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ISSUES *IN BRIEF*

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Building skills online

Expertise can make the difference between success and failure. This is true not only for individuals but for most countries as well: without expertise and skills, economic development can be at best slow, at times non-existent.

Developing countries are well aware of this truism, and increasing access to knowledge and training skilled workers are now two of their major concerns. In many countries where poor education records and low literacy rates go hand in hand with a chronic shortage of skilled and experienced trainers, inadequate infrastructure and acute budget constraints, distance learning would appear an ideal solution.

For people who work and cannot attend formal education or vocational training institutions, distance learning is an attractive alternative. Trainees can be educated at home or in their workplace. They can choose their schedule, study at their own pace, and exchange information and ideas with other trainees, regardless of location.

However, even though many countries are taking advantage of developments in information and communication technology to increase the number of distance learning and e-learning courses, setting up this kind of training presents several challenges. Courses are generally expensive to develop (although subsequent costs are low). They require a dependable communications infrastructure to ensure that teaching materials reach the trainee. Consequently, in countries where electricity supplies are erratic, telecommunications inadequate or Internet access limited, online distance learning poses many problems. Besides, in the absence of face-to-face support and human interaction, trainees often feel isolated, and the dropout rate is high.

These challenges should be properly addressed if developing countries, especially the most deprived, are to benefit from the opportunities offered by distance learning. With many years of experience in the field, UNCTAD's training experts are well aware of the difficulties and have developed a programme specifically designed to cater to the problems of these countries.

UNCTAD

Issues in Brief are circulated periodically by UNCTAD and cover topical issues pertinent to UNCTAD's work programme

UNCTAD's TRAINFORTRADE Programme

Since 1988, UNCTAD's TRAINFORTRADE programme has trained and built up human resources in developing countries in various fields of international trade and investment. Although it targets all developing countries, it focuses particularly on the [least developed countries](#) (LDCs), a grouping officially recognized by the United Nations in 1971.

How it works

At the request of a government or a regional organization, the TRAINFORTRADE team carries out a preliminary analysis of training needs. It identifies the technical capacities and networks in place that could be used for delivering distance-learning courses. It also reviews the local distance-learning training activities carried out by other organizations to avoid overlapping and creates partnerships with local operators. Based on these findings, the team decides on the training methods and techniques to apply.

Experts in specific fields are identified and trained to deliver the courses. The pedagogical material developed with UNCTAD experts is based on a hybrid approach that combines face-to-face training with distance learning. It is adapted to local or regional needs. National and regional pedagogical committees monitor the activities and promote wider distribution.

Local networks and trainers provide ongoing support. A distance-learning platform, available via any Internet browser, has been developed for countries participating in the programme. It includes a chat room and a forum for registered participants to communicate with experts according to a predefined time schedule. Web versions of the courses and other training material can be downloaded from the platform.

Another advantage of the UNCTAD methodology is the training of local trainers, which has an undeniable multiplier effect: you train 10 people who in turn coach 10 each, and so on, and within a limited period several hundred people have been educated.

Distance learning for the least developed countries

The effectiveness of the TRAINFORTRADE approach in strengthening LDC trade institutions was highlighted by an independent evaluation conducted in January 2003.

From 2001 to 2003, the UNCTAD/TRAINFORTRADE project tutored 300 trainees and 28 high-level trainers from Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali, all three LDCs, in the areas of trade and environment, competition law and trade and logistics. In 2003–2004, a further 70 countries, including 24 LDCs, benefited from TRAINFORTRADE activities.

A four-year TRAINFORTRADE project started in Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2003. It focuses on international trade, investment and port management and is intended for government officials and policy makers, as well as trade and investment operators. This 1.9 million euro project is being funded by the Government of France.