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# UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC & SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

## ESCWA Biennial Report of Evaluations 2018 – 2019

January 2020

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## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

ESCWA considers evaluation to be a strategic function that independently assesses the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of its work. In line with the Evaluation Policy issued in 2017, this biennial report provides an overview of evaluation related efforts at ESCWA in 2018 and 2019. It presents the main achievements and the lessons learned and highlights the challenges and the steps forward.

## RECURRENT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FEED INTO THE META-ANALYSIS

All the findings and recommendations of the evaluations conducted in 2018 and 2019 confirmed the findings and recommendations identified in the meta-review of evaluations carried out in the previous Biennium. The aim of confirming the findings and recommendations was to validate the trends and patterns, both positive and negative, through a horizontal comparison of all evaluations. The validation of the meta-analysis provided ESCWA with an analytical tool identifying organization-wide areas of strength and improvement that the organization may wish to capitalize on or address, helping it ensure its regional impact is more than the sum of its parts.

The validation of ESCWA's meta-review of evaluations followed a rigorous process. The twelve existing Key Insights of the meta-evaluation conducted in 2017 were reviewed and compared with the findings and recommendations of the ten evaluations conducted in 2018 and 2019. Further, based on the findings of the evaluations conducted in 2018 and 2019 a new Key Insight was added under the criterion of relevance (Key Insight 4). Please find below the thirteen Key Insights organized by the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability:

### Relevance

Overall, ESCWA's work is relevant to the needs of the region, to the Internationally Agreed Development Goals and to its mandates, although further opportunities exist to better target its work.

#### Key Insight 1 - Relevance levels vary between member States and topics

- **Finding:** Insufficient attention is paid to the differences between the sub-regions and member States.
- **Recommendation:** ESCWA should tailor its support to the sub-regional level to increase its relevance to its member States.

**Key Insight 2 - More knowledge about the problems being addressed is recommended**

- **Finding:** Needs assessments and problem analysis are rarely undertaken with external input, and baselines are often missing as normative work is hard to quantify.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure input from external stakeholders in the needs assessments and problem trees and consider knowledge or capacity surveys at the start of projects to establish baselines.

**Key Insight 3 - Participation in DA projects is consistently problematic**

- **Finding:** Project teams are often not able to impose criteria for participation and project focal points are frequently unaware of them. As a result, participants often do not meet the required profile. Women participation is typically around 30-40%.
- **Recommendation:** Define participation criteria clearly and explain them to the focal points and senior officials in member States; ensure women's participation is closer to 50%.

**Key Insight 4 – Vision for long-term impact**

- **Finding:** Defining the vision for long-term impact increases the relevance and coherence of ESCWA Subprogrammes.
- **Recommendation:** Develop a vision and a Theory of Change for ESCWA's Subprogrammes.

**Effectiveness**

ESCWA produces unique work and is often praised for addressing topics that are otherwise disregarded. However, inconsistent engagement with external stakeholders and participants and inconsistent quality often limits the effectiveness of its work.

**Key Insight 5 - Inconsistent engagement with external partners and participants**

- **Finding:** External partners and participants would prefer greater and more consistent engagement in ESCWA's projects. Some ESCWA partnerships could be more strategic.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure that partnerships are goal-oriented and ensure regular and consistent engagement with partners and participants at the time of project inception.

**Key Insight 6 - The quality of ESCWA's work in its three core functions is varied**

- **Finding:** ESCWA knowledge products often do not target a specific audience and are not sufficiently disseminated and tracked for their uptake. Technical cooperation is much appreciated but often is not aligned with the programme of work. ESCWA's Technical Committees can be maximized for more impact.

- **Recommendation:** Clearly define the target audience and develop a dissemination plan for knowledge products; further align technical cooperation with the programme of work; and design a strategy to maximise the impact of Technical Committees.

## Efficiency

ESCWA's work has garnered praise for its flexibility but could be more efficient if workplans and internal monitoring for results mechanisms were better designed and implemented.

### **Key Insight 7 - Logical Frameworks are often poorly designed, but projects work within budget and are efficient at gaining in-kind support**

- **Finding:** Given Secretariat requirements, Expected Accomplishments (EAs) and Indicators of Achievement (IoAs) often exceed the scope of the project or programme and are not readily measurable. Projects are completed within budget and often solve the problems creatively to obtain in-kind support.
- **Recommendation:** Consider developing a Theory of Change alongside the logframe, and if IoAs are outside the scope of work, develop proxy indicators.

### **Key Insight 8 - Internal monitoring and reporting is inconsistent**

- **Finding:** Most Divisions and projects do not have a system in place to monitor for results/impact.
- **Recommendation:** ESCWA should decide how substantive and results-based monitoring takes place. Tools and mechanisms for monitoring for results should be designed for ESCWA's regular work and for its projects.

### **Key Insight 9 - Flexibility in project/programme workplan leads to greater relevance and greater efficiency**

- **Finding:** Some DA projects and programmes of work are modified during implementation to address emerging issues, thereby improving relevance and impact, but not all project/programme managers are aware of this option.
- **Recommendation:** When applicable, undertake changes through formal review channels as soon as possible to improve relevance and impact.

### **Key Insight 10 - Sub-contracting and administrative challenges are persistent and can deter ESCWA staff from initiating XB/DA projects**

- **Finding:** Contracts with consultants are often time consuming, consultant deliverables are often delayed and sometimes below quality, and ESCWA staff are frequently unaware of recourse options.
- **Recommendation:** Staff should be trained on the contracting of consultants and should know their options, and be empowered to pursue them when a consultant under-performs.

## Sustainability

Although a majority of project stakeholders and participants request projects to continue, the sustainability of most projects is not sufficiently institutionalized or ensured.

### Key Insight 11 - Insufficient sustainability measures

- **Finding:** Many projects assume that knowledge production, capacity building and maintenance of online platforms equals sustainable gains.
- **Recommendation:** Design an explicit exit strategy within each project, with continued opportunities for the application of skills acquired.

### Key Insight 12 - Projects are not integrated enough into regular programme of work

- **Finding:** As DA projects are not extended, much of their sustainability lies in the integration of the project into the Section's regular programme of work.
- **Recommendation:** Identify how the various components of ESCWA's regular work can continue aspects of project work.

### Key Insight 13 - Attempts at Resource Mobilisation for follow-up projects are limited

- **Finding:** Successful small DA projects can be treated as "pilot projects" and used to gain larger XB funds, but this is rarely done.
- **Recommendation:** Use the positive experience of DA projects when pitching to donors.

## IMPLEMENTED EVALUATIONS

Every biennium, ESCWA carries out discretionary and mandatory evaluations of its Subprogrammes, Development Account (DA) projects and projects financed from extra-budgetary sources (XB), according to a set biennial workplan and budget. In 2018-2019, ESCWA completed the evaluation of five DA projects and one extra-budgetary project. In addition, it completed the evaluation of four of its Subprogrammes (see Annexes 1,2 and 3).

### SUBPROGRAMME EVALUATIONS

Subprogramme evaluations examine the overall performance of a substantive Subprogramme or Division in ESCWA. Such evaluations normally examine the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the Subprogrammes through their knowledge production, engagement with stakeholders, technical cooperation, strategy and implementation of projects (see Annex 3). In 2018-19 ESCWA completed four Subprogramme Evaluations:

- Evaluation of the Subprogramme on Economic Development and Integration
- Evaluation of the Subprogramme of Integrated Management of Natural Resources for Sustainable Development
- Evaluation of Subprogramme on Social Development
- Evaluation of the Subprogramme on Statistics for Evidence-based Policymaking.

### EXTRA-BUDGETARY & DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNT EVALUATIONS

ESCWA also undertakes evaluations of specific projects managed by the different Subprogrammes. Project evaluations are normally time bound to the life of the project and focus on assessing the extent to which ESCWA met the stated objectives and outcomes identified in the project document.

In the 2018-2019 biennium, ESCWA completed five Development Account project evaluations:

- Development Account project on “Strengthened National Capacities for Integrated, Sustainable and Inclusive Population and Development Policies in the Arab Region”
- Development Account project on “Promoting renewable energy investments for climate change mitigation and sustainable Development”

- Development Account project on “Developing the capacity of countries members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia to address the water and energy nexus for achieving sustainable development goals”
- Development Account project on “Strengthening the statistical capacity of the countries members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in producing and disseminating short-term economic indicators for sustainable growth”
- Development Account project on “Establishing National Technology Development and Transfer Systems in select ESCWA member states”

In addition, in the 2018-19 biennium, ESCWA completed one extra-budgetary evaluation of the extra-budgetary project on “Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region” and initiated the evaluation of extra-budgetary project on "Promoting food and water security through cooperation and capacity development in the Arab Region" (see Annexes 1 and 2).

#### **Box 1 - The RICCAR evaluation supports future financing of the project**

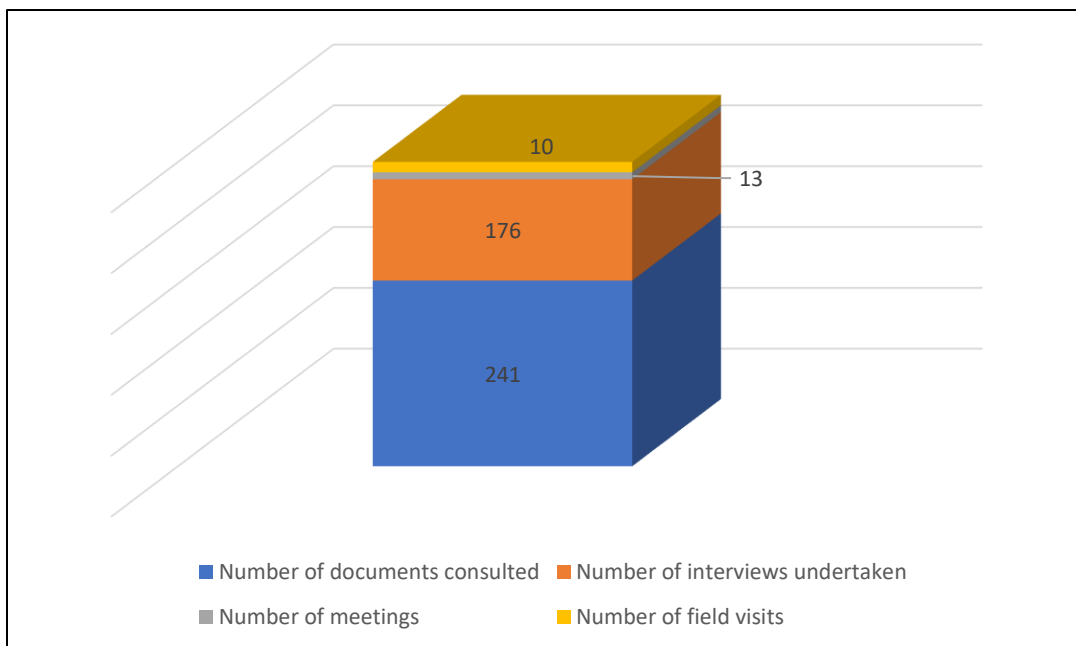
In May 2018, ESCWA completed the summative evaluation of its extra-budgetary project: “Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR)”. The aim of this evaluation was to provide key findings and recommendations for the planning of the next phase of the project. Given its formative nature, the evaluation was carried out during last months of the implementation of the first phase of the project to be able to provide timely feedback to the project team before the start of the next phase.

The evaluation was undertaken by a team of two international external evaluators, Nadia Bechraoui and Amel Makhoulouf, who conducted the evaluation fieldwork in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia. The data collection consisted of 35 semi-structured interviews, a comprehensive review of the project documentation, and the observation of meetings and conferences. The evaluation findings were presented to the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). As result of the rigor and credibility of the evaluation, the donor agreed to finance the next phase of the project.

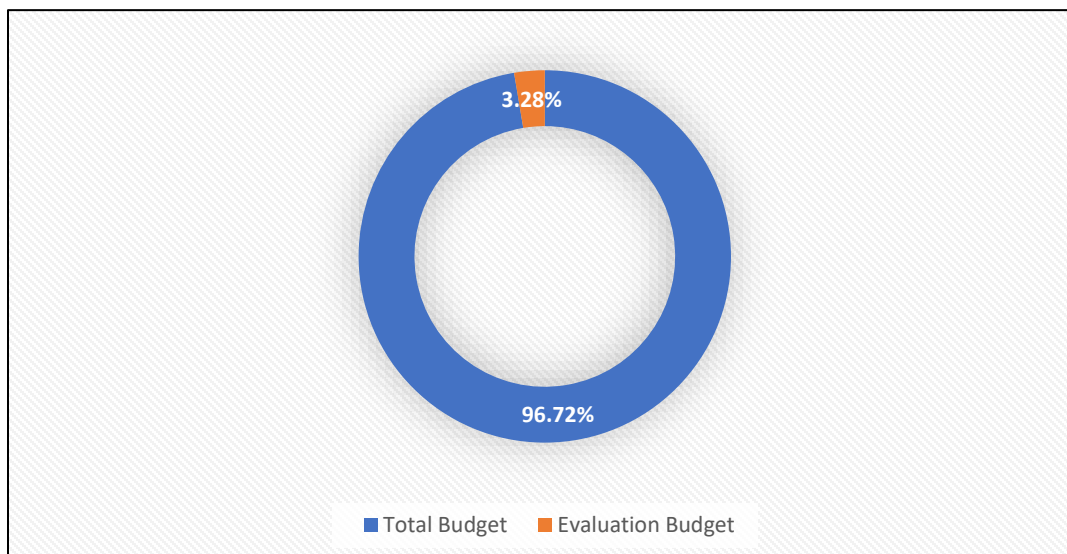


The findings and recommendations of all the project evaluations undertaken in 2018-19 were used to validate meta-analysis of ESCWA evaluations. The following two charts provide an overview of the resources and efforts to conduct XB and DA project evaluations in 2018-19.

**Chart 1 – Triangulation in Development Account and extra-budgetary projects**



**Chart 2 – Budget allocation for project evaluations**



In 2020, ESCWA will conclude the evaluation of the following DA and XB projects:

**DA projects:**

- Implementation and Follow-Up and Review of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Enhancing the Capacities of Arab countries
- Facilitating the Implementation of the Arab Custom Union
- Promoting Social Justice in Selected Countries in the Arab Region
- Fostering Institutional Development for Participatory Approaches towards the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Western Asia

**XB projects:**

- National Agenda for the Future of Syria Phase II
- Libya socio-economic dialogue project

## IMPROVING ESCWA'S EVALUATION PERFORMANCE

The 2018-2019 biennial Evaluation Plan was developed in consultation with the Executive Secretary. As part of the new plan ESCWA consolidated many practices and improvements.

ESCWA further developed the roster of evaluators with regional experience. For this ESCWA's evaluation function used the headhunting technique by attending the conference of the Evaluation Association of the Middle East and North Africa (EvalMENA). As a result of an active networking, ESCWA's evaluation function was able to identify new emergent evaluators and senior evaluators that were included in the existing roster of experts.

ESCWA's evaluation function created new evaluation tools and revised existing ones. ESCWA further refined its standardized annexes of evaluation Terms of Reference with a detailed outline for inception and evaluation reports to include new criteria such as the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS). These tools provide external experts with clear instructions on how to structure reports, how to mainstream gender and human rights, and how to comply with the new UNEG Norms and Standards.

### Box 2 - ESCWA Evaluation Activities in 2016-2017, assessed by OIOS

ESCWA's achievements in the 2016-2017 biennium built on progress made in the previous biennium as acknowledged in "United Nations Secretariat Evaluation Scorecards 2016-2017", prepared by the Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (IED/OIOS). This exercise acknowledged the remarkable progress made by ESCWA during the 2016-17 biennium as it ranked first among all Regional Commission and second among the thirty entities assessed by the Scorecard.

In particular, the Scorecard, highlighted the excellent performance of ESCWA with regards to the evaluation framework and to the quality of the evaluation reports. In terms of the evaluation framework, ESCWA had perfect scores regarding its reporting line for evaluations, its evaluation policy, its evaluation procedure and its evaluation plan. With regards to the quality of evaluation reports, ESCWA obtained the highest scores for the overall quality of the evaluation reports, for the quality of the evaluation recommendations and for integrating gender. Only for the integration of human rights did not obtain a perfect score. ESCWA will work in the 2020 to further improve in this area.

Source: OIOS, United Nations Secretariat Evaluation Scorecards 2016-2017, 30 Apr 2019 Assignment No: IED-19-002

## ESCWA EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN ITS EVALUATION CULTURE

ESCWA's evaluation function continued its outreach activities in 2016-2017 to strengthen its evaluation culture. For each Subprogramme evaluation, the ESCWA evaluation team organized division-wide meetings to explain the objectives, steps, roles and responsibilities in the evaluation process. Further, evaluation findings and recommendations are publicly available on ESCWA's website .

### Box 2 - ESCWA launches training to foster evaluation culture

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) launched a training on "Evaluation: Opportunities for Learning & Accountability" addressed to programme staff who are not specialized in the field.

The training, held 29 May 2019 with participants from different Divisions of the Regional Commission, was an eye opener to the colleagues who attended. "I did not know that evaluations can be so useful", expressed one of the colleagues who added: "Now when my initiative will be evaluated in the near future, I will no longer fear it".

As Felix Herzog, the facilitator of the training, explained: "We are all aware that evaluation is a priority for the Secretary-General; however, there is still a common misconception among Secretariat staff on what it is and what it isn't". Using a series of interactive exercises the training explored the parameters and objectives of evaluation, but most importantly it showed how evaluation can be an excellent tool for self-reflection and learning for any Programme or Project.

Ramla Khalidi, Chief of the Strategy, Evaluation and Partnership Section, added: "If we want the UN Secretariat to embrace a culture of evaluation, we need to actively promote self-reflection and learning from our own experiences and those of others. This training is part of our effort to engage in a dialogue on the purpose and utility of evaluations".

Source: Article published on iSeek in July 2019.

## ESCWA EFFORTS TO INTEGRATE GENDER IN EVALUATIONS

ESCWA continued to report on the degree of gender mainstreaming of its evaluations to the UN System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN-SWAP. During the 2018-2019 biennium, ESCWA maintained its high score in the UN-SWAP exercise obtaining "exceeds requirements" in 2018 and 2019. This continued achievement underscores

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ESCWA's commitment to integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women in all the stages of the evaluation process.

**Box 3 – ESCWA contributes to develop Technical Note for Evaluation Performance Indicator of the UN-SWAP 2.0**

In its effort to mainstream gender in evaluation, ESCWA played in 2018-19 an active role in the United Nations Evaluation Group and joined the Working Group on Integrating Gender and Human Rights in evaluation. As a result, ESCWA directly contributed to revising the Technical Note for the Evaluation Performance Indicator of the UN-SWAP 2.0. This Technical Note is the guiding document for all UN System entities on how to integrate gender in evaluations. It sets the benchmark for all entities and encourages all entities to in their efforts to fully mainstream gender in evaluation.

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## STRUCTURE & RESOURCES

ESCWA's evaluation function reports directly to the Deputy Executive Secretary and to the Executive Secretary. The Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme acts as Head of Evaluation and is a full member of UNEG. Since the departure of the Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme Support in February 2017, the role of Head of Evaluations has been assigned to the Executive Secretary.

To strengthen the rigour of the evaluation process, ESCWA's evaluations are managed separately from the monitoring and planning functions. In addition, external evaluators are selected independently by ESCWA's evaluation function, which adds to the impartiality of the exercise.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, the work on evaluations was undertaken by an Acting Evaluation Officer (P3) working exclusively on evaluations.

Support from the Chief of Section and General Service Staff was provided throughout the biennium. In addition, staff from substantive divisions at different levels also supported each of the completed evaluation assignments. Thus, it is estimated that the total staff time dedicated to evaluations reached around 42.4 work months in the 2018-2019 biennium (See Endnote).

## NETWORKING ON EVALUATIONS

ESCWA is actively engaged with global and regional networks on evaluation. At the global level, ESCWA is a member of UNEG, participating in the annual UNEG evaluation week, and contributing to specific outputs of the Evaluation Practice Exchange. In 2018, ESCWA showcased its findings on how to evaluate policy support, and in 2019, ESCWA was invited to prepare an interactive workshop on the same topic. As a result of the success of these two activities, ESCWA founded in collaboration with FAO the first Interest Group as part of UNEG. This Interest Group holds monthly meetings to exchange best practices on how to evaluate policy support.

**ANNEX 1: EXTRA-BUDGETARY PROJECT EVALUATIONS, 2018-2019**

Project Title	Amount	Status
<b>Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region</b>	\$ 15,000	Evaluation completed in May 2018

**ANNEX 2: DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNT PROJECT EVALUATIONS, 2018-2019**

Project Title	Tranche	Amount	Status
<b>DA Evaluations completed in 2018-2019</b>			
<b>Strengthened National Capacities for Integrated, Sustainable and Inclusive Population and Development Policies in the Arab Region</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Tranche	\$ 714,000 (\$14,000)	Evaluation completed in June 2019
<b>Promoting renewable energy investments for climate change mitigation and sustainable Development</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Tranche	\$ 632,000 (\$116,500)	Evaluation completed in May 2018
<b>Developing the capacity of countries members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia to address the water and energy nexus for achieving sustainable development goals</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Tranche	\$ 525,000 (\$9,975)	Evaluation completed in May 2018
<b>Strengthening the statistical capacity of the countries members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in producing and disseminating short-term economic indicators for sustainable growth</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Tranche	\$ 518,000 (\$10,000)	Evaluation completed in February 2018
<b>Establishing National Technology Development and Transfer Systems in select ESCWA member states</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Tranche	\$ 497,000 (\$10,000)	Evaluation completed in March 2018

**ANNEX 3: SUBPROGRAMME EVALUATIONS, 2018-2019**

Title	Status
<b>Discretionary Evaluation of the Subprogramme on Economic Development and Integration</b>	Evaluation completed in January 2018
<b>Discretionary Evaluation of the Subprogramme of Integrated Management of Natural Resources for Sustainable Development</b>	Evaluation completed in May 2018

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<b>Discretionary Evaluation of the Subprogramme on Social Development</b>	Evaluation completed in June 2019
<b>Discretionary Evaluation of the Subprogramme on Statistics for Evidence-based Policymaking</b>	Evaluation completed in November 2019



#### ANNEX 4: ESCWA'S PROVISIONAL 2020 EVALUATION WORKPLAN

Evaluation Title	Budget	By Whom	Schedule Q/Y	Type
<b>Evaluation of DA Project: Implementation and Follow-Up and Review of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Enhancing the Capacities of Arab countries.</b>	\$ 12,000	External Evaluator	<b>Q1 2020</b>	DA Project Evaluation
<b>Evaluation of DA Project: Facilitating the Implementation of the Arab Custom Union</b>	\$ 15,000	External Evaluator	<b>Q2 2020</b>	DA Project Evaluation
<b>Evaluation DA project: Promoting Social Justice in Selected Countries in the Arab Region</b>	\$ 10,000	External Evaluator	<b>Q3 2020</b>	DA Project Evaluation
<b>Evaluation of extra-budgetary project: Libya socio-economic dialogue</b>	\$ 119,040	External Evaluator	<b>Q4 2020</b>	XB project Evaluation
<b>Evaluation of extra-budgetary project: National Agenda for the Future of Syria</b>	\$ TBD	External Evaluator	<b>Q4 2020</b>	XB project Evaluation
<b>Evaluation of extra-budgetary project: Fostering Institutional Development for Participatory Approaches towards the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Western Asia</b>	\$ 10,000	External Evaluator	<b>Q4 2020</b>	DA Project Evaluation

**ENDNOTE**

<b>Estimated Staff time dedicated to evaluations during the 2018-19 Biennium</b>			
Staff and level	Percentage dedicated to evaluations	Duration	Work months
Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme/Programme Support (D2)	5%	24 months	1.2
Chief of Strategy, Evaluation and Partnership Section (P5)	20%	18 months	4.8
Acting Strategy and Evaluation Officer (P3 on SPA)	100%	24 months	24
Programme Assistant (G6)	10%	24 months	2.4
Additional Staff Time from Divisions/Teams of the ten evaluations completed in the biennium			
Senior Officers (0.5 months per evaluation)			5
Research Assistants (0.5 months per evaluation)			5
<b>Total Staff Time</b>			<b>42.4</b>