in drought-affected districts (Guruve and Mbire) of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe" which was conducted in March to April 2023 with funding from the Government of Japan.

Purpose and objectives of the project

The project was implemented with the purpose of strengthening gender responsive prevention of and response to COVID 19 in Guruve and Mbire through enhancing access to COVID 19 testing and vaccination services, provision of PPE and improving knowledge and attitudes on COVID 19¹. This project was implemented within the broader goals of UN Women global Strategic plan on SP Outcome 4 on Women's equitable access to services, goods and resources. It envisaged to strengthen gender responsive prevention of and response to COVID 19 in Guruve and Mbire through enhancing access to COVID 19 testing and vaccination services, provision of PPE and improving knowledge and attitudes on COVID 19 by March 2023². In implementing the project, UN Women contributed to its strategic focus of gender equality and empowering women.

Evaluation Report Users

The evaluation is intended to assist the UN women and the implementing partner to identify lessons learned, good practices, and factors that facilitated/hindered achievements contribute to accountability, learning and decision-making, and offer practical recommendations to inform the management and coordination of future projects and other related initiatives on humanitarian response.

Purpose and Methodology of the Evaluation

UN Women commissioned an independent evaluation of the project to ascertain the performance of the project against its set objectives and use the findings to inform the design of UN Women's future work around humanitarian response and mitigation. The specific purpose of this evaluation was to assess progress towards achievement of goals and objectives of the project at district levels and ascertain how it contributed to the national level against the standard evaluation principles of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact since its inception in April 2022.

The evaluation adopted a cross-sectional study design employing mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach to data collection methods to measure the project outcomes and impacts. A phased approach in data collection was used. The first phase was on secondary data collection where desk review of reports and other documents relevant to the project was conducted. This phase was followed by primary data collection which included interviews with key informants, Focus Group Discussions, field observations, as well as photography and videography. Below is a summary of key findings of this evaluation.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Relevance

The project was relevant in the context of COVID 19 and that of the related challenges that were being faced in the districts. The project was designed to serve the populations who are marginalized and often left behind in all aspects of development. It addressed priority needs of the community regarding enhancing the community's access to COVID 19 prevention, testing and vaccination services, improving people's knowledge and attitudes towards prevention of Covid-19, and women's economic empowerment. For instance, health facilities were in need of vaccine storage spaces and transport to conduct mobile vaccinations, the project managed to provide for these needs, and this increased vaccination among the populace of the districts. The populace of Guruve and Mbire districts lacked information on COVID 19, and the project managed to conduct awareness campaigns and produce Information, Education and Communication (IEC) material in local language to enhance knowledge and understanding. With regards to women empowerment, the project trained women on how to make liquid soap and masks to enable them to resale for sustainable income. The project was well thought out, clearly demonstrating the influence of use of empirical evidence to address the true needs and priorities of beneficiaries, national interests, as well as international priorities on gender equality and human rights. With these interventions, the project contributed to the achievement of national priorities such as the Government of Zimbabwe's COVID 19 vaccination programme which adopted a 'whole of government', 'whole of society' approach which created an enabling environment for all partners including the private sector and civil society to work together to take immediate action towards containment of the disease. In addition, the project responded to regional frameworks such as the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of women

¹ UNWOMEN (2022) Project Agreement Document - Prevention of COVID 19 infection among vulnerable women and girls in drought-affected districts (Guruve and Mbire) of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe

² UNWOMEN (2023) Final Consultant TORs for the JSB Final Evaluation.

through, among others, economic empowerment. The Sustainable Development Goals aspire for a world where no one is left behind in health service provision, gender equality and empowerment of women, and this is what the project attempted to do.

Effectiveness and Impact

The evaluation found evidence that the project was largely on track in achieving its intended results across all the four objectives. The project design is based on a Theory of Change that recognises that having strengthened gender responsive prevention of and response to COVID 19 in Guruve and Mbire enhancing access to COVID 19 testing and vaccination services, provision of PPE and improving knowledge and attitudes on COVID 19³. Overall, the short term-impact of the project has been seen in the increase in the uptake of vaccinations by women and girls from 45% to 58.3% and 69.8% in Mbire and Guruve Districts respectively. The project's aspirations to increase access to COVID 19 prevention and response services especially women and girls and those in the most vulnerable and marginalised communities' accessing COVID 19 preventative messages was reached; and the target of 500 women and 50 men were capacitated on how to make multi-purpose liquid soap for economic empowerment. However, despite the intended results of the project, some positive and negative unintended results were witnessed. Positive unintended results include the re-purposing of the soap-making groups by the women into story sharing platforms where they share challenges and get counselling or assistance from others. In addition, the soap-making groups are also used as loan groups, where the women loan each other funds for various development purposes. The negative unintended results include the disbanding of some groups due to mismanagement of funds and this has affected the sustainability of the soap-making project for other team-members. A detailed description of the achievement of results by objective, are highlighted below:

Table 1 Project Target to Output Compliance.

Target	Achieved	Status
Increase the proportion of women and girls and those on marginalized communities who receive COVID 19 vaccination from 45% to 75%.	13 - 24% increase	Significant progress
77 407 people vaccinated against COVID 19	27 319	Some progress
Number of people especially women and girls and those in the most vulnerable and marginalised communities' accessing COVID 19 preventative messages	180,656	Achieved
500 women trained in developing PPE (face masks & soap)	550	Achieved
Produce 2 success stories of the project.	2	Achieved

Objective 1: Improve access to COVID 19 prevention, testing and vaccination services by communities, particularly women and girls, in Guruve and Mbire districts.

The project eased the challenges that stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health were facing by assisting them with the provision of transport to districts for COVID 19 testing and vaccination interventions including outreach to ease logistical challenges and facilitate reach to the furthest areas which had limited or no access to the services. This ensure that women, men, children, people with disabilities and those in hard-to-reach areas were able to access vaccination services. This initiative saw the districts reaching areas that located further from the district centres. Women and girls appreciated that the services were brought closer to the community, not only affording them the opportunity to gain knowledge on COVID 19 but also relieving them of the burden of costs associated with travel to the health facilities which offered vaccination and testing centres.

Objective 2: Improve distribution of COVID 19 infection control supplies including PCR test kits and COVID 19 vaccinations.

Availability and timely distribution of COVID 19 test kits and vaccines was a key priority to complement the massive demand generation activities that were supported by the project. As a result of these initiatives, commendable evidence of improved availability of COVID 19 vaccines and test kits has been witnessed. Although the project initially planned to provide PCR test kits, this was later changed in response to the context where the need for PCR testing declined rendering PCR test kits less essential. According to the district records, No PCR Test Kits were distributed to health facilities and no people received PCR Testing.

Objective 3: Increase knowledge and understanding on covid -19 prevention and vaccination through social behaviour change strategies to promote uptake of Covid -19 vaccination in Mbire and Guruve districts.

Although there is no baseline measure in quantitative terms with regards to the knowledge and understanding on COVID 19 prevention and vaccination, it is commendable to note, according to project reports, that the project reached 103,210 people through various awareness raising strategies which include 13 road shows, 430 t-shirts, 30 hunters' jackets, 3 branded gazebos, 100 java printed fabrics, 2000 flyers, 100 posters and 513 bandanas. These awareness campaigns contributed to the populations of the two districts being more aware of COVID-19

³ UNWOMEN (2022) Project Agreement Document - Prevention of COVID 19 infection among vulnerable women and girls in drought-affected districts (Guruve and Mbire) of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe

related information. Additionally, during soap-making training sessions people were informed with facts about COVID 19 addressing misconceptions. Community influencers, village heads and village health workers among other stakeholders were informed about covid -19 prevention and vaccination so they could cascade the information down to the villagers. The success of the awareness raising strategies can be attributed to the change in behaviours of the community regarding uptake of vaccines and the claims gathered from the qualitative data. Stakeholders indicated that even though the project effectively began in June 2022 approximately 2 years after the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic, and notwithstanding the national level efforts on prevention and case management of COVID 19 , the greater proportion of the population in Mbire and Guruve were still largely characterized by high levels of vaccine hesitancy which was sustained by lack of accurate information and misinformation about COVID 19 , myths and misconceptions, lack of confidence on the vaccine. The project came at an opportune time. The positive work of the project in changing these perceptions and misinformation was widely acknowledged by the stakeholders and project beneficiaries, all unanimously agreeing that the current levels of knowledge and extent of understanding among the population could not have been achieved in the absence of the project interventions. There was complete consensus that the majority of the population was reached with accurate information via the awareness campaigns and printed materials, and this translated to the uptake of testing and vaccination among the population.

Objective 4: Build capacity of 500 vulnerable women and girls to locally produce Personal Protective Equipment in Guruve and Mbire districts.

A total of 500 women and 50 men were trained on production of all-purpose liquid soap and face masks with a triple down effect of 1,230 women and girls being trained beneficiaries from 82 women led groups. Training was delivered in small groups and adopted a Training of Trainers approach where those who are trained were expected to transfer the skills to others. Those who were trained after the Training of Trainers (ToT) approach reached 1,230. The women were also linked to the markets to sale their locally produced soap, although the majority of those in Mbire reported that they did not receive market linkage. Some of the soap was bought by the project at \$1.35 per 500ml and re-distributed in the community with the most vulnerable (elderly and those with disability) being the primary recipients. In total LGDA bought 7,183 litres of liquid soap from the women's groups and redistributed them to 19 health facilities, 101 schools, Guruve Prison and 500 vulnerable households in the Mbire.

Efficiency

The efficiency within the project appears to be acceptable, according to what was agreed within the project proposal that was awarded. However, it is difficult to assess the cost/benefits analysis for the project components which was addressing knowledge, behaviour and attitude changes as these involve changes in social, and cultural values and norms which may take time, and these take enormous number of resources. Sometimes these changes can go faster and the uptake of COVID 19 accinations is such an example. To some extent the project achieved behaviour and attitude change (vaccinations) in a relatively short period of time.

- *Project Management*

The general management of the project by the implementing partner was noted to be efficient as it was characterized by specifically dedicated personnel with clear reporting lines and structures. The project had a specific Project Coordinator who oversaw the entire management of the project and had the technical support of the rest of the steering committee. All the personnel were competent and qualified staff with vast programming experience in working with women, vulnerable populations and participation health and development. Generally, the project demonstrated overall positive target compliance to set output targets.

- *Project's Fund Management*

There is evidence of sound project fund management. The project had in place mechanisms to reduce possibilities of fiduciary risks. The UN Women itself has a strong financial system with internal controls which all showed good management of project funds. In purchasing of any goods and services the project insisted on a Value for Money (VfM) basis and followed stipulated procurement procedures all the time. In addition, the IP used its own facilities and that of stakeholders to conduct monthly and periodical meetings with partners and this resulted in savings that could have otherwise been used for venue hire. Additionally, training sessions for soap-making made use of the IPs facilities.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the project was reviewed with particular focus on the extent to which the project's results will be sustained over time. Thus, examining the strategies that have been put in place to ensure sustainability of results, including integration of lessons learned from implementation of this project. Overall, the project made efforts to ensure sustainability of the interventions in two broad ways, that is:

- *Strengthening partnerships and collaborations with other government allied and community stakeholders:* The project was implemented within a whole of government – whole of society approach which is about building mutual partnerships and networking not only with the stakeholders of top levels like at national and provincial levels, but it is also about building a partnership with the district and communities at the roots of the villages in Mbire and Guruve. This approach enabled the project to build strong confidence among the stakeholders and community cadres who were the key drivers of community mobilization and

information dissemination. The project inclusively brought multi-sectoral stakeholders and facilitated their active participation in the decision-making process from project design right through to taking appropriate intervention implementation modalities. This was evidenced from the time the project undertook fact finding missions and the series of stakeholder consultative meetings and regular meetings and updates on monthly basis. The partners had the opportunities to hold dialogue and formulate common strategies and resource pooling carrying out collective work to accelerate access to COVID 19 prevention services.

- *Ensuring active involvement and participation of women and community members in the implementation of the project activities:* The nature of the project was that the key interventions were implemented by the beneficiaries themselves and their active participation cultivated a spirit of ownership of the project. The women, Community Health Workers (CHW), community leaders, and gender champions were all drawn from the community and became the vehicles of information and knowledge sharing which in itself contributed to project sustainability. This approach also reflects the key principles of Human Rights which stress the importance of leaving no one behind. The various cadres involved in the project represented all the categories of the community members. The project achieved its intention to afford everyone access to COVID 19 prevention and vaccination services including those most vulnerable and in hard-to-reach areas.

Gender Equality and Human Rights

The evaluation assessed the project's considerations on integration of gender equality and human rights into the project design and its implementation. The analysis also assessed how such integration (if at all) advanced the achievement of the project results. The findings indicated that there was a strong integration of gender equality and human rights into the project design and implementation. The way in which the integration of these concerns advanced the achievement of project results is visible throughout all the stages of the project from design to implementation, and the subsequent manifestation of the project effects on the project beneficiaries. The project recognised that as the COVID 19 pandemic unfolded, while everyone was affected, women and girls were carrying the greater proportion of the negative impacts both economically and socially. As such the design of the project specifically targeted women and girls with economic strengthening interventions while also capacitating the health system with resources to support and increase reach and access for both women and men, the elderly, people living with disabilities and children.

Women as the primary beneficiaries of the project testified of the gains they earned through the project and ripple effects reached men and boys manifesting in greater results which are indicative of positive impact. By undertaking outreach vaccination activities, women were afforded access to life saving vaccines which some may otherwise have foregone due to shortage of time and to balance travel and demands of childcare and unavailability of financial resources to pay for transport. The root causes of gender inequality were addressed through the capacity and skills building on training on production of PPE with the opportunities for income generation. This reduces women's economic dependence on men.

Lessons Learned

Consultations with the stakeholders and project beneficiaries, as well as observations by the evaluator indicated the following as the key lessons learned and worth considering in the implementation of future projects. These lessons can also be integrated into other development projects in other sectors.

- i. Availing COVID 19 prevention services, or any other health services and bringing such services closer to the people can increase uptake and utilization within short periods of time.
- ii. If capacitated, women can work independently and effectively manage themselves and their income generating projects.
 - *This was observed among the women's groups who were able to proceed with making all-purpose soap and diversify their small business soon after they received empowerment through training.*
- iii. A project transition strategy/ exit strategy needs to be communicated with project beneficiaries and other stakeholders well in advance to ensure that there is no confusion as to whether project is still under the support of a donor partner or not.
 - *This enables other stakeholders to adjust and plan to absorb any support activities that beneficiaries may require.*

Conclusions

Overall, the project achieved its intended objectives as findings highlight that awareness was raised on COVID-19 prevention measures and this increased knowledge in the targeted communities. The uptake of COVID 19 vaccinations increase in a context where, in the absence of this project, some may have foregone getting vaccinated or remained with lack of knowledge and understanding of COVID 19. As this was a community wide intervention, it is bound to have ripple effects in both issues related to COVID 19, other vaccine preventable diseases, gender equality and women economic empowerment. The project was well coordinated and actively involved other the multisectoral partners. The monthly meetings held at district levels were a strong vehicle for

strengthening capacity and collaborative efforts, as well as a smart transition strategy. This success was a result of a combination of factors including the clear integration of women's rights and gender equality concerns in the design and practical implementation of the project. This evaluation concludes that this project has generated good lessons and is the type of project that can be replicated with some adjustments to optimize impact.

Recommendations

The evaluation suggests the following recommendations based on the findings of the assessment.

Relevance, Gender Equality and Human Rights

UN Women must maintain its strategic focus and dedication to gender equality and the empowerment of women and is encouraged to continue to excel in its coordination role and promote initiatives that advance gender equality. This includes:

- a. Working closely with the Government of Zimbabwe, Civil Society Organizations other development partners ensuring that gender equality and women's rights concerns are integrated into all programs and in all sectors. Mbire and Guruve Districts remain in need of this support.

Effectiveness and Sustainability

Devise more innovative, young people friendly income generating projects which are appealing to the girls who are youth, and not necessarily heavily contested by the adult women and men. The all-purpose soap making initiative saw older women more involved which could easily crowd away the younger ones. Key considerations in the development and implementation of appropriate women's economic empowerment projects include:

- b. Support the exit or transition phase of the project by continuing to attend the monthly meetings at district level offering technical assistance.
- c. **Ensure a holistic approach to introduce women and girls to the complete value chain for locally produced products.** Even though this project has come to an end, future projects can build on the achievements of this project. Those who were trained can be linked to the markets.
- d. **Extend financial and support to the MWACSMED to deliver technical assistance to the community via their gender champions groups.** The Ministry lacks adequate funding to ensure consistent supply of technical support to the community cadres and depends on the private-public partnerships for these to remain in place. They have human resources who are dedicated to the tasks but over time they spend more time in offices instead of conducting field visits due to lack of financial resources.

Efficiency

Projects with a short lifespan such as this one, should not be too reliant on procuring equipment that is essential to the achievement of project results outside the country of operation, especially where alternative sources may be obtainable within the local context. If the projects require procurement of equipment and vehicles, they must consider opportunities for doing such locally or have a longer lifespan. If local procurement is considered, strict compliance to procurement procedures must be adhered to just as is expected.

- This is to ensure that the project delivers on its promises without questions or doubts from collaborating stakeholders.