



United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
29 June 2009

Original: English

Trade and Development Board

Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget

Fifty-third session

Geneva, 7–9 September 2009

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: an in-depth external
evaluation of UNCTAD's commodities programme

In-depth external evaluation of UNCTAD's commodities programme*

Executive summary

The work of UNCTAD on commodities has passed through a difficult phase, resulting cumulatively from a declining interest in and support for commodities in the face of past failures of UNCTAD-coined paradigms; a gradual atrophying of commodities expertise in UNCTAD; a new complacency generated by recent commodity booms; and the eventual crash in global markets. Internal organizational challenges of the Commodities Branch further impaired its ability to adequately respond to these developments.

As a result, the Commodities Branch's performance did not live up to the high expectations raised by the São Paulo Consensus, despite genuine efforts and a number of activities. Yet, the Commodities Branch was able to deliver reasonable results in some areas: price risk management, analytical and market information products and capacity development courses.

To deliver on its new mandate, the Commodities Branch needs to adopt a more upstream orientation in research, redefine its technical assistance thrust, intensify partnerships with domain leaders and restructure and remotivate its human resources.

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Supporting materials on the evaluation can be found in document TD/B/WP/214.

I Introduction

A. Background

1. This evaluation addresses the mandate from the forty-ninth session of the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and Programme Budget for an in-depth evaluation of the UNCTAD commodities programme, with findings and recommendations of the evaluation to be presented at the fifty-third session in 2009.
2. Assessments have focused primarily on activities initiated or under implementation since 2004 (based on the mandates from UNCTAD XI in São Paulo), but have also considered major changes in approach, activity content and delivery post-2007, in view of their significance to the evaluation.

B. Methodology

3. The information that forms the basis of assessments were collected through the following :
 - (a) Desk reviews;
 - (b) Interviews;
 - (c) Multi-year expert meetings and the UNCTAD Secretary-General's Multi-stakeholder Consultations on Coffee in Geneva, April 2009;
 - (d) An e-mail survey of donors and beneficiaries;
 - (e) Field missions to selected countries (Benin, Ghana, India and the United Republic of Tanzania) to assess the results/impacts from a number of representative projects covering all commodity groups and thematic areas.
4. A detailed note on the methodology, criteria for country selection and the guidance questions for interviews are contained in section VI of document TD/B/WP/214.

II. Overview of activities

A. Profile of commodities work at UNCTAD

5. Global developments in commodities in the past few years have brought to the forefront the realization that challenges in commodities remain as daunting as ever, even as both donors and development institutions, including UNCTAD, have seen a dilution of their focus on commodities since the 1990s. Within UNCTAD, commodities work has lost its former importance slowly but steadily in all aspects: staff strength; stature (from a division to a branch); and budgets and donor support. Meanwhile, other global themes, particularly World Trade Organization (WTO) accession and trade negotiations, have grown and have occupied the centre stage in UNCTAD policy work, and new issues such as environment have become more trendy than commodities.
6. Commodities work falls under three pillars: research and analysis; intergovernmental consensus process; technical assistance. Of these, the first two are substantially funded by regular budget resources. In technical cooperation, commodities was among the smallest areas, accounting for less than 2 per cent of UNCTAD total

technical assistance, and between 5 and 10 per cent of assistance delivered by the Division of International Trade in Goods, Services and Commodities. Africa is the main beneficiary region of technical assistance in commodities.

Table 1.

Technical cooperation delivery by DITC and its branches, in thousands of \$

Branch	2004	2005	2006	2007	Posts
DITC	6,399	8,880	9,664	6,163	
Trade Analysis	507	414	649	544	18
Trade Negotiations and Comm. Diplomacy	2,525	4,115	4,916	3,118	18
Trade Information	38	124	4	(7)	-
Commodities	349	495	697	558	18^a
Trade, Environment and Development	2,230	3,233	2,268	1,367	10
Competition Law, Policy and Consumer Prot.	750	499	1,131	582	10

Source: TD/B/WP/181/Add. 1; TD/B/WP/188/Add. 2; TD/B/WP/195/Add. 1; TD/B/WP/202/Add. 2.

^a One post has been loaned to the Office of the Secretary-General.

Table 2.

Commodities technical cooperation delivery by region, in thousands of \$

Region	2004	2005	2006	2007
Africa	116	53	27	114
Interregional (also includes Africa)	233	442	670	444
Total	349	495	697	558

Source: *ibid.*

B. Activities under the Three Pillars¹**1. Research and analysis**

7. Commodities research and analysis outputs are in the form of publications, technical materials and analytical papers covering a number of themes and product groups. The branch was highly prolific during 2004–2007, with 111 information outputs, significantly higher than the previous two biennia as well as the current biennium.

¹ Section III of document TD/B/WP/214 provides a listing of the outputs delivered by the Commodities Branch for the review period.

Table 3.
Detailed output

Output type	2000–2001	2002–2003	2004–2005	2006–2007	2008–2009
Recurrent publications	11	14	21	13	8
Non-recurrent publications	0	4	7	12	1
Booklets, fact sheets, wall charts, information kits	0	0	4	6	0
Technical material	5	3	2	13	4
Other research and analytical papers	n/a	n/a	7	26	-
Total	16	21	41	70	13

Source: compiled from detailed output schedules.

8. A large number of reports have multi-sectoral content or apply to multiple sectors, due to their thematic focus. However, coverage has not been uniform across the six product groups: agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining, metals and energy. There have been almost no activities in fisheries and only one in forestry (support to the Tropical Timber Agreement).

Table 4.
Detailed outputs, by theme

By theme	2000–2001	2002–2003	2004–2005	2006–2007	2008–2009
Risk management and finance	4	8	10	19	2
Market information and transparency	8	11	22	36	9
Diversification and resource management	4	2	9	15	2
Total	16	21	41	70	13

Source: compiled from detailed output schedules.

9. Commodity information and statistics: the Commodities Branch developed a number of information and statistics products such as The Commodity Yearbook, The Handbook of World Mineral Trade Statistics, The Commodity Atlas and The Handbook of Statistics, besides several other materials including training and portal contents. However, many of these have been discontinued, partly due to the coverage of commodities in annual publications of the Statistics Unit, and partly due to the emergence of other commodities-specific publications from other international organizations (e.g. FAO and RMG²), some being original data sources. Presently, Annual Iron Ore Statistics is the only statistical publication by the Commodities Branch. The evaluation found these information products to be of good quality and of practical usefulness.

10. UNCTAD has a centralized distribution list covering all member countries, which receive all official publications and reports. In some countries, UNDP also circulates short summaries (done by UNDP staff) of UNCTAD publications to key stakeholders, which presents an additional dissemination channel for UNCTAD. The Commodities Branch portal has not been updated regularly and it is not possible to find many important documents (the evaluation's own experience). A new portal was introduced in April 2009 and information has been updated substantially. However, the overall reach and awareness of these publications and research outputs remains rather limited in member countries.

² Section I of document TD/B/WP/214 fully lists the abbreviations used in this report.

2. Intergovernmental consensus building

11. The Commodities Branch organizes, participates in or provides support to a number of events, consisting of expert meetings, multi-stakeholder meetings, intergovernmental conferences, panels and workshops.

12. Commodity bodies: International Commodity Bodies (ICBs) now serve mainly as forums for consultations and exchange of statistics and undertake development projects. UNCTAD convenes and services meetings related to negotiation, renegotiations and the functioning of these bodies based on its long expertise in coordinating commodity agreements. In return, UNCTAD benefits from the bodies' special expertise on individual commodities. During 2004–2007, the Commodities Branch facilitated in the successful renegotiations of the International Tropical Timber Agreement and the Olive Oil and Table Olives Agreement. Concerns have emerged on the quality of the branch's contributions in recent meetings (post-2007), for which staff not having appropriate background or experience with the process were deputed.

13. Expert meetings: expert meetings have been the traditional content forums at UNCTAD for decisions and deliberations at higher levels. After Accra, multi-year expert group meetings have been provided exclusively for commodities. Similarly, multi-stakeholder consultative groups have been constituted for ten commodities and meetings have already been held on cotton and coffee.

14. Conferences: the branch has facilitated a number of conference events as the secretariat, many dealing with finance and risk management. Some of them have become flagship events in their domains: the Bürgenstock Conferences, the Africa Oil and Gas Annual Conferences, the Global Network of Export-Import Banks and Development Finance Institutions (G-NEXID) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development.

3. Technical cooperation

15. Technical cooperation activities consist of training and capacity-building activities and donor-funded projects implemented by the Commodities Branch.

16. Training and capacity-building: the Commodities Branch supported the UNCTAD Virtual Institute to develop and deliver a training course on the economics of commodities production and trade, for training university researchers and lecturers. In Africa, the Universities of Dakar and Dar-es-Salaam have introduced a special module on commodities in their Masters programme in international trade, based on the training package.

17. Donor-funded projects: during 2004–2007, the branch was involved in 14 donor-funded projects (mostly regional and interregional), covering four major themes:

- (a) Commodity market information and transparency;
- (b) Compliance with international trade standards and certification;
- (c) Sustainable development issues in extractive industries;
- (d) Marketing systems and commodity risk management.

Some projects were initiated before 2004 but were completed during the review period. Section II of document TD/B/WP/214 presents the full listing of these projects, including information on donors, their contributions and the countries that have benefited from each project.

C. Human resources

18. Specialist human resources in commodities: with a staff count of 23, of which 17 are permanent, head count is on par with the other branches of the division (18 permanent staff each in Trade Analysis and Trade Negotiations, and 10 each in Environment and Competition). The following problems/shortcomings were observed:

(a) Skill mix: over the years, the staff resource has reduced considerably, from over 50 persons in the 1970s and 35 in the mid-1990s. The current skill profiles of the branch indicate a shift from commodities/development economics research specializations, to financial and management specializations. Several staff do not consider themselves specialists in their fields. The branch presently has no one with a background in three of its six product groups: fisheries, forestry and mining/metals (since 2007), which limits its domain expertise in the aggregate. Yet, in 2008, it was reorganized under product groups;

(b) Staff shortages: the branch did not have its full strength in place in recent years and suffered the loss of three persons. Leadership has lacked continuity, with three persons having headed it during the period under review;

(c) Staff morale has been rather low. Stagnation has set in the careers of many senior staff members, with few mobility options within the branch, and for most, an absence of fit into other parts of the system. Under the recent leadership, the quality of interpersonal relations was at its nadir and there have been complaints of harassment and unfair, non-transparent performance assessments and recruitments.

D. Cooperation with external stakeholders and partners

19. Beneficiaries: the engagement of UNCTAD with countries is mainly limited to interactions in Geneva. Work at the country level is purely demand-driven, with specific requests from countries translating into technical cooperation proposals. UNCTAD does not have any focal points at the country level except under instruments like the Integrated Framework and Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme (JITAP). Engagement has also been negligible with the United Nations Resident Coordinators and focal points on development, trade and poverty-related issues in United Nations country offices.

20. Other agencies: a sizeable number of projects and activities have been pursued in partnership with other institutions, such as the Common Fund for Commodities (CFC), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the International Trade Centre (ITC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This approach has been pursued to leverage the collective strengths of partners: domain expertise; convening power; outreach; policy dialogue and advocacy; and access to funding. The handling of relationships with partner agencies has been a mixed lot. Relationships with several external partners have been under strain in the past two years, substantially traced to personality issues and management styles in the branch. This has led to abrupt termination of some high-profile initiatives, particularly the Global Initiative on Commodities and the Sustainable Commodities Initiative.

21. Donors: in commodities, there have been rather few project-specific donors and these include Canada, the European Commission, Finland, France, Japan, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. There has been a declining interest in funding commodities-related work, partly due to past failures and embarrassments related to commodities and partly due to branch-level issues: the absence of leadership toward a coordinated donor engagement strategy, resulting in the pursuit of projects based on individual influence, and a lack of new

ideas generating sufficient donor interest. As a result, the branch focused on very small interventions requiring little funding.

III. Relevance

22. Despite remarkable economic progress in a number of developing countries in the last two decades, commodities-dependent developing and least developed countries continue to face several complex challenges even as they integrate into the global trading system. The failure of state intervention models in the 1980s, the shift to market-based interventions and the rapid swings of fortune in recent boom/bust cycles, have only exacerbated conditions for commodity-dependent countries and exposed their vulnerability in open market conditions.

23. The lessons of recent years reiterate the continued enormous significance of commodities in developing countries, particularly in economies highly dependent on commodities. Therefore, the relevance of UNCTAD work in this area is beyond any doubt. Even despite its internal challenges, it must be stated that UNCTAD made a sincere attempt to analyse commodities from a development perspective and propose market-based mechanisms to deal with their challenges. This is reflected in the subjects dealt with in research and analysis, intergovernmental consensus-building and also in technical assistance.

24. Despite resource constraints, UNCTAD has made a significant contribution in enabling countries to understand the implications of various developments in commodity sectors. Research and other knowledge content have been designed to be useful and relevant across countries and commodities. The voluminous compilation of information and research materials is more than adequate to provide a sufficiently useful background for analysts, policymakers and other stakeholders to interpret their own settings and consider due responses.

25. However, there is some criticism (within UNCTAD as well as externally) that research and analytical work does not have a prognostic orientation/focus and lacks innovative thinking in terms of solving commodity challenges, which is the popular expectation of UNCTAD work. At the same time, the political sensitivities involved may have also restrained the branch from venturing avant-garde ideas and postures, as seen in some instances.

26. Intergovernmental consensus processes have been redesigned from their former role as negotiation forums, to awareness, experience sharing and advocacy settings. UNCTAD continues to service a number of international commodity bodies' study groups and plays a meaningful role as a neutral guide in policy dialogue, given its mandate and conversancy with the key issues that dominate the universe of commodities. As the only United Nations agency working on minerals and metals, the mere involvement of UNCTAD in study groups and forums is seen as a major contribution, given the low capacities of member states to understand technical issues. However, the ceremonial role has to be supported by domain expertise, which calls for a restructuring of skill profiles.

27. Technical cooperation: there has been a rising trend of externally assisted technical cooperation activities in commodities. Given its limited resource strength, the branch has followed an approach of identifying systemic issues that are common to a large number of commodities and focusing on multi-country or interregional projects rather than on single country projects. However, the branch appears to have entered areas (e.g. sanitary and phyto-sanitary – SPS) having many established players, such as GTZ, ITC, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with greater field presence and experience with

implementation. Most projects are also rather light on activities, and in some, the UNCTAD role is more that of a coordinator than a technical expertise provider.

28. Sector coverage: there is an imbalance of activities across product groups: agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining, metals and energy. There have been practically no activities in fisheries and forestry (other than support to the renegotiation of the Tropical Timber Agreement). Substantive work in minerals and metals sectors has been on the decline, with practically no projects since 2007. There also has been inadequate attention to the highly sensitive issue of cotton, an item emphasized with great priority in the São Paulo mandate. However, post-Accra, cotton is one of the ten commodities for which multi-year expert meetings have been provisioned.

29. Meanwhile, according to several stakeholders, a host of new themes needs to be further integrated into the work on commodities: technology/productivity; regional integration and strategic positioning of countries in value chains; food security and energy; foreign investment and the business climate; environmental sustainability and climate change.

IV. Impact

30. Despite very prolific outputs in terms of research publications and intergovernmental meetings, it would be incorrect to assume that the mere presence of such outputs leads to impacts, particularly given the inadequate reach and dissemination of these outputs, the limited exposure and access of beneficiaries to UNCTAD events and print publications and a rather inadequately updated web portal. This is not to say that there are no impacts from research outputs. Indeed, UNCTAD work acts as a seed for further initiatives whether or not implemented by UNCTAD itself. The evaluation came across at least two examples (Commodities Exchanges, Ghana, and Oil and Gas, Guinea), where beneficiaries were significantly influenced by a single document or a network event and were able to build up major initiatives based on this initial exposure.

31. The ultimate impact of UNCTAD work on commodities needs to be found in its contribution to developing countries' formulation of policies and strategies to respond to the opportunities and challenges of commodity markets and in the building and strengthening of institutions related to commodity trade. Evidence must manifest in the resilience of countries to the cyclical and market-imposed fluctuations in commodities, through integration across the value chain; diversification of products and markets; stronger or new institutions related to commodity trade; or through effective state intervention, safety nets and cross-subsidization to protect the more vulnerable stakeholders.

32. Achieving such resilience requires clear, well-articulated development strategies for commodity sectors, supported by action plans; institutions; budgetary support for sector development as well as for mitigating support instruments; and external/donor support. Most of these areas are beyond the direct control of UNCTAD. Also, the lack of field presence limits the country level engagement of UNCTAD to support the development of commodity sectors.

33. Meanwhile, UNCTAD has chosen an approach of self-abnegation with respect to impact. As a policy, UNCTAD (like other United Nations organizations) does not lend itself to outcome indicators, and uses very light, dermal indicators, such as the number of countries (15–20 as claimed) that received support from UNCTAD or have reported substantive progress in the contribution of commodities sectors to development.

34. Overall, there have been useful contributions to assist countries in solving their commodity-related challenges, through:

- (a) Integration of commodity strategies into national development strategies;
- (b) Creation of appropriate markets and structures;
- (c) Market access and compliance for exports.

Some countries have implemented export-compliant SPS and quality control systems to meet the demands of major markets, while others have set up market-based structures and institutions for domestic trade in commodities, entirely or partially through UNCTAD support. On the other hand, there has been only one such (unfruitful) engagement under JITAP toward the mainstreaming of commodities in development strategies. In all, these would be fewer than the 15–20 countries claimed.

35. The most tangible impacts of UNCTAD work are to be found in the performance of commodity exchanges set up in India and the multiple spin-offs from the Oil and Gas Conferences in Africa. The Multi-Commodity Exchange (MCX) of India has risen to become among the world's largest commodities exchanges, and several countries have implemented production partnerships following opportunities identified/initiated at the Oil and Gas events. Even in such cases, their impact depended to a much larger extent on external factors. The immensely successful example of India could not be replicated in other countries due to domestic bottlenecks: unviable market size; lack of specialist skills in derivatives trade; financial assistance; and regulatory constraints.

36. Scale plays a significant role in producing impact. Most of the branch's projects had very small budgets, ranging from \$40,000–\$175,000; as a result, they focused on the lighter side of assistance (awareness, studies, etc.) and not on sustained technical expertise delivery to solve specific problems in specific settings. Their influence on policymakers, the main constituency of UNCTAD, has also been limited in the absence of adequate engagement at the country level.

V. Sustainability

37. Much of UNCTAD work potentially results in consideration of policy alternatives, common approaches based on consensus and policy/investment decisions regarding commodities development, and can engender long-term benefits if implemented in the form of commodity sector development policies and strategies. However, this requires absorption and retention of the knowledge transferred, continuation of activities and interventions initiated by/with UNCTAD and local ownership and leadership to influence development policies and strategies using the knowledge and expertise provided by UNCTAD.

38. Local ownership of initiatives: contributions of the Commodities Branch have limited usefulness unless there is local ownership of the initiatives. The evaluators found low recall and awareness of UNCTAD projects among several officials met during field missions, and, in several cases, the activities seldom involved government officials. In some cases, the heads of apex organizations dealing with projects on key issues like SPS were not even aware of the Commodities Branch's projects in their countries, which highlights engagement and dissemination challenges.

39. Institutional capacities in commodity sector institutions: UNCTAD has provided useful support for the development of institutional capacities through its research, intergovernmental consensus activities, and more particularly, the training content developed by the Virtual Institute. The postgraduate-level training courses being conducted in Dar-es-Salaam and Dakar are seen as potentially the most durable results of UNCTAD work, as they irreversibly expand beneficiaries' knowledge horizons. However, their current reach remains limited due to financial and human resource constraints (both at

UNCTAD and partner universities) to develop additional content and expand coverage of training programmes both in Geneva and nationally.

40. Policy support measures and resource commitments to strengthen commodities sectors: in successful projects, such as commodity exchanges in India, UNCTAD activities were matched by substantial financial and regulatory support from the appropriate level of government. However, not all activities/projects have built on the initial support provided by UNCTAD through appropriate policies and resource commitments to activities.

41. Follow-up/continuation of UNCTAD-initiated activities: the biggest impediment to sustainable impacts is the inability of UNCTAD to engage continually with a large number of member states at the country level, to follow up on the analytical inputs, expert events and even after the implementation of technical assistance activities, which is substantially due to location, budgetary and human resource constraints.

VI. Effectiveness

42. As essentially a knowledge institution, the effectiveness of UNCTAD needs to be judged in terms of effectiveness in creating and diffusing knowledge and capacities, traced in:

- (a) Convening power to attract knowledge networks for analytical work;
- (b) Ready usability of analytical work developed by UNCTAD and its knowledge networks;
- (c) Results orientation of its expert meetings and member states deliberations: takeaways for policy actions, further analysis and technical assistance;
- (d) Effective dissemination of outputs and knowledge repositories;
- (e) Capacity development for formulation of policies and strategies.

43. Research and analysis: there has been some criticism (both internal and external) that the quality of research and analytical publications lacked the rigour and originality of yesteryears, partly due to the lack of requisite domain expertise in these sectors. Collaborative attempts with other institutions having specific domain expertise have been lacking, particularly the ICBs and study groups. The evaluation perused a selection of reports and found many to be very informative and interesting from a layman's perspective. However, their ready translation into action agendas is debatable.

44. Expert groups and multi-stakeholder groups: expert group meetings and multi-stakeholder consultations are extremely useful forums, but have tended to be one-off events. In the absence of a comprehensive strategy toward the solution of identified problems or issues, they have lacked continued progress in the build-up of results from successive meetings.

45. Technical assistance projects: the effectiveness of technical assistance has been a mixed bag. Firstly, the nomenclature is misleading: studies, information products and network events have been shown as technical assistance projects, simply because they have been funded externally. The results of completed projects are a mix. The evaluation's first-hand observations based on field missions and/or telephonic interviews with stakeholders for some projects are summarized below.

Table 5.
Evaluation observations on specific projects

Project	Activities	Observations
Mining and minerals		
Community-based arrangements for sustainable commodity production in areas affected by mine closures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic model for Espinar Province, using UNCTAD software tools 2. Training support to redundant mine workers for alternate economically viable activities (tannery) 	The project achieved most of its target results, and was well received by the local community and the government in power at the time. But the new government has not taken the initiative forward, and this remained a one-off intervention.
Partnership on Sustainable Economic Development and Mining	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Annual meeting in each region (Africa, Latin America) 2. Website of regional networks launched in Latin America 	The project was a non-starter in Africa. According to the local partner SEAMIC, the African Mining Network could not take off due to strong overlaps with the Ministry-supported African Mining Partnership under the NEPAD initiative. Also, SADC, having its own mining network, was not keen to promote a network spanning other African regions. The UNCTAD role in this project appears to have been mostly ceremonial, bringing in the credibility and convening power as a United Nations organization.
Development Account project; resource wealth management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Publication: <i>Challenges of Mineral Wealth and Resource Endowment Toolkit</i> 2. Publication: <i>Socio-economic Impact of Mining: Synthesis of Four Case Studies</i> 	<p>The case studies have been completed in four countries – Chile, Ghana, Peru and the United Republic of Tanzania. The partner ICMM is very positive about the results and plans a number of pilot projects building on the lessons from these studies. However, some case studies have not yet been published due to delays in UNCTAD.</p> <p>The technical expertise contribution of UNCTAD to developing the content is not clear (except in the Chile study). Nonetheless, ICMM stresses the importance of UNCTAD involvement as a United Nations agency. The future plans of UNCTAD in this sector are unclear, with no staff having authoritative expertise/conversancy in minerals and mining.</p>
Agriculture commodities		
Improvement of sustainability of cotton production in West Africa	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Study and regional workshop on the cotton sector in eight countries 2. Action plan for the development of the sector at a regional level 	There have been several studies on the cotton issue and the problems are different in each of the eight countries. Major issues like the influence of industry structure, experiences with privatization, price transmission, regional competitiveness, investment facilitation and injury from used clothing imports should have received focus. Also, there has been no link between the study and further actions, such as the financing workshop or the multi-stakeholder groups meetings, nor development of follow-on projects.

Project	Activities	Observations
Partnerships for enhancing the capacity of developing country farmers to supply international markets through linkages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training of producer groups to meet official and commercial standards in export markets, for selected products (e.g. mangos in Ghana) 2. Training on safety and quality issues such as GAP and GMP 	According to UNCTAD documents, the project was remarkably successful in helping the farmers' association PAMPEAG in an export shipment to Migros and association members reaped enormous financial gains (three times), which is allowing them to pay school expenses and other basic necessities. However, beneficiaries in Ghana met by the evaluation contradicted UNCTAD claims on the huge success of the project. Beneficiaries mentioned that there was absolutely no contribution from UNCTAD, although the Swiss Import Promotion Programme (SIPPO) was more involved. All costs of the project were borne by beneficiaries, including the visit to Switzerland to check out trial shipments to Migros. Migros dropped the project (change of management at Zurich) and neither UNCTAD nor SIPPO followed the project.
Support to the Mozambique horticulture sector to improve the ability to understand and comply with commercial supermarket standards		The project is still under implementation. However, delays have been reported and host country arrangements were reported to be unsatisfactory. Overall, there are complaints and disagreements over the way the project was being implemented. The beneficiary mentioned UNCTAD support to be unsatisfactory and that other ongoing donor-funded SPS projects are progressing better.
SPS compliance and agrifood safety standards in the Pacific region	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Subregional workshops and study of "SPS compliance and costs of agrifood safety and quality standards in selected LDCs in the Pacific: Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu" 2. Advisory mission on cost of compliance and capacity-building workshops for Vanuatu 	This project is the first of UNCTAD in small landlocked and island states, which had remained off the radar in the past. The project was able to highlight the challenges of small island states in accessing international markets and sensitize national as well as external stakeholders toward a comprehensive approach to strengthen export-compliant systems. Based on the results, Vanuatu and other Pacific island states are beneficiaries of the EU/ACP programme on commodities.
Cross-cutting themes		
Support to the development of commodities exchanges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Multi-commodities Exchange was successfully set up in India, and more exchanges followed on same lines. The government has enacted regulatory provisions based on research materials and best practices shared by UNCTAD, and an independent regulator is about to be appointed for forward markets. 2. Similar interventions have resulted in the development of exchanges and/or policy frameworks in Kazakhstan and Africa. 	The commodity exchanges in India have had spectacular financial results and UNCTAD receives a lot of credit even long after the intervention. However, there has been a gap in engagement since the project, while second generation challenges have emerged. For instance, issues of convergence of financial markets and commodities spot markets, overlap of regulatory powers of finance and agriculture agencies, and the fundamental differences between commodities and financial products as an asset class, all call

Project	Activities	Observations
		for second generation research as well as policy actions, to attain balance between the financial gains of market indices and market prices of underlying commodities. UNCTAD needs to address these new emergent issues.
Oil and Gas Trade and Finance in Africa	1. Organization of three-day international event (with more than 200 participants) in volunteering African countries	The event, held for 12 consecutive years, is Africa's highest-profile event in the sector. This is one of the most popular and sustained initiatives of UNCTAD, fully funded by private sector and host governments. However, it substantially draws upon the resources of three staff members and could be more cost-effective.
Selected commodities issues in the context of trade and development	1. Study of agrifood safety and SPS compliance costs in three African LDCs: Guinea, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania 2. Studies on softening the negative effects of commodity price volatility and supply management	SPS compliance cost studies were carried out in three countries and results were disseminated at national workshops. Using the findings, the WTO Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) agreed to assist follow-on projects for Guinea and Mozambique. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) and ComMark Trust joined in the funding for Mozambique. However, in field missions to the United Republic of Tanzania, the evaluators could not get any feedback on the project in there and neither the Trade Ministry officials nor the head of the SPS agency were aware of a study done by UNCTAD on SPS compliance costs. The study on commodity issues was conducted by a French university and was completed in 2007. However, lack of donor support to financial intermediation in commodity markets, as well as lack of interest by the branch's leadership to continue the initiative, caused the study to remain academic.
Sustainable Commodities Initiative	1. The project was discontinued midway by the branch.	There have been disagreements between the implementation partners on the content and implementation of the project, and eventually, the project was transferred to the Trade and Environment Branch at the partners' request. Meanwhile, the work done by the Commodities Branch on the claims portal has become a part of the EU/ACP All Commodities Programme.

Source: evaluation assessments based on documents, field missions, meetings and teleconferences.

46. To be fair to UNCTAD, national ownership and political will to implement much needed policies and structural changes in commodity sectors seems to be lacking in a number of countries. Unfortunately, there is no provision or mechanism to include an appraisal of the efforts and actions initiated by countries/regions based on their engagement with UNCTAD. In the absence of such an appraisal, the verdict on UNCTAD effectiveness will remain somewhat incomplete.

VII. Efficiency

A. Completion of activities

47. Although the branch has undertaken a large number of activities, there have been some slippages in delivery/completion, in research papers, key information products and some technical cooperation projects. In some cases, projects were aborted or discontinued after initiating some activities.

48. Research and analysis: not counting information material, market reviews, statistics and training materials and unofficial papers, the branch produced 42 analytical and research reports during 2004–07. According to the activity report for 2007, only 11 of the 25 analytical reports planned have been completed/published. For 2008–2009, several scheduled analytical outputs have not even started and outputs carried forward from earlier periods have not progressed adequately. Staff has cited the lack of leadership and guidance as the major reason for this reduced efficiency.

Table 6.

Status of completion of research and analytical papers, by theme

Research papers by areas of work	2004	2005	2006	2007	2007 pending
Risk management and finance	1	5	4	3	4
Market information and transparency	1-	4	3	7	2
Diversification and resource management	1	5	4	-	4
General/others	-	-	3	1	4
Total	3	14	14	11	14

Source: compiled from aide memoire provided by branch senior staff.

49. Information products: the production of market information products has suffered the most, particularly after 2007. Key publications such as *The Commodity Dependency Atlas* and *The Handbook of Mineral Statistics* have been discontinued, and even the highly popular INFOCOMM lags seriously in its content updates since 2006. Of the 40 commodity profiles, only 23 are complete, and few profiles have been updated since their first version. The commodities website too has been in dire neglect until recently.

50. Technical assistance projects: some high-profile projects/initiatives (the Sustainable Commodities Initiative and the Global Initiative on Commodities) were abandoned by the Commodities Branch in the past two years, on grounds that point to personality/ideology issues with other implementing partners. One project initiated by Commodities Branch (the Biofuels Initiative) was taken over by the Trade and Environment Branch. In some projects (mining case studies), despite completion of activities, there are delays in finalizing/printing the end-of-project documents/publications.

B. Productivity

51. Overall, the branch has lagged behind other branches in the division in the delivery of technical assistance. During 2004–2007, the branch accounted for between 5 and 10 per cent of the technical assistance delivery from the division, despite accounting for 24 per cent of the division's staff strength. Reasons mentioned for the lower productivity were less donor funding and underutilization of human resources. The branch suffered from the absence of three persons: one in Market Information (due to a serious accident); one person in Commodities Financing (seconded to another branch until March 2009); and one post

loaned (in 2008) to the Office of the Secretary-General. And donor support, already low for commodities, suffered from inadequate engagement by highly introverted senior members in the branch (self-admission by persons interviewed).

52. Even looking forward, there are serious concerns on the productivity of the branch. Analysis of the manpower expended under each type of activity indicates a marked reduction in resource allocation since 2004, and a drastic reduction for 2008–09. Many staff members reported not being consulted on the work programme and budgets for 2008–09, and some do not have their formal work plans assigned for the biennium.

Table 7.

Manpower allocations as reported in biennium work plans, 2004–2009

Description of activities/man months allocated under work plans for the biennium	2004–2005		2006–2007		2008–09*	
	RB	RB+XB	RB	RB+XB	RB	RB+XB
Parliamentary documentation	9	9	3.5	3.5	2	2
Substantive servicing of meetings and negotiations on individual commodities	12	12	12	18	1	1
Expert meetings	8	10	6	8	4	4
Recurrent publications	65	77	8	8	4	4
Non-recurrent publications	8	8	24	24	5	6
Others	32	42	31	31	-	-
Advisory missions	60	76	36.5	51	4	14
Training courses, seminars and workshops	50	83	14.5	22.5	0	0
Country/ intercountry projects	14	20	30	48	3	3
Total	258	337	165.5	214	23	34
Full-time staff strength (excl. secretaries)	17	17	17	17	17	17
Per capita utilization over biennium (months)	15.17	19.82	9.73	12.59	1.35	2.0

*Data for 2008–09 is as documented and may be incomplete.

Source: Biennial work plan documents provided to the evaluation, IMDIS.

C. Cost-effectiveness

53. An analysis across various projects indicates that external expertise accounts for the bulk of the expenditures. In several cases, UNCTAD staff has acted as project managers, rather than providing specialist inputs. The strategy behind such “outsourced” projects is unclear: is the Commodities Branch gradually building internal expertise on themes like SPS, while using external experts as an interim? If so, there needs to be a clearly outlined plan for the acquisition of specialist skills, eventually reflected in the organization’s structure. But, responding to popular demand by outsourcing expertise is not cost-effective, given the UNCTAD administrative overhead of 13 per cent.

Table 8.
Breakup of project expenditures of the Commodities Branch

Expenditure breakup	Expenditure (USD)	% to total expenditure
Experts	843 339	25%
Consultants including national consultants	777 662	23%
Training	334 436	10%
Travel	346 526	10%
Mission costs (UNCTAD staff)	373 874	11%
Others	655 080	20%
Total expenditures	3 330 917	100%

Source: Expenditure data of ten projects, Budgets and Project Finance Section.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

54. UNCTAD work on commodities has been subject to a number of external and internal challenges that have limited its outcomes despite a large number of activities addressing the mandate from the São Paulo Consensus. Neither UNCTAD nor its external partners including donors could adequately anticipate and forewarn stakeholders to intercept and deal with the swift boom and bust cycles in commodities during this period, which were caused by unprecedented events and warranted unprecedented responses. Unfortunately, the internal challenges of UNCTAD in the Commodities Branch further impaired its ability to respond to these developments with the requisite agility, intensity/vigour and innovativeness.

55. This unpreparedness to deal swiftly with recent commodity issues has been the result of a collective neglect of commodities on the part of donors (faced with huge development aid write-offs earlier), developing countries (complacent during the recent favourable upswing phase) and within UNCTAD (demand for other streams picked up). Commodities became an embarrassing subject following the failure of UNCTAD-engineered paradigms of state intervention, negotiated price stabilization and supply agreements, and stabilization funds. The lack of donor support to commodities in general, and to UNCTAD commodities work in particular, lowered the profile and importance of commodities within UNCTAD, ceding importance to other streams such as trade analysis, trade negotiations and the environment.

56. The lessons of recent years reiterate the enormous significance of commodities in developing countries, particularly those dependent on non-fuel commodities for their economic development. Therefore, the relevance of UNCTAD work in this area is beyond any doubt. Even despite its internal challenges, it must be stated in the defence of UNCTAD that a sincere attempt was made to analyse commodities from a development perspective and propose market-based mechanisms to deal with their challenges.

57. The convening power of UNCTAD and its neutrality as a United Nations institution provides enormous credibility to the deliberations on key issues, and this is its key strength,

which also reflects the usefulness of its work in commodities during 2004–07. Unlike in negotiation forums, both donor and beneficiary member delegations find platforms such as the expert meetings very useful to freely voice suggestions, concerns and opinions and deliberate intellectually, without overly provoking political sensitivities.

58. This indispensability has both positive and negative implications for the Commodities Branch. On one hand, other actors are entering the turf, challenging its authoritative position on commodities issues, while, on the other, the branch can leverage its stature and neutrality to promote a large number of initiatives, leaving technical contributions to others with the requisite “hands on” domain expertise. The ideal mix would lie somewhere in between, because UNCTAD would need to have authoritative knowledge of domains in order to intermedicate in intergovernmental processes and commodity-specific discussions, even though the negotiating character of its mandate is no longer as critical as in the past.

59. Particularly after 2007, there has been a declining emphasis on market information products, despite their usefulness, popularity and high promotional value for UNCTAD commodities work. Notwithstanding the availability of other information sources, there are several avenues for value addition by the Commodities Branch in developing a set of basic but very useful analytical compilations on commodities, based on existing statistics. This is low hanging fruit that the branch could easily target to increase its relevance, reach and visibility.

60. In technical assistance, UNCTAD has veritable and aggressive competition and needs to reinvent its positioning, given the presence of several entrenched players with more field presence and implementation experience, some of which provide financial and operational support as well.

61. The human element has played a major part in performance. The quality of external and internal partnerships has suffered most in the past two years, partly due to inefficient implementation and partly due to poor human relationships. The Commodities Branch has also been weak at marketing its offerings to donors. A lack of enthusiasm, morale and team spirit has affected its performance too.

B. Recommendations

62. There has been a change in structure as well as mandate since the UNCTAD XII Accra Conference. The Commodities Branch has been spun off into a new Special Unit on Commodities, reporting to the Secretary-General; the work programme for 2008–2009 is under way and budget proposals for the biennium 2010–2011 are in an advanced state of preparation. Therefore, the evaluation’s recommendations are directed at the new structure and mandate, while drawing conclusions from the previous years’ experiences and performance.

1. Relevance

63. The Special Unit on Commodities needs to draw its credibility on the strength of its analytical rigour as much as on its convening power as a United Nations body. Therefore, it needs to invest further in its research and analysis pillar. If human resource constraints limit research, the unit could explore the other extreme: becoming a high-profile convener of events by using its United Nations flag. Such a positioning is viable in the short term, but will eventually erode UNCTAD competence and credibility as a thought leader on commodity issues.

64. Commodities work should be more upstream – focusing more on research and analysis and the unit should critically review its technical cooperation thrust and focus on

projects to field-test new ideas and innovative approaches (based on such research) to solve commodities challenges, rather than pursue conventional field projects with external expertise.

2. Impact and sustainability

65. A more specific, results-based approach is needed to measure UNCTAD contributions. The work programme of the unit should be built around major targets against specific problems and issues, a statement of ideal results, the road map/strategy to be pursued by the unit and a “drill down” of activities, corresponding to the strategies for each problem/issue identified.

66. UNCTAD can increase its impact by:

(a) Focusing comparative analysis on experiences and practices across various countries and drawing useful lessons to improve the development impact of commodity policies;

(b) Deepening analysis on specific commodities through collaborations with partners having greater domain expertise on specific commodities and shedding inhibitions over turf sharing and visibility;

(c) Building institutional capacities for the development of sustainable commodity strategies through local multipliers, web-based learning tools and the Virtual Institute;

(d) Increasing engagement on national commodity development policies through the United Nations Resident Coordinator channels.

67. Technical assistance interventions need to have a meaningful scale and scope to be able to generate impacts. The unit should focus on a few select, large, multi-disciplinary projects such as the EU/ACP programme, which can involve the collective specializations of the unit in a sustained manner over a duration sufficiently long to make impact. Commodities-related training should be increased, in partnership with the Virtual Institute, addressing strategy formulation for policymakers.

3. Effectiveness

68. The Commodities Unit should have a clear operational strategy for its menu and sequence of activities toward a specific objective corresponding to the mandate, otherwise most activities will remain isolated and disjointed from one another. Work plans should have an integrated regimen of activities beginning with analysis and ending in country-level technical assistance covering at least the major commodities.

69. Research and analysis:

(a) Recurrent publications like *The World Commodities Survey* or a new flagship report need to be revived and reoriented to cover periodic overviews on key commodities across geographic regions, using statistics already compiled by other sources. Member states would benefit particularly from case studies of best practice, providing useful guidance on how other countries/regions in similar/comparable settings have managed to address their commodities-related challenges;

(b) Partnerships: the Commodities Unit should develop research partnerships with leading think tanks in all regions, ideally members of the Global Network of Development Think Tanks already launched by UNCTAD, in order to build an “ahead of the curve” positioning in its analytical work. The unit should also leverage partnerships to complement its own imbalanced expertise across commodities;

(c) Product focus: while the unit cannot have domain expertise in all product groups, it cannot afford to neglect major commodities such as cotton, coffee and cocoa, which are of critical importance to a large number of least developed countries, and have major and far-reaching implications for poverty reduction.

70. Expert groups and multi-stakeholder consultations can become more effective by adopting a four-year objective for each major commodity and using these meetings to build successively, over the four-year horizon, problem identification, deliberations on alternatives, consideration of specific alternatives and sharing of implementation experiences. This is an opportunity the unit cannot afford to miss. Also, meetings can become more fruitful with the following changes:

(a) Break-out groups for individual commodities: not all subjects/ products are relevant to all participants at expert group meetings, and it would be useful to have more homogeneous break-out groups after the plenary, to discuss commodity-specific issues in appropriate detail;

(b) Key messages and takeaways should be generated, for prioritization of actions for research, policy dialogue in countries and technical assistance, at the national and regional levels. There should be progress from one meeting to the next: each meeting should end in a stock-taking summary by countries on the steps taken by them to address these issues, the policy changes initiated, technical assistance requests made and financial resources mobilized.

71. External partnerships: high priority should be given to fence-mending and building of new bridges with key partners and alliances, as the quality of external relationships has taken a hit in recent years. UNCTAD should leverage its “legitimacy” card effectively to bring credibility and visibility for its partners, while benefiting from their local presence, outreach and ability to finance the “ahead of the curve” ideas and activities of UNCTAD, which would be a win-win approach.

72. Internal partnerships: exclusive domain ownership of the unit on commodities-related activities is impractical, given the multi-faceted challenges. However, there can be constructive overlaps, with different branches working from their specialist perspectives, leading to a confluence of the entire expertise of UNCTAD to address these challenges. At the least, the unit could draw on the collective strengths of various branches/units within UNCTAD for the production of research papers, meetings and workshops on all commodity-related issues, to avoid duplication and unnecessary overlaps.

73. Results indicators: performance measurement should use beneficiary-level indicators to appropriately reflect the UNCTAD contribution and sphere of influence. In this regard, a few basic, objective and attributable indicators are proposed:

(a) Number of commodity-dependent developing countries that have formulated specific policies toward the resilience of their commodity sectors based on UNCTAD activities;

(b) Number of countries that have obtained UNCTAD technical assistance for policy formulation alternatives in commodities sectors;

(c) Number of commodity-specific national/regional strategy development projects developed and implemented by UNCTAD and its domain partners;

(d) Number of policymakers and key stakeholders in member states trained on commodities and development strategies.

74. Organization: the key to the success of the Special Unit on Commodities is the choice of the right person as new Head of Unit. The new Head of Unit would have to:

(a) Remotivate staff and reallocate them across themes to balance the contributions in commodity development strategies and in market information services, and ideally revert to the former structure based on cross-cutting thematic clusters instead of the current verticalized structure based on product groups;

(b) Regain the unit's reputation as an authoritative thought leader in the field, coming out with innovative approaches to deal with commodities issues;

(c) Progressively attain a balanced blend of economists with commodities/development economics backgrounds, business management and information technology/statistics. Also, rebalance P3 positions and P4 positions to provide upward mobility for senior staff.

75. Donors: the lack of donor support to upstream work in commodities can be a setback for UNCTAD to carry out ahead of the curve, innovative approaches. Donors should support design and pilot testing of new concepts, and UNCTAD should be allowed to fail forward and learn from the experience. However, they would be fully justified in demanding that UNCTAD does not merely recycle old ideas and indeed develops new, collaborative approaches.

76. Beneficiaries: at Accra, beneficiaries have expressed their disappointment over the inadequacy of UNCTAD commodities work in addressing their major challenges. However, national commitment has been lacking, too. Many countries have not engaged proactively and need to more clearly define their commodity-related priorities and demonstrate policy commitments. Meanwhile, they should not overinfluence internal processes and attempt to micromanage institutions that serve them (e.g. the prescriptive Accra texts on the Special Unit) and should trust the wisdom of the Secretary-General in dealing with organizational issues, keeping the best interests of member states in mind.

77. To conclude, the current circumstances in global markets, the Accra mandate and the restructuring of the Commodities Unit present an unprecedented opportunity for UNCTAD to reclaim/redeem its status as the thought leader on commodity-related development issues, a space that is yet uncontested by others. UNCTAD must build on its positions of neutrality and cognitive dissonance, which have indeed been its strengths, in galvanizing member states and donors toward development outcomes from commodity policies and interventions. The opportunity has been provided and the responsibility has been assumed at the highest level in the secretariat. Expectations have been set and now the Special Unit on Commodities needs to deliver on its enlarged mandate effectively and visibly.
