



REGIONAL EVALUATION REPORT

# UN WOMEN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA REGIONAL OFFICE (ESARO) STRATEGIC NOTE EVALUATION





# UN WOMEN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA REGIONAL OFFICE (ESARO) STRATEGIC NOTE (2022–2025)

**UN Women Independent Evaluation,  
Audit and Investigation Services**

Independent Evaluation Service

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# ACRONYMS

<b>3R</b>	Recognize, Reduce and Redistribute
<b>ACT</b>	Advocacy, Coalition Building and Transformative Feminist Action
<b>AfCFTA</b>	African Continental Free Trade Area
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>Beijing+30</b>	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
<b>CCA</b>	Common Country Analysis
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>COMESA</b>	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>CSW</b>	Commission on the Status of Women
<b>EAC</b>	East African Community
<b>ESARO</b>	UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office
<b>EVAW(G)</b>	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>GIHA</b>	Gender and Humanitarian Action
<b>GST</b>	Global Service Tracker
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>IEAIS</b>	Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services
<b>IES</b>	Independent Evaluation Service
<b>IGAD</b>	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
<b>ICGLR</b>	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
<b>LEAP</b>	Women's Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection in Crisis Response
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer people
<b>QBR</b>	Quarterly Business Review
<b>REC</b>	Regional Economic Community
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SOGIESC</b>	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
<b>UNCT</b>	United Nations Country Team
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNSDCF</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
<b>UN-SWAP</b>	United Nations System-Wide Action Plan
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>WEE</b>	Women's Economic Empowerment
<b>WPP</b>	Women's Political Participation
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) conducted this Strategic Note Evaluation to deliver a systematic assessment of the work of UN Women's East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) over the period 2022–2025. The evaluation's purpose is to support enhanced accountability for development effectiveness and learning to inform the next Strategic Note.**

## OBJECTIVES

The evaluation objectives were to:

1. Assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, sustainability, and gender equality and human rights of ESARO's work.
2. Identify lessons learned and good practices that can be scaled.
3. Provide actionable recommendations to inform development of the new Strategic Note.

## INTENDED USERS

The primary intended user of this evaluation is ESARO in designing its new Strategic Note. Secondary users include headquarters, intergovernmental stakeholders and regional partners seeking to identify effective practices, gaps and opportunities for advancing gender equality.

## BACKGROUND – UN WOMEN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA REGIONAL OFFICE

The Strategic Note is ESARO's main planning tool to articulate how it will support UN Women's triple mandate across normative, coordination and operational work in the 25 countries it covers. Between 2022 and 2025, ESARO's non-core resource mobilization target was US\$ 4.6 million.<sup>1</sup> During the Strategic Note period, ESARO mobilized a total of US\$ 4.8 million in non-core resources.<sup>2</sup>

## METHOD

This evaluation employed a theory-based, gender-responsive approach. In consultation with ESARO, the evaluation team expanded the theory of change highlighting the particular added value of ESARO and used this as the basis for its contribution analysis. The team obtained multiple sources of data and consulted 231 stakeholders through interviews, focus groups and surveys between April and June 2025.

<sup>1</sup> UN Women ESAR Partnership and Resource Mobilization Strategy 2022-2025.

<sup>2</sup> ESARO's allocation from the Donor Agreement Management System.



## KEY FINDINGS

### EFFECTIVENESS

#### **Is ESARO contributing to the Strategic Note's target outcomes to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in the East and Southern Africa region?**

ESARO contributed to strengthening the capacities of regional bodies through training, tools, knowledge products and support for strategic planning. It played a key role in helping regional entities develop gender-responsive policies and tools, and in increasing the visibility and influence of feminist and youth-led networks in policy processes across all thematic areas. ESARO's convening role also advanced coordination and use of gender statistics, especially through strategic partnerships and regional platforms. Within the UN system, ESARO provided valued technical guidance and supported accountability frameworks that helped drive gender equality and women's empowerment. ESARO also positioned UN Women as a key actor in humanitarian coordination (Gender and Humanitarian Action) and played an important role in mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment in disaster risk reduction.

However, several factors limited the depth and durability of results. Institutional capacity and financing gaps within regional institutions hindered implementation of gender commitments; while resistance to gender equality, often driven by low political will or social norms, and ongoing crises in the region slowed uptake. Engagement with UN Resident Coordinators/ Offices was uneven, reducing system-wide coherence. Civil society engagement remained largely informal and under-resourced, with limited mechanisms for structured follow-up.

### COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

#### **How relevant and coherent were ESARO's areas of focus?**

ESARO's comparative advantage lies in its convening power, technical expertise, institutional memory and unique positioning between headquarters and Multi-/Country Offices. Its contributions to cross-country learning, normative support and targeted funding were consistently valued. ESARO's areas of focus were well aligned with regional priorities and global gender

equality and women's empowerment commitments. However, stronger integration of regional frameworks (such as the African Union Gender Strategy) into country programming, and more deliberate alignment with corporate strategies (e.g. on social norms, youth and disability inclusion), would enhance both relevance and coherence.

### EFFICIENCY

#### **How efficient is ESARO's structure and support to Multi-/Country Offices?**

ESARO's structure is broadly functional but over-stretched. More strategic alignment is needed across office typologies, core allocations, ESARO support and delegation of authority. While ESARO's structure is coherent with clear focal points, internal capacity and systems weaknesses constrain efficiency, including document management, ESARO funding and the clarity of roles between ESARO and Country Offices. ESARO's support to Country Offices is valued for its responsiveness and technical depth. Greater strategic prioritization, tailored capacity-building and proactive planning would enhance sustainability.

### SUSTAINABILITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

#### **How sustainable and inclusive is ESARO's programming?**

ESARO has made progress integrating intersectionality and "leave no one behind" principles, especially for youth and persons with disabilities. However, engagement remains inconsistent, with gaps in integrating SOGIESC and rural inclusion. Sustainability was stronger where efforts were embedded in institutional frameworks and long-term partnerships, especially normative work and capacity strengthening. However, a number of initiatives were short-term, donor-dependent and lacked transition planning or national ownership. Shrinking civic space further limited the durability of results.

## CONCLUSIONS

1

The absence of a **clear approach to prioritization** affected ESARO's value-add at regional and country levels.



2

**ESARO's comparative advantage** lies in its technical expertise, regional advocacy, convening power and ability to leverage partnerships, although this remains underutilized due to *ad hoc* partnership approaches.



3

ESARO contributed credibly to **outcome-level change** by strengthening regional normative and accountability frameworks; positioning gender-norms change within regional policies and capacities of regional stakeholders; enabling regional women's movements to apply accountability frameworks; advancing gender data standards and their use for decision-making; and supporting system-wide coordination with UNCTs. Potential for sustainability was highest where there was strong partnerships with government and civil society.



4

**A more strategic and deliberate approach to UN Women's presence** across the region is needed, making tough resource allocation decisions rather than defaulting to the *status quo*.



5

Technical support to Country Offices is valued but could be strengthened by **stronger strategic planning and systematic tracking**.



6

**Institutional accountability systems** need to be strengthened to enable ESARO to effectively support and hold itself and Country Offices accountable for results.



7

While ESARO demonstrates **commitment to leaving no one behind**, inclusive programming is inconsistent, under-resourced and not always systematically tracked.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### RECOMMENDATION 1:

#### **Sharpen strategic focus and thematic integration**

ESARO should refocus its strategic direction by clearly defining regional priorities guided by the new Strategic Plan and evidence where efforts have the most potential for impact; aligning regional and country-level efforts; and fostering cross-thematic collaboration and planning mechanisms to maximize impact and coherence.

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### RECOMMENDATION 2:

#### **Strengthen strategic and inclusive partnerships**

ESARO should strengthen its partnership approaches by enhancing strategic engagement with regional bodies and deepening inclusive collaboration with civil society.

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### RECOMMENDATION 3:

#### **Enhance intersectionality through systematic approaches to leave no one behind**

To translate corporate commitments on leave no one behind, including disability, youth inclusion and LGBTIQ+ rights into consistent and appropriate regional practice, ESARO should strengthen institutional guidance, accountability and engagement mechanisms.

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### RECOMMENDATION 4:

#### **Strengthen system-wide coordination on gender equality and women's empowerment**

To reinforce UN Women's coordination mandate and improve system-wide coherence on gender equality, ESARO should strengthen regional coordination by deepening engagement with regional coordination mechanisms on gender and across thematic areas, Resident Coordinators and United Nations Country Teams; enhancing use of accountability tools and data; clarifying roles; and leading and linking regional platforms.

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### RECOMMENDATION 5:

#### **Enhance strategic and differentiated support to Country Offices**

To ensure more targeted, efficient and needs-responsive support to Country Offices, ESARO should systematize and differentiate its support; strengthen planning and accountability mechanisms; and enhance needs-based capacity-building approaches and cross-thematic support.

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### RECOMMENDATION 6:

#### **Strengthen operational efficiency and effectiveness**

To improve strategic coherence and regional support functions, ESARO should reinforce systems in results-based management, resource mobilization, communications, knowledge management and operations.

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### RECOMMENDATION 7:

#### **Escalate corporate-level challenges**

ESARO should engage headquarters on priority issues that require corporate-level solutions, for example, Quantum and Global Service Tracker (GST) duplication, and crisis-setting processes.





Photo: UN Women/James Ochweri

# 1

## EVALUATION PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

**The purpose of the Strategic Note Evaluation is to deliver a systematic assessment of the work of UN Women’s East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO).**

**The Eastern and Southern Africa region comprises 25 countries. UN Women operates through 13 offices (12 Country Offices<sup>3</sup> and one Programme Presence [Somalia]) and provides remote support to 12 countries<sup>4</sup> as a Non-Resident Agency.**

The intended uses of the evaluation are:

1. Learning on effective approaches to support improved decision-making.
2. Accountability for UN Women’s contribution to gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The primary user of this evaluation is ESARO, which will use the findings to inform design of its new Strategic Note. The evaluation will serve accountability purposes by articulating achievements, lessons learned and existing gaps.

Secondary users are expected to be headquarters and Country Office colleagues, intergovernmental stakeholders and regional partners, to identify what works to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, areas that need additional support and opportunities for strategic partnership.

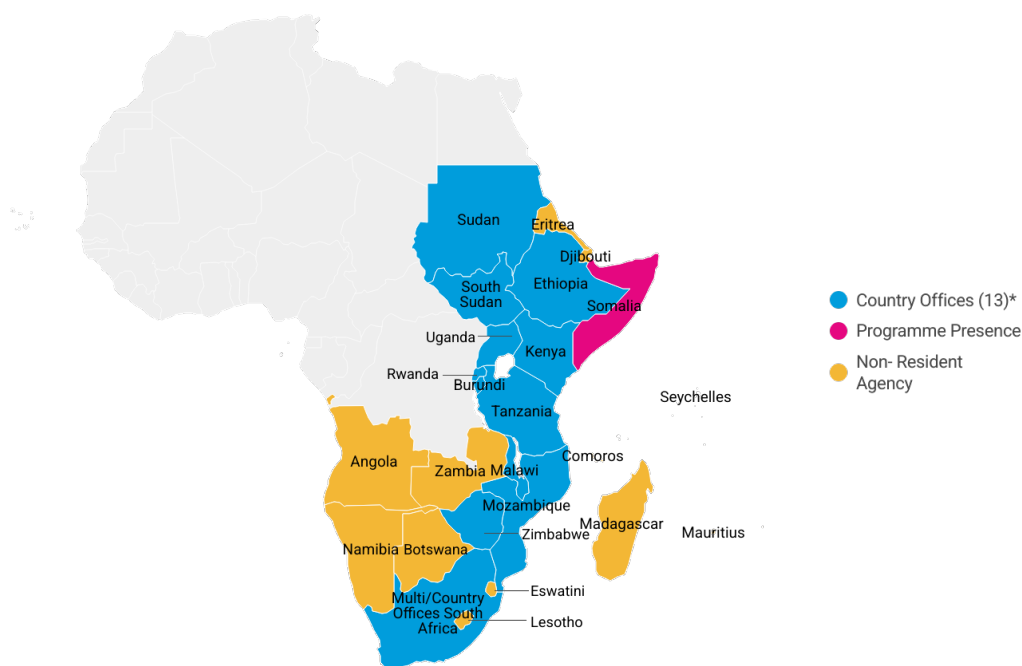
The scope of the evaluation is the Strategic Note, including the Development Results Framework and the Operational Efficiency and Effectiveness Framework. The evaluation covers the period January 2022–May 2025.

The specific objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of the regional portfolio, and the extent to which human rights and gender equality have been addressed.
- Identify lessons learned and good practices that can be scaled.
- Provide recommendations to inform development of the new Strategic Note, building on ESARO’s strategic positioning.

**FIGURE I**

#### **25 countries of Women’s East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)**



3 Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe  
 4 Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Namibia and Zambia.





Photo: UN Women Africa | Malawi ASWAP project

# 2

## CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the regional context (see Annex 13 for further details). It draws primarily on the 2023 UN Women Regional Gender Equality Profile.<sup>5</sup> ESARO covers 25 countries in the East and Southern Africa region, which is home to 750 million<sup>6</sup> people, expected to reach 1.1 billion by 2050.<sup>7</sup> The region has a significant and growing youth population, with 42 per cent of the population under the age of 15. While legal and policy reforms for gender equality have advanced, implementation remains variable.<sup>8</sup>

## REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS



Key continental and regional bodies include the African Union (AU), East African Community (EAC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Gender equality is central to the AU Commission's strategic plan and is supported by key frameworks such as the Maputo Protocol, Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, AU Gender Policy, the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and the Continental Results Framework on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>9</sup>

## WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND PEACEBUILDING



As of January 2025, women hold 32 per cent of parliamentary seats in Southern Africa and 31 per cent in Eastern Africa, driven by electoral reforms and temporary special measures.<sup>10</sup> However, meaningful participation in politics and the peace and security space is hindered by patriarchal norms and violence.<sup>11</sup> Although 13 countries have adopted Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans, implementation is often under-resourced and narrowly focused on participation and protection, with limited emphasis on prevention and recovery. Regional Action Plans developed by Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and supported by UN Women have helped enhance accountability.<sup>12</sup>

## EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION



Rates of young people not in education, training or employment are high in the region, e.g. in Malawi only 3 per cent of youth have formal waged employment. In Mozambique, 90 per cent of women in the 15–19 and 20–24 age groups work in family agriculture with less than 5 per cent vendors and less than 1 per cent skilled labourers (sewing or cooking).<sup>13</sup>

Women continue to face significant barriers in the labour market, in part due to unpaid care responsibilities and limited public childcare systems (available in only five countries, and free in just one). Women's land ownership remains low: under 13 per cent in Kenya (2024) and 33 per cent in Tanzania (2023).<sup>14</sup>

Women dominate informal cross-border trade in the region, constituting 70 per cent of traders and contributing 30–72 per cent of total cross-border trade.<sup>15</sup> This trade, often in food commodities and livestock, supports regional food security and economic growth, with initiatives such as the COMESA-EAC-SADC Simplified Trade Regime empowering women traders.<sup>16</sup> Opportunities in green sectors, such as climate-smart agriculture, are growing; however, women face challenges including limited access to finance, digital tools and compliance with trade standards, hindering their ability to scale micro-enterprises or fully leverage regional value chains under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).<sup>17</sup>

5 [UN Women \(2023\). East and Southern Africa Regional Gender Equality Profile. Nairobi: UN Women East and Southern Africa ESARO.](#)

Hereafter UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)

6 [World Bank \(2024\). Population, total – Sub-Saharan Africa.](#)

7 [UNFPA ESARO | Population matters](#)

8 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)

9 *Ibid*

10 [Women in parliament 1995-2025 | Inter-Parliamentary Union](#)

11 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)

12 [UN Women \(2020\). Corporate Evaluation of UN Women's Support to National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security. New York: Independent Evaluation Service.](#)

13 [The Status of NEET - A Quantitative Analysis of Youth Not in Employment.](#)

14 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)

15 [East Africa cross-border trade bulletin for January - March 2024 - ICPAC](#)

16 [Simplified Trade Regime Threshold Reviewed - Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa \(COMESA\)](#)

17 [The African Continental Free Trade Area | African Union](#)



## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HARMFUL PRACTICES



Despite laws addressing different forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and specialized services in some countries, violence remains widespread. Intimate partner violence, the most common form of VAWG, affects approximately 35 per cent of women in their lifetime in the region, higher than global averages of 27 per cent (as of 2021).<sup>18</sup> Over 50 million girls were subjected to child marriage in the region as of 2022, with nearly one third (32 per cent) of girls married before their eighteenth birthday.<sup>19</sup> A majority (17) of countries in the region have multi-sectoral National Action Plans to address VAWG and related multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms, although only half are current and implementation remains a gap.<sup>20</sup>

## CRISES AND HUMANITARIAN NEEDS



East and Southern Africa faces overlapping crises, including droughts, floods, cyclones, armed conflict, political instability and violent extremism, that exacerbate gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. Over 30 million people face acute food insecurity, disproportionately affecting women-headed households.<sup>21</sup> In Sudan alone, more than 12 million people are displaced. Humanitarian needs remain severely underfunded;<sup>22</sup> for example, Sudan's 2024 humanitarian response plan was only 6.3 per cent funded by March 2025.<sup>23</sup> According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the region's 2024 humanitarian requirements were approximately US\$ 10.9 billion.<sup>24</sup>

## LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND



All countries have legal protections for persons with disabilities, and women with disabilities are becoming more active in advocacy.<sup>25</sup> However, programmes are underfunded, with limited affirmative action. Progress has been made on HIV-related protections and awareness around albinism, including the AU's 2019 Plan of Action to End Attacks on Persons with Albinism.<sup>26</sup> LGBTQI+ rights remain under growing threat, with same-sex relationships legal in only 6 of 25 countries in the region.<sup>27</sup>

## REGIONAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS



Women-led civil society and grassroots movements are driving progress on gender equality, including through advocacy to end VAWG, peace processes, legal reform, economic and climate justice, and natural resource management.<sup>28</sup> In South Sudan and Sudan, women have played key roles as mediators and in responding to conflict-related sexual violence;<sup>29</sup> while in Burundi and South Africa, women are advancing inheritance rights and promoting gender-equitable energy strategies. However, threats to women human rights defenders and chronic under-resourcing of women's rights organizations place their existence at risk. Technology-facilitated violence and gendered digital divides continue to limit women's full participation in online spaces.<sup>30</sup>

- 18 World Health Organization [WHO]. (2021). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. Geneva: World Health Organization; Annex 10
- 19 UNICEF. (2022). Child marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice. Retrieved from <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-eastern-and-southern-africa-a-statistical-overview-and-reflections-on-ending-the-practice/>
- 20 UN Women ESARO Internal Mapping of National Action Plans on EVAW/GBV in ESAR Countries (as of February 2025), noting although only eight are current/not expired as of 2025.
- 21 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)
- 22 OCHA (2024). Humanitarian Response Plan 2024 – Sudan (Summary). Financial Tracking Service.
- 23 OCHA HRP (2024)
- 24 European Commission (2024). Humanitarian Implementation Plan – Sub-Saharan Africa 2025. Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).
- 25 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)
- 26 OHCHR (n.d.). Albinism in Africa – Mandate of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism.
- 27 Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, Seychelles, Mauritius (UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023))
- 28 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)
- 29 Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B., & Nabulega, S. (2020). Alternate realities, alternate internets: African feminist research for a feminist internet.
- 30 UN Women ESA Gender Profile (2023)

## UN REGIONAL STRUCTURE



The Development Coordination Office in Africa supports Resident Coordinators Offices to engage at the regional level, working alongside UNDP and Regional Commissions as the secretariat of the Regional Collaborative Platform to connect global and country initiatives.<sup>31</sup> It supports Regional Coordinators and UN Country Teams with policy guidance and regional expertise.<sup>32</sup> In Africa, the Regional Collaborative Platform operates through six Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalitions and three inter-agency task forces<sup>33</sup> to provide system-wide responses to regional and country needs.<sup>34</sup>

UN Women plays a pivotal role within the Regional Collaborative Platform by leading and coordinating gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives, including through the Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality, ensuring that gender perspectives are mainstreamed across all coalitions and task forces, in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).<sup>35</sup>

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31 [UN DCO \(n.d.\). DCO at the Regional Level. United Nations Development Coordination Office.](#)

32 [UNSDG \(n.d.\). Regional Collaborative Platform – Africa. United Nations Sustainable Development Group.](#)

33 The task forces focus on knowledge management, regional business operations and transparency with results-based management.

34 [UNECA \(n.d.\). Africa Opportunity and Issues-Based Coalitions \(OIBC\). Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.](#)

35 [UN System and Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanisms | UN System Coordination](#)



Photo: UN Women Africa, Ethiopia

# 3

## PORTFOLIO ANALYSIS

## STRATEGIC NOTE OVERVIEW

The Strategic Note covers the period 2022–2025 and targets women, especially the poorest and most excluded, and institutions that can contribute to strengthening women's empowerment and gender equality. Guided by the global UN Women Strategic Plan, the Strategic Note also aims to contribute to the UN Women Africa Strategy 2022–2025.

The Strategic Note's budget for 2022–2025 was US\$ 42.5 million. As of July 2025, ESARO's total expenditure was US\$ 28.39 million.<sup>36</sup>

ESARO has mobilized US\$ 4.8 million including US\$ 1.45 million directly for Country Offices through regional programmes.<sup>37</sup>

## THEORY OF CHANGE

ESARO selected five of the seven Strategic Plan systemic outcome areas to focus on in the Strategic Note. The Development Results Framework outcomes are set out below.

1. Regional actors have strengthened policies, programmes and practices on gender equality which challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive social norms.
2. Regional women's movements, networks and organizations use their voice, leadership and agency to hold duty bearers accountable for their commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
3. Regional bodies hold Member States accountable for implementation of gender equality and women's empowerment commitments.
4. Gender statistics, sex-disaggregated data and knowledge products are produced and used to inform policymaking, advocacy and accountability for delivering results on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in the region.
5. The UN system in the region is coordinated, and coherently and systematically contributes to progress on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

The Operational Effectiveness and Efficiency Framework outlines 14 goals to strengthen UN Women's institutional performance. These include: generating a strong evidence base through quality evaluations; enhancing resource mobilization; improving efficiency in operations and administration; fostering a diverse, high-performing and accountable workforce; advancing risk management and oversight systems; strengthening communications, advocacy and knowledge management capacities; achieving cost recovery targets; deepening partner engagement; and ensuring robust results-based management and strategic leadership across the region.

Key assumptions in the theory of change include political will from key partners, women's groups willing to engage, political stability, sufficient human and financial resources, credibility of ESARO and effective partnerships (see Annex 2).

Figure 1 sets out ESARO's main approaches to deliver its five target outcomes (based on a review of key documents and feedback from the inception workshop).



Photo: UN Women/Solomon Tumwesigye | Angel Musiime local parish chief and peace mediator in Kyegegwa Town Council (Uganda) speaks with UN Women personnel about her work in the community.

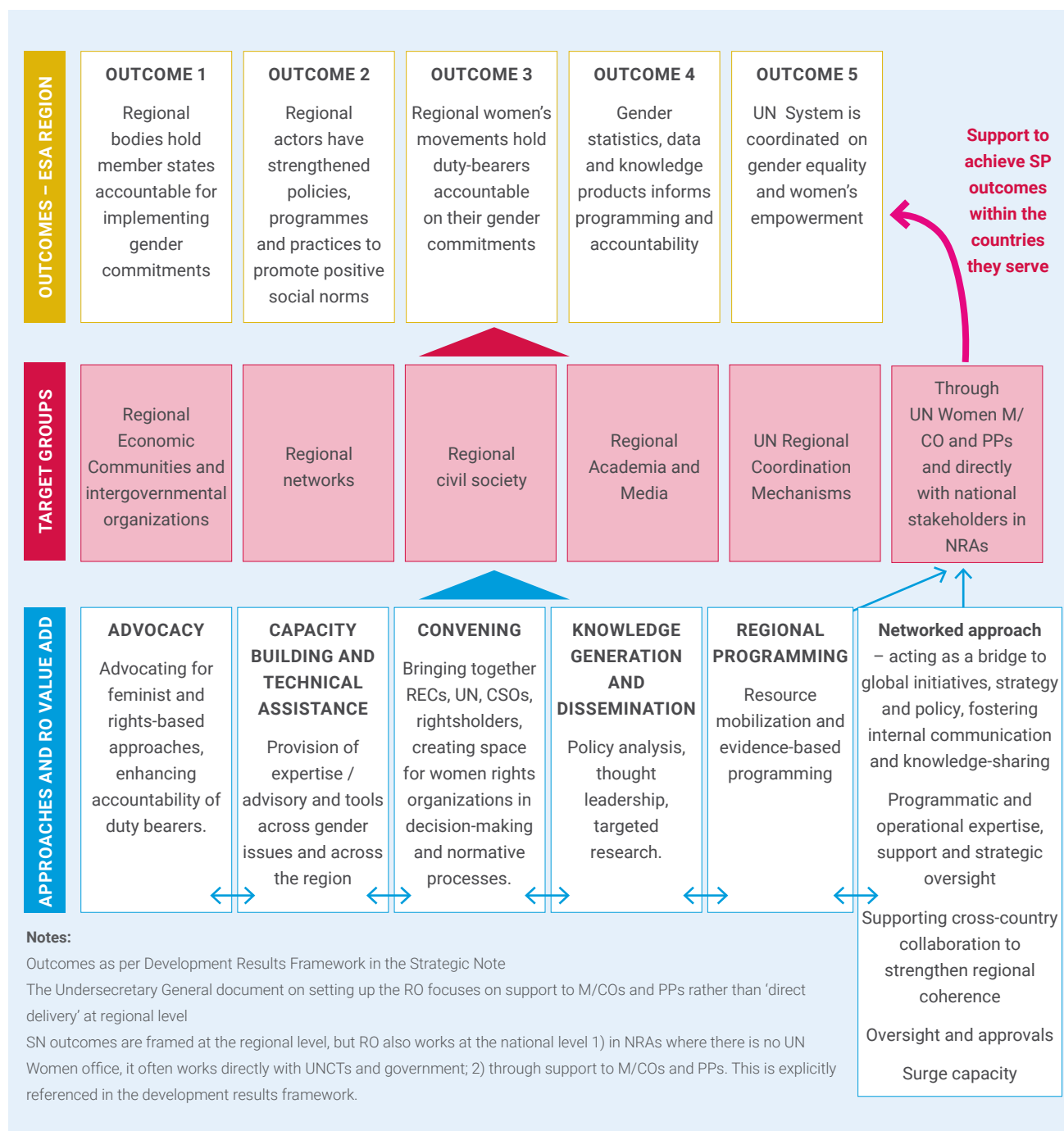
36 Quantum – 2023 and 2024 and 2025 ESAR delivery report

37 According to the Donor Agreement Management System



**FIGURE 1:**

**ESARO approaches and value add to deliver UN Women's triple mandate**



## RESULTS FRAMEWORK AND RESULTS DATA

The Development Results and Operational Efficiency and Effectiveness Frameworks set out indicators against target outcomes and outputs.

The results-based management system involves mandatory bi-annual reporting against output indicators, annual reporting against outcome indicators and annual reporting. A mid-term review was undertaken in 2023.

## STRATEGIC NOTE INTERVENTIONS

Annex 3 lists the programmes undertaken during the Strategic Note period, mapped against normative, coordination and operational mandates. In total, ESARO delivered 20 regional programmes across thematic areas. Regional programmes were delivered through engagement with regional bodies and in all countries except Burundi, South Sudan and Sudan.

The 5 largest projects include:

TITLE	BUDGET (US\$ MILLION)	YEARS	THEMATIC AREA
<b>ESA Women Count Phase II:</b> Builds capacity to produce and use gender statistics in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to track SDG progress.	2.96	2022-2025	Gender Statistics
<b>Prevention of COVID-19 infections among women and girls displaced into IDP and refugee camps in ESAR:</b> Strengthens COVID-19 prevention, protection, and leadership for displaced women, men, and youth in Uganda and Somalia.	1.85	2022-2023	Humanitarian
<b>ESAR A.C.T. to EVAW:</b> Multi-country systems approach (Kenya, Zimbabwe, Eswatini) to end VAW by tackling root causes, securing commitments, and transforming norms.	0.72	2023-2026	EVAW
<b>3R ESARO:</b> Reduces women's unequal unpaid care burden to enable full and equal economic participation.	0.51	2022-2025	WEE
<b>Every badge counts:</b> Implemented with UNODC, boosts women's leadership in law enforcement to counter terrorism, transnational crime, and GBV across Eastern Africa.	0.38	2024-2025	WPS

## FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES ANALYSIS

**The financial and human resources analysis draws on data from January 2022 to June 2025.**

ESARO's total budget for the Strategic Note period was US\$ 42.5 million, increasing year-on-year from US\$ 6.96 million in 2022 to US\$ 8.85 million in 2023, US\$ 13.11 million in 2024 and US\$ 13.58 million in 2025. As of June 2025, core resources accounted for 52 per cent of ESARO's budget, non-core for 27 per cent, institutional budget for 15 per cent, and extrabudgetary for 6 per cent. The top five donors contributed 34.4 per cent of the non-core budget. By June 2025, ESARO had a total expenditure of US\$ 28.39 million.<sup>38</sup>

**Timeliness of donor reporting was strong**, with 91 per cent of ESARO reports submitted on time between January 2022 and June 2025.<sup>39</sup>

**As of June 2025,<sup>40</sup> ESARO employed 71 people**, 33 of whom were staff, 23 on consultancy contracts, 3 United Nations Volunteers and 6 on service contracts. The 33 staff comprised 14 international professionals, 11 National Officers and 8 General Service staff.

Figure 2 provides more detail on the financial and human resources analysis.

## STAKEHOLDER MAPPING AND ANALYSIS

**The main stakeholder groups include:**

- Intergovernmental bodies such as Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) and rights holders, including women's rights organizations, youth and cultural/religious leaders.
- Research and academic institutions working on gender equality.
- Private-sector partners
- UN agencies engaged in joint programming and coordination.
- Bilateral and foundation donors supporting UN Women's work.
- UN Women ESARO personnel implementing the Strategic Note, and Country Office personnel supported by ESARO.
- Other multilaterals and regional bodies aligned to shared gender equality goals.

Annex 6 provides further detail on each group's role and intended contributions to the Strategic Note.



Photo: UN Women Africa | Zimbabwe Generation Equality Commitment Makers' Meeting

<sup>38</sup> Quantum – [2023](#) and [2024 and 2025 delivery report](#)

<sup>39</sup> [DAMS](#)

<sup>40</sup> [UN Women OneApp Personnel Dashboard](#)



**FIGURE 2:**

**Human and financial resources analysis for ESARO ( as of June 2025)**

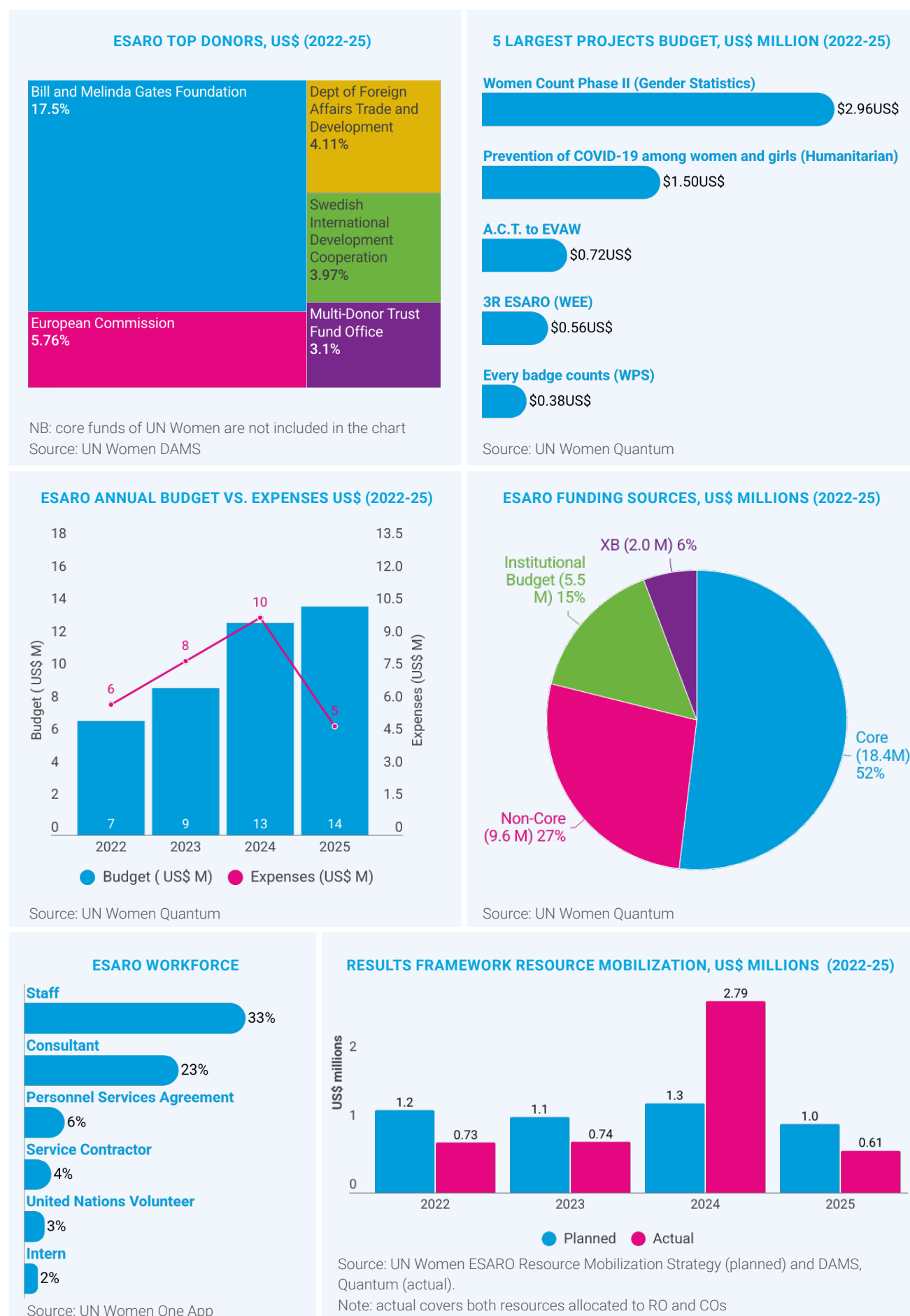




Photo: UN Women/James Ochweri | Tanzania: Tackling GBV in Zanzibar

# 4

## METHODOLOGY



## EVALUATION APPROACH

The evaluation approach was theory based and contribution analysis was used to assess ESARO's contribution to target outcomes as set out in the theory of change (see Annex 2). The evaluation used mixed methods, drawing on both quantitative data (primarily financial and from the survey) and qualitative data (from document review, interviews and focus groups). Gender equality and human rights considerations formed a critical component of the evaluation in the following ways:<sup>41</sup>

**Stakeholder analysis and methodology:** Stakeholder analysis was used to select a diverse group to engage in the evaluation, including women and men, and those who are marginalized and difficult to reach. Data was triangulated across different sources and stakeholders.

**Evaluation criteria and questions:** An evaluation criterion on gender equality and human rights was added, and associated evaluation questions developed. For the project review sample, the evaluation team assessed outcomes against the UNDP Gender Results Effectiveness Scale (see Finding 16).

**Reporting:** Human rights and gender equality issues are covered in all sections of the report (findings, lessons learned, conclusions and recommendations).

## EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation sought to answer the following overarching questions:

### EFFECTIVENESS

**Is ESARO contributing to the target outcomes set out in the Strategic Note to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in the region?**

### COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

**How relevant and coherent were ESARO's areas of focus?**

### EFFICIENCY

**How efficient is ESARO's structure and support to Multi-/Country Offices?**

### SUSTAINABILITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

**How sustainable and inclusive is ESARO's programming?**

Additional details are set out in the evaluation matrix in Annex 8.



Photo: UN Women Africa | UN Women ESARO PSEA Training 2024

41 Building on the Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in 26 Evaluation – Towards United Nations Evaluation Group Guidance

## DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation team reviewed 93 internal and external documents on progress against gender equality and women's empowerment (see Annex 1 for a list of documents reviewed).

The evaluation applied a purposive sampling approach, based on a stakeholder mapping exercise conducted with support from ESARO (Annex 6). A total of 228 stakeholders were reached, exceeding the target sample of 175. Of these, 115 participated in interviews and focus group discussions between April and May 2025, the majority of which were undertaken remotely, while 113 responded to three surveys administered in April 2025.

The surveys targeted:

- UN Women personnel in Country Offices (12 per cent response rate;  $N=368$ ) and in ESARO (33 per cent response rate,  $N=71$ )
- A separate survey for coordination focal points working within UN Women (59 per cent response rate;  $N=22$ )
- External stakeholders (31 per cent response rate;  $N=45$ )

A number of survey questions asked respondents to rate effectiveness on a scale of 1-5, with 1 = very ineffective, 2 = somewhat ineffective, 3 = neither

effective nor ineffective, 4 = somewhat effective, 5 = very effective. These categorizations were also used for the survey analysis.

While programme participants were not directly interviewed, consultations included 25 CSOs representing target populations. In line with the leave no one behind principle, 12 interviewees represented young women, women with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

Data was disaggregated by gender where relevant and managed in accordance with the data management plan (see Annex 10). Data collection tools are set out in Annex 9.

## ANALYSIS

The evaluation matrix forms the framework for analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed in a tabular analysis framework, developed based on the evaluation matrix. Quantitative data were analyzed in Excel, to identify trends.

The evaluation team presented preliminary findings to ESARO on 30 June 2025 for validation and to identify other perspectives, which were incorporated in this report.

Contribution towards each target outcome was analyzed using the format as shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.**

**Contribution analysis format**

TARGET OUTCOME		
EVIDENCE FOR ACHIEVEMENT		
Achievement – strength of evidence		
<b>STRONG</b> Corroborated by multiple sources and different types of stakeholders, with detailed examples	<b>MODERATE</b> Corroborated by more than one source, but limited examples and/or general examples only	<b>WEAK</b> Only cited by one source, or by one type of stakeholder. No specific examples provided
EVIDENCE FOR UN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION		
UN Women contribution – strength of evidence		
<b>STRONG</b> Change explicitly attributed to specific UN Women activity, detailed explanation of how it contributed	<b>MODERATE</b> General and non-specific link between outcome and specific UN Women activities	<b>WEAK</b> Link between the outcome and UN Women activity unclear, limited explanation of how the activity supported change
Contribution of other factors; testing of theory of change assumptions		

## ETHICS

The evaluation complied with the relevant United Nations Evaluation Group and UN Women standards on ethics.<sup>42</sup>

### Integrity

The evaluators complied with the Code of Conduct and delivered the evaluation with honesty, professionalism and impartiality. The evaluators are independent from programme delivery. The evaluators documented changes to findings as a result of discussions between the evaluation team and ESARO.

### Accountability

The evaluation took a transparent sampling and analysis approach, using an analysis framework and Stata. Evaluation findings were mapped to the evaluation questions, referencing the underlying evidence.

### Beneficence

The evaluation team sought informed, oral consent. The team clearly explained the purpose of the evaluation and how the information would be used. The evaluators highlighted the potential benefits and harm in participating, and that participants could stop the interview or focus group discussion at any point. All responses have been anonymized; there was no expected harm to participants.

## Respect

The evaluation meaningfully engaged evaluation stakeholders not only as subjects of data collection. The evaluation team will share the evaluation brief with all evaluation stakeholders. To ensure fair representation of different voices, the sampling approach considered coverage of different stakeholder categories, including those representing those hard to reach.

## LIMITATIONS AND MITIGATIONS

Survey response rate: Despite several follow-ups, response rates to the UN Women regional survey and external survey were low. The evaluation team supplemented this by extensive interviews with key UN Women and external stakeholders.

Timing of evaluation: Finalization of the report overlapped with the Strategic Note planning process due to outreach delays. However, emerging findings were shared in advance of the planning process, and evaluators facilitated sessions during the Strategic Note retreat to agree ways forward in response to the key lessons arising from the evaluation.

## DISSEMINATION AND USE

Table 2 sets out the dissemination plan for the targeted primary and secondary evaluation users.

The Regional Director will lead follow-up on the evaluation and issue a management response within six weeks of the report's finalization.

**TABLE 2.**

**Evaluation dissemination plan**

DISSEMINATION APPROACH	HOW IT WILL BE TRACKED
ESARO The evaluation team shared findings and facilitated a discussion on next steps for development of the new Strategic Note.	Uptake of findings and extent to which findings result in concrete next steps. Number of attendees
Regional partners and others working in the sector Evaluation team to share a two-page brief	Number of stakeholders the brief is shared with

<sup>42</sup> The evaluation adhered to United Nations Evaluation Group and UN Women Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct; and the United Nations Evaluation Group guidance on integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations, with gender-responsive and human rights approaches integrated into the evaluation.

EVALUATION MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Director, Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) and Chief, Independent Evaluation Service (IES) reviewed and approved all evaluation products. Supported by the evaluation team, the Team Lead led data collection, analysis and reporting. The evaluation report will undergo the Global

Evaluation Report Assessment and Analysis System process of quality assessment.

The Evaluation Reference and Management Groups (see Annex 11) and a peer reviewer provided a technical review

FIGURE 3:  
Summary of the evaluation methodology

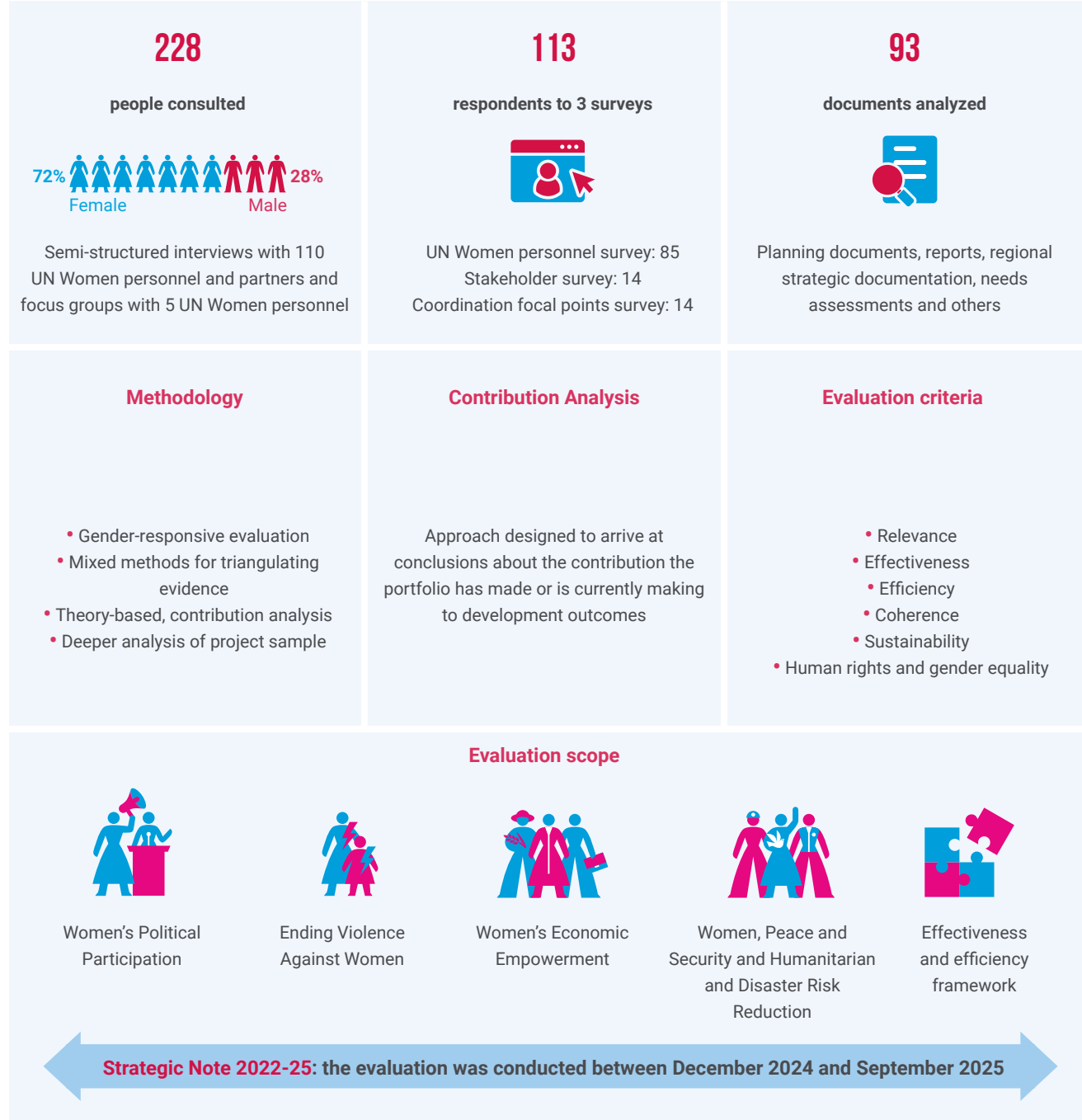






Photo: UN Women/James Ochweri – South Africa: UN Women at SVRI Forum 24

# 5

## FINDINGS



## EFFECTIVENESS, RELEVANCE AND COHERENCE

### Is ESARO contributing to the Strategic Note's target outcomes to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in the region?

*How effective was ESARO's coordination, normative and operational work in contributing to target outcomes?*

Across Findings 1–5, contribution analysis tables summarize findings and rate the strength of evidence for outcome achievements and ESARO's contribution. Discussion on the contribution of other factors is set out in Finding 6. No unexpected outcomes were identified by the evaluation team.

### OUTCOME 1: REGIONAL BODIES HOLD MEMBER STATES ACCOUNTABLE FOR IMPLEMENTING GENDER COMMITMENTS



#### FINDING 1

**ESARO's support to Regional Economic Communities in the East and Southern Africa region has been instrumental in strengthening institutional capacities, fostering policy coherence and enhancing regional accountability mechanisms to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. While notable progress has been made, persistent structural and operational challenges continue to affect the full realisation of accountability.**

► There has been good integration across UN Women's triple mandate, with this area of work supporting policy and strategy development and treaty ratification; coordination with sister agencies including United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, UNDP and UNFPA; and operational work through capacity-building for REC gender units and financial support.

### STRENGTHENED REGIONAL NORMATIVE AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORKS

► UN Women enhanced the institutional capacity of RECs to influence treaty ratification and alignment with global gender frameworks. With financial and technical support from ESARO, regional bodies such as the AU, SADC, IGAD and COMESA convened high-level dialogues and developed advocacy tools, legal gap assessments and regional scorecards. RECs reported that these mechanisms enabled them to identify countries lagging behind on gender equality and women's empowerment commitments and apply targeted peer pressure. As a result, two additional Member States (Botswana and South Sudan) ratified the Maputo Protocol during the Strategic Note period, following advocacy supported by ESARO through the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme, bringing ratification in the region to 88 per cent.<sup>43</sup>

► Support from ESARO facilitated the integration of CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Maputo Protocol into REC frameworks and monitoring tools. Interviewed RECs highlighted support to SADC in strengthening the Gender Protocol Barometer, developing IGAD's Gender Equality Strategy and Regional Action Plan on WPS, and regional gender strategies that embedded global norms into regional accountability systems. Interviewed RECs reported that these tools have enabled them to track Member States' progress against shared gender equality benchmarks and promote legal and policy coherence.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Key informant interviews with RECs and CSOs [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-sl-PROTOCOL\\_TO\\_THE\\_AFRICAN\\_CHARTER\\_ON\\_HUMAN\\_AND\\_PEOPLES\\_RIGHTS\\_ON\\_THE\\_RIGHTS\\_OF\\_WOMEN\\_IN\\_AFRICA.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-sl-PROTOCOL_TO_THE_AFRICAN_CHARTER_ON_HUMAN_AND_PEOPLES_RIGHTS_ON_THE_RIGHTS_OF_WOMEN_IN_AFRICA.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> The development of SADC's Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage, which draws on the Maputo Protocol's principles has informed national legislative reforms, such as in Zimbabwe.

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
<b>Strengthened regional normative and accountability frameworks</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> of ESARO support facilitating broader regional engagement (confirmed by Member States, CSOs and Country Offices) in normative processes including Beijing+30, CSW and pre-CSW convenings. More limited support to CEDAW processes.	<b>Strong evidence of ESARO contribution</b> through convening, coordination, producing knowledge products and technical guidance.
<b>Regional mechanisms driving thematic accountability</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> through increase in the number of Member States ratifying CEDAW (100 per cent) and Maputo protocol (88 per cent) and increased adoption of progressive normative frameworks; improvement in the regularity and quality of CEDAW State Party reporting; Member States engagement in CEDAW; and Beijing Platform for Action reporting and feedback processes triggering legal and policy reviews.	<b>Strong evidence of ESARO contribution</b> through provision of technical, financial, capacity-building and convening support to RECs, contributing to the development of National Action Plans for WPS and EVAW, strategies, accountability tools and Member States reporting on gender commitments, valued by RECs and Member States.
<b>Contributory factors and challenges</b>	<p>→ ESARO technical capacity, ability to tap into global expertise, convening power and strong multi-sectoral partnerships</p> <p>→ Short-term, project-based funding affects sustainability</p> <p>→ External challenges around limited follow-up and accountability mechanisms, limited reporting on CEDAW (84 per cent of Member States with outstanding reports), capacity constraints among Regional Economic Communities (RECs), limited gender data and pushback.</p>	

➤ **UN Women played a catalytic role in advancing inclusive reporting and regional coordination for Beijing+30 and CSW processes.**

- Beijing+30: ESARO worked with the UN Economic Commission for Africa, UNDP and UNFPA to synthesize Member States' national Beijing+30 national reports into a regional synthesis of the continent's progress, challenges and priority needs. The Africa Analytical Report and the Common Africa Position (CAP) Document was undertaken with support from the UN Women programme "Accelerating the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda", providing inputs to focus and advocacy for CSW 69. The Africa Pre-CSW process and the conceptual groundwork helped African delegations engage more coherently in negotiations and advocacy at CSW 69.<sup>45</sup>
- CSW: ESARO played an important facilitative role in supporting pre-CSW regional annual meetings

and consultations, serving as the secretariat for the Africa pre-CSW consultations. ESARO worked with the West and Central Africa and Arab States Regional Offices to support development of the Africa Common Position paper and conducted research into the extent to which the paper is used by Member States to influence Global Agreed Conclusions. ESARO also worked to coordinate/facilitate stakeholder engagement during the event and side events.<sup>46</sup> At CSW 69, Member States adopted the Beijing+30 Political Declaration by consensus, reaffirming their commitment to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action within the 2030 Agenda framework.

- **ESARO has supported Member States to meet their CEDAW reporting obligations and use CEDAW Concluding Observations to inform national policy and legislative reform.** CSOs reported that ESARO

<sup>45</sup> Interviews with RECs and UN Women

<sup>46</sup> Evidence base includes key informant interviews, Strategic Note annual reports, secondary reports and documentation, and the focal point survey (67 per cent received support for engagement Beijing+30; 50 per cent for CSW).

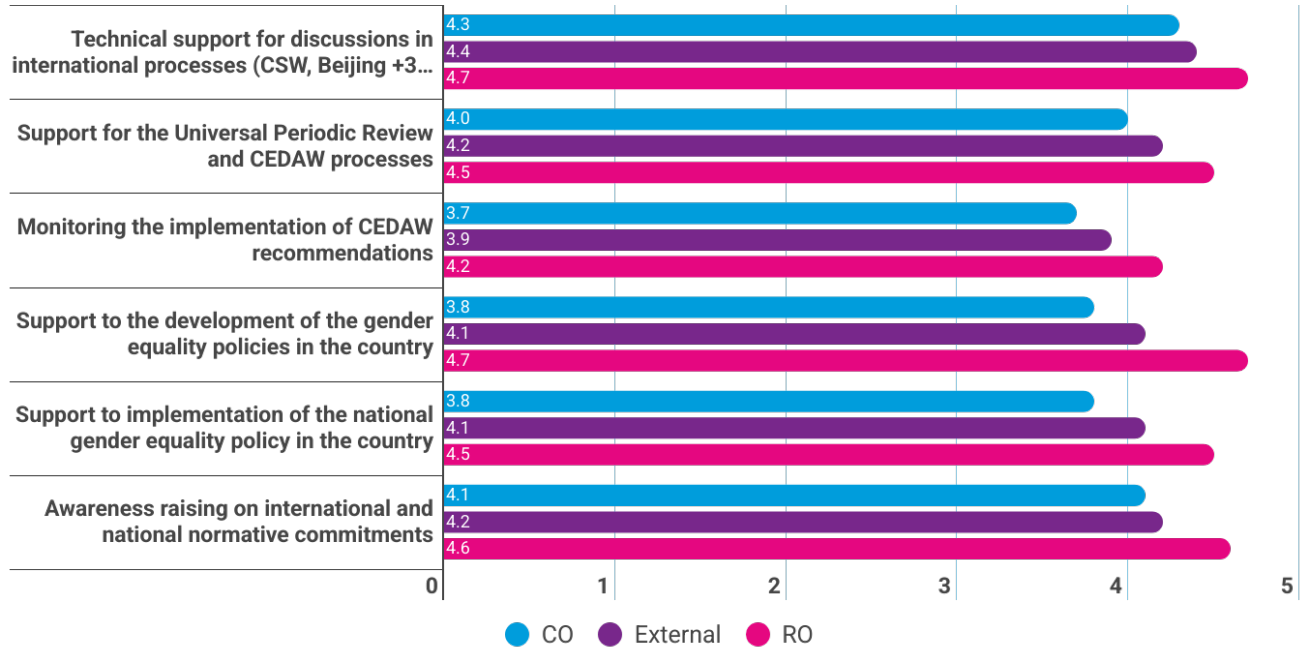
helped to facilitate long-overdue CEDAW submissions and national capacity strengthening in countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, Eswatini and Lesotho, contributing to more gender-responsive legal frameworks. RECs and CSOs noted that this support contributed to gender-responsive legal and policy reforms, including family law changes in Eswatini and Lesotho, and legislative debates on gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage in Malawi and Ethiopia. In Kenya and Zambia, CEDAW Concluding Observations are increasingly being used to guide national planning, signalling a shift in perception of CEDAW from a compliance exercise to a strategic policy tool.<sup>47</sup>

➤ **However, ESARO’s support for CEDAW has been less systematic compared to its stronger leadership on CSW and Beijing+30 processes.** Much of the engagement to date has been Country Office-driven and ad hoc, with limited regional oversight or tracking of Member States’ reporting and implementation status. Fragmented regional support, weak cross-sectoral follow-up mechanisms and limited engagement with civil society have hindered deeper accountability

for implementation.<sup>48</sup> Stakeholders highlighted the opportunity for ESARO to adopt a more intentional and coordinated approach in the next Strategic Note, particularly by leveraging General Recommendation No. 40 on women’s equal representation in decision-making, in alignment with ESARO’s work under WPP and other thematic areas. Stakeholders also suggest ESARO can support with more systematic tracking of Member States’ reporting and implementation status, and on this basis, work with Country Offices to provide more targeted support to Member States.

As set out in the evaluation survey findings below, overall ESARO, external and Country Office stakeholders felt ESARO’s support on normative work was somewhat effective, with areas for improvement around supporting development and implementation of policies in country and monitoring of CEDAW recommendations. Country Office colleagues highlighted some good practice in terms of linking countries to support knowledge sharing, for example around national care economy policies, that could be further built upon.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Evaluation survey, Normative work effectiveness**  
*On a scale of 1-5, how effectively has the UN Women Regional Office contributed to normative work in the following areas (1=very ineffective; 5=very effective) n= 99 (RO=24, CO=61, external=14)*



Source: Evaluation survey

47 Annual reports, key informant interviews with RECs and CSOs.  
 48 While 40 per cent of coordination focal point survey respondents (n=14) had received support from ESARO over the Strategic Note period, Programme Presence/Non-Resident Agency countries were less likely to engage ESARO about CEDAW, running the risk that support remains centred on those countries where UN Women has a Country Office.

## REGIONAL MECHANISMS DRIVING THEMATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

### Cross-thematic

➤ **ESARO has supported the localization of Generation Equality<sup>49</sup> by providing technical assistance to Member States and RECs**, including the designation of national focal points, development of regional implementation road maps and integration of Gender Equality Facility indicators into REC scorecards to enable regional monitoring and reporting. CSOs report that significant progress has been made in countries such as Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Somalia, where commitments under the six Action Coalitions<sup>50</sup> have been institutionalized through inclusive governance structures, digital inclusion efforts and legislative reforms<sup>51</sup>.

➤ **UN Women has also strengthened REC capacity through technical adviser placements, strategy development and knowledge generation.** SADC and IGAD have integrated Gender Equality Facility tracking indicators into regional strategies, supporting cross-country advocacy on feminist leadership and youth participation.<sup>52</sup> Youth and feminist CSOs reported that with ESARO support, they have been able to increase scrutiny of service availability and accountability for sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender budgeting.<sup>53</sup>

### Women, Peace and Security

➤ **ESARO played a strategic role in advancing the WPS agenda** across the region by strengthening RECs' institutional capacities to align Regional Action Plans with AU indicators, develop monitoring tools and convene peer review mechanisms to enhance Member States' accountability. RECs reported that this contributed to the adoption of costed National Action Plans in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Tanzania

with 14 Member States and 4 RECs now having WPS action plans.<sup>54</sup> Through REC-facilitated processes, countries such as Kenya and Uganda have integrated AU indicators into national monitoring systems, while IGAD's support for inclusive peace dialogues led to strengthened women's participation in formal peace processes for Sudan and South Sudan.<sup>55</sup>

### Women's Political Participation

➤ **ESARO reinforced regional normative frameworks for WPP by supporting the development of tools** such as the Africa Governance Atlas, the SADC Gender Parity Framework, WPP scorecards and the Gender and Development Monitor. RECs reported that these instruments strengthened regional accountability mechanisms aligned with the Maputo Protocol and Beijing Platform for Action, contributing to the adoption of gender quotas in Zimbabwe and Lesotho, and supporting sustained gains in women's representation in countries including Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa and Ethiopia.<sup>56</sup>

➤ **ESARO strengthened capacities and contributed to legal reforms.** It trained 88 legal professionals and 12 Electoral Management Bodies through SADC to address violence against women in politics. SADC reported that this contributed to policy reforms in Malawi. ESARO worked with the EAC to support countries such as Uganda and Tanzania to align national laws with EAC gender equality frameworks. This included reviewing how existing laws and commitments were being implemented and organizing dialogues between parliamentarians from different countries to encourage learning and legislative reform.<sup>57</sup>

49 [Generation Equality](#) is a UN Women-led initiative driving joint commitments across six themes to accelerate gender equality by 2030, with progress tracked through a global accountability framework.

50 The six Action Coalition commitments are: Gender-Based Violence, Economic Justice and Rights, Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Feminist Action for Climate Justice, Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality, and Feminist Movements and Leadership.

51 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women, Strategic Note Annual Reports

52 Key informant interviews with RECs and UN Women, Strategic Note Annual Reports

53 Interviews with CSOs, Strategic Note Annual Reports

54 Key informant interviews with RECs and UN Women, Strategic Note Annual Reports

55 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women, CSOs.

56 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women; and Strategic Note Annual reports

57 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women; and Strategic Note Annual Reports

## Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

➤ **ESARO supported integration of EVAWG priorities into regional frameworks** developed by SADC, IGAD, ICGLR and the AU Commission. RECs reported that this contributed to greater regional alignment on EVAWG standards and provided normative reference and momentum that informed development or revision of National Action Plans in countries such as Burundi and Tanzania.<sup>58</sup> ➤ **ESARO contributed to the operationalization of regional EVAWG strategies** by supporting development of monitoring tools, including scorecards, reporting templates and implementation of the SADC GBV Strategy. RECs reported that ESARO's support strengthened their institutional capacities,<sup>59</sup> improved national GBV data systems and supported increased domestic financing, with results such as GBV observatories in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. ESARO also supported the development and adoption of the 2025 AU Convention on EVAWG, ensuring the inclusion of emerging issues such as digital violence and leveraging advocacy campaigns to sustain regional political commitment.<sup>60</sup>

## Women's Economic Empowerment

➤ **ESARO supported the development and operationalization of the AU Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Strategy tracking framework**, which was adapted into regional scorecards by COMESA and SADC and is now used by countries such as Malawi and Ethiopia to report on women's access to land, credit and markets.<sup>61</sup> RECs also reported that ESARO also provided technical assistance to mainstream gender in AfCFTA implementation, developed gender accountability tools; supported institutionalization of gender-responsive budgeting in Tanzania; promoted private-sector engagement through training on the Women's Empowerment Principles; and collaborated with COMESA on research to advance women's participation in intra-African trade.<sup>62</sup>

➤ **ESARO advanced WEE by convening the EmpowerHerTrade regional dialogue to support domestication of the AfCFTA Women and Youth in Trade Protocol** and to promote gender-responsive trade tools such as audits and scorecards.<sup>63</sup> ESARO also led innovation in the care economy through policy dialogue, capacity-building, knowledge generation and sharing, social and behaviour change communication and investment planning in multiple countries, alongside regional initiatives with the African Development Bank to integrate care priorities into development financing.<sup>64</sup> ESARO has also supported private-sector engagement through its work on the Women's Empowerment Principles, with over 50 companies in Tanzania committing to advance WEE.<sup>65</sup>

## HIV and AIDS

➤ **ESARO contributed to strengthening regional and national accountability for HIV/AIDS commitments** by supporting the integration of gender-responsive governance mechanisms into HIV responses, particularly through collaboration with SADC and Member States. Through continued technical and advocacy support to the biennial CSW resolution on Women, the Girl Child and HIV/AIDS, ESARO helped secure increased Global Fund participation and funding for women-led HIV interventions in countries such as Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Rwanda, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda. These efforts also supported the emergence of a growing cohort of young women leaders advancing gender-transformative HIV responses across the region.<sup>66</sup>

See also Finding 14 for detailed evidence on humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction contributions.

➤ **The following systemic challenges to accountability and implementation were noted:**

- Institutional capacity: RECs, national gender machineries and human rights institutions face some constraints in financial, staffing and technical expertise, affecting their ability to effectively

58 Key informant interviews with RECs and CSOs

59 For example, ESARO supported scaling-up of the ICGLR Regional Training Facility on sexual and GBV in Uganda.

60 Key informant interviews with RECs and CSOs.

61 UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Care Economy Evaluation

62 [Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in the Context of the African Continental Free Trade Area AfCFE.pdf](#)

63 Strategic Note Annual Reports, Key informant interviews with RECs and UN Women

64 ESARO Care Economy Evaluation

65 Regional care economy evaluation, forthcoming.

66 Strategic Note Annual Reports, SAMCO CPE



coordinate, implement and monitor gender equality commitments (see also Finding 8).<sup>67</sup>

- Integration into development frameworks: Gender equality action plans, including WPS National Action Plans, are often uncoded and insufficiently integrated into national development plans and fiscal frameworks undermining their implementation and sustainability.<sup>68</sup>
- Legal alignment: Despite ratification of binding instruments such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, many Member States have not aligned their national laws with these commitments, particularly in dualist legal systems where customary law may supersede statutory protections.
- Accountability mechanisms: The absence of binding compliance frameworks and REC's limited mandate to enforce state obligations restricts accountability to a facilitative role, weakening the enforcement and monitoring of gender equality and women's empowerment commitments.
- Additional cross-cutting challenges include weak stakeholder coordination, limited gender data,

inconsistent civil society participation, pushback against gender equality and funding constraints (see Finding 6 on enablers and barriers).

► **Opportunities exist to build on progress made with a more coordinated approach** to normative engagement across thematic areas and countries in the next Strategic Note.<sup>69</sup> There were discrepancies in ESARO and Country Office ratings of ESARO's support to Country Offices, for example, around the development of gender equality policies in country. Country Offices highlighted opportunities for more coordinated efforts. For example, while independent evaluations of the 3R and climate-smart agriculture programmes found good alignment with regional frameworks (e.g. AU Agenda 20643 and East African Community strategies), there were no specific linkages between these programmes and ESARO's efforts with the RECs. The RECs and CSOs interviewed also highlighted the importance of coordinated, cross-thematic programming. For example, sustaining WPP gains requires protection from violence, economic empowerment, social norms change, improved data systems and equitable political financing.



Photo: UN Women ESARO/Adelaide Malweyi

67 Key informant interviews with RECs, Country Offices, government stakeholders, CSOs

68 Key informant interviews with RECs, Member States, stakeholders

69 Key informant interviews with ESARO and Country Office personnel

## OUTCOME 2: REGIONAL ACTORS HAVE STRENGTHENED POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS



### FINDING 2

ESARO has effectively positioned social norms change as a regional policy priority and supported the development of gender-responsive frameworks and programmes through its technical assistance and convening role. Despite systemic challenges that limited more profound structural impact, the groundwork laid offers a strong foundation for scaling and institutionalizing transformative approaches in future programming.

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
<b>Strengthened regional normative frameworks to promote positive social norms</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> of ESARO's support for the development, review, monitoring and implementation of regional instruments to promote positive social norms and accountability, e.g. AU Convention on EVAWG, SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, IGAD Gender Strategy and Regional Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, EAC Gender Bill, COMESA Trade Strategy.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of contribution, through technical and financial support to develop/revise and implement frameworks, integrate social norms indicators and legal and policy reviews.
<b>Increased political commitment and peer accountability for gender-equitable norms</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> of regional actors demonstrating stronger commitment and engagement in intergovernmental platforms addressing gender norms, for example AU Conference on Positive Masculinities.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of RECs' contribution towards addressing gender norms through facilitation of forums, negotiations and dialogues.
<b>Strengthened institutional capacity on social norms</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> of regional bodies and national stakeholders adopting tools and practices to influence social norms (e.g. GBV oversight, behaviour change campaigns, gender training, survivor-centred approaches).	<b>Strong evidence</b> of contribution, through training, technical assistance and mentorship of REC gender units and other stakeholders, and development of relevant tools.
<b>Improved integration of social norms into programming</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> of social norms integrated across climate, disaster and community programming.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of contribution, through technical support to IGAD and regional programming.
<b>Contributory factors and challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ ESARO technical capacity, ability to tap into global expertise, convening power and strong multi-sectoral partnerships</li> <li>→ Short-term, project-based funding affects sustainability</li> <li>→ Lack of organization-wide conceptual clarity on social norms for most of the evaluation period</li> <li>→ Resistance from conservative actors affected achievement of outcomes</li> </ul>	



**Between 2022 and 2025, ESARO strategically advanced positive social norms by leveraging its triple mandate. It supported RECs and Country Offices to embed norms change in legal and policy frameworks; convened high-level and grassroots dialogues to challenge harmful practices; and strengthened institutional capacities to deliver and monitor gender-responsive interventions.**

## **STRENGTHENED REGIONAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS**

➤ **ESARO supported the integration of social norms transformation into regional and continental normative and accountability frameworks** through strategic technical assistance, advocacy and multi-stakeholder engagement. This included contributing to the development and adoption of the AU Convention on EVAWG (2025); integration of social norms change indicators into AU policy instruments such as the Results Framework on WPS, SADC GBV Scorecard Mid-Term Review and AU gender Scorecards; as well as the production of regional studies and policy briefs to inform AU advocacy. ESARO also engaged in advocacy to ensure that the AU Gender Strategy (2018–2028) is operationalized in a way that incorporates social norms change priorities. ESARO's support was acknowledged and valued by the AU Commission.<sup>70</sup>

➤ **ESARO also supported RECs to strengthen normative frameworks.** For example, SADC acknowledged ESARO's support in operationalizing the Protocol on Gender and Development through the Gender Scorecard and Monitoring Framework, and in developing the Gender Parity Framework and the Mid-Term Review of the Regional Strategy on Gender-Based Violence (2018–2030)<sup>71</sup> all of which embed commitments to address harmful practices and discriminatory norms. With EAC and IGAD, ESARO contributed to the review and development of regional strategies and legal instruments that include provisions on transforming harmful gender norms and advancing accountability.<sup>72</sup> With COMESA, ESARO

supported development of a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for Trade Protocols to address stereotypes limiting women's economic participation. ESARO also guided the International Peace Support Training Centre in revising its Gender Policy to respond to new peace and security threats in the region, including new provisions on preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.<sup>73</sup>

## **INCREASED POLITICAL COMMITMENT AND PEER ACCOUNTABILITY**

➤ **ESARO advanced the promotion of positive social norms by convening RECs, governments and civil society on EVAWG.** For example, ESARO contributed to the Second Men's Conference on Positive Masculinity with the AU Commission in 2022; supported the AU's engagement at CSW; and worked with SADC to facilitate dialogues with traditional leaders, youth and faith-based organizations to challenge harmful gender norms.<sup>74</sup> ESARO also engaged traditional and religious leaders through COTLA in regional dialogues to shift discriminatory laws, e.g. on gender parity and VAWG. ESARO supported regional inter-parliamentary dialogues and consultations across IGAD and SADC to align national laws with regional gender commitments and integrate social norms change into policy implementation, with a focus on countries such as Uganda and Tanzania.<sup>75</sup> With IGAD, this work informed development of a Regional Gender Equality Strategy (2023–2030), which calls on Member States to provide overall political and strategic oversight at the Head of State and ministerial levels and ensure the operational implementation of strategy commitments, one of which is on changing social norms.<sup>76</sup>

70 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women; Strategic Note Annual Reports

71 KII RECs & UN Women, SN Annual Reports

72 IGAD Gender Strategy and IGAD and EAC Regional Action Plan on WPS

73 Key informant interviews with RECs; Strategic Note Annual Reports

74 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women; Strategic Note Annual Reports

75 Key informant interviews with RECs; Strategic Note Annual Reports

76 Key informant interviews with RECs

➤ **ESARO also convened sector-specific dialogues.**

In partnership with ICGLR, it convened regional peace dialogues to enhance women's participation in peace processes and supported development of monitoring tools under the WPS agenda in the Great Lakes (see Finding 3), with a strong focus on norms. With COMESA, UN Women facilitated public-private dialogues and integrated social norms modules into gender training, with targeted efforts to address discriminatory narratives affecting women entrepreneurs, particularly in informal cross-border trade.<sup>77</sup>

## STRENGTHENED INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

➤ **ESARO supported capacity strengthening across RECs** to advance social norms change by training national actors; mainstreaming gender into peace and security strategies and curricula; and equipping Member States with tools for behaviour change and community mobilization. This included support to the SADC's Training-of-Trainers programmes and Regional Peacekeeping Training Centre, as well as technical assistance to develop community-based interventions and behavioural change campaigns.<sup>78</sup>

➤ **ESARO also strengthened legislative accountability through technical support to the SADC Parliamentary Forum**, contributing to the establishment of GBV oversight mechanisms and parliamentary caucuses focused on harmful practices. Capacity-building efforts extended to training for SADC Gender Unit staff and focal points on social norms theory, data use and communication for attitudinal change.<sup>79</sup>

➤ **With EAC and ICGLR, ESARO supported gender-responsive communication and policy frameworks to address GBV and discriminatory norms.** This included operationalizing the Regional Training Facility on sexual and GBV in Uganda and enhancing training for judicial and law enforcement officers on survivor-centred, norm-transformative approaches.<sup>80</sup>

## INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL NORMS INTO REGIONAL PROGRAMMING

➤ **ESARO supported IGAD to integrate gender considerations into its Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative**, enhancing the gender-responsiveness of drought resilience, disaster risk reduction and climate security strategies. This included promoting women's access to markets, supporting climate adaptation efforts and advancing gender-responsive disaster risk management.<sup>81</sup>

➤ **At the national level, evaluations of regional programmes found contributions to norms change** through community-level engagement, leadership training, initiatives aimed at engaging men and boys in advancing gender equality (for example the South African men's parliament) and advocacy on care work and land rights.<sup>82</sup>

➤ **Progress was affected by lack of conceptual clarity on social norms, some resistance from communities and the short-term nature of most funding.** Lack of conceptual clarity – both within UN Women and among regional partners – on how social norms are defined, transformed and measured often resulted in fragmented, awareness-based interventions rather than systemic integration of institutional norms change, covering laws, budgets and governance frameworks, shifts in discriminatory narratives and collective mobilization of movements to challenge unequal power structures.<sup>83</sup> While the strategic plan included a systemic outcome on norms, there were different understandings, and a corporate level framework for understanding norms was only finalized in 2025. Progress was also hindered by some resistance from communities, traditional and religious leaders, especially on sensitive issues such as child marriage, GBV and women's leadership. Finally, the prevalence of short-term, project-based funding cycles undermined sustained engagement with regional actors; limited the depth of institutional capacity-building; and constrained the extent of deliberate linkages between regional and national programming.

77 Strategic Note Annual Reports

78 Key informant interviews with RECs; Strategic Note Annual Reports

79 Key informant interviews with RECs

80 Key informant interviews with RECs; Strategic Note Annual Reports

81 Key informant interviews with RECs; Strategic Note Annual Reports

82 Evaluations of LEAP (2023), 3R (2023) and Climate Smart Agriculture (2022)

83 Key informant interviews with UN Women, CSOs

### OUTCOME 3: REGIONAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS HOLD DUTY BEARERS ACCOUNTABLE ON THEIR COMMITMENTS



#### FINDING 3

Regional women's movements, with support from ESARO, have played a pivotal role in holding duty bearers accountable for gender equality commitments through advocacy, engagement in normative processes and the use of regional accountability tools. However, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited funding, inadequate political commitment, restricted civic space and the exclusion of marginalized groups, underscoring the need for deeper, sustained investment in feminist movement-building, inclusive platforms and protection of civic space.

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
Regional women's movements hold duty bearers accountable on normative frameworks	<b>Strong evidence</b> , women's rights organization engagement through the Advocacy, Coalition Building and Transformative Feminist Action (ACT) Civil Society Regional Network and Generation Equality contributed to stronger Beijing+30 outcomes and CEDAW shadow reports. Tangible results include legal reforms in Eswatini, increased financing for gender budgeting in Tanzania and Uganda and ratification of the Maputo Protocol by South Sudan and Botswana.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of ESARO's contribution through funding and training women's rights organization and facilitating access to advocacy platforms such as the CSW and AU summits. These efforts enabled feminist advocates to influence regional declarations and national follow-up commitments.
Regional women's movements use accountability frameworks to hold duty bearers accountable	<b>Strong evidence</b> of Gender Barometer and Scorecard processes prompting Member States to undertake policy and legal reforms.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of ESARO's contribution to regional tools, piloting of accountability frameworks and technical support to civil society.
Women's movements in fragile and conflict-affected settings hold duty bearers accountable	<b>Strong evidence</b> , the Kampala Feminist Declaration, co-developed with 350 Sudanese women, influenced AU and UN engagement and improved women's visibility in peace platforms. Similar engagements were facilitated with women in the Great Lakes region in response to the political crisis in 2024 and 2025. A regional humanitarian network of women and youth-led organizations is advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in humanitarian interventions across the region.	<b>Strong evidence</b> of ESARO's contribution, through technical support, capacity-building and facilitation of regional advocacy.
Contributory factors and challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ ESARO is a trusted partner of both CSOs and RECs, convening power and strong partnerships</li> <li>→ Challenges around limited, short-term funding, some constraints on CSO capacity, shrinking CSO space and limitations in accountability mechanisms</li> </ul>	

➤ **ESARO strengthened regional feminist movements**

by supporting their institutional and advocacy capacity, expanding access to policy spaces and providing tools to monitor gender equality commitments. This was achieved through integrated normative, coordination and operational efforts, including civil society engagement in Beijing+30 and CEDAW processes; the establishment of the ACT Civil Society Regional Network; and direct support to over 40 women's rights organizations through ACT to end VAWG and Spotlight to influence policy and track reforms.

➤ **There was strong evidence for ESARO's contribution to regional women's movements holding duty bearers accountable on normative frameworks.**

In 2024, under the EAW ACT, ESARO facilitated establishment of the Civil Society Regional Network to institutionalize feminist engagement with RECs and duty bearers. The ACT Civil Society Regional Network shadow reports and advocacy led to stronger outcome language and Member State commitments, including legal reforms in Eswatini and increased financing for gender budgeting in Tanzania and Uganda.<sup>84</sup>

➤ **ESARO's operational support also enabled women's rights organizations to drive regional advocacy and accountability for gender equality commitments.**

Through the Spotlight Initiative, ESARO supported the Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition, a pan-African network of over 60 organizations advocating for the ratification and implementation of the Maputo Protocol, contributing to the ratification of the Maputo Protocol by South Sudan and Botswana (see Finding 1).<sup>85</sup> Under the ACT for EAW programme, 42 women's rights organizations engaged regional institutions to align frameworks with women's rights advocacy priorities, while Generation Equality provided platforms for women's rights organizations to monitor commitments and hold institutions accountable.<sup>86</sup>

➤ **ESARO supported regional women's movements to use accountability frameworks to hold duty bearers accountable**

for gender equality and women's empowerment commitments, contributing to legal, budgetary and policy reforms across the region. These tools enabled civil society to translate regional norms into national accountability demands, strengthening advocacy and engagement with duty bearers.

- The SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, strengthened with ESARO's support through the SADC Gender Statistics Strategy and Gender and Development Monitor, became a central mechanism for civil society-led monitoring. Its findings informed legal reforms in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, budgetary changes in Zambia, land rights reform in Botswana, and sexual and reproductive health and rights advocacy in Namibia.<sup>87</sup>
- ESARO supported the piloting of feminist accountability frameworks piloted with Akina Mama wa Afrika and Equality Now enhanced CSO capacity to track CEDAW and Maputo Protocol commitments and engage in shadow reporting and policy dialogue.<sup>88</sup>
- In the IGAD region, CSOs used the IGAD Gender Strategy (developed with ESARO support) to influence national planning, resulting in increased budget commitments in Kenya, policy revisions in South Sudan and Uganda, and GBV legislation development in Somalia and Ethiopia.<sup>89</sup>
- As part of regional programming, ESARO supported women cooperatives in national advocacy on gender-responsive agriculture and community dialogues.<sup>90</sup>

84 Key informant interviews with regional CSOs, UN Women; Strategic Note Annual Reports

85 Ibid

86 Ibid

87 SADC Gender Protocol Barometer 2017; Gender Links Reports 2022, Zambia Ministry of Finance 2023 Gender Budget Report.

88 Key informant interviews with CSOs

89 Key informant interviews with RECs, Strategic Note Annual Reports

90 Evaluations of 3R (2023) and Climate Smart Agriculture (2023)



➤ **ESARO demonstrated strong convening power to support women’s movements in fragile and conflict-affected settings to hold regional bodies accountable**, notably by co-facilitating the development of the 2024 Kampala Feminist Declaration with over 350 Sudanese women, including internally displaced persons and refugees.<sup>91</sup> The Declaration, used to engage regional and international bodies such as the AU and UN Security Council, led to increased representation of Sudanese women in peace and humanitarian platforms and influenced the integration of gender priorities in regional recovery frameworks.<sup>92</sup> Under the LEAP programme, ESARO supported women-led organizations in community-level advocacy on rights to justice and community hygiene.<sup>93</sup> It also strengthened the capacities of women and youth-led organizations to lead humanitarian response

through systematic support for advocacy and programming, including three annual consultations on humanitarian engagement and funding access. This led to the establishment of a 24-member regional women-led organization network, with some members now engaging in high-level events such as the Global Refugee Forum and Africa Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction to advocate for stronger gender integration in key frameworks.<sup>94</sup>

➤ **Despite these gains, regional feminist movements face persistent challenges**, including short-term funding, shrinking civic space and limited access for organizations representing vulnerable groups. Fragmentation, digital exclusion and ideological divides further limit unified advocacy (see Finding 8).<sup>95</sup>



Photo: UN Women Africa | Adelaide Camasso champions from Nampula province and activists for women’s rights, Mozambique

91 AU, Sudan Women’s Peace Dialogue Communique, Kampala, Uganda, July 2024

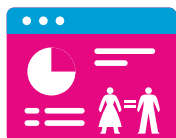
92 Key informant interviews UN Women, IGAD, ICGLR

93 LEAP evaluation (2023)

94 Key informant interviews, regional CSOs, annual reports

95 Key informant interviews, women’s rights organizations, UN Women

## OUTCOME 4: GENDER STATISTICS, DATA AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS INFORM PROGRAMMING AND ACCOUNTABILITY



### FINDING 4

ESARO made a strong contribution to Outcome 4 by supporting regional and national coordination mechanisms on gender statistics, including convening platforms such as the Africa Gender Statistics Forum and its strong collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Development Bank. Its leadership, technical expertise and strategic partnerships enabled the development and uptake of gender data, tools and products, which have informed policy and programming across the region.

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
Use of gender statistics and knowledge products to inform policy, advocacy and evidence-based decision-making	<b>Strong evidence</b> for this outcome, with gender statistics informing legislative reforms, national policies and institutional strengthening. Surveys on violence against women have shaped legal amendments and data systems, while time-use data has influenced care economy policies. Continued demand is demonstrated by regional requests for support in assessing gender data and capacity gaps.	<b>Moderate evidence</b> for ESARO's contribution through advocacy, media engagement, support to data production and convening, alongside strong national government leadership and commitment.
Standards and guidance developed to regulate and inform the production of gender data, statistics and research	<b>Strong evidence</b> of progress, with regional standards and guidance developed to inform gender data production and use. This includes toolkits on SDG prioritization, humanitarian settings, financial inclusion, harmonized methodologies through the EAC working group and Minimum Set of Gender Indicators training materials.	<b>Strong evidence</b> for ESARO's contribution through regional and national coordination, convening, capacity-building, advocacy and development of tools, reports and knowledge products.
Stakeholders have strengthened capacity to produce, use, monitor and report on gender data and statistics	<b>Strong evidence</b> for this outcome in terms of regional and national stakeholders strengthening production and use of gender data and statistics, and development of strategies and action plans on gender data.	<b>Strong evidence</b> for ESARO's contribution through capacity-building, technical support, action plans, capacity assessments and cross-country experience sharing.
Contributory factors and challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ ESARO and Country Office technical expertise</li> <li>→ Investment in communication of statistics and tracking uptake was noted to be a critical factor, and in certain cases a barrier to evidencing use</li> <li>→ Strong partnerships</li> </ul>	

➤ **ESARO made a strong contribution to advancing the production, use and coordination of gender statistics**

**across the region.** UN Women's leadership in the area of gender statistics in the region, its partnership

with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Development Bank and ability to convene in this area is well acknowledged by external stakeholders. In terms of coordination, UN agencies noted they have been able to leverage and learn from ESARO's convening on gender statistics. There has also been good integration across UN Women's triple mandate, with ESARO convening stakeholders, for example, through the Africa Region Gender Statistics Forum, using these platforms to advocate for standardized production of gender data and providing operational support to regional bodies and Member States to strengthen gender data production and use.

➤ **There is strong evidence of progress against the outcome of gender statistics used to inform policy making and accountability** through strategic institutionalization within policy and legal frameworks, resource allocation and accountability systems. Demand is reflected in direct requests from the AU Commission and IGAD for support in assessing gender data gaps, including on WPS.<sup>96</sup>

- The Uganda National Violence Against Women and Girls Survey, supported through Women Count, directly informed several legislative reforms including the reintroduction of the Marriage Bill (2022); revisions to the Sexual Offences Bill, Domestic Violence Act and Penal Code; creation of a Gender Unit in the Uganda Police Force; and development of anti-sexual harassment provisions in the Employment Amendment Bill. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics has since committed to undertaking this survey every five years, anchoring its role in policymaking.<sup>97</sup>
- In Kenya, gender data played a central role in driving its anti-SGBV policy and legal reform at the county level, including the establishment of specialized GBV courts in three counties, and informed development of county-level policies on family healthcare, economic empowerment and land rights.<sup>98</sup> Through the Country Office, ESARO supported the time-use survey which led to development of the first draft of the national care policy.<sup>99</sup>

- In Ethiopia, collaboration between ESARO and the government led to the integration of a stand-alone GBV module in the 2024 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, informing revisions to the Gender Equality Policy and a forthcoming national policy on EAW. Gender data on unpaid care work has also informed workplace childcare and breastfeeding provisions in Ethiopia's updated labour law.<sup>100</sup>
- Tanzania has institutionalized monthly dissemination of GBV statistics through its Zanzibar gender desks and one-stop centres. This data has underpinned parliamentary motions for resource reallocation to combat GBV and is now being used to advocate for marriage law reform. The SIGI survey also informed advocacy for passage of the long-pending Marriage and Divorce Bill.<sup>101</sup>
- In Rwanda, data on the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and school drop-out rates led to education policies supporting re-entry for teen mothers; the introduction of gender curricula in schools; and designated nursing spaces. Gender statistics are also embedded in national budgeting law through mandatory gender-responsive budgeting across all public agencies, following sustained advocacy from the Gender Monitoring Office.<sup>102</sup>

➤ **ESARO's contribution to these results is moderate**, with its advocacy; media campaigns on the importance of gender data; technical support; and convening efforts playing a clear catalytic role, recognizing that implementation and uptake were also heavily driven by national governments.

➤ **There is strong evidence of contribution to normative and technical standards for gender statistics.** For example, ESARO co-developed a gender analysis toolkit with Portia to support prioritization of SDG goals, disseminated to nine countries. This led to the development of training materials for the Minimum Set of Gender Indicators and supported the East African Community to harmonize gender statistics methodologies. ESARO also helped to develop the gender data status and financial inclusion report; gender data in humanitarian settings toolkit and the

96 Interviews with RECs

97 A 2022/2023 study examining [gender statistics uptake and use in Uganda](#)

98 2024 study on [Gender Data Use in Kenya: Insights from Kisumu County and illustrations from Homa Bay and Siaya counties](#)

99 IES. Regional Care Economy Evaluation. Forthcoming.

100 [A 2024 study on uptake and use of gender data in Ethiopia](#)

101 2023 case studies on work in [Zanzibar](#) and [Tanzania](#)

102 Case study forthcoming, based on gender statistics unit field interviews

gender data uptake and use toolkit; assessments of the administrative data systems related to discrimination and inequality; and a financial inclusion training toolkit to standardize financial inclusion surveys. There is strong evidence for ESARO's contribution through supporting regional and national coordination mechanisms on gender statistics; advocating for improved data use; developing a regional portal for the Paris21/OECD Bern initiative; capacity-building; knowledge production; and reports and toolkits.<sup>103</sup>

➤ **ESARO also strengthened the capacities of internal and external stakeholders to produce, use, monitor and report on gender data and statistics.** ESARO supported National Statistics Offices and line ministries across more than ten countries<sup>104</sup> to incorporate gender modules into household surveys; design time-use surveys; and develop strategies, action plans and toolkits on gender data. It also supported governments to link administrative data and survey data and to develop training toolkits to mainstream gender-responsive budgeting. ESARO supported the RECs to develop gender statistics assessment, programmes and strategies.<sup>105</sup> Stakeholders spoke highly of the quality of ESARO's capacity assessment and capacity-building, technical support and facilitation of cross-country exchange.<sup>106</sup>

➤ **UN Women's technical expertise was consistently cited as a key enabler across the region.** In countries where gender statistics specialists were in place, stakeholders noted greater depth in partner training, stronger credibility and increased demand for UN Women's support. Conversely, gaps in in-country expertise were seen to limit effective implementation. National stakeholders stressed the need for sustained, well-integrated support, pointing to the importance of investing in national UN Women expertise where gender statistics is identified as a priority within country strategic notes. In some cases, limited engagement with national working groups hindered tool uptake, highlighting the importance of strong in-country gender statistics expertise.

➤ **Investment in the communications function and capturing evidence for the uptake of gender statistics were key enablers in demonstrating the value of this work. Other key enablers included strong partnerships** with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank and other national and regional stakeholders through Women Count, which facilitated coordinated, complementary support to Member States.

103 Annual reports, interviews with Regional Economic Communities and UN Women colleagues, Women Count evaluation report and donor reports.

104 including Djibouti, Namibia, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Somalia, Zimbabwe

105 AU Commission, COMESA, IGAD, EAC, SADC

106 Annual reports, interviews with RECs and UN Women colleagues, Women Count evaluation report and donor reports



## OUTCOME 5: UN SYSTEM IS COORDINATED ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



### FINDING 5

ESARO has played a critical role in providing capacity development and technical guidance to UNCTs and Humanitarian Country Teams to implement gender equality commitments, leveraging UN common processes and accountability systems. While work has been undertaken to expand reach to Programme Presences and countries where UN Women is a Non-Resident Agency, more focus is required including greater engagement with Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators. Leadership and engagement with key inter-agency and advisory mechanisms has been uneven, requiring focused attention to address challenge areas.

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
UNCT capacities to implement UN gender equality commitments	<p><b>Strong evidence</b> of progress through capacity development, knowledge-sharing and focal point forums (UNCT-SWAP, Gender Equality Marker, Gender Theme Groups); responsive on-demand support; support to UNCTs with Country Offices; strengthening Gender Theme Groups (58 per cent of UNCT Gender Theme Groups were directly supported over the Strategic Note period).</p> <p>There was more limited progress on support to Non-Resident Agency UNCTs with seconded gender coordination specialists; localizing Gender Equality Accelerator Plans; and outreach and advocacy for Resident Coordinator/Offices.</p>	<p><b>Strong but variable evidence of ESARO's contribution</b> through focal point coordination and outreach, knowledge-sharing, capacity development and tailored technical support.</p>
Leadership/ participation in key inter-agency mechanisms	<p><b>Strong evidence</b> of progress in several regional coordination mechanisms, including the Regional Collaborative Platform, Africa Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction, Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalition 1 on Statistics, regional UNAIDS coordination bodies and joint teams on AIDS, and UN Prevention Platforms for the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. In contrast, progress was more limited in the Regional Gender Working Group, Regional-GIHA and other Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalitions.</p>	<p><b>Moderate and variable evidence of ESARO contribution</b> through convening, (co)leadership and participation in key mechanisms</p>

OUTCOME	EVIDENCE OF OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)	ESARO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTCOME (AND STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE)
<b>Gender mainstreaming in Common Country Analysis (CCA) and /UNSDCF, Humanitarian Response Plans and UN prevention strategies</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> , with gender mainstreaming across outcomes in 12 UNSDCFs in 2024 (increasing from 4 in 2021). Thirty-three per cent of UNCTs in the region were directly supported for gender mainstreaming in CCAs and UNSDCFs over the Strategic Note period, while others were indirectly supported through the Peer Support Group. Evidence of gender integration in Humanitarian Response Plans and in the UN Comprehensive Regional Prevention Strategy for the Horn of Africa.	<b>Strong evidence of ESARO contribution</b> through the Peer Support Group and Country Office capacity-building and support, leveraging UNCT-SWAP requirements on coherence, and support to and coordination of gender analysis efforts.
<b>Strengthened accountability – UNCT-SWAP Scorecard, Gender Equality Markers, Gender Parity</b>	<b>Strong evidence</b> , with 20 UNCTs submitting UNCT-SWAP in 2024 (11 in 2021): 77 per cent of UNCTs were directly supported with UNCT-SWAP and 73 per cent UNCTs supported with the Gender Equality Markers. <b>Strong evidence of ESARO's contribution</b> through capacity-building and technical support	
<b>Contributory factors and challenges</b>	<b>Technical capacity</b> and responsiveness of ESARO to UNCTs and Humanitarian Country Teams. <b>Recognition</b> of UN Women's leadership role in regional coordination and gender integration. <b>Lack of clarity</b> of reporting lines and roles of seconded gender coordination specialists. <b>Ad hoc support</b> to some normative processes (e.g. CEDAW) <b>Institutionalization</b> of GIHA coordination mechanisms remains uneven.	

➤ **ESARO has played a critical role in providing capacity development and technical guidance to UNCTs to implement gender equality commitments.** Over the Strategic Note period, support was delivered through regional and country-level training, knowledge-sharing, networking and focal point forums. ESARO has also demonstrated responsiveness to specific requests for tailored support to UNCTs throughout the region.<sup>107</sup> External, Country Office and ESARO stakeholders rated the effectiveness of ESARO's efforts in coordinating the UN system on gender at 4.0, 4.2 and 4.1 of 5 respectively<sup>108</sup> (Annex 5 synthesizes the coordination focal points survey [n=14] and UNCT-SWAP tracking. ESARO engaged in regional and national humanitarian coordination platforms (e.g. Humanitarian Country Teams, GIHAs) and strengthened women-led organizations' participation in humanitarian planning and advocacy (see Finding 8 for detailed results).

➤ **ESARO advanced gender mainstreaming in inter-agency processes through its leadership and engagement with regional advisory mechanisms,**<sup>109</sup> including the Regional Collaborative Platform and UN Development Coordination Office Peer Support Group. These provided opportunities for ESARO to provide substantive inputs to integrate gender into key planning instruments and frameworks and earned ESARO credibility among inter-agency peers. ESARO also contributed to regional inter-agency groups such as the Working Groups on Disaster Risk Reduction, PSEA, GBV and Disability Inclusion, UNAIDS Coordination Bodies, Care Platform (WEE), UN Prevention Strategy Platform for the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (WPS).<sup>110</sup> As co-convenor in three Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalitions, ESARO expanded its normative influence, although issues remain in some of the coalitions about the clarity of UN Women's role.

107 UN Women Country Coordination Focal Point survey results revealed that (93 per cent) of responding UNCTs received information and knowledge-sharing support from ESARO; 86 per cent received capacity-building; 57 per cent of countries benefitted from tailored technical support; and 50 per cent from networking and community building. Data was also obtained from Strategic Note Annual Reporting, interviews and secondary reports.

108 N=24 (ESARO); 61 (Country Office); 14 (external), 1=very ineffective, 5=very effective)

109 Evidence base includes key informant interviews, Strategic Note Annual Reports, secondary reports and documentation, meeting minutes.

110 Refer to relevant sections for elaboration.

UN agencies acknowledged particular contributions to Opportunity and Issue-Based Coalition 1 (Statistics).<sup>111</sup> ESARO also supported Country Office inputs and coordination of gender analysis to inform humanitarian responses (see Finding 7). ESARO has also played a key role in supporting regional level multi-agency initiatives, such as the Spotlight programme, to create greater synergies across agencies.

➤ **Commitment is required over the next Strategic Note to define and operationalize the Regional Gender Working Group.** The group was not operational at the time of the evaluation, having faced leadership and definition challenges over the period of the Strategic Note, with technical advisers bridging gaps between Regional Directors. External stakeholders expressed confusion and frustration over the group's purpose but showed willingness to re-engage if a clear agenda and value proposition is established. Strengthening the Regional Gender Working Group and clarifying its linkages with other thematic platforms, to ensure clear added value rather than duplication, is a priority. For example, opportunities were identified for leveraging the space to develop joint UN regional programmes and on common research or strategic advocacy. Opportunities were also highlighted to strengthen the clarity and positioning of the Regional-GIHA within an already crowded coordination space (see Finding 8).

➤ **ESARO has strategically leveraged UN common processes to mainstream gender into UNCT planning frameworks.** Significant progress was made in mainstreaming gender into CCAs and UNSDCF in the region in line with UN Sustainable Development Group standards. The ESARO Coordination Division provided direct support to UNCTs during planning processes, alongside technical contributions via the Peer Support Group.<sup>112</sup> Comprehensive gender mainstreaming was evidenced in 12 of 24 (50 per cent) UNSDCFs in the region in 2024 compared to only 4 (17 per cent) in 2021.<sup>113</sup>

➤ **ESARO has significantly contributed to strengthened regional UNCT accountability for gender through operationalization of UNCT accountability frameworks,** including the UNCT-SWAP, UNCT-Gender Equality Marker and gender parity targets and dashboards, and through technical and capacity development support.<sup>114</sup> Twenty of 24 regional countries submitted UNCT-SWAP reports and action plans in 2024, up from 11 in 2021, with significant gains in onboarding countries without Country Offices<sup>115</sup> (see Annex 5 for more details). UN Women Coordination focal points viewed the UNCT-SWAP Gender Equality Scorecards as key drivers of institutional change by tracking progress, enhancing accountability and informing leadership engagement. ESARO supported gender integration in the UN Regional Prevention and Integration Strategy for the Horn of Africa, including a stand-alone section on WPS, which was endorsed by the Executive Committee in December 2023.<sup>116</sup>

➤ **Despite progress, coordination remains a challenge in many UNCTs.** Half of UN Women Coordination focal point survey respondents said their UN system was well coordinated; the rest rated it as only somewhat or poorly coordinated. Views on ESARO's support also varied: 50 per cent of focal points found it very effective; 29 per cent somewhat effective; and 21 per cent somewhat ineffective (n=14). Those most satisfied appreciated the responsive and tailored support, and learning forums; those less satisfied often came from countries where UN Women was not a resident agency.

➤ **Countries where UN Women was not a resident agency require more sustained support on coordination.** ESARO designated or seconded focal points in Programme Presence/Non-Resident Agency countries,<sup>117</sup> but challenges remained in defining the working model and clarifying responsibilities and reporting lines. Respondents highlighted a lack of in-country dedicated support; gaps in technical

111 Strategic Note Annual Reports, interviews, meeting minutes, membership lists and secondary reports.

112 Thirty-six per cent of UNCTs responding to the survey reported receiving direct support for UNSDCF design; 33 per cent for CCA. All processes work through the PSG mechanism where UN Women plays a key technical role.

113 Based on UNCT-SWAP indicator reporting and Strategic Note Annual Reporting. An Africa-wide assessment of gender mainstreaming in CCA/UNSDCFs was under way at the time of this evaluation: the final product is expected to offer more granular analysis.

114 Seventy-three per cent of focal point respondents reported direct support from ESARO for UNCT-SWAP, and 73 per cent for annual work planning (Gender Equality Markers).

115 UNCT-SWAP global reporting and Strategic Note Annual Reporting. Two more Non-Resident Agency countries were in the process of undertaking their first assessments at the time of the evaluation and are expected to onboard in 2025. Also based on Strategic Note Annual Reports and interviews

116 [The United Nations Climate, Peace and Security Hub for the Horn of Africa](#)

117 By February 2025, there were four seconded (Zambia, Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritius/Seychelles) and four appointed (Eritrea, Angola, Lesotho, Namibia) Coordination focal points, covering 8 of 11 Programme Presence/Non-Resident Agency countries.

visibility, hindering impact; and challenges in raising the visibility of technical contributions, exacerbated by at times siloed and competitive inter-agency cultures.<sup>118</sup>

➤ **Strategic engagement with Resident Coordinators/ Offices and Humanitarian Coordinators is needed to strengthen coordination on gender.** Outreach and advocacy efforts have relied heavily on Coordination focal points at country level, some of whom face persistent challenges working with overstretched entity-level focal points and little power to influence decisions.<sup>119</sup> ESARO has had limited direct engagement with Resident Coordinators/Offices to support coordination, although focal points highlighted their strong and visible leadership as a catalyst for progress.<sup>120</sup>

➤ **ESARO is well positioned to scale its coordination mandate amid shifts in the global development landscape.** Key informants at all levels highlighted the elevated importance of UN Women's role in system-wide coordination in light of recent reviews on the gender coordination system, humanitarian reforms, reduced resources and expected reductions in programming presence for many UN entities.<sup>121</sup> The development of UN Women's core commitments in humanitarian action is a key entry point to strengthen humanitarian coordination. Localization of the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan, endorsed at the highest UN levels, also offers a new entry point for high-level engagement. There have been some efforts to brief Country Offices, but Country Offices have requested more practical tools and implementation support, including on how the Plan is to be implemented and the ways in which it aligns with existing frameworks.



Photo: UN Women Africa | ESARO: WPS Every Badge Counts campaign

118 Refer to Annex 5 for further analysis.

119 Targeted ESARO support to strengthen Gender Theme Groups has helped to develop capacities across the system, but the issue persists. Fifty-eight per cent of survey respondent countries reported receiving direct support to Gender Theme Groups.

120 Examples included the Resident Coordinator's role in advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment, dedicated UNCT gender meetings and the commitment of senior leadership to support key processes.

121 See, for example, Dalberg (2023) 'Independent Review of the UN System's Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality'.



## What were the enablers and barriers to achieving target outcomes?

### FINDING 6

**The evaluation confirmed that the assumptions set out in the theory of change are valid, including the external factors of political will, commitment and capacity of women groups, political stability; and internal factors of effective partnerships and ESARO's credibility and technical expertise. Additional enabling and constraining factors were identified in relation to the pushback against gender equality, internal systems, operating context and delivery mechanisms.**

➤ **Political will and political stability were key contributory factors.** While the theory of change assumed that political will and regional normative frameworks would be sufficient to drive change, this was undermined in contexts where national translation was weak or contested (e.g. disconnects between REC policy frameworks and country-level uptake). For instance, resistance to provisions such as Maputo Protocol Article 14 (on Health and Reproductive Rights) undermined the normative environment in several countries. Political stability provided a foundation for advancing normative, coordination and operational work. Variable coordination among UN agencies, RECs and civil society also affected the coherence and effectiveness of gender equality efforts, highlighting the need for harmonized planning, inclusive engagement and joint accountability mechanisms.<sup>122</sup> Normative progress was strongest where institutional mechanisms (e.g. AU conventions, Regional Action Plans) were reinforced by grassroots engagement. However, weak engagement and feedback loops between civil society and institutional partners (Findings 3, 8) limited collective accountability.

➤ **Continued pushback against gender equality and human rights has intensified as a significant barrier.** Shrinking civic space and resistance to politically sensitive issues, bodily autonomy, gender identity and women's political participation curtailed advocacy efforts. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, women human rights defenders faced harassment when calling for gender-responsive governance.

Such dynamics limited UN Women's normative influence and have delayed legislative progress; for example, in implementation of the Somalia Sexual Offences Bill and Kenya two-thirds gender rule. This reflects persistent patriarchal norms, highlighting the need for sustained social programming. Stakeholders emphasized the need for institutional guidance on addressing backlash and maintaining safe dialogue spaces, while leveraging convening power to uphold normative standards, in alignment with the work on social norms.

➤ **Capacity within regional bodies and women's movements were both enablers and barriers.**

Success often depended on the institutional capacity of the AU Commission and RECs, which varied significantly. Where gender units lacked dedicated expertise, operational budgets or decision-making power, collaboration and accountability mechanisms suffered. National counterparts also frequently lacked the technical capacity for gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting and data systems needed to institutionalize gender equality and women's empowerment. The availability of quality gender data (an implicit theory of change assumption) proved enabling where it existed and supported advocacy and policy. However, gaps in disaggregated data, particularly in humanitarian settings, impeded evidence-based decision-making. Meanwhile, although women's rights organizations were positioned as key actors in the theory of change, many lacked the administrative systems to access donor funding, hindering consistent engagement in regional processes.

➤ **Several internal theory of change assumptions were confirmed as enabling factors. UN Women's credibility, normative leadership and technical expertise were widely cited as assets.** Effective partnerships with RECs, feminist CSOs and UN entities enabled joint advocacy, programming and knowledge generation – especially where roles and value-add were clearly defined. Core funding allowed for more strategic planning and piloting of innovations, and helped finance hard-to-fund areas such as coordination. However, short donor funding cycles limited the institutionalization of successful approaches,

122 Key informant interviews with RECs, UN Women, CSOs, Member State stakeholders

disrupted continuity and constrained longer-term capacity development, government handover, ownership and long-term accountability (see Finding 17). Finally, gaps in gender data affect accountability, reporting and evidence-based policymaking on gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>123</sup>

➤ **Internal systems presented both enablers and constraints.** While corporate systems supported delivery overall, limitations particularly in emergency/humanitarian contexts undermined responsiveness. As seen across humanitarian and operational support (Findings 7, 13, 14), system bottlenecks, including recruitment, procurement and reporting, constrained

timely implementation. Turnover within the ESARO leadership team also disrupted strategic continuity. Tracking outcomes across delivery modalities also remained a challenge. While some teams, such as gender statistics, invested in documenting the policy influence of their outputs, most modalities (advocacy, knowledge generation, convening and support to Country Offices) were still assessed largely at output level. Few structured mechanisms exist to assess uptake, follow-up or the results of these activities.

**Specific enablers and barriers identified through the evaluation are set out against ESARO's main delivery modalities below.**<sup>124</sup>

MODALITY	FACTORS OF SUCCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED
<b>Advocacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Advocacy efforts were most effective when grounded in credible evidence and gender data, linked to regional programmes and sustained over time.</li> <li>➔ Regional campaigns effectively supported more coordinated, effective and efficient efforts across countries, providing a multiplier effect in reaching audiences</li> <li>➔ Linking regional advocacy to national programming was essential for national policy uptake and adoption of tools and systems. Limited institutional follow-up was a barrier, noted in the regional 3R and Climate Smart Agriculture evaluations.</li> </ul>
<b>Capacity-building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Capacity-building was one of ESARO's most visible contributions across thematic areas and was widely appreciated by stakeholders when tailored to context and grounded in practical application. However, the Regional Capacity Development Evaluation (2017) and ESARO internal audit found that ESARO invested heavily in workshops without consistently assessing needs, strategically selecting participants or tracking results.</li> <li>➔ Coordination of Member State capacity-building through RECs (for example in gender statistics) was a key enabler.</li> <li>➔ High turnover, especially in humanitarian settings, affected capacity-building results.</li> <li>➔ Greater inclusion of marginalized groups and attention to language/accessibility is needed.</li> </ul>
<b>Convening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Strategic entry points such as CSW and AU summits enhanced ESARO's convening power.</li> <li>➔ A key enabler was relationships with RECs, development partners and CSOs, and structured mechanisms that enabled institutionalization beyond individual relationships.</li> <li>➔ Limited mechanisms to follow up on high-level engagements and regional events (e.g. CSW discussions through the ACT programme) on how contributions influenced outcomes and next steps affected continuity.</li> </ul>

<sup>123</sup> Key informant interviews with RECs, CSOs, UN Women

<sup>124</sup> The other key modalities – knowledge generation, regional programming and support to Country Offices - are covered under the 'efficiency' findings.

## How effectively has ESARO positioned itself to support the gender responsiveness of humanitarian–development–peace nexus programming?

### FINDING 7

Over the Strategic Note period, ESARO has made good progress in demonstrating UN Women's relevance in the humanitarian–development–peace space by building capacities and mobilizing human and financial resources to support GIHA at the country-level, despite challenges with UN Women's humanitarian-related human resources availability and operational systems to respond in crises.

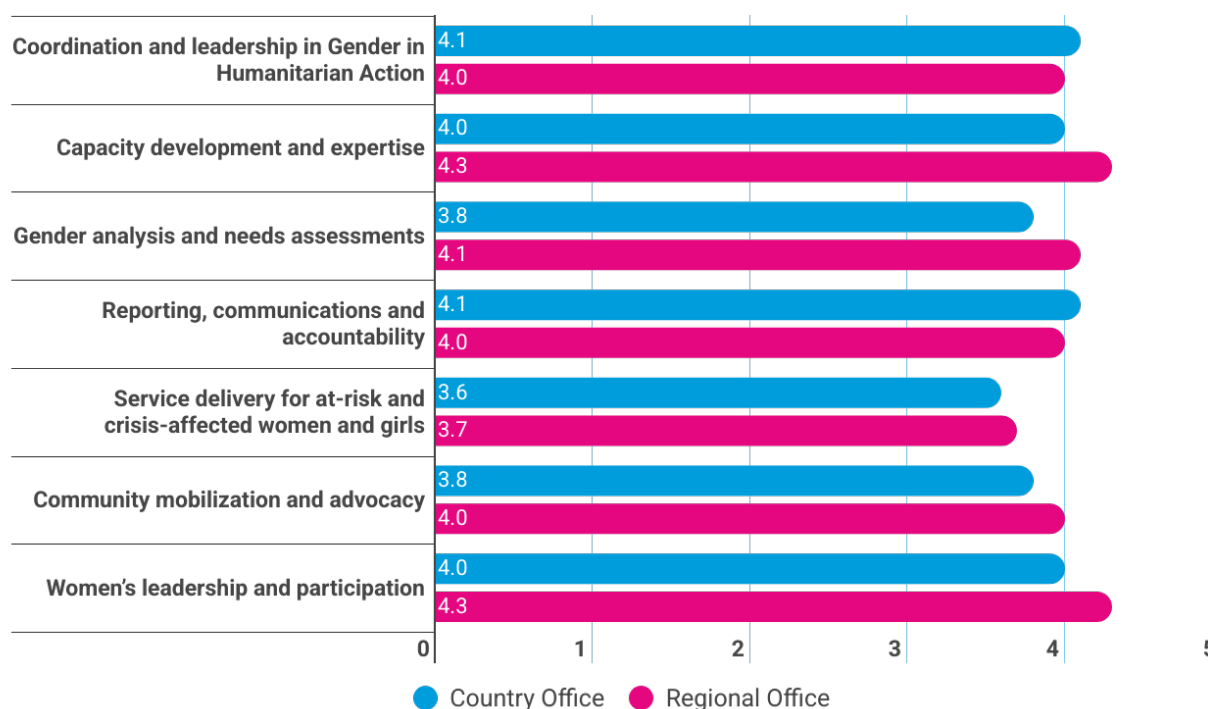
➤ **ESARO has demonstrated UN Women's relevance in the humanitarian space by effectively supporting the integration of gender equality in country-level humanitarian actions (GIHA).** In the context of rising humanitarian needs, UN Women joined the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2022, developing

enhanced global clarity over the Strategic Note period on UN Women's role and priorities.<sup>125</sup> ESARO supported country-level GIHA integration with capacity development, knowledge-sharing and regional networking.<sup>126</sup> UN Women expanded its presence and influence in seven Humanitarian Country Teams and two UNCT Refugee Response mechanisms in the region<sup>127</sup> and supported the formation of GIHA working groups and gender integration in Humanitarian Country Teams planning frameworks in Somalia, Sudan and Malawi. ESARO made notable progress in clarifying and operationalizing its support to gender equality and women's empowerment in humanitarian settings.<sup>128</sup> Overall, ESARO and Country Office colleagues rated ESARO's effectiveness in supporting gender-responsive humanitarian responses in the region as somewhat effective, particularly in the areas of women's leadership, and capacity development and expertise.

FIGURE 5

#### Evaluation survey, Effectiveness in supporting gender-responsive humanitarian response

On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the effectiveness of the Regional Office in supporting gender-responsive humanitarian responses in the region in the following areas? (1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective) n = 85 (RO=24, CO=61)



Source: Evaluation survey

125 As evidenced by the development of the Humanitarian Strategy (2022-25), Gender Equality Accelerators (2024) and enhanced global architecture to support delivery.

126 Examples include regional GIHA training of trainers, community of practice and Gender in Humanitarian Action Pocket Guide (n.d.).

127 Humanitarian Country Teams: Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Mozambique, Malawi, Burundi, Ethiopia. Refugee Response: Kenya and Uganda.

128 Evidence base includes key informant interviews, Strategic Note annual reports, secondary reports and documentation. Recognized comparative advantages of UN Women within Humanitarian Country Teams included gender equality and women's empowerment technical and advocacy support.

➤ **Nonetheless, challenges remain in expanding and strengthening work on GIHA.** Advocacy is required to clarify distinctions between GIHA and GBV at country and regional levels, which are often conflated, leading to pushback in some contexts. Country stakeholders cited continued demand for practical guidance and tools, as well as improved data and analysis to inform GIHA. Localization of global Memorandums of Understanding offers a key opportunity to advance implementation.<sup>129</sup>

➤ **ESARO has supported the operationalization of GIHA through collaborative resource mobilization and programme support,** working with bi-lateral development partners and specialized funds to support resource mobilization in six countries.<sup>130</sup> ESARO supported implementation of two Gender Equality Accelerator programmes: Leadership, Empowerment Access and Protection (LEAP) and Women's Resilience to Disasters.<sup>131</sup> Both are designed as multi-pillar initiatives operating across the humanitarian–development–peace spectrum: LEAP links immediate protection and livelihood recovery to women's participation in governance and decision-making, while Women's Resilience to Disasters integrates disaster preparedness, risk reduction and resilience building into recovery planning. ESARO's coordination and management role in LEAP II was identified as positively influencing programme effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.<sup>132</sup>

➤ **Partnerships with women-led organizations have helped build capacity for crisis response and sustained recovery and peacebuilding grounded in women and girls' needs and rights.** In the latter part of the Strategic Note period, ESARO mapped women-led organizations engaged in humanitarian action and developed a standardized training approach. During 2023–2024, regional training sessions for 26 participants from nine countries helped catalyse peer-to-peer learning and engagement, and laid the groundwork for building a network of women-led organizations to support gender-transformative crisis responses.<sup>133</sup> This network of women-led organizations has

potential to influence local development planning, contribute to disaster preparedness and engage in peace processes, aligning with the nexus approach.

➤ **Operationalization of the humanitarian programme at country level has been hampered by some corporate systems not suited to crisis contexts.** Stakeholders consistently cited delays in fund disbursement and cumbersome contracting around human resources in crises as major bottlenecks, particularly in countries without a fully-fledged Country Office. This led to compressed implementation timelines and missed opportunities.<sup>134</sup> ESARO should continue to advocate at the corporate level for faster, more risk-based flexible operational modalities in humanitarian settings.

## FINDING 8

**ESARO has strengthened its internal structures to enhance coordinated humanitarian responses while also advancing regional UN system coherence on GIHA. ESARO has played key advocacy and technical roles at the country and regional level in mainstreaming gender equality in disaster risk reduction in line with the nexus approach.**

➤ **ESARO instituted two mechanisms to facilitate coordinated responses and foster more effective and coherent UN Women responses across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus:** the Humanitarian Advisory Team (comprising Country Office representatives from crisis contexts) and the Crisis Management Team in response to crises in Sudan and Mozambique but were expected to extend to other Country Offices facing humanitarian crisis. The Crisis Management Team convenes ESARO thematic leads (including WPS, humanitarian and other thematic colleagues) and Country Office actors as needed to provide strategic, coordinated guidance; and to support programming, resource mobilization and timely response to crises. Both teams were seen by regional and country stakeholders as contributing to more coherent and efficient humanitarian engagement.

129 Work was undertaken with UNHCR to develop a regional level Memorandum of Understanding to operationalize the global memorandum between the two entities, but the strategy was never finalized. The evaluation of UNW/AU MOU (2024) noted that gender equality in humanitarian and conflict situations were missing from the memorandum's joint strategy.

130 Uganda, Kenya, Mozambique, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Burundi. Key funds and development partners included Japan, KOICA, CERF (OCHA) and SPF (Sweden). See Finding 15 for further details on resource mobilization.

131 LEAP focused on Kenya, Somalia and Uganda.

132 Evaluation LEAP II (2023).

133 Interviews with partners

134 For example, the evaluation of LEAP III Uganda (2024) highlighted delays in funds disbursements, which negatively influenced programme results and sustainability.



➤ **The Regional GIHA Working Group, led by ESARO, facilitated inter-agency collaboration but faces challenges in sustaining engagement and defining its scope within the regional humanitarian space.**

Stakeholders highlighted inconsistent meetings and unclear objectives, as well as continued conflation of GBV and GIHA at regional and country levels. There are opportunities to restructure the Regional GIHA Working Group based on models such as the GBV Cluster, for example, by introducing agency-led pillars on advocacy, research or programming, and by strengthening links to other inter-agency mechanisms such as the Regional Gender Working Group.

➤ **The Humanitarian/Disaster Risk Reduction team has worked cross-thematically to some extent, but opportunities remain for more intentional and strategic engagement.** Examples include technical collaboration with WPS on LEAP programmes and GIHA training; with WEE on the LEAP initiative; EVAW technical support to incorporate GBV in GIHA training; and support to WPP in South Sudan's elections. Stakeholders noted that, while effective, efforts were often opportunistic rather than strategic, and often limited to support to capacity development forums. Mechanisms such as the Crisis Management Team and Regional GIHA offer potential to promote more systematic cross-thematic work, aligned with the nexus approach to support more synergistic programming and resource mobilization. **ESARO has effectively integrated gender equality and women's empowerment into regional and national disaster risk reduction frameworks and processes,** a core development and resilience pillar within the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, reducing

vulnerability to future shocks. Working closely with the Africa Working Group for Disaster Risk Reduction and IGAD, ESARO has served as an advocate and technical expert for mainstreaming gender in regional initiatives. Key successes include gender integration within the Africa Sendai Framework Programme of Action and the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative, alongside the development and dissemination of gender in disaster risk reduction mainstreaming tools, guidance notes and research.<sup>135</sup> ESARO also completed gender assessments and recommendations for the Africa Programme of Action and a cross-border gender assessment on climate-induced disasters in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, which informed gender-responsive disaster risk reduction policy and programming. ESARO also supported Country Offices to integrate gender in disaster risk reduction strategies in Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique.

➤ **This work has fostered recognition of the importance of gender equality in disaster risk reduction while generating demand for further technical support at country and regional levels.** Key stakeholders at all levels expressed respect for ESARO's work in disaster risk reduction, and highlighted momentum that had been generated for further engagement. This was seen as particularly important to complement and counteract crisis-driven responses in line with the nexus approach. Key opportunities in the next Strategic Note include support for implementation of the Sendai Gender Action Plan, developing female-led early warning systems and strengthening linkages between women-led organizations and youth engagement for disaster risk reduction.

<sup>135</sup> For example, Gender Mainstreaming Guidance Notes for Disaster Risk Reduction (Sendai) and Cross-Border Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe (n.d.).

## How effectively has ESARO developed strategic partnerships with the most relevant stakeholders and managed these partnerships to deliver target outcomes?

### FINDING 9

**ESARO has established strategic partnerships with key stakeholders to advance gender equality across UN Women's triple mandate, especially with regional entities and feminist networks. However, to deliver more transformative outcomes, partnerships need to be more institutionalized, co-created, inclusive and longer-term.**

➤ **While ESARO made important gains in partnership development, more needs to be done to move to strategic partnerships.** The previous Strategic Note noted that many partnerships were largely transactional rather than strategic. A 2022 partnership mapping exercise, drawing on internal and external stakeholder consultations, was conducted to better align partnerships with the new Strategic Note. While it contributed to greater clarity on institutional priorities, some mapped partners were not engaged. There is limited documentation on partner selection

or reasons for exclusion, making institutional learning and continuity difficult. ESARO, civil society and RECs emphasized the need to shift from short-term arrangements to structured, multi-year partnerships with clearly defined roles, shared outcomes, monitoring mechanisms and joint resource mobilization. While structured agreements were seen as essential for sustainability, several partners also noted the value of flexible, informal collaboration especially in dynamic advocacy and policy processes. Concerns were also raised about limited follow-up and weak coordination between ESARO and Country Offices, which sometimes led to fragmented engagement with shared partners.

FIGURE 7

Evaluation survey, Partnership satisfaction

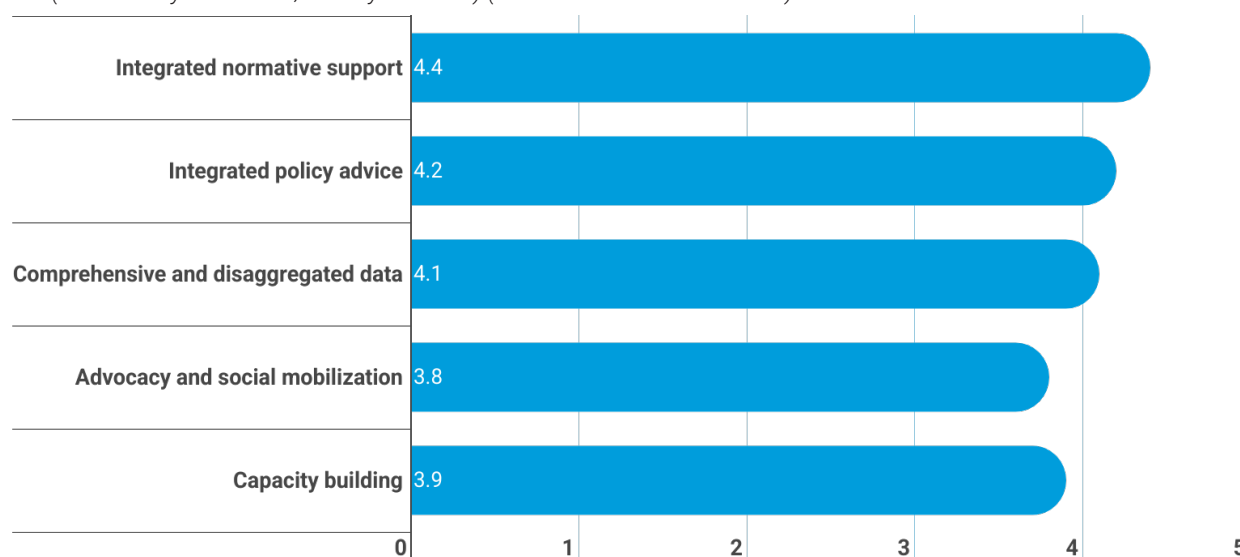
**EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS WERE BROADLY SATISFIED WITH THE PARTNERSHIP**

★★★★☆ 3.7

FIGURE 8

Evaluation survey, effectiveness of support

On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the effectiveness of the UN Women Regional Office support to you in the following areas (with 1= very ineffective, 5= very effective) (n=10 - external stakeholders)



Source: Survey of external stakeholders n =10

## PARTNERSHIPS WITH REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES (RECS)

➤ **ESARO maintained strategic partnerships with the AU, EAC, SADC, IGAD, COMESA and ICGLR**, recognizing their critical role for advancing regional normative frameworks and influencing national policy. Through financial and technical assistance, convening, training and advocacy support, ESARO contributed to the development and implementation of gender equality policies and action plans; strengthened REC–CSO linkages; and helped expand civil society participation in regional processes (see Findings 1–4).

➤ **RECs consistently valued ESARO’s normative leadership, coordination mandate and technical expertise.** REC officials described the partnerships as transparent, technical solid and enduring, in some cases citing over a decade of collaboration on key frameworks such as the AU Gender Strategy and more recently, the AU Convention on EVAWG.

➤ **Nonetheless, the quality and consistency of engagement varied.** Some RECs lacked formalized frameworks, limiting coordination and long-term planning. Others noted frustration over unmet funding expectations and irregular support. RECs highlighted the need for ESARO to stay relevant by investing beyond events, such as institutional development, sustained capacity and models that RECs themselves can own and scale. These gaps highlighted the need for clearer objectives, more structured modalities and better differentiation in approaches ESARO takes across RECs.

➤ **In response, ESARO has begun refining its engagement strategy** by prioritizing select RECs; clarifying the added value and intended results of each partnership; aligning around defined priority areas based on expected results; and assigning dedicated focal points to improve continuity and accountability. The forthcoming shift of the AU Liaison Office to headquarters reporting lines will require ESARO to rethink its operational interface with the AU Commission to preserve momentum.

➤ **Some REC representatives noted that joint achievements have not been sufficiently communicated** and recommended greater visibility through co-branded knowledge products and shared advocacy. Pooled fundraising was seen as a way to reduce fragmentation and strengthen shared ownership, particularly for cross-institutional initiatives.

## PARTNERSHIPS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

➤ **ESARO has positioned feminist and civil society organizations as key allies**, working with networks such as GIMAC, FEMNET, AWLN, SOAWR, Akina Mama wa Afrika. Through initiatives such as the Spotlight Initiative and regional care economy dialogues, UN Women facilitated CSO participation in regional platforms and supported advocacy, gender-responsive budgeting and data-driven monitoring of normative instruments. ESARO also supported cross-border campaigns led by networks such as Solidarity for African Women’s Rights and the NALA Feminist Collective, thereby enhancing continental institutional accountability (see Finding 3).

➤ **Despite these advances, civil society engagement remains uneven.** Many partnerships remained ad hoc, donor-driven or short-term, especially for youth-led, rural and disability/vulnerability-focused organizations (see Finding 16). Competitive bidding processes disadvantaged these smaller, younger organizations with limited compliance capacity. CSOs highlighted perceived heavy reporting requirements and top-down engagement. Civil society stakeholders called for a more coherent and inclusive partnership approach within the existing frameworks of how small grants and competitive tenders are structured and awarded. They emphasized the importance of co-creation where possible; more equitable access to funding opportunities; and greater attention to intersectional representation in partner selection and engagement. As part of the ACT consultations, civil society emphasized the importance of feminist partnership principles (such as shared decision-making, two-way engagement and trust) in shaping how partnerships are implemented, not just how they are framed. The current partnership portfolio shows limited

engagement with environmental and climate justice networks, representing a missed opportunity given their intersection with gender and regional priorities.

➤ **The Civil Society Advisory Group and Regional Youth Steering Committee remain underutilized, with unclear mandates and limited opportunities to influence strategy and programme design.** While ESARO ensured diverse institutional representation and engaged civil society and youth in Beijing+30 and CSW consultations,<sup>136</sup> broader engagement has been difficult. Two iterations of the Regional Civil Society Advisory Group were convened over the Strategic Note period, but neither functioned as intended. Members noted that engagement is often late in the project cycle, limiting opportunities for meaningful co-creation. Identified issues included limited resources, communication gaps, unclear roles and perceived tokenistic engagement. Earlier, structured engagement and drawing on lessons from advisory models across UN Women and the Spotlight Initiative would strengthen these mechanisms.<sup>137</sup>

## NON-TRADITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

➤ **ESARO engaged with media professionals to amplify gender equality messaging and influence public discourse.** Notable collaborations were with Farm Radio International to facilitate social norms change and capacity-building for the African Women in Media Network, supporting women's voices and leadership in media spaces and to enhance coverage of GBV cases.<sup>138</sup>

➤ **ESARO also partnered with international financial institutions, including the African Development Bank** to (a) deliver training on care economy principles, linking macroeconomic planning to gender equality outcomes and (b) publish several national gender equality profiles; and supported South Sudan with its World Bank programming. A key lesson was

the importance of early entry points and flexible engagement in fragile contexts. ESARO supported the International Monetary Fund, AFRITAC East and the Government of Tanzania in convening African Ministers of Finance and Gender to discuss financing for gender equality, aligning macroeconomic planning with gender equality and women's empowerment outcomes. This showcases ESARO's convening power but also underscored the need for follow-up mechanisms to ensure commitments translate into financing reforms and national budgets.<sup>139</sup>

➤ **ESARO also expanded its partnerships with the private sector**, in line with the UN Women Corporate Private Sector Engagement Strategy (2023–25). This included capacity-building for companies, women's organizations and business associations on AfCFTA-related opportunities for women entrepreneurs; supporting women's networks to advocate for gender equality within companies; and mapping entry points in trade and value chains. ESARO supported the development of gender-responsive regional trade policies under the AfCFTA by producing policy briefs that advocated for the inclusion of women's economic interests (see Finding 1). It also promoted responsible business practices via training based on the Women's Empowerment Principles, aimed at embedding gender equality into corporate practices. ESARO also joined the East Africa Philanthropy Network, and supported Country Offices through engagement with multi-national corporations/foundations such as DeBeers and the Gates Foundation. However, stakeholders noted limited follow-up to assess private-sector implementation of gender equality commitments. They suggested working with business associations to strengthen accountability through compliance frameworks aligned with national commitments, such as gender audits, benchmarking tools and recognition programmes.<sup>140</sup>

136 For example, Regional Youth Steering Committee members delivered youth statements during CSW68 & CSW69, Beijing+30 regional and subregional consultations, and input and sharing sessions with the Regional Civil Society Advisory Group on CSW69.

137 Evidence base includes key informant interviews, Strategic Note Mid-Term Review, Strategic Note Annual Reports, secondary reports and documentation. See, for example, Spotlight Initiative Final Evaluation (2024).

138 CSO and REC interviews

139 Interviews with Country Offices and CSOs.

140 ESARO interviews, annual reports, policy briefs.



## How effectively and coherently are ESARO efforts (across UN Women's triple mandate) supporting and amplifying the work undertaken at country level?

### FINDING 10

**ESARO's efforts have supported resource mobilization, cross-country learning and targeted funding to under-resourced areas through regional programmes and seed funding. Country Offices value ESARO's support on normative and coordination work. There are opportunities to strengthen internal coherence by better integrating regional frameworks into country programming and strengthening REC engagement strategies.**

#### ➤ **ESARO provides valued support to Country Offices across the Entity's triple mandate.**

Country Offices consistently cited its contributions to CEDAW reporting, Generation Equality processes and the UN-SWAP scorecard as instrumental in strengthening their normative and coordination work. The effectiveness of ESARO's support in linking Country Offices with regional and global initiatives was rated as somewhat effective at 3.7/5 and 3.9/5, by Country Office and ESARO personnel respectively, through supporting Country Offices align with corporate processes and normative frameworks. Country Offices also appreciated ESARO's support in positioning them with key stakeholders, including the Resident Coordinators Office system. Over one third of Country Office survey respondents<sup>141</sup> reported that ESARO support had led to new partnerships and networking opportunities.

➤ **Regional programmes have served as a gateway to additional resource mobilization.** Programmes such as LEAP helped Country Offices secure additional funding, including Japan's MUSHO grant, and expanded programming e.g. Rwanda's climate-resilient agriculture. ESARO support enabled cross-learning on funding streams such as Spotlight 2.0 and provided seed funding to revitalize work and in hard-to-finance areas, e.g. through regional governance funding and social protection programming. Thirty-one per cent of Country Office respondents<sup>142</sup> to the survey reported that ESARO support contributed to new funding,

underscoring the potential to scale up coordinated efforts in resource mobilization efforts through joint regional proposals.

#### ➤ **ESARO plays an important convening and technical role in regional programming, although the added value of the 'regional' dimension varied.**

Country Offices reported that while some regional programmes facilitated integrated approaches and cross-learning, not all regional programmes fully realized this potential. Evaluations of the LEAP and 3R programmes highlighted ESARO's strong technical, quality assurance and capacity-building contributions, supporting more integrated and coherent delivery. Conversely, the Climate Smart Agriculture project evaluation identified gaps in cross-country learning and sharing. Country Offices expressed appetite for more regional programmes, but also emphasized that national-level programming should be led by Country Offices, and the need to distinguish between multi-country efforts and genuinely regional initiatives, i.e. those engaging regional conventions or addressing cross-border issues such as AfCFTA and trade.

#### ➤ **ESARO's engagement with RECs is valued but Country Offices felt this could be more coordinated and integrated with national programming.**

Country Offices highlighted that links between RECs and Member States are not always direct, and Country Offices suggested they and ESARO could work better together on this. Several Country Offices cited country-level gaps, including limited engagement with RECs and limited support on how to respond to REC requests or contribute to regional reporting commitments. There is opportunity to develop a coherent regional strategy to guide engagement with RECs. This finding consolidates evidence from across the evaluation highlighting the need to strengthen translation of regional policy frameworks and programming into coherent national-level uptake and action (see Findings 1, 5 and 16).

141 36 per cent, n=61

142 n=61

## What was ESARO's comparative advantage and value add vis-à-vis other development actors?

### FINDING 11

**ESARO's comparative advantage lies in its unique position bridging headquarters and Country Offices, offering contextually relevant support, institutional memory and high-level normative engagement. Externally, it is valued for its holistic gender focus; convening power with RECs and development partners; and strong thought leadership.**

➤ **Externally, ESARO is widely recognized as a trusted and authoritative actor on gender equality.** As the only UN entity with a dedicated gender mandate, it is seen as a natural counterpart to gender ministries within RECs and a key source of policy advice, gender data and tools. ESARO's convening power brings together governments, development partners, UN entities and feminist civil society to drive policy dialogue, action and accountability. RECs highlighted that ESARO's greatest strength was its ability to link it with other RECs, and to advise RECs on linkages with global and continental normative frameworks. Interviewees noted that ESARO's credibility is reinforced through technical leadership and knowledge generation, including synthesis of evidence, quality-assured tools (e.g. Voluntary National Review guidance, gender scorecards, normative tracking), and support for their

uptake, which contributes to coherence and stronger monitoring across the region.

➤ **Internally, ESARO provides integrated support to Country Offices across technical, normative and operational domains.** It contextualizes corporate guidance and helps align Country Office programming with global priorities. Country Offices consistently value ESARO's strong institutional capacity (including specialized thematic and normative expertise), technical assistance, quality assurance and hands-on surge support, especially valuable in contexts with high personnel turnover.

ESARO plays a critical role in strengthening the strategic positioning of Country Offices through cross-regional collaboration and high-level normative engagement. Country Offices appreciated ESARO's facilitation of peer learning through communities of practice and other platforms. ESARO's direct support to Country Offices, e.g. participation in high-level meetings and forums and engaging with Member States at the highest level, was noted to be extremely useful in elevating Country Office visibility and positioning with governments, UNCTs and development partners. For example, the Regional Director's meetings with government and development partners in Zimbabwe was noted to be critical in unlocking partnership and funding opportunities.

## How relevant and coherent were ESARO's areas of focus?

### FINDING 12

**ESARO's areas of focus were largely relevant to regional needs; coherent in delivery against the systemic outcomes; and responsive to emerging priorities and opportunities. There are opportunities to strengthen coherence across thematic areas; mainstream corporate strategies on social norms and disability inclusion; and further prioritize efforts.**

## RELEVANCE

➤ **ESARO's areas of focus were broadly relevant to regional priorities and aligned with the root causes of gender inequality.** Partners acknowledged ESARO's responsiveness to emerging opportunities, such as its leadership on the care economy. Country Office and external survey respondents rated ESARO highly for addressing regional needs (4.3/5).<sup>143</sup> However, stakeholders raised concerns regarding the breadth of engagements, which risk overstressing limited human and financial resources and led to perceptions of diffuse rather than deep engagement. Stakeholders called for more strategic focus and prioritization. Donors emphasized the need for data-informed prioritization, building on country-level performance on normative frameworks and UNCT-SWAP indicators to guide where to invest efforts. ESARO is moving in this direction, with recent efforts targeting priority areas with a few RECs. There was strong interest from Country Offices in ESARO investing in innovation, such as piloting scalable models for country-level uptake.

➤ **Based on key stakeholder inputs, cross-cutting priorities for the next Strategic Note include:**

- **Environment:** integrating gender into national climate plans; advocating for women's leadership in climate regional forums; and influencing funding pathways (GCF, IFAD, etc.).
- **Social norms:** mainstreaming social norms approaches more systematically across thematic areas, building on the new corporate framework.

- **Leave no one behind:** mainstreaming leave no one behind programming, see Finding 16.

Annex 16 sets out emerging thematic priorities and strategic opportunities for consideration.

➤ **Despite efforts to support innovation and regional leadership, questions remain about ESARO's comparative advantage in certain areas.** Some convening efforts, such as the Great Lakes peace processes, were viewed as duplicative and not coordinated with existing regional mechanisms, e.g. the ICGLR frameworks. Civil society and RECs also raised concerns about perceived competition in implementation and called for more collaborative approaches. ESARO's mandate and niche were perceived as less clear around young women and humanitarian response. It was suggested that clarifying UN Women's niche and the way it collaborates with sister agencies would enhance legitimacy and impact. Clarity is improving with the Global Humanitarian Strategy and UN Women's Core Commitments in Humanitarian Action.

➤ **There is growing demand for ESARO to reinvigorate its coordination mandate and reinforce its thought leadership role.** As highlighted in evaluations<sup>144</sup> and the Dalberg review on the UN Independent Review of the UN System's Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality, ESARO's comparative advantage lies in catalysing action through convening, norm-setting and leveraging UN system-wide entry points, rather than through large-scale implementation in regional programmes. Coordination budgets remain small across the region and are merged with other roles in most Country Offices. Country Offices indicated that in the context of declining resources, coordination remains a valuable opportunity to influence others to deliver on gender equality and women's empowerment, which ESARO could enhance by providing greater support, tools and advocacy with Resident Coordinators, especially around the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan.

143 1 = very ineffective and 5 = very effective; n = 61 (Country Office) and 14 (external).

144 Such as the IES-led East and Southern Africa regional evaluation on the care economy, expected to be published later in 2025.

## COHERENCE

➤ **ESARO has made some progress in cross-thematic collaboration, supported by a Strategic Note structured around systemic, cross-cutting outcomes.**

However, in practice, planning and reporting continue to be siloed across thematic teams. Joint work is often ad hoc, driven more by individual initiative than institutional systems. Reporting tends to compile discrete efforts from individual units, rather than reflect shared delivery. This disconnect is reinforced by corporate reporting structures and funding modalities that favour single-thematic accountability, limiting incentives for integrated programming.<sup>145</sup> Leadership turnover within ESARO has further disrupted efforts to embed more coherent cross-thematic approaches. Stakeholders expressed a desire for more intentional collaboration from the programme design phase, through joint concept notes and coordinated resource mobilization. Areas such as WPS and humanitarian action, or HIV and WEE, were noted as having strong potential for greater synergy. The Kenya Country Office's use of Strategic Note-linked, cross-thematic concept notes was highlighted as a promising example to enhance coherence across resource mobilization efforts.

➤ **Opportunities exist to strengthen regional coherence through clarifying regional priorities and supporting Country Offices to integrate corporate and normative frameworks into programming.**

Country Offices requested clearer communication of regional priorities, through designating priority Strategic Plan outcomes, outcome indicators and Gender Equality Accelerators<sup>146</sup> to support better alignment and joint planning. The Africa Strategy and key normative frameworks (e.g. CSW outcomes, Gender Equality Acceleration Plan) were also viewed as under-leveraged, with calls for ESARO to support stronger integration in country-level programming, including through implementation tools. Country Offices also suggested more proactive updates on different normative processes, i.e. on what they should be contributing to.



Photo: UN Women | Equality in Climate Action

<sup>145</sup> Also noted in the corporate meta-synthesis of evaluations.

<sup>146</sup> Strategic priority areas identified to drive transformative change for gender equality across its normative, coordination and operational work.



## EFFICIENCY

### How efficient is ESARO's structure and support to Multi-/Country Offices?

*Is ESARO's structure fit for purpose to deliver the Strategic Note and support offices in the region?*

#### FINDING 13

**ESARO's structure is broadly coherent and well-aligned to support Country Offices, with clear focal points and communication channels. However, efficiency and strategic follow-through are constrained by some capacity gaps, funding limitations, unclear division of technical support roles with headquarters and internal system weaknesses, particularly in document management, accountability tracking and longer-term human resource planning.**

➤ **ESARO's structure is generally coherent and well aligned to Country Office structures.** Country Offices highlighted the functionality of the structure, and strong communication channels across focal points and communities of practice. Country Office and ESARO personnel rated the effectiveness of ESARO's structure at 3.8/5 and 4.1/5 respectively.<sup>147</sup> Country Office colleagues suggested there is opportunity to group Country Offices together based on context and needs to support greater cross-learning. Several Country Office colleagues suggested strengthening collaboration across ESARO thematic units in supporting Country Offices. Several also noted issues in some cases with the timeliness and responsiveness of ESARO colleagues. Some recommended that ESARO reintroduce Country Office focal points to improve follow-up.

➤ **A few gaps were noted across the region.** Country Offices highlighted the need for more bilingual personnel; support on resource mobilization and implementation of the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan; and access to specialists (e.g. economists and agriculturalists) to strengthen technical credibility, especially in joint programming. Stakeholders proposed creating an internal roster of regional expertise to improve access to technical support.

➤ **Clarifying technical backstopping responsibilities between headquarters and ESARO will be essential as the pivoting process progresses.** This was evident in cases such as the South Sudan African Development

Bank project, where blurred responsibilities between headquarters and ESARO delayed delivery

➤ **Leadership turnover has impacted continuity and strategic follow-through.** Stakeholders noted that frequent changes in the ESARO management team have affected direction-setting and accountability for action plans. Stakeholders noted that strengthening internal document management systems and follow-up of action points is needed to support accountability.

➤ **Reviewing differences between ESARO and headquarters structures could help identify opportunities for greater synergies.** At headquarters, knowledge management and gender statistics are part of one team, as are WPS and humanitarian action; in ESARO, these are structured separately. Closer collaboration, drawing on headquarters integrated approach, could help maximize synergies and effectiveness. Additionally, HIV programming could be more systematically incorporated into ESARO's targets and workplans. Several ESARO colleagues suggested pooling administrative support under the Strategic Support Unit.

➤ **Funding constraints further impact the structure.** ESARO has maintained it needs coverage across all thematic areas, to support Country Offices. Regional programmes require additional personnel. Regional-level funding is constrained by limited regional donor funding, with most decisions made at the headquarters or country levels. Cost recovery for ESARO is not consistently applied in Country Office programme proposals. ESARO is stretched, with over 75 per cent of core resources spent on personnel – far above the 30 per cent target. In response, ESARO aims to move toward a leaner structure: a HR scenario planning tool to accompany the new Strategic Note could guide decisions on long-term versus short-term contracts. Corporate direction also encourages increased cost-recovery from Country Offices, and stakeholders noted potential to learn from agencies such as UNCDF on structuring ESARO support as a funded service.

147 1=very ineffective; 5=very effective; n = 61 (Country Office) and 24 (ESARO)

## Is the regional structure (across Non-Resident Agencies, Programme Presences, Multi-/Country Offices) and delegation of authority coherent and optimized to support delivery?

### FINDING 14

**The regional structure is broadly functional but overstretched, posing delivery and reputational risks. Coherence and effectiveness could be enhanced by better aligning delegation of authority, core resource allocation and ESARO support to office size, capacity and performance, while focusing surge support in countries with the greatest gaps.**

- **Performance accountability and transparency across the region requires strengthening.** The 2021 ESARO internal audit and recent quarterly business reviews (QBRs) identified performance issues around delivery rates, timeliness of GST support, resource mobilization and delays in donor reporting and Strategic Note development across the region. ESARO and Country Office personnel suggested ESARO could do more to hold Country Representatives accountable for performance and implementation of audit and evaluation recommendations.<sup>148</sup> Integration of QBR compliance metrics into Country Representatives' performance management is a positive step to strengthening accountability, as would expanding QBRs to cover programmatic delivery as well as operations, and increasing focus on strategic and planning. Country Office colleagues also suggest greater transparency on agreed actions across different platforms, such as Country Representatives and Deputy Representatives meetings, to support coherence and accountability.
- **While the region has benefitted from increased delegation of authority, there is a need to review and align this to performance.** Country Offices flagged system bottlenecks where ESARO approval is still required and rated the effectiveness of the current delegation of authority as 4.1 of 5,<sup>149</sup> suggesting thresholds should be more explicitly linked to performance on key metrics. Some flexibility may also be warranted in emergency or high-inflation contexts to avoid delivery delays.
- **Allocation of core resources and office typology remain misaligned.** Most offices in the region do

not meet the revenue and delivery thresholds for their typology. Small and medium-sized offices are often overstretched across too many thematic areas, contributing to delivery and reputational risks. Many offices also exceed recommended personnel levels, leaving limited funding for programming. Core and 8 per cent cost allocations are based on legacy arrangements rather than typology or strategy. The UN Women internal audit meta-synthesis (2025) recommended a more strategic resource allocation approach.

- **Support to the 11 UNCTs where UN Women acts as a Non-Resident Agency has been resource-intensive with uneven results.** UNCTs expect to receive the same level of support as they would from a Country Office, creating unrealistic expectations. In countries with a coordination focal point, there is limited clarity on their role and how they link to ESARO, and if they should support broader programming. This raises questions about the added value of the focal points to UN Women's target outcomes and whether it is a good use of regional resources.
- **ESARO surge support has been critical in filling capacity gaps, especially during personnel turnover and in fragile contexts such as Somalia. However, this support should only be used on a temporary basis and is not a sustainable solution.** In some cases, where gender statistics advisers left, important streams of work have stalled or collapsed. In the Somalia Programme Presence, external country-level stakeholders welcomed ESARO's presence in meetings and training courses but noted that the Somalia Office was unable to take the work forward once ESARO colleagues had left. Surge support should focus on sustainability, such as building Country Office personnel pipelines and cost recovery planning to avoid capacity gaps. In Somalia, capacity-building should be prioritized to support transition to full Country Office status.
- **There is also potential to improve deployment responsiveness through mechanisms such as rapid rosters and volunteers,** drawing on other UN agency practices to address recruitment delays and increase responsiveness in crisis settings.

148 The IAS meta-synthesis also recommends introducing an accountability framework and compact to enhance this throughout the Entity.

149 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective; n = 61.

## How efficiently has ESARO supported offices in the region to deliver results?

### FINDING 15

**ESARO has been recognized for its (mostly) efficient, responsive support across programming and operations. Country Offices valued the timely technical assistance, troubleshooting peer-learning platforms and collaborative approach, particularly in fragile and capacity-constrained settings. However, there is need for more strategic prioritization, tailoring of capacity-building and systematic planning of support to reduce ad hoc engagement and strengthen sustainability.**

➤ **ESARO support was consistently described as mostly timely, responsive, collaborative and impactful.** It provided targeted technical and strategic support across all thematic areas, including peer exchange, policy guidance and positioning support to strengthen normative influence, coordination and programme implementation. Examples included support for Spotlight 2.0 mobilization, legal technical assistance to Tanzania and WEE peer exchange and joint programming. Many Country Offices described ESARO specialists as integrated members of their teams, adding value across programme development, implementation, policy engagement and regional/global linkages. Annex 17 sets out additional thematic examples. ESARO's institutional contributions, such as development of shared planning tools, regional QBR implementation and knowledge repositories, also strengthened coherence and accountability across offices.

➤ **Communities of practice were especially valued.** Country Office personnel rated the effectiveness of communities of practice at 4.1/5,<sup>150</sup> and 42 per cent of Country Office survey respondents agreed that ESARO facilitated cross-regional learning opportunities.<sup>151</sup>

Country Office personnel valued these platforms for sharing technical expertise, facilitating cross-learning on what worked in other countries (e.g. how to work with security institutions) and supporting alignment of programming with normative frameworks and corporate approaches. Stakeholders valued the use of needs assessments to plan the communities of practice and bring other teams in, e.g. communications into the ERAW community of practice, to support campaign planning. Country Offices suggested strengthening communities of practice by cross-sharing effective practices.

➤ **On average, Country Offices rated the effectiveness of ESARO in supporting the delivery of results at 4/5 across the different thematic and functional areas.** Resource mobilization (3.6), partnerships (3.7) and HIV (3.3) were rated lower, due to lack of dedicated personnel (ESARO did not have a dedicated resource mobilization and partnership specialist until 2024) or dual roles limiting regional engagement (in the case of the HIV specialist and Multi-Country Office programme manager).

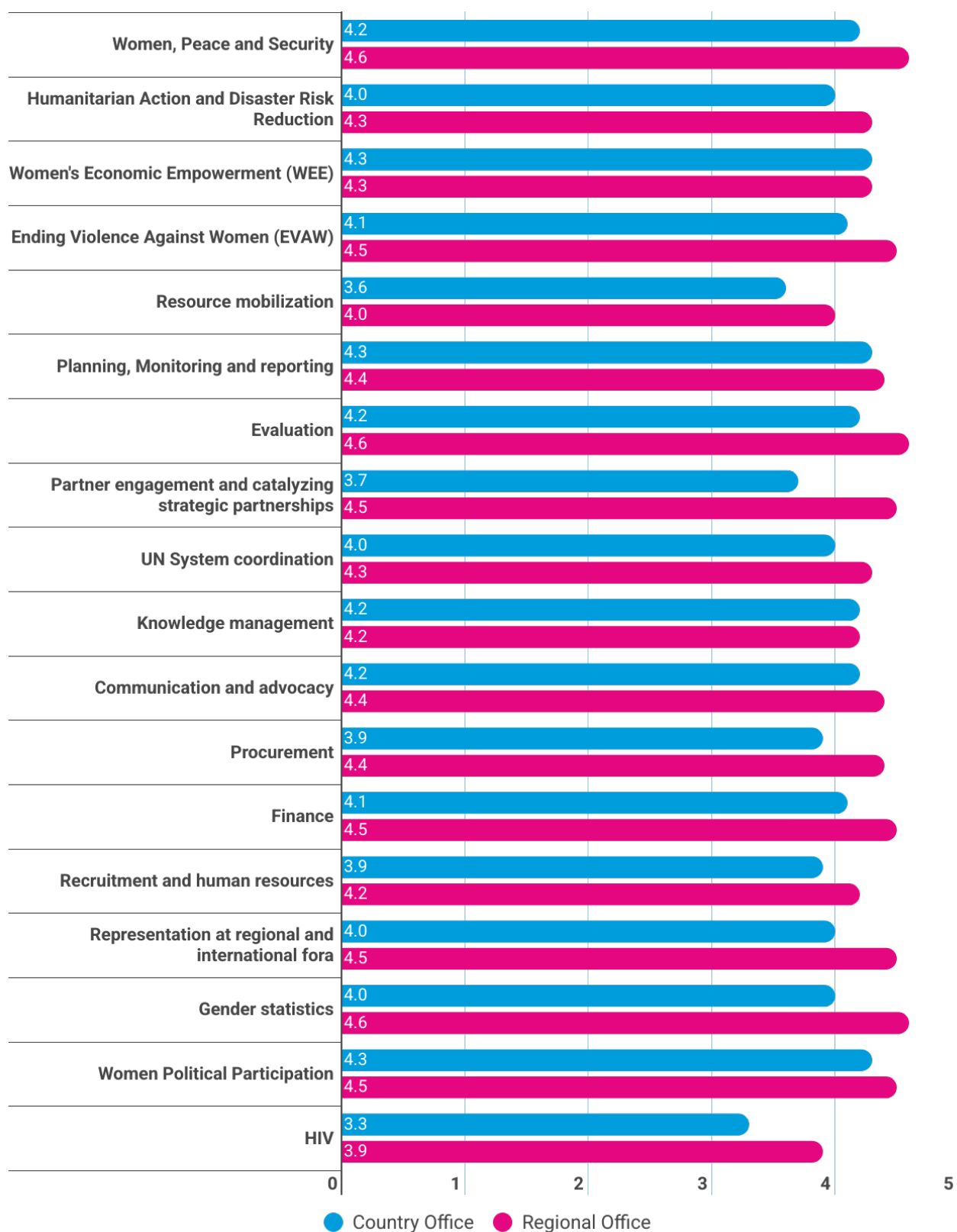
➤ **ESARO support to Country Offices has been largely effective but requires more strategic planning, differentiation and coordination to maximize its impact.** Thematic leads report that support has often been shaped by the availability of non-core, donor-funded programmes and by context-specific needs such as conflict, fragility or institutional capacity gaps. While this responsiveness has addressed urgent demands, it has also led to uneven engagement across the region. Both ESARO and Country Office stakeholders emphasized the importance of aligning support not only with immediate funding or requests, but with broader regional priorities to ensure strategic and catalytic impact.

150 1=very ineffective; 5=very effective; n = 61 (Country Office)

151 n=61

**FIGURE 8****Evaluation survey, Thematic effectiveness**

How effectively is the Regional Office catalysing and supporting delivery of UN Women results in the region? (1= very ineffective; 5 = very effective) (n=61 - Country Offices)



Source: Evaluation survey



➤ **More systematic planning is needed to move from reactive to proactive support.** ESARO currently lacks a region-wide mechanism to assess and plan to provide Country Office support based on strategic criteria and Country Office needs, with the current Quarterly Business Reviews not yet addressing this. The 2021 internal audit recommended annual assessments of Country Office needs and development of clear criteria to guide prioritization, such as risk, opportunity or strategic alignment. The Asia and the Pacific region provides a promising example, where offices submit support requests through the annual work planning process. A more structured model would enable ESARO to better align resources with demand; improve efficiency; and reduce ad hoc or duplicative requests, an issue noted by several Country Offices. Earlier engagement is also needed, especially in proposal development, to strengthen programme design and ensure cost recovery for ESARO's services, particularly in fragile or fast-changing contexts.

➤ **Support must also be better differentiated and tailored to country context.** For example, middle-income countries often require distinct approaches due to their resource mobilization environments and policy entry points. Survey data reflect this gap: 34 per cent of Country Office and 42 per cent of ESARO respondents felt that ESARO support was not sufficiently tailored to Country Office priorities.<sup>152</sup> For example, Country Offices noted that annual training courses were often repetitive and not well tailored to specific capacity gaps, performance or compliance issues. While training-of-trainers courses are widely used, follow-up is limited and cascade training remains uneven. Country Offices recommended better alignment with learning plans and improved tracking, while ESARO highlighted the need for Country Office accountability and attention to personnel turnover affecting follow-through.

➤ **Finally, there is potential to enhance ESARO's role as a regional incubator of innovation.** There have

been effective cases of ESARO providing seed funding and Country Offices suggest ESARO could more intentionally scale this by (a) funding pilots to test new ideas and digital innovations and (b) supporting Country Offices with tools and technical guidance to foster user-centred, scalable solutions.

➤ **Balancing regional programming and Country and Programme Presence Office support and oversight remains a challenge.** Thirty-four per cent of Country Office and 42 per cent of ESARO respondents felt this balance was not being achieved – Country Offices sought greater support and oversight, while ESARO respondents called for more regional-level programming. Thematic team leads currently spend an estimated 50–70 per cent of their time on Country Office support and 20–30 per cent on regional stakeholders. However, the Development Results Framework only captures regional programming, contributing to under-recognition of national-level work. Additionally, the Undersecretary General document setting up the Regional Offices focuses on support to offices in the region, rather than direct delivery at regional level. The new Strategic Note should sharpen the focus of regional engagement, prioritizing selected RECs and regional processes that demonstrably link to and strengthen UN Women's country-level programming, with dedicated road maps and resources.

➤ **ESARO's support to offices was shaped by funding and context but would benefit from a more strategic approach.** Engagement was greater in countries with non-core, donor-funded programmes and in contexts facing conflict or capacity gaps. While this responsiveness addressed urgent needs, ESARO and Country Office stakeholders emphasized the importance of aligning support with regional priorities to maximize catalytic impact, not just funding or demand.

152 n=24 (ESARO); 61 (Country Office)

## COMMUNICATIONS

➤ **ESARO's communications function has been an important enabler of regional visibility and country-level impact.** Country Offices consistently described the Communications team as responsive and collaborative, supporting website updates to regional advocacy campaigns and quickly responding to feedback (e.g. on the media scan). The 2023 regional communications retreat was seen as a valuable platform for planning and peer learning.

➤ **Despite limited personnel, ESARO has achieved notable visibility, positioning UN Women as a credible source for gender data through its regional media partnerships** (e.g. BBC Africa, UNEP, East Africa Editors' Guild) and the data hub development, as reported by media partners. However, personnel felt more could be done to strengthen data availability. Social media reach was high and exceeded targets (254,000 new website users in 2024; nearly 100,000 Facebook followers)<sup>153</sup>, although engagement metrics (clicks and comments) remain low, indicating potential to strengthen content through more user-centred design. Followers are also not disaggregated by location. Metrics to assess communications impact remain underdeveloped, particularly around behavioural shifts and qualitative engagement.

➤ **ESARO is shifting from direct delivery to building Country Office communications capacity**, with initial training delivered in Sudan and South Sudan. However, uptake is uneven due to personnel turnover and budget limitations. Communications remain underfunded, and the recommended 5 per cent programme budget allocation is not consistently applied.<sup>154</sup> Country Offices saw a role for ESARO leadership in reinforcing the importance of communications, including social media engagement by representatives and the presence of designated spokespersons.

➤ **Efforts to strengthen donor visibility and national advocacy** have included innovative storytelling campaigns (e.g. on femicide, Beijing 30+ storytelling); piloting of donor visibility weeks; and increasing collaboration with the Resource Mobilization unit. Communications partners emphasized storytelling as a tool to facilitate accessibility, audience ownership

and clear requests, although short timelines have been a challenge for campaigns. Stronger coordination with headquarters on flagship campaigns was suggested to support earlier planning and reduce last-minute pressure.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

➤ **ESARO has played a key role in improving the quality and consistency of knowledge management across the region.** Its support has enhanced alignment with corporate standards through quality assurance, technical guidance and capacity-building, which Country Offices consistently rated highly. A robust plagiarism and ethics control system has contributed to greater consistency, and several Country Offices have developed localized knowledge management strategies with ESARO's support. Long-Term Agreements for editing and design have improved turnaround times, although colleagues noted opportunities to streamline these agreements across knowledge management and gender statistics.

➤ **A digital gender data repository is operational, and an internal knowledge management repository is under development to improve access and institutional memory.** However, the Strategic Documents repository remains incomplete, and knowledge management to preserve institutional knowledge requires further attention.

➤ **ESARO support has laid important groundwork for improving the uptake and utility of knowledge products, but systems to track their use remain limited.** The 2023 reader survey indicated that research reports and policy briefs are used for advocacy, programme design and fundraising. However, actual use is inconsistently documented. While some publications have attracted strong interest,<sup>155</sup> overall usage data show that many receive minimal traction (see Table 3 below), highlighting the need for clearer prioritization and more investment in dissemination. There is currently no systematic post-launch follow-up or usage reporting against intended use cases. Embedding light follow-up into existing reporting frameworks would help assess effectiveness and inform future knowledge management investments.

<sup>153</sup> Communications team, drawn from social media analytics

<sup>154</sup> UN Women Project Document (ProDoc) Template guidance

<sup>155</sup> Why Women Earn Less: Gender Pay Gap and Labour Market Inequalities in East and Southern Africa was the most downloaded publication, with 1,195 downloads.

TABLE 3

Knowledge products and number of downloads, 2022–Q1 2025

NUMBER OF DOWNLOADS >	1000+	100 – 400	50 – 100	10 – 50	0 – 10
NUMBER OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS >	1	9	10	22	13

Source: UN Women website downloads, evaluation team analysis

➤ **Country Offices called for more strategic planning and coordination of knowledge products to further UN Women's thought leadership role** by ensuring content is timely and aligned with key events. This should be facilitated by a regional tracker to improve coherence between country and regional work. Country Offices also encouraged ESARO to go beyond publications by documenting and sharing lessons learned to foster continuous learning and thought leadership.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

➤ **While Country Offices appreciated ESARO's strategic planning support, there is scope to enhance its timeliness and strategic value to ensure greater regional coherence.** Country Offices highlighted the need for clearer, more visible co-created regional priorities to strengthen linkages with their own Strategic Notes and to support more consolidated reporting. The headquarters Strategic Planning Unit emphasized the need for ESARO to strengthen quality assurance and oversight of Country Office planning, ensure timely delivery and support more robust pipeline discussions. The separation of coordination from strategic planning presents an opportunity for ESARO to expand its strategic planning support. Country Offices specifically requested more guidance on results-based planning and operationalizing corporate policies.

## RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

➤ **ESARO has made notable progress in strengthening resource mobilization**, particularly by supporting Country Office proposal development; supporting alignment with corporate processes; and sharing donor intelligence and opportunities. Country Offices acknowledged the added value of ESARO's technical input and high-level engagement with national stakeholders, with examples of this securing funding, such as the EUR 8 million Finland-funded regional programme on women's leadership and economic rights. ESARO also facilitated cross-country exchange on donor engagement with the global Spotlight Initiative.

➤ **Despite these advances, ESARO support remains constrained by fragmented outreach and the lack of a centralized system to coordinate donor engagement.** The LEADs platform is used inconsistently, and there is no shared repository to track donor outreach. As a result, at times, donors are approached independently by different units, across headquarters and Regional and Country Offices, without a coordinated strategy. This contributed to missed opportunities and occasional donor fatigue. Internal and external stakeholders highlighted the need for clearer articulation of ESARO's role and value-add in regional proposals.

➤ **Country Offices have requested additional ESARO support**, including a pool of regional consultants for surge capacity; more strategic donor matchmaking; and coordinated outreach to international financial institutions and philanthropic partners. They also proposed developing cross-thematic concept notes and templates based on Strategic Notes to enable faster, joint proposal development, particularly for multi-country initiatives. This is already being piloted by the Kenya Country Office and could serve as a practical model for regional adaptation.

➤ **The timeliness of Country Office donor reporting continues to affect the quality of submissions.** Stakeholders proposed flagging high-value reports for review by the regional Resource Mobilization Unit to strengthen accountability. Donors also recommended increasing the number of site visits conducted and establishing platforms to engage joint programme donors, enhance visibility and support strategic coordination.

## MONITORING AND REPORTING

➤ **ESARO provided valued support to Country Offices on monitoring and reporting**, particularly through technical guidance, thematic reviews, access to global tools and support for strong inputs into Cooperation Frameworks. This has led to tangible results, e.g. in Tanzania, regional assistance was said to have improved the quality of reports helped clear a backlog of 12 donor reports, some which had been delayed for over two years.

➤ **ESARO has played a key role in strengthening capacities through communities of practice and training.** Country Offices highlighted the need to shift from one-off training to a more sustainable training-of-trainers approach, paired with clearer expectations on Country Office monitoring and verification, practical tools and hands-on quality assurance.

➤ **ESARO's role in monitoring and verification remains limited at both ESARO and Country Office levels** due to resource constraints, and is not yet meeting Programme Support Management Unit guidance. ESARO support in this area has been ad hoc, and Country Offices emphasized the need for stronger reinforcement that monitoring is a shared responsibility, not only of Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation (MRE) staff. Mechanisms such as QBRs could be more systematically used to flag data gaps and advocate for greater monitoring and reporting capacity.

➤ **The new Planning, Monitoring and Reporting (PMR) policy offers an opportunity to improve consolidation of regional results through clearer alignment between corporate, ESARO and Country Office indicators.** This will require clear guidance from ESARO on which indicators will be used for consolidated regional reporting. Country Offices also called for more timely and coordinated reporting requests from ESARO, noting that last-minute changes have undermined planning and submission quality.

## OPERATIONS

➤ **ESARO provided critical operational support, which Country Offices strongly valued for its responsiveness, transparency and hands-on problem-solving.** Monthly operations manager meetings and the QBR platform were particularly appreciated for highlighting issues and coordinating ESARO support. One-off troubleshooting meetings, such as on donor reporting, were cited as especially effective; while capacity-building efforts have supported greater operational coherence and compliance with corporate policy. Country Offices in fragile contexts highlighted the value of ESARO surge support during capacity gaps.



➤ **Despite these contributions, delays in operational processes remain common.** In South Sudan, a project launch was delayed despite funding being available, in part due to gaps in early pipeline planning, highlighting the need for more anticipatory processes. Country Offices requested that ESARO develop new workflows; identify where it is possible to streamline processes; and set out target timelines per step to improve predictability, manage internal expectations and support tracking. ESARO noted the potential to work with Country Offices to initiate procurement, recruitment and earlier partner selection, building on existing pipelines. Lessons from South Sudan's experience with the African Development Bank offer opportunities to better equip Country Offices in working with international financial institutions. There is also a need to advocate with headquarters for crisis-adapted fast-track procedures in procurement, HR and administrative systems<sup>156</sup> and to clarify guidance on handling VAT issues in-country.

➤ **Several Country Offices called for earlier and more transparent planning of both core and non-core resource allocations, as late-year disbursements limit effective absorption.** Country Offices recommended clearer budgeting guidance; a review of allocation criteria in line with office typology and capacity; and more visibility on the distribution of indirect cost recovery.

➤ **While compliance systems have improved, enforcement remains uneven.** Country Offices proposed tiered support based on office performance and capacity, including differentiated access to uncertified financial reporting rights. ESARO identified gaps in Country Offices' use of standardized tools for partner selection and monitoring, and the need to maintain audit trails and timely partner report submissions. Donor financial reporting remains a challenge, with

the region recording the highest number of overdue project financial reports. This is linked in part to the manual mapping of expenses and a high volume of ad hoc requests.

➤ **Finally, Country Offices noted a gap in human resources and well-being support** during periods of conflict or pressure and called for more proactive communication on available well-being resources.

➤ **Internal systems show progress on visibility but opportunities remain to increase efficiency by addressing delays, duplication and imbalanced support across the GST, Regional Programme Approval Committee and travel.**

- The GST has improved the visibility of requests, but the regional average turnaround time is still above the corporate target, at an average of 3.3 days against a target of 1.5 days. Increasingly, some approvals are carried out in Quantum, resulting in duplication with GST.
- In 2024, the average Regional Programme Approval Committee processing time was 62 days, with 42 per cent of submissions post-facto or ad hoc. There are opportunities to use GST to track the process, including target timelines for each step to reduce time frames; strengthen planning to reduce post-hoc and ad hoc submissions; and facilitate easier second review for the committee.
- Travel has been highlighted as an area to introduce cost efficiencies across the organization, and there are key opportunities to strengthen efficiency in terms of the number of travellers per mission; reducing internal in-person missions; and reviewing the balance of support to different Country Offices (see Annex 15 for detailed analysis).

<sup>156</sup> To complement current fast-track procedures for partner engagement.

## How sustainable and inclusive is ESARO's programming?

**Has the portfolio been designed and implemented according to human rights, leave no one behind and inclusivity (including disability) principles?**

### FINDING 16

**ESARO's portfolio reflects a clear commitment to human rights, leave no one behind and inclusive programming principles, particularly through its engagement of youth; efforts to advance disability inclusion; and normative and coordination work to promote intersectionality. However, implementation of these principles remains uneven, with inclusion not yet fully integrated across thematic areas, systems or partnerships.**

➤ **ESARO has made good progress on inclusive programming.** All eight sampled regional programmes<sup>157</sup> (see Annex 15) included at least one leave no one behind group in their design, with stronger attention to youth, women with disabilities and indigenous women; more limited focus on displaced women; and minimal engagement with diverse SOGIESC populations. The 3R evaluation confirmed effective targeting of vulnerable women;<sup>158</sup> and gender statistics work through census and survey analysis in Zimbabwe, Djibouti and Botswana, as well as regional NEET and displacement studies helped improve disaggregated data and evidence-based targeting.<sup>159</sup> However, intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g. displacement and disability) were rarely addressed together.<sup>160</sup> ESARO personnel noted that elderly women, sex workers and women living with HIV are frequently overlooked, and called for stronger cross-thematic collaboration with the HIV portfolio. Survey respondents rated ESARO's effectiveness in identifying and engaging vulnerable populations at 4 and 3.8/5 respectively.<sup>161</sup>

➤ **At coordination level, ESARO advanced intersectionality** via platforms such as the Development Coordination Office's Peer Support Group, integrating intersectionality in CCAs and Country Frameworks;

and the regional inter-agency working group on disability, contributing to GBV fact sheets and joint advocacy during campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism. ESARO promoted prioritization of at-risk groups including ethnic/religious minority refugees and pregnant women in humanitarian responses. UN agencies viewed this as a strong foundation for deeper programmatic integration.<sup>162</sup>

➤ **Normatively, ESARO leveraged platforms such as Generation Equality and CSW to elevate excluded voices, especially those of young women.** Generation Equality facilitated structured engagement of youth, feminist groups and historically excluded actors. ESARO also supported integration of youth perspectives into SADC parliamentary hearings, the Common Africa Position for Beijing+30 (informed by 20 youth activists and online consultations with over 1,400 participants) and youth-led Beijing+30 reports. In South Africa, over 300 youth organizations co-developed a Gender Action Plan with ESARO's support, which was later adopted by the national government; and youth-led groups in Kenya and Rwanda led work on the Feminist Action for Climate Justice Coalition.<sup>163</sup>

➤ **Disability inclusion has seen focused progress but remains insufficiently mainstreamed across the portfolio.** Guided by the 2022–2025 Disability Inclusion and ERAW Roadmap, ESARO supported inclusive initiatives such as the Coalition on Violence Against Women (Kenya, Rwanda, Malawi) and the Unpaid Care, Disability and Gender Transformative Approach project on unpaid care and disability in Kenya and Tanzania.

Internal capacity was strengthened through training webinars, and ESARO developed a database of women-led Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, engaging six in feminist funding spaces such as the AWID Forum Hub. ESARO supported greater

<sup>157</sup> The largest programme per thematic area was selected.

<sup>158</sup> Recognize, Reduce and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work, 2023

<sup>159</sup> Interviews with ESARO personnel and RECs.

<sup>160</sup> Strategic Plan synthesis

<sup>161</sup> N=61 (Country Office) and 14 (external)

<sup>162</sup> Interviews with ESARO and UN agencies.

<sup>163</sup> Interviews with ESARO, youth, programme documents, reports.

accessibility in some events, through sign interpretation and captioning.

However, the 2022 ERAW and disability inclusion assessment highlighted key gaps: weak legal knowledge, low participation rates from Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, lack of indicators and communication strategies and unclear budgets. Broader uptake of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy remains limited, with most programme areas lacking a systematic approach to disability inclusion.<sup>164</sup>

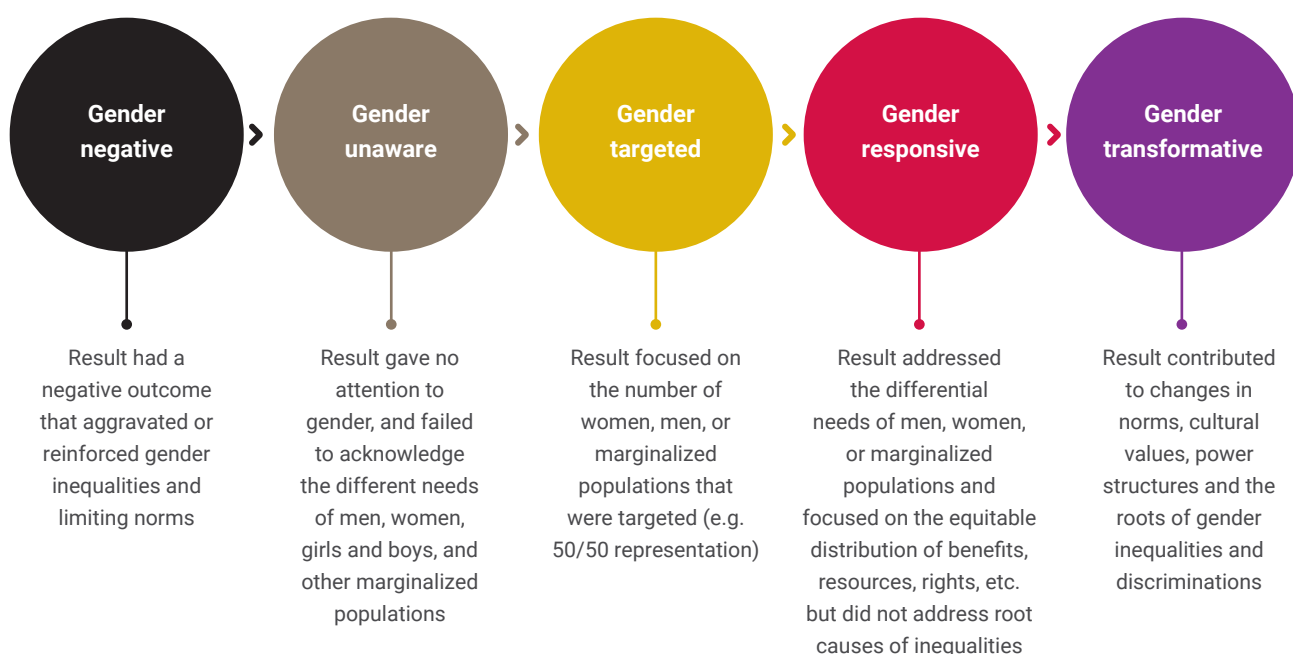
➤ **The inclusion of diverse SOGIESC was advanced primarily through inter-agency collaboration in the ERAW space.** ESARO contributed to the Africa Shared Research Agenda for ending GBV; collaborated in regional working groups with sister UN agencies; and engaged in the 2023 Pan-Africa International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Conference. Forward-looking approaches to enhancing integration of LGBTIQ+ rights is under way in the context of countering pushback. However, portfolio-wide uptake remains low, with restrictive legal environments (e.g. CSO deregistration in Uganda and Tanzania) limiting engagement.<sup>165</sup>

➤ **Displaced, rural and indigenous women were covered more inconsistently.** Humanitarian responses used vulnerability criteria to target women including disability, displacement and minority status. However, this was not consistently undertaken, with CSOs cited underfunding as a key barrier to reaching rural women. ESARO personnel acknowledged weak tracking of engagement with indigenous and minority women.<sup>166</sup>

➤ **All eight sampled regional programmes were rated as having transformative potential on the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale (see figure 9) in design and implementation,** addressing the differential needs of targeted marginalized groups and root causes of gender inequality through tackling social norms and power structures (see Annex 15). For example, the 3R programme sought to advance the care economy agenda by addressing the root causes of gender equality through shifting social norms and engaging government, the private sector and communities to redistribute unpaid care responsibilities.

**FIGURE 9**

#### Gender Results Effectiveness Scale



Source: UNDP Gender Results Effectiveness Scale (GRES)<sup>167</sup>

164 Disability Inclusion presentation, Roadmap, IDIWA 2023 consultations. with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, Annual Report, interviews with ESARO and civil society.

165 Interviews with ESARO and CSOs.

166 Interviews with CSOs and ESARO.

167 [The Gender Results Effectiveness Scale](#).

## There are several lessons learned and opportunities to strengthen inclusion:

➤ **Institutionalization:** Results were strongest where dedicated budgets and strategies existed (e.g. disability inclusion road map), but clarity on metrics and accountability remains weak. Inclusion needs to be mainstreamed as a shared responsibility across all teams, rather than seen as the sole remit of designated focal points.

➤ **Partnerships:** While initial mapping and convenings have laid a good foundation, engagement with women-led Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and SOGIESC organizations has been ad hoc, with limited long-term investment or capacity support. The male-dominated nature of the disability movement further hinders women's representation. Advancing inclusion will require more consistent partnerships and recognition of these groups as key actors in programme planning and implementation across thematic areas.

➤ **Tracking:** Most programmes lack data on leave no one behind participation, targets or clear definition of vulnerable groups. This would support more intentional intersectional programming. EVAW is a positive outlier, tracking women's organizations in advocacy spaces by age and indigeneity.

➤ **Normative engagement:** Greater attention to how the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/2 (2016) on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are reflected in national commitments would help advance inclusive normative work.

➤ **Youth leadership:** There is scope to deepen the role of the regional advisory youth committee, beyond participation in normative platforms, to guide ESARO in its programming.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Interviews with civil society, ESARO, UN agencies, programme sample analysis, survey respondents.



## How sustainable are ESARO's intervention results?

### FINDING 17

**ESARO's interventions have made important strides towards sustainable impact, through advancing normative reforms, institutional capacity strengthening and regional partnerships. However, the likelihood of sustainability remains uneven, limited by weak national ownership, short-term funding and unclear transition strategies**

➤ **Sustainability was strongest where initiatives were embedded in national or regional systems and aligned with existing policy frameworks.** ESARO supported 26 regional and national entities to adopt gender equality-related policies and action plans across nine countries, in collaboration with RECs, Member States and CSOs. These frameworks provide a foundation for sustainable change, especially when integrated into national systems and supported by political will and resources.<sup>169</sup> However, implementation remains fragile in several countries due to donor dependence, weak enforcement and sociopolitical resistance. The Corporate WPS evaluation highlighted the need to strengthen sustainability strategies for national action plans.<sup>170</sup>

➤ **Capacity strengthening of regional institutions and civil society remains central to ESARO's sustainability efforts.** Through training, technical assistance and policy dialogue, ESARO supported regional institutions to embed gender equality within development plans, agendas and programming. Interviewed RECs and civil society representatives appreciated this support, noting they had made efforts to incorporate new capacities into standard operating procedures and embed practices (such as inclusive planning) into workplans.<sup>171</sup> Regional programmes also built capacity among women's cooperatives, local authorities and

community activists.<sup>172</sup> However, some interventions continue to focus on short-term training, with limited mechanisms to support institutions to absorb knowledge into systems and structures and limited follow-up to assess the impact of these initiatives.<sup>173</sup> Sustainability is also affected by institutional challenges around funding constraints and high turnover.

➤ **Partnerships with feminist movements and women's rights organizations are essential to sustainability, fostering local ownership and long-term accountability.** These partnerships have been critical to supporting delivery of target outcomes (see Findings 1–3). However, their potential to sustain change through movement-building remains underleveraged due to short-term, project-based engagement and limited strategic investment (see Finding 3). ESARO has responded through supporting ERAW regional dialogues on feminist funding as part of the ACT programme.

➤ **Regional programmes also contributed to national policy change,** for example, the 3R programme led to the inclusion of unpaid care work in municipal plans.<sup>174</sup> Overall, regional programmes had mixed results in terms of national ownership. The Climate Smart Agriculture and 3R evaluations found strong national and local government ownership, while in the LEAP project it was more fragmented.<sup>175</sup>

➤ **Regional programming and pilot initiatives often lacked deliberate sustainability strategies.** Most interventions (3R, Climate Smart Agriculture and LEAP) relied on short-term funding and had no formal exit plans. Without structured handover to national institutions, promising pilot results risk stagnation. For instance, although 3R successfully promoted care work in South Africa and Senegal, only Rwanda has moved onto a second phase.<sup>176</sup> LEAP benefitted from engaging local delivery structures but was constrained

169 2024 Strategic Note Annual Report.

170 ESARO, CSOs and RECs interviews.

171 After receiving technical support from UN Women for its WPS Strategy and Action Plan, IGAD's Mediation Support Unit revised its standard operating procedures to include gender experts and women mediators in all peace processes. SADC integrated gender analysis tools and inclusive planning into its Conflict Early Warning Systems. Gender-sensitive indicators are now part of standard reports and conflict assessment templates.

172 Evaluations of 3R, LEAP and Climate Smart Agriculture.

173 Regional evaluation on capacity-building.

174 3R Evaluation

175 Evaluations of 3R, Climate Smart Agriculture and LEAP.

176 Key informant interviews with UN Women.

by delayed funding and a short implementation window. Nonetheless, examples of good practices included some of the care centres in Rwanda which developed financial sustainability plans with local government agencies, around low-fee models;<sup>177</sup> and, in Somalia, the LEAP project supported women to form Village Savings and Loan Associations and linked them to financial institutions to promote sustainability.

➤ **The absence of institutional handover strategies was partly driven by framing in the previous Strategic Note**, which assumed that sustainability was less relevant to ESARO given its non-operational role, i.e. working with partners to lead their own initiatives. In practice, few initiatives explicitly assessed institutional readiness, financing or partner capacity to sustain outcomes. Therefore, few initiatives explicitly outlined how work would be handed over to RECs,

governments, civil society or local actors, or assessed the enabling environment in terms of institutional capacity, political will, financing and system readiness, which limited continuity and partners' ability to sustain results.<sup>178</sup> Overall, survey findings showed moderate confidence in sustainability, with external, regional, and country-level stakeholders rating it at 3.9, 3.9 and 3.7 out of 5, respectively.<sup>179</sup> Internal platforms such as communities of practice were under-used in terms of sharing lessons to replicate effective sustainability approaches across countries.<sup>180</sup>

➤ **Contextual factors also play a major role:** Countries with political commitment, domestic resource mobilization and strong civic engagement are better positioned to sustain outcomes. In contrast, fragile settings such as Somalia, South Sudan and Eritrea face greater sustainability risks.<sup>181</sup>

177 Climate Smart Agriculture, 3R and LEAP evaluations.

178 Programme document review and interviews with ESARO, RECs and CSOs.

179 (n= ESARO=24, Country Office=61, external=14)

180 Interviews and survey of CSOs and RECs.

181 Interviews with RECs, CSOs.

# 6. LESSONS LEARNED

## 1

### **BALANCING REGIONAL AND COUNTRY SUPPORT THROUGH CLEAR CRITERIA AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT**

Balancing regional delivery with support to Country Offices remains a challenge, particularly when non-core funding and results frameworks lean towards regional initiatives that may not fully align with Country Office priorities. The evaluation underscored the importance of positioning regional work as catalytic and complementary to national results, rather than parallel or competing. This requires prioritizing initiatives that generate value for Country Offices through shared frameworks, tools or resources and ensuring adequate capacity for strategic backstopping. At the same time, in the absence of a clear framework to guide prioritization across regional programming and Country Office support, ESARO faced ongoing pressures and risk of overstretch. Structured and transparent criteria are needed to guide where and how ESARO engages based on factors such as strategic relevance, catalytic potential, country capacity and context, demand and synergies with other work. This lesson is particularly relevant in settings where Regional Offices are expected to both deliver and oversee work under constrained resources.

Linked to Findings 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15

## 2

### **STRATEGIC CLARITY AND STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT STRENGTHEN THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARTNERSHIPS**

While ESARO has built a broad network, many partnerships remain transactional, with unclear objectives, roles or accountability for shared outcomes. RECs and civil society actors highlighted missed opportunities for more sustained collaboration, particularly where engagement is informal or mechanisms are underutilized. The evaluation emphasizes the value of formal frameworks with defined responsibilities, regular partner mapping and clearer terms of engagement for platforms such as the Civil Society Advisory Group/Regional Youth Steering Committee.

Linked to Findings 5, 8 and 9

## 3

### **THE USE OF SYSTEMIC OUTCOMES DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY TRANSLATE TO GREATER CROSS-THEMATIC COLLABORATION**

Systemic outcomes have promoted more integrated, cross-sectoral collaboration but, in practice, this remains ad hoc. Planning and reporting often remain siloed, shaped by team structures and a lack of incentives or accountability. Joint efforts, such as cross-thematic concept notes, were effective when intentionally structured. Unlocking greater collaboration across programming, country support, knowledge and resource mobilization requires deliberate mechanisms to embed cross-thematic working as standard practice.

Linked to Findings 4, 8, 12 and 13





Photo: UN Women/ Adelaide Malweyi | ESARO: International Women's Day 2024 Media Engagement

# 7

## CONCLUSIONS



This section provides the evaluation's overall conclusions on ESARO's Strategic Note (2022–2025). ESARO has made important contributions to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls across the region through its triple mandate. However, resource limitations, competing demands and some challenges in systems and processes have constrained ESARO's ability to fully realize its comparative advantage and strategic positioning. ESARO's efforts have also been affected by growing backlash against gender equality, increasing protracted crisis contexts in the region, and a fast-growing youth cohort, representing key challenges and opportunities.

### CONCLUSION 1:

**The absence of a clear approach to prioritization affected ESARO's value-add at regional and country levels.**

The Strategic Note was relevant and broadly aligned with regional needs. However, Country Offices often viewed ESARO as stretched between programme delivery and oversight roles, i.e. there were few structured prioritization mechanisms in place, which led to overstretch. Strengthening strategic focus, including through clearer prioritization of engagement with RECs; more structured criteria to guide prioritization of differentiated support to Country Offices; greater alignment across regional and national programming; and more systematic cross-thematic collaboration, would enhance ESARO's ability to add catalytic value.

Relevance, Effectiveness and Coherence.  
Linked to Findings 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12.

### CONCLUSION 2:

**ESARO's comparative advantage lies in its technical expertise, regional advocacy, convening power and ability to leverage partnerships, although this remains underutilized due to ad hoc approaches.**

ESARO plays an important convening and thought leadership role, particularly its engagement in regional platforms, normative processes and contributions to regional movement building. However, the potential of these convening efforts is often diluted by informal and transactional partnerships. More structured approaches such as formal agreements, clearer stakeholder engagement strategies and strategic use of the Gender Equality Action Plan are needed to fully harness this advantage and drive more sustained regional impact.

Relevance, Effectiveness and Coherence.  
Linked to Findings 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11.



Photo: UN Women ESARO | ESAR Gender Pay Gap Report 2023

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**CONCLUSION 3:**

**ESARO contributed credibly to outcome-level change by strengthening regional normative and accountability frameworks; positioning gender-norms change within regional policies and capacities of regional stakeholders; enabling regional women's movements to apply accountability frameworks; advancing gender data standards and their use for decision-making; and supporting system-wide coordination with UNCTs. Potential for sustainability was highest where there was strong partnerships with government and civil society.**

ESARO has supported measurable progress in advancing regional commitments, including around social norms, gender-responsive policies, regional coordination and movement building. ESARO supported regional bodies to strengthen accountability mechanisms to hold Member States to account, advancing positive social norms through technical and financial support to regional entities; increasing the influence of women's rights organizations in policy spaces; and advancing gender statistics to influence policy reform. Efforts to support UN system coordination on gender equality also yielded results, particularly through capacity-building for UNCTs and engagement in key inter-agency forums.

Where partnerships with governments, RECs and feminist movements were deeper, results showed more promise of sustained impact. However, sustainability remains uneven, with many interventions constrained by short-term funding, limited integration into national systems and lack of strategic exit or handover plans.

[Effectiveness and Sustainability. Linked to Findings 1-6, 16](#)

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**CONCLUSION 4:**

**A more strategic and deliberate approach to UN Women's presence across the region is needed, making tough resource allocation decisions rather than defaulting to the status quo.**

Misalignment between offices' typology, staffing, core resource allocation, thematic coverage and delegation of authority has overstretched many offices, posing risks to delivery and reputation. Intentional decision-making is needed on where and how ESARO invests its limited financial and human resources. Clearer engagement approaches for ESARO as a whole (not just its Coordination unit) are required in Non-Resident Agency/Programme Presence countries based on an overarching strategy.

[Efficiency. Linked to Findings 13, 14 and 15.](#)

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**CONCLUSION 5:**

**Technical support to Country Offices is valued but could be strengthened by stronger strategic planning and systematic tracking.**

ESARO is widely appreciated for its expertise, responsive technical support, facilitation of cross-country learning and collaborative approach. ESARO also played a bridging role between HQ and COs, translating corporate guidance into region-adapted tools and coaching, and channeling CO lessons and evidence to inform HQ standards and guidance. Nonetheless, support to Country Offices remains largely demand-driven and ad hoc, with inconsistent planning, tracking and follow-up. Stronger systems to identify Country Office needs and tailor capacity-building initiatives based on Country Office workplans; development of ESARO annual workplans to respond to these needs; increased cross-thematic support to Country Offices; and strengthening internal documentation and document management to support accountability and handover would enhance ESARO's support to Country Offices.

[Efficiency. Linked to Findings 13, 14 and 17.](#)

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**CONCLUSION 6:**

**Institutional accountability systems need to be strengthened to enable ESARO to effectively support and hold itself and Country Offices accountable for results.**

Corporate reviews have flagged performance issues across the region, including low delivery rates, delays in donor reporting and Strategic Note development, and slow GST response. Within ESARO and across the region, gaps remain in follow-through on action plans, document management and the integration of compliance metrics into performance management systems. Strategic oversight has also been affected by leadership turnover. While the regional QBR process is a key accountability tool, it currently focuses primarily on operational compliance, which is divorced from programmatic delivery and results. Strengthening the QBR to reflect programmatic performance and linking delegation of authority thresholds more explicitly to demonstrated performance such as QBR metrics would enhance accountability for results.

[Efficiency. Linked to Findings 13, 14 and 15.](#)

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**CONCLUSION 7:**

**While ESARO demonstrates commitment to leaving no one behind, inclusive programming is inconsistent and not always systematically tracked**

Despite a strong corporate commitment to intersectionality, application of leave no one behind principles varied. While some initiatives applied inclusive lenses, e.g. engaging young women, rural women, displaced women or women with disabilities, these approaches were not systematically tracked or embedded. There is a need to adopt a more systematic and resourced approach to leave no one behind, including strengthening intersectionality in programme design, disaggregated tracking and target setting, structured vulnerability assessments and the identification of diverse implementing partners.

[Gender equality and human rights. Linked to Finding 16.](#)



Photo: UN Women Africa | Women Led Organizations workshop ESARO

# 8

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Preliminary findings were presented to ESARO on 30 May 2025, with the discussion focused on identifying feasible actions to inform the recommendations below, and considering the current context, including the ongoing UN80 initiative. Each recommendation is linked to key findings and includes a priority level and implementation timeline.

## RECOMMENDATION 1 : SHARPEN STRATEGIC FOCUS AND THEMATIC INTEGRATION



**Refocus ESARO's strategic direction by clearly defining regional priorities guided by the new Strategic Plan and evidence where efforts have the most potential for impact; aligning regional and country-level efforts; and fostering cross-thematic collaboration and planning mechanisms to maximize impact and coherence.**

*Based on Findings 1-5, 11, 14 and 15*

Priority: HIGH	Timeline: SHORT-TERM
<p><b>Suggested steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Establish clear regional priorities across normative, coordination and operational areas to guide delivery, based on the regional context, such as the intensified pushback against gender equality, increasing protracted conflicts, and the youth bulge.</li> <li>→ Prioritize regional initiatives that generate synergies with Country Office efforts and support integration of regional normative frameworks in national-level programming.</li> <li>→ Strengthen cross-thematic collaboration through joint planning mechanisms, shared concept notes and cross-thematic resource mobilization. Incentivize collaboration by embedding joint deliverables (shared knowledge products, events and coordinated travel) into workplans and performance indicators.</li> <li>→ Clarify ESARO's role in the Africa Strategy and review the relevance of any future Africa Strategies in light of continental and regional normative gender equality and women's empowerment frameworks.</li> <li>→ Clarify priorities and target outcomes for engagement with RECs, ESARO and the region at large.</li> <li>→ Strengthen feedback mechanisms to ensure ESARO priorities and investments are regularly validated with Country Offices and key partners, and that programme focus reflects jointly identified needs and areas of greatest value. Develop structured and transparent criteria to guide where and how ESARO engages based on factors such as strategic relevance, catalytic potential and evidence of potential impact, country capacity, performance data and context, demand and synergies with other work, and review the balance between programmatic/policy support and operational oversight.</li> <li>→ Improve alignment between regional and country-level strategies, planning and results frameworks.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>To be led by: Regional Planning and Coordination Unit, with support from Thematic Leads and Strategic Partnerships</b></p>	
<p><b>Rationale and impact:</b></p> <p>ESARO faces overstretch without clear criteria to guide where and how it engages. Prioritization based on strategic relevance, country capacity and potential catalytic impact would enable more efficient use of limited resources and increase ESARO's added value. While systemic outcomes promoted cross-thematic intent, collaboration remains <i>ad hoc</i> due to siloed structures and weak incentives. Strengthening joint planning and accountability mechanisms across thematic areas will foster more coherent and integrated delivery across ESARO's functions.</p>	

## RECOMMENDATION 2: STRENGTHEN STRATEGIC AND INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIPS



**ESARO should strengthen its partnership approaches by further enhancing strategic engagement with regional bodies and deepening inclusive collaboration with civil society.**

*Based on Finding 9*

Priority: MEDIUM

Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM

### Suggested steps:

- Prepare and regularly update a mapping of key partners.
- Finalize and operationalize Memoranda of Understanding with RECs, including clear protocols, roles, responsibilities and joint review mechanisms. Consider how to complement events with longer-term institutional capacity development support and development of models that RECs can sustain and scale .
- Expand funding access and capacity-building for targeted groups based on intersectional analysis (e.g. youth-led, rural-based and disability-inclusive feminist organizations).
- Shift from primarily consultative to co-creative approaches with civil society, enabling shared leadership in programme design and delivery. Establish joint workplans with roles and responsibility for both UN Women and partners; and establish regular feedback mechanisms such as joint monitoring visits and learning sessions to assess what is and is not working. Document and share good practices across the team to support this shift in partnership approach.
- Strengthen the Regional Civil Society Advisory Group and Regional Youth Steering Committee by clarifying objectives and reviewing terms of reference
- Advocate with headquarters for simplified and flexible core funding and reporting processes that reflect the realities of women's rights organizations, in line with the forthcoming [UN Funding Framework for women's rights organizations](#).
- Strengthen coordination between ESARO and Country Offices, starting by developing a tracker of shared partners, and introducing periodic check-in meetings.

To be led by: Thematic leads, Regional Strategic Planning Specialist, Regional Coordination Specialist

### Rationale and impact:

Many partnerships remain informal or underutilized, and roles are not clearly defined. Clarifying engagement frameworks and expectations would strengthen joint ownership, improve coordination and ensure partnerships contribute more directly to shared outcomes.

### RECOMMENDATION 3: ENHANCE INTERSECTIONALITY THROUGH SYSTEMATIC APPROACHES TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND



**To translate corporate commitments on leave no one behind, disability and youth inclusion into consistent regional practice, ESARO should strengthen institutional guidance, accountability and engagement mechanisms.**

*Based on Finding 16*

Priority	HIGH	Timeline	MEDIUM-TERM
<p><b>Suggested steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Consider reworking the Roadmap for ERAW and Disability Inclusion into a cross-cutting road map for inclusion across all thematic areas, with clear resourcing and accountability mechanisms, as well as approaches to proactively identify and support diverse partners representing vulnerable groups.</li> <li>→ Mainstream intersectional analysis to guide leave no one behind efforts across thematic programming with clearer institutional guidance and resourcing. Include specific indicators and targets on inclusion in the Strategic Note, with specific attention to youth, migrants and women and girls with disabilities in all their diversities.</li> <li>→ Provide tailored support and facilitate the exchange of good practices and practical tools to Country Offices to apply inclusive approaches in design, delivery and monitoring, across thematic areas.</li> <li>→ Strengthen linkages between the Regional Civil Society Advisory Group/Regional Youth Steering Committee and other organizations representing vulnerable groups, to reinforce leave no one behind integration across regional programming. Clarify their role in strategy-setting and programme design.</li> <li>→ Support Country Offices to explore umbrella funding models to sub-grant to grassroots actors.</li> </ul>			
<p><b>To be led by:</b> Deputy Regional Director, with support from Thematic Leads and Coordination, Youth and Disability Focal Points</p>			
<p><b>Rationale and impact:</b></p> <p>Leave no one behind dimensions are referenced in regional work but are not consistently applied or tracked. Embedding intersectionality across programming and systems would strengthen accountability for inclusive results and ensure efforts reach those most at risk of being left behind.</p>			

## RECOMMENDATION 4: STRENGTHEN SYSTEM-WIDE COORDINATION ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



**To reinforce UN Women's coordination mandate and improve system-wide coherence on gender equality, ESARO should strengthen regional coordination by deepening engagement with Resident Coordinators and UNCTs; enhancing use of accountability tools and data; clarifying roles; and leading and linking regional platforms.**

*Based on Finding 5*

Priority: HIGH

Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM

### Suggested steps:

- Support Country Offices to engage Resident Coordinators/Offices in supporting Member States to operationalize key normative gender commitments, aided by regular tracking at the regional level of the status of progress against reporting requirements (CSW, Beijing+25, CEDAW).
- Refocus advocacy on UNCT coordination for gender equality and women's empowerment in common processes (CCA/Country Frameworks, UNCT-SWAP, Gender Equality Markers, Gender Parity, Gender Equality Acceleration Plan) to Resident Coordinators/Offices, building on enhanced coverage of Coordination Focal Points.
- Implement UNCT and Humanitarian Country Team gender accountability tools to provide resources and tools that target weak areas regionally based on analysis (e.g. forthcoming CCA/UNSDCF analysis, regional analysis of UNCT-SWAP performance indicators and/or unimplemented action plan items).
- In collaboration with relevant Resident Coordinators/Offices, revisit and revise the Coordination Focal Point structure and terms of reference where UN Women is a Non-Resident Agency to clarify reporting lines, deliverables and responsibilities for system-wide coordination and engagement with ESARO.
- Strengthen the Regional Gender Working Group with a clear value-add proposition for members. Reinforce linkages between the Regional Gender Working Group, Regional GIHA and Regional GBV Working Group to ensure more integrated support and to facilitate joint regional programming proposals.
- Clarify distinctions between GIHA and GBV at regional and country levels and localize global Memoranda of Understanding with other agencies to advance coordinated implementation.
- Support Country offices and advocate with Resident Coordinators to move to adoption of GEAP financing targets within UNSDCF financing compacts and joint programmes, such as the minimum 15% allocation to outputs with gender equality objectives across cost-sharing and pooled mechanisms, and support tracking of adherence in UNCT SWAP reporting.

**To be led by: Regional Coordination Specialist, with support from Thematic Leads and Strategic Planning Specialist**

### Rationale and impact:

A more strategic and better-aligned coordination function is needed to increase system-wide accountability for gender equality and women's empowerment results and to better leverage the Resident Coordinator system to influence national action on normative commitments.



## RECOMMENDATION 5: ENHANCE STRATEGIC AND DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT TO COUNTRY OFFICES



**To ensure more targeted, efficient and needs-responsive support to Country Offices, ESARO should systematize and differentiate support to Country Offices; strengthen planning and accountability mechanisms; and enhance capacity-building approaches and cross-thematic support.**

*Based on Findings 13, 14 and 15*

Priority: HIGH	Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM
<p><b>Suggested steps:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Develop a more systematic and differentiated approach to Country Office support based on clear criteria, e.g. performance, strategic relevance, country context and capacity. Systematize tracking of support (through GST, individual Team Leads tracking) to assess alignment with priorities.</li> <li>→ Align delegation of authority frameworks, core resource allocation and typology based on strategic considerations, assessment of Country Office needs and performance, and sociopolitical and economic contexts. Shift towards a criteria-based approach to strategically allocate resources where it is likely to be catalytic, i.e. generating greater results, additional investments or new partnerships.</li> <li>→ Strengthen Country Office capacity-building through tailored training linked to identified needs and development plans and scale up training-of-trainer approaches to reduce reliance on ESARO's direct delivery of training. Group Country Offices together based on contexts (e.g. size, conflict affected countries) and needs to support greater cross-learning.</li> <li>→ Shift from ad hoc to planned ESARO requests and support, informed by annual assessments, annual workplanning process (both at the ESARO and CO level) and the support needs highlighted in the QBR. Consider facilitating country offices to submit support requests through the annual work planning process.</li> <li>→ Strengthening use of QBR to include programmatic metrics, tracking progress and delivery against agreed actions, and to increase focus on strategic matters and planning, rather than compliance.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>To be led by:</b> Deputy Regional Director, with support from Operations, Strategic Planning Specialist and Thematic Leads</p>	
<p><b>Rationale and impact:</b></p> <p>ESARO support is highly valued but often reactive and inconsistently tracked. A more structured, needs-based approach would improve predictability; better match support to office typologies and performance; and enhance the effectiveness of regional technical assistance.</p>	

## RECOMMENDATION 6: STRENGTHEN OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS



**To improve strategic coherence and regional support functions, ESARO should reinforce systems in results-based management, resource mobilization, communications, knowledge management and operations.**

*Based on Finding 15*

**Priority: MEDIUM**

**Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM**

### **Suggested steps:**

#### **Results management**

- Integrate ESARO support to Country Offices more clearly within the Development Results Framework.
- Strengthen systems to track regional outcomes, including tangible outcomes resulting from coordination efforts, communications reach, capacity building, private sector engagement, and knowledge product uptake.

#### **Resource mobilization**

- Improve coordination across thematic areas and Country Offices for donor engagement.
- Maintain a bank of ESARO and Country Office cross-thematic concept notes to accelerate proposal development.
- Provide drawdown/retainer support to Country Offices for on-demand technical input on proposal design and donor outreach.

#### **Communications**

- Position communications as a strategic priority in Country Offices through leadership engagement, and build their communication capacities.
- Strengthen links between communications and resource mobilization for donor visibility and engagement.

#### **Knowledge management**

- Plan knowledge products more strategically, by aligning content, timing and linkages across offices and key events and normative processes.
- Invest in documenting lessons learned and facilitating peer exchange across countries.
- Improve planning and budgeting for promoting the use of knowledge products, including but not limited to dissemination.

#### **Operations**

- Enhance document and knowledge management, including consistent tracking and follow-up of agreed actions.
- Strengthen internal accountability mechanisms across ESARO and Country Offices, by integrating key responsibilities into performance management (PMDs).
- Improve delivery rates by identifying bottlenecks, streamlining workflows and ensuring earlier planning for procurement, recruitment and partner selection.

**To be led by: Respectively, the Monitoring and Reporting Specialist, the Resource Mobilization Specialist, Communications Consultant, Knowledge Management Specialist and Operations Manager**



# **UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.**

As the lead UN entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations translate progress into lasting changes. We make strides forward for women and girls in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and women, peace and security as well as humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.



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