

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
A UNDG-sponsored Action Learning Programme 2009-2010  
FINAL REPORT on Results and Lessons Learned  
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UNICEF and UN Women

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## I. Executive Summary

This report describes an initiative of the UN Development Group to strengthen the work on gender equality in selected countries (Nepal, Albania and Morocco). Recent agency-wide gender equality evaluations (UNICEF, WFP) and the analysis of the UNDG Task Team on Gender Equality have found that the demand on the UN Country Team for support to national partners on advancing gender equality is growing, while the capacity of the UNCT to respond remains relatively inadequate. This project, managed by UNICEF and UN Women, was an effort to build greater coherence, effectiveness and mutual support among agencies at the country level to strengthen their coordinated response to national opportunities and demand. The approach was to work with the Gender Theme Groups (GTGs) in each country to improve the collaboration among UN agencies and their country partners, rather than to add gender-related resources to particular agencies.

The three countries were chosen because they represented three different types of inter-agency coordination. Albania was a Delivering as One country; Nepal, emerging from years of civil war, was developing a new pro-poor constitution which also prioritized gender equality in public policy and programmes; and Morocco had a significant grant of \$9 million from the Spanish MDG Achievement Fund to support the country to strengthen its services to survivors of violence against women, with nine participating UN agencies.

The Gender Theme Groups in the three countries were supported by Gender at Work to strengthen their contribution by undertaking a facilitated action-learning process. Representatives of the GTGs from all three countries met in New York in February 2009 to define the issues they wished to tackle, and make plans to address them. Work in the three countries differed, depending on the context.

In Albania the GTG was already working on a major inter-agency programme with the government to strengthen policies and provide services for women survivors of violence. The action-learning process was used by the team to reflect on and analyze their experience in implementing the Joint Programme under the One UN Framework in order to determine lessons for mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment support into the next UNDAF. In Morocco, the joint programme to support gender equality and end violence against women (Project Tamkine) joined 13 Ministries with UN agencies and representatives of the women's movement to deliver better services to

women. The project decided to use process observation tools to improve the functioning of the coordination meetings. In Nepal, the group undertook two key activities – mapping the timeline of gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal, and developing a conceptual framework that locates gender equality within the larger framework of social inclusion. The latter was a key priority of the new government, and created an opportunity for improving women's lives at the local level. They used these activities to strengthen their understanding of each other's work, and of how to insert gender issues more effectively into the country framework.

In all three countries, the effort to reflect on process as well as content led, in the view of the participants, to more effective programming: better integration within the UN and with the government, and increased support from non-GTG colleagues.

## Lessons:

The main lessons from the process are the following:

- Learning on interagency coordination is enhanced when it takes place in the context of an actionable programme agenda with clear deliverables and adequate resources to ensure results. In all the three UNCTs the GTGs had joint programmes which were well funded. This helped them to focus their learning in concrete ways to achieve measurable results;
- Cohesive, informed and engaged GTGs can be key drivers of policy and programming innovation for women's empowerment and gender equality in the UNCTs. Collectivity in the team, mutual accountability, and joint ownership of their change agenda requires trust. In this process, informal discriminatory norms and exclusionary practices that worked against trust were identified and broken down;
- Competence: This pilot showed that experiences that facilitate the GTG members to tap into their collective knowledge and competence, to learn from each other and strategically use the space to promote gender equality, build their confidence and generate solid programming ideas;
- Breaking down power hierarchies: Involvement of national staff in action learning processes of this type is unique and critical. In this initiative, national staff took leadership roles and recognized how important it was for their ability to take initiative to build bridges across UN organizations;
- Participation: Including non-UN actors, like government, women's organizations and other civil society representatives, improves the quality of the work and extends the model of coordination. Government and NGO

partners also learned to coordinate more effectively through their participation in an action-learning initiative focused on exploring more effective means of coordination;

- Authority: Links with and support from the Resident Coordinator's office are important. In all cases, seeking the RC's buy-in and participation in this initiative created time and space for the participants to engage meaningfully;
- Solidarity: External facilitation with expertise in both the substance (in this case women's empowerment and gender equality) and process (action learning) strengthens the quality of the learning and the programme strategy;
- Capacity: Action-learning and reflection is an effective and under-utilized method for capacity development. In the case of these three countries, the 2-year cost was modest (USD 266, 423) compared to supporting each agency to build country-level gender mainstreaming capacity.

## Recommendation:

The main recommendation from this programme is to:

***Support the capacity development of Gender Theme Groups – which work closely with government, women's organizations and other civil society groups - in all UNCTs and ensure that they have strong senior management support, adequate resources for joint work, and space for learning and reflection with external facilitation, to enable them to be cohesive drivers for positive change for women's empowerment and gender equality.***

***For the GTGs to be more effective catalysts of change for women's empowerment and gender equality, they need to build their own cohesiveness and collective commitment by breaking down exclusionary practices and power hierarchies that undermine trust and mutual accountability; expand their knowledge by linking to key actors in the government and to women's organizations to develop an agenda for change that these key actors contribute to and help lead; and have senior management support with the necessary resources to put plans into action.<sup>1</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 2 below for more details on 'What Are We Trying to Change in Organizations?'

## II. Introduction:

How can inter-agency coordination improve gender equality results on the ground? How can knowledge and action on holistic and replicable joint UN programming on women's empowerment and gender equality be strengthened in a way that helps countries achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other international commitments? What coordination processes and tools can build a vision of and capacity to support well-coordinated work for gender equality? How do support mechanisms at headquarters need to be strengthened to help the country teams implement cohesive and effective women's empowerment and gender equality programmes? These were the key questions driving the UNDG Action Learning Programme for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

*As the lead UN agency addressing women's empowerment and gender equality, UN Women is especially interested in understanding how the involvement of national partners in the processes of joint programming on gender equality improves the process*  
– UN Women

*There is so much rhetoric about operating and delivering "as one", but people know very little about this process. Although gender equality was taken into account in the planning and finalization of ONE UN, it is hard to understand how the process of collaboration between system partners works... There is a disconnect to be addressed – the loop from the country level, to UN Headquarters (HQ), to the regional level. Changes in countries may need to involve systemic changes affecting all levels. The hope is that these country teams can be a part of this process, reflecting on what changes can be made, what is feasible and possible and where is the space for such innovation to happen. – UNICEF*

## Structure of this Report

After a brief introduction of the UNDG Action Learning Programme and process, we present a snapshot of each country team's action learning agenda within the context of their joint programmes. In all cases, their joint programmes focused on gender equality with a specific emphasis on addressing violence against women and girls. Following this, the report presents a brief overview of the Gender at Work approach to change and the action learning process. This is followed by detailed case studies of the content and process of the intervention in each of the three countries. We then analyze the programme experience in terms of achievements and lessons. The report ends with recommendations for replicating this process in a cost effective manner, and strengthening gender theme groups working across agencies, with government and multiple stakeholders. The appendix contains a more detailed explanation of Gender at Work's approach to action learning.

### UNDG Action Learning Programme:

This programme was initiated in 2009 by the UNDG Task Team on Gender Equality with UNICEF and UNIFEM (now part of UN Women), as task managers for the initiative. Gender at Work ([www.genderatwork](http://www.genderatwork)), an international collaborative with over two decades of experience in facilitating gendered organizational change, led the programme and provided strategic technical inputs and process facilitation to country teams<sup>2</sup>.

The UNDG programme was a response to a number of factors. Firstly, the UNDG's own assessments of accountability and action by UN Country Teams on gender equality was demonstrating an increase in reports on joint initiatives on gender equality, but there was little information about the processes being used. Colleagues working on gender equality in the Delivering as One (DaO) pilots were reporting strong demand for gender equality support from national partners, but vastly inadequate capacity in the UNCT and very high costs, in terms of time, to mainstream gender equality in the increasing

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<sup>2</sup> The Gender at Work Team consisted of Aruna Rao (team leader and facilitator of the Albania action-learning project); Rieky Stuart (facilitator of the Morocco action-learning project) and Kalyani Menon-Sen (facilitator of the Nepal action-learning project).

number of DaO processes. An evaluation by the UNDG of CCAs and UNDAFs in 26 countries also highlighted the gaps between problem analysis and actions on gender equality. Additionally, recent agency-wide gender equality evaluations (for instance, in UNICEF and WFP) have found that the application of gender equality mainstreaming is weak at the country level. In light of the growing emphasis on inter-agency coordination, these gaps were a serious concern.

The UNDG programme was an effort to understand how to build greater coherence, effectiveness and mutual support among agencies at the country level to include gender equality in their work. The approach was to improve the collaboration among UN agencies and their country partners through the Inter-Agency Gender Theme Groups, rather than to enhance the resources or capacities of particular agencies.

Three UN Country Teams (UNCTs) – Albania, Morocco and Nepal - responded positively to the invitation to participate in the programme. While there was no pre-conceived priority on exploring joint initiatives on ending violence against women, the three country teams that expressed interest all put initiatives on ending violence against women forward for the action learning. At the same time, each of the three countries presented a unique situation with specific challenges around joint programming. Albania is a “Delivering as One” country and is in line for EU accession, with a joint UN programme on gender equality with a special focus on eradicating domestic violence. Morocco is an Islamic state which recently passed a progressive family law and is implementing a large, nine-UN agency joint programme focused on empowering women and girls to prevent gender-based violence. The UN System in Nepal, a country which was emerging from decades of conflict, developed a joint framework on gender equality and ending violence against women in line with the new government’s policy on social inclusion.

The objectives and process of the UNDG programme were shared with the Resident Coordinators and members of the UNCTs in each country, following which the action learning programme teams were formed. Each team consisted of 4-5 members of the UNCT Gender Theme Groups (GTGs) including, in each case, the Assistant Representatives from UNFPA, the country programme manager or a project manager from UN Women and Gender Focal Points from UNDP and UNICEF. The Morocco team also included a government representative from the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Nepal team included a staff member from the RC’s office.

The Programme Inception Meeting took place in New York in February 2009 and was attended by the action learning teams from the three countries as well as the programme managers from UNICEF and UNIFEM. The objectives of the Inception Meeting were to: (i) build a learning community; (ii) help the GTGs assess key factors in their situation related to implementation of a successful project; (iii) discuss relevant frameworks for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment; and (iv) develop or strengthen existing plans for implementation of significant gender equality projects in the three countries.

Following this meeting, the Gender at Work facilitators worked with country teams in the field, helping to design and implement an action learning plan tailored to the specific country context. During this period, the Gender at Work facilitators made several visits to each country and provided hands-on support in envisioning the change process and developing process tools.

The programme ended with a meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, in July 2010. At this final meeting, the teams: (i) updated each other on the work they had been carrying out since programme inception; (ii) reflected on what was learned, separately and across teams, about coordination that improves gender equality results; (iii) agreed on the purpose and the elements of the case studies and key analytical points that each case study must make including country specific issues and issues of system-wide relevance; (iv) decided on next steps and time line for the remainder of the programme; and (v) evaluated the programme.

### **III. The Gender at Work Approach to Change**

Gender at Work has a multi-faceted and holistic approach to social change that links organizational change, institutional change and gender equality. This approach is based on an analysis of the role of social institutions – both formal and informal – in maintaining and reproducing women's unequal position in society. To bring about positive change in gender equality, changes must be made in four inter-related domains as depicted in Figure 1 below<sup>3</sup>. These include changes in measurable individual conditions (resources, voice, freedom from violence, access to health) and individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness and commitment to change toward equality), as well as systemic changes in formal institutional rules (for instance,

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<sup>3</sup> This framework is an adaptation of the work of Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Boston: Shambala, 2000

as laid down in constitutions, laws and policies) and the informal norms and cultural practices that maintain inequality in everyday life. Change in one domain is related to change in the others.

In order for an **organization** to be an effective agent of change in one or more of the above domains it must have certain capabilities and cultural attributes that also have individual and systemic, and formal and informal dimensions. In an organization these would include the following:

- Individual/informal: personal skills and consciousness, commitment and leadership.
- Individual/formal: resources and opportunities available to staff.
- Systemic/formal: organizational policies and procedures, ways of working and accountability mechanisms.
- Systemic/Informal: deep structure and organizational culture.

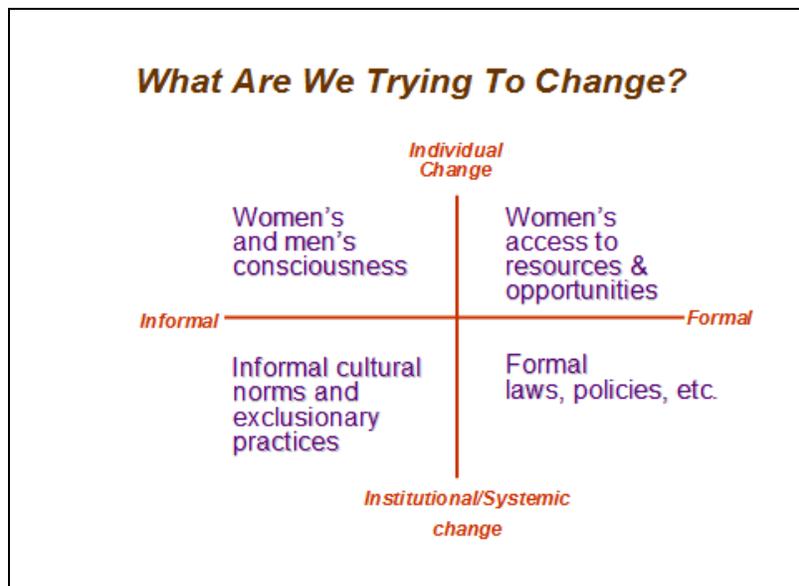


Figure 1. **What Are We Trying To Change**

This Gender at Work Framework provides a way to plan and assess change interventions and explore possibilities for synergised efforts across domains.

Figure 2, "**What Are We Trying to Change in Organisations?**" points to some key questions related to gender equality *within* organizations. For example, what is the level of women and men's consciousness within the organization? Is there access to resources available to move these issues onto the organizational agenda and into

action? What are the policies in the organization, and are they resourced or staffed? What are the key features of organizational culture and power structures? How are values and belief systems expressed? What is the type of leadership? By what mechanisms is accountability to women clients ensured? Does the organisation have the mechanisms and capacities required for dialogue and conflict resolution? Most importantly, the analysis focuses on the nature of the power dynamics that keep things the way they are and what it will take to change those dynamics.



Figure 2: *What Are We Trying to Change Within Organizations?*

In the specific context of the UN System, many factors are known to affect interagency work. Enabling factors include buy-in from senior management; strong demand from constituencies and national partners; committed staff (men and women) who use personal and social skills to positively influence gender equality work; good rapport among inter-agency colleagues; personal networking; a conducive work environment; effective common platforms (such as gender theme groups); and the nature of reporting mechanisms and requirements. Factors that can potentially hinder inter-agency efforts on gender equality include hidden power dynamics that generate mistrust and competition, and hinder coordinated action and mutual accountability; inconsistent or unclear focus related to meanings and objectives; different frameworks for gender equality among agencies; lack of a targeted strategy; operational and administrative

barriers; conflicting priorities with gender considered 'additional' work; overlap between activities/agency work; and the use of gender as a trend or buzzword. These factors tend to be contextual, mutually influencing and overlapping, and can be difficult to classify.

In order to effect change, it is crucial for actors within the system to be aware of how these factors interact with each other and affect their behavior and actions and to build new norms of group functioning and learning. They can then more effectively carry out a collective analysis to identify the direction and the nature of the change desired, and identify the strategic entry points for change. Using Gender at Work's framework, the action learning process helped participants to uncover these hidden but pervasive power dynamics and understand how to change them. The process then facilitated a collective assessment of what had been accomplished, and space to plan new work with an understanding of the opportunities for forward movement, in partnership with key national actors.

## IV. Case Studies

### ALBANIA CASE STUDY

**The UNCT in Albania** developed a multifaceted gender equality programme in response to its complex country context. The country had experienced years of political transformation, beginning with the collapse of communism and the move toward democratic reform beginning in mid-1990s. Political, economic and social instability in the region has given rise to numerous changes, which affect women in several crucial ways; for example the opportunity to revise laws so as to increase the visibility and participation of women in society, and the introduction of sex trafficking laws.

In 2007, Albania became a Delivering as One country, committed to enhancing development results by bringing together the UN's comparative advantages into one strategic programme. Regarding women's empowerment and gender equality, the UN in Albania has prioritized more inclusive participation in public policy and decision-making, increased and equitable access to quality basic services, and regional development to reduce regional disparities.

## **The Status of Women**

Although women's educational levels are on average higher than those achieved by men, their participation falls behind that of men in many areas. For example, women's level of unemployment is substantially higher and women's salaries are lower than men's in both private and public sectors. About 56% of women in Albania report facing violence within their home. Minority women, such as the Roma, face further marginalization and vulnerability to gender-based and domestic violence. As in most other societies, women in Albania face a double burden that often goes unrecognized. Changes in the economic and political situation in the country, however, have served as a reality check; society realized the urgent need for greater gender equality and the importance of women engaging in visible, public leadership roles. Furthermore, capacity development, increased political participation of women, accountability of stakeholders and efforts aimed at dispelling gender stereotypes in the media – are all recognized as important strategies for the government, UN agencies, and other stakeholders to engage in.

Recent CEDAW reports have highlighted the need to strengthen gender equality mechanisms within the government, with a focus to increase women's participation in decision-making, both through special measures and advocacy efforts. It suggested that the government prioritize comprehensive steps to address violence against women, and focus on the situation of women at the local level. This requires immediate attention due to a resurgence of discriminatory laws and traditional codes of conduct in certain regions of the country, as well as an overall lack of gender-responsive public services. Given the changes in government in 2005 (national-level) and 2007 (local-level) and the subsequent turnover of civil servants and staff, monitoring and implementing gender equality commitments among government branches has been weak.

## **Gender Equality: Milestones and Setbacks**

In 2006, the Albanian Parliament passed its first national law to prevent domestic violence. In 2008, the Parliament passed a new and improved Gender Equality Law. The *National Strategy on Gender Equality and Eradication of Domestic Violence and its Plan of Action 2007-2010* encouraged a safer and more equal environment for women and girls in Albanian society. Domestic violence is one of the 8 main components of this

Strategy, while the other 7 address various dimensions of gender equality such as health, education, and political participation. The National Strategy and Plan of Action promoting Gender Equity and against Gender Based Violence, and the new gender equality, domestic violence and anti-discrimination laws have laid the groundwork for Albania's gender equality programming. The National Strategy has established a framework for coordination among ministries on how gender equality needs to be implemented. However, within this framework, there are not many specifications, or resources for implementation.

## **The Role of the UN**

The UN has played a crucial role in supporting and guiding government efforts on gender equality. UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women and UNDP all collaborate on gender equality in the country. UN Women supported the issue of balanced participation on electoral reform and provided guidance on how to implement the 30% quota. UNDP worked with UNICEF to support work on domestic violence. A joint action plan was created and evolved naturally when inter agency partners began discussing the issue among themselves.

## **Albania's Joint Programme on Gender Equality**

The design of Albania's Joint Programme occurred in consultation with the government and the guidelines on gender for joint programmes among UN agencies in Albania emerged from specific government requests. Joint Programming now serves as a basis to implement specific components of the national strategy on gender equality. Currently, the UN helps implement 4 of the 8 components of the National Strategy on Gender Equality and UN activities in the country have complemented country-level government requirements. Domestic violence had been singled out as a key priority issue, in part, because UNICEF and UNDP entered the policy dialogue early on and found the issue was common and important. Albania's UN joint programme on Gender Equality has the following expected outcomes:

- (i) that the GOA has capacity to more effectively monitor and implement the NSGE-DV;
- (ii) improved public sector response to women's needs and priorities at the local level;
- (iii) increased women's participation in the accountability processes which impact the advancement of gender equality; and (iv) improved coordination of external support to the government and civil society in advancing gender equality.

Decision-making within the One UN Programme, including allocation of funding, is jointly made by the Government and UN. This is also the case with the Joint Programme on Gender Equality which is governed by a Steering Committee which is co-chaired by UN RC and the Deputy Minister, Ministry of Labour.

Most of the actions under the JP are “joint” or “coordinated” actions but at the same time for each planned activity in the Implementation Plan, there is a UN lead agency appointed on the basis of core competencies:

- UNDP leads the work on ending violence against women; supports the development and strengthening of institutional mechanisms and policy measures pertaining to the GEL and DV law; and supports grassroots and national initiatives connected to women and elections
- UNICEF in coordination with UNDP supports local level service delivery for children and women at risk or victims of violence and supports initiatives that mobilize youth around the issue of women in elections.
- UNFPA provides skills to healthcare workers to combat DV and is leading the support for the country’s first National Time Use Survey (TUS);
- UN WOMEN is the UNCT lead agency on gender equality and is the facilitator of the joint programme. It leads the work on gender responsive budgeting and women and elections; it contributes towards strengthening institutional mechanisms and policy measures pertaining to the GEL; and it supports improved monitoring and statistics on GE and the status of women, in cooperation with UNFPA.

**Albania’s Action Learning Objectives & Actions:** Within the context of Albania’s Joint Programme, the team<sup>4</sup> decided that they wanted to use the Action-Learning Programme to reflect on and analyze their experience in implementing the Joint Programme under the One UN framework in order to determine lessons for strategic planning for gender mainstreaming into the next UNDAF.

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<sup>4</sup> The Albania team members were Manuela Bello (Assistant Representative UNFPA), Estela Bulku (National Programme Coordinator, UNIFEM), Entela Lako (Programme Analyst, UNDP), Alketa Zazo (Youth Health & Development Officer, UNICEF, Inception meeting), Florina Hima (Child Protection Officer, UNICEF, Morocco workshop), and Christine Arab (Country Manager, UNIFEM, Tirana workshop) and Emira Shkurti (Project Manager, UN JP on Gender Equality and against Domestic Violence, UNDP, Tirana workshop).

The team, together with the larger Gender Theme Group in Albania, agreed that one of the main impacts of the One UN pilot should be better integration of gender equality considerations into all the UN supported programmes. In carrying this forward, the GTG thought they would target the new programmes to be developed under the UNDAF. While the group understood that this was an ambitious agenda that might not be achieved, they believed that they should attempt it and learn from their efforts.

The GWG mapped out the steps to be taken to achieve this objective which included: (i) ensuring that the TORs for the mid-term evaluation of the JP includes examining the impact of the One UN on the JP; (ii) with the agreement of the RC and heads of agencies, commission a gender audit to examine the UNCT's capacities to respond to gender equality needs (policies, staffing, capacities, programmes etc.) and involve the Heads of Agencies in validating the results of the assessment and generating agreement on priorities and strategic focus for gender mainstreaming; and (iv) conduct a strategic planning exercise (including costing) for gender mainstreaming in one sector/large programme/key priority area of the next UNDAF.

The mid-term evaluation of the Joint Programme on Coordinated Community Responses to Domestic Violence completed in December 2009 was very positive and the Gender Audit carried out by an ILO team in July 2010 pointed out that the Joint Programme had been instrumental for mainstreaming gender into the UNDAF and enhancing gender equality in Albania. The audit recommended the need for quality training on gender analysis and mainstreaming is essential for all UN officials as well as key national partners. The audit also recommended that gender mainstreaming should be considered as a criterion for proposals to the Albania One UN Coherence Fund; that gender equality should be a criteria in the key areas of the Joint Partnership and Resource Mobilization Strategy with regard to impact assessment and development effectiveness; and that gender capacity building for agencies within the Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group be institutionalized. The Albania Team reports that the recommendations of the gender audit were further discussed and served as the basis for the work carried out for the preparation of the new UNDAF/ONE UN programme and that gender equality occupies a significant part in the new ONE UN programme document and is mainstreamed in all programme areas.

**Albania Results:** The Joint Programme on Gender Equality, according to the mid-term evaluation, was assessed as one of the most successful joint programmes in the One UN in Albania. It has resulted in the following key improvements:

- Improved coordination between the different agencies which resulted inter alia in greater time savings for partners
- Improved coordination among UN agencies has led to improved coordination among national partners and the DAO approach strengthened national ownership
- Sharing of approaches and knowledge products have improved coherence and effectiveness in the collective effort
- Ripple effects of improved coordination in the JPGE on other activities such as organizing the 16 days of activism on DV

The Albania team believes that the action learning programme helped to build trust across agencies for coordinated action and provided the stimulus and the space for strategizing how to use existing instruments and build toward a process that results in fully mainstreaming gender equality in the work of the UN in Albania and in building the demand from national partners for guidance on gender equality issues.

## MOROCCO CASE STUDY

Background: The movement for gender equality and women's rights in Morocco is deeply rooted in feminist activism and has a long history of breakthrough efforts and successes. It is a movement that has been facilitated by many political changes; the arrival of a progressive king who enacted reforms related to the legal and social concerns of women. In 2004, the Moroccan Parliament passed a new family code, 'Moudawana.' Key components of the new family code include raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 for men and women, establishing joint responsibility for the family among men and women, limiting the terms of polygamy and divorce, and granting women more rights in the negotiation of marriage contracts. This new law is considered one of the most advanced texts regarding family law in Arab and Muslim countries and a successful example of a progressive reform framed in indigenous, Islamic principles. It reconciled universal human rights principles and the country's Islamic heritage in a society at half way between the construction of a secular identity and the Islamist revival in the framework of an incomplete transition toward democratization.

### The Status of Women

In Morocco, women's illiteracy rates are very high (54.7%). To address this issue, the Ministry of Education has put in place a series of measures aimed at increasing girls' enrollment in school including expanding the school feeding programmes, extending medical services within schools, distributing books, and providing transport for students living in remote areas. For the first time in the country's history, a gender budget statement was presented as an annex to the national budget for 2006. This budget outlined how the allocation of public resources will address gender equality priorities. This also includes prioritizing of family planning, maternal health clinics, vocational training and increased access to microcredit for women. Morocco's maternal mortality rate is 227/100,000 and child mortality is 35 per 1000 live births for children under 1 year.

According to the UN, 60 percent of Moroccan women have experienced some form of violence recently and a quarter of them sexual violence in their lifetime. The most frequent and widespread abuse was psychological (48.4 percent), followed by infringement of civil liberties (32 percent), and law enforcement-related violence (17.3 percent). Furthermore, vulnerability to violence is higher among women from migrant and Sub-Saharan communities. Divorced women in the workforce and unemployed women at home also face higher instances of violence. Cases of sexual and gender-based violence remain under-reported – a problem compounded by a lack of national data on the forms and prevalence of gender-based violence. Existing cultural norms have tended to organize social roles of men and women into a hierarchy and legitimize gender-based violence.

## **Gender Equality: Milestones and Setbacks**

The first steps towards achieving gender equality and empowerment in Morocco entailed raising awareness of the vulnerabilities faced by women in the general population, led by the feminist movement in the country. Next, was the institutionalization of mechanisms to facilitate more equitable gender relations, which included the creation of the Ministry of Social Development, strategic involvement of NGOs, and strong support from multilateral agencies, including UNIFEM.

The period 2000 to 2005 was marked by legal battles for women's human rights; international agreements like CEDAW led to a debate on national laws. From 2005 - 2008, the gender equality movement entered its operational phase, integrating gender issues into national policies and strategic plans. The raising of awareness,

institutionalization of mechanisms and legal battles to promote gender equality also continued during this time. The political will by the current government to address gender issues has been important to facilitate the movement towards gender equality in the country. The existence of a national mechanism to address women's needs – such as by the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity – has expanded to include a specific department to work on gender issues.

## **The Role of the UN**

The UN Gender Theme Group acts as a point of collaboration for UN Agencies and often involves national experts and representatives from government ministries. Before the MDGF for gender programming, UN Agencies (led by UNIFEM) had worked with NGOs and national institutions for several years. This supported the process of designing the Joint Programme *against gender-based violence through the empowerment of women and girls* (later named *Projet Tamkine*) 2008-2010 and its implementation and monitoring, which involves many actors: UN Agencies, NGOs, Women's movements and national institutions within several committees. The Steering committee, for instance is comprised of the Spanish Cooperation team, the Resident Coordinator, the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UN Women and the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity. The Programme Management Committee is composed of 9 Monitoring or sub Committees to oversee each output, led by a national institution. Each Monitoring Committee includes staff from several Ministries, UN staff and NGO representatives.

### ***Projet Tamkine:***

- Is a pilot experiment of joint programming which strengthens good governance practices;
- Fits in the framework of Morocco's national concerns on fighting against gender-based violence and strengthening women's and girls' empowerment;
- Contributes to the reach of Morocco's MDG priorities, especially for MDG 3 : To promote gender equality and women's empowerment . Morocco agreed to incorporate its own target 14 : "to eradicate the discriminatory legislative dispositions and halve violence against women";
- Reinforces coordination and convergence of multi-sectoral initiatives and those of civil society in an integrated and participative approach through the empowerment of women and girls.

Morocco's joint programme, *Projet Tamkine*, ([http://www.un.org.ma/IMG/pdf/PC\\_04\\_fr.pdf](http://www.un.org.ma/IMG/pdf/PC_04_fr.pdf)) is a result of the participatory and collaborative approach taken by UN Agencies and national partners in order to build a strong consensus, create a climate of trust, openness, and clear allocation of responsibilities and ownership of the programme by all participants.

National political action has created a constructive base for national priorities on gender issues. Furthermore, the availability of funding and the competitive process employed by the MDG Fund has ensured that the Joint Programme built on lessons learned from past, successful initiatives in Morocco.

Despite the participation of their staff in the Joint Programme on gender-based violence, challenges remained in implementing gender mainstreaming in some of the UN Agencies as well as national institutions, including a lack of human resources within the Ministry which coordinates the Joint Programme, and inadequate capacity and knowledge on gender issues in the UN Agencies in Morocco. One of the biggest challenges is managing the input of all the partners in the Joint programme. Because there are so many partners, this is far more time consuming and programme management has to balance the divergent interests and priorities among partners who are competing for money and input in the design the programme, and programme implementation requires rigorous monitoring.

The Morocco team identified several challenges, weak points and areas of improvement for their action learning project, focusing specifically on the challenges of coordination in implementing the Joint Programme on Gender Equality. The Action Learning Question for the Morocco team was: Can we contribute to improving the coordination for the efficient implementation of joint programmes on gender through a participative approach of action learning with the UN country team and national partners and influence practices of those who have coordination responsibilities?

The goals of the AL programme were:

1. To elaborate a work plan to analyze the practices in the coordination of the joint programme
2. To agree on a methodology and tools to use for analysis and to distribute responsibilities among leading ministries and action learning team
3. To build a group / collaborative network among the participants

The Ministry and focal points from the 9 monitoring committees as well as the 8 UN agencies (UN Women, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, ONU SIDA, FAO, and ILO) and NGOs – who participated in the AL programme.

## **Overview of Process and Results**

The chosen focus of the action learning was to assist participants to improve the way coordination meetings functioned by observing and reflecting on the dynamics of the meetings. Gender at Work adapted a set of observation tools for use by the project. The Observation Toolkit contains 3 tools: (i) The Planning and Management report – this is used to assess planning and management of the meeting through participants' feedbacks and comments at the end of the meeting; (ii) The Interaction Diagram – this is used to assess the level of participation (frequency, duration, intensity), to identify effective approaches to inter-personal dialogue and thus to make through « snapshots » a faithful rendition of the participants interaction during the meeting; and (iii) The Role Evaluation Table – this is used to analyze the interventions and the role played by each participant<sup>5</sup>.

In bureaucracies, an important way to exercise power is through the interactions that take place at meetings, as individuals differ not only in their positional power, but in their ability to influence the debate and decisions (or lack of decisions) in these settings. Gendered dynamics are important: there is often externalized and internalized stereotyping of expectations about women's interventions (they are expected to be 'caring' and 'supportive', for example). A frequent complaint from women in bureaucratic meetings is that no one pays attention when they make an observation or suggestion, but when a male colleague makes the same point later in the session, it is greeted with enthusiasm. This can result in undermining and silencing women. Women also note that men often repeat what other men (especially influential group members) say, while women make more effort to be brief and not 'take up the time' of the meeting – with the result that their contribution is less visible (unless they have considerable positional power within the group). The dynamics generated by gender stereotypes overlay other power-related meeting dynamics, and often hamper effective debate and decision-making. Therefore, understanding the analytical frameworks to interpret what happens in meetings, and how this is gendered, is a tool for improving

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<sup>5</sup> The observation tools were adapted from Hedley G. Dimock, "How to Observe Your Group", (University of Guelph, 1985).

the quality of problem-solving and decision-making in meetings, since understanding permits attempts to influence and interact differently. This, in turn, can support the change the group is responsible for supporting and monitoring.

The skills gained in observing meeting processes leads to understanding how effective – and ineffective - meetings work. This in turn enables women and men participants to improve their own intervention skills. An important part of this process is the opportunity to give and receive feedback on interventions and on effective and ineffective participation by individuals. This process entails observing and reflecting on one’s own behavior as well as that of others, and can provide a safe space for ‘practicing’ new behaviors. Moreover, the very process of observation tends to improve the quality of people’s interventions and interactions: women and men tend to be on their ‘best behavior’ when they know they are being observed.

The coordination group (about 50 people from the UN, the Ministries and the women’s movement) experimented with a range of planning and observation tools and decided which ones to apply to their monitoring meetings. They delegated one of the Projet Tamkine staff to circulate feedback sheets and collect the feedback, and also to apply and report on the more complex observation instruments. They used these instruments over an eight month period and assessed the results. They then planned to continue the process for a further period in order to be able to draw conclusions about the value of the action-learning.

The participants noted the following strengths of the process. The meeting planning tool was felt to be particularly helpful in building good meeting skills. Participants felt that the planning and interaction in meetings improved, although satisfaction with meeting outcomes was not as high as with the quality of the meetings themselves. There is a growing awareness that the Toolkit can open some interesting perspectives to strengthen and improve coordination.

The main limitations were that some of the monitoring groups met infrequently, and did not feel they mastered the tools fully, in part because they were administered by the Tamkine team. In addition, some of the participants were not clear on the link between learning how to improve the quality of meetings and the desired end result of diminishing gender-based violence and empowering girls and women. Finally, the highly formalized nature of bureaucratic interactions did not always sit comfortably with the

reflective nature of the observation tools, and some participants preferred to belittle their potential rather than engage with them.

## Conclusion

The coordination meetings have become somewhat more effective, and some of the participants have increased their skills in observing, analyzing meeting dynamics and participating in meetings. Given the ambitious nature and short time frame of the action –learning process, these outcomes are encouraging.

One of Gender at Work’s assumptions about complex social change, like efforts to build gender equality, is that the process and the outcomes are interrelated. HOW one goes about trying to create change will affect the potential for change, although not necessarily in linear ways. Moreover, as human beings, we are all shaped by our environment and not necessarily conscious of how we ourselves act to inhibit or assist the very change we wish to see.

These connections –between ourselves and those we want to ‘develop’, and between the results and the means – are not normally part of the development discourse, and in fact challenge dominant images that pervade the development enterprise. Therefore using meeting observation instruments to ask development agents to critically reflect on their own ability to listen respectfully to diverse perspectives to come up with robust decisions and solutions to problems is not a simple undertaking. Moreover, collective and overt analysis and reflection on how power operates in groups is counter to the bureaucratic cultural practice of undertaking such analysis with trusted colleagues in private and *post facto*.

The Tamkine project is a very complex undertaking with a very short (3-year) time frame that seeks to integrate a wide range of diverse actors from the national to the local level. One way to strengthen the action learning process would have been to work more intensively with a smaller group of coordination team members to allow them to feel greater mastery and ownership of the tools and their potential and limitations in order to facilitate their peers in the process of learning about effective coordination.

It would also have been useful to reinforce the gender dimensions of the meeting observation and analysis more explicitly. This could have been done by exposing

stereotypes that women and men have of their own and the opposite sex in meetings to understand how they perpetuate gender inequality, and how they can be challenged. The intersection of the gender dimension with that of positional authority, seniority and sectoral/technical perspective is also important. This would, in turn, lead to a further exploration of the link between more equal participation in meetings, recognition of the value of diverse perspectives and insights, and effective coordination.

Finally, a number of the women working as focal points in the Ministries felt they needed to improve their capacity to influence the way their Ministry addressed gender inequality and women's empowerment. This was often expressed as needing to be located in the permanent secretary's office, or lacking their own staff or budget to implement initiatives. An exploration of the assets of their position – the ability to acquire and share information from outside departmental or ministerial silos, the ability to make useful connections, to see systemic issues, and to identify and address problems early – rather than only the limitations of the familiar hierarchical model would also have been useful in strengthening their confidence and skills.

## NEPAL CASE STUDY

### Background

Nepal is emerging from ten years of intense political upheaval and violent conflict, the roots of which can be traced to long-standing inequalities and injustices that have been ignored and suppressed in the past. The end of the monarchy, the establishment of the republic and the new Constitution are universally perceived as historic opportunities for meeting the aspirations of hitherto marginalised and excluded groups for inclusive development.

Nepal ranks low on indices of women's social, economic and political participation. Violence against women is perhaps the most sensitive indicator of the subordination of women in Nepal, and is a daily reality for many women, although the majority of cases go unreported due to fears of stigma and retaliation. Rape and sexual violence have been extensively used as tools of war. As expected, women from minority communities, subordinate castes and ethnic groups are more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

The current political climate in Nepal is very favourable to gender equality. As many as 197 women, representing diverse ethnic groups and regions, have been elected to the Constituent Assembly. The women's movement in Nepal has a strong presence at the grassroots, although work burdens and traditional norms act as barriers for women's involvement in activism. The role of NGOs has also been significant in implementing government programmes, bridging gaps in services, bringing rights violations to public attention and advocating for gender equality.

Most of the UN agencies in Nepal are addressing the issue of gender equality within the context of their specific mandates and in support of UNDAF outputs. The UN System has supported the government, by organising sensitisation programmes on CEDAW and has provided technical support for integrating gender and social inclusion concerns into the national Census. A joint UN framework has been developed to guide responses to gender-based violence and facilitate inter-agency collaboration. Funding has been secured for a joint programme by UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women, which aims to pilot a multi-sectoral district-level response to gender-based violence through raising awareness, strengthening availability and quality of services, building the capacity of multiple service providers and ensuring government support via an improved legal framework. A programme has also been proposed in partnership with the Ministry of Local Development, to establish “inclusive, responsive and accountable local governance and participatory community-led development” ensuring increased involvement of women, Dalit and other under-privileged groups. The UN System in Nepal has also made efforts to create common platforms where government representatives, women's NGOs and donors can come together to exchange views and experiences and explore partnerships to further the cause of gender equality.

### **Action-learning process**

On their return from the inception workshop (New York, February 2009), the Action-Learning Core Team (Ugochi Daniels from UNFPA, Anjali Pradhan from UNICEF, Sharu Joshi-Shreshta from UN Women and Minna Harkonen from the RC office) made a presentation to the UN Country Team on the objectives and strategy for the Action-Learning project. While endorsing the project in principle, the UNCT underlined the need for the action-learning project to contribute directly to the achievement of the joint results framework to which the UN System was already committed. Subsequently, it was decided to expand the Core Group to include UNDP and UNODC, since they have significant gender portfolios, have been active in the UN Gender Theme Group (UN-

GTG) and have significant roles to play in implementing the joint UN Framework on GBV. The starting point for the discussion was the list of “givens” that set the context for the work of the UN-GTG in Nepal:

- Gender equality needs to be “sold” both to government and to UN agencies – the GTG thus has to take on both external and internal advocacy.
- Gender equality is more acceptable to both internal and external actors when it is packaged with “broader” concerns such as social inclusion and human rights.
- For the GTG to be taken seriously by managers, its activities have to contribute substantively to programme results on the ground.
- In order to take advantage of opportunities opened up by the rapidly changing political situation, the GTG needs to be much more flexible, adaptable and quick with responses than at present.
- The GTG needs to operate at two levels - to create “gender space” within each agency as well as within the UN System as a whole.
- Coordinated action requires a much higher degree of rapport, trust, information-sharing, and clear division of responsibilities.
- Very few of the members are full-time “gender experts” - they need a stronger mandate and backing from senior management for putting time into the GTG.

In view of the above, it was decided that the GTG action-plan for 2009-2011 should be substantive and “meaty” enough to establish the GTG as the pivot for gender equality work by the UN System in Nepal. It was felt that the action-learning project could catalyse this effort by energising the GTG and enhancing its credibility within the UN System.

The group then developed a draft work plan for the GTG in order to achieve the following key results by 2011:

- Enhanced visibility and recognition of the UN System contribution to achievement of gender equality in Nepal.
- Common understanding across UN agencies of the intersections between gender, social inclusion and human rights.
- Application of the intersectional framework to UN programming (specifically, the Common Country Assessment for the next UNDAF, the joint programme of support to Local Governments, the GSI evaluation and the National Census 2011).

- Joint implementation of activities under Output 2.2 of the Joint Action Framework on violence against women.

The sequence of activities and outputs for achieving each of these results was detailed. The action-learning process was conceptualised as a series of “pit-stops” which would enable the GTG to take stock of its own functioning and feed the lessons back into the process of achieving each result.

Highlights of the reflection workshops around two key activities – mapping the timeline of gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal, and developing a conceptual framework that locates gender equality within the framework of social inclusion in Nepal – are presented below to show how the action-learning process unfolded on the ground.

### **Gender equality timeline**

The workshop to develop a gender equality timeline for Nepal was facilitated by Gender at Work and attended by 15 individuals from 10 agencies. The objective of the workshop was to collectively map the history of women's rights and gender equality in Nepal, identify key contributions by the UN System and identify the external and internal factors that enabled effective collective action by the GTG. This was an internal workshop, since the Core Group felt that the presence of partners might constrain critical self-reflection.

In the first part of the workshop, participants were invited to mark significant dates and key events along a timeline. It was immediately apparent that there were differences within the group in terms of levels of familiarity with the history of the women's movement in Nepal. The internationals, especially those who were new to Nepal, felt frustrated because they could not contribute substantively. Even among the nationals, the older members and those who had a history of work outside the UN System, were able to map historical and political events while the younger women tended to focus on UN-led events and programmes. Interestingly, two younger women who were providing logistical support for the meeting and were encouraged by the Gender at Work facilitator to join the exercise were able to mark contemporary events of larger national relevance, such as the first ascent of Everest by a Nepali woman. In contrast, GTG members focused almost exclusively on UN-led activities and programmes.

Once the timeline was completed, participants identified the points where the UN System had taken the lead or was able to provide effective support, tried to recap the actual sequence of events and draw out the lessons for the present. There was unanimous agreement that the joint initiative to engender the Census 2001 represented an all-time high in the history of the GTG. Since the next National Census is due in 2011, it was suggested that the group could build on this success and ensure the integration of a wider range of gender equality concerns this time around. It then emerged that some agencies had already initiated work with the Census Bureau at an individual level – in fact, it appeared that the process of finalising the schedules, training modules and training materials was already in its penultimate stages. The group was dismayed to find that they had nearly missed the opportunity to make a significant collective intervention in a process of such national importance and long-term relevance to UN agencies.

This led to a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the present GTG in the current national context and in comparison to the situation in 1999-2000. The discussion generated a list of immediate actions to involve the GTG as a key actor in engendering Census 2011.

The Core Group met the day after the workshop to reflect on the experience. The process was felt to have increased the rapport between old and new members, and enabled some honest self-criticism and analytical reflection. In particular, the fact that the workshop had spurred the GTG into action on Census 2011 was much appreciated. However, the exercise had also revealed that the GTG members as a group did not have sufficient information to construct a complete or accurate historical timeline – the timeline constructed in the workshop was dominated by events where the UN had a role, and did not really reflect a comprehensive view. It was therefore decided to repeat the exercise, this time with the participation of selected women's movement activists and government counterparts.

The workshop with women's movement groups was held in June 2010 and was attended by 59 women from 32 organisations, including 10 members of the Constituent Assembly. Apart from generating a richly detailed timeline, the workshop also provided the space for a honest discussion on the role of the UN in Nepal, and suggestions on how the GTG could provide support to women's movements.

### **“Think Piece” on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion**

Given the commitment of the new government to social inclusion as the overarching rubric for governance, the GTG placed a high priority on putting in place a conceptual framework and tools that would make visible and build on the connections between gender equality, women's human rights and social inclusion. The core team identified a consultant and prepared the TOR, and the contract was issued by UNIFEM and UNFPA. However, the draft prepared by the consultant did not meet the expectations of the group. After several rounds of feedback and redrafting failed to resolve the issue, the group decided to try and produce the paper themselves. A two-day writing retreat was organised for members of the Core Group and some 'special invitees' who it was felt could add substantive value to the paper. A short paper listing the issues and questions that would need to be discussed and resolved was circulated in advance, along with a proposed chapter outline. Most of the time at the workshop was spent on discussion of concepts

The group had to grapple with the idea of intersectionality and the fact that multiple forms of exclusion were not only layered onto each other but actually created new hierarchies and patterns of subordination. A significant moment was the realisation that the question “Who is most vulnerable?” could not be answered in absolute terms or without reference to context – implying therefore that the application of an intersectional approach to programming would require a far more rigorous situation analysis than was the norm at present.

The next challenge was to translate this complex framework into a simple programming guide, one that could be integrated with existing programming tools being used by different agencies without being seen as “extra work”, but which would nevertheless push users to go beyond simplistic assumptions about vulnerability. It was finally decided that the tool would be a series of questions to be asked at each stage of the programming process, augmented with clarifying examples, and case studies of effective and ineffective practices.

The experience of working together was unusual in several respects. Engaging in hands-on intellectual work instead of hiring a consultant, critically questioning their own practice and pushing each other to sharpen the analysis, were specifically listed as achievements. Learning together created a new level of bonding and trust – the fact that people had stepped out of their organisational boundaries was remarked on several times. The workshop became a safe space for reflection, created and owned by

everyone in the group – as one member put it, “This workshop was an action-learning project in itself.”

## Results

The Core Group has identified the following positive results of the action-learning process.

- Engaging in the action-learning programme led the GTG to critically question their ideas and assumptions about women’s empowerment and gender equality and sharpen their strategies on how to work toward both in the current political and social context in Nepal. This built a level of respect and trust that propelled the GTG to act together as one unit which improved their work coordination and their ability to leverage resources, and as well, led to better coordination on the part of their national partners. By focusing on challenging obvious but unspoken power relationships (based on inequalities such as national/international status; agency status, educational qualifications, and work experience) the process enabled participants to make them visible, break them down and create new group norms which overcame territorial boundaries, and facilitated communication and joint action.
- Joint action and “one voice” by the UN on gender issues contributed to increased visibility of gender equality issues and stronger partnerships with national counterparts.
- Participation of the government in the action-learning process was critical in generating mutual objectives and strategies and commitment carrying out the process.

The Core Group is committed to taking forward the action learning process and reaching out to GTG members who have not been involved so far. Challenges identified by the group include dealing with personality dynamics, and confronting the subtle reluctance and resistance within the system to “speaking as one” on gender issues. The group is moving ahead with plans to apply and test the intersectional framework during the upcoming UNDAF evaluation. It is also gearing up to use an intersectional lens to review

the existing programmes and policies of the Government of Nepal and the UN System in Nepal including the Peace and Development strategy.

## V. Reflections and Lessons

Analysis of the track record on joint programming on gender equality by UN country teams has highlighted many concerns: inadequate resources; “territorial” sensitivities among agencies with similar or overlapping mandates and clientele; and lack of a common analysis of the causes of inequality and lack of consensus on the actions required to advance equality. Most of these problems relate to the formal aspects of organisational functioning – formal laws, policies and arrangements, and access to resources and opportunities.

In contrast to the above scenario, in all the three countries selected for the action-learning programme the Gender Thematic Groups had been successful in mobilizing resources for a joint programme or (in the case of Nepal) for activities leading to programming. This in itself was an important element providing a direction and purpose to the group beyond ‘information-sharing’ which is the default role for many of the UN and bilateral interagency gender thematic groups.

Moreover, this enabled the action-learning process to focus for the most part on organizational dynamics and power inequalities that hinder effective joint coordination.<sup>6</sup> As discussed earlier, a series of factors can potentially hinder inter-agency efforts on gender equality (such as inconsistent or unclear focus related to meanings and objectives; different frameworks for gender equality among agencies; lack of a targeted strategy; and operational and administrative barriers) but hidden power dynamics that generate mistrust and competition, and hinder coordinated action and mutual accountability are the most invidious. They are also the hardest to change. This programme supported Gender Theme Groups to use analytical tools to identify these practices and engage collectively to transform them. The Nepal group worked on building trust and breaking down institutional barriers; the Morocco team worked on understanding power dynamics and making these visible to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of the coordination team; and the Albania team used the action learning process to strengthen trust across agencies for coordinated action on gender equality.

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<sup>6</sup> See Gender at Work Framework Figure 2: “What are We Trying to Change in Organizations?,” Section III of this report

In all three countries, the effort to reflect on process as well as content led, in the view of the participants, to more effective programming: better integration within the UN and with the government, and increased support from non-GTG colleagues.

The main lessons from the process are the following:

- **Learning on interagency coordination is enhanced when it takes place in the context of an actionable programme agenda with clear deliverables and adequate resources to ensure results. In all the three UNCTs. The GTGs had joint programmes which were well funded. This helped them to focus their learning in concrete ways to achieve measurable results.**

The experience of this project suggests that action-learning can be a good vehicle for strengthening GTGs and enabling them to take on the challenge of integrating gender concerns into the work of the UN system. At the same time, it should be recognized that many of the conditions that are taken as given for most Gender Theme Groups – that few if any members are full-time gender experts; that members are randomly assigned by parent agencies, with no reference to their involvement in or commitment to gender work; that funds for implementing activities and sustained capacity-building are hard to come by – can present serious impediments to collective learning processes. A minimum degree of stability and continuity in the GTG must be assured if they are to meet expectations of playing a substantive role in advancing gender goals within the UN System.

- **Cohesive, informed and engaged GTGs can be key drivers of policy and programming innovation for women’s empowerment and gender equality in the UNCTs. Collectivity in the team, mutual accountability, and joint ownership of their change agenda requires trust. In this process, informal discriminatory norms and exclusionary practices that worked against trust were identified and broken down.**

The experience of the action-learning process underlines the central role of the Gender Theme Group as a mechanism for advancing gender equality goals within the UN System. Engagement in collective learning through the UNDG project was acknowledged to have built solidarity, mutuality and a sense of trust among team members, enabling them to go beyond organizational mandates and work towards building a system-wide perspective on gender issues.

- **Competence: This pilot showed that experiences that facilitate the GTG members to tap into their collective knowledge and competence, to learn from each other and strategically use the space to promote gender equality, build their confidence and generate solid programming ideas.**

The collective commitment built by the GTGs was a powerful motivator for the group to work towards strengthening its technical capacity and claiming a substantive space - not merely a token presence - within the system. A GTG also offers the potential for stronger analysis and strategy development through its inclusion of diverse perspectives rooted in different agency mandates and the concerns of different client groups.

- **Breaking down power hierarchies: Involvement of national staff in action learning processes of this type is unique and critical. In this initiative, national staff took leadership roles and recognized how important it was for their ability to take initiative to build bridges across UN organizations.**

The action-learning process became a space where taken-for-granted divides (for instance national staff/international staff, UN staff/government staff) became blurred and were replaced by relationships of warmth and friendship. The sense of a collectivity created by the action-learning process gave the group the confidence to acknowledge and resolve contentious territorial issues (such as the prickly question of who “owns” gender) through dialogue and discussion rather than through behind-the-scenes lobbying with senior managers. This openness and transparency in acknowledging and dealing with agency-specific concerns and interests at the start of the process is essential to collective ownership and effective implementation of joint programmes on the ground. Group members must be willing to reflect constructively on their own behavior and that of their colleagues. Both the cultural context and the bureaucratic context may militate against such an engagement: some may find it threatening, requiring them to expose their own vulnerability, or may see it as irrelevant to bureaucratic work.

The action learning programme process also showed the difficulties in dealing with diversities and differences of opinion within the UNCT. Individual differences can be strength, but disagreement on fundamental issues can disrupt collaborative processes. Dealing with these differences in such situations becomes difficult for a group of with no hierarchical or positional authority. Setting up formal mechanisms for dialogue and resolution of differences thus, becomes an imperative for the effective functioning of inter-agency groups.

- **Participation: Including non-UN actors, like government, women’s organizations and other civil society representatives, improves the quality of the work and extends the model of coordination. Government and NGO partners also learned to coordinate more effectively through their participation in an action-learning initiative focused on exploring more effective means of coordination.**

Diversity within the group is a definite positive factor, especially in terms of breaking down preconceived notions and prejudices between colleagues. Far from being a constraint, the presence of “outsiders” (such as government counterparts and women's movement activists), was found to have a positive impact on the group's functioning particularly in terms of setting and enforcing norms of participation and interaction.

- **Authority: Links with and support from the Resident Coordinator’s office are important. In all cases, seeking the RC’s buy-in and participation in this initiative created time and space for the participants to engage meaningfully.**

The experience of this programme once again emphasises the importance of ownership and leadership of change processes by senior management. In all three countries, the support of the RC and the UNCT was critical to empowering the GTG to take on the action-learning process, and in creating and maintaining the “safe space” for reflection. The outputs and recommendations of the process at the country level were smoothly and quickly integrated into the on-going work of the UN System, through the involvement of the RC office in the process.

- **Solidarity: External facilitation with expertise in both the substance (in this case women’s empowerment and gender equality) and process (action learning) strengthens the quality of the learning and the programme strategy.**

“Safe spaces” for critical reflection were identified as the most important element of the action-learning process. Despite the fact that most UN agencies describe themselves as “learning organizations”, such spaces are hard to come by - staff members (and national staff in particular) seldom get opportunities for reflection. The external facilitators were critical in creating such reflective spaces through collaborative and non-prescriptive learning processes. Such facilitators can bring in fresh perspectives and provide unbiased feedback – while facilitation was provided by international consultants in this instance, action-learning processes

might just as well be supported by experienced national resource persons. The project challenged GTG members to look critically and analytically at their own functioning, and built accountability for applying this learning to strengthen their practice

- **Capacity: Action action-learning and reflection is an effective and under-utilized method for capacity development. In the case of these three countries, the 2-year cost was modest (USD 266, 423) compared to supporting each agency to build country-level gender mainstreaming capacity.**

This experience underlines the importance of addressing individual attitudes and informal hierarchies and processes in lifting the process of gender programming from a minimal compliance, or 'box-ticking' mode toward a results-oriented, problem-solving approach. It also validates the use of action learning as a means to expand concern for gender equality beyond the purview of dedicated and exceptional individuals within the system, and make it the expected and accepted practice of the system as a whole. Within a bureaucratic system like the UN, this requires changing the cultural norms, relationships and work practices that impede attention to gender equality. Experience shows that having a policy on gender mainstreaming does not automatically result in changing the attitudes or ways of working of staff members. Similarly, gender awareness or gender analysis training for staff does not ensure the effectiveness of an agency's contribution to gender equality. Resource allocation alone, although important, is not sufficient. Action-learning can build positive synergies between these elements by generating change in organizational beliefs and practice.

The experience of this project suggests that action-learning has strong potential to address some of the blockages identified in applying gender mainstreaming within the UN System. The emphasis over the last decade has been on institutionalizing the use of standard analytical and programming tools, and has inevitably led to a situation where conformity to guidelines, rather than innovation, is recognized and rewarded by the system. By focusing attention on processes and making linkages between means and ends, action-learning can generate an environment that encourages innovation and creativity in addressing gender issues.

The action-learning process described in this report followed very different trajectories in the three participating countries – but the common lesson is that

supporting the gender theme group to strategize collectively – with the participation of local governmental and civil society organizations and the support of an impartial facilitator if required– can improve the group’s capacity to influence UN planning tools and processes and ensure that gender equality is better addressed in UNCT programming. This was applicable to initiatives specifically targeting women (as in Albania), or in improving the integration of gender dimensions in other programming (as in Morocco and in Nepal). The participating GTGs strongly recommended that resources be made available to other interested countries to replicate this process.

The main recommendation from this programme is to:

***Support the capacity development of Gender Theme Groups – which work closely with government, women’s organizations and other civil society groups - in all UNCTs and ensure that they have strong senior management support, adequate resources for joint work, and space for learning and reflection with external facilitation, to enable them to be cohesive drivers for positive change for women’s empowerment and gender equality.***

***For the GTGs to be more effective catalysts of change for women’s empowerment and gender equality, they need to build their own cohesiveness and collective commitment by breaking down exclusionary practices and power hierarchies that undermine trust and mutual accountability; expand their knowledge by linking to key actors in the government and to women’s organizations to develop an agenda for change that these key actors contribute to and help lead; and have senior management support with the necessary resources to put plans into action.***

## APPENDIX A: About Gender at Work

Gender at Work ([www.genderatwork.org](http://www.genderatwork.org)) is an international non-profit incorporated in the US and in Canada. Gender at Work was founded in 2003 by UNIFEM, the Association of Women's Rights in Development, CIVICUS-World Alliance for Citizen Participation, and Women's Learning Partnership. It focuses on building cultures of gender equality and social justice. Working in partnership with local, national and international social change organizations, Gender at Work helps to create new norms and cultures of equality and takes on complex organizational change processes in challenging environments. Gender at Work helps organizations to change their structures, culture, processes and programmes to effectively support the empowerment of women and facilitate progress toward gender equality goals within the sphere of public action.

## APPENDIX B: What is Action Learning?

Since the early 1990s, Gender at Work has used action-learning as a tool to improve organisational effectiveness. Action learning describes a purposeful process by a group of people who normally work together, often facilitated by someone from outside the group to support effective teamwork, analysis and problem-solving. This group of people agrees that they would like to improve the organization's effectiveness by improving the way they work. This improvement may be in either the content or the process of their work, or both. The group will undertake the improvement in something which is under their purview – that is, something that they have the authority to decide on the changes they wish to test out. They begin by undertaking a diagnosis to understand the improvement they wish to make (or the change they wish to see), and what might be done to achieve it. They test or validate their proposed action with the facilitator, with peers, with supervisors, and perhaps with experts. They revise their proposed action in light of the feedback, and give themselves sufficient time for it to be tested.

They review to assess whether their action has resulted in the desired improvements, what further changes or adjustments might be needed, and what other factors, beyond their immediate control, they might also need to influence to achieve the desired change. Some of these factors might relate to their own organization's policies or ways of working that could be changed. They undertake a second phase of implementation after making adjustments to their action. Their final reflection takes place to summarize what they have learned and share it with peers, clients, experts and supervisors.

An action-learning process requires three intensive periods of group work – to define the improvement and action plan, to review it after an appropriate interval, and to reflect on what has been learned. In between, team members apply their 'new ways of working' and support each other in learning what works. The entire cycle is likely to take a year or longer, depending on the scope of the change that is being attempted.

## Why is Action Learning Useful?

Much of the change development organizations aim to bring about requires the complex interaction of many variables. Understanding what generates change is not simple. Therefore, an approach that encourages experimentation and evidence-based reflection is often more useful than the application of cookie-cutter skills and techniques. Moreover, collaborating to learn about such change will be more effective for organizational learning (as compared to individual learning) if the teams that undertake the action-learning have an on-going stake in better performance. The different perspectives they bring because of their social and professional positioning will sharpen the action plan and enrich the learning.

It is unlikely that one individual, no matter how talented and capable, can create lasting change without the support and understanding of colleagues. A collective process within an organization is likely to be more effective in understanding and addressing organizational constraints, especially if the team comes from different parts or positions in the organization. (Organizational change literature notes that a 'diagonal slice' is particularly useful for ensuring robust solutions to organizational problems.) Finally, an action learning approach will support and strengthen a results-based orientation in programming and in addressing organizational constraints. It will encourage experimentation, team work, and evidence-based action.