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**Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview**

**Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD**

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## Introduction

1. An overview of the external evaluations completed between April 2019 and April 2020 of UNCTAD programmes and projects is provided in this report. The aim is to report on all evaluation activities and to promote accountability and lessons learned. Evaluation synthesis reports are knowledge products and a means of consolidating and sharing acquired knowledge and strengthening UNCTAD evaluation feedback and learning loops.

2. Evaluations are conducted against the 2011 evaluation policy<sup>1</sup> of UNCTAD and the updated Norms and Standards for Evaluation outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group.<sup>2</sup> The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions from the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and best practices. This information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work. Programme managers at UNCTAD are encouraged to refer to previous reports and overviews of evaluations of UNCTAD activities<sup>3</sup> in designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.

3. In this report, the results of five evaluations of projects are presented in chapter I; chapter II presents a meta-analysis of lessons learned from project evaluations conducted between 2015 and 2019; and chapter III provides an update on evaluation matters and activities at UNCTAD in 2019–2020.

4. During the period between April 2019 and April 2020, a total of five external evaluations of projects were completed. Three projects were supported by the United Nations Development Account, one project was supported by the Government of the Netherlands, and one project was supported by the Government of Finland. Specifically, these projects are:

(a) Project 1415M: Building capacities of selected least developed countries to upgrade and diversify their fish exports;

(b) Project 1415N: Strengthening capacities of policymakers to assess implications of non-tariff measures in international trade and formulate appropriate policy responses;

(c) Project 1415Q: Building capacities of developing countries to shift towards sustainable freight transport;

(d) Project INT/OT/TFBI: Investment promotion partnerships for the development, marketing and facilitation of bankable Sustainable Development Goal projects;

(e) Project: eTrade for all.

5. Below are some highlights of key findings from the five evaluations of these projects. More detailed findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations are presented in chapter I.

(a) Overall, all the projects were found to be relevant to the needs of beneficiary countries and fully consistent with the UNCTAD mandate. In addition, the comparative advantage of UNCTAD in the areas of work evaluated, such as non-tariff measures and freight transport, were validated.

(b) Regarding outcomes and effectiveness, the evaluations found that all projects have enhanced the technical knowledge, awareness and capacity of policymakers and practitioners in developing countries on a variety of topics, from international standards on fish exports, sustainable freight transport, non-tariff measures and electronic commerce (e-commerce), to investment promotion and the Sustainable Development Goals. Some evidence shows that UNCTAD projects have contributed to concrete changes in domestic

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189](http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189).

<sup>2</sup> [www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914](http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914).

<sup>3</sup> <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/About%20UNCTAD/Evaluation%20at%20UNCTAD/Eval-All.aspx>.

legislation, institutions and policies in the fisheries sector of some countries, such as the Comoros, Mozambique, Myanmar and Uganda, or supported positive freight policy changes in Kenya and Rwanda. However, long-term impacts remain to be seen, as some projects have recently been concluded or, in some cases, the tool and/or guide produced by a project was rolled out only in the final phase of a project, when the external evaluation was already under way.

(c) All projects demonstrated high degrees of efficiency in the timely and cost-effective utilization of resources, despite some internal and external constraints.

(d) In many projects, partnerships contributed to enhancing efficiency and impacts. However, it was found that there was scope for increased collaborations, including more involvement of the private sector or other United Nations agencies, in some projects.

(e) Gender and human rights mainstreaming were featured in some project concepts or activities, but efforts were still mostly limited and, for some projects, it was found that integration of these considerations into substantive work and analysis was challenging.

(f) Sustainability and continuity of the work of these projects were also questioned, as follow-up work or scaling up activities would require more financial commitment and technical support.

## I. Summary of evaluation findings

### A. Project 1415M: Building capacities of selected least developed countries to upgrade and diversify their fish exports

6. The project started in 2014 with an approved budget of \$596,000, complemented afterwards by additional funding of \$255,775 from the United Nations Development Account and an extension of activities until 31 May 2019. This project was aimed at upgrading technical knowledge and expertise, to overcome challenges posed by international standards on fish exports, in five least developed countries: Cambodia, the Comoros, Mozambique, Myanmar and Uganda. It was aimed at highlighting how international standards, regulations and measures in the areas of fish and fishery products affect the exports of least developed countries and their international competitiveness. The project sought to identify successful experiences and best practices from other countries, as well as identify policies and strategies for implementation, with a view to improving capacity to comply with international standards and enhancing the capacities of least developed countries to develop and diversify their exports, by tapping their fishery potential.

7. **The evaluation concluded that the project was fully consistent with the role of UNCTAD and highly relevant to the needs and challenges of least developed countries.** The project rationale and design were highly relevant to the needs and challenges of least developed countries and other vulnerable countries. The project also drew on comparative advantages of UNCTAD in the area of trade, especially long-standing work on non-tariff measures and their impact on least developed country exports, complemented by the sector-based expertise of a number of organizations in the dissemination of knowledge and training content. As the first project in the fisheries sector, the project also contributed to the future comparative advantage of UNCTAD.

8. **The project has contributed useful and actionable technical knowledge to policymakers and practitioners to embark on formulating and improving fisheries sector development plans with a market orientation and with due consideration to resource sustainability and environmental governance.** There was some evidence of an increase in beneficiaries' knowledge, awareness and understanding of a number of issues that contribute to the trade competitiveness of fisheries sectors. However, it cannot be inferred that the translation of this knowledge into capacities of countries to manage the sector at a national level lay within the project's ambit. Some evidence shows that the project also contributed to concrete changes in domestic legislation, institutions and

policies in four of the five participating countries, the Comoros, Mozambique, Myanmar and Uganda

9. **The project demonstrated high degrees of efficiency in the timely and cost-effective utilization of resources and partnership with specialist agencies for content delivery, and secured additional resources to expand coverage.** The project was implemented efficiently, with timely completion of activities and within budget, and adapted swiftly to unforeseen developments and opportunities. The mobilization of supplementary funding was exemplary. A notable aspect of implementation was the success of UNCTAD in raising additional external resources of \$145,500, which enabled increased beneficiary coverage and expansion of content.

10. **Follow-up interventions would need additional technical and financial support.** The project has created a base of evidence and knowledge to embark on follow-up interventions; however, additional technical support and investment support would be necessary, from UNCTAD as well as other partners and donors. The evaluation concluded that, due to the recent finalization of the project, it was too early to draw conclusions about its sustainability, though there was evidence that the participating countries are using or intend to use the knowledge and awareness gained from the project in policy actions or administrative regulations to improve the state of fisheries in those countries.

11. **Some effort was made on gender and human rights mainstreaming.** The project made an effort to mainstream gender and human rights by featuring the incidence of employment of women worldwide in the fisheries sector in several analytical texts in the project, and due attention was given to the inclusion of women beneficiaries in project activities. Even though gender roles in the fisheries sector were recognized, the evaluation found that coverage of gender issues was somewhat scant in the workshops.

12. **Strong partnerships were built but still had potential for more agency involvement.** Through the project, a number of specialized international technical institutions, government agencies, academia and other non-profit organizations were partners on the development of content and knowledge delivery. Some of these arrangements were institutionalized in the form of two centres of excellence. The project built strong institutional arrangements with two regional centres of excellence in Viet Nam and Mauritius for replicating and upscaling the capacity development approaches developed. However, the potential for involving some agencies (for instance, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Industrial Development Organization) could go far beyond content support and extend into development of full-scale joint programmes on market access, as well as investment mobilization.

13. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) The long-term success of capacity development projects is in training the best suited persons in technical and leadership skills who are in the right positions and have the opportunity to transform policies and actions. Projects such as 1415M could make the trainee selection process more robust through a competitive selection process led by Governments in consultation with UNCTAD. The availability and personal presence of a training for the entire project should be compulsory and a precondition;

(b) Capacity development projects such as project 1415M generate huge volumes of high-quality content that only few can receive in the first instance. It would be useful to build online repositories of all the content, including videos of the lectures, which serve as global public goods;

(c) UNCTAD could document successful case experiences of other developing countries in penetrating markets through actions, such as market regulations (minimum export prices), market information bulletins in key entrepôt centres and the appointment of export marketing agencies in the trade sections of overseas missions, and disseminate them to the countries participating in the project and least developed countries in general;

(d) UNCTAD could consider a multi-country intervention to assist the five participating countries in developing actionable fisheries improvement programme proposals and concept notes for consideration by donors and other agencies for technical

cooperation; to take the concept further, UNCTAD could develop a standard project formulation facility mechanism for funding to assist countries in developing fisheries improvement programme using a structured process and prioritization of key elements;

(e) UNCTAD should consider seeking, from participating countries, a report outlining the major policy actions being considered for export development and a strategy to move forward and a report outlining the further capacity needs of Governments and the private sector to comply with international sanitary and phytosanitary standards;

(f) It was recommended that the final versions of the training manuals should include a chapter on gender issues, prepared in consultation with an authoritative institution more specialized in analysis of gender issues in fisheries; related to this, in future training curricula to be designed by the centres of excellence, there should be a session on gender equality, human rights and fisheries, for which expert speakers should be identified from specialized institutions advocating on gender equality and women's empowerment.

## **B. Project 1415N: Strengthening capacities of policymakers to assess implications of non-tariff measures in international trade and formulate appropriate policy responses**

14. This project was implemented during the period 2014–2018 with a budget of \$620,000. It aimed at contributing to the capacity of policymakers in developing countries to address issues related to non-tariff measures, so as to ultimately improve access of developing country exports to international markets. The project targeted three regions (Africa, Asia and Latin America). Participating countries were defined as those for which the project contributed to data collection, and case studies were conducted. In particular, the 15 countries that benefited directly from the project were Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Cuba, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Thailand and Viet Nam. As the information is available online at no cost, though, any country representative can access the non-tariff measures database and publications.

15. **The evaluation concluded that the project is considered relevant for the beneficiaries and the non-tariff measures database is useful.** All respondents mentioned that non-tariff measures databases, in general, and the UNCTAD Trade Analysis and Information System (known as TRAINS) database in particular, are useful, when they are up to date, as normally, data on non-tariff measures are available but scattered either on the Internet or in national documents. The project, in that sense, aimed at both collecting the dispersed information and updating non-tariff measures databases as they become obsolete quickly.

16. **UNCTAD has a comparative advantage in the field of non-tariff measures.** As for the comparative advantage of UNCTAD compared to other organizations, such as the International Trade Centre, World Bank and World Trade Organization, within the specific work accomplished through this project (collecting data on non-tariff measures at the policy level and populating a database and analysing the data), UNCTAD is better positioned than the other three (and others). In fact, the other organizations conduct different but complementary tasks to enhance the availability of overall non-tariff measures data. However, UNCTAD, with its pre-existing database and academically oriented reputation and staff, as well as a wealth of connections with professors, students and academic consultants, has the convenient human resources at hand and is thus best placed to conduct this endeavour.

17. **Awareness and knowledge on non-tariff measures were raised but sound policy responses take time.** The evaluation also concluded that the project has contributed to enhancing the beneficiaries' awareness, knowledge and capacity to analyse the effects of non-tariff measures, using established non-tariff measures data platforms and improved analytical research and tools. However, as developing sound policy responses to non-tariff measures takes time, this did not happen during the lifetime of the project. To raise awareness of and increase knowledge on non-tariff measures or capacity to analyse the

effects of non-tariff measures on the countries' economy, many respondents mentioned that the involvement of the private sector, to some extent, would have helped.

18. **Overall efficiency was deemed high for the project.** The management team's size at UNCTAD was kept to a minimum and, in many cases, the events were organized in coordination with other organizations' initiatives, which helped reduce the actual cost of organizing events. The majority of respondents mentioned that the production and publication of a book were accomplished at low cost, considering the quality of the work done and the notability of the authors.

19. **Continuous work on non-tariff measures needs further financing.** Sustainability of the results is supported by the overall recognized need for continuous updating of the information available on non-tariff measures. However, the fact remains that there is a cost to this work, and it is not known exactly how much this endeavour would cost. The evaluation found that, at UNCTAD, there is interest in further financing of these types of activities. The reason for this optimism is the renewed interest of donors concerning non-tariff measures, partly thanks to the project.

20. **Integrating gender and human rights into the project was challenging.** The evaluation found that the management team faced challenges in integrating gender and human rights into the project. Nearly half of survey respondents believed that equitable trade and gender-sensitive trade policies were not relevant topics within the project. Among those who believed gender was a relevant issue to integrate into the project, 70 per cent believed it was appropriately incorporated. All respondents mentioned that integrating the human rights concept into the non-tariff measures domain was not an easy task.

21. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) UNCTAD should ensure adequate allocation and designation of capacity for each United Nations Development Account project team; in addition, this might have the unexpected result of bringing new ideas to the table;

(b) It is recommended that specific baseline data be collected on all Development Account project indicators on which targets would be set, to allow for similar evaluations in future to have benchmarks on which to rely for the assessment of such projects;

(c) It is recommended that the private sector be involved in the events of similar projects in future; as the International Trade Centre also collects data from the private sector, it is recommended that reinforcement of collaboration between the two organizations be continued, to ensure the two sets of non-tariff measure data remain complementary;

(d) Before the start of such projects, the links with cross-cutting themes, such as gender and human rights, need to be analysed and tested; links would then need to be fully integrated in project designs;

(e) Tools to monitor usage of databases developed by UNCTAD should be utilized, to obtain tangible data on global interest in the issue and to raise interest of donors;

(f) It is recommended that dissemination channels be multiplied for the present project's information and data, as well as for existing content; future non-tariff measure projects need to continue making the project's content more accessible to more policymakers and other relevant policymakers.

### **C. Project 1415Q: Building capacities of developing countries to shift towards sustainable freight transport**

22. The project was implemented between 1 April 2014 and 30 November 2018, with a budget of \$611,000. The project's objective was to enhance knowledge and cooperation among policymakers, transport operators and financiers in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean to promote and finance development of sustainable freight transport.

23. **The evaluation concluded that the project fully responded to the needs of its direct target beneficiaries, and its objectives contributed to internationally agreed**

**priorities, such as Sustainable Development Goal 9 (target 9.1), as well as addressed priorities of UNCTAD subprogramme 4 on technology and logistics.** While some other development actors within and outside the United Nations system work on sustainable transport, UNCTAD is the only United Nations entity working on freight transport comprehensively and with a global perspective.

24. **The project contributed towards positive changes in freight policy at the country level.** The evaluation found that UNCTAD contributed significantly to the development of the green freight programme that was developed in 2017, through a partnership between the Northern Trade Corridor Coordination Agency, UNCTAD, the United Nations Environment Programme and the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, and subsequently approved by the Northern Trade Corridor Coordination Agency. At the outcome level, the Northern Trade Corridor Coordination Agency reported initial steps towards positive freight policy changes at the level of its member States (particularly Kenya and Rwanda).

25. **In terms of management, the evaluation found that the project performed well in ensuring relevance and good quality of deliverables.** However, project implementation advanced slowly, due to both internal and external constraints (respectively, human resources and the introduction of the Umoja system; and the availability of partners and change in the management of key institutions and partners). Such delays prevented follow-up support to seminars during the project, which reduced effectiveness (upscaling of results) and efficiency.

26. **For sustainable results, additional funds are needed to update and promote the project's sustainable freight transport tool.** The evaluation concluded that in order to contribute to sustainability, the sustainable freight transport tool needs regular updating to remain relevant and needs to be promoted to ensure broader use. Without additional extrabudgetary funding (for website maintenance, activities to promote the sustainable freight transport tool, training etc.), the risk that the awareness built will not be maintained and translated into the expected policy changes is rather high. Mobilizing funding for a stand-alone sustainable freight transport project might be more challenging than offering services related to sustainable freight transport to donors working in relevant fields, such as the upgrading of freight transport infrastructure.

27. **There was not much evidence of gender and human rights mainstreaming in the project.** Project design included some reflections on gender issues, yet no specific analysis on how a project may affect both genders was undertaken. Nonetheless, the sustainable freight transport framework includes gender- and human rights-related key performance indicators and sustainable freight transport measures. For new projects, there is room to strengthen the application of existing UNCTAD gender mainstreaming tools, including the UNCTAD Toolkit.

28. **There were good partnerships at the regional level.** The partnerships with the Northern Trade Corridor Coordination Agency and the Central Trade Corridor Coordination Agency were good examples of addressing subregional issues (cross-border transportation) through regional bodies with a corresponding mandate. In the Caribbean, UNCTAD involved the Caribbean Development Bank, Port Management Association of the Caribbean and All Island Truckers Association (Jamaica). In East Africa, UNCTAD, the United Nations Environment Programme and the Climate and Clean Air Coalition jointly contributed to the Northern Trade Corridor's green freight programme. Other United Nations entities (regional commissions) participated in events, as well as the University of the South Pacific which contributed a case study to build on exchange of experience.

29. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) UNCTAD should strengthen efforts to mainstream gender aspects into new projects, using existing UNCTAD tools. Especially important is to analyse how a project may affect both genders in order to define measures to avoid gender bias (unfair or different treatment of women and men);

(b) To further increase usefulness and ongoing relevance to beneficiaries, consolidate and enhance products developed, including fine-tuning of the sustainable

freight transport framework and the sustainable freight transport training toolkit and regular updating of the website; consider publishing a simplified sustainable freight transport framework for a rapid self-assessment, which could require some additional resources;

(c) When projects are relatively small, UNCTAD could consider joint programmes where UNCTAD supports mainstreaming of concepts (for example, sustainable freight transport, in this case) into interventions of other development actors rather than offer stand-alone support on sustainable freight transport;

(d) Consider continuing to use regional and subregional approaches for work on sustainable freight transport where it is possible to link into or strengthen existing cooperation frameworks; where required, regional support should be combined with national support;

(e) Reinforce efforts to strengthen cooperation with financial institutions interested in providing funding to measures related to sustainable freight transport.

#### **D. Project INT/OT/TFBI: Investment promotion partnerships for the development, marketing and facilitation of bankable Sustainable Development Goal projects**

30. Project INT/OT/TFBI was funded by the Government of the Netherlands with a budget of \$275,000, and its implementation lasted from November 2016 to February 2019. The project was intended to enhance the capacities of investment promotion agency officials for the preparation, promotion and facilitation of bankable Sustainable Development Goal projects. This capacity-building proposal included information about outward investment agencies and investors' priorities; it showcased successful practices of Sustainable Development Goal-related investment promotion, developed tools and training on packaging investment project proposals and fostered some investment promotion partnerships around the Sustainable Development Goals.

31. **The evaluation concluded that the project was highly relevant to the countries' needs and responded to the UNCTAD mandate and specialization in supporting developing countries' agencies in attracting investment that leads to sustainable development.** While many aspects of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development fall under the umbrella of several United Nations agencies, UNCTAD is the only entity with solid and comprehensive experience and knowledge in the field of investment promotion, according to project beneficiaries. From an international donor and investor perspective, the project was also promising in the sense that knowledge on private sector development and the leverage of private finance by development agencies is underdeveloped in comparison to other topics of the 2030 Agenda.

32. **Awareness was raised but the effects remain unclear at the operational level.** The evaluation found that the project has effectively raised awareness on the challenges and opportunities of the Sustainable Development Goals in the target groups. The project provided tools and training for investment promotion agency officials, but their effects remain unclear at the operational level. This is because the model and the guide for the preparation, promotion and facilitation of bankable Sustainable Development Goal projects are not yet being used, possibly due to the fact that the full model and guide were developed and prepared during the project and only widely available in the final project phase.

33. **The evaluation concluded that the project was managed efficiently and benefited from UNCTAD resources and capacities, as well as collaboration from partners.** All the activities were carried out on time and on budget. The collaboration of investment promotion agencies and outward investment agencies, mainly in the host countries for regional forums (Mexico, South Africa and Thailand) was key to achieving global outreach within the limited time frame and budget. The project also benefited from the expertise of investment promotion agencies and prior research work, as well as from the reputation and convening capacity of UNCTAD.



34. **The project's effects are likely to be sustainable at the national level.** In project design and implementation, sustaining and increasing the project's effects beyond the duration of external financial support was sought, by targeting the institutions mandated to promote investment in each country, and thereby national systems were built on. Moreover, given the leading position of UNCTAD on this issue within the United Nations family, and the involvement of other United Nations agencies in the project, the available resources will likely be used in activities led by other actors. On the other hand, project design did not mainstream gender and human rights but was inclusive in the selection of beneficiaries and successful cases.

35. **Partnerships were central in project design, and UNCTAD collaboration with investment promotion agencies at the national, regional and global levels was reinforced, while synergies with international and national public actors were advanced.** However, the involvement of the private sector could have been improved. In future projects, UNCTAD could consider better connecting its proposals on investing in the Sustainable Development Goals with requirements by outward investment agencies for funding applications and private sector initiatives on impact investment and reporting.

36. Based on these findings and conclusions, the evaluation recommended that:

(a) UNCTAD could elaborate a more sophisticated theory of change about capacity enhancement for intermediation in investments related to the Sustainable Development Goals.

(b) In order to mainstream gender into the theory of change, UNCTAD could further reflect on the relevance and feasibility of providing common guidance to investment promotion agencies in this area. In order for partner countries not to leave behind context-specific gender issues, when an update of a project profile template is made, a section on gender analysis could be included in the template.

(c) While the consideration of human rights could take a risk mitigation approach, as in the United Nations framework on business and human rights, and lead to the adoption of safeguard criteria and lists of exclusion in investment promotion agencies, the equitable investment paradigm might lead to a similar approach as that for gender mainstreaming. According to the guide produced by this project, the poverty-eradication potential of a given investment could be based on employment opportunities for the lowest-income segments in each country.

(d) UNCTAD could consider finding a way to systematize a greater number of good practices in order to continue raising awareness around the opportunities provided by the Sustainable Development Goals to the investment community.

(e) In order for UNCTAD and its partners to favour changes at an operational level, a follow-up project under the same specific objective (capacity enhancement) is recommended. The workplan of such a new project should concentrate on testing the model against real-life cases, with meaningful involvement by outward investment agencies, and promoting and following up on pilot cooperation agreements.

(f) In future projects such as this, UNCTAD could also involve outward investment agencies and outward investment agency associations, such as the European Development Finance Institutions or the International Development Finance Club. Given their financial capacity, if such institutions endorsed the model and guide elaborated by UNCTAD, then those tools would probably be more easily spread throughout the investment community.

(g) The private sector could contribute to the alignment of investments in the Sustainable Development Goals by connecting UNCTAD tools with measurement and reporting standards developed and disseminated by the private sector (for instance, the Global Reporting Initiative). UNCTAD could consider involving private sector entities in future training on Sustainable Development Goal-related investment promotion and, when updating the project template, could elaborate on certain items, such as corporate social responsibility reporting, by referring to these standards.

## E. Project: eTrade for all

37. The independent evaluation was included as part of the agreement between UNCTAD and the Government of Finland, which contributed €500,000 to the project for 24 months between 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018. During this time, the project also received €500,000 from the Netherlands in 2018, \$264,000 from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2016 and €50,000 from Estonia in 2017. The evaluation results pertain to all contributions from 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2018 and are not limited to the contribution of the Government of Finland.

38. **The eTrade for all initiative is a demand-driven mechanism for leading development partners, in partnership with the private sector, to make their actions more coherent and efficient by pooling capabilities and resources.** The main tool of the eTrade for all initiative is a web-based platform to assist in capacity-building and knowledge development. Its aim is to provide developing countries, donors and partners with an additional resource to explore, synthesize and learn about e-commerce and related digital issues and opportunities at multiple levels of details. Beyond the knowledge-sharing platform, the initiative acts also a catalyser of partnerships among its 30 members, which actively collaborate in UNCTAD E-commerce Weeks.

39. **The evaluation found that the eTrade for all initiative is a highly relevant project, providing unique value added to e-commerce stakeholders.** To date, the project largely met its objectives, based on stakeholder perception, and also generated positive spin-off effects. Most stakeholders highly appreciate the project team's role as a neutral facilitator and its multi-stakeholder approach. The project was found to be well aligned to the UNCTAD mandate and to the needs of its partners and stakeholders, with some room for improvements.

40. **The evaluation concluded that the project largely achieved its objectives.** The project's logframe outputs, outcomes and goals were assessed to have been mainly achieved. Project partners from other United Nations agencies and international organizations appreciated the efforts of the UNCTAD project team in effectively leading eTrade for all. Most project partners from other United Nations agencies and international organizations appreciated the project team's practice of shared ownership of the project and the highly consultative approach taken by UNCTAD in managing the project to underline that all partners have a stake in it. The project has also generated positive spin off effects, including two spin-off projects with separate funding sources: Rapid eTrade readiness assessments and eTrade for Women.

41. **In terms of efficiency, the project used resources appropriately.** The multi-stakeholder approach is highly appropriate for the implementation of this project, with a substantial partnership element as its cornerstone. Internal UNCTAD resources actively enrich the project and vice versa, including UNCTAD E-commerce Weeks, rapid eTrade readiness assessments and the eTrade for Women network. While the project benefits from internal UNCTAD resources and processes, core budget activities take precedence on the time of the regular budget staff of the project team. As a result, small project resources get stretched to their limit.

42. **After two years, the perceived sustainability of main project components advances well despite uncertainty about future funding.** Partners' commitment is affected to some extent, given the uncertain funding situation of the project and some growing expectations from project partners about implementation activities in member States, in particular on the follow-up phase of the rapid eTrade readiness assessments for least developed countries. While donors appreciate programmatic approaches in UNCTAD, they are reluctant to provide unearmarked, more flexible funding. They nonetheless support, together with other UNCTAD member States, the eTrade for all initiative, as they conveyed at the sixty-sixth session of the Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD.

43. **Gender is treated as a cross-cutting element, and human rights figure implicitly in the project design.** While the project uses a gender lens and started referencing eTrade for Women as a spin-off of eTrade for all, the gender focus is less prominent in the perception of stakeholders. The project team considers human rights under the right to

privacy in the context of a broader, legal and regulatory dimension. In addition, reference is made to the right to development by making digital development more inclusive. The project has room for improvement to underpin and communicate its rights perspective to partners and stakeholders.

44. **The project advances in the creation of partnerships at varying velocities.** There are very satisfactory results in advancing partnerships with international organizations with e-commerce and digital issues high on their agenda. Partnerships with civil society organizations and regional development banks are evident, but challenges have been faced in engaging with the private sector.

45. Based on these findings and conclusions, the evaluation recommended that:

(a) The project manager should establish specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, timebound (SMART) milestones and targets for the project; consultations with the partners might enhance the quality of that target-setting process;

(b) The project team should include at least one gender indicator and one human rights indicator in the project logframe (complemented by SMART milestones and targets) and communicate this logframe revision to all project partners;

(c) The project team should seek ways to establish formal partnerships with the private sector through a business association model, rather than individual companies, to maintain the project's neutrality;

(d) UNCTAD should share the results of this evaluation and the mutual advantages of a more programmatic funding approach, through a donor round table meeting, building on the convening power and credibility created by the project;

(e) UNCTAD could establish a trust fund for the e-commerce and digital economy programme, comprising eTrade for all and its spin off projects, and encourage donors to contribute to such a joint trust fund;

(f) Donors are encouraged to continue funding eTrade for all, as it provides unique value added to e-commerce stakeholders;

(g) The project team should address the project's funding pipeline with partners during the next scheduled project event; expectations should be carefully managed and further synergies explored; moreover, the project manager should revise the project budget so that funding proposals to donors more realistically reflect the resource requirements to meet the demands on such a project;

(h) The project manager should expand outreach and make use of regional opportunities to reach out to more and relevant stakeholders in member States;

(i) The project team should develop a strategy, together with project partners, for advancing on the output "a matching mechanism for e-commerce related assistance"; more than one approach could be tested on a pilot basis.

## II. Meta-analysis of lessons learned from project evaluations, 2015–2019

46. At its seventy-eighth session, the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget reaffirmed the importance of internal and external evaluations for transparency, accountability and efficiency, in accordance with the UNCTAD evaluation policy and the Norms and Standards for Evaluation of the United Nations Evaluation Group. In an effort to enhance the use of evaluation and improve evidence-based decision-making, the secretariat carried out a meta-analysis of 85 lessons learned that were extracted from 21 project evaluations<sup>4</sup> completed during the last five years (2015–2019). The aim is to bring a broader picture of lessons learned from project design and implementation over the past years to feed into future UNCTAD project planning and strategic decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> Out of 21 project evaluations, 4 evaluations do not have any lessons learned.

This would also contribute to increased accountability and learning for the organization and its internal and external stakeholders.

47. This chapter presents results from the meta-analysis. The 85 lessons learned have been consolidated into the following four broad categories: (a) project design and sustainability; (b) project implementation; (c) partnership; and (d) gender and human rights mainstreaming.

## **A. Project designs for sustainable results**

### **Better alignment of project design with countries' needs, priorities and capacities**

48. It is important to think about the needs, priorities and capacities of targeted countries early in the design process. For example, in the case of the project on non-tariff measures, it was useful to collect a wealth of data, but convincing countries to update their data was more demanding than initially thought. More time was needed to structure the data and make sure it was harmonized with other existing data.

49. Involving stakeholders early in the design process and ensuring a shared understanding of project objectives among all parties have led to better understanding of the expected results, the risks involved and the level of commitment from the beneficiary countries to develop sustainable actions. The experiences of some projects suggest that it is important to assess the level of interest (for example, by sharing draft proposals, soliciting comments, etc.) of the targeted countries before committing to the inclusion of those countries in a project.

### **Country ownership is key to success and results**

50. Projects should be designed in a way that ensures engagement of national counterparts throughout project development and implementation. Some projects found that they achieved concrete results by allowing national stakeholders to prioritize key issues, identify problems and craft solutions. Also, Governments' validation of the process and reports is another key step to ensure country ownership and sustainability with regard to the follow-up of recommendations.

### **Identify and ensure inclusion of "anchor" participants for wider policy impacts**

51. As many of project activities of UNCTAD aim at influencing policy changes through capacity-building, it is important to ensure that the appropriate persons are being trained. Given the limited resources for training in each project, it makes sense to focus on "anchor" participants, e.g. officials/policymakers with policy influence roles or who play a key role in applying standards and regulations in practice, for wider policy impact. As trainees were often nominated by Governments with little or no role for UNCTAD in the selection, evaluators suggested that selection could be a more consultative process that involves UNCTAD in selecting participants to ensure a good mix of technical and policy level reach. In countries with a high level of vertical centralization of decision-making, it is important to engage with top-level government officials.

### **Capacity-building should go beyond training and be based on a sound assessment of both individual and institutional capacity gaps**

52. Capacity-building is complex, time consuming and situation dependent. A trade policy project intended to deliver capacity development has to be designed with contributions from experts in several areas, including both trade policy and capacity development. The necessary customization of a project to accommodate target country characteristics should feature adequate scoping of issues, such as a trade ministry's capacity and available means of addressing capacity gaps. Furthermore, offerings of advisory services and training have to be properly resourced and creatively delivered to fully build capacity and support development-oriented policy reform.

### **Partnership with and learning from experiences of other developing countries**

53. Experience from some projects shows that highlighting the experience of developing countries is sometimes more relevant for least developed country contexts than lessons from middle- or high-income countries. The success trajectories of developing countries and even some least developed countries are more readily understandable and replicable, by identifying the key transformative policy actions implemented in these successful countries. An example from a project shows that institutionalizing knowledge transfer mechanisms through regional centres of excellence in some other developing countries can enable replication and upscaling of a training programme, in order to benefit several more participants from interested countries.

### **Training activities that are designed to optimize absorption of knowledge**

54. Well-designed training is a key element of successful capacity-building. Training should be comprehensive and continuously adapt to the needs of beneficiaries. Experience from one project shows that sequenced and well-spaced delivery of knowledge to the same direct beneficiaries was an important factor that contributed to absorption and application of the knowledge and information acquired, as opposed to a series of one-off training programmes covering a larger number of beneficiaries. Future projects should consider the provision of the right balance of information delivery based on the type of audience concerned and more time should be dedicated to discussions. Regional workshops, where international experiences were shared, appear to have had the most positive effect on influencing the opinions of national policymakers. It is crucial that tools for measuring and testing knowledge be developed at the design stage to assess the overall effectiveness of a training intervention.

### **Sustainability considerations should be captured in the design of projects**

55. Designs of project components that are thought through better are needed especially in terms of sustainability, including communication strategies, institutionalization and/or formalization of the structures or policies promoted and follow-up actions by national and regional actors. Attention should also be paid early in the project's design stage to design of a sustainable exit strategy, taking into account absorptive capacity, staff rotation and staff availability in the beneficiary countries and the need build institutional capacity rather than only individual capacities.

56. Follow-up activities after training workshops are necessary to bolster a project's outcomes. In particular, the design of smaller-scale projects or of interventions that aim for longer-term policy impacts should anticipate the need for continuous support to countries in the implementation of policies or actions recommended by UNCTAD.

## **B. Project implementation: How to achieve project results in the most efficient and effective ways**

### **Flexible and adaptive project management approach**

57. Implementation of a multi-year technical cooperation project in a large number of countries with a small budget necessarily requires a hands-on and flexible project team and an institutional setting which encourages adaptive management. Such an approach facilitates purposeful customization of a project to meet the trade policy capacity-building needs of widely differing countries, address the dynamism of trade and development, the complexities of development cooperation and a variety of internal and external constraints on the project, including ensuring that financial resources available for the project are put to best use and within the time frame needed.

### **Better risk management and contingency planning**

58. The experiences of some projects show that systemic factors within the United Nations system or beneficiary countries can constrain project performance and cause delays until they are resolved at higher levels. Examples of such constraints are different rules and

regulations on procurement and consultant recruitment or currency controls at the country level. It is therefore important to take into account these constraints in the early stages of planning and for the implementation of future projects and to have clear risk mitigation strategies.

#### **Give adequate funding and attention to monitoring and evaluation in project design and implementation**

59. Course corrections and even partial redesign of a trade policy project during its lifespan are to be expected in a rapidly changing global trade and development context. However, adequate attention and funding directed to monitoring and evaluation ensures provision of a feedback loop to project management to enable course corrections if necessary. A very heavy reliance on a final project evaluation serves the function of ex post facto learning. Learnings from other project evaluations can be particularly helpful in the design and implementation of small capacity-building projects to benefit from good practices or avoid similar missteps.

### **C. Partnerships: How to partner for success given limited resources**

#### **Work closely with regional partners**

60. Regional approaches are an effective and efficient way to address cross-border challenges where a regional institutional framework and cooperation are needed. This is an effective way to promote a common vision that, in turn, is able to strengthen a project's results, broaden the dissemination of products and enhance sustainability. The presence of the UNCTAD regional office in Addis Ababa has been a significant advantage for one UNCTAD project in boosting working relationships with the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa and channelling requests from member States.

#### **Leverage partnerships with other development actors**

61. Considering the limited resources of each project, providing input to interventions of other development actors might be more likely to lead to the expected socioeconomic and environmental benefits than training and capacity-building of a limited number of stakeholders through small stand-alone interventions. Not only does this approach help to leverage partner networks to save costs, it also helps with the sustainability of interventions by pursuing linkages with larger projects and initiatives.

#### **Transparency, openness and inclusiveness of the coordinating partners**

62. Transparency, openness and inclusiveness are crucial for the successful and trustful management of a multi-stakeholder partnership. Discrete visibility of the coordinating partner is beneficial for this purpose, as in the case of the eTrade for all project. From a donor perspective, awareness raising can be successful and value for money, even with small scale investments, if the partnership is strong and there are effective outreach mechanisms.

#### **Foster multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approaches/platforms to enable changes at the policy level**

63. A key added value from some UNCTAD projects and interventions is to bring together actors who normally would not work together, such as different government ministries, private sector and academia, and national and regional institutions. This multi-stakeholder approach enables better discussion and collaboration among stakeholders within the system for better policymaking and decision-making.

## **D. Gender and human rights mainstreaming: What can be improved**

### **Better conceptualization of gender and human rights aspects in the project preparation phase**

64. Better conceptualization of gender and human rights aspects would ensure better integration of these issues into project concepts, activities and implementation. At the moment, there are some scattered efforts to mainstream gender and human rights into project activities, but there is a need to ensure conduct of an overall analysis and have a comprehensive approach to mainstream gender and human rights into project concept, design, results and implementation.

### **A more coherent approach to promote sustainability of UNCTAD work on gender**

65. As the projects funded by the United Nations Development Account and through extrabudgetary resources are often one-off interventions, gender objectives were usually not the main focus of technical work. Therefore, there is a need for longer-term and sufficient funding to mainstream gender into trade policy. There is also a need to ensure a shared understanding of project objectives among all parties on enhancing capacity on gender issues at the start of any new project. While project managers often conceptualize the project mainly in relation to outputs, such as workshops and reports, government stakeholders have a greater interest in longer-term capacity development.

## **III. Evaluations at UNCTAD**

66. The mandate for conducting, coordinating and overseeing evaluations at UNCTAD is vested in its Evaluation and Monitoring Unit. This mandate covers all programmes and projects under the regular budget and projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are implemented by UNCTAD. The Evaluation and Monitoring Unit undertakes these evaluations in accordance with the requirements of the United Nations General Assembly and the Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD, and in conformity with the Norms and Standards for Evaluation of the United Nations Evaluation Group. This chapter provides an update on evaluation matters and activities in 2019–2020.

### **A. The United Nations Secretariat self-evaluation policy and update of the UNCTAD evaluation policy**

67. An update of the UNCTAD evaluation policy has been under way since 2019 in order to reflect the important changes that have taken place at UNCTAD since 2011, in the United Nations system and in the broader evaluation community, such as the ongoing United Nations reform introduced by the Secretary-General; the 2016 revision of the Norms and Standards for Evaluation of the United Nations Evaluation Group; and the reinvigorated approach to results-based management at UNCTAD. For example, the updated Norms and Standards for Evaluation includes four new norms on internationally agreed principles, goals and targets, in addition to a stronger emphasis on the utility and use of evaluation. The update of the UNCTAD evaluation policy will also take into consideration feedback from the 2019 biennial overview and United Nations evaluation dashboard of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and other assessments of the evaluation function of UNCTAD. Finalization of the updated UNCTAD evaluation policy is pending the promulgation of the self-evaluation policy of the United Nations Secretariat, as the UNCTAD evaluation policy is required to be aligned with it.

### **B. Supporting system-wide evaluation and coordination of evaluations of coronavirus disease interventions**

68. On 3 April 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General launched a \$2 billion multi-partner trust fund (for two years) to finance United Nations actions against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund aligns

with the United Nations development system's repositioning, offering a cohesive United Nations response to national Governments, through a common funding mechanism led by United Nations Resident Coordinators at the country level, to leverage the capabilities of United Nations entities. The fund operates under the overall leadership of the United Nations Secretary-General through his Designate for the COVID-19 fund.

69. The terms of reference for the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund indicate that evaluation of the fund will be at three levels (fund, country and recipient United Nations organization) to ensure adequate learning and accountability. Such evaluations will follow the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group and will be carried out in line with the system-wide evaluation policy of the United Nations. Evaluation of the fund will have the objective of providing credible periodic evaluative evidence on how the United Nations is contributing collectively to addressing the challenges brought by COVID-19 in the first year of the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals and on progress, innovation, good practices and lessons learned.

70. To this end, an Evaluation Management Group has been convoked, with its membership comprising the heads of evaluation of the entities that are on the Advisory Committee of the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (UNCTAD, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, International Labour Organization, World Food Programme, World Health Organization and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). The Evaluation Management Group has started its work to discuss and operationalize the system-wide evaluation.

71. In addition, UNCTAD is a member of an ad hoc working group of the United Nations Evaluation Group to coordinate evaluations of COVID-19 response and recovery interventions, to avoid overlaps and overburdening counterparts, especially at the national level, as well as to minimize the disruption to United Nations operations. The focus of the ad hoc working group includes collecting information on who does what in evaluating COVID-19 response and advising members of the United Nations Evaluation Group if there is scope for collaboration or avoiding overlap; proposing collective United Nations Evaluation Group initiatives on and approaches to COVID-19 response evaluations; coordinating interaction with partner networks, in particular the Development Assistance Committee's Network on Development Evaluation (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the Evaluation Cooperation Group; and considering any United Nations Evaluation Group guidance or knowledge products in relation to evaluating COVID-19 response or evaluation under the situation caused by the pandemic.

### **C. Evaluation plan for 2021**

72. At both its seventy-sixth and seventy-eighth sessions,<sup>5</sup> the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget requested the secretariat to continue a new evaluation cycle of the five subprogrammes after the fifteenth session of the Conference. The Conference was initially scheduled for 18 to 23 October 2020 but has been postponed to 2021 due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the new cycle of subprogramme evaluations will now commence in 2021 with an independent evaluation of subprogramme 1 on globalization, interdependence and development strategies, to be presented for consideration by the Working Party in 2022. In addition, the UNCTAD evaluation plan for 2021 will include a number of independent evaluations of projects funded through extrabudgetary sources and United Nations Development Account projects that are set to conclude in 2020–2021.

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<sup>5</sup> TD/B/WP/293 and TD/B/WP/300, respectively.