

Management response to the Independent Evaluation of UNCTAD's E-commerce and Digital Economy (ECDE) Programme

22 June 2022

A. Overall response to the evaluation

The Division on Technology and Logistics (DTL) Management welcomes the evaluation as timely and useful to assess progress towards the achievement of the Programme's development objective and identify areas for further improvement. DTL Management is pleased that the evaluation findings confirm the high relevance of the Programme, further corroborated by the accelerated use of digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. DTL Management welcomes the evaluation findings of a high level of user satisfaction with the Programme's research and analysis products including the Digital Economy Report, as well as a high level of interest and confidence in its intergovernmental consensus-building work. It further welcomes the findings that activities undertaken under the technical cooperation pillar, in particular eTrade Readiness Assessments, have been instrumental in boosting the e-commerce and digital economy agenda within beneficiary countries, and that partnerships and stakeholder engagement initiatives, in particular the eTrade for all initiative, have contributed to a more holistic and collaborative approach to e-commerce and the digital economy for development among development partners.

DTL Management acknowledges the recommendations outlined in the final evaluation report and has given them due consideration. A response by recommendation is provided below.

DTL Management wishes to thank the Evaluation team for its commitment and diligence along all stages of the evaluation and for the constructive dialogue with the Programme team during the inception phase and adapting its methodological approach accordingly.

DTL Management also thanks the UNCTAD Evaluation and Monitoring Unit (EMU) for the guidance and support provided in the evaluation process.

B. Response by recommendation

This section addresses each recommendation that is addressed to UNCTAD, discussing them in the order they are presented in the evaluation report. This is done in the format of the Management Response matrix (see Box 1) and includes:

- a. The recommendation number and text copied from the evaluation report;
- b. Indication of whether the recommendation is accepted fully, partially, or rejected;
- c. Description of actions to be taken, with comments as required on the conditions to be met during implementation, or on reasons leading to a partial acceptance or rejection of a recommendation;
- d. The responsible party for implementing the action/s;
- e. The timeframe or schedule for implementation, if required;
- f. Indication if and what resources are required for implementing the recommendation.

Box 1. Management response matrix

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<p>Strategic Recommendation 1</p> <p>In view of the evaluation findings and the Bridgetown Covenant, which instructed UNCTAD to strengthen its work in the digital area, UNCTAD should consider ways for allocating additional regular budget funding to the ECDE Programme to ensure that it is better able to deliver sustainably the results sought by UNCTAD's member States. This may include a comparative assessment of staffing and resources currently allocated to different tasks.</p>	Accepted	The Office of the Secretary-General welcomes this recommendation and has made a request for additional regular budget resources for the Programme, a decision on which is expected to be made in the United Nations General Assembly Fifth Committee later in the year.	Office of the Secretary-General	End 2022	Y
<p>Strategic Recommendation 2</p> <p>Donors to the Programme could aim at following the examples of the governments of Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands, who provide increasingly longer term, flexible and non-earmarked funding support to the ECDE Programme. This would allow the Programme</p>	Accepted	DTL Management welcomes this recommendation and continues advocating for a programmatic approach to funding among its new and existing donors. The recommendation was given favourable consideration by the Programme's core donors during	Programme donors	Ongoing	N

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team to further strengthen its adaptive programmatic approach which is fundamental to maintain the Programme's high relevance and facilitate its further development in a rapidly evolving area.		the 2 nd meeting of the Core Donor Advisory Board in May 2022.			
Strategic recommendation 3 The main recommendation to the DTL management is to focus the remaining part of the current Programme period (up to end-2023) on consolidation of initiatives that have already been initiated and not launch any new major initiatives within the remaining Programme period. This is in particular important if the ECDE Programme is unable to attract the amount of resources anticipated in its budget, which then further limits the possibility to expand its scope at this point of time. Thus, while it will be important for the Programme to remain adaptive and flexible to its interventions, only minor	Accepted	DTL Management accepts this recommendation and the Programme team will focus the remaining part of the current Work Plan (up until the end of 2023) on consolidating, refining and nurturing existing initiatives, many of which are relatively new and have not yet reached maturity (e.g., eTrade for Women Communities).	DTL management and Programme team	Up until the end of 2023	N

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adjustments to the existing portfolio should be considered for the remaining part of the current Programme period. More fundamental adjustments should be explored mainly as preparation for a possible new Programme phase beyond 2023 (see recommendation 4 below).					
Strategic Recommendation 4 For the remaining period of the current Programme plan, and as part of the preparation and design of the Programme phase beyond 2023, it is recommended that the ECDE Programme team will take on board the following concrete proposed adjustments:	See below 4.1-4.8				
Strategic Recommendation 4.1 For the research and analysis area, there is need to further integrate and communicate key data and analytical results through the technical cooperation activities. This may call for more dedicated skills and resources to communication	Partially accepted	DTL Management partially accepts this recommendation, which relates to communication aspects rather than research and analysis work proper. The Programme team will seek to explore ways to better integrate	Programme team; UNCTAD Communication and External Relations Division	Ongoing	N

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and outreach within the Programme. There is a huge interest and demand from country stakeholders to learn more about trends and experiences from other countries/regions in this field and how this could relate to the situation in their own country and institution. Therefore, additional measures and mechanisms to enable a wider engagement and outreach of research products should be introduced with a view to enable a higher utility and uptake for policymaking. More specifically, and with a direct link to a new UNCTAD communication and outreach strategy, this could include: i) development of a specific Programme outreach strategy with a clear focus on how to reach and track target groups/audiences more effectively; ii) a broader engagement of key stakeholder groups (e.g. eTrade for Women Advocates) in		<p>research and analytical outputs in technical cooperation activities, and efforts to that end are ongoing. For example, in 2021, the message of the Digital Economy Report (DER) was amplified through close to 30 outreach events reaching over 1,200 participants from all stakeholder groups. These included a high-level dialogue in New York with the support of the President of the UN General Assembly and opened by UNCTAD's Secretary-General, the World Data Forum in Bern, a joint event with Research ICT Africa, meetings of the UN Economists Network, eT Ready Focal Points, and <i>eTrade for all</i> Focal Points and courses for UN delegates in Geneva, North Macedonia and Egypt.</p> <p>As regards experience-sharing among countries/regions, analysis from the DER served as the basis of the background note for the fifth meeting of the Intergovernmental</p>			

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brainstorming/discussions of possible research topics (although it is still UNCTAD who will eventually decide on the specific research topics); and iii) use of more innovative and creative ways to communicate results from the research and analytical work e.g. through social media.		<p>Group of Experts on E-Commerce and the Digital Economy on the topic of “Recovering from COVID-19 in an increasingly digital economy: Implications for sustainable development”. The theme of the eCommerce Week 2022 “Data and Digitalization for Development” further extended discussions around the issues presented in the DER.</p> <p>With regard to communicating on research and analysis outputs more widely, the Programme team has already provided its inputs to UNCTAD’s new Communication Strategy through DTL. They include a definition of the Programme’s communication objectives and target audience as well as the concrete actions that the Programme wishes its communications to inspire in its target audience. The Programme’s communication plan also outlines its</p>			

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		<p>main communication mediums and distribution platforms, as well as key performance indicators of its communications' reach. Beyond reach, the Programme team will reflect on how to better track uptake of its research and analysis by policymakers.</p> <p>Broader engagement of various stakeholder groups in research and analysis work will continue to be sought at the point of peer review and brainstorming where relevant; the decision of reserch topics remains UNCTAD's prerogative.</p>			
<p>Strategic Recommendation 4.2 Stronger efforts should be put into capacity development of national stakeholders, including focal points, on collecting of data for production of statistics related to the digital economy and e-commerce, applying and building on the revised UNCTAD Manual for the Production of</p>	Partially accepted	DTL Management partially accepts this recommendation, which is consistent with the Programme's objectives in the areas of statistical work and technical assistance on measuring on e-commerce and the digital economy. More and better data is needed to inform policy decisions at the national, regional,	Programme team; donors; beneficiary countries	Ongoing	Y – resources for technical assistance to countries in the area of Measuring e-commerce and the digital

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<p>Statistics on the Digital Economy 2020. This should include the capacity of these actors to collect gender and human rights disaggregated data, and hence allow for better analysis and mainstreaming of these issues in the ECDE Programme work. The human resources within the ECDE Programme team have recently been strengthened in this area, which should enable this enhanced focus.</p>		<p>and international level, and ensure evidence-based policy formulation. Existing capacity and resources available across member States are currently insufficient. The Programme advocates for more resources to be allocated to the areas of statistical work and technical cooperation on measuring on e-commerce and the digital economy in the next few years.</p> <p>Concrete training of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) will commence in 2022 for the Pacific Island countries and be followed by training in other parts of the world. The extent to which UNCTAD will be able to support more developing countries in this area will depend on the availability of resources.</p> <p>DTL Management notes a reservation on the part of the recommendation related to collecting gender and human rights-</p>			<p>economy have been factored into the Programme budget</p>

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		disaggregated data on e-commerce and the digital economy. Given the current state of development of methodological approaches to measuring e-commerce and the digital economy, statistical work and technical assistance on measuring are conducted at a more macro level which often leaves no scope for disaggregation by gender or other individual attributes (e.g., belonging to a minority group).			
Strategic Recommendation 4.3 For the intergovernmental work, a system for better monitoring and tracking of stakeholder feedback from IGE sessions should be implemented, allowing for a clearer understanding of outcomes and identification of opportunities for closer linkages within the Programme as appropriate.	Partially accepted	This recommendation does not seem to emerge from the evaluation. Moreover, the margin of action of the Programme in the context of intergovernmental meetings is very limited, given the need to follow official procedures and that intergovernmental processes are member-driven. Nevertheless, DTL Management partially accepts this recommendation and the Programme team has already begun	Programme team	Ongoing	N

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		<p>to implement it. A feedback survey was deployed to the registered participants in the fifth session of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts (IGE) on E-Commerce and the Digital Economy (April 2022) on the topic of “Recovering from COVID-19 in an increasingly digital economy: Implications for sustainable development”. The survey results confirmed the relevance of the session’s topic to the policy focus of the IGE and the analytical value of the background note. More than 90% of respondents reported that the session had provided enhanced access to the latest research and analysis as well as an opportunity to share experiences and good practices among participants.</p> <p>As an example of a lesson learned, feedback provided through the survey on the timing of the session (concurrent to the eCommerce</p>			

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		Week 2022) was taken into account in planning future sessions of the IGE.			
Strategic Recommendation 4.4 For the eTrade Readiness Assessment processes, it should be considered whether the selection of countries for support could include stronger indications of country ownership aspects, inter-institutional cooperation at the country level and multistakeholder engagement as key selection criteria. Further, the next iteration of the ECDE Programme could be informed by an independent evaluation of the eTrade Readiness Assessments with a particular view to assess how to ensure and strengthen its continued relevance and usefulness beyond 2023. This should include a mapping and comparative assessment of related diagnostics offered by other development partners, a review of	Partially accepted	DTL Management partially accepts this recommendation and the Programme has already begun to implement it. The constitution of an inter-Ministerial Committee was one of the recommendations of UNCTAD's eT Ready stocktaking workshop in 2019. Since then the eT Ready process has been strengthened to increase Government involvement and buy-in, build institutional capacities, improve coordination across ministries and the private sector. However, there is no guarantee that because a committee has been set up, it will function as expected. The internal dynamics are often stronger. Mitigation measures, ensuring regular meetings with the Committee are put in place, and	Programme team	Ongoing	Y – resource required include the costs of a potential evaluation of the eTrade Readiness Assessments

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the relevance of its concept and approach within different contexts, as well as an assessment of its concrete results.		<p>donors on the ground and UN Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs) are also of great assistance. However, there are cases where despite these measures, the coordination fails. Anticipating issues related to country ownership before the project starts is not realistic based on our experience with over 30 eT Readies conducted to date.</p> <p>Furthermore, in 2021 the Programme conducted a mapping of assessments of country e-commerce and digital readiness. Looking at LDCs, so far 31 of the 46 LDCs have been assessed by UNCTAD (24), the World Bank (16) and UNDP (1). The various assessments have different scope (digital economy in a broad sense for the World Bank and UNDP) and use different methodologies, with eTrade Readiness Assessments having the added value of a capacity-building aspect and an</p>			

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		implementation support mechanism to ensure follow-up to policy recommendations. The Programme advocates for improving coordination among partners by building on existing studies and strengthening cooperation for their implementation, for example through the <i>eTrade for all</i> initiative.			
Strategic Recommendation 4.5 Within the partnership approach, mainly related to the eTrade for all initiative, efforts should be done to further activate the collaborative potentials among partners with a particular view to support implementation of transformative actions at country level. This could include developing of pilot joint initiative(s) within one or few countries, involving several eTrade for all members (e.g. in support to implementation of recommended actions from eTrade Readiness Assessments). In a forward-looking	Partially accepted	DTL Management accepts the recommendation to pursue further collaboration among partners at the country level, whenever synergies are possible and without duplication of existing efforts or the creation of parallel structures, which is consistent with the Programme's Results Framework. The suggestions to move forward with <i>eTrade for all</i> planned and coordinated joint programme activities at the country level seems to be unrealistic because of the different administrative processes	Programme team	Ongoing	Y – resources would be required for additional staff for each additional joint programming activity as well as at the level of the core <i>eTrade for all</i> team for coordination purposes

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perspective, this could lead towards introduction of simple joint work/activity planning within the eTrade for all initiative in order to enhance the commitment from the members and inspire more collaborative actions within countries.		<p>and management procedures in place within the different partners, as well as the different needs of beneficiaries, and the financial instruments of the different donors. The scope of the partnership is to create synergies not duplication of work or structures. Therefore, other avenues such as the one being pilot-tested and explored by the Programme seems to be more promising than an overall top-down joint programming effort.</p> <p>For instance, a joint programme – the Pacific Digital Economy Programme – has been developed and is already being implemented together with UNDP and the UNCDF in the Pacific, more specifically in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.</p> <p>Also, UNCTAD is providing support to Kazakhstan in the area of e-commerce and Law Reform in the context of a joint project with ITC –</p>			

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		<p>the Ready4Trade Central Asia (R4TCA) project.</p> <p>Other concrete steps to that end include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the eT Ready Action Plans in both Tunisia and Jordan, closer collaboration with several eTrade for all partners and with and among donors is taking place; • deepening of collaboration with UN Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs); • early-stage discussions with the Joint SDG Fund for a new investment window on digital. As an inter-agency pooled fund, the Joint SDG Fund supports joint programmes at the country level implemented by multiple UN agencies, funds and programmes 			

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		coordinated through the Resident Coordinator. The Fund's Digital Transformation Window is envisaged to be launched by Q4 of 2022 with a multi-year funding envelope to be used for implementation of joint programmes at the country level.			
Strategic Recommendation 4.6 For the eTrade for Women initiative efforts should be made to strengthen the established communities, in particular the aspects of networking as this is a major reason for female entrepreneurs to join the Masterclasses. There should be a stronger focus on the content and build-in some form of exclusivity (for instance, "rewards" could be given as a recognition to particularly well-performing community members	Partially accepted	DTL Management accepts the recommendation to strengthen the established eTrade for Women Communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for networking were limited by restrictions on movement and physical interaction. The plan in 2022 is for activities to resume in person. As regards introducing "rewards" as a recognition of community	Programme team	Ongoing	Y – resources required have been factored into the eTrade for Women Communities line of the Programme budget

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and access to grant opportunities where participation in the community could make part of the selection criteria to motivate active participation). Especially in some regions, as the Balkans but also to some extent in East Africa, there are several other communities and forums available to entrepreneurs so the exclusivity of the UNCTAD community needs to be clear before inviting female entrepreneurs outside the Masterclasses to join. The communities could also be used for raising awareness among the eTrade for Women community members on what UNCTAD stands for and how they can benefit from UNCTAD's work and products. This could be done more effectively by introducing and engaging them more in other Programme activities such as eTrade Readiness Assessments and e-commerce strategy developing processes.		<p>members' active participation, DTL Management considers that it is not in the spirit of the Communities to encourage competition among members.</p> <p>The Communities are envisaged as safe spaces where women digital entrepreneurs can share good practices, create synergies, develop new skills, inspire each other and discover new business opportunities.</p> <p>Among the concrete steps that the team is taking to expand the professional and personal growth of community members there is the negotiation of dedicated partnerships, like the one formalized with Deutsche Post DHL Group, which enabled two community members to enter the highly selective DHL GoTrade GBSN Fellowship Program on 5 April 2022. The 12-month programme will</p>			

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		<p>provide Ms. Sofia Chandi, who runs a floral e-commerce business in Ecuador, and Ms. Edith Tialeu, who sells African home decor items and accessories across Africa and Europe from Cameroon, with training, mentoring as well as new business skills to improve the overall management of their businesses, including by offering them logistical support to reach new markets.</p> <p>Joint efforts between eTrade for Women and Deutsche Post DHL Group are expected to expand the fellowship scheme to benefit more women digital entrepreneurs in developing countries in the coming years.</p> <p>The Programme team will seek to include more eTrade for Women Community members in UNCTAD's and eTrade for all technical cooperation activities where relevant. Closer synergies with</p>			

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		eTrade Readiness Assessments are already being explored.			
Strategic Recommendation 4.7 The ToC and the results framework went through a further refinement and operationalisation as part of the evaluation process, and it is important that the revised framework will now lead to the intended revision of the M&E framework and be used as a dynamic tool by the team to manage and guide planning and implementation of interventions across the three pillars and the partnership dimension. In a forward-looking perspective, the ToC and its linkages to the results framework could still be enhanced to further strengthen adaptive management principles within the Programme and the understanding on how outputs from the ECDE Programme contribute to the next result level (immediate outcomes).	Accepted	DTL Management accepts this recommendation and the Programme team will seek to update the Programme's M&E Framework to align it with the refinements introduced to the Results Framework during the inception phase of the evaluation. It will also endeavour to strengthen the participatory approach to monitoring and more systematically integrate lessons learned in the project cycle. Concrete steps to that end already implemented include the feedback survey to registered participants in the fifth session of the IGE (mentioned above) and post-event surveys of eCommerce Week 2022 participants and session organizers, among others.	DTL management and Programme team	Next 1 year	N – while financial resources may not be required, the Programme may seek to draw on resources available within UNCTAD for guidance

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This could include: i) integration of learning sessions into the project cycle with a view to extract lessons learned after completion of major activities (e.g. DER, publications, eTrade Readiness Assessments, Masterclasses etc.); ii) introduction of a more participatory and dynamic M&E approach (e.g. Outcome Harvesting could be a useful approach to this); iii) introduction of brief follow-up surveys six months after concluding of major events (e.g. to eCommerce Week and Masterclass participants); iv) introduction of process and learning indicators (across the three pillars and the partnership dimension); and v) inclusion of more qualitative targets/indicators in the M&E framework (to enhance the focus on the qualitative dimensions of the results and less focus on numbers).					

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<p>Strategic Recommendation 4.8</p> <p>As a larger and wider group of donors and other funding actors now seem to recognise the importance of e-commerce and digital economy for development in view of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the ECDE Programme should prepare an updated strategic assessment and action plan on current and emerging opportunities for further diversifying and broadening its extra-budgetary funding base. The fact that a large number of country requests for eTrade Readiness Assessments received by the Programme are still awaiting funding may represent a good starting point.</p>	Accepted	<p>DTL Management accepts this recommendation and efforts to implement it are already underway.</p> <p>Contributing to an overall positive funding outlook for the Programme in 2022-23 are new or renewed commitments for extra-budgetary funding from GIZ, the Republic of Korea, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; upcoming JPOs from the United Kingdom and Germany; and ongoing discussions with the Netherlands for the next Programme period. The Programme is also exploring possible funding opportunities with the European Union and philanthropic actors.</p> <p>Challenges to maintaining funding commitments from existing donors are linked to COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, which are likely to remain factors in the medium- to long-term.</p>	DTL management and Programme team	Ongoing	N

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Strategic Recommendation 5 As appropriate, gender equality and human rights aspects should be strengthened and become more consistently reflected in the implemented Programme activities and the outputs produced. More specifically, this could include:	See below 5.1 – 5.4				
Strategic Recommendation 5.1 Conducting an analysis of gender equality and human rights for the entire ECDE Programme, followed by developing a programme-wide gender equality and human rights strategy. This should showcase results, indicators and actions to be integrated in all areas of the Programme's work, to further enhance gender mainstreaming and social inclusion.	Accepted	DTL Management accepts this recommendation and acknowledges the importance of ensuring respect for human rights standards and principles, including equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability in its programming. The Programme team will seek to analyse Programme interventions through the normative frameworks underpinning gender equality and an HRBA, based respectively on the different experiences and roles as well as the differential impacts of programme interventions on men and women, and the entitlements	DTL management and Programme team	Next 1 year	Y – depending on the chosen modality, financial resources may not be required if the Programme can draw on resources available within UNCTAD for guidance in

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		and obligations of different stakeholders in the digital economy.			the analysis and strategy development process
Strategic Recommendation 5.2 Based on such analysis, explicit reference to application of a HRBA in research and technical cooperation, entailing clear explicit linkage to human rights (refer for instance the Universal Periodic Review or the CEDAW Periodic Review) and who the most vulnerable groups are and whether this group can realistically be included in the technical cooperation), ensuring accountability, empowerment, participation, non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups. A stronger focus on these aspects in analytical work will also allow for greater discussions of this in IGE sessions and at multistakeholder engagements (for instance, it could be emphasised in the application for	Partially accepted	While DTL Management acknowledges the importance of ensuring respect for human rights standards and principles, including equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability in its programming, it is not always relevant to include gender or human rights as a focus in research and analysis or technical cooperation activities. As noted in Strategic recommendation 4.2 above, while some Programme activities (e.g., the training course on Digital Identity delivered in 2019 for ASEAN member States (in cooperation with the World Bank, UNCITRAL, and UNESCAP)) have explicit linkages to specific rights, other activities, such as statistical work and technical assistance on measuring e-	Programme team	Next 1 year	N

Management Response to the Independent Evaluation of UNCTAD's E-commerce and Digital Economy (ECDE) Programme					22 June 2022
Evaluation Recommendation (a)	Management response (b) Accepted, partially accepted or rejected	Management plan			
		Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection (c)	Responsible unit (d)	Timeframe (e)	Resources required (Y or N) (f)
conducting thematic sessions at the eCommerce Week that topics integrating gender equality and human rights dimensions will be given priority). In technical support to statistics, it should be further assessed whether there is scope for including data on company owner's age, gender and whether this person belongs to a minority group.		commerce and the digital economy, are conducted at a more macro level which often leaves no scope for disaggregation by gender or other individual attributes (e.g., belonging to a minority group). The Programme team will endeavour to ensure that a focus on gender and human rights be included in Programme activities to the extent possible and relevant.			
Strategic Recommendation 5.3 Inclusion of a specific session for consultants conducting eTrade Readiness Assessments on how to mainstream gender and ensure application of a HRBA in the process. This could be concretised by developing checklists for consultants.	Accepted	DTL Management accepts this recommendation and will reflect on how to best operationalize it. As regards mainstreaming gender, all Programme staff have completed the training course "I know gender", which is mandatory for all UNCTAD staff. The Programme team will consider requiring that before undertaking an assignment with the Programme, consultants also complete the courses. The Programme will endeavour to provide relevant guidance on	Programme team	Next 1 year	N

Management Response to the Independent Evaluation of UNCTAD's E-commerce and Digital Economy (ECDE) Programme					22 June 2022
Evaluation Recommendation (a)	Management response (b) Accepted, partially accepted or rejected	Management plan			
		Actions to be taken, and/or comments about partial acceptance or rejection (c)	Responsible unit (d)	Timeframe (e)	Resources required (Y or N) (f)
		mainstreaming HRBA to all staff and consultants.			
Strategic Recommendation 5.4 Actively encourage enrolment of marginalised groups in the eTrade for Women application processes to clearly signal non-discrimination as a key value. While marginalised groups can be difficult to reach, a pro-active outreach strategy should be developed to ensure marginalised people's potential participation. Allying and sharing opportunities with CSOs representing such groups could be a first step.	Accepted	DTL Management accepts this recommendation and the Programme team will seek to actively encourage the participation of marginalized groups in activities conducted by the eTrade for Women initiative where relevant.	Programme team	Next 1 year	N