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Report of the joint field visit of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP to the Kyrgyz Republic, 2-7 May 2016

I. Introduction and context

1. For the annual joint field visit of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, WFP and UN-Women, a delegation of 21 members visited the Kyrgyz Republic from 2 to 7 May 2016, with the purpose of enhancing members' understanding of the extent and ways in which the United Nations development system is assisting the Kyrgyz Republic to implement its national development strategy and the newly approved Sustainable Development Goals. The joint field visit had a special focus on United Nations inter-agency collaboration and coordination.

2. The delegation would like to thank the secretariats of the Executive Boards for the choice of traveling to the Kyrgyz Republic in 2016 and the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) for the

choice of the projects visited that gave an overall very positive impression. The delegation is aware that the country and the projects visited may not be representative of all United Nations operations in the Kyrgyz Republic or even less worldwide. Therefore our observations and recommendations reflect only our short visit but we believe that they could be useful for the preparation of the next United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).

3. The programme included exchanges with the UNCT, the highest authorities of the country (Prime Minister, Speaker of Parliament and Members of Parliament, Minister of Foreign Affairs), several high officials from various ministries (Minister of Health, Minister of Emergency Situation, Minister of Education, Minister of Labor and Social Development, Deputy Chief of the Office of the President, Deputy Minister of Economy, State Registry Agency), the donor community (Germany, Japan, Russian Federation, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, European Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Aga Khan Foundation and the World Bank) and 10 civil society organizations (CSOs). Two days of field visits were organized to remote areas, divided in four different groups covering the south and the north of the country (group 1: Batken, Kadamjai district, Samarkandek Aiyl Okmotu, Uch Korgon, Osh; group 2: Osh, Shark, Yrys, Aravan; group 3: Kochkor, Jugmal, Chayek; group 4: Naryn, At-Bashy, Jerge Tal). In total the delegation visited about 30 project sites in five oblasts (provinces) of the country.

4. Executive Board members express their gratitude to the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic for its hospitality and availability for exchanges. Warm appreciation is also extended to the UNCT for the extremely well-prepared and organized joint field visit, as well as to the Executive Board secretariats for their permanent support and all the partners that were available for the exchanges. Special thanks are extended to UNDP as the coordinating agency for the 2016 joint field visit.

5. The Kyrgyz Republic became a Member State of the United Nations on 2 March 1992. A resident office of the United Nations opened in 1993. In 2016, 27 United Nations agencies are active in the country, 14 United Nations agencies are resident and 13 United Nations agencies are non-resident. The current UNDAF covers the period 2012-2017 and the country became a 'Delivering as One' country in 2010 following initial joint programming based on 'Delivering as One' principles linked to the economic slowdown of 2008-2010. A total of 490 United Nations staff (35 international and 455 national positions) managed an average budget of about \$50 million per year during the last 10 years. Lately, the budget of the United Nations has increased slightly (\$67 million per year in 2014-2015), while the overall support received from donors (official development assistance) seems to be decreasing slightly.

6. The Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked mountainous country (average altitude of 2,750 metres with its highest peak at 7,439 metres) in Central Asia, with some minerals, particularly rare metals, including gold and uranium. Historically, it has been on the trade path of the Silk Road between Asia and Europe. It has good agricultural potential, limited by a number of factors including poor water resources infrastructure and management. The Kyrgyz Republic ranks 120 of 180 countries in the Human Development Index. The poverty level decreased from 37 per cent in 2013 to 30.6 per cent in 2014. The country recently graduated from being a low-income country to become a (lower) middle-income country. In May 2015, it joined the Eurasian Economic Union, together with the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. Remittances from Kyrgyz citizens working abroad are an important source of income, averaging up to 25-30 per cent of gross domestic product in recent years. The country has about 80 different ethnic groups, with strong and rich traditions.

7. The Kyrgyz Republic became independent in 1991, having previously been part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In the past 25 years since independence, the country has introduced a democratic system, promoted market economy reforms and established an open society with a strong role for the non-governmental sector, a free mass media and respect for human rights.

8. During independence, the country went through several upheavals of a political, economic and social nature. The Kyrgyz Republic has been actively promoting regional cooperation in addressing

its challenges, including non-resolved border issues, which are still under negotiation and demarcation, creating potential tensions. In 2010, tragic inter-ethnic conflict took place in the south of the country (Osh), with hundreds of deaths, injuries and material losses. Specific support for conflict prevention and peacebuilding by the United Nations, through the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), and the international community has been intensified. The current situation in Osh has normalized. Since 2010, a new parliamentary form of government is in place, which has strengthened the increasing democratic nature of the country. The recent parliamentary elections (October 2015) were considered free, fair and peaceful with strong support from the United Nations, particularly UNDP, through an electoral assistance project funded by the Governments of Denmark, Germany, Japan and Switzerland, in close coordination and cooperation with the United Nations, European Union, OSCE and the Republic of Korea, among others.

II. Coordination between United Nations agencies, the Government and other stakeholders

UNCT and government cooperation

9. The UNDAF and the work of United Nations agencies are strongly aligned to the national sustainable development plan and priorities of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic. The relationship between the central Government, including the Parliament, and United Nations agencies is strong, with frequent and regular consultations and communications taking place at the highest level on programme strategies and results. In recent years, the United Nations has organized, together with the Parliament, a number of public hearings on United Nations activities and on legislation and other important developmental issues.

10. The United Nations agencies also have close collaboration with provincial and local governments in the regions visited. The delegation was impressed by the level of involvement and commitment of local authorities, especially regarding co-financing or assuming some of the costs to support social development and local initiatives. Some selected examples of municipal support are financial and technical assistance to youth clubs; support to a centre for children with disabilities; support for vital community assets, productive infrastructure and investments in human capital; work with local entrepreneurs and farmers; and co-financing for the improvement of kitchens for the provision of school meals.

Partnership among United Nations agencies

11. The UNCT gave an overall very good impression to the delegation of functioning very well as a team, with clear strategic vision, respect for each other, a high level of engagement, coordination and willingness to do more together. This collegial, collaborative and committed spirit of collaboration concerns mainly the coordination and some planning (strategic directions and thematic planning) as each United Nations agency functions with total autonomy from the others.

12. The financing situation remains a challenge for all agencies as they rely heavily on earmarked funds. In most cases, only 10 per cent of their budgets is from headquarters (regular resources that are non-earmarked) and most remaining funds are mobilized within the country from bilateral donors or global funds, a reason for some competition among United Nations agencies for funds and fundraising. The private sector or philanthropic organizations are not funding any significant projects in the Kyrgyz Republic through the United Nations.

13. Currently, 125 United Nations projects are under implementation in the country. There are no longer any significant humanitarian activities. A few of the United Nations projects are joint programmes, with the number growing, especially in the areas of peacebuilding, health, women's empowerment and disaster risk reduction. A very good example of a joint programme is the activities supported by the PBF, which has been asked for a single plan and report. In 2013, after an internal competitive process, 10 projects were selected to be implemented by seven United Nations

agencies in a single joint programme of the PBF, which is now being implemented in an independent but coordinated manner by each agency with joint reporting. These 10 projects were funded under the PBF Peacebuilding Recovery Facility. An additional three projects were funded later under the PBF Immediate Response Facility and are currently being implemented by eight United Nations agencies. The requirement attached to the funding mechanism seems to be a powerful incentive for joint planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

14. The intensity of collaboration must not be measured only by the number of joint programmes but also by the number of joint programming and strategizing exercises. A good example is seen in the Millennium Development Goal Acceleration Framework on maternal health issues. In many cases, the UNCT explained that some joint planning is done within joint United Nations outcome groups, without necessarily using a joint programme implementation modality. This joint planning and reporting seems increasingly important for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and consequently for the new UNDAF for 2018 -2022.

United Nations partnership and coordination with other development partners

15. The Development Partners' Coordination Council (DPCC), see <http://www.donors.kg/en>) meets once a month as a donor coordination mechanism; 14 thematic DPCC subgroups meet regularly. The United Nations Resident Coordinator represents the UNCT in the DPCC, with other United Nations agencies also participating on an ad-hoc or as required basis in an observer capacity. Every three months, the DPCC meets with the Prime Minister for a dialogue on development aid.

16. Another important mechanism is the National Coordination Council on cooperation with development partners chaired by the Prime Minister and co-chaired currently by the United Nations Resident Coordinator on behalf of donor partners, with the United States Agency for International Development currently serving as the alternate co-chair. An aid platform registering all ongoing development projects in the country has been developed but is not yet fully operational or used.

17. Bilateral donors have been very positive about collaboration and coordination with the United Nations in the Kyrgyz Republic. "With the United Nations, we can do much more than what we can achieve with only our bilateral efforts" summarizes well the impression of many partners. The Russian Federation has become an important donor to the United Nations system in the Kyrgyz Republic in recent years.

18. The World Bank representative has recently become a full-fledged member of UNCT, which is not common in other countries. This is an unequivocal recognition of the high regard for and the added value of the work of the UNCT.

19. CSOs play a very active and robust role in the Kyrgyz Republic on issues involving vulnerable groups, projects that address the three dimensions of sustainable development and the more difficult issues related to governance and human rights. CSOs work well with different United Nations agencies on a range of issues including child rights, gender equality and women's empowerment, governance, peacebuilding and sustainable development. The CSOs consider that the United Nations has helped to create an environment where the concerns of civil society are also taken on board by the Government, enabling them to influence some government policies, particularly on gender and children's issues. The CSOs consider that United Nations agencies work well and complement each other. CSOs would be grateful to receive continued capacity-building support to further intensify their collaboration with the United Nations.

III. Other observations and comments

20. The UNCT has an excellent knowledge of the country, its reality and the overall context.

21. Gender issues are addressed explicitly in most of the projects visited, and the programme has an impressive focus on empowering women, especially to ensure that women's voices are heard in

decision-making on project priorities and in the economic empowerment of rural women. There are still some challenges, for example, eliminating 'bride kidnapping', that need longer-term dialogue and advocacy to address this unfortunate phenomenon.

22. Another important challenge is the scarce access to basic services or infrastructure (water, sanitation and hygiene services) and the need for productive assets and human capital development, which are limiting factors in social and economic development and empowerment of the population.

Working as one

23. The delegation has the impression that there is a very clear distribution of labour, roles, expertise and resources among the United Nations agencies, especially in projects that involve more than one area of activity.

24. The delegation was given good examples of the necessity and added value of common planning and multisectoral interventions such as the PBF oversight and monitoring group.

25. The projects in schools are a showcase of multisectoral interventions that address the quality of education, food security and nutrition, gender empowerment, municipal service delivery, basic water and sanitation needs, hygiene services, social inclusion and multilingual education.

26. During our visit, we witnessed two informal United Nations commitments to work more jointly, the first between WFP and UNICEF to join their efforts in schools, combining better school meals and sanitation and hygiene, and the second between the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and WFP to undertake a joint pilot on poultry hatcheries to improve food security and link up with school meals.

27. An example where more integrated planning and interventions of United Nations could be considered is related to the reduction of child mortality, an area in which the Kyrgyz Republic has demonstrated good progress in achieving Millennium Development Goal 4. Important activities are undertaken in strengthening capacities of family doctors and immunization campaigns, but with weak coordination to support improved access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene services and to diminish cultural resistance towards immunization. Integrated actions in those areas could improve the country's progress on reducing child and maternal mortality.

28. Another area that might gain importance with the Sustainable Development Goals is the support to statistical work that will involve many United Nations agencies, with their specific thematic knowledge. Peacebuilding and the implementation of the Secretary-General's plan to fight violent extremism are key priorities of the Government with support from the UNCT.

29. Joint context analysis and design of interventions are sometimes done and should become the norm; relevant. United Nations system partners often cited limited financial resources and the lack of donor interest in certain interventions as an impediment to operating in a more comprehensive manner.

30. In the progress towards 'Delivering as One', the delegation was advised of the progress made in common services and operations for all United Nations agencies. The United Nations Operations Management Team developed a draft Business Operations Strategy in the areas of harmonized approach to cash transfers (HACT), procurement, human resources, information and communication technology and the United Nations House, with the participation of a majority of United Nations agencies in the country. Under the Business Operations Strategy, the United Nations common procurement team established a number of common services long-term agreements to be used by all United Nations agencies for financial services for HACT (micro-assessment, spot checks, audits) and for fuel, travel services, mobile communications, vehicle maintenance and insurance, event management, etc. An evaluation of the use of such common services and the savings generated would be interesting.

Sustainability

31. The approach observed in several projects is to support existing or planned local initiatives at the municipal level or by civil society. The United Nations gives limited support, mostly in terms of capacity-building and hardware. This approach ensures some sustainability as the United Nations gives limited and targeted support to ongoing dynamics in the hands of the local authorities or civil society. The explicit duration of United Nations support, especially at the local level, ensures better sustainability by not creating dependency through long-term support. Examples of such support with local government or local initiatives as the driving force are school meals (with WFP supporting improving the existing governmental system); youth club groups (support for the local dynamic); cross-border projects (joint planning); productive safety nets and area-based approaches; support to local entrepreneurs; inter-ethnic dialogue; conflict prevention through early warning; and work with religious leaders and religious communities.

32. When interventions are at the national level, long-term support should be planned with some gradual transfer of responsibilities. For example, in the case of the provision of free contraceptives by UNFPA, some progressive handing over, or gradual cost-sharing with the Government, should be planned and implemented.

Working approach

33. The delegation appreciated that there are strong and direct links between work at the policy level (policy and strategy formulation, legislative upgrades and national budget allocations) and operational activities/pilots in several of the projects visited. The United Nations is and should continue to promote innovation, upscaling and direct links between policy work and operations.

34. The delegation was very impressed by the level of engagement of local authorities and beneficiaries. The United Nations is a trusted and reliable partner for local government in the Kyrgyz Republic. Open, transparent and participative planning enables the involvement of elders, women, children and youth in planning and decision-making. The delegation has noticed the high level of ownership and pride in achievements, with impact on the lives of people and communities and a determination to contribute to expanding the impact of projects through their own contributions (for example, parents helping to pay for food and salaries of kitchen help), or setting ambitious goals for themselves (for example, no more than a 30-minute wait for services at the public services centre). This strong local engagement was also witnessed during the inauguration of the United Nations Park in the City of Osh to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations.

Specific comments

35. The challenge of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Government is working on its new sustainable development strategy 2018-2022 that will be based on the 2030 Agenda paradigm. Given the wide scope of the 2030 Agenda, clear priorities will need to be established by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic as not all the Goals and targets can have the same level of priority. Climate change and the environment will be an increasingly serious issue for the region, given its reliance on agriculture but also because of the importance of generating hydro-electricity. The national committee on monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals has been upgraded to a National Sustainable Development Goal Coordination Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, to follow the implementation of the Goals, with two meetings planned each year. United Nations agencies are discussing the way forward in the Kyrgyz Republic on revisiting their internal priorities in the light of the Sustainable Development Goals and the new UNDAF under preparation. One initial step is the special coordination UNCT group led by UNDP that was recently created. The Government has also started its homework on the Sustainable Development Goals but it is still at its initial phase, and sharing of the experiences of this process will be useful with other development partners in the country as will exchanges with similar countries.

36. The United Nations support to the electoral system led by UNDP, and in particular, the introduction of biometric identification for the October 2015 parliamentary elections, was highly appreciated by all our interlocutors. This support could not have been provided without the support of several donors that should be thanked. This project was perceived as an important step towards building peace and trust in the country, which contributed to its longer-term stability and sustainable development. The country took it as a successful test of social stability after the tragic events of 2010.

37. The delegation was impressed and very interested by the activities implemented with the support of the PBF, which has been joined by other donors. Several types of activities (schools, youth clubs, public councils, work with religious schools or madrassas) and infrastructure (water supplies under the cross-border project with Tajikistan) are supported to encourage interaction, mutual understanding and common goals in order to build trust and lower inter-ethnic tensions in areas where different ethnic groups coexist.

38. The delegation had a positive impression of the 'Aid for Trade' projects implemented by UNDP and funded by the Government of Finland that aim at supporting value-added production and increasing commercialization of agricultural products at the community level. They seem to have transformed the lives of communities by increasing employment opportunities.

39. The delegation visited a few interventions involving the private sector in entrepreneurial activities.

40. As the country might wish to further develop an aid platform database, UNCT could consider supporting the Government to revive such an instrument, if relevant, needed and a priority to serve a specific purpose and need.

IV. Main recommendations, suggestions and challenges

41. The excellent collaborative, collegial and committed spirit of the UNCT in a 'Delivering as One' setup is progressing and remarkable in the Kyrgyz Republic. In order to help UNCTs in other countries also to work well together, the Kyrgyz experience/case could be further studied. For example, the delegation was interested to further identify the success factors, incentives and bottlenecks in implementing the 'Delivering as One' approach in the Kyrgyz Republic. In the light of the 2030 Agenda, this study could also identify lessons learned and good practices as well as propose aspects of 'Delivering as One' to be adapted and measures be taken at headquarters, at the regional level and in country teams to support United Nations agencies to work efficiently together for better delivery in the spirit of paragraph 88 of the 2030 Agenda ("system-wide common planning, implementation and reporting").

42. The work with the PBF demonstrates a convincing case of the integrated work of peacebuilding and development in a joint programme of several United Nations agencies. This experience merits to be documented for its approach, lessons learned and good practices. Peacebuilding activities might develop with more regional projects involving the United Nations from neighbouring countries and with the implementation of the Secretary-General's action plan on fighting violent extremism.

43. The formulation of the new UNDAF is always an opportunity to review the priorities of the United Nations in the Kyrgyz Republic to increase its focus and the number of joint programmes and to reduce the number of small interventions in order to be more strategic and more oriented towards the long term. Inequalities, climate change and the environment might gain some importance in the future.

44. In many projects visited, small- to medium-scale pilots are implemented. In order to ensure impact and go to scale beyond the pilot level, there must be clear plans to support the Government to scale up and achieve full coverage of the approach for the country. Examples include the 'School

without Violence' project, the school meals project, productive measures of social development, youth centres, the area-based development programmes, disaster management and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

45. The electoral support was very much appreciated, and upon government request, continuous support could be considered. According to CSOs, the local elections taking place in 2016 showed some problems relating to corruption practices, manipulation of votes and voter education. Electoral support to the Government as well as through CSOs is sensitive, but represents a contribution to longer-term peace, stability and sustainable development.

46. The UNCT could consider supporting the Government in its wish to work more with its neighbouring states (regional level), including through South-South collaboration that could strengthen and improve regional collaboration and build trust. Such cross-border collaboration has started and might expand, such as the new and innovative joint initiative under the Immediate Response Facility of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office for cross-border cooperation with Tajikistan that is being implemented by the UNCTs of both countries.

47. United Nations agencies could also consider some fundraising with the international private sector (corporate social responsibility) and some philanthropic international organizations, to broaden their donor base. School feeding and children's education are themes that usually attract those kinds of partners. Some strategic partnerships with the international private sector on knowledge and skills might also be promising. The United Nations could also consider supporting the Government for local resource mobilization to increase the budget of the State.

48. In the context of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, inclusivity (leave no one behind) is an important challenge. The United Nations might jointly support the central, provincial and local government level in training and knowledge sharing in the implementation of the Goals. The implementation of the Goals, as well as follow-up, review and monitoring should be done in an inclusive manner, with the involvement of all key partners/actors.

