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Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

Introduction

1. An overview of independent evaluation activities at UNCTAD between July 2022 and June 2023 is provided in this report. The results of seven evaluations of projects and programmes are presented in chapter I; a synthesis of lessons learned from the evaluations is presented in chapter II; an update on other evaluation matters and activities is provided in chapter III; and the evaluation plan for the period July 2023–June 2024 is provided in chapter IV. The aim of the report is to demonstrate accountability to UNCTAD member States and to consolidate lessons learned and good practices for decision-making and future planning, promoting evaluation feedback and learning loops.

2. Evaluations are conducted against the evaluation policy of UNCTAD, which has been updated in 2023 to reflect the revised norms and standards for evaluation outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group, as well as the latest instructions and guidance on evaluation from the United Nations Secretariat.¹ The evaluation policy of UNCTAD explains key evaluation concepts, establishes guiding principles, outlines the institutional framework and main evaluation roles and responsibilities and delineates evaluation processes and mechanisms. The evaluation policy covers all projects and programmes under the regular budget and projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are implemented by UNCTAD. The custodian of the evaluation policy is the UNCTAD Independent Evaluation Unit. The Independent Evaluation Unit reports directly to the Deputy Secretary-General and is comprised of two professional staff members. The Chief of the Unit can report on evaluation matters directly to those who commissioned the evaluation, and to management or governing bodies, without any undue influence by any party.

¹ See <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189>,
<http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914> and ST/AI/2021/3.



I. Summary of evaluation findings

3. Between July 2022 and June 2023, independent external evaluations were completed of the following seven UNCTAD projects and programmes:

(a) Leapfrogging skills development in electronic commerce (e-commerce) in South-East Asia in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

(b) Defining, estimating and disseminating statistics on illicit financial flows in Africa (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

(c) Enabling policy frameworks for enterprise sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals reporting in Africa and Latin America (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

(d) South–South integration and the Sustainable Development Goals: Enhancing structural transformation in key partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative (funded by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Subfund of the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund);

(e) UNCTAD–Kingdom of the Netherlands strategic partnership (funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands);

(f) Promoting gender-responsive trade policy in the least developed countries (funded under the Enhanced Integrated Framework);

(g) UNCTAD subprogramme 2 on investment and enterprise (funded under the regular budget).

4. The objectives of the evaluations were to assess, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of UNCTAD projects and programmes, including the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues, and to draw conclusions from the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and good practices, to feed into decision-making and future planning. Detailed findings, recommendations and lessons learned from the evaluations are presented in this chapter.

A. Project: Leapfrogging skills development in e-commerce in South-East Asia in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

5. The project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from April 2018 to December 2021 with a budget of \$600,000. The project was aimed at promoting knowledge and evidence-based policies on e-commerce in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region. The project consisted of blended learning courses developed by UNCTAD and further aimed at supporting policymakers and entrepreneurs in understanding issues pertaining to e-commerce; and increasing their readiness to design e-commerce strategies and laws. Two training packages were developed, one on e-commerce and one on digital identity, addressing these topics through the lens of issues such as data protection, marketing, technology solutions and governance. Additionally, in-person workshops on the two topics were held in Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore to reinforce online training.

6. The evaluation raised concerns regarding the high rate of dropouts by registered participants, as well as the rate of successful completions. For example, for the first course on e-commerce best practices, 264 people registered but only 140 started the course and only 79 successfully completed the course and received a certificate and, for its second iteration, 139 people registered but only 96 successfully completed the course. Similar trends were observed for the courses on digital identity. These trends were partly due to the fact that the course dates coincided with national holidays and to the broadening of the target audience to include countries beyond the three initial project beneficiaries. However, participant satisfaction with the training courses was high, with 91 per cent stating that the course either successfully met or exceeded expectations. Moreover, the evaluation

determined that the relatively low pass rate for the first iteration of each of the two courses indicated a competitive and effective learning environment, as only participants who successfully completed the post-training assessment and did not drop out were awarded a completion certificate.

7. In addition, the evaluation found that project publications and the dissemination of information through dedicated websites and e-portals were likely to contribute to the sustainability of project results, as stakeholders could benefit from outputs beyond the project term. The online training platform used throughout the project remains open and participants can continue to access training material following completion of the course.

8. With regard to gender-related considerations, there was gender parity among project participants, 48 per cent of whom were women. A variety of case studies prepared by women on topics related to e-commerce and digital identity were included in the course content. The evaluation noted that more emphasis on human rights issues, such as those related to privacy concerns with regard to personal data, could be integrated into future iterations of the courses and workshops.

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

(a) To fund the continued review and delivery of the training courses, UNCTAD should adopt multipronged funding strategies, such as partnerships with relevant entities such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the World Trade Organization, and integrate such training into future multisectoral projects and make it available to participants at an affordable cost;

(b) Given the rapid evolution of e-commerce worldwide, UNCTAD should offer, in addition to generalized introductory courses, intermediate and advanced level courses, including with a specialized focus on elements of a value chain (e.g. logistics or payments) or within industries such as health, fashion and retail;

(c) In the interest of effective learning, UNCTAD should translate the e-commerce and digital identity courses into local languages, in particular for countries with lower levels of English comprehension among the local population.

B. Project: Defining, estimating and disseminating statistics on illicit financial flows in Africa

10. The project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from March 2018 to June 2022 with a budget of \$1,315,647, of which around \$600,000 was managed by UNCTAD and over \$700,000 by the Economic Commission for Africa. The project was aimed at strengthening the statistical capacity of Governments and stakeholders in Africa to define, measure and disseminate statistics on illicit financial flows in order to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The beneficiary countries were Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Zambia. Due to a high level of demand and travel-related savings due to pandemic-related restrictions, two further countries were included in addition to the initial nine beneficiaries. The project had three phases, namely, evaluating options for illicit financial flow measurement and providing harmonized definitions and methods; testing the methodologies; and disseminating project results.

11. The evaluation found that the project was aligned with the 2030 Agenda and the mandates of the implementing entities and relevant to the needs of countries in Africa. However, there were delays in implementation and in disseminating the estimates produced, due to the challenging methodological work and the pandemic, and in using them in Goals-related reporting. The project contributed to greater coherence among international actors and received support from various organizations. It achieved its expected outcomes by producing harmonized definitions and methodologies, enhancing the capacity of institutions in Africa and disseminating methodological outputs. Nine countries produced preliminary estimates of illicit financial flows, exceeding the target of six. All 11 beneficiary countries prepared action plans to close data-related gaps, exceeding the target of four.

12. Lessons learned from the evaluation included the importance of methodological developments, consensus-building and political buy-in at the national and international levels. The release of estimates of illicit financial flows required communications support by the United Nations to avoid misinterpretation and misuse. Collaboration between UNCTAD, the Economic Commission for Africa and United Nations country office in Namibia had been successful and could be a model for future work.

13. In conclusion, the project made significant progress in enhancing the statistical capacity of countries in Africa to measure illicit financial flows, and contributed to global efforts to address this issue. However, there was a recognized need for further work to report on data under Sustainable Development Goals indicator 16.4.1 on illicit financial flows; disseminate estimates; scale up work globally; continue to gather political buy-in; and coordinate among stakeholders to ensure the sustained use of illicit financial flow estimation methodologies in the framework of the 2030 Agenda. The General Assembly recognized the significant progress and availability of concepts and tested methods to measure illicit financial flows and called upon “United Nations system entities, international organizations and donors to work in coordination with the custodian agencies to train national statistical offices and other entities in charge of reporting on illicit financial flows on these agreed methods”.²

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

(a) UNCTAD and the Economic Commission for Africa should explore financial arrangements for the continuation and scale-up of their work on illicit financial flows;

(b) New country projects aimed at introducing illicit financial flow methodologies could include follow-up activities for countries participating in previous projects, including managing data communications;

(c) Consensus-building activities should be strengthened further to complement technical cooperation on illicit financial flows, including to promote the effective use of the methodologies approved;

(d) Additional partnerships could be explored with international institutions such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Financial Action Task Force and World Customs Organization, to reinforce efforts with regard to illicit financial flows;

(e) UNCTAD and the Economic Commission for Africa should continue research and publish findings on illicit financial flow measurement, including through the United Nations Development Account project on illicit financial flows;

(f) Inclusion criteria for participant countries should require gender balance in national working groups and reporting on the adaptability of training activities for people with disabilities.

C. Project: Enabling policy frameworks for enterprise sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals reporting in Africa and Latin America

15. The project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from February 2018 to June 2022 with a budget of \$740,000. The project had a national focus, with Colombia, Guatemala, Kenya and South Africa as direct beneficiaries, as well as a regional focus, with activities across Africa and Latin America. The project was aimed at strengthening the capacities of Governments to measure and monitor the contribution of the private sector to the 2030 Agenda. To unlock the full potential of company reporting with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals, further efforts are needed towards harmonization, comparability and consistency between the areas of financial reporting and sustainability reporting. To address this need, the goals of the project were as follows: develop and implement a mechanism to coordinate efforts among different national authorities in establishing a sustainability reporting framework; help companies prepare and publish useful sustainability reports within that framework; and support Governments in the

² A/RES/77/154.

collection of comparable and reliable information on the contribution of companies towards the achievement of the Goals, aligned with the global framework of Goals indicators.

16. The evaluation found that the project was relevant and responded to the needs and priorities of beneficiary countries and regions. Three additional countries (Cameroon, Mexico, Uganda) requested technical support from UNCTAD and were included in the project. The project also established two regional partnerships (one in Africa and one in Latin America), with the goal of improving awareness of sustainability reporting and promoting experience-sharing at the regional level. Stakeholders interviewed during the evaluation noted that regional partnerships were key to kickstarting sustainability and Goals-related reporting processes in countries that had been lagging behind.

17. The evaluation identified the following catalytic effects that would help to ensure the sustainability of project results: the establishment of a regional partnership in Asia based on the blueprint developed in other regions; and the recognition of project results at the thirty-ninth session of the Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting and the thirteenth session of the Investment, Enterprise and Development Commission. UNCTAD has since received additional requests from countries for similar support.

18. Project stakeholders identified a range of factors that had enabled the success of the project, including national demand for assistance; the knowledge-sharing and networking generated by regional partnerships; and the long-standing recognition of UNCTAD as a trusted authority on issues addressed by the project. The evaluation noted, however, the continued challenge of measuring and monitoring private sector contributions to the 2030 Agenda at the national level, including the potential lack of human capacity.

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

(a) UNCTAD should seek additional funding for the continuation and scaling-up of work on sustainability and Goals-related reporting. The regional partnerships in particular should be further strengthened through capacity-building initiatives based on an UNCTAD policy guide on tackling the sustainability reporting challenge, and could be further replicated in other regions;

(b) Given the lack of capacity or high-level support in some countries to sustain long-term outcomes, UNCTAD is encouraged to further assess possible sustainability measures and build these into future projects. This could include building on synergies with other entities such as regional organizations, civil society and private sector organizations in order to promote the benefits of sustainability reporting;

(c) UNCTAD should include a clear and detailed communications plan in projects, to ensure that key outputs and outcomes are well understood by project stakeholders. In particular, this could include updated and streamlined guidance on the UNCTAD Accounting Development Tool;

(d) UNCTAD should continue to work on indicators and guidelines for the systematic mainstreaming of all cross-cutting issues, including environmental concerns, human rights and disability inclusion.

D. Project: South–South integration and the Sustainable Development Goals: Enhancing structural transformation in key partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative

20. The project, funded by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Subfund of the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund, was implemented from November 2018 to April 2022 with a budget of \$929,046. The project was aimed at sharing experiences from China with regard to the Belt and Road initiative with other countries in the Global South, namely, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The project had the following three objectives: enhanced ability of partner countries to engage with the Belt and Road initiative through a better understanding of structural transformation in China; improved capacity of partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative to design policy strategies and

institutional mechanisms to increase the development outcomes of initiatives under the Belt and Road initiative on the process of structural transformation; and improved understanding among selected partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative of the economic shock from the pandemic and appropriate policy options to respond to the shock.

21. The evaluation found that the project was highly relevant to the needs of beneficiary countries, as well as to the UNCTAD mandate and the Sustainable Development Goals. The project design, the choice of activities and the deliverables reflected and addressed the development needs and priorities of participating countries. By providing for a deeper understanding of policies used in China, the project helped bridge existing knowledge gaps on alternative development models and was thus highly relevant in other developing countries and among partner development organizations.

22. Prior to the launch of the project, policymakers in beneficiary countries had had limited knowledge of policies in China in the areas of trade, industry, macroeconomics and finance, debt management and digital economy, and knowledge had substantially improved by the end of project. Participants indicated that they had gained an understanding of the development experience in China. In terms of likelihood of impact, the evaluation found increased capacity to utilize the development and structural experience of China in policy formulation. Over 15 relevant policy recommendations were identified by participants during project webinars. In Sri Lanka, a new digital strategy was adopted based on the policy recommendations.

23. Interventions implemented during the project were those that could be sustained with little further support. Delivery involved local stakeholders, who participated actively in the process and were likely to have a significant degree of interest in outcome ownership. Findings were consolidated in a publication made available on the Belt and Road initiative platform, to help expand project impacts beyond beneficiary countries.³

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

(a) Seek additional resources for a second phase or a new related project, to sustain and build on momentum gained to date. Such a project could identify and expand current interventions to other countries and thematic areas and build on lessons learned from other emerging economies, since many stakeholders had expressed interest in experience-sharing and peer learning;

(b) Engage more actively with partners and stakeholders, for example by changing the Belt and Road initiative platform from a static knowledge dissemination platform to an active and engaged community and by developing a clear communications strategy to distinguish UNCTAD expertise from that of other development organizations;

(c) Further incorporate cross-cutting issues, for example by strengthening research and analysis efforts on human rights, gender and disability inclusion, including by conducting an in-depth assessment of gender inequalities and disparities and providing recommendations on operational or policy concerns in key priority areas.

E. Programme: UNCTAD–Kingdom of the Netherlands strategic partnership

25. The UNCTAD–Kingdom of the Netherlands strategic partnership was established for a duration of four years (2019–2022), with the Kingdom of the Netherlands providing funds to UNCTAD totalling \$6 million to cover activities under three thematic priority areas. Priority theme 1 (investment for sustainable development) and priority theme 3 (good governance for private sector development) were implemented by the Division on Investment and Enterprise with \$4 million and priority theme 2 (e-commerce and digital economy) was implemented by the Division on Technology and Logistics with \$2 million.

³ UNCTAD, 2022, *[China] Structural Transformation: What Can Developing Countries Learn?* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.22.II.D.9, Geneva).

This evaluation focused on priority themes 1 and 3. The evaluation of priority theme 2 was conducted in 2021.⁴

26. The main purpose of this evaluation was to support accountability for results and to enable learning. The evaluation assessed the activities under the partnership using the criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, as well as the extent of gender and human rights mainstreaming. The evaluation found that the partnership's activities were highly relevant, addressing important issues and allowing UNCTAD to meet the needs of developing countries. Partnership activities were consistent with UNCTAD objectives, the mission of the donor and the Sustainable Development Goals; and were effective in increasing the capacity of government entities, such as ministries of finance and investment, and regional bodies, such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the Economic Community of West African States and the League of Arab States, with regard to topics such as investment treaties and taxation. The evaluation identified, as key factors contributing to the effectiveness of the partnership's activities, the high quality of UNCTAD research and technical assistance, as well as the reputation of UNCTAD as a trusted partner. However, the lack of partnership-specific indicators made it difficult to establish the direct outcomes of the partnership.

27. The efficiency of the partnership's activities was assessed positively. Unearmarked, multi-year funding was a key strength of the partnership, providing flexibility and allowing UNCTAD to focus on projects and countries based on demand. The evaluation identified challenges in implementation due to internal coordination issues in host ministries and the negative impacts of the pandemic. However, UNCTAD had leveraged additional funds (\$4.65 million) and demonstrated efficiency in resource utilization.

28. The evaluation found that partnership results were likely to be sustained. For example, a central information technology platform for e-registration had been established, helping to ensure that national profiles created under the partnership continued to be used, and research on foreign direct investment and international taxation had been included in courses conducted by the secretariat under paragraph 166 of the Bangkok Plan of Action, for dissemination to government officials. UNCTAD had made efforts with regard to gender mainstreaming and human rights, to varying degrees across activities. For example, e-registration platforms showed significant reach among women in beneficiary countries, and gender-related provisions in model treaties and the promotion of investment for gender empowerment demonstrated the commitment of UNCTAD to gender equality.

29. Based on the findings, the evaluation recommended that the Government of the Netherlands continue with this type of funding arrangement with UNCTAD, to allow for flexibility in meeting member State demand for technical cooperation; and proposed the following key recommendations for UNCTAD:

- (a) Establish partnership-specific indicators and targets for monitoring and assessing the next UNCTAD–Kingdom of the Netherlands strategic partnership (2023–2026);
- (b) Engage embassies of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in beneficiary countries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in activities on the ground, to enhance synergies;
- (c) Replicate the benefits of using digital tools in other countries, such as the e-registration platform piloted in Bhutan and the e-accounting tool piloted in El Salvador;
- (d) Systematically document the funds leveraged through partnership-funded activities and include this information in annual reports to the Kingdom of the Netherlands;
- (e) Explore further sustainability measures through partnerships with the United Nations regional commissions, academia and civil society;
- (f) Include indicators on gender and economic rights in the monitoring framework.

⁴ See https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osginf2022d5_en.pdf.

F. Project: Promoting gender-responsive trade policy in the least developed countries

30. This project, funded through the Enhanced Integrated Framework, was implemented from May 2020 to December 2022 with a budget of \$251,450. The project involved the delivery of teaching modules and training courses on trade and gender (two courses delivered in 2021 and two courses delivered in 2022) and was part of the overall UNCTAD Trade, Gender and Development Programme. It aimed at building capacities in the least developed countries to integrate gender considerations into trade policies and address gender disparities in trade.

31. The evaluation found that the project was highly relevant, highlighting the importance of addressing the trade and gender nexus, to achieve gender equality. The training materials had been customized for the least developed countries, and trainees had been selected based on professional background and function (including policymakers, trade advisers, business actors, academics and gender equality advocates) and likelihood of influencing policymaking. The number of applicants had exceeded programme capacities. However, the number of applicants from the least developed countries had not been sufficient to meet Enhanced Integrated Framework expectations, indicating that further promotion among the least developed countries might be necessary.

32. The courses effectively reached 414 trainees from 81 countries, 51 per cent of whom were from 34 of the least developed countries and 58 per cent of whom were women. End-of-training surveys indicated that the course content was adapted to the needs of participants; In 2022, 97 per cent of those trained in 2021 stated that they had applied the knowledge acquired in the course; 39 per cent stated that they had been able to contribute to various aspects of policymaking (advocacy, dialogue, concrete measures); 88 per cent stated that their organizations were increasingly engaging in trade and gender issues; and 67 per cent reported that their countries were incorporating gender considerations in trade policy activities.

33. To promote the sustainability of results, the project facilitated knowledge-sharing after the end of training courses. An alumni network was launched, providing online exchanges with guest speakers and opportunities to attend relevant UNCTAD activities. However, the alumni network has not been tasked with following up on post-training action, facilitating experience-sharing or motivating action. The evaluation concluded that, in order for a capacity-building project to go beyond training into concrete action, time and resources should be allocated to this end.

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

(a) Training delivery should be accompanied by post-training activities under the UNCTAD trade and gender alumni network, including follow-up on actions undertaken by trainees, follow-up on policy changes at the national level, the facilitation of experience-sharing and updates on new practices;

(b) Resources made available on a project basis should not target trainees benefiting from one particular project but be pooled in order to provide activities that follow up with the wider network as part of the overall Trade, Gender and Development Programme;

(c) Greater attention could be given to trainees from previous courses, with greater opportunities to make effective and practical use of training, which could in turn inform new training materials and activities.

G. Programme: UNCTAD subprogramme 2 – Investment and Enterprise

35. The results of the evaluation of subprogramme 2 are presented in a separate document.⁵

⁵ TD/B/WP/324.

II. Lessons learned from evaluations

36. An annual synthesis of the main lessons learned from evaluations at UNCTAD is generated by the Independent Evaluation Unit. Findings, conclusions and recommendations from multiple evaluations are examined and analysed, to gain a broader, more comprehensive and integrated understanding of the overall programme, maximizing the value and impact of evaluation efforts. Through the synthesis, common patterns, trends and recurring themes from across different evaluations can be identified, as well as lessons learned on UNCTAD strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement or further exploration. Additionally, by comparing and contrasting findings from different evaluations, the synthesis contributes to strengthening the validity and reliability of the evaluation process, allows for the triangulation of evidence and reduces the risk of drawing conclusions based on isolated or limited evaluations. In addition, the synthesis can serve to generate new insights and knowledge, by integrating diverse perspectives and data sources, and uncover underlying factors or dynamics that may not have been evident in individual evaluations.

37. Lessons learned extrapolated from the seven evaluations completed during the reporting period are detailed in this chapter, to provide decision-makers with a consolidated and comprehensive view of the evidence, to facilitate informed decision-making, to promote learning and knowledge-sharing by consolidating and disseminating evaluation findings and to facilitate the exchange of experiences among stakeholders. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities, presented in previous reports, remain recommended references for project officers and programme managers in designing and managing projects and programmes.

A. UNCTAD technical cooperation appreciated by member States

38. Overall, there is a high level of appreciation of UNCTAD technical cooperation projects among beneficiaries and member States. UNCTAD technical cooperation projects are viewed as highly relevant and as addressing the needs of member States, as well as being clearly aligned with organizational mandates and goals. This is evidenced by the increasing demand for UNCTAD assistance.

39. The strength of UNCTAD is perceived to be in its specialized knowledge and the quality of its research and analysis, which assist beneficiaries in navigating complex trade and development issues and making informed policy decisions. Its multidisciplinary approach provides a broad perspective, enabling member States to address interconnected challenges and opportunities.

B. Project teams demonstrated resilience, flexibility and innovation in adapting to the pandemic

40. Project managers had to adapt in various ways during the pandemic to continue implementation and achieve objectives. They implemented strategies to ensure continuity, respond to emerging needs and mitigate the impacts of the crisis. Demand for digital solutions offered by UNCTAD, such as the e-registrations platform, increased during the pandemic. With restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings, training sessions, workshops, and capacity-building activities were conducted online, utilizing e-learning platforms and webinars. These involved challenges and could not replace in-person interactions, yet helped minimize delays and ensure that milestones and deliverables were achieved.

41. The pandemic also prompted UNCTAD staff to strengthen digital skills, explore innovative ways of working and leverage technology to overcome challenges associated with remote work. The adoption of digital tools not only facilitated remote work during the pandemic but offered new possibilities for flexible and collaborative work practices afterwards.

C. Further efforts needed in monitoring performance indicators and generating meaningful results data

42. Significant steps have been taken in the past few years to improve logical frameworks and performance indicators in project documents, yet monitoring of and reporting on indicators remain inadequate. Clear systems and processes are not always in place in the project management structure to collect and manage data related to performance indicators, and human and/or financial resources dedicated to monitoring are not sufficient.

43. Data on indicators, especially at the outcome level, was not always systematically collected by project teams, and evaluators had to rely more on interviews to obtain this type of information and to triangulate findings. Evaluations identified the need for more detailed monitoring plans that included not only specific indicators, but information on data collection methods, frequency of monitoring, responsible parties and mechanisms for data analysis and reporting. In addition, monitoring plans should be agreed upon by all stakeholders prior to project implementation in order for all parties to be clear about responsibilities. With the recent introduction of the integrated planning, management and reporting (IPMR) tool, it is possible to add project indicators at all levels of the logical framework and report on the status of indicators on a project-by-project basis. The new tool, in connection with more detailed monitoring plans, could help provide more accurate and relevant data, and facilitate streamlined and quality reporting.

D. Sustainability of results remains insufficiently addressed at the planning phase

44. Progress has been made under some projects in including components aimed at ensuring the sustainability of results in a project document and during implementation, yet evaluations suggested that exploring additional sustainability measures at the central level would greatly benefit the organization. In several instances, beneficiaries noted that additional assistance and/or resources were needed for continued progress along the results chain. However, planning for sustainability required dedicated resources and the implementation of strategies beyond project duration, including for ongoing monitoring and evaluation, capacity-building, knowledge transfer and mechanisms for continued support and the maintenance of project outcomes.

45. The perspectives of and inputs from stakeholders and beneficiaries is crucial in ensuring sustainability. Engaging relevant stakeholders throughout the planning process could help ensure that their perspectives are incorporated, foster greater ownership and commitment to sustainability and facilitate the integration of project activities into existing structures and systems at the national level. Furthermore, risks to project sustainability, such as changes in government policies, economic conditions and shifts in social and environmental contexts, could be identified and mitigated against.

E. Improving communications and dissemination of UNCTAD products and results critical for wider reach and impact

46. Evaluations highlighted that important stakeholders and decision makers were not necessarily familiar with the work of UNCTAD. More detailed and considered communications plans and strategies could elevate the effectiveness of UNCTAD projects and programmes and contribute to capacity-building efforts. Sharing the work of UNCTAD more widely would support stakeholders in making more informed decisions and increase impacts.

47. Technical publications could be made available in multiple formats to different target audiences, including concise summaries, infographics, videos and interactive content, to engage diverse audiences and make information easily understandable. Collaboration with Governments, other organizations and civil society could also amplify dissemination efforts.

F. UNCTAD could further leverage partnerships to increase reach and impact and ensure sustainability of results

48. Stakeholder engagement and participation foster ownership and ensure the relevance and effectiveness of interventions. By exploring new and innovative partnerships or deepening existing partnerships, UNCTAD could broaden its resources, expertise and networks, allowing for more comprehensive and sustainable technical cooperation efforts and the dissemination of knowledge products. UNCTAD could engage more strategically with bilateral and multilateral donors, development banks and other organizations, to secure extrabudgetary funding and in-kind support for technical cooperation programmes. Collaborating more with civil society organizations could also enrich the work of UNCTAD, with diverse perspectives, local knowledge and grass-roots engagement, and help ensure that the views of marginalized groups and communities are reflected.

49. Evaluations recommended deepening partnerships with the United Nations regional commissions, which have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the particular economic, social and developmental challenges in their respective regions. By aligning strategies, sharing data and research findings and coordinating efforts, UNCTAD and the regional commissions could ensure that trade and development policies are complementary and mutually reinforcing and contribute to common goals. The regional commissions have established networks and platforms for engaging with regional stakeholders, including Governments, regional organizations, civil society and private sector representatives. Partnering with the commissions could therefore provide UNCTAD with an opportunity to enhance the reach and impact of capacity-building efforts.

G. Further guidance required to support mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues

50. In accordance with General Assembly resolutions on human rights, gender, disability inclusion and the environment,⁶ and with the evaluation policy of UNCTAD, all UNCTAD evaluations consider, throughout the evaluation cycle, questions related to gender equality, disability inclusion, the environment and human rights. Evaluations found that, while progress had been made, to varying degrees, on mainstreaming gender equality in UNCTAD projects and programmes, the other cross-cutting issues require more attention. Interdivisional working groups have been established on gender, and the environment and climate change, along with an organizational level strategy on disability inclusion. However, at the project level, additional guidance and/or capacity-building for staff is required for cross-cutting issues to be addressed more systematically and purposefully.

51. Evaluations recommended establishing indicators at all levels of the results chain, to collect gender-disaggregated data and data on disability inclusion. Good practices from within and outside UNCTAD could be collected and shared across divisions and units. Partnerships with other United Nations entities with mandates on such cross-cutting issues could also help enhance UNCTAD capacity to mainstream cross-cutting issues in its work.

III. Other evaluation matters

52. In addition to the conduct of evaluations, the Independent Evaluation Unit provides support to UNCTAD project officers and programme managers on evaluation plans, including appropriate indicators and evaluation questions. The Unit participates in the review of new project concepts and proposals, and formally endorses new project documents through the UNCTAD project clearance process. The Unit is on the UNCTAD Technical Cooperation Committee and keeps the Committee advised of policies and developments concerning the evaluation of technical cooperation projects, shares relevant

⁶ A/RES/60/1, A/RES/71/243, A/RES/75/154, A/RES/76/6 and A/RES/76/L.75. See also ST/SGB/2019/7.

findings and lessons learned from evaluation reports and presents recommendations for consideration by the Committee. In addition to the updated evaluation policy of UNCTAD, the Unit has produced guidance for UNCTAD staff on evaluation standards, procedures, criteria and methodology, including for self-evaluations. For example, the Unit worked with the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) team to revise their self-evaluation template and guidance, and conducted a workshop with ASYCUDA regional project officers to incentivize and facilitate reflection and reporting on challenges, good practices, lessons learned and ways forward.

53. The UNCTAD evaluation function is assessed every two years by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the internal oversight body of the United Nations, through its biennial report on the state of evaluations in Secretariat entities, with an accompanying evaluation dashboard.⁷ The assessment covers 76 United Nations Secretariat entities and uses predefined indicators and criteria to assess each entity in four areas, namely, framework, resources, output and coverage and report quality. The purpose is to support the strengthening of United Nations evaluation functions through a systematic assessment against objective indicators in order to support Member States, senior managers and staff members in identifying trends and areas for improvement.

54. UNCTAD was assessed as a large operational entity of the United Nations Secretariat and deemed to have a robust evaluation system in place (table 1).

Table 1

Office of Internal Oversight Services Evaluation assessment of UNCTAD, 2020–2021

<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Change since 2018–2019</i>
Framework	1. Type of evaluation function	Stand-alone evaluation unit (5/5)	No change
	2. Reporting line	Evaluation function reports to the governing body and/or the head of the entity (3/3)	No change
	3. Seniority of the professional leading the function	P4 (2/4)	No change
	4. Evaluation policy	High (31/36)	No change
	5. Evaluation procedures in use	All (5/5)	No change
	6. Evaluation plan score	Medium (7/14)	Decrease
Resources	7a. Estimated expenditure on evaluation reports only	\$602,121.81	No change
	7b. Share of total programme budget	0.27 per cent	No change
	7c. Estimated expenditure on all evaluation-related activities, including reports	\$688,371.21	No change
	7d. Share of total programme budget	0.31 per cent	No change
Output and coverage	8. Number of reports submitted	10	No change
	9. Number of evaluation reports	10	Decrease
	10. Subprogramme coverage	5/5	No change
Report quality	11. Share (number) of sampled (very) good quality reports	83.33 per cent (5/6)	Increase

⁷ A/78/70 and United Nations, Office of Internal Oversight Services, Inspection and Evaluation Division, 2023, United Nations evaluation dashboard 2020–2021, Assignment No. IED-23-006.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Change since 2018–2019</i>
	12. Share (number) of sampled reports with (very) good recommendations	50 per cent (3/6)	Increase
	13. Average United Nations system-wide action plan score / (number of reports that satisfactorily/fully meet criteria)	7.3 (meeting requirements) / (4/6)	Increase
	14. Average score on integration of human rights considerations / (number of reports with satisfactory/full integration)	2.2 (satisfactorily integrated) / (5/6)	Increase

Source: United Nations, Office of Internal Oversight Services, Inspection and Evaluation Division, 2023.

55. In terms of areas for improvement, the Office of Internal Oversight Services noted that the evaluation plan could be strengthened, including the articulation of the evaluation purpose, resources and procedures for submission to the head of the entity or governing body for review/approval.⁸ The quality of recommendations could be improved by ensuring that they are realistic, actionable and targeted.

IV. Evaluation plan for the period 2023–2024

56. The Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance requested the secretariat to continue a new evaluation cycle of the five subprogrammes.⁹ The secretariat launched a new evaluation cycle in October 2021, starting with the evaluation of subprogramme 1 on globalization, interdependence and development strategies.¹⁰ An evaluation of subprogramme 3 on international trade in goods and services, and commodities, will be undertaken in 2023–2024. The UNCTAD evaluation plan for the period 2023–2024 will also include a number of independent evaluations of projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are set to conclude during this period (table 2).

Table 2
Evaluation plan, 2023–2024

<i>Programme or project</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Overall budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Evaluation budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Period of evaluation</i>
Evidence-based and policy-coherent oceans economy and trade strategies	Development Account	650 000	15 500	Q4 2022–Q3 2023
Seizing the trade and business potential of blue biotrade products for promoting sustainable livelihoods and conservation of marine biodiversity in selected Organization of Eastern Caribbean States countries	European Union, through the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States Commission	327 000 (estimate)	16 000	Q4 2022–Q3 2023
Joint COVID-19 project: Global initiative towards post-pandemic resurgence of the microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises sector	Development Account	4 490 500	92 950	Q4 2022–Q3 2023
Joint COVID-19 project: Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics	Development Account	4 835 000	106 551	Q4 2022–Q3 2023

⁸ United Nations, Office of Internal Oversight Services, Inspection and Evaluation Division, 2023.

⁹ See TD/B/WP/306 and TD/B/WP/312 and TD/B/WP/319.

¹⁰ See TD/B/WP/312 and TD/B/WP/318.

<i>Programme or project</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Overall budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Evaluation budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Period of evaluation</i>
Joint COVID-19 project: Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19	Development Account	1 155 270	30 106	Q1–Q4 2023
Facilitation of transit, transport and trade in West Africa for better value chain participation	Enhanced Integrated Framework	1 775 000	15 000	Q3 2023–Q1 2024
External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 3 on international trade and commodities	Regular budget	15 016 400	50 000	Q3 2023–Q2 2024
Coherent strategies for productive capacity development in African least developed countries	Development Account	590 155	25 155	Q4 2023–Q2 2024
Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesian Spearhead Group	Development Account	576 927	24 927	Q4 2023–Q2 2024

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

Source: UNCTAD.

57. The Independent Evaluation Unit will continue its efforts to disseminate evaluation results across UNCTAD for consideration by project officers and programme managers, including through a biannual newsletter. The Unit will also update its tools and guidance for quality assurance and pursue plans to develop a formal recommendation tracking system. The evaluation plan for 2023–2024 was shared with divisions and services for feedback and has been endorsed by the Deputy Secretary-General.