



**United Nations Conference
on Trade and Development**

Distr.: General
24 June 2019

Original: English

Trade and Development Board
Working Party on the Strategic Framework
and the Programme Budget
Seventy-eighth session
Geneva, 2–4 September 2019
Item 4 (a) of the provisional agenda

Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

GE.19-10401(E)



Please recycle The recycling symbol, consisting of three chasing arrows forming a triangle.



Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects completed between April 2018 and April 2019. The aim is to report on all evaluation activities and to promote accountability and lessons learned. Evaluation synthesis reports are knowledge products and a means to consolidate and share acquired knowledge and strengthen UNCTAD evaluation feedback and learning loops.

2. Evaluations at UNCTAD are conducted against the 2011 Evaluation Policy¹ and the updated 2016 Norms and Standards for Evaluation outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group.² The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions from the work implemented, to 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 of evaluations of UNCTAD activities³ in designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.

I. Summary of evaluation findings

3. The Trade and Development Board, at its sixty-second annual session, requested the UNCTAD secretariat to conduct an independent evaluation of subprogramme 5 on Africa, least developed countries and special programmes.⁴ Using a mixed-methods approach with triangulated data, the evaluation assessed the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability, partnerships and human rights and gender equality aspects of subprogramme 5 in the period 2013–2017.

4. External project evaluations were completed of the following projects supported by the United Nations Development Account:

(a) Project 1415O: Climate change impacts on coastal transport infrastructure in the Caribbean – Enhancing the adaptive capacity of small island developing States;

(b) Project 1415P: Strengthening the capacity of the Economic Community of Central African States to enhance domestic production linkages from the mineral resources sector;

(c) Project 1415R: Strengthening the capacities of developing country policymakers, investment promotion officials and academia in two priority sectors to attract investment for sustainable and inclusive development;

(d) Project 1415L: Supporting Member States in developing and launching sustainable product export strategies through national sustainable product export reviews.

5. Key findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations are described below.

A. External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 5: Africa, least developed countries and special programmes

6. This independent, in-depth evaluation assessed the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of subprogramme 5, as implemented by the Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes between 2013 and 2017. The main findings and recommendations of the evaluation are highlighted below.

¹ www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189.

Note: All websites referred to in footnotes were accessed 12 June 2019.

² www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914.

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

⁴ TD/B/WP/292.

7. The evaluation concluded that the work of subprogramme 5 was making a substantial contribution towards its stated objective of promoting evidence-based national policies and international support measures on trade, economic development and poverty reduction in the countries of focus under the subprogramme. The work of subprogramme 5 had improved the effectiveness of international responses to current and emerging challenges in the field of trade and development while also being relevant to the mandate of UNCTAD on trade and development and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goals 8, 9, 10 and 17, among others, linked to its results during the evaluation period. Notably, during the evaluation period, the Division had provided important inputs on geographical indications, which contributed to negotiations on the African Continental Free Trade Area. The Division also contributed with regard to the establishment of the Djibouti–Ethiopia corridor; policies on trade integration in Ethiopia, the Gambia, Mali, Mozambique, the Niger and Senegal; and advances in fisheries sectors, for example in Mozambique and Uganda.

8. The evaluation highlighted that outputs produced by subprogramme 5 were of high quality and relevant to the mandate of UNCTAD and stakeholder needs, yet the portfolio as a whole was in need of rebalancing in favour of increased technical cooperation, which would help to strengthen synergies across the three pillars of its work. The ripple-effect strategy pursued by subprogramme 5, with research as the core driver, was essentially sound, yet needed to be accompanied by periodic boosters, to sustain momentum towards lasting impacts.

9. Finally, the evaluation concluded that UNCTAD, including subprogramme 5, had recently taken substantial steps towards developing partnerships yet, given the lack of UNCTAD presence on the ground, there was a need to do significantly more with regard to leveraging partnerships for visibility and policy impact. Some progress was observed on human rights and gender equality issues, yet the evaluation concluded that there was a need for an enhanced and systematic human rights and gender equality approach in future programming.

10. On the basis of its observations, the evaluation team presented seven recommendations to the Secretary-General of UNCTAD and the director of the Division. With regard to its activities, the Division was encouraged to rebalance its portfolio and to fine-tune its strategy by placing increasing emphasis on technical cooperation and follow-up support. The evaluation recommended that the Division should make sustainability considerations an integral part of its interventions, by building in thematic continuity in research and programmatic continuity in technical cooperation and ensuring periodic follow-up and synergies in research and technical cooperation interventions. To support this, at the organizational level, the evaluation recommended that UNCTAD should undertake an evaluation to revisit workplans and budgets, to inform interdivisional resource allocations and, together with the Division, should develop strategies for raising extrabudgetary resources to increase the technical cooperation portfolio, to better meet stakeholder needs. UNCTAD should consider a matrix organizational structure for its office in Addis Ababa, and the office should continue to report directly to the Office of the Secretary-General yet should also have stronger linkages and reporting responsibilities to the director of the Division. With regard to increasing partnerships and collaboration at the institutional level, the evaluation recommended the development of an overarching road map, including increased incentives for staff to actively seek collaboration, both in-house and with other United Nations entities; the institutionalization and strengthening of collaborations with other United Nations agencies; and an increased number of United Nations country teams in areas in which UNCTAD carries out substantial work. The evaluation recommended that the Division should improve the results-based monitoring system for the better measurement of outcomes and impacts; involve member States and partner agencies in monitoring and evaluation; and assign specific results-based management roles and responsibilities to staff and partners. Finally, the evaluation recommended that UNCTAD and the Division should increase current efforts and integrate human rights and gender equality issues in interventions, to better deliver on the mandates and commitments of the United Nations.

11. In its management response, the secretariat welcomed the evaluation and accepted all seven recommendations.⁵

B. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account projects

1. External evaluation: Climate change impacts on coastal transport infrastructure in the Caribbean – Enhancing the adaptive capacity of small island developing States (14150)

12. This project, implemented between June 2014 and December 2017, aimed at strengthening the capacity of policymakers, transport planners and transport infrastructure managers in small island developing States in the Caribbean to take appropriate adaptation response measures to climate change impacts on seaports and airports. The project included research outputs, two national case studies in Jamaica and Saint Lucia and the development of a methodology for assessing climate-related impacts and adaptation options in coastal transport infrastructure (seaports and, as appropriate, airports) as a tool for use in other small island developing States, as well as three training and capacity-building workshops.

13. The evaluation concluded that the project was pertinent from both a technical and political point of view and highlighted that only UNCTAD had engaged the region in the kind of research and analysis related to climate change impacts and coastal transportation infrastructure. The evaluation found that the project, as well as its activities and products (workshops and publications), had been well suited to addressing the different regional priorities; had been fully aligned with the mandate of UNCTAD by identifying capacity-building needs and promoting sustainable and resilient transport systems and climate change adaptation for transport infrastructure and operations, in particular in small island developing States; had contributed to several United Nations conferences and summits; and had directly contributed to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goal 9 by promoting resilient infrastructure and Goal 13 by taking action to combat climate change and its impacts.

14. The evaluation concluded that the project could have been underpinned by a more comprehensive logic in order to demonstrate that the results were realistic. In particular, the evaluation noted that the three dimensions of capacity development (individual, institutional and external enabling environment) could have been addressed through a more robust theory of change. The evaluation concluded that the project had contributed to enhancing the capacity of policymakers, transport planners and transport infrastructure managers to effectively plan and develop adaptation measures that enhanced the resilience of coastal transport infrastructure. Notably, the project findings had led to the publication of an article in *Regional Environmental Change* (May 2018), a respected international journal, presenting the key results and some technical elements of the methodology.

15. Despite external difficulties, the project was implemented on time and within budget, and project funds were properly allocated to the expected allotment areas. The project benefited from collaboration with numerous international, regional organization, academic and research institution partners, among others, which created important synergies and added significant value to the project, such as through the leveraging of financial resources in the form of in-kind contributions and the facilitation of dissemination and sustainability.

16. The evaluation concluded that due to the recent finalization of the project, it was too early to draw conclusions about its sustainability, but confirmed that the implemented activities had contributed to generating interest in and increasing awareness of climate change impacts. The evaluation found evidence of the project's contribution to long-term processes triggered as a consequence of the changes in mindset influenced by the activities. The project had not incorporated a thorough gender perspective, neither in its design nor its implementation, in part due to the technical nature of the subject matter. However, efforts had been made to ensure the participation of women during implementation, and there had been many women among the workshop participants and contributing experts.

⁵ TD/B/WP(76)/CRP.1.

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

(a) UNCTAD should systematically develop a more comprehensive theory of change at the project design phase that better explains the causality chain to achieve the objectives and results, and which identifies intermediate effects and assumptions that are not necessarily under the control of the project. A possible outcome could be to include one expected accomplishment for each dimension of capacity-building;

(b) The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs should consider greater flexibility to allow for Development Account funds to assist with administrative issues, given that regular staff movements cannot be avoided or planned;

(c) The Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNCTAD should review their procedures and develop guidelines and tools to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed into planning, monitoring and reporting mechanisms. Project design could include positive actions to ensure equal and active participation by women in the activities; promote the added value of incorporating gender issues into the beneficiaries' work; and include gender-sensitive indicators and targets. Gender experts or representatives may be invited to the activities to ensure ongoing focus on gender issues;

(d) In order to maximize the project's sustainability, UNCTAD should enhance its dissemination strategy at the project outset and/or during its implementation. This could also include targeted activities and identify opportunities to link the project results and methodology with the regular work of UNCTAD;

(e) UNCTAD should continue to promote the replication of the activities, and Development Account follow-up funding could be offered for projects with meaningful follow-up.

2. External evaluation: Strengthening the capacity of the Economic Community of Central African States to enhance domestic production linkages from the mineral resources sector (1415P)

18. This project, implemented between December 2015 and December 2017, was aimed at strengthening the capacity of policymakers, technical specialists and national institutions in countries in the Economic Community of Central African States to enhance domestic production linkages from the mineral resources sector. Chad and the Congo participated in the project. The project also implemented additional activities at the regional level to expand the impact of the project to other countries in the Economic Community.

19. The evaluation concluded that the project was relevant for the countries in the Economic Community, given the low level of linkages between local companies and the mineral sector and existing gaps in member countries concerning the elaboration and implementation of relevant policies and frameworks related to local content and the development of linkages in the mineral sector. Moreover, the evaluation highlighted the comparative advantage of UNCTAD as a partner in this process due to its extensive experience and well-developed network in the mineral sector.

20. The evaluation also concluded that the project was in line with the mandate of UNCTAD, but that the design of the project had been optimistic in its risk assessment and ambitious in its plan to achieve the objectives within the time frame. This could have been addressed through a broader consultation conducted at the project design phase. Although consultations had been undertaken with stakeholders at a high level during the design process, the lack of inclusion of private sector companies and various stakeholders on the ground were considered by the evaluation as shortcomings.

21. The project completed all of the planned activities in two of the three beneficiary countries and implemented additional activities at the regional level, with 99.5 per cent of the allocated budget. However, the evaluation noted that the absence of one of the three beneficiary countries, despite efforts by the project management to include Equatorial Guinea, had led to the redesign of some project activities. The evaluation noted that the UNCTAD project team had nevertheless been successful in finding alternatives, organizing additional activities at the regional level to expand the impact of the project in the Economic Community region and completing the project within the scheduled time frame.

22. Stakeholders rated the quality of the workshops and subjects discussed highly, while acknowledging increased knowledge of local content and the development of linkages. It was difficult for the evaluation to find evidence, within the project's time frame, of whether the acquired knowledge was sufficient and appropriate to enable outcome-level changes. The evaluation noted that there had been a change in law in the Congo as a result of inputs from the project, and that the long-term implications would be visible over time. Partnerships with international and regional institutions had resulted in online training and study tours, considered as a high value addition to the project by participants.

23. Following a project redesign, information platforms for Chad and the Congo had been established that provided all workshop materials but had yet to be completed for effective use by the countries. Task forces, one of the project's outcomes, had been set up, yet the evaluation noted that they did not seem to be operational. Lack of motivation and cohesiveness at the national and regional levels had been raised as concerns and needed to be addressed for strategic policy change. The status quo of the task forces in both beneficiary countries and the feedback from stakeholders was a clear indication that sustainability plans had not been sufficiently developed by beneficiaries. There were also no indications at the national level that the road maps were being implemented. It was likely that interactions with stakeholders during the design process could have helped to build a more realistic approach to sustainable actions.

24. The evaluation noted that despite the efforts made by the project team to emphasize the inclusion of women in national-level policy dialogues and community-level consultations, their participation in the project remained low, at 20.4 per cent. However, efforts had been made to include women at the level of the task forces, resulting in greater participation by women in the task forces in Chad and the Congo. The evaluation concluded that increasing the percentage of women in policy decisions as well as of youth in the extractive sector should be part of a medium and long-term strategy through active and effective communication campaigns. The project had raised the importance of equitable development, including that of human rights, in the extractive sectors, with the overall objective of supporting economic development. The issues related to the protection of the environment had also been discussed during the workshops and highlighted as being among the requirements of multinationals in granting contracts to small and medium-sized enterprises in the oil value chain. The workshops had helped to create awareness and commitment with regard to oil spill issues, and some preventive work was being carried out in this direction. The knowledge of environmental policies of the national task forces had been enhanced through presentations of local, regional and international experiences.

25. Overall, the project was appreciated by stakeholders and instrumental in developing partnerships with regional and international institutions, leading to the organization of study tours that had contributed to the sharing of information, ideas and experiences, capacity-building and discussions on further collaboration. The project had also indirectly helped to initiate communication between government institutions in the participating countries.

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

(a) UNCTAD should consider more in-depth risk analysis and involve various beneficiaries, public and private, in the design of the project to minimize problems and avoid overambitious design;

(b) The Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNCTAD management should develop tailored results-based management approaches for measurement of the effectiveness of capacity-building activities;

(c) UNCTAD should develop more partnerships with regional and international organizations to enable countries in the Economic Community to learn from experiences in other countries;

(d) To increase effectiveness and sustainability, UNCTAD should consider mechanisms and modalities to capacitate more women and encourage their participation in relevant activities.

3. External evaluation: Strengthening the capacities of developing country policymakers, investment promotion officials and academia in two priority sectors to attract investment for sustainable and inclusive development (1415R)

27. This project, implemented between January 2015 and December 2017, aimed at supporting government policymakers, investment promotion officials and academia in identifying, designing and implementing effective investment policies aimed at increasing the level of corporate investment in priority sectors and maximizing the sustainable development contribution of such investment. Project support included several deliverables, such as expert meetings, workshops and regional conferences, all with capacity-building elements; training materials; advisory services; and web-based platforms, including customized UNCTAD databases, an online repository of best practices, based on the customization of existing UNCTAD databases, and an online forum with blogs.

28. The evaluation concluded that the project had been successful in improving the institutional capacity of beneficiary countries. The project had raised awareness of the role that international investment could play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, improved knowledge of best-possible investment policy actions and strengthened the technical capacity of the beneficiary countries to formulate and implement such policy actions. The evaluation noted that the project had anticipated the global importance of sustainable economic and social development through investment even prior to the adoption of the Goals, and showed a high level of relevance. The project closely aligned with the mandate of UNCTAD. The evaluation found that the project contributed to achieving a range of Goals, with the most direct contribution to Goal 17, to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. The relevant targets and indicators related to finance and capacity-building.

29. The evaluation concluded that the project had used resources appropriately, showing a high level of responsiveness to beneficiary country needs; the implementation rate of the budget had reached 88 per cent at the end of the project cycle. Strategic partnerships had also contributed to resource optimization, involving co-financing and the co-organization of events, such as, in 2018, joint workshops with the International Institute for Sustainable Development on investment in infrastructure and public services, held in Nairobi; and a technical workshop with the International Institute for Sustainable Development and the International Institute for Trade and Development, held in Bangkok.

30. The evaluation found that the project had achieved its planned results. In addition, the project had been particularly successful in increasing awareness and understanding, and some unintended positive results had emerged. For example, in one country, the project had contributed to a change in practices beyond the investment policy department (the institutional beneficiary of the project), to involve the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several of the country's embassies.

31. Further, the evaluation concluded that in order to contribute to sustainability, the project had sought to create ownership and laid the foundation for sustaining results through its ongoing engagement with countries through other UNCTAD activities such as the biennial World Investment Forum and the sessions of the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Investment, Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Productive Capacity-building and Sustainable Development. The project had therefore been successful in ensuring the likelihood of the sustainability of project activities, as evidenced by the high to very high ratings on sustainability provided by 68 per cent of project beneficiaries. National stakeholders had acknowledged that to ensure the sustainability of project activities, a considerable challenge lay in the level of institutional capacities, which were largely under the responsibility of national governments. Differences between countries in terms of capacity and institutional continuity clearly affected the sustainability of project results. The evaluation emphasized that more could be done in terms of further follow-up of the activities undertaken as part of the project. A continuation of focused interventions, for example through a second phase of the project, would strengthen the long-term impact and sustainability of the project.

32. The evaluation concluded that the project team had treated gender and human rights in a sensitive manner. The gender and human rights dimensions of investment

policymaking had not figured prominently in the project document, yet the project had adopted a proactive approach to mainstreaming gender and human rights concerns into its activities. Stakeholders and country beneficiaries had not considered gender and human rights to be a core component of the project, yet gender and human rights considerations had figured in presentations and discussions during project-funded events and had been addressed in the project team's research and analysis, as well as advisory services and online exchange platforms. For example, UNCTAD statistics on gender aspects related to international investment agreements had proven effective in showing certain gender-related imbalances. The project team had therefore been successful in initiating discussions between stakeholders at regional conferences, even in politically and culturally sensitive contexts.

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

(a) UNCTAD should develop theories of change for its Development Account projects to further strengthen the project design, even if not required in the Development Account project document template;

(b) The UNCTAD Division on Investment and Enterprise could consider how a future Development Account project might provide for a set of additional, focused beneficiary countries, which would benefit from an increase in follow-up activities, with a view to further improving the sustainability of the project;

(c) The UNCTAD Division on Investment and Enterprise should increase its engagement in research and analysis on the inclusion of gender and human rights aspects in international investment agreements.

4. External evaluation: Supporting Member States in developing and launching sustainable product export strategies through national sustainable product export reviews (1415L)

34. This project, implemented between January 2014 and December 2018, in Angola, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Madagascar, Morocco, Oman, the Republic of Moldova, Senegal and Vanuatu, aimed at improving the ability of public and private stakeholders in developing countries, namely government officials and decision makers from business and civil society, to build national productive and export capacity in sustainable products. This objective would be achieved through three intermediate expected accomplishments that aimed at improving the capacity of public and private stakeholders.

35. The evaluation concluded that, as the potential for exporting green products and services had not been sufficiently addressed in the beneficiary countries to date, the project was pertinent from both a technical and political point of view. The project's activities and products (workshops and publications) had been well suited to addressing the different national and regional priorities and built upon the experiences of UNCTAD. The project had been fully aligned with the mandate of UNCTAD, including contributing to the achievement of, in particular, Goals 8 and 12. The project design had benefited from a thorough analysis of both national and regional specificities. In addition, the project had directly targeted nine countries, and its design responded to a demand-driven and research logic. The project had benefited from the comparative advantages of UNCTAD, and UNCTAD was able to draw extensively on multidisciplinary expertise through its informal network of leading researchers and experts. The evaluation noted that despite some difficulties, mainly related to external factors and limited technical and administrative support, the project had been completed within budget and responded to external difficulties, resource constraints and the changing needs of the beneficiaries.

36. The evaluation concluded that the project had addressed the enhancement of the knowledge of individuals and to some extent the other two dimensions of capacity development, mainly by aligning with existing institutional frameworks in order to maximize effects at the organizational level and collaborating with regional partners that could promote the project results. The project, in particular through the workshops, had contributed to enhancing the capacity of beneficiaries (government officials, policymakers, trade and environment negotiators, the private sector, academia and non-governmental organizations) to effectively plan and develop measures to improve productive and export

capacity in over nine countries. The project had clearly contributed to increasing knowledge, awareness and understanding at the individual level with regard to identifying and selecting sectors for national production and the export of green and/or sustainable products; assessing the policy, regulatory and institutional requirements for supporting the development of selected products; and preparing and adopting recommendations and action plans for building productive and export capacity. Most beneficiaries highlighted that the workshops and the publications had provided crucial information that could be used in their daily work.

37. At the time of the evaluation, there were significant differences between countries with regard to the level of implementation of action plans. Despite the recent finalization of the project, the evaluation found evidence of its contribution to long-term processes that had been triggered as a consequence of the implemented activities. There was evidence that the project had contributed to improving decision-making and planning in the beneficiary countries. The evaluation noted that the achievement of concrete development impacts was particularly interesting in the framework of a project with a strong focus on research. The project's findings had informed and would continue to inform the work of UNCTAD, and synergies were also envisaged at a broader level. The evaluation noted that despite the efforts made, it was necessary to give more publicity to the work done and to more broadly disseminate the publications. At the time of the evaluation, UNCTAD had been making efforts in this direction in its regular work, and this was expected to result in strengthened appropriation by beneficiaries and increased political support.

38. The project had not incorporated a thorough gender or human rights perspective, neither in its design nor its implementation, due to the technical nature of the subject matter. However, efforts had been made to ensure the participation of women during implementation, and there had been many women among the workshop participants.

39. Due to the recent finalization of the project, it was too early to draw conclusions about its sustainability, but the evaluation confirmed that the implemented activities had contributed to generating interest in and increasing awareness of productive and export opportunities for sustainable products. Local ownership had been promoted by involving and consulting stakeholders and the methodology would facilitate longer term planning and investment processes. The project had also facilitated the establishment and strengthening of networks within and among countries and catalysed a number of initiatives to promote sustainability. Partnerships with other development institutions and programmes had allowed for the mobilization of additional resources and the extension of the scope of the project. At least 18 countries had already expressed interest in conducting a national green export review, but extrabudgetary funding would need to be secured to respond positively to these new requests.

40. Based on these findings and conclusions, in addition to recommendations on developing more robust theories of change for UNCTAD projects and on ensuring the development of exit and dissemination strategies during project design and implementation and the development of guidelines and tools in support of improved gender-related considerations in project implementation, the evaluation recommended that UNCTAD should continue to promote the replication of the activities, including through the submission of new project proposals to the Development Account to fund meaningful projects to further build on the achieved results. In particular, UNCTAD should continue to ensure coordination with national and regional partners currently seeking funds to implement actions on the basis of the project findings and methodology. This could include monitoring and implementation follow-up of the action plans, as well as the promotion of pilot projects on the basis of the project recommendations. This would allow for a demonstration of the extent to which a transition to a green economy might introduce constraints on growth or competitive disadvantages. There was significant demand, with at least 18 countries having expressed interest in conducting a national green export review. UNCTAD should seek to establish co-funding schemes with other donors in these countries to meet the demand.

41. Finally, the evaluation recommended that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and/or UNCTAD undertake an evaluation at a more strategic level and with a more comprehensive methodology, in particular to thoroughly investigate the contribution and/or

attribution of Development Account projects, to enrich reporting on results and obtain lessons learned on how to optimize the effectiveness of Development Account projects.

II. Lessons learned

42. Evaluation plays a crucial role by contributing to the United Nations system's enhancement of the impacts and results of its support to Member States in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group and recently updated norms and standards, the UNCTAD secretariat is committed to efforts to enhance the use of evaluation and improve evidence-based decision-making and accountability. Evaluations provide a comprehensive, systematic, transparent and objective approach to assessing the performance of programmes and the work of UNCTAD. The secretariat advocates to all stakeholders the importance of applying such lessons to a broader range of programme management aims at UNCTAD, to feed into UNCTAD programme planning and strategic decision-making.

43. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities (TD/B/WP/291, TD/B/WP/286, TD/B/WP/280, TD/B/WP/273 and TD/B/WP/263) remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing their programmes and projects. This report focuses on lessons learned that have been extrapolated from the five evaluations completed during the reporting period.

A. Programmatic

44. For its research work to have meaningful impacts and contribute to sustained results, UNCTAD needs to allow for adequate time for follow-up support to member States. This might include the redesign of its flagship reports in a manner that provides some continuity with previous reports, such as by including an update on the theme(s) from the previous report(s) or by choosing topics that are more closely interlinked.

45. In leading the United Nations Inter-Agency Cluster on Trade and Productive Capacity, UNCTAD promote joint operations with the combined participation of resident and non-resident agencies. Joint operations developed in the context of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework bring policy coherence and results at the country level. In the future, the role of the Cluster may be further developed as an inter-agency mechanism for responding to envisaged "One United Nations" initiative reforms.

46. Small technical cooperation projects may be an issue from the perspective of both effectiveness, given an inadequate scale to make a difference, and efficiency, since bureaucratic processes remain the same. In this regard, creating a consolidated regional programmatic approach would be beneficial and more appropriate.

B. Project design and sustainability

47. The Development Account projects clearly illustrate the benefits of the strategy of working at national and regional levels. In particular, many achieved concrete results by including specific national case studies. They also demonstrated that working closely with regional partners is an effective way to promote a common vision that, in turn, is able to strengthen a project's results, broaden the dissemination of products and enhance sustainability.

48. The inclusion of project stakeholders, including the private sector, in the design process remains a good practice for project managers, to have a better understanding of the risks involved, as well as of the level of commitment from the beneficiary countries to develop sustainable actions.

49. Several divisions implementing Development Account projects were successful in integrating the project and its activities into the divisional portfolio of activities rather than

creating a stand-alone component of questionable sustainability. In these cases, the projects were also successful in contributing to the objectives of the core products of the divisions.

C. Project effectiveness

50. There is a general assumption that capacity-building activities automatically lead to an increase in knowledge and enable beneficiaries to carry out the tasks for which they have been trained. Multiple observations have shown that a capacity-building project should first ensure that the right person is being trained and second, evaluate the extent to which the knowledge provided has been absorbed. An important lesson, therefore, is that acknowledgement is not sufficient proof of an increase in knowledge, and it is crucial that tools for measuring and testing knowledge be developed for future projects, to assess the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

51. Future Development Account projects should consider the provision of a proper balance of information delivery based on the type of audience involved, which could directly influence the assimilation capacity and effectiveness of the project.

52. Study tours have been highlighted as one of the tools that successfully contribute to increased interaction with participants from other countries, as well as the acquiring of new knowledge.

53. The private sector remains the most important partner and beneficiary of economic development activities, but its participation in projects has been weak. Although the majority of the projects focused more on the government level, constant interaction with end consumers, including the private sector, needs to be maintained.

III. Evaluations at UNCTAD

54. The mandate for conducting, coordinating and overseeing evaluations at UNCTAD is vested in the Evaluation Unit. This mandate covers all programmes and projects under the regular budget and projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are implemented by UNCTAD. The Evaluation Unit undertakes these evaluations in accordance with the requirements of the General Assembly and the Trade and Development Board, and in conformity with the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards for Evaluation. This chapter provides an update on evaluation matters and activities in 2018–2019.

A. Introduction of a new framework and guidelines for the evaluation of projects funded by the Development Account

55. The United Nations Development Account was established in 1997 by the General Assembly as the capacity development programme of the United Nations Secretariat. The Development Account supports the implementation of projects of five United Nations entities and five regional commissions, with the goal of enhancing the capacities of developing countries in priority areas of the United Nations development agenda. In order to strengthen the quality of evaluation reports and the learning from evaluations of Development Account projects, a Development Account evaluation framework was developed in 2018–2019 and will be operationalized for the twelfth tranche of projects. The framework describes the objectives of the Development Account evaluation function as to enable the Development Account to be accountable for the use of resources and to learn from the implementation of projects supported, in order to inform project design under new Development Account tranches and to support the development interventions of the implementing entities, as well as the wider sustainable development process and the achievements under the 2030 Agenda to which they contribute.

56. The new evaluation framework consists of three components, namely project-level evaluations, programme-level evaluations and the generation and use of learning through evaluation, as follows:

(a) Rather than evaluating every project in a tranche, a sample of projects will be evaluated. Evaluating a more limited number of Development Account projects will enable a more rigorous process and more in-depth assessment and analysis of the issues concerned. This will, moreover, free up resources for more complex evaluations at the programme level;

(b) Programme-level evaluations consist of cluster evaluations, ex-post evaluations and meta evaluations and analysis;

(c) A set-up is provided for the use of recommendations through the formulation of a management response by the agencies concerned and ways to follow up on their implementation.

B. Performance of the Evaluation Unit and evaluation quality

57. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, the internal oversight body of the United Nations, conducts a systematic overview of the state of evaluations across 31 United Nations entities in each biennium, to support the strengthening of evaluation at the United Nations. The report of the 2016–2017 biennium was presented to the Committee for Programme and Coordination in June 2019.⁶ Accompanying each biennial overview is a report titled “United Nations Evaluation Dashboard”, which aims to provide an assessment of evaluation at each entity, including frameworks, resources, reports and their quality.⁷ The goal is to support the strengthening of the evaluation function across the Secretariat, by providing the data that management need to determine which aspects of the evaluation function are operating well and where there is room for improvement, while giving due consideration to evaluation resources in both absolute terms and in proportion to the total programme budget. The UNCTAD Evaluation Unit performed satisfactorily in the 2016–2017 assessment, with the following noted in the United Nations Evaluation Dashboard 2016–2107:

(a) Evaluation framework: UNCTAD had robust evaluation systems in place across all indicators, and that a strong evaluation policy, procedures and planning were in place;

(b) Report spending, output and coverage: UNCTAD did not meet the minimum threshold of resources for evaluation, with evaluation expenditure at 0.35 per cent of the programme budget. In comparison, the evaluation expenditure of the International Trade Centre is at 0.54 per cent. The Joint Inspection Unit has indicated a benchmark range of between 0.5 to 3 per cent of organizational post and non-post expenditure as a minimum financial benchmark for carrying out evaluation for learning and accountability purposes;

(c) Report quality: 100 per cent of sampled reports were rated good or very good for their overall quality, suggesting strong evaluation practice in place. There were, however, gaps in the areas of integrating human rights standards into evaluation practice;

(d) Areas for strengthening evaluation: report spending, output and coverage, whereby expenditure on evaluation can be increased to meet a minimum of 0.5 per cent of programme expenditure; and report quality, whereby evaluation reports can more fully meet United Nations Evaluation Group quality standards, including greater integration of gender and human rights dimensions. Recommendations of reports should be actionable and targeted.

C. Updated UNCTAD Evaluation Policy

58. The UNCTAD Evaluation Policy explains key concepts, establishes guiding principles, outlines the main evaluation roles and responsibilities within the institutional framework and delineates the evaluation processes, as well as the mechanisms for the implementation of the Policy.

⁶ A/74/67.

⁷ <https://oios.un.org/page?slug=evaluation-report>.

59. The decision to revise the Evaluation Policy reflects the important changes that have taken place at UNCTAD, in the United Nations system and in the broader evaluation community since 2011, such as the 2030 Agenda, which necessitates follow-up and review processes that examine progress toward achieving the Goals; the ongoing United Nations reform introduced by the Secretary-General; the 2016 revision of the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards for Evaluation; and the reinvigorated approach to results-based management at UNCTAD. For example, the 2016 revision to the Norms and Standards for Evaluation includes four new norms on internationally agreed principles, goals and targets; human rights and gender equality; national evaluation capacities; and professionalism, in addition to a stronger emphasis on the utility and use of evaluation. The revision will also take into consideration feedback from the recent biennial overview and United Nations Evaluation Dashboard of the Office of Internal Oversight Services. The revised policy is expected by the second half of 2019.

D. Evaluation plan for 2020

60. At its seventy-sixth session, the Working Party requested the secretariat to continue its subprogramme evaluation approach after the fifteenth session of the Conference (UNCTAD XV) and to focus on streamlining costs and fundraising extrabudgetary resources for this purpose, taking into account the outcome of the review of the evaluation findings at its seventy-eighth session. An external in-depth evaluation is not proposed for 2020 in view of the preparations for and activities associated with UNCTAD XV. The evaluation plan for 2020 will include a number of United Nations Development Account projects set to conclude in 2019–2020, in addition to bilaterally funded projects due for either a midterm or a final evaluation, such as the European Union–UNCTAD joint programme for Angola, Train for Trade II.
