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**Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview**

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



## Introduction

1. An overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD projects and programmes completed between April 2021 and April 2022 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 evaluation policy of UNCTAD and the norms and standards for evaluation outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group.<sup>1</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 in designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.<sup>2</sup>

3. In this report, the results of eight evaluations of projects and programmes are presented in chapter I; a synthesis of lessons learned from the evaluations is presented in chapter II; and an update on evaluation matters and activities at UNCTAD in the period 2022–2023 is provided in chapter III.

4. Between April 2021 and April 2022, a total of eight external evaluations of projects and programmes were completed. The projects and programmes were supported as follows: three projects, by the United Nations Development Account; one project, by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Subfund of the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund; one project, by the Government of Germany; one project, by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand; and two programmes, by several Governments and organizations. The projects and programmes were as follows:

- (a) Improving the value added of cotton by-products in Eastern and Southern Africa;
- (b) Indices for benchmarking productive capacities for evidence-based policymaking in landlocked developing countries;
- (c) Development policies for sustainable economic growth in Southern Africa;
- (d) Integrating landlocked commodity-dependent developing countries into regional and global value chains;
- (e) African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement support programme to eliminate non-tariff barriers, increase regulatory transparency and promote industrial diversification;
- (f) Transparency in trade regulation and facilitation in the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus;
- (g) Capacity-building in trade and gender programme, online training;
- (h) Electronic commerce (e-commerce) and digital economy programme.

5. Detailed findings, recommendations and lessons learned from the evaluations are presented in chapter I. Some highlights of key findings are as follows:

- (a) Overall, all of the projects were found to be relevant to the needs of the beneficiary economies and organizations, and closely aligned with UNCTAD mandates. The comparative advantage of UNCTAD was recognized in many cases, as was the deep level of knowledge and expertise at UNCTAD;

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189](http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189) and [www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914](http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914) (accessed 29 June 2022).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://unctad.org/about/evaluation/reports> (accessed 29 June 2022).

(b) UNCTAD continued to produce pioneering work at the cutting edge of trade issues, for example with regard to the trade and gender nexus and the digital economy. Technical assistance in these areas expanded and solidified the comparative advantage of UNCTAD;

(c) The pandemic had a significant impact on several projects; however, the evaluations highlighted the innovative methods that project teams employed to overcome delivery issues and successfully complete activities. At the same time, the work of UNCTAD was found to have positively contributed towards the early analysis of pandemic-related impacts and towards recovery efforts;

(d) The sustainability of results remained a core challenge in technical assistance efforts. In some cases, this had been mitigated by the creation of an online portal or tool for ongoing use or by training national focal points, yet without dedicated resources both at UNCTAD and on the national side, longer term benefits might not be realized;

(e) Under a number of projects, partnerships had contributed to enhancing the efficiency and scale of impacts. However, in consideration of sustainability issues, further efforts to build and expand such partnerships to further crystallize project impacts were recommended;

(f) There had been mixed success across projects in mainstreaming gender and human rights aspects; some projects and programmes had included gender-related considerations as a core element, yet broader human rights issues had sometimes been neglected;

(g) A need to formulate stronger linkages with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals was noted in the evaluations of several projects, to help ensure impacts were considered in the achievement of the Goals and targets.

## **I. Summary of evaluation findings**

### **A. Project: Improving the value added of cotton by-products in Eastern and Southern Africa**

6. This project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from March 2016 to December 2020 in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the Economic Commission for Africa, with an initial approved budget of \$591,000 and an additional \$100,000 in July 2019. The project was aimed at supporting selected countries in the region, namely, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, in promoting opportunities for greater value addition in the cotton sector, with a focus on cotton by-products, by strengthening national capacity to assess the economic viability of developing cotton by-products; and formulate relevant policy measures to stimulate investment aimed at improving the value addition of cotton by-products.

7. The evaluation concluded that the project was a pioneering one. The project was aimed at contributing to the development of new cotton by-products through capacity-building support in the beneficiary countries, and many national stakeholders had considered it revelatory to learn that there was value in cotton residues. In terms of achievements, the project had mostly attained the performance targets. Considering the available budget and scope, the project had encompassed what could reasonably be covered in terms of awareness-raising, stakeholder consultations and national priority-setting, resulting in national action plans and support towards progressing on certain aspects of the plans.

8. However, the evaluation concluded that further work was required to ensure the sustainability of project results. The engagement of stakeholders in consultations had culminated in national action plans, policy recommendations and the preparation of investment profiles. However, these elements had not yet been fully implemented; the

pandemic had impacted project implementation but this did not fully explain the situation. The project wrap-up workshop held in May 2019 had been a relevant and well-received event, but had not resulted in reinvigorating decision-making at the national level to organize next steps. National buy-in had been promising at the start of the project but had diminished towards the end, with momentum lost as the steering mechanism in national action plans had not become operational. Similarly, there was limited indication that the investment profiles were being effectively used with regard to dissemination to potential investors. A scaled-up implementation of project initiatives would have required a range of additional actions, including identifying and supporting investor interest in cotton by-products and greater awareness-raising among cotton farmers, to direct cotton residues to the production of by-products.

9. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) Ensure the dissemination of the core documents produced in the context of the project to all national-level public and private sector stakeholders that contributed, directly or indirectly, to the documents and are expected to play a role in the effective use of the project outcomes;

(b) Activate the planned but to-date dormant multi-stakeholder steering mechanism and agree on a road map or implementation plan for the development of cotton by-products to guide the way forward;

(c) Mobilize local resources, both technical and financial, to initiate tangible, even if small scale, on-the-ground actions that demonstrate that cotton by-products can boost the incomes of smallholders and create jobs and livelihoods for youth.

## **B. Project: Indices for benchmarking productive capacities for evidence-based policymaking in landlocked developing countries**

10. This project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from January 2016 to April 2021, with an approved budget of \$599,000. The main objective was to strengthen capacity in three landlocked developing countries, namely Botswana, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Rwanda, to develop productive capacities indices and use them to support evidence-based policymaking. The project was aimed at supporting the development of the conceptual, methodological and statistical framework for identifying, selecting and validating indicators to be used in the construction of the indices. Project interventions included developing the capacities of policymakers to understand, interpret and use the indices as tools to formulate and monitor policies and strategies. In addition, the project sought to develop capacity in statistical institutions to collect statistics and related information in key areas of productive capacities.

11. The evaluation concluded that the project was aligned with the objective of UNCTAD to provide support to landlocked developing countries in achieving structural economic transformation, increasing productive capacities, reducing poverty and building resilience to adverse factors. UNCTAD has carried out research and analytical work on productive capacities for over a decade and member States, including through intergovernmental processes, had conveyed requests to UNCTAD to develop indicators and policy guidance on mainstreaming productive capacities in national development policies and strategies in landlocked developing countries. Programmed activities under the project had been successfully completed, with 15 training courses and workshops delivered, and close to 60 per cent of survey respondents had indicated using to a high level or a significant extent the knowledge, skills, methods and/or techniques acquired during these events. In February 2021, UNCTAD launched a productive capacities index database, covering eight categories and 46 indicators of productive capacities for 193 economies in the period 2000–2018 and this database had been mainstreamed into the workplan of the Statistics Service. Policy reforms based on research conducted under the project were advanced in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Rwanda; in Botswana, due to institutional changes, such reforms had not yet materialized.

12. Project results were likely to be sustainable but additional efforts could have catalytic effects. Beneficiary countries were committed to continuing to work towards the objectives beyond the end of the project period. These outcomes were due to the alignment of the project with national development agendas and to national ownership. However, there was scope to strengthen the robustness of the indices, which would require further efforts and resources. The project had experienced delays due to the pandemic but also contributed to related responses in other countries. For example, in Mongolia, research conducted under the project informed the United Nations socioeconomic response plans to the pandemic. In March 2021, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific published a flagship report integrating the productive capacities index as one of the instruments used in the analysis of the impacts of the pandemic in the region. The evaluation noted that the development of indices incorporating gender and human rights aspects was an area on which future projects could focus. Building global indices that were gender sensitive and reflected human rights aspects was dependent on the availability of data; the evaluation noted that only one of the 46 indicators under the productive capacities index was gender sensitive (the indicator on fertility rate under the human capital category).

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

(a) UNCTAD should, to better respond to demand from countries and to promote the sustainability of results, formalize the programmatic approach to work on the indices, which will enable the scaling up of support to graduation processes and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(b) UNCTAD should, in the context of the United Nations development system reform, commit further efforts to strengthening and systematizing relationships with the resident coordinator system;

(c) UNCTAD should consider further increasing the visibility of productive capacities indices and building capacities to facilitate uptake;

(d) UNCTAD should, in future related projects, strive to make increased efforts to mainstream gender and human rights aspects at the design and implementation stages.

### **C. Project: Development policies for sustainable economic growth in Southern Africa**

14. This project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from June 2016 to December 2021, with an initial approved budget of \$501,000 and an additional \$100,000 in 2019. The project, implemented in Mauritius, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, was aimed at building capacity to design and implement development policies for sustainable economic growth, through country-specific research based on established UNCTAD tools and methodologies, as well as through the conduct of several national training workshops for policymakers, to help improve national capacity to formulate integrated macroeconomic, trade-related and sectoral policies in support of productive transformation. Regional workshops were also delivered to explore obstacles to and opportunities for regional collaboration and value chains, as well as coordinated policy efforts to enhance regional economic integration.

15. The evaluation concluded that the project design had been timely and responsive to the needs and demands of the beneficiary countries. However, the focus of the design had prioritized economic growth over social inclusion in the content of activities and deliverables, thereby only partly aligning the project with the Sustainable Development Goals framework. Greater emphasis was required on project coordination and knowledge management. The targets on upgrading industrial policy development skills had been fully achieved and further steps had been taken at the national level to plan and develop productive development policies with continued support from UNCTAD. However, the elements of coordination, dialogue and public-private engagement with regard to policy development processes had to a lesser extent been addressed and improved due to the project. This might become a critical limiting factor in the beneficiary countries in their efforts to formulate and implement integrated productive development policies for

sustainable economic growth. In addition, the project had little strategic focus on knowledge management and the documentation of learning and experiences from the implemented activities, including workshops.

16. In addition, the evaluation noted that gender and human rights aspects had not been sufficiently considered or mainstreamed. The gender mainstreaming strategy of the project appeared to have been only partially institutionalized in the beneficiary countries. The lack of consideration of these aspects at the project design stage had permeated the implementation stage. This represented a missed opportunity. Despite positive outcomes in the beneficiary countries, the sustainability of project results was uncertain. In the beneficiary countries, the project had been revelatory in terms of understanding the concept and importance of productive development policies and a high level of interest in continuing this process had been generated. However, at the time of the evaluation, evidence of catalytic effects beyond the level of the beneficiary countries had not been noted.

17. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) Future project designs should, to a greater extent, reflect the holistic nature of the Sustainable Development Goals framework, in particular the balance between the social and economic dimensions, to more effectively promote the inclusiveness and sustainability aspects of productive development policies;

(b) Gender-related and vulnerability concerns should be more explicitly addressed at the project design stage and properly reflected in all steps at the implementation stage and in guidelines. This should include gender-related and vulnerability assessments and involve organizations specializing in vulnerable and/or marginalized groups and/or women's rights organizations; due reflection and integration of gender equality and vulnerability perspectives in research products; and regular collection of data on the participation of women and vulnerable groups in project implementation;

(c) A more strategic approach to knowledge management, communications and learning opportunities should be developed and implemented, including by exploring opportunities for the development of joint project proposals with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, which has a closely related mandate and on-the-ground presence;

(d) UNCTAD should strengthen its support for the identification and development of regional value chains and short supply chains in the region in view of the trade-related issues emerging in relation to the pandemic. Such support should also ensure a focus on gender-related and vulnerability aspects, as these are areas of concern that will require greater attention in supported development interventions due to the impacts of the pandemic;

(e) More thorough consultations with and involvement by key national stakeholders should take place at the project design stage, to ensure that incentives and ownership are established from the start. In addition, greater consideration should be given to how learning and experiences can be more effectively transferred across countries at the implementation stage, to enhance possibilities for replication and the uptake of good practices and experiences;

(f) An exit strategy should be developed at the project design stage and include more explicit considerations of the role key partner institutions could play to help sustain project results on the ground.

#### **D. Project: Integrating landlocked commodity-dependent developing countries into regional and global value chains**

18. This project, funded by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Subfund of the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund, was implemented from March 2018 to December 2021, with an approved budget of \$466,000. The project was aimed at strengthening capacity in selected landlocked commodity-dependent developing countries

to foster integration into regional and global value chains; and market linkages at the national, interregional and intercontinental levels. A target commodity and/or sector was selected in each country, as follows: Ethiopia, coffee; Lao Democratic People's Republic, maize; Mongolia, meat; and Uzbekistan, food processing. The project had the following two development objectives: improve statistical and analytical capacity in effective policy formulation in the beneficiary countries to promote value chain integration and enhance development linkages; and improve the capacity of the private sector in the beneficiary countries to assess market prospects, identify market opportunities and overcome market barriers, to better integrate into value chains.

19. The evaluation concluded that the project had established a significant foundation from which to expand the target commodity markets. In particular, the country studies based on surveys and value chain analyses were considered crucial in fostering economic growth and rural poverty reduction; and constituted an analytical basis on which to build new or enhance existing strategies aimed at developing, expanding and/or diversifying regional or interregional trade in the targeted sectors. In addition, the relevance and value of national workshops and training sessions had been commended by participants. Project delivery and budget issues had presented challenges; improved planning might have mitigated such issues. The project had been affected by staff turnover at UNCTAD and by changes among national focal points, leading to delays. Similarly, there had been delays in initiating activities in the beneficiary countries, as not all had received national-level endorsement by the start of the project. At the end of the project period, a balance of around \$77,000 had not yet been spent, due to pandemic-related travel limitations. A revision of the budget should have been undertaken, to redirect funds to other activities that could have complemented the project.

20. In addition, the evaluation noted that there were encouraging signs that project sustainability would be achieved. For example, the Lao Democratic People's Republic aimed to incorporate the UNCTAD findings into a revision of the five-year agricultural plan and, in Mongolia, a road map with regard to red meat products had been endorsed by project stakeholders. However, the achievement of all intended impacts was uncertain without additional resources, such as from the country or through a new follow-up project. The evaluation noted that, given the timespan of the project and the time needed at the national level to prepare and validate action plans, it was difficult for the project to go beyond analytical studies and selected training courses. The pandemic had impacted project delivery; however, the project team had successfully recalibrated planned actions and events. For example, online dialogues with stakeholders and virtual attendance at trade fairs had ensured that the project continued to be implemented.

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

(a) UNCTAD should explore the development of a follow-up project to support countries in the implementation of recommended actions. Alternatively, UNCTAD should ensure that this project is fully completed in each of the beneficiary countries, for example by sharing all project deliverables and encouraging and supporting the countries in planning and organizing follow-up actions;

(b) UNCTAD should foster synergies with related policy and financing efforts, for example by supporting funding mobilization efforts in the beneficiary countries, to seek financial resources through the Belt and Road initiative that would benefit the target sectors;

(c) UNCTAD should, in future, propose to funding partners appropriate project and/or budget revisions, if required, to adapt initial project documents and/or strategies in line with significant changes required at the implementation stage.

**E. Project: African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement support programme to eliminate non-tariff barriers, increase regulatory transparency and promote industrial diversification**

22. This project, funded by the Government of Germany, was implemented from December 2018 to March 2021, with a budget of €1,600,000. In March 2018, 44 member States of the African Union signed the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement, which was anticipated to bring together 1.2 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of over \$2 trillion. The project was aimed at contributing to the key objectives of the Protocol on Trade in Goods under the Agreement through the following two components: support implementation of the annexes on non-tariff barriers, technical barriers to trade and sanitary and phytosanitary measures, by helping to increase the capacity of policymakers in Africa with regard to collaboration, regulatory transparency and the elimination of non-tariff barriers; and support economic diversification, regional value chain integration and industrial capacity upgrading, to help build capacity, for example with regard to intellectual property policies, licencing and technology transfer.

23. The evaluation concluded that the project was aligned with UNCTAD mandates and highly relevant to African Union member States. The African Union had requested technical assistance from UNCTAD to support negotiation and implementation aspects related to the Agreement. UNCTAD support on non-tariff barriers and non-tariff measures had been well regarded by project stakeholders, with 75 per cent positively rating UNCTAD efforts in this area. Overall, the evaluation noted high levels of implementation across the various project activities and strong evidence for the value of engagement by UNCTAD. For example, following UNCTAD support, 44 countries had established national focal points for non-tariff barriers, in contrast with the 24 national focal points for rules of origin aspects.

24. In addition, due to ownership of the Agreement process by member States and the African Union, the evaluation noted that it was highly likely that project results would be sustainable. Similarly, the appointment of national focal points could drive future impacts beyond the timespan of the project. However, there was a concern that financial constraints in some States might hinder ongoing impacts and that only a limited amount of funding had been allocated by the African Union towards maintenance of the UNCTAD-developed online tool for reporting non-tariff barriers. Despite the likelihood that implementation of the Agreement might impact gender and human rights aspects of development, these elements had not been considered under the project. The Agreement recognized the importance of gender equality, but there had been limited mainstreaming of this element in project activities. Entry points for UNCTAD to address gender mainstreaming in future related work could include targeted awareness-raising of national focal points and negotiators, capacity-building of joint border posts, collection of disaggregated data and promotion of the reporting tool among informal women traders.

25. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) The donor is encouraged to continue funding the project due to its high level of relevance and demand-driven nature. Implementation of additional phases could significantly enhance the reach of the project, such as a phase involving awareness-raising and capacity-building with regard to the reporting of non-tariff barriers, using a train-the-trainer approach;

(b) The project team should review experiences with the train-the-trainer approach in Togo and consider the systematic roll-out of such an approach, to significantly enhance the reach of awareness-raising and capacity-building beyond national focal points and national monitoring committees;

(c) The project team should develop an exit strategy jointly with the African Union Commission, to enhance the sustainability of the online tool for reporting non-tariff barriers;



(d) The project team should review the identified entry points for strengthening the mainstreaming of gender and human rights aspects and systematically address the most suitable entry points in the next phase of the project;

(e) The project team should, with regard to capacity-building and awareness-raising events, also target the private sector and civil society organizations, for example through representatives wherever feasible. For example, the evaluation noted that chambers of commerce could assist in disseminating project messages and that civil society organizations could facilitate communications with vulnerable groups.

## **F. Project: Transparency in trade regulation and facilitation in the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus**

26. This project, funded by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand, was implemented from March 2018 to June 2021, with an approved budget of \$A 2,000,000. The Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus is a reciprocal trade agreement signed by Australia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Cook Islands and Niue, which entered into force on 13 December 2020. The project was aimed at providing training and technical assistance in the island economies signatories to the Agreement, with the aim of increasing trade-related regulatory transparency ahead of the entry into force of the Agreement. The main output was the establishment of online trade portals in each beneficiary economy to provide an interface through which information on relevant legislation and procedures could be uploaded and accessed and information to facilitate trade and investment could be accessed. Together with a regional trade facilitation index, the portals formed an online regional trade platform.

27. The evaluation concluded that the project had been fully relevant to the needs of the beneficiary economies, addressed relevant limitations in public administrations and resulted in enhanced capacity that improved the overall business environment and administrative efficiency in the economies. The project had been aligned with UNCTAD mandates and tapped into the comparative advantage of UNCTAD with regard to the use of business and trade facilitation portals. Indications of sustainability varied considerably across the beneficiary economies; and human resources and technical knowledge were the most relevant issues in this regard. UNCTAD staff and national counterparts had noted that further support was necessary to consolidate and sustain the achievements of the project. Sustainability had also been affected by the lack of integration of the trade-related Internet resources of the donors with the regional trade platform.

28. The project had included a gender-related analysis that had uncovered links between gender and trade transparency, but further work was required in order to disseminate this information. In addition, products with which women producers were more involved had been identified, facilitating the prioritization of import and export procedures that might have a greater impact on the livelihoods of women. However, the knowledge generated through the project in this regard had not in all cases permeated to government officials involved in the project in the beneficiary economies and some were unaware of the gender and trade-related materials uploaded onto national trade portals. Closer collaboration with the private sector might have had catalytic effects, as the private sector was the final recipient of project outputs and, therefore, in future similar projects, the involvement of the private sector could be more intensive, through closer consultation during the creation of knowledge products and greater involvement in the dissemination of portal links.

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

(a) Prioritize the establishment of a planned implementation unit at UNCTAD, to ensure that the beneficiary economies are supported in sustaining and expanding the achievements of the project, including the maintenance of national and regional trade portals and regional activities aimed at increasing regulatory transparency in trade and investment issues;

(b) Donors should consider better connecting their trade-related Internet resources with the regional trade platform and the regional trade facilitation index. They

should use UNCTAD trade portals to inform the beneficiary economies of the import and export procedures that are of greatest interest to island economies. In the identification of such procedures, UNCTAD guidelines on products made by women in the relevant economies should be taken into account;<sup>3</sup>

(c) Donors could take into account requests from the beneficiary economies to expand the functionalities of the national trade portals and make them capable of facilitating transactions. This could be done in a coordinated manner with other development cooperation initiatives involving the donors and oriented towards private sector development, business environment improvement or public administration reform;

(d) UNCTAD and beneficiaries should conduct promotional activities on trade portals in order to raise awareness among private companies. Such activities should differentiate between different target groups based on gender and collect comments and suggestions. The activities could be monitored using Internet-based tools to provide feedback on efforts;

(e) UNCTAD should continue to provide advice on reinforcing the business facilitation aspects of the national trade portals and expanding their functionalities through the integration of feedback tools and use of Internet-based tools, which should be designed to allow for disaggregation by gender. UNCTAD should continue its training efforts by adopting a train-the-trainer approach, to reinforce knowledge management capacity in the beneficiary economies.

## **G. Programme: Capacity-building in trade and gender, online training**

30. This programme, consisting of multiple phases funded by various donors, commenced in 2013 and had received, by the time of the evaluation, approximately \$1,600,000 in funding. The evaluation considered activities in the period 2015–2020, during which 13 online training courses on the trade and gender nexus were developed under the programme, covering different aspects of this topic and featuring tailored content for particular regions, with delivery in multiple languages. Funding was provided by the Government of Finland, the Secretariat of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the Enhanced Integrated Framework and Trade Mark East Africa, and the evaluation was conducted at the request of the Government of Finland, the principal donor. The courses, delivered by UNCTAD, were directed at professionals in Government, academia and civil society, with the goal of raising awareness of the different impacts that trade policies can have on men and women and how this can be addressed to enhance gender equality. At the time of the evaluation, the 13 courses had been attended by 1,277 participants (66 per cent of whom were women) from 128 countries.

31. The evaluation concluded that the courses had addressed a knowledge gap with regard to the interlinkages between trade and gender and how trade policies could contribute to reducing gender-related inequalities. Although the issue had received increased attention in recent years and several international actors were now active with regard to the trade and gender nexus, the UNCTAD programme continued to be the main capacity-building provider in this area, and there was demand for further dissemination of the research produced and systematized by UNCTAD. Overall, a high rate of success had been achieved among participants, although the rates varied significantly between courses. Four out of five participants had passed; however, although the numbers of participants had increased, success rates had declined over time. At the same time, the number of courses offered and languages of delivery had expanded. These issues suggested that there might be a need to refocus delivery on the quality of courses rather than the quantity of participants and to ensure clear communications with regard to the expectations of participants.

32. The evaluation identified a positive influence at the organizational level of participants, with four out of five incorporating what they had learned into the work of their organizations and the latter engaging with trade and gender differently as a result of the

<sup>3</sup> See <https://unctad.org/webflyer/international-trade-transparency-and-gender-equality-case-pacific-agreement-closer>.

courses. Over three quarters of participants' organizations were incorporating gender considerations in policy development processes. Catalytic effects had been identified due to the success of the programme and positive results achieved in early activities had led to additional funding from new donors. Cascade effects from the courses were also identified, with participants requesting further training, participating in international projects and holding training sessions at their organizations and with peers.

33. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) The training courses should continue, considering the positive evaluation results and persistent economic inequalities, and new course packages and iterations should build upon the existing model. A new phase of interventions could be planned with a longer-term perspective and a greater emphasis on post-training activities, including catch-up for unsuccessful participants, enrolment in several courses by the same participants, updates and opportunities for the refreshment of knowledge and the use of knowledge at the individual, organizational and national levels;

(b) Further geographically differentiated modules could be produced in partnership with the United Nations regional commissions, which could cooperate in course planning and design, in addition to funding, outreach and recruitment. As part of the geographical adaptation of courses, involving experts from each region in tutoring and lecturing might add value;

(c) The courses could allow for more interaction through synchronous activities, such as webinars or tutoring sessions, given that teleconferencing technologies have spread broadly during the pandemic and based on feedback from some participants. In addition, learning materials could be developed that allow for a greater level of engagement and experience-sharing in order to allow participants to learn from each other;

(d) Different levels of certification should be considered, given the varied success rates across stakeholders and courses and the overall negative trend in this regard, and a catch-up mechanism should be facilitated for those who do not succeed, whereby, if a participant does not obtain a certification, a second opportunity could be offered in a subsequent iteration of the same course.

## H. Programme: E-commerce and digital economy

34. This programme, funded by various donors in the period 2019–2023, consists of a broad package of research and other initiatives addressing topics related to e-commerce and the digital economy. The programme has been supported by the Governments of Estonia, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates, as well as by the European Investment Fund. The evaluation was conducted at the request of the Governments of Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, the principal donors, and covered the first three years, namely, 2019–2021. Key initiatives included the flagship publication *Digital Economy Report*; sessions of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-Commerce and the Digital Economy; eTrade for all initiative; eTrade for women initiative; eTrade readiness assessments; e-commerce and law reform programme; and e-commerce weeks. The overall objective of the programme was to enhance inclusive and sustainable development gains from e-commerce and the digital economy in developing countries, with the work of the programme closely reflecting the three pillars of the work of UNCTAD and synergies between them.

35. The evaluation concluded that the pandemic had served to enhance the relevance of the programme, although further work might be required to ensure national ownership of outcomes. The research conducted through the programme had documented the risk of the widening of the digital divide within and across countries and spurred intergovernmental work in this area. The importance of ensuring ownership and inclusive participation in implementation processes was documented, although it was often difficult for UNCTAD, as a non-resident entity, to conduct follow-up. The evaluation noted that political and bureaucratic challenges in several countries had posed significant obstacles to project delivery. There was a high level of user satisfaction with the research and analysis products

of the programme and UNCTAD was considered an important source of information on e-commerce and the digital economy for development. The *Digital Economy Report* publication was considered highly relevant and broadly recommended to the professional networks of readers of the report.

36. The high level of interest in the programme and its relevance was indicated by the number of member States participating in intergovernmental meetings, which had continued to increase. The intergovernmental work on e-commerce and the digital economy for development was found to be an essential part of the work of UNCTAD and considered relevant by stakeholders. In addition, the technical cooperation activities of the programme had showed promising early results, yet more work might be required to ensure the sustainability and relevance of these activities. For example, a significant number of eTrade readiness assessments had been successfully developed for some countries, but the evaluation noted that their format and production should be further customized to better suit the beneficiaries. Similarly, activities related to eTrade for women were in high demand but further efforts were needed to ensure that catalytic effects, such as participant networking, were strengthened.

37. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following key recommendations:

(a) UNCTAD should consider ways to allocate additional regular budget funding to the programme, to ensure that it is better able to sustainably deliver the results sought by member States, including in the Bridgetown Covenant, in which member States stated that UNCTAD should strengthen the work on assisting developing countries to systematically assess their state-of-play and readiness to engage and integrate into the digital economy, thus contributing to the closing of the digital divide;

(b) Donors could aim to follow the examples of previous donors to the programme by providing increasingly longer term, flexible and non-earmarked funding support, in order to allow for further strengthening of the adaptive programmatic approach fundamental to maintaining the high level of relevance of the programme and facilitating its further development in the rapidly evolving area of e-commerce and the digital economy;

(c) The programme should focus, during the remaining portion of the current period, to end-2023, on consolidating already-initiated activities and should not launch any new major initiatives. This is particularly important if the programme does not attract the level of resources anticipated in its budget, thereby limiting the possibility of expanding the scope of the programme at present.

## II. Lessons learned from evaluations

38. Evaluation plays a crucial role by contributing to the United Nations system's enhancement of the impacts and results of its support to Member States in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group, the UNCTAD secretariat is committed to efforts to enhance the use of evaluation and improve evidence-based decision-making and accountability. Evaluations provide a comprehensive, systematic, transparent and objective approach to assessing the performance of programmes and the work of UNCTAD. The secretariat advocates to all stakeholders the importance of applying such lessons to a broader range of programme management aims at UNCTAD, to feed into UNCTAD programme planning and strategic decision-making.

39. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities, presented in previous reports, remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing projects and programmes.<sup>4</sup> This chapter focuses on lessons learned extrapolated from the eight evaluations completed during the reporting period, under the following two categories: maximizing project sustainability; and innovative subjects and approaches.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, TD/B/WP/298, TD/B/304 and TD/B/WP/310.

## **A. Maximizing project sustainability**

40. Given that the availability of follow-up project funding is not guaranteed, an emphasis on methods to ensure the sustainability of results needs to be carefully considered in project design stages. Crucial elements include what, if any, resources may be available, the capacity of stakeholders to continue pursuing outcomes, the partnerships that can be sought and/or expanded and the tools that could be developed to promote and disseminate outcomes. With regard to the latter, online tools have been shown as particularly effective with regard to the sustainability of results. Such tools include the creation of websites with all developed materials deposited for stakeholder access, the incorporation of indices into UNCTAD statistical databases and the creation of specialized online portals to facilitate trade-related activities. However, given the maintenance costs of such tools, it is important to carefully consider, with project beneficiaries, management arrangements for after the end of a project period.

41. Given the global expansion of teleconferencing capacity and hybrid conferences since the pandemic, it has become easier for project officers to remain connected with stakeholders. There should be less need for staff to travel to continue supporting stakeholders beyond the timespan of a project and, in turn, the provision of assistance through online channels could boost the longer-term sustainability of results.

42. Another important element in this regard is the expected or realized catalytic effects of delivering technical cooperation activities. For example, some of the demonstrated effects observed included national stakeholders disseminating new knowledge within their organizations, stakeholders returning for further training and activities and UNCTAD programmes receiving additional funding. Therefore, in addition to considering sustainability at the design stage, project teams should also anticipate the catalytic effects that may be produced and how targeted actions could help bring about such effects.

## **B. Innovative subjects and approaches**

43. UNCTAD continues to expand and solidify its comparative advantage through the execution of cutting-edge research and technical assistance. Projects in which such innovation was evident were particularly commended by stakeholders. In particular, this was noted with regard to the e-commerce and digital economy programme, which provided innovative content in a burgeoning field, and was upgraded within UNCTAD to the branch level. However, for this sort of high-profile result to be sustained, consideration of UNCTAD regular budget programming may be necessary, to facilitate long-term project stability.

44. The programmatic approach, whereby donors fund a variety of initiatives instead of individual projects, gives teams greater flexibility to deliver broad outcomes. Fewer constraints with regard to contents and time frames allow for a more holistic approach to addressing trade and development issues, such as the trade and gender nexus, and can also help to ensure that technical cooperation has the appropriate level of resources, to positively impact the sustainability of results. Where feasible, this approach should be considered by teams in approaching potential donors.

45. Given the proven ability to complete projects remotely during the pandemic, programme officers should consider this approach in future proposals. Donors, including the United Nations Development Account, often cap budget availability per project. Under certain projects, rather than a portion being spent on travel, more resources could instead be dedicated to developing a broader topical scope or facilitating higher levels of participation in online training and events.

## **III. Evaluations at UNCTAD**

46. The mandate for conducting, coordinating and overseeing evaluations at UNCTAD is vested in the Independent Evaluation Unit. This mandate covers all projects and programmes under the regular budget and projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that

are implemented by UNCTAD. The Independent Evaluation 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 the period 2022–2023.

### **A. Performance of the Independent Evaluation Unit and evaluation quality**

47. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, the internal oversight body of the United Nations, conducts a systematic overview of the state of evaluations in Secretariat entities every two years and aims to provide an assessment of evaluation at each entity and of challenges in strengthening evaluation. In the 2018–2019 assessment, the Office noted that UNCTAD had a robust evaluation system, with a strong evaluation policy, procedures and planning in place. The estimated expenditure of UNCTAD on evaluation was 0.23 per cent of the programme budget and remained below the minimum threshold of 0.5 per cent of resources for evaluation. With regard to report quality, 80 per cent of sampled reports (four out of five) were rated as good or very good with regard to overall quality.

48. The results of the assessment of evaluations at UNCTAD covering the period 2020–2021 are expected to be available in mid-2023.

### **B. Thematic evaluation of contributions by Secretariat entities to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**

49. In December 2021, the Office of Internal Oversight Services launched a Secretariat-wide evaluation to assess, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of Secretariat contributions to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The evaluation will cover the period 2019–2021 and will consider matters such as the extent to which the Secretariat has mainstreamed the Goals into programming and how the Secretariat is supporting Member States in achieving the Goals.

50. UNCTAD will participate in this evaluation by providing relevant data and case studies that illustrate contributions towards the achievement of the Goals. Data collection will commence in June 2022 and the final report is expected in December 2022.

### **C. Evaluation plan for the period 2022–2023**

51. The Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance requested the secretariat to continue a new evaluation cycle of the five subprogrammes after the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.<sup>5</sup> The secretariat launched a new evaluation cycle in October 2021, starting with the evaluation of subprogramme 1 on globalization, interdependence and development strategies.<sup>6</sup> The UNCTAD evaluation plan for the period 2022–2023 will also include a number of external evaluations, to be completed by March 2023, of projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are set to conclude during this period, including three joint projects, funded by the United Nations Development Account, aimed at supporting Governments in responding to the socioeconomic challenges of the pandemic. The evaluations currently planned to be completed in this period are listed in the table.

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

<sup>6</sup> See TD/B/WP/312 and TD/B/WP/318.

**Evaluation plan, 2022–2023**

<i>Programme or project</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Period of evaluation</i>
Leapfrogging skills development in e-commerce in South-East Asia in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	Development Account	Q1– Q3 2022
Evidence-based and policy-coherent oceans economy and trade strategies	Development Account	Q2–Q4 2022
Enabling policy frameworks for enterprise sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals reporting in Africa and Latin America	Development Account	Q2–Q4 2022
Strengthening capacities of African countries to compile and disseminate statistics on illicit financial flows	Development Account	Q2–Q4 2022
South–South integration and the Sustainable Development Goals: Enhancing structural transformation in key partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Subfund	Q2–Q4 2022
Seizing the trade and business potential of blue biotrade products for promoting sustainable livelihoods and conservation of marine biodiversity in selected Organization of Eastern Caribbean States countries	European Union, through Commission of Organization of Eastern Caribbean States	Q2–Q4 2022
Joint COVID-19 project: Global initiative towards post-pandemic resurgence of the microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises sector	Development Account	Q2 2022–Q1 2023
Joint COVID-19 project: Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19	Development Account	Q2 2022–Q1 2023
Joint COVID-19 project: Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics	Development Account	Q2 2022–Q1 2023
External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 2 on investment and enterprise	Regular budget and/or extrabudgetary	Q3 2022–Q3 2023
UNCTAD and Netherlands strategic partnership	Government of the Netherlands	Q4 2022–Q3 2023

*Abbreviations:* COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019; Q, quarter.

*Source:* UNCTAD.