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## Trade and Development Board

### Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget

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## Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

### Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

#### Introduction

1. The present report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects completed between April 2016 and April 2017. The information presented allows more complete reporting on all evaluation activities and promotes accountability and lessons learned. Evaluation synthesis reports are knowledge products that consolidate and share acquired knowledge, as well as strengthen the feedback and learning loops for UNCTAD evaluations.

#### I. Summary of evaluation findings

2. Evaluations at UNCTAD are conducted against its 2011 evaluation policy<sup>1</sup> and the 2016 *Norms and Standards for Evaluation*<sup>2</sup> outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group. The objectives of these assessments are to draw conclusions on the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and best practices. This information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work. Programme managers at UNCTAD are encouraged to refer to previous reports and overviews<sup>3</sup> of evaluations of UNCTAD activities when designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.

3. The quadrennial United Nations Conference on Trade and Development took place in 2016 in Nairobi. The annual in-depth subprogramme evaluation was thus suspended for

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<sup>1</sup> [http://unctad.org/Sections/edm\\_dir/docs/osg\\_EvaluationPolicy2011\\_en.pdf](http://unctad.org/Sections/edm_dir/docs/osg_EvaluationPolicy2011_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>.

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/About%20UNCTAD/Evaluation%20at%20UNCTAD/Eval-All.aspx>.



2016.<sup>4</sup> External project evaluations of the following four projects supported by the United Nations Development Account were completed:

(a) Strengthening of capacities of trade and planning ministries of selected least developed countries to develop and implement trade strategies that are conducive for poverty reduction (project 1213M);

(b) Building national capacities for promoting foreign direct investment in green and other growth sectors (project 1213N);

(c) Strengthening capacities of African countries in boosting intra-African trade through support for establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (project 1213AR);

(d) Capacity-building for the formulation and implementation of Millennium Development Goal-oriented trade policies in developing countries contributing to accelerating achievement of Millennium Development Goals in the context of multiple and interrelated development challenges (project 1213K).

## Evaluation of United Nations Development Account projects

### **External evaluation: Strengthening of capacities of trade and planning ministries of selected least developed countries to develop and implement trade strategies that are conducive for poverty reduction (project 1213M)**

4. This project, implemented between 2012 and 2015, aimed at strengthening the capacities of trade and planning ministries in selected least developed countries to identify trade priorities as well as formulate and implement trade strategies leading to poverty reduction. The project targeted six countries: Bhutan, Ethiopia, Kiribati, Lesotho, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Senegal. It organized six national studies, six national workshops and two regional workshops, and produced a handbook and practical guide to mainstreaming trade.

5. The evaluation concluded that the project's design, activities and deliverables were largely well aligned with the needs of beneficiary countries as well as with the mandates of UNCTAD and the objectives of the United Nations Development Account. The evaluation also noted that the majority of stakeholders were satisfied with the quality of UNCTAD work as well as the project results at the national level, and indicated some areas for improvement. For instance, the main suggestion from workshop attendees was that the duration of the workshops should have been longer. In addition, the project target of contributing to the enhancement of national coordination of involved ministries and institutions in trade mainstreaming was not fully met in some countries. The evaluator recognized the positive stakeholder feedback with respect to the efficiency of the project and, at the same time, noted certain efficiency challenges caused by the introduction of Umoja (the enterprise resource planning system launched in late 2015). While the evaluation noted that it was too early to assess the overall sustainability of the project's results, it identified the handbook as contributing to the sustainability of the project. However, the report also highlighted the expectations of beneficiaries for more intensive intervention and follow-up support from UNCTAD and anticipated that a programmatic approach could lead to more sustained results. The project considered gender through a panel on gender issues and social inclusion during the regional workshop in Asia and the workshop in Lesotho addressed gender equality and its link with trade and poverty. Furthermore, there was a dedicated chapter on gender in the handbook.

6. Based on the findings, the evaluator proposed the following key recommendations: (a) maximize the use of pre-existing documentation and tools to avoid overlaps and duplication; (b) integrate gender as a cross-cutting theme in similar projects; (c) establish and maintain direct communication links with the beneficiaries to ensure their ownership and engagement; and (d) use a programmatic approach to follow up on the promising results of the project, including but not limited to helping establish inter-agency committees

<sup>4</sup> See TD/B/WP/275, chapter I.

or working groups to follow up on the country studies and develop implementation plans, limiting follow-up action by addressing the needs of the most promising beneficiary countries and collaborating with different development partners to utilize their particular expertise to complement UNCTAD expertise.

**External evaluation: Building national capacities for promoting foreign direct investment in green and other growth sectors (project 1213N)**

7. This project, implemented between 2013 and 2016, aimed at strengthening the capacities of developing countries to attract and benefit from foreign direct investment (FDI) in green and other growth sectors in order to create employment, promote agricultural development and reduce poverty. Project interventions included capacity-building activities and advisory services, and awareness creation through international meetings. The project organized three regional training workshops in Colombia, the Republic of Korea and South Africa. Advisory services were delivered in India, Jamaica and Kenya. As part of the UNCTAD World Investment Forum 2014, the project organized an investment promotion conference in Geneva on 15 October 2014, with over 250 participants from 65 countries, that included sessions on attracting FDI in the areas of infrastructure and green growth.

8. The evaluation concluded that the main objectives of the project were found highly relevant by the investment promotion community in developing countries as well as among project beneficiaries. Survey results confirmed that there was a positive and broad perception of the unique comparative advantage of UNCTAD in the critical area of investment and FDI. The evaluation found that the project was effective, especially in terms of helping project beneficiaries in formulating and implementing plans and supportive measures for green investment promotion as well as for finding useful information on green FDI trends, opportunities and lessons and best practices from other countries through the website developed under the project ([www.greenfdi.org](http://www.greenfdi.org)). However, the evaluator also pointed out the need to provide more intensive mentoring support and guidance to developing countries to advance and operationalize their green FDI strategies. On efficiency, the evaluation concluded that the project delivered what it had planned for within the proposed timetable, and underscored that the project was successful in raising an additional 26 per cent over its budget from external contributions and partnerships. Under the evaluation criterion of sustainability, while beneficiaries were optimistic that their respective institutions would be able to carry forward the work started as a result of the technical assistance received from UNCTAD, they suggested that additional support would be needed to sustain the project results. The evaluator observed that UNCTAD had plans to further develop the website to sustain the benefits to its targeted audience and stakeholders. On gender mainstreaming, the relationship between green FDI and gender equality was included in the workshop in India with a session on employment opportunities for women in the green energy sector. The website developed also includes a section on gender equality and green FDI.

9. Based on the findings, the evaluator proposed the following recommendations for UNCTAD: (a) ensure future UNCTAD technical assistance on this theme is more structured around coaching beneficiaries on developing green FDI plans and related incentives; (b) focus more narrowly on green FDI in specific low-carbon subsectors when organizing seminars, and involve more private sectors investors in workshops to deepen the understanding of beneficiaries; (c) address the fundamental capacity constraints in least developed countries and small island developing States by developing technical assistance to support their formulation of green investment frameworks; (d) develop and offer more case studies on the [www.greenfdi.org](http://www.greenfdi.org) website to meet the beneficiaries' needs for more successful practices and tools in other developing countries to attract green FDI; and (e) continue to develop simple and measurable indicators pertinent to project objectives that can be tracked relatively easily in future green FDI programming.

**External evaluation: Strengthening capacities of African countries in boosting intra-African trade through support for establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (project 1213AR)**

10. The overall objective of this project, implemented between 2014 and 2016, was to foster and boost intra-African trade expansion, leading to sustained economic growth and inclusive development, through dedicated support to the establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA), and thereby facilitating a process of inclusive structural transformation of African countries. The beneficiaries of the project were intended to be (a) selected African Union member States; (b) African Union member States not directly involved (to benefit indirectly through the dissemination of project results); (c) the eight regional economic communities<sup>5</sup> recognized by the African Union; (d) the African Union and its Commission; and (e) individual participants (including policymakers/experts from member States and suitable private sector representatives) identified by the UNCTAD secretariat.

11. The evaluation confirmed the high relevance of this pilot initiative as it served a fundamental need of member States in the process of concluding the CFTA. The project (and its choice of activities) was relevant for addressing the knowledge and skills gaps for the successful finalization of the CFTA. In terms of effectiveness, the project achieved its planned activities as enunciated in the project document. The quality of UNCTAD support was highly appreciated by the beneficiaries. However, the evaluation noted that, while the project laid the technical foundations for the start of the negotiations, much more of this kind of support was required, which the member States, regional institutions and private sector considered UNCTAD well positioned to provide. There were no major efficiency challenges; the project had a 98.5 per cent implementation rate and successfully utilized its internal expertise, including the UNCTAD Regional Office for Africa based in Addis Ababa. The evaluation found that the issue of sustainability was not clearly defined in the project document, and there was no indication of initiatives having been or being undertaken nationally as a result of project efforts. The evaluation determined that it was too early to determine the full impact of the project as the negotiation process in the forthcoming years would be a testament to the value of the technical support delivered under the project. While not captured in the project document, gender elements were embedded in the project's outcome in the form of increased market access and business opportunities for women, particularly in services and agrifood sectors, poverty alleviation, and equal access to trade opportunities through the creation of a trade enabling environment for all. Broadly, the project advanced the core values of equitable development by supporting gender responsive policies on the African continent with the objective of achieving economic development through inclusive trade. Finally, while strong partnerships were developed with government officials (who represented 63 per cent of project beneficiaries), one of the weaknesses observed in this project was the low profile of the private sector in project activities.

12. Based on the findings, the evaluator proposed the following recommendations for UNCTAD: (a) prioritize continued support to the CFTA process; (b) provide for adequate operational support in future projects of this nature; (c) improve results-based management approaches for measurement of the effectiveness and impact; (d) develop a set of screening criteria for selecting target beneficiaries when organizing workshops or seminars; and (e) ensure stronger participation of national trade unions and industry associations in trade policy negotiations.

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<sup>5</sup> The Community of Sahelo-Saharan States, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, East African Community, Economic Community of Central African States, Economic Community of West African States, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, Southern African Development Community and Arab Maghreb Union.

**External evaluation: Capacity-building for the formulation and implementation of Millennium Development Goal-oriented trade policies in developing countries contributing to accelerating achievement of Millennium Development Goals in the context of multiple and interrelated development challenges (project 1213K)**

13. The goal of this project, as implemented between 2013 and 2016, was to make a contribution towards the design of coherent and best-fit Millennium Development Goals-oriented national trade policies that were geared towards enhancing trade (export growth), productive capacities and employment, while achieving social and economic improvements consonant with the Goals. In doing so, the project targeted the trade policy community to enhance awareness and capacities in assessing related policy changes and options and to build institutional capacities to formulate and implement such policies. Nine countries benefited directly from the project: Algeria, Angola, Botswana, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Namibia, Panama, Tunisia and Zambia. The project developed trade policy frameworks for each beneficiary country and held validation workshops in seven countries. It also organized two interregional workshops and prepared a handbook to summarize lessons learned and best practices.

14. The evaluation concluded that the project was highly relevant and the project team had taken appropriate steps to adapt the project's design during its lifespan to match changing global trade and development contexts (notably, the post-2015 sustainable development agenda and a surge of interest in regional trade integration among African countries). With respect to the evaluation criterion of effectiveness, the main activities were completed as planned with the project exceeding its reach both geographically and concluding well within the established time frame. Participant feedback confirmed high satisfaction with the workshops, though many interviewees expressed scepticism that trade ministry staff were better equipped post-intervention. The evaluation confirmed that the project was efficient in delivering on time and within the budget, with some challenges including delays between project approval and funding allotment, as well as the introduction of Umoja. On sustainability, the evaluation found indications that recommendations from completed trade policy frameworks were in the process of being incorporated into trade regimes in four target countries; furthermore, UNCTAD had already received four requests for follow-up assistance. Interviewees generally indicated satisfaction with the level of national ownership over the work accomplished by the project and confidence that some recommendations would be implemented in their respective countries. The evaluation examined gender equality and human rights mainstreaming and found no recommendations from trade policy framework documents explicitly addressing gender equality, although the project team took into account female representation in the selection of participants. While neither gender mainstreaming nor human rights in trade policy was a project objective, the treatment of equity issues that vulnerable populations faced was clearly addressed in some trade policy framework documents. On partnerships and synergies, the evaluation noted that the project provided opportunities for dialogue between the public and private sectors and for the building of relationships between officials in different ministries as well as with regional entities. The evaluation underscored the close fit between the project and the directions adopted by the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

15. Based on the findings, the evaluators proposed the following recommendations for UNCTAD: (a) allocate more resources to background scoping work in a target country when designing new projects, especially with respect to existing capacity gaps; (b) develop a project results framework that meets current United Nations requirements and can be operationalized by the project team, especially with respect to indicators of achievement and utilization of results-based management terminology; (c) ensure projects are provided with adequate staff and budgetary resources to properly conduct monitoring and evaluation, particularly provision of a feedback loop for project management, instead of heavy reliance on a final project evaluation; (d) commission a post-project evaluation to determine the impacts of its development-oriented trade policy initiatives and their contribution to progress in the attainment of Millennium Development Goals/Sustainable Development Goals; (e) develop a communications strategy at the project design stage that is aligned to the project objective and supportive of wider needs; and (f) improve communication with

national consultants to ensure their full understanding of agency-wide expectations and cross-cutting issues.

## II. Lessons learned

16. Evaluation plays a crucial role in contributing to the enhancement of the impacts and results of UNCTAD support to member States in their efforts towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group and recently updated norms and standards, the secretariat is committed to efforts for enhancing the use of evaluation and improving evidence-based decision-making and accountability. Evaluations provide a comprehensive, systematic, transparent and objective approach to assessing the performance of UNCTAD programmes and work. The secretariat advocates to all stakeholders the importance of applying these lessons to programme planning and strategic decision-making.

17. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities (as summarized in documents TD/B/WP/280, TD/B/WP/273, TD/B/WP/263 and TD/B/WP/254) remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing their programmes and projects. The present report focuses on lessons learned that have been extrapolated from the four evaluations completed within the reporting period.

### Lessons learned on project design

18. Programmatic approaches and sustainability considerations should be captured in the design of all projects to ensure that medium- to long-term results are achieved at the institutional level. It is clear that some pilot interventions with limited budgets cannot cover the entire life cycle of such an approach. Nonetheless, project design should anticipate the need for continuous support until the objective is realized and consider exit strategies as appropriate. Focused support and resources to a smaller number of countries can improve the depth of activities that can be offered within the limited United Nations Development Account project budgets. In addition, the sustainability of actions at the national and regional levels as a follow-up to specific projects must be considered and anticipated at the design stage.

19. Adequate attention and funding directed at monitoring and evaluation is critical for the provision of a feedback loop for project management and heavy reliance on final project evaluations is not sufficient for this purpose. Simple and measurable indicators should be devised for monitoring and reporting purposes. In addition, pragmatic attempts should be made to link programme and project interventions to UNCTAD-wide efforts to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Recent efforts at UNCTAD towards improving results-based management in its technical cooperation and research and analysis pillars are moving in the right direction.

20. Gender mainstreaming should be a cross-cutting theme in the design of projects and programmes. Cross-cutting integration implies that gender equality considerations cover research and analysis, advisory services provided to beneficiary countries, meetings and training that gather together experts and beneficiaries, and country studies, policy advice, action plans and implementation strategies provided to beneficiary countries. Even in cases where programmes and projects were designed without consideration of gender equality, there was always room to integrate gender equality at the project implementation stage.

21. With the revised United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards launched in July 2016, all United Nations evaluations are required to integrate a human-rights based approach. Given UNCTAD mandates, this translates into, inter alia, an equity-based inclusive economic development approach that entails a lens of leaving no one – nations, people and segments of society, especially hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups (including women) – behind. Equity and inclusive development are at the core of the UNCTAD mandate and like gender equality, integrating human rights and equity performance targets into project design should be a key consideration.

22. Appropriate attention needs to be placed on capacity-building, which is complex, time consuming and situation dependent. The necessary customization of a project to accommodate target country characteristics should feature adequate scoping of issues such as counterpart capacity and available means of addressing capacity gaps. Furthermore, advisory services and training have to be properly resourced and creatively delivered to fully build capacity and support development-oriented trade policy reform.

### **Lessons learned on project implementation**

23. Evaluators encourage UNCTAD to work systematically with international, regional and national partners to complement UNCTAD expertise and sustain programme and project results. Continued expansion of partnerships to include the private sector and civil society, especially in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, can lead to economies of scale. Field outposts can help UNCTAD reach its beneficiaries. The presence of a regional office in Addis Ababa has been an advantage for a recently concluded project by boosting working relationships with the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa and channelling requests from member States.

24. Implementation of multi-year technical cooperation projects in a large number of countries necessitates dedicated project teams and an institutional setting that encourage adaptive management with respect to course corrections. This approach allows for purposeful customization of approaches to meet the capacity-building needs of varied national contexts and address the dynamism of trade and development, complexities of development cooperation and various internal and external constraints on the intervention.

25. Training is a key and continuous process especially in the context of trade negotiations. UNCTAD should consider organizing training sessions preceding negotiations or technical meetings as these improve the quality of the resulting intervention outcomes. In addition, closer attention should be paid to the profiles of participants for training to ensure utility and sustainability.

26. Member States prefer short synthesis policy documents, which have proved extremely useful for trade negotiations. It is also important for UNCTAD to ensure that sufficient consultation and pre-validation discussions are held on the documents produced through its projects before presenting and formally validating them during validation workshops.

27. Lastly, no matter how much careful planning, effort and creativity goes into projects, systemic factors within the United Nations system will continue act as internal constraints on project performance until they are resolved at higher levels. Examples of such constraints are the Inspira and Umoja systems and the United Nations practice of allocating budgets for consultant services that are below market fee rates.

## **III. Evaluation plan for 2018–2020**

28. The Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget fulfils an important oversight function through its consideration each year of external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects. The subject of the evaluation is usually in accordance with a three-year evaluation plan that is approved by the Trade and Development Board. Subprogramme evaluations approved by member States are usually undertaken primarily in the first quarter of the year by an evaluation team comprising a professional evaluator supported by two representatives of UNCTAD member States who participate in the evaluations in a personal capacity, bringing their unique expertise, perspectives and experiences to the evaluations. Depending on the nature and scope of the work of a subprogramme and the available budget, a decision may be made at the recruitment stage of the professional (lead) evaluator to also assign an associate evaluator, to obtain complete coverage in terms of expertise and experience related to substantive matters of the subprogramme. Evaluation teams usually present their reports at the Working Party meeting held in the third quarter of the year.

29. In line with the decision of the Trade and Development Board at its fifty-ninth session regarding measures to strengthen results-based management and the evaluation of programmes of work, the Working Party agreed at its sixty-third session to a trial implementation of the approach of ensuring the systematic evaluations of UNCTAD subprogrammes. Accordingly, the Working Party considered the external evaluation of subprogramme 1 in 2013, subprogramme 2 in 2014 and subprogramme 3 in 2015.

30. In accordance with established practice, following Working Party decision 2003/7 of 19 September 2003 (see TD/B/50/12-TD/B/WP/169, chapter I, section B) to invite the secretariat to propose future evaluation plans, the secretariat proposed an evaluation plan for 2016–2018 for consideration by member States at the seventy-first session of the Working Party in 2015. To complete the cycle of subprogramme evaluations, member States approved the evaluation plan for 2016–2018, with consideration of subprogramme 4 to take place in 2017 and subprogramme 5 in 2018.

31. At the culmination of the first cycle of subprogramme evaluations in 2018, the secretariat proposes a continuation of the subprogramme evaluation approach, starting with the evaluation of subprogramme 1 in 2019.

#### **Evaluation plan for 2018–2020**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>
2018	External evaluation of subprogramme 5: Africa, least developed countries and special programmes
2019	External evaluation of subprogramme 1: Globalization, interdependence and development
2020	Conference year – no external evaluation to be considered by the Working Party

## **IV. Seeking a sustainable way to fund evaluations at UNCTAD**

32. Evaluations requested by member States used to be funded by a trust fund project entitled “Strengthening results-based management of UNCTAD programmes”, supported by the Government of Norway.<sup>6</sup> However, as of the end of 2015, no further voluntary contributions for evaluations have been received. As a result, the secretariat has committed to funding the minimum financial requirements for the approved evaluation plan from within existing resources.

33. With the aim of ensuring a more robust evaluation function that better supports continuous improvement efforts, member States are invited to support evaluations through extrabudgetary contributions. These contributions will be utilized to expand the number and coverage of evaluations at UNCTAD, advance efforts towards strengthening the evaluation culture and respond to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

34. The Working Party is invited to submit its conclusions and recommendations to the Trade and Development Board.

<sup>6</sup> To assist UNCTAD with strengthening the results-based management of work programmes, the Government of Norway began providing funds in October 2004 through this trust fund project. The principle objective of the project was to enhance the effectiveness of UNCTAD activities and results-based management through an annual report, in-depth programme evaluations and inter-agency coordination. The project had an initial budget of US\$213,980. The Government of Norway continued its support for the project; in 2004–2014, total funds received were US\$1,123,892.