



The SDGs and EU projects in Central Asia: Recommendations for improving project KPIs, SDG linking, and simplifying EU SDG monitoring system

Recommendations report

July 2024



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1. Introduction

The countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) have committed to achieving the SDGs, and to support this effort the EU and UNDP have joined forces and launched a project for setting up a regional SDG platform. To this purpose, the UNDP Country Office in Kazakhstan has mandated a research study on SDG-related KPIs to document how regional EU-funded projects contribute to meeting the SDGs. A first research report focused on best practices in monitoring frameworks.

A second report built on the research mentioned above and consisted of a qualitative estimation of the contribution of EU projects to the SDGs in Central Asia. The analysis was carried out with the data available from the SDG Index, UN Stats, UN Women, and a sample of 43 EU-funded projects provided by the UNDP Country Office in Kazakhstan. That second report also documented obstacles, gaps, and methodological issues to be considered in relation to EU-project KPIs.

The present document builds on the previous two reports to provide a final set of recommendations for future SDG planning and project design and monitoring.

2. Recommendations from research on SDG interlinkages

The SDG Platform for Central Asia offers a unique opportunity to collect, store, and analyse SDG-related information in the five Central Asian countries individually and the region as a whole. To provide a complete analysis of which SDGs are impacted by different policies, budget allocation, or project KPIs, **it is important to map such initiatives at the SDG target level. That analysis at the SDG target level can also benefit from an additional nuance that comes from the identification of interlinkages between mapped SDG targets:**

- Are there any causal relationships among the different SDG targets analysed?
- What type of relationship is it (synergy or trade-off)?
- How intense is that relationship? Is it a strong or a weak synergy/trade-off?
- Is that relationship two-way or only one way?

The first report of the current consultancy consisted of a systematic research study of the different methodologies to identify and assess interlinkages among SDG targets¹. Four main methodology typologies were analysed, and the research concluded that to develop a regional SDGs platform for Central Asia, the methodology to map SDG target interlinkages should combine the following features:

- ✓ **Be structured, with a set of simple rules** to identify and assess SDG interlinkages and ensure methodological robustness and consistency of results.
- ✓ **Map both synergies, trade-offs, and low or no influence among SDG targets, ideally with target direction.** In order to simplify the system proposed by Nilsson et al. (2016), a

¹ For more information, see the report titled “Implementation of the SDGs in Central Asia: best practices on monitoring framework for estimating regional progress and the contribution of EU projects”.

five-point scale similar to the one used by Miola et al. (2019) could be useful. The different values of that scale could be:

- +2: Strong synergy
 - +1: Significant synergetic relation
 - 0: little or no causal relation or influence between targets
 - -1: Significant trade-off relation
 - -2: Costly trade-off relation
- ✓ **Undergo peer-review rounds by national and international development practitioners** to ensure the uniformity of the methodology used and the consistency of the interlinkages' assessment.

Considering the similarities among Central Asian countries, a **'template' structure of mapped interlinkages² could be used for all five countries, with *ad hoc* adaptations to specific countries**. This template could be defined first by available data, then improved by available literature, and finally polished and adapted to each country.

3. Recommendations from research on the status of SDGs progress in Central Asia

The SDG Platform for Central Asia is intended to allow government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and stakeholders to assess the progress toward achieving the SDGs and identify challenges and opportunities. To this end, the initial status of the 2030 Agenda progress in Central Asia must be periodically updated (with new data) and upgraded (with methodological improvements – better data and insights).

The second report of the current consultancy³ did an initial estimation of the implementation status of the SDGs in Central Asia based on data from the SDG Index initiative and UN Stats. According to SDG Index (using proxy data), four SDGs still face major challenges in Central Asia: SDGs 3, 7, 15, and 16. When using data from UN Stats (with available SDG indicators) the SDGs facing most challenges (off track, advancing or not) are SDGs 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. On gender issues, according to data from UN Women, only a combined 26% of the gender aspects relevant to the applicable SDG indicators for Central Asia show a high or medium performance, and there is a remaining 74% of the gender aspects relevant to the applicable SDG indicators that have low performance or missing data.

A way to perform a more accurate analysis would involve defining the applicable and non-applicable SDG targets in Central Asia. **A 'default' list of applicable SDG indicators and targets should be defined, to be gradually validated, adapted to each Central Asian country, and improved with experience from development practice.** With this 'template', interlinkages

² See "SDG targets connections" tab inside attachment titled "Annex 1_EU SDG Project Logframe_template.xlsx" for an example of template containing SDG interconnections, populated with the interlinkages examples documented in Nilsson (2017). The referred tab shows influence as "SDG targets at the row level affect SDG targets at the column level".

³ See the report titled "The SDGs and EU projects in Central Asia: Estimation of SDG regional progress and contributions from EU projects"

among SDG targets can be defined (ideally following recommendations from section 2), which can in turn serve to the effort of integrating the contribution of projects to the achievement of the SDGs in Central Asia. It is recommended that further upgrades begin by carrying out PAM, BAT, and IPR analyses⁴ in the target countries.

4. Recommendations from the estimated contribution of EU projects to the SDGs in Central Asia

The second report of the current consultancy⁵ also did an initial estimation of how EU-funded projects contribute to achieving the SDGs in Central Asia. A sample of 43 EU-funded projects was analysed by mapping their specific outcomes to the SDG targets. This allowed also for an estimation of budget priorities among SDGs. The results of that initial analysis showed that the thematic priorities within the 43 EU-funded projects are in line with SDGs 8, 10, 12, 16, and 17. When comparing these results with the ones from SDG Index, **SDG 16 was shown as a priority for investment, and when comparing with data from UN Stats, SDGs 8 and 10 were identified as priorities for investment.**

The analysis of EU-funded projects also focused on the project KPIs⁶. The results indicated that the KPIs with more challenges for implementation are connected to SDGs 1 and 12, while the ones with fewer challenges are connected to SDGs 7, 9, and 10. Following this, **these three SDGs (7, 9, and 10) could be candidates for which to increase or maintain budget allocation.**

5. Aggregated recommendations and combined insights

Combining all results from the analyses mentioned in previous sections, **the SDGs that would be better suited for SDG acceleration in Central Asia through EU projects, for different reasons, would be SDGs 7, 8, 9, 10, and 16.** Comparing this to the current priorities based on the sample of 43 EU projects (8, 10, 12, 16, and 17), it shows a **match between current priorities and best candidates for acceleration in SDGs 8, 10, and 16.**

5.1. Main challenges to SDG analysis

Although these conclusions seem robust enough to inform further conversations about the status of SDG progress in Central Asia and budget funding priorities for the EU, **there are some methodological assumptions and data gaps** (46% of applicable SDG indicators and 64% for gender issues) **that should be taken into account to produce more accurate results in the**

⁴ For more information about the SDG Push tools, see section 5 of the report titled “Implementation of the SDGs in Central Asia: best practices on monitoring framework for estimating regional progress and the contribution of EU projects”.

⁵ See the report titled “The SDGs and EU projects in Central Asia: Estimation of SDG regional progress and contributions from EU projects”

⁶ Defined in that analysis as the project indicators directly linked to specific outcomes.

future. The main issues have to do with the fact that ‘relatively simple’ methodologies such as the Indicator-based Performance Review were used⁷; some SDG indicators do not fully capture the themes of SDG targets⁸; or the significant data gaps found when doing an SDG indicator-level assessment (with 46% of the applicable SDG indicators without available data).

5.2. Main challenges to EU project monitoring and evaluation

The analysis of the 43 EU-funded projects was done with the following inputs:

1. A set of excel files containing the projects’ logframes main data, including the project reference, brief description, specific outcomes, their related assumptions, as well as project-level indicators (including the project KPIs at the specific outcome level), baseline values, target values, and intermediate values from different monitoring phases. That set of excel files for each project were merged into a single excel file containing information from the fields from all the given projects.
2. A set of project documents ranging from project briefs and prodocs where more relevant information about the projects could be collected, mainly an identification of the participating countries and the project budget.

Additionally, some project budget information was provided by the UNDP Kazakhstan Country Office upon request.

The main challenges found from carrying out the SDG analysis of the EU-funded project were:

- Information contained in the project logframes was not always enough:
 - Available budget was not indicated, when it should be ideally indicated at least at the Specific Objective (outcome) level.
 - Participating countries were not systematically identified, as sometimes they would be mentioned in the project description, but not always.
 - There was no prior indication of the specific SDGs or SDG targets that would be impacted by the project.
 - Project duration was not specified: There would be project baseline dates and target dates, but target dates can be either referring to the end of the project or to some time after the end of the project, as there might be an expected time gap for project activities to take effect.
- There was not a standardised template for complementary information about the projects: Complementary information would sometimes come from project briefs and or prodocs (which had also different formats), websites, or specific requests to the UNDP Kazakhstan Country Office.

⁷ SDG Push methodologies such as the Policy Alignment Mapping (PAM), Budget Allocation Tagging (BAT), or Indicator-based Performance Review (IPR) prioritise rapid assessments to point out relevant development issues to discuss with Governments, with whom more in-depth technical interventions should be arranged.

⁸ For example, SDG target 17.6, which is defined as “*Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism*” the only SDG indicator included is 17.6.1, which reads “*Fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, by speed*”, and clearly does not reflect the thematic purpose of the SDG target.

5.3. Suggested improvements to EU project monitoring and evaluation

The SDG analyses that resulted in the second report of the current consultancy provided an initial estimation of the contribution of EU-funded projects to the SDGs in Central Asia, and spotted potential improvements for facilitating SDG analysis and simplifying EU monitoring frameworks. To that end a suggested project logframe template has been developed (see Annex 1), which standardises and simplifies the logframe template to 50 columns, containing the following:

- ✓ **Basic project-level information**, such as the project ID code, the project title, and where the project's budget and the EU contribution to the project's budget should be specified.
- ✓ **Specific outcome-level information**, containing the specific objective (outcome) number, its title/description, its assumptions, and with additional columns for the most relevant SDG target, the budget percentage of the total budget, and the budget amount.
- ✓ **Specific outcomes indicators (KPIs) metadata**, specifying the outcome indicator (KPI) number and code (if available/relevant), the indicator description, category, and type.
- ✓ **Values at the beginning of the project**, containing the baseline date, value, disaggregated values by sex, and comments.
- ✓ **Project target values**, containing the same information as the previous point, but for target values. Under this rubric it should be specified whether or not the target date corresponds to the end of the project or to a later point in time.
- ✓ **Latest available values**, containing the same information as the previous point, but for the latest available values. Adding this rubric will allow for an easy analysis by comparing baseline, target, and latest values to find out the level of progress of each indicator.
- ✓ **Former available values**, which would contain the same data as the previous two rubrics but for intermediate points of project implementation between the baseline and the latest values. This would contain up to three temporal instances and could help analyse the trend/evolution of implementation.

6. Final conclusions and recommendations

The previous two analyses pointed to a set of recommendations to be considered for future development and portfolio design in Central Asia. This is the final list of recommendations for improving SDG policy planning and project formulation and monitoring:

- ✓ When carrying out an SDG analysis, **it is key to work at the SDG target level**. A ‘default’ list of applicable SDG targets should be defined, to be gradually validated, adapted to each Central Asian country, and improved with experience from development practice.
- ✓ **A thorough analysis of SDG target interlinkages should be carried out for Central Asia** to be able to flag opportunities for synergies and risks of trade-offs within and among projects and other development initiatives. Those SDG interlinkages should then be applicable to all five Central Asian countries (albeit with ad hoc modifications for specific countries), and regular updates and corrections of the identified interlinkages can help gradually improve and refine SDG analyses.
- ✓ Considering the first and second reports of the current consultancy, there are methodological assumptions and data gaps that should be taken into account to produce more accurate SDG analysis results in the future. **Carrying out deeper analyses, working with government agencies or development counterparts, and improving data availability and report periodicity are key to improving SDG acceleration processes.**
- ✓ Regarding opportunities for SDG acceleration in general (policy and project level), **the SDGs best suited for SDG acceleration in Central Asia, for different reasons, would be SDGs 7, 8, 9, 10, and 16**. Since the current thematic priorities based on the sample of 43 EU projects revolve around SDGs 8, 10, 12, 16, and 17, **the best candidates for acceleration through EU-funded projects are SDGs 8, 10, and 16**. Also, **SDGs 7, 9, and 10 are important candidates in which to increase or maintain EU project funding**.
- ✓ **Projects’ specific outcomes should be phrased as thematic outcomes** (not operational⁹), and they should be mapped against their most relevant SDG target.
- ✓ **The SDG Platform for Central Asia should include an up-to-date section on SDG indicator-based development performance for the five Central Asian countries and for Central Asia as a whole to avoid data fragmentation** and to allow for better programming and thematic project prioritisation.
- ✓ **Finally, EU-funded logframes would benefit from a simplification on its monitoring system** to highlight and easily identify the projects’ budget, specific outcomes (and their budget), most relevant SDG targets affected by the project, and the projects’ baseline, target, and most relevant values (KPIs) and dates. For this purpose, a suggested logframe template is provided as Annex 1 to this report.

⁹ Thematic outcomes refer to material changes in development progress (e.g. poverty reduction, gender equality, ecosystem conservation), while operational outcomes refer to the success of project activities rather than material improvements (e.g. reports written, meetings organised).

7. Reference list

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8. Annexes

The current brief report comes with an excel file consisting of a proposed template for facilitating SDG analyses and simplifying EU project logframes: See attachment titled “Annex 1_EU SDG Project Logframe_template.xlsx”.

Figure 1. Visual example of what the EU project logframe template looks like. Information is structured in wider columns such as Project-level information and Specific Objective-level information. The columns with highlighted text in yellow with red font are the new suggested columns to facilitate SDG analysis.

Project-level information			Specific Objective-level information						
Project reference	Project title	EU budget contribution	Result Level	Specific Objective Number	Specific Objective Title/Description	Most relevant SDG target	% Budget Specific Objective	Specific Objective Budget	Assumptions
INTV-16618	Accelerate Prosperity in Central and South Asia (AP-ASIA)	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Specific Objective - Outcome	SO1	Specific Objective: Improved self-employment and employment of women and men in supported enterprises	To be mapped based on the Specific Objective description	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Government regulations and policies continue to be supportive of private sector development.
INTV-16618	Accelerate Prosperity in Central and South Asia (AP-ASIA)	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Specific Objective - Outcome	SO2	Outcome 1 (OC1):Increased growth of supported enterprises	To be mapped based on the Specific Objective description	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Macroeconomic environment resembles pre-COVID levels by mid-2021 through to 2023: I.e. GDP growth, inflation rates, unemployment levels, remittance volumes, in target countries Banks, MFIs and non-bank financial institutions (SME Funds) effected by COVID-19 remain operational during recession and begin to rebound by Q1 2021 in target geographies IFC Doing Business rankings improve or remain relatively stable through 2021 to 2024 in target countries Government and donor commitments to gender equality are not undermined / dropped as part of COVID-19 recovery efforts
INTV-16096	Supporting the Economic Empowerment of Afghan Women through Education and Training in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Specific Objective - Outcome	SO1	Specific Objective 1. Improved higher education and TVET outgoing learning mobility system for women in Afghanistan	To be mapped based on the Specific Objective description	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	All parties maintain commitment to cooperation on learning mobility and to empowering Afghan women. International learning mobility offers a valuable opportunity to fill the national human capital deficit, and support individuals to achieve higher qualifications in new fields of knowledge. Favorable conditions exist for women's learning mobility. Parties collaborate on facilitating all arrangements for learning mobility. Agriculture applied statistics and mining remain Afghanistan priority sectors for development and economic growth. The society, to which the Afghan women belong, favors the application of new gender roles.
INTV-16096	Supporting the Economic Empowerment of Afghan Women through Education and Training in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	Specific Objective - Outcome	SO2	Specific Objective 2. Improved involvement of Afghan women in higher education and TVET outgoing learning mobility programmes	To be mapped based on the Specific Objective description	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	To be identified in the project logframe and or prodoc	All parties maintain commitment to cooperation on learning mobility and to empowering Afghan women. International learning mobility offers a valuable opportunity to fill the national human capital deficit, and support individuals to achieve higher qualifications in new fields of knowledge. Favorable conditions exist for women's learning mobility. Parties collaborate on facilitating all arrangements for learning mobility. Agriculture applied statistics and mining remain Afghanistan priority sectors for development and economic growth. The society, to which the Afghan women belong, favors the application of new gender roles.