

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

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.¹ During the Strategic Note period, ESARO mobilized a total of US\$ 4.8 million in non-core resources.²

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.

¹ UN Women ESAR Partnership and Resource Mobilization Strategy 2022-2025.

² 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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.