



EVALUATION BRIEF

UNDA Project 2023AA: Building Urban Economic Resilience during and after COVID-19

BACKGROUND

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, cities have been the main hotspots for the transmission of the virus. The extensive impacts of the pandemic on urban economies have exacerbated urban poverty and inequality, especially in cities with large informal sectors and limited access to basic services. Local governments have been at the frontline of COVID-19 economic response and recovery despite reduced public revenues and limited capacities.

The project “Building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19” sought to strengthen the capacities of local governments in 16 pilot cities globally to design, implement, and monitor sustainable, resilient, and inclusive COVID-19 economic and financial responses, as well as recovery and rebuilding plans. Following the Diagnostic and Planning Tool (DPT) developed as part of the project, the development of three key deliverables was supported in the pilot cities: an economic resilience diagnostic, an Economic Resilience Building Plan (ERBP), and an information note on sources of financial support. Regional and global knowledge products were also developed to support the cities and to ensure experience exchange and dissemination.

The project was funded under the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) and had five Implementing Entities (IEs): the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA). Two technical collaboration partners supported project implementation across all the regions: the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF).

EVALUATION PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation analyzed the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of the project with the purpose of assessing the results achieved by the project and of identifying lessons learned and good practices to inform future projects and strengthen the knowledge base regarding what works to build urban economic resilience in different contexts. The evaluation covered the full implementation period between May 2020 and April 2022. It was carried out between July 2022 and December 2022 following a structured process of data collection and analysis, which included key informant interviews, an online survey, five city deep dives and a review of project documents.

MAIN FINDINGS

Relevance:

The project was designed to address expressions of interest from local authorities in developing country Member States and was thus relevant to their new needs and priorities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Project activities and modalities were also relevant to the new environment created by the pandemic.

The evaluation found that there were some missed opportunities related to the alignment of the ERBPs developed in each city with the countries’ Socio-Economic Resilience Plans, particularly in relation with green recovery opportunities and the specific needs of persons in situations of vulnerability. The project was aligned with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the design stage, but some ERBPs did not explicitly reflect the comprehensive approach to development promoted by the SDGs, pointing to opportunities for a more integrated approach.

The gender perspective was adequately considered in the project design and, to a certain extent, in stakeholder discussions and other project activities, but is not fully mainstreamed into the DPT, city diagnostics and ERBPs, mainly due to the lack of disaggregated data at the city level. The same can be said for the rights of the persons in situation of vulnerability and with disabilities. Project design and activities were aligned with a human rights perspective, especially by fostering inclusive processes, but limited guidance was provided on how to integrate it in city diagnostics and plans, where it remained implicit.

Coherence:

Opportunities for complementarity and coordination with other work undertaken by project partners were clearly identified at project design. In some cities, synergies were established with Voluntary Local Reviews, while in others, IEs integrated the project into ongoing collaboration to foster synergies and ensure continued support after project end. Project partners also harnessed synergies to integrate the data collected and the DPT into subsequent projects.

Despite the efforts made to engage United Nations (UN) Country Teams and other UN entities, coordination remained limited, mainly due to their multiple engagements and stretched capacities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited evidence was found of coordination with the UN COVID-19 Response & Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund, although potential synergies might have been explored.



Effectiveness:

With support from the IEs, economic resilience diagnostics, ERBPs, and information notes with sources of financial support were developed for the 16 pilot cities, in addition to several knowledge products and events, and additional project outputs to address emerging needs and opportunities.

The project contributed to increased knowledge on urban economic resilience, but it was not always successful in increasing cities' capacities to access finance, and its contribution to improving implementation and monitoring capacities was limited. Despite these limitations, local stakeholders consider that the project was useful for city governments' response to the economic impacts of COVID-19, and positively value the quality and the timeliness of the support provided.

The DPT is a key contribution and legacy of the project. This tool proved particularly effective in providing a snapshot of urban economic resilience and in highlighting key gaps, while allowing comparisons between different periods and across cities. While relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, this tool is easily applicable to other contexts. The application of the DPT provided valuable lessons that can be harnessed to strengthen the tool.

Efficiency:

Key project outputs were completed by project end in all cities despite some delays experienced during implementation, partly thanks to the fact that risks were correctly anticipated and managed. In some cases, however, delays and sequencing issues affected the timeliness and relevance of project outputs, particularly the information briefs.

Project partners were adequately selected, with the five UN Regional Commissions providing an adequate platform to support project implementation. Overall, the clear division of labor among project partners, together with clearly established processes for decision-making, communication, information-sharing, and knowledge management, ensured efficient implementation. Weekly Steering Committee meetings were an effective mechanism to coordinate activities, monitor progress, discuss emerging challenges, and exchange experiences.

Sustainability:

Several measures were implemented to foster ownership by local governments, including letters of endorsement, continued engagement through events, spin-off and follow-up projects, as well as communication and knowledge management activities. Despite these measures, some risks to the sustainability of project outcomes in the future still need to be monitored, especially in relation to funding and to government changes that could affect political ownership. To a lesser extent, limited technical capacities in local governments and institutional frameworks also pose some challenges.

LESSONS LEARNED & GOOD PRACTICES

- A multidimensional approach is needed to build urban economic resilience.
- Building local government capacities to access funding should be a key component of any project directed towards building urban economic resilience.
- A unified but adaptable implementation strategy is key for multi-partner projects than span several regions and cities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the sustainability of project results:

Recommendation 1: ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA, with support from UN-Habitat and UNCDF as relevant, should continue efforts to engage pilot cities in their respective regions and help them further develop their capacities to access funding for their plans. In particular, they should continue engaging local governments in ongoing or upcoming projects and activities, and providing spaces for experience exchange among pilot cities, both at the regional and global level.

Recommendation 2: ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP, ESCWA, UN-Habitat and UNCDF should consider mobilizing resources (UNDA or other) for a follow-up project to support the implementation and monitoring of ERBPs in the pilot cities.

Recommendation 3: ECA and ECE, with support from ECLAC, ESCAP ESCWA, UN-Habitat and UNCDF as relevant, should systematize the lessons learned from this project.

For future projects:

Recommendation 4: UNCDF, with support from UN-Habitat, ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA as relevant, should update the DPT based on lessons learned from its application in the 16 pilot cities, and pilot its use in tandem with other diagnostic instruments.

Recommendation 5: ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP, ESCWA, UN-Habitat and UNCDF should continue implementing joint, global projects to fully harness potential synergies and multiply outcomes. Future joint projects should replicate the project's governance arrangements.

Recommendation 6: UNDA projects should support capacity building throughout implementation. Efforts should focus, in particular, on helping local governments strengthen their capacities to increase public revenues and develop a pipeline of projects matched with adequate types of funding from different sources.

For more information about the project, [click here](#).

The full evaluation report is available [here](#).