Launching SRM and SES in Venezuela Helps “Create a New Way of Thinking”

The Venezuela Country Office has completed all six steps to establishing its Stakeholder Response Mechanism – including a comprehensive review of the social and environmental risks associated with each project in their portfolio.

When the CO met with government partners to review the portfolio in the context of the SES and risk-screening procedures, they first had to “sort through a bit of confusion,” said Maria Abogado, Energy and Environment Programme Officer and SRM Focal Point in Venezuela.

For example, she said, “it was not immediately clear how the national standards, screening protocols, and grievance procedures differ from UNDP’s requirements. Who is responsible for what, how are the SES relevant to projects related to financial management?”

“These were difficult questions to grapple with,” Abogado said. “Our constitution requires every government institution to consider risks within their own programmes, and to conduct social and environmental assessments prior to initiating projects that could cause any impact, no matter its magnitude,” she said. While this gave the UNDP team a solid starting place for discussions about the SES, it also raised concern among government partners that UNDP’s requirements represent “double work.”

“We had to work through differences and similarities between assessments performed by the ministries, and the UNDP screening procedures,” she said. “In the end, we were able to show that UNDP’s is a complimentary process that results in a richer analysis of the issues and risks.”
For instance, the government is obliged to take human rights into account when they initiate a project, Abogado explained. “But they use a different approach than the one required by the SESP. Once we compared the two, we were able to draft language that incorporates both sets of standards, and they found this very helpful.”

Gender equality and sustainability raised similar questions. “We have clear laws in Venezuela regarding women and gender equality, as well as sustainability,” Abogado said, “so on these issues, the government saw the SES as duplicative. But after many conversations, they realized the SES provided additional assessment and tools that actually strengthen their procedures.”

Applying the SES to a UNDP-supported project aimed at financial management of investments in electrical energy seemed to make no sense to the ministry, said Abogado. “The SES helped to underscore that a project like this is not only about making better investments in energy. In fact, better investments in a diverse energy matrix, through things like efficiency and solar energy, will dramatically improve the lives of isolated communities – many of whom have been living without electricity.”

Abogado said the deep and sometimes difficult conversations about why and how the SES should be applied “created a new way of thinking” among their government partners. And they reminded the partners that “this is not just an exercise in checking off what the law says; on the contrary, it actually improves our ability to have good development outcomes – and this is what we believe is most important.”