

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

Independent project evaluation:

***“Fostering the development of “green” exports
through Voluntary Sustainability Standards
(VSS) in Asia and the Pacific”
(Development Account Project 1617AI)****

Independent Evaluation Unit
September 2022

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UNCTAD/OSG/INF/2022/4

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

APFSD	Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development
DITC	Division on International Trade and Commodities (UNCTAD)
EA	Expected Accomplishment
EMU	Evaluation Monitoring Unit (UNCTAD)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
ITC	International Trade Centre
ISEAL Alliance	Global membership association for credible sustainability standards
LOAF	Lao Organic Agriculture Forum
MSG	Melanesian Spearhead Group
NAP	National Action Plan
NGER	National Green Export Review
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SECO	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (Switzerland)
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDA	United Nations Development Account
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UN-ESCAP	United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFSS	United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
VCO	Virgin Coconut Oil
VSS	Voluntary Sustainability Standards

Executive Summary

Introduction

This independent final project evaluation covers the UNCTAD project *Fostering the development of "green" exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) in Asia and Pacific* funded by the United Nations Development Account (UNDA; Project Code 1617AI). The project is aimed at strengthening capacities of selected countries in the Asia and Pacific region to make the best use of VSS as a tool to foster the development of green export sectors which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It covers three interrelated areas of intervention and corresponding activities, with focus on three countries in the region, namely Lao PDR, the Philippines and Vanuatu. The project was implemented from February 2017 to August 2020 with an approved budget of \$520,000.

This final evaluation of the project has the following main objectives: (i) assess the degree to which the desired project results have been realized and (ii) identify good practices and lessons learned from the project that could feed into and enhance the implementation of related interventions. The evaluation fulfils accountability purposes and provides and lessons learned to country level project stakeholders, UNCTAD management, the Development Account Programme (Capacity Development Programme Management Office) of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), as well as UNCTAD's member States at large. The assessment leads to practical recommendations for different project stakeholders to facilitate decision making with respect to: (i) the way forward beyond the closure of the current project in the focus countries as well as (ii) eventual future projects in this field.

The assessment of the project has been structured in accordance with the standard evaluation criteria, examining the following: the relevance of the project (including the degree of country ownership); the implementation approach used and to what extent the activities have been carried out in an efficient manner; the results (effectiveness), to what extent there is progress towards the planned outcome and impact and whether the results are likely to be sustainable. Moreover, the assessment covers cross-cutting themes, among which the dimensions of gender equality and human rights.

A mixed-method approach was used, covering data gathering and analysis to draw conclusions and recommendations based on the evaluation findings. Due to the Covid-19 context, the assignment was entirely home-based and spread over a period much longer than initially envisaged. Whereas meeting the key stakeholder face-to-face in the margin of the regional workshop (EA 3) was initially planned, the fact that this was not possible is considered not to have affected the evaluation findings nor the overall quality and usefulness of the evaluation. To the extent the final project report includes case studies for each of the beneficiary countries, data emanating from the evaluation de facto complement the data on the country level efforts as per these case studies and also provide the stakeholder perceptions on the results. All interviews were conducted via skype/whatsapp. By following a participatory approach, the different stakeholders were given the opportunity to share their perception on the overall performance of the project including its implementation strategy. The evaluation was conducted over the period May - October 2020.

Findings

In the VSS logo used by UNCTAD, it captures its VSS approach in the form of the following interrelated cornerstones:

- research and analysis
- policy dialogue
- inter-agency collaboration.

The project under review constituted a pilot project, aimed at developing an analytical instrument (VSS Assessment Toolkit) and testing the same in three selected countries in the Asia-Pacific, namely Lao PDR, the Philippines and Vanuatu. In accordance with the above cornerstones, the findings are as follows:

Research and analysis

UNCTAD developed a tool that has been tailored to and tested in the three beneficiary countries; the tool has been finalized based on this pilot experience and put on line as UNCTAD service offering (for now inside project web pages). Whereas publicly accessible, the tool is primarily UNCTAD's methodology when advising countries on the keys steps to foster the adoption and use of VSS (subject to country requests and funding). UNCTAD considers its methodology complementary to other methodological approaches (such as those of its UNFSS partners) The tool focuses on collecting and analysing the perception of stakeholders targeting selected agricultural commodities and particularly the environmental dimension of VSS (organic) that is expected to result in premium prices (economic dimension). The social dimension of VSS (such as decent working conditions and no child labour) is not emphasized in the approach.

Policy dialogue

The pilot testing of the tool in the three countries resulted in country studies that were to guide priority setting of actions to foster the adoption and use of VSS. The project brought together the core public and private sector stakeholders in the selected agricultural commodity/theme, in order to reach consensus on the priorities, jointly identify and plan the multiple actions, including agreeing on respective responsibilities pertaining to the implementation thereof. The ensuing National Action Plans take different forms in each of the three countries and were in different stages at the moment of this evaluation. Whereas the implementation thereof is outside the scope of the project, it is important to note that they are anchored to national strategies (sector specific or thematic, such as the country's wider national sustainable development strategies). While not 'automatic', the latter is expected to contribute to the likely use of the project results beyond its closure.

Inter-agency collaboration

The tool development and its pilot testing mainly involved UNCTAD itself. Notwithstanding good intentions, collaboration with others (sister UNFSS agencies, other partners) was pursued

but remained limited. A Steering Committee - if established – might have fostered wider collaboration. To carry the work forward at country level and taking into consideration complementary mandates, inter-agency collaboration is considered important at the current juncture, if the strategic aim is to effectively pool resources and synchronize efforts of different agencies.

Recommendations

The findings resulted in the following recommendations (see Section 9 for explanatory notes regarding each of the recommendations):

Recommendations to UNCTAD

1. To feature UNCTAD's work on VSS to foster 'green' trade, related tools and inter-agency cooperation more prominently among its core themes on its main web site.
2. To decide on the human resources needed to design and implement the follow-up of this pilot project, including also the wider use of the tool developed and tested in this pilot project.
3. To clarify for whom the VSS Toolkit developed and tested through the project is most useful as basis for deciding on its dissemination strategy.
4. To present the findings of the project to the UNFSS partners, in view of seeking interest in strengthening collaboration regarding country level capacity building support, both as follow-up of the policy work done in the three countries and through the development of new projects elsewhere.

Recommendation to UNCTAD in consultation with the three beneficiary countries

5. To ensure a clear hand-over of the project at its closure (a "conclusive exit").

Recommendation to UNCTAD/UN-DESA

6. To include in the project design format/instructions the formulation of an exit strategy at the start of the last year of project implementation.

Recommendation to UN-DESA

7. To review to what extent budget rules can allow, on an exceptional basis and if required, the extension of the use of (part of) the budget balance for a limited period to ensure a conclusive exit of the project.
8. To encourage the development of Development Account project proposals that cover multi-agency cooperation and multi-funding initiatives.

1. Introduction

This independent final project evaluation covers the UNCTAD project *Fostering the development of "green" exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) in Asia and Pacific* funded by the United Nations Development Account (UNDA; Project Code 1617AI). The project is aligned to statements and goals emanating from high level international fora that recognize the role of international trade to foster inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction. It is in this context that the use of VSS is considered among the strategic actions to be pursued by countries in order to promote inclusive and sustainable growth of trade and thus move forward on the road towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Section 2 below covers a detailed description of the context in which the project was developed and implemented.

The current evaluation is an end-of-project evaluation as per the standard procedures of UN Development Account funded projects and follows its Project Evaluation Guidelines (October 2019). Section 5 below describes in detail the purpose and scope of the evaluation that has been conducted over the period May - October 2020 (i.e., longer than initially planned given delays related to Covid-19).

In terms of its expected users and use, the evaluation is carried out as a regular procedure in the spirit of providing accountability and lessons learned to country level project stakeholders, UNCTAD management, the Development Account Programme (Capacity Development Programme Management Office) of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), as well as UNCTAD's member States at large. The assessment is expected to result in practical recommendations for different project stakeholders to facilitate decision making with respect to: (i) the way forward beyond the closure of the current project in the focus countries as well as (ii) eventual future projects in this field.

2. Project context

There has been growing demand for sustainable or "green" products and services in the global market. These cover a wide range of products and also services that are produced, processed and marketed in a sustainable manner by applying, e.g., more energy efficient and/or low carbon emission methods, using sustainable production/harvesting approaches (such as organic food production, sustainable fishing, sustainable timber/natural fibres' harvesting), and offering sustainable services such as ecotourism. In addition to environmental dimensions, there is increasingly attention to other aspects also included under sustainability concerns, in particular production in accordance with international labour standards, reflecting gender equality principles and basic human rights in general. Goods and services under the common denominator "green products" have demonstrated higher growth and profitability rates than their conventional "brown" equivalents, as many consumers worldwide are increasingly willing to pay more for sustainable products. To illustrate, worldwide sales of organic food increased from US\$ 15.2 billion in 1999 to US\$ 95 billion in 2018 (www.statista.com, 2020).

Based on the notion that international trade is an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction¹, this growing global demand for “green” products provides an opportunity for developing countries to increase their share in the production and exports thereof as one of the avenues to foster inclusive growth and thus contribute to the achievement of their Sustainable Development Goals. However, the “green” segments of exports from developing countries represent just a small fraction of conventional (“brown”) exports.

The project seeks to foster the use of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) as a tool to develop and expand “green” exports. VSS are standards specifying the requirements to be met as regards a product/process addressing economic, environmental and social sustainability concerns, including respect for basic human rights, health and safety of workers, gender equality, and environmental impacts. These standards are voluntary (thus different from mandatory measures) and certified by third parties. They are expected to benefit small-scale producers in developing countries in the sense of improving their production/processing techniques and product/service quality, thus facilitating their participation in high(er)-value added chains and markets. Producing for “green” market niches and obtaining premium prices is thus expected to generate employment and income opportunities, in particular for rural poor and including women. There are reported to be at present more than 450 VSS in the global market, many of which apply to agricultural commodities exported by developing countries such as coffee, cocoa, tea, bananas, sugar, cotton, soya beans and palm oil. Illustrations of VSS and corresponding certifications in, for example, the coffee sector are Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ.

Notwithstanding the above opportunities, there are information gaps thereon. Moreover, compliance with the VSS in developing countries faces challenges, among which producers having to deal with possibly higher production costs to meet VSS requirements, the costs involved in certification and also gaps in country level certification capacities. The project under review aims at addressing some of these challenges, with focus on reducing information gaps and promoting a holistic, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach in order to achieve policy coherence and effective coordination of VSS-related actions at the national level in the Asia and Pacific region, in particular in the three targeted countries.

3. The project

Objective, coverage and timeframe

As mentioned in the Introduction, the ultimate objective of the project is to strengthen capacities of selected countries in the Asia and Pacific region to make the best use of VSS as a tool to foster the development of green export sectors which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It covers three interrelated areas of intervention and corresponding activities, with focus on three countries in the Asia and Pacific region, namely Lao PDR, Philippines and Vanuatu selected based on formal and informal requests (cf. project

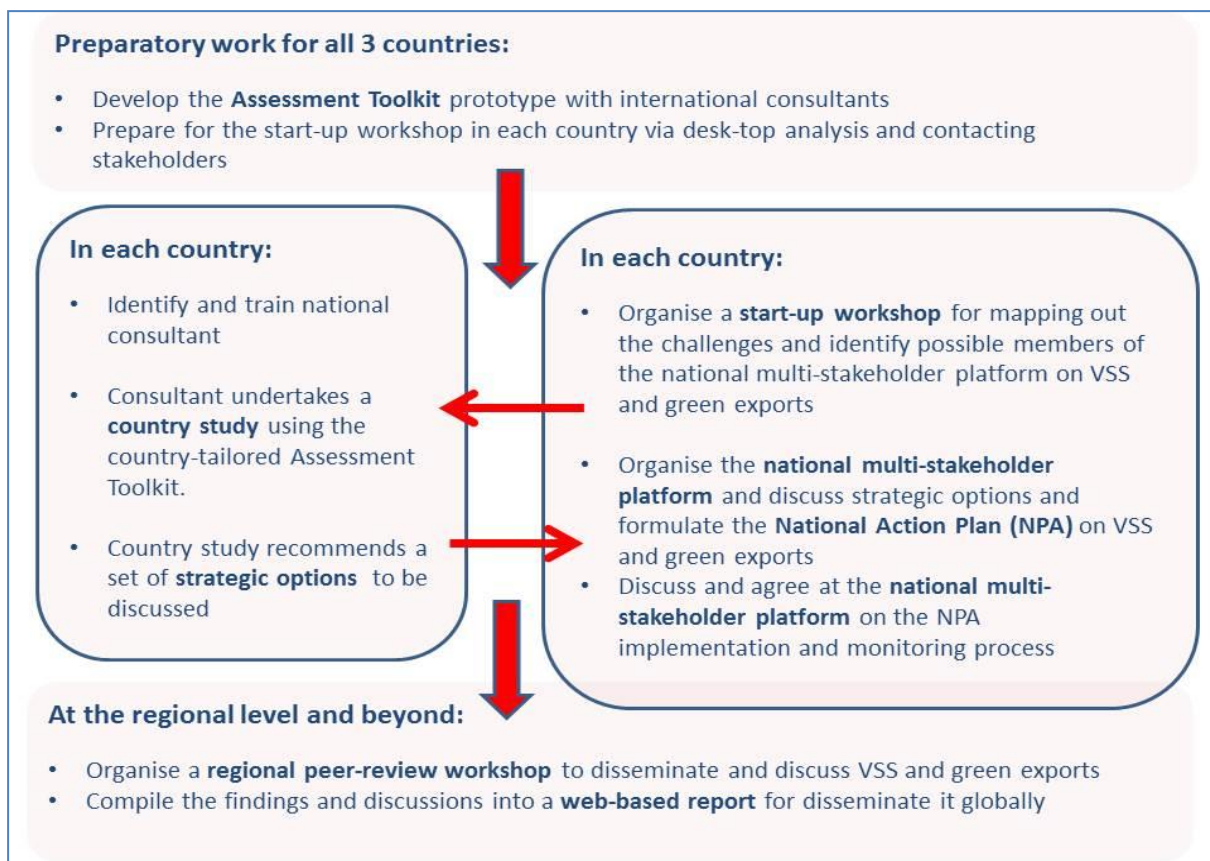
¹ See *inter alia* the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the outcome of the 3rd International Conference on Financing for Development in 2015 (the Addis Action Agenda) to which reference is made in the project document.

document, p. 4 summarized below). For the precise and complete description of the project structure, reference is made to Annex 2 (detailed Results Framework).

Summary of the project structure

<i>Expected Accomplishments (EA) or Outputs</i>		<i>Main activities/steps as per the project document</i>
EA 1	Increasing understanding of national stakeholders on the importance of VSS to promote green exports and sustainable development objectives in the 3 focus countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Development of Assessment Toolkit *Fact-finding mission to each of the 3 focus countries *Launching workshop (3 countries)
EA 2	Strengthening national capacities to develop and implement strategic actions pertaining to the use of VSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Country study (guided by the assessment toolkit) covering a comprehensive appraisal of key challenges and concerns, including market access/entry conditions, regulatory and institutional conditions as well as gender implications surrounding VSS), resulting in strategic options; *Establishment of a national multi-stakeholder and multi-sector platform that is to discuss and evaluate the strategic options recommended in the country study (workshop) *Agreement on National Action Plan (NAP) and related advice in support of NAP implementation
EA 3	Increasing understanding at the regional level, aimed disseminating the VSS experience and lessons of the three focus countries to a larger number of developing countries in the region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *One regional peer-review workshop to discuss findings and experiences of the three focus countries including sharing the same with other developing countries in the region (that is expected to result in expanding VSS use in the region) *Preparation of a comprehensive report on VSS and green exports

The figure below (reproduced from the project document) captures, in essence, what the project intended to do and achieve with the available resources.



Source: project document, p. 14

The project started in February 2017, had an initial estimated duration of three years (up to December 2019) but was granted an initial extension up to end May 2020 (to enable the regional peer-review workshop to take place as a side event of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development/APFSD envisaged for end March 2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this planned Forum and hence also the project workshop could not take place as planned. The project is operationally completed by 31 August 2020 as per the request for extension submitted to UN DESA in May 2020 (approved).

Project partners

At the country level, the following counterpart organizations acted as national focal points of the project:

1. Lao PDR: Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry;
2. Philippines: Department of Trade and Industry (DTI);
3. Vanuatu: Department of Industry (DoI).

The project is implemented by UNCTAD in collaboration with, at the global level, the member agencies of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS), covering other than UNCTAD (where its secretariat is based) the following UN agencies: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Trade Centre (ITC), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). At the regional level the project is also working closely with the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and

the Pacific (UN-ESCAP; Trade, Investment and Innovation Division), in particular as regards the organization of the national multi-stakeholder platform meetings, as well as the (planned but cancelled) regional peer-review conference. Similarly, there has been cooperation with a staff at the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as regards the initial development of the toolkit - later finalized by an affiliate of the Overseas Development Institute in cooperation with Manchester University. Cooperation with entities outside the UN system includes the ISEAL Alliance (an association of sustainability standards operating globally), and with other non-governmental organizations and private sector bodies at country/global level.

Synergies with related efforts

The project builds on prior efforts by UNCTAD, in particular the work carried out under UNFSS (see above) in India, China and Brazil covering the establishment of multi-stakeholder platforms on VSS, as well as UNFSS publications to which UNCTAD contributed, in particular the 2019 (second) UNFSS flagship report titled ‘Meeting Sustainability Goals: Voluntary Sustainability Standards and the role of government’. Also, UNCTAD’s National Green Export Review (NGER) work is reported to have guided the project, using NGER’s framework for assessing the national potential to develop “green” export sectors. In the case of Vanuatu, the project could use the findings of the National Green Export Review/NGER for Vanuatu (2016) under a previous project (coded 1415L).

Financial and human resources

Budget

Of the total approved budget of US\$ 520,000, project expenditures as at October 2020 totalled US\$ 439,865, which corresponds to an overall implementation ratio of 85%.² The budget breakdown by EA and budget item is summarized below, covering both the planned budget and actual expenditures/commitments. There is no information on the breakdown of expenditures by focus country (Lao PDR, Philippines and Vanuatu).

Planned budget and actual expenditures/commitments by project component

<i>EA</i>	<i>Total planned (US\$)</i>	<i>Total planned (%)</i>	<i>Total actual as at 1 October 2020 (US\$)</i>	<i>Total actual as at 1 October 2020 (% of total expenditures)</i>
EA 1	223,125	43	236,560	54
EA 2	124,875	24	154,096	35
EA 3	158,200	30	35,995	8
Evaluation/other	13,800	3	13,214	3
Total	520,000	100	439,865	100

Planned budget and actual expenditures/commitments by budget line

² Attention is drawn to the fact that this budget overview is based on the status as at 1 October 2020. It is possible that, at the moment of financial project closure, there are some minor variations in the actual expenditures figures.

Budget code/item	Total planned (US\$) ³	Total planned (%)	Total actual as at 1 October 2020 (US\$)	Total actual as at 1 October 2020 (% total expend.)
015 General temporary assistance (HQ)	33,000	6.4	31,748	7.2
105 Consultants and experts	131,800	25.4	113,549	25.8
115 Staff travel	94,500	18.2	104,458	23.7
120 Contractual services	104,000	20.0	62,700	14.3
125 General operating expenses	4,625	0.8	221	< 0.1
145 Workshops/ study tours (Grants and contributions)	152,075	29.2	127,190	28.9
Total	520,000	100	439,865	100
Balance (based on budget status as at 1 Oct. 2020)				US\$ 80,135
Implementation ratio				85%

Human resources

The project was managed by a HQ-based Project Manager who is staff of UNCTAD's Trade Analysis Branch within the Division on International Trade and Commodities, and implemented together with another staff (assistant economic affairs officer) of the branch.⁴ Short-term international consultants were recruited for VSS Assessment Toolkit development and training of the three (3) national consultants (latter conducted the country analysis through local customization of the toolkit). Contractual services included other HR inputs (such as for web design, interpretation in workshops, report editing and translation).

4. Evaluation purpose

Scope

The main purpose of this end-of-project evaluation is to assess in a systematic and objective manner project design and implementation, the latter covering the achievements against the intended outcomes and results as set out in the project's logical framework.

Initially the evaluation was to cover the entire duration of the project, i.e., from February 2017 to May 2020. Whereas originally foreseen to include also the peer-review workshop in Bangkok (March 2020), this event could not take place due to the Covid-19 outbreak. In accordance with the extension of the project duration, the evaluation now covers the duration

³ As per the project document and including a marginal reallocation in the first year of implementation (increase by US\$8,000 of budget line 015 and corresponding decrease by US\$8,000 of budget line 105).

⁴ Staff in charge of project meanwhile has moved to a different Branch within UNCTAD, but is continuing its management up to the end of the project.

of the project from February 2017 up to and including its operational closure as at end August 2020.

Objectives

This final evaluation of the project has the following main objectives: (i) assess the degree to which the desired project results have been realized and (ii) identify good practices and lessons learned from the project that could feed into and enhance the implementation of related interventions.

Questions

The assessment of the project has been structured in accordance with the standard evaluation criteria, examining the following: the relevance of the project (including the degree of country ownership); the implementation approach used and to what extent the activities have been carried out in an efficient manner; the results (effectiveness), to what extent there is progress towards the planned outcome and impact and whether the results are likely to be sustainable. Moreover, the assessment covers cross-cutting themes, among which the dimensions of gender equality and human rights.

Accordingly, the evaluation is guided by the following six core questions:

Q1. *To what extent and how did the project design and implementation properly reflect and address the development and strategies of the selected countries (**relevance**) and to what extent and how are the local stakeholders involved in implementation (**ownership**)?*

Q2. *What are the project's key achievements in terms of progress towards the intended results (**effectiveness**) and what is the likelihood for the project to achieve the intended objective (**potential impact**)? Is there evidence of any positive and negative changes produced by the project, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended, in particular against relevant SDG targets? Are there catalytic effects of the project at both the national and regional levels?*

Q3. *Has the project "done things right" in terms of inputs covering: adequacy of human and financial resources; timeliness and quality of inputs; quality and adequacy of planning and monitoring (**efficiency**)?*

Q4. *What is the likelihood that results/benefits will continue after the project ends (**likely sustainability**)? Is there evidence that beneficiary countries are committed to continue working towards the project objectives beyond the end of the project?*

Q5. *To what extent were a gender mainstreaming strategy and, if appropriate, a human rights-based approach incorporated in the design and implementation of the project, and can results be identified in this regard (**cross-cutting issues**)?*

Q6. *To what extent has coordination with related efforts (internally) and also partnering with other public and private sector organizations (external complementarities/synergies) enabled or enhanced the project results and the likely sustainability thereof? Did the project facilitate other partnerships among national or regional stakeholders (i.e., beyond the partnerships that the project itself engaged in)? (**synergies and partnerships**)?*

5. Methodology of the evaluation

Approach

The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the UNDA Project Evaluation Guidelines (October 2019) as well as UNCTAD's Evaluation Policy (December 2011) and followed a theory-based approach, guided by the project results framework (attached as Annex 2) and the core evaluation questions. The evaluation matrix (attached as Annex 4) followed the six core questions listed under Section 4 above and guided the interviews of the different stakeholders (adapted to the specific role of the different stakeholders in the project).

Due to the Covid-19 context, the assignment was entirely home-based and spread over a period much longer than initially envisaged. Whereas meeting the key stakeholder face-to-face in the margin of the regional workshop (EA 3) was initially planned, the fact that this was not possible is considered not to have affected the evaluation findings nor the overall quality and usefulness of the evaluation.

A mixed method was used, covering data gathering and analysis to draw conclusions and recommendations based on the evaluation findings. To the extent the final project report includes case studies for each of the beneficiary countries, data emanating from the evaluation de facto complement the data on the country level efforts as per these case studies and also provide the stakeholder perceptions on the results.

Regarding the provision of information, at the start of the evaluation exercise a comprehensive list of project related documentation was made timely available by the PM. This list was later on complemented with the requested updated budget details, and also meanwhile completed remaining project deliverables (the report on VSS and green exports and the draft final project report).

Based on a list provided by the Project Manager, the Chief of UNCTAD's Evaluation Monitoring Unit introduced the evaluator end September 2020 to the main stakeholders through an introductory email, based on which the interviews were scheduled by the consultant. These covered, in addition to UNCTAD staff (two directly involved in project work and one staff of the UNFSS Secretariat homed in UNCTAD: the three chief counterparts (Project Focal Points) in each of the focus countries as well as some other stakeholders at country level involved in the project activities (two in case of the Philippines); delegates of the missions in Geneva to the extent they were directly involved in project work (the case of Vanuatu), one national expert involved in implementation (to the extent only one responded to the - repeated - request for meeting) and the main external partners involved in project activities

(UNFSS/ITC/ISEAL/ESCAP/other partners – see Annex 6 for the complete list of organizations and persons interviewed).

All interviews were conducted via skype/whatsapp. By following a participatory approach, the different stakeholders were given the opportunity to share their perception on the overall performance of the project including its implementation strategy.

Given the relatively small number of stakeholders, one-to-one skype interviews were preferred to an email-based survey of project stakeholders (given the risk of late response or non-response to such survey). It proved challenging to get a response from some parties (in particular from stakeholders at the national level) notwithstanding multiple reminders. Also, as communication (skype/whatsapp) with one of the national counterparts proved to be complicated, the approach of last resort was to have an exchange via email. Overall, despite the need for reminders and also rescheduling to adjust to the availability of the different respondents, the evaluation was able to touch base with the main actors involved in the project.

Summing up, the evaluation process covered the following main steps:

- Document review (throughout the evaluation process);
- First draft of inception report (May 2020);
- Evaluation postponed to September 2020 by UNCTAD (given delays due to Covid-19 and the related project extension until end August 2020);
- Updated and final version of inception report (September 2020);
- Introduction of evaluation consultant by UNCTAD to project stakeholders (23 September 2020);
- Planning and conducting skype/whatsapp-based interviews with the main stakeholders of the project (most of which took place in the first two weeks of October 2020);
- Submission of the draft evaluation report (28 October 2020);
- Submission of the final evaluation report (20 November 2020) reflecting comments received from UNCTAD.

Finally, in conformity with the UNCTAD and UNDA Guidelines, the evaluator sought to extract gender mainstreaming related data from both the document review and the interviews with the project stakeholders. Moreover, the assessment covers some human rights related dimensions (as per the UNCTAD guidelines) to the extent relevant in the context of this project. Moreover, also in conformity with the same guidelines, there were no ethical concerns in this evaluation to the extent the evaluator acted in her own capacity as independent evaluator (not attached to any organization that could present a conflict of interest and having not worked with the project in any capacity).

6. Findings

6.1 Project design

Context analysis

The project document starts with a detailed description of the context, defining VSS and highlighting both the opportunities when using VSS and challenges faced by developing countries to seize these opportunities (Section 1.1 of the project document). It also presents in detail how the project is aligned to UNCTAD's recent Strategic Frameworks and mandate to work in the field of voluntary standards (Section 1.2) and how the project is linked to the SDGs (Section 1.4).

Its comparative advantage in the field of VSS and "green" exports is in particular linked to its founding role and membership of the UN Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) established in 2013 together with 4 other UN agencies (FAO, ITC, UNEP and UNIDO). UNFSS conducted analytical work (resulting in a number of flagship publications on VSS) and also supported the creation of multi-stakeholder platforms in a number of countries (India; China; Brazil). Reference is also made to UNCTAD's National Green Export Reviews (NGER) that constitute an analytical framework for identifying green export potential. In brief, the current project is based on these prior efforts and seeks to expand these to more countries (3 in the case of this project) through supporting multi-stakeholder dialogue, development and pilot testing of an assessment tool, and strategy cum action plan development. It also aims at providing advice in the implementation thereof. To the extent the 4 UNFSS partner agencies are explicitly listed as cooperating entities in the project, the latter can be considered integral part of UNFSS' work plan.

Target countries

While the description of the context and mandate (Sections 1.1 and 1.2) is general, information on the context in the beneficiary countries is provided in Section 1.3 (Country demand and target countries). The genesis of the country selection is reported to be 'formal or informal requests' (p.4). There is no mention if the 3 countries were selected among more countries in the Asia and Pacific region eventually having requested support to green export development through VSS. It is understood that

- in the case of Vanuatu, there was a possibility to complement prior related work of UNCTAD, i.e., a National Green Export Review that already identified priority sectors and through which stakeholder groups were established. The latter was to facilitate the establishment of the national multi-stakeholder platform on VSS.
- regarding Lao PDR, the project was also a response to an opportunity to complement another project, in this case a UN Delivering as One initiative bringing together UNCTAD, ITC, UNIDO, ILO and UNOPS, to support sustainable tourism, cleaner production and export capacity (funded by Switzerland/SECO). Considering the export potential of organically and sustainably harvested products, the project aimed to support the application of VSS in this regard.
- with respect to the Philippines, the project was to build on the country's VSS experience regarding different export products (coconut oil, bananas, pineapples, tuna) and bring together rather segmented practices by supporting the establishment of a national multi-stakeholder platform on VSS and green exports with a view to conduct a

'comprehensive and holistic assessment' of the impact of VSS on 'market access improvement and sustainable development' (p.5).

Problem analysis, stakeholder analysis and capacity assessment

In the problem analysis (Section 1.5) emphasis is put on lack of information/analysis and of a multi-sector and multi-stakeholder framework aimed at coordinating VSS related actions at national level. It is recognized that there are different experiences (referring even to a 'proliferation of VSS within and across product sectors'), but drawing *inter alia* attention to the need for multi-sector coherence and coordination. The schematized problem tree (p.7) highlights the main challenges at producer, institutional and policy level that affect the ability of developing countries in general to maximize the benefits from VSS application. In terms of the country specific situation and gaps (Section 1.6), these are generally described for each of the three selected countries and result in the same expected outputs for each country: a country case study, a multi-stakeholder platform on VSS and a National Action Plan on VSS. Emphasis has thus been on the introduction of a *separate* VSS related strategy albeit aligned to existing plans and platforms, among which the national action plan for green exports in Vanuatu, and, in the case of the Philippines, a multi-stakeholder body for promoting sustainable development.

Implementation strategy

The starting point guiding the project interventions is the finding of prior studies that the application of VSS, notwithstanding its potential trade, social and environmental impact, is not easy for producers in developing countries, given capacity gaps. The project's way of addressing this at country level is by focusing on increasing understanding on VSS (output 1), improving capacity of multi-stakeholders at policy/strategy level (output 2). Finally, output 3 brings understanding and information sharing to the regional level within the spirit of regional upscaling (and beyond) of VSS efforts.

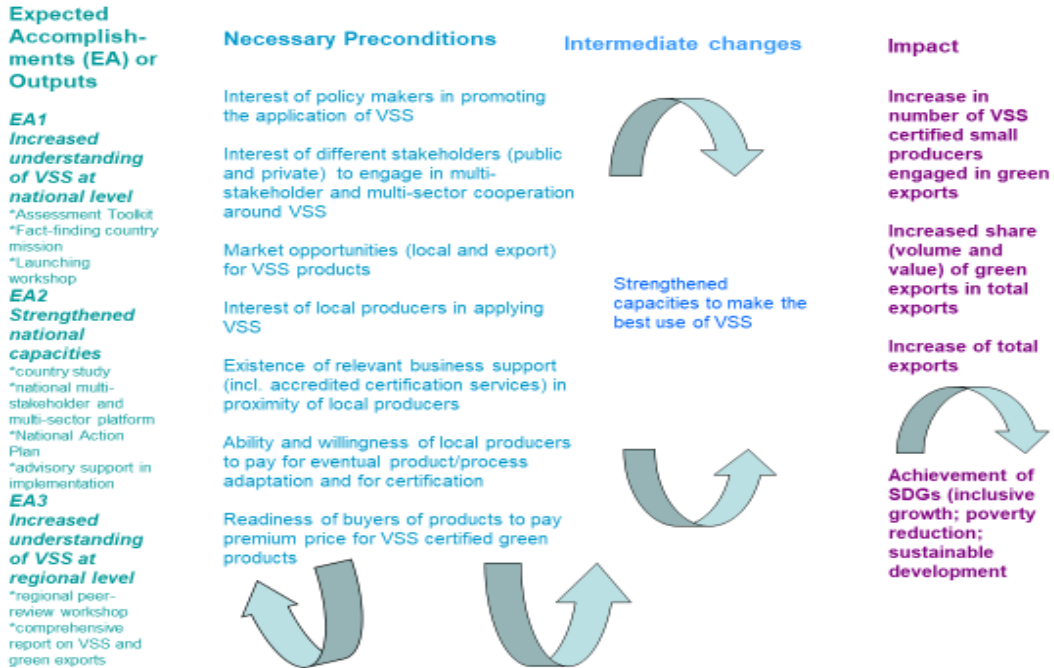
Based on the structure and intervention logic of the project, the evaluator reconstructed the project's Theory of Change (ToC, see Figure 1 below), identifying the project's causal and transformational pathways from project outputs to expected impact. It schematizes also the preconditions (constituting drivers or barriers - some of which are outside the control of the project, yet could affect project performance). Regarding results, a distinction is made between intermediate changes expected to occur by the end of the project as well as expected impact in the longer term.

The project achievements cover in essence the output level and their short-term effects (intermediate changes), with project interventions focused at the upstream/macro level: situation analysis resulting in a study (*Phase 1*) discussed and validated by a multi-stakeholder forum, leading to, at country level, a National Action Plan (*Phase 2*), followed by, at regional level, a peer-review workshop and, at global level, a comprehensive report for global dissemination at the end of the project (*Phase 3*).

The first tangible deliverable planned to be produced as per the project strategy is an assessment toolkit to be customized and used by the national consultants when conducting

the situation analysis resulting in a comprehensive country study for each of the three countries. Reference is made to the development of this tool, which assumes that the predecessor interventions to which reference is made in the document (India; Brazil; China) covered support to the establishment of multi-stakeholder platforms but did not include country assessments using such tool/template. While not explicitly mentioned again under Phase 3, the tool is expected to be integral part of dissemination efforts (output 3).

Figure 1 Reconstructed ToC



With respect to the planned chronological sequencing of the project work (p.13), some time gaps are considered rather wide, such as between the fact-finding mission (by June 2017), the start-up workshop at country level (by March 2018), and the multi-stakeholder platform (by March 2019), even taking into consideration the time needed to conduct the country study. Moving the process forward step by step but more speedily is expected to facilitate keeping up the momentum in the process of engaging national multi-sector stakeholders in assessing and deciding on strategic options regarding VSS. As an additional project under the DA 10th tranche project, the project duration was three years. Also, taking into consideration the available resources, support to the *implementation* of the National Action Plans could only be limited.

Logical framework

Analysis of the logical framework results in the following observations:

- The immediate objective: whereas the goal is defined, there is no indicator at this level to measure 'strengthened capacities' in an aggregate manner, other than the indicators at each outcome level. This approach however follows the DA guidelines.

- The distinction made between the work under the three Expected Accomplishments (meanwhile called Outcomes as per the DA guidelines) is somewhat debatable, as the operational multi-stakeholder platform, the validated country study, and the ensuing adopted National Action Plan are logical steps/elements of the intended capacities. Another way of looking at it is to consider “operational platform” one output and “validated country study and validated action plan” a parallel output (to the extent the study and the plan are related). This formulation is considered more precise than “increased understanding”. It would also have implied more precise indicators (beyond the feedback provided by the participants in the start-up workshop and platform events; such feedback also does not measure how strengthened capacity is ultimately used).
- Outcome 1 and underlying activities: the development of the assessment tool is *stricto sensu* not purely for the work in the three targeted countries, although applied/tested in the context of this project and planned to be used in other subsequent interventions elsewhere. There is no indication in the logical framework of a planned assessment of the pilot testing of the tool prior to its discussion and dissemination (latter being envisaged under output 3), although this has been dealt with in implementation through the organization of an Expert Meeting (2019). It is not made explicit if/how the tool relates to the analytical framework used by UNCTAD in conducting National Green Export Reviews (NGER) that assesses national potential to develop green export sectors. It is however understood that NGER focuses on identifying priority sectors/products, whereas the VSS assessment tool targets mapping, dialogue and priority setting of a chosen product and its value chain. Finally, the formulation of activity 1.5 (country study) is rather lengthy; given the importance of this study as first step towards the Action Plan, the project strategy could have included, e.g., a Box presenting an outline of the planned study.
- Outcome 2 and underlying activities: the expected result seems not really the “capacity to jointly assess and implement” but the (more tangible) validated National Action Plan. If the platform is to be a continuing body for dialogue and coordinated action and monitoring of the implementation of the National Action Plan, it would have been useful to include in the project strategy the features of how such a platform is operated (based on the lessons learned from prior projects in India, Brazil and China - to which brief reference is made in Section 1.2 of the project document) and, accordingly, include an indicator to measure its functioning/performance beyond the adoption of the plan. As mentioned above, two precise and separate outputs could have been: the adopted plan in each country and the operational platform. Activity 2.2 (advisory services) is broad and ‘tricky’ in the sense that the project resources were (too) limited for organizing support to the plan’s implementation; if such advisory support was meant to cover periodic monitoring by UNCTAD, the question can be raised if monitoring of the implementation of the plan isn’t rather integral part of the role of the national stakeholders leading the platform (within the spirit of sustainability). This justifies the above suggestion for more details on the platform’s planned functioning (see above).
- Outcome 3 and underlying activities: while the effort towards upscaling under this output is laudable, it is considered somewhat ambitious to refer to disseminating information on good practice and success cases from the three selected countries, as, according to the initial time planning, there were only some three months between the adoption of the plan at country level and the exchange on achievements and lessons learned. To generate what is called “success stories” much more time is needed for implementation, as the VSS application and certification process is not expected to be a quick deliverable. Finally, the

comprehensive report (output 3.2) is not only expected to be a delivery relevant for UNCTAD but also for the UNFSS cooperating partners (and thus possibly to be added to the documentation diffused on UNFSS' web). Its diffusion is planned to be global and thus seeking to stimulate interest of countries beyond Asia and the Pacific in VSS related support.

Cross-cutting issues, in particular gender equality and women empowerment

In different sections of the project document one finds reference to gender equality, with some sentences in the project strategy indicating that the events, the study and the ensuing plan would pay attention to integrating gender equality. In the logical framework this dimension is reflected in the activity regarding the country study (output 1.5) and in one of indicators regarding the action plan (2.2). Also, under monitoring, there is reference to attention to awareness raising to ensure gender balance. There is no reference to other cross-cutting issues, such as human rights.

Risks and mitigation actions

Starting with (and even including) the risk that one chooses the wrong consultant is a bit unusual. Whereas this may of course occur, a job description contains in any event details on the required profile and references are usually required as integral part of a candidate application and can be checked in the selection process.

The stated risk regarding the platform is focused on either not enough or too much influence by the government. This again recalls us of the need to clearly define and specify how such platform should operate (including its membership and its governance). In this regard eventual lessons from previous experiences supported by UNCTAD (Brazil, China, India) seem relevant. Another risk regarding the platform is that it convenes only in an ad hoc manner (to adopt the plan) rather than acting as a body to actively steer and monitor the actions envisaged in the plan's implementation stage. Therefore, the modus operandi of such a platform, to the extent crucial in the approach, would have merited being included in the project strategy. Finally, it is noted that the reconstituted ToC (see above) includes a number of necessary preconditions of which some could also become a risk source.

Sustainability

This section refers to the availability of budget support for the platform to function and, hence, the importance for this body to be anchored to an independent agency. In this regard, reference to the "independence" of such agency is not evident, as the cited examples (entities in charge of standards, accreditation or export promotion) are not necessarily self-governing but established under a ministry. It would have been of interest to include in the project strategy examples how such platforms (existing elsewhere) are being funded – recognizing that funding may not be the only concern regarding sustainability of the platform. Another observation relates to the intention to link the members of the platform to each of the UNFSS agencies for technical advice. This is not really considered a feature of sustainability, if the aim is for such platform to survive project support, from whichever (agency) source.

Indeed, the assessment tool is expected to be used beyond the project (as an analytical tool when preparing a country study). How this country study then is to result in an Action Plan, and how the multi-stakeholder platforms are expected to operate when steering and monitoring the plan's implementation, is expected to be part of the comprehensive report that is to capture the results and lessons from the three target countries (providing demonstration cases disseminated by UNCTAD and possibly also by its UNFSS partners). Seeking financial support as response to (new) country requests generated as a result of the regional event and the global dissemination of the comprehensive report are, as such, not steps towards sustainability of the support in the three target countries.

Monitoring and evaluation

This section refers to in-house reporting, but does not specify how communication and reporting between the cooperating entities (UNFSS) and other partners (ISEAL Alliance) is planned to be dealt with. The different co-operating bodies are expected to have different/complementary roles in the implementation of the project including reporting thereon (if beyond their participation in the start-up workshop and/or the event during which the platform validates the Action Plan). The annual progress report is thus expected to be a compilation of the work done and achievements of all parties involved.

Considering the chosen indicators, the collection and analysis of event-related participant feedback forms seems to be the main means to collect data on performance. The latter is not specified in the section on monitoring.

Management and coordination agreements

Emphasis put on inter-agency collaboration (UNFSS) is laudable, as well the envisaged link with the office of the Resident Coordinator (at country level) and UN-ESCAP (at regional level) within the spirit of operating under a common framework of UN country/regional development assistance.

Several other cooperation arrangements were envisaged under the project, with special reference to ISEAL Alliance (a global association of VSS operators), with Japan through JICA (in the case of Lao PDR), with the International Chamber of Commerce and with Germany (specific entity involved not specified) that works already with UNFSS. Reference is also made to the envisaged alliance with "NGOs with special expertise in systematic and science-based measurement of sustainability impacts of production and processing methods in country-specific contexts".

Budget

In the discussion of the efficiency evaluation criterion in the assessment of project implementation (Section 6.2) the planned budget is compared with the actual budget utilization.

6.2. Project implementation

6.2.1 Relevance and ownership

Relevance

There is no doubt about the relevance of the project for the three beneficiary countries, as the work was overall coherent with their respective national policies and strategies in the selected commodities/themes (as evidenced below for each of the three countries) Interventions were aligned to country needs and priorities, given opportunities for the countries to boost inclusive and sustainable trade by applying VSS. In general, the focus on smallholder producers and micro, small and medium size enterprises in low-income countries and aim to support them to adopt VSS, is important – to the extent the ones capable to adopt standards, pay for certification and benefit from premium market prices tend to be large enterprises. Moreover, the project supported the strengthening of linkages among different national stakeholders (public and private) based on the understanding that the adoption and implementation of VSS requires consistent and coherent actions of multiple actors along the chosen value chain.

For *Lao PDR* focus was multi-commodity (organic agriculture), in line with the priorities of the National Strategy for Agricultural Development Strategy 2011). It built on prior efforts supported by UNCTAD, in particular the multi-stakeholder public-private dialogue through the Lao Organic Agriculture Forum (LOAF), initiated in 2012 by UNCTAD under an earlier UN Inter Agency Cluster project on trade and productive capacity. The project thus complemented prior work by supporting the organization of the two most recent meetings thereof, i.e., the 6th LOAF in December 2017 (used for the start-up workshop) and the 7th LOAF (November 2019). The focus on the coffee sector and value added of the country study (November 2019) is however not fully obvious, to the extent the country interest seemed wider (organic agriculture at large). Moreover, the coffee sector was reported to have been already quite studied and also supported both in the past and at present (e.g., EU/ITC's support in the design of a coffee sector road map). The prime interest of the country as regards the UNCTAD support is found to be focused in particular on the dialogue dimension (LOAF) and the country seeks the same to become sustainable (evolving into an organic agriculture movement organization).

In the case of *the Philippines*, UNCTAD's focus on the organic virgin coconut oil (VCO) value chain was and remains a pertinent choice and was also aligned to the country's Export Development Plan and its Coconut Industry Roadmap 2018-22. Notwithstanding the experience already gained by the country over the past decades in promoting VCO exports, the coconut sector at large is key for the country's economic (including rural) development. This is illustrated by the proportion of farmland used for coconut palm production (30%), the number of farmers engaged in the sector (3.5 million) and the position of VCO in agricultural exports (23% of total agricultural exports, 2015). Yet the VCO export volume and earnings showed a decline over the past few years and a series of challenges need to be addressed, including pertaining to organic certification (i.e., the focus of the country study, January 2019). This being said, the reason for widening of the project focus in the (draft) National Action Plan (from organic certification to VCO sector development at large) is confusing. However, it was reported by the project team during their review of the draft evaluation report that the misunderstanding about the scope of the NAP had been resolved with the counterparts in the Philippines.

In Vanuatu the project work was also complementary to prior efforts by UNCTAD, aiming to contribute to the implementation of elements of the action plan emanating from the National Green Export Review (NGER), initially planning to focus on the coconut and cocoa sectors, including support to the establishment of a national brand. Ultimately the project work zoomed in on the coconut sector, with the study (August 2019) targeting the certification of organic coconut oil and culminating in the first Vanuatu Coconut Summit (October 2019). This summit was aligned to the priorities of the 2016-2025 National Coconut Strategy and constituted de facto an interim review thereof. The project was also fully aligned to the National Sustainable Development Plan.

For UNCTAD, the strategic fit of the project is shown by

- the project being aligned to its Strategic Frameworks 2016/17 and 2018/19 and, in particular, to its mandate pertaining to work on private standards as per UNCTAD XIV (project document, p.3);
- the relevance of the theme (VSS; green exports) in the context of the multiple SDG targets (project document, p.5);
- the project allowing for the development of a VSS Assessment Toolkit, its pilot testing in the three countries covered by the project and discussion thereon with relevant partners through an expert meeting before finalizing the toolkit, including its web-based version;
- the project enabling UNCTAD to carry out country level work to foster the use of VSS;
- it providing an opportunity for UNCTAD as founder and member of the UN Forum on Sustainable Standards (UNFSS) to cooperate on the ground with UNFSS sister agencies.

Recognizing that VSS is a vast field, it is observed that in all three beneficiary countries focus is on the environmental dimension (organic). Other features listed in the project rationale include also economic and social concerns. Whereas organic certification is expected to have economic effects (better price; more income), attention to the social dimension (e.g., child labour) is not evident in the implementation stage.

Ownership

Ownership somewhat varies per country and also was found to vary within the countries, depending on the stage of project implementation. Accordingly, statements in reporting that the project and its results are fully owned by the national counterparts are considered to require some nuance, without taking away the overall appreciation of the counterparts of the support received from UNCTAD.

In the case of both Lao PDR and Vanuatu, the engagement of the national stakeholders at the start of implementation was evident, to the extent the project built on a (recent) predecessor project involving UNCTAD. In Lao PDR, ownership appears to have meanwhile somewhat faded out. The use of the country study by the country stakeholders is not evident and UNCTAD reported that it did not yet receive the action plan based on the discussions of the 7th LOAF (November 2019).

Regarding Vanuatu, the Coconut Summit (October 2019) resulted in a number of resolutions that UNCTAD and the country stakeholders consider equivalent to an action plan. There is clear country level engagement and commitment and it was reported that the government is implementing the recommendations that emanated from the Summit (supported by a 4 year EU - EDF11 – funding target).

Finally, with respect to the Philippines, at the start of the project country ownership was found to be limited (the local stakeholders including chief counterpart reporting to become aware of the country study when already available in draft form). This study was reported to be based on interviews of stakeholders primarily in the Manila area - not covering regions with highest concentration of VCO production. The involvement of the country stakeholders however increased during implementation, as evidenced by the participation in the first meeting of the (for now informal) multi-stakeholder Technical Working Group on the Assessment of Organic Certification in the Coconut Oil Value Chain. This was followed by virtual consultations organized by the counterparts themselves spread over 3 regions. Ownership of the next step (the drafting of the action plan) somewhat faded again, to the extent the focus of country study and that of the draft action plan diverge (the counterparts putting emphasis on the next steps regarding the narrow focus, i.e., organic certification rather than the VCO value chain at large - the latter is the case in the current draft). The counterparts reported to not have been involved in the selection of consultants who prepared the draft action plan (that reads like a value chain study rather than focused action plan). While the counterparts are keen to carrying the work forward (maintaining the initial focus, i.e., organic certification), there was a call for more clarity on project closure, including formalizing the hand-over of responsibilities (taking formal ownership of the follow-up). It is however noted here, as mentioned above, that after the project team noted in their comments on the draft evaluation report that this issue has been addressed with the counterparts.

6.2.2 Effectiveness and impact

This section starts with an overview of the achievements against the planned objective and its underlying outputs/activities (in matrix format). This is followed by the assessment of these achievements, the results and progress towards impact.

Concise overview of achievements against planned results and activities ⁵

Summary of project logic/structure as per the project document		
Objective	To strengthen capacities in the Asia and Pacific to make the best use of VSS <i>Indicator: none</i>	
Output	Summary of planned activities	Achievements <i>(note: for participant perception, see the assessment section after this matrix)</i>
<p>1. Increased understanding of VSS (country level; multi-stakeholders)</p> <p>Indicators: IA1.1: At least 80% of participants (of which at least 40% are female) at the start-up workshop understands what are VSS and how they can influence the viability of “green” exports. IA1.2: At least 75% of participants in the national multi-stakeholder platform state an increased understanding on the VSS’ impact on “green” exports and social and environmental</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment Toolkit • Fact-finding mission • Training of national consultants on tool kit • Start-up workshop • Country study 	<p>Performance against the stated indicators, based on the evaluations submitted by the participants: ⁶</p> <p>IA1.1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanuatu - 76% (female=42%) • Lao PDR - 92% (female=31%) • Philippines - 85% (female=58%) <p>IA1.2: Not measured by project team - At the time of organizing the first national stakeholder workshops, UNCTAD decided not to include this question in the meeting evaluation, considering that the question would be too broad to be answered YES/NO by the participants at that stage.</p> <p>Assessment Toolkit development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft package prepared by international consultant (covering concept note, questionnaire, interview guidelines (2017) • National consultants trained by international consultant on draft tool, including interaction on adaptation to country context in the three countries

⁵ Based on the project progress reports and complemented by the evaluator with information obtained during the interviews; the overview covers the *main* achievements and does not claim to be exhaustive in terms of covering *all* the project work carried out by the project.

⁶ Performance against the indicators is self-reported by the project team and has not been verified by the evaluator.

<p>sustainability in their communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert Meeting on Toolkit, 28 March 2019 validating the final structure (inter alia based on pilot application in the three countries) with 13 participants (including also representatives of partner organizations/UNFSS and other parties involved in the theme) • Review of structure/content of draft Toolkit (2019) • Design of web-based version of (final) Toolkit - accessible online (https://vssapproach.unctad.org) <p>Country level (<i>in chronological order</i>):</p> <p>Lao PDR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact-finding mission in April 2017 • Consultant trained, 2017 • Start-up workshop: Dec. 2017 (in context of 6th Lao Organic Agriculture Forum/LOAF6) • Country study entitled "Sustainable commercialisation of the coffee value chain", Nov. 2019 <p>Philippines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultant trained, 2017 • Country study entitled "Assessment of organic certification in the coconut oil value chain", January 2019 • Initial mission to meet with country stakeholders, Feb 2019 (delay reported to be related to time needed to finalize the cooperation with the national counterpart) • Separate start-up workshop skipped and combined with first meeting of the Technical Working Group on the Assessment of Organic Certification in the Coconut Oil Value Chain (November 2019) <p>Vanuatu</p>
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact-finding mission in Feb. 2017 (in conjunction with the discussion of the result of the NGER project (2014-2016), in particular its Action Plan and with the launching of another UNCTAD project, i.e., Market Information Service. According to the mission report the VSS project would support elements of the above Action Plan, focusing on the coconut and cocoa sectors, including the establishment of a national (organic) brand. • Start-up workshop: Nov. 2017 (on Sustainability Standards and Market Transparency for Coconuts and Cocoa) bringing together some 50 stakeholders • Consultant trained, 2018 • Country study entitled “Views of Coconut Oil Stakeholders on Organic Certification”, August 2019
<p>2. Improved capacity (multi-stakeholders)</p> <p>Indicators: IA2.1: At least 75% of participants in the national multi-stakeholder platform consider that the strategic options towards improving effectiveness of VSS, as discussed in the platform meeting(s), is relevant for enhancing “green” exports. IA2.2: In at least 2 out of 3 target countries, the national multi-stakeholder platform adopts the National Action Plan and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National multi-stakeholder platform • National Action Plan • Advisory support in implementation of the plan 	<p>National multi-stakeholder platform and NAP IA 2.1: Based on the evaluation⁷ submitted by the participants, the figure for each country is the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanuatu - 65%/Yes, 8%/No, 27%/Neutral (female=28%) • Lao PDR - 85% (female=44%) • Philippines - 92% (female=62%) <p>IA 2.2 : All three countries adopted the National Action Plan. In Philippines, the content of the National Action plan has been adopted by stakeholders. The date for the official endorsement of the National Action Plan by DTI and PCA is being discussed.</p> <p>Lao PDR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6th Lao Organic Agriculture Forum/LOAF6, Dec. 2017 (see above)

⁷ For Philippines, the figure is based on the feedback from participants to three regional breakout sessions that took place in July 2020.

<p>establishes the process for reviews and monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan, taking into account the need to integrate gender equality into the policy making and implementation.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7th LOAF Forum – National Strategy for Green Development and International Competitiveness, Nov. 2019 • Draft NAP by country stakeholders planned for May 2020 but not yet available at time of evaluation <p>Philippines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st Technical Working Group on the Assessment of Organic Certification in the Coconut Oil Value Chain, November 2019 (see above), covering 56 participants from different public and private stakeholders • Virtual consultations among the stakeholders (three days, July 2020) organized by DTI and PCA, with each day covering a region/cluster of regions, involving total of some 300 participants • 2nd Technical Working Group on the Assessment of Organic Certification in the Coconut Oil Value Chain (pending at the time of the evaluation, October 2020); this Working Group is to discuss and validate the NAP (see below) • NAP for strengthening the Philippine Organic VCO value chain towards health, economy and environment (draft version prepared by two national consultants consolidating the virtual consultations of July 2020 – version as of 28 Sept. 2020 received by consultant; review round by country stakeholders ongoing at the time of the evaluation). <p>Vanuatu</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st Vanuatu Coconut Summit: Coconut for a better future, 30/31 October 2019 bringing together some 100 public and private country stakeholders • NAP in the form of outcome statements/resolutions/recommendations adopted by the Summit in support of the implementation of the Vanuatu National Coconut Strategy 2016-2025 <p>Advisory support</p>
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		<p>Support initially intended to advise the countries in NAP implementation was used for a number of global outreach activities, in particular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert meeting on VSS, Sept 2017, Geneva • Better trade for the SDGs at 2018 High-Level Political Forum, July 2018, New York • Making VSS contribute to the SDGs, Oct. 2018, Geneva • Participation in Intl. Coconut Community Ministerial Meeting and 2nd World Coconut Congress, Aug. 2018, Philippines
<p>3. Increased understanding of VSS (regional level; multi-stakeholders)</p> <p>Indicators: IA3.1: At least 75% of participants at the regional peer-review conference (e.g. representing the governments, producers, businesses, and NGOs) understand the contribution of the VSS-green exports nexus to the achievement of the SDGs in their countries. IA3.2: At least 3 countries showed interest in developing a project on VSS-green export nexus in their countries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional peer-review workshop • Comprehensive report based on findings, country experiences and workshop discussion 	<p>Planned together with ESCAP as pre-event of 7th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, Bangkok (March 2020) ; due to Covid-19, this ESCAP event was postponed to May 2020 (held in virtual format); this format did not leave space for side events.</p> <p>Preparation and publication of 4 project newsletters</p> <p>Project web page with links to all project outputs</p> <p>Final report prepared and available on UNCTAD web site</p>
<p>Unintended/indirect activities and results</p>	<p>Project implementation covered work as planned under each of the three outputs; the regional event planned under output 3 could not take place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Information sharing beyond efforts in each of the three participating countries focused in essence on the global level (see the section on Advisory support under output 2).</p>	

	<p>Indirect results to be reported here relate in particular to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the start of a new multi-agency project in Myanmar in which UNCTAD uses the VSS Assessment Toolkit (focussing on avocado, ginger and tea value chains)• the start of new Development Account 12th Tranche project focused on green exports (Project Code 2023G) implemented by UNCTAD that covers four small island States (members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group) including Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; the project focuses on the identification of green trade promotion strategies, including VSS, and is expected to benefit from the experience of in particular Vanuatu under the Development Account project 1617AI under review• presentation of the Toolkit at the ITC Benchmarking Technical Working Group (TWG) with participation of ITC, GIZ, and IISD (latter, so also see below)• the interest of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), a think tank engaged in research and policy work, in the Toolkit. IISD already partnered with UNCTAD in earlier consultations on sustainable commodities production and trade; it is reported to plan to use/use the Toolkit in ongoing efforts aimed at information and capacity-building needs related to VSS, targeting 6 pilot countries (non-specified) across Africa, Asia and Latin America covering data collection and analysis, information sharing, dialogue and advice (source: IISD website).• planned use of Toolkit in project proposed (Latin America) under DA 14th
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Assessment of results

The achievements summarized above indicate that, overall, the project implemented most of the planned activities that resulted in better understanding of VSS and fostered multi-stakeholders interactions through the events organized. At country level this was achieved through the launching workshop, followed by the country study and subsequent multi-stakeholder meetings/events, culminating in action plans or resolutions on the way forward.

As per the available evaluations of participants that attended the *different networking events*, these were positively rated in terms of having resulted in being more informed about VSS and their relevance for increasing “green” exports. To the extent the evaluation response rates varied and were partial (e.g., about 45% in Lao PDR and Vanuatu), the use of the logical framework indicators (% perception on usefulness etc.) is considered less significant in this evaluation. In any event, in each of the three countries the project supported multi-stakeholder networking that took different forms and, based on the interviews held, was much appreciated by the country stakeholders: (i) the Coconut Summit bringing together public-private stakeholders in Vanuatu resulting in a roadmap for coconut diversification and value addition; (ii) the Organic Agriculture Forum that UNCTAD continued to support in Lao PDR, and (iii) the (for now informal) Technical Working Group on Organic Certification of VCO in the Philippines. The regional workshop that was planned in close collaboration with ESCAP and was to take place in Bangkok as pre-event to the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (March 2020) could, unfortunately, not take place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This event was expected to be an important step towards expanding the outreach of the methodology tested in the three countries.

The *country studies* presented in these national events were based on the methodology prescribed by the (then draft) Assessment Toolkit. The immediate usefulness of these studies depends on their use in the *National Action Plans (NAP)*. At the time of the evaluation this process was not yet fully completed in some of the countries, namely:

- Lao PDR: no NAP was available yet (UNCTAD reporting that this is awaited from the counterparts); according to the discussion with the counterparts, this NAP is expected to focus on efforts to make the LOAF platform sustainable by establishing the Lao Organic Movement Association (LOMA) that is expected to be private sector driven. There is no indication that the country study “sustainable commercialisation of the coffee value chain” is used as direct input into the NAP.
- Philippines: the draft NAP (prepared by national consultants recruited by UNCTAD) is under discussion (comment round from national stakeholders is ongoing). Based on the initial country study (assessment of organic certification in the coconut oil value chain), a series of stakeholder consultations (both real and virtual meetings) thereon resulted in the above draft NAP. It is understood from the counterparts that they want the action plan to be refocused on the initial theme in accordance with the WG discussions (see also under relevance and ownership). It was reported that this issue has been meanwhile addressed (see above).

- Vanuatu: the resolutions adopted at the first Coconut Summit (in the form of an outcome document) are considered equivalent to a NAP. There is no indication of a schedule specifying who is expected to do what in terms of the next steps. Of all three country studies, the title of the one conducted for Vanuatu is considered capturing best its content: 'views of coconut stakeholders on organic certification'. It was reported that, based on the project work, R&D on the value addition of coconut products has been strengthened (MoU signed between the Department of Industry and the Vanuatu Agriculture and Technical Research Centre). Moreover, more local entrepreneurs are reported to invest in processing (including VCO – involving in particular women in the rural areas) and other by-products.

The above situation as regards the NAPs thus shows some gaps. It is the implementation of the NAPs, once validated, that is expected to play a crucial role in carrying forward the work done by the project.

Finally, with respect to the *Assessment Toolkit*, the same was developed, adapted to/tested in the three countries and guided the methodology used in the country studies. Based on this pilot testing with the involvement of national experts ("country tailoring"), the toolkit was reviewed by a group of experts (internal and external to UNCTAD), thereafter finalized and made available on line (project web). The toolkit is meanwhile reported to be used in other projects implemented by UNCTAD (Myanmar; regional project in Melanesian, others - see above) and is among the service offerings of planned VSS work in Latin-America through UNFSS. Whereas IISD is reported to use the methodology developed under this project in its VSS related data collection and analysis, this is not (yet) explicitly recognized by IISD on its website information on this VSS programme entitled State of Sustainability Initiative (that however refers to ITC as collaborative partner).

The focus of the toolkit is on identifying the preparedness of different stakeholders (perceptions) across the value chain of selected agricultural commodities to adopt VSS. It is recognized by UNCTAD that the toolkit complements other available tools to develop "green" exports. In this regard, reference is made for example to the diagnostics methodology used by UNFSS that has a more macro analysis purpose, whereas the tool developed under this project is more micro – seeking to collect and analyze the VSS related perceptions of the stakeholders. Other UNFSS partners have their own tools (e.g., ITC's Standards Map; Sustainability Map).

Whereas available on line, there is no indication of the intention of UNCTAD to build 'tool user' capacity in developing countries, beyond (in the case of this project) three national consultants engaged in its country customization and pilot testing. The toolkit is rather resource intensive (survey; interviews; study) and for now offered by UNCTAD within the context of projects. It is thus de facto UNCTAD's methodology used in its VSS projects. Accordingly, upscaling of its use has been envisaged by rolling out the methodology through new request-based projects.

Assessment of impact

It is considered premature to assess at this stage the longer term effects of the project in terms of the targeted countries making use/more use of VSS to foster the development of their green export sectors - that in turn are expected to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. This is

not really surprising, to the extent the project scope and resources covered primarily a contribution to analysis as input for policy making and priority setting as well as to networking among multiple stakeholders. There are encouraging signals as regards policy level attention to VSS, but tangible actions showing the implementation of (validated) NAPs will be first indicators of intermediary medium-term results. Also, whereas opportunities to use the toolkit in new projects and by additional actors are an encouraging sign, this is considered rather an indirect result and does not measure the impact of the project interventions at the level of the three participating countries.

As shown in the schematic presentation of the ToC (page 12), multiple factors affect the ability of countries to seize green trade opportunities through applying VSS. In this regard the support under this project has addressed one among several challenges and there are a number of preconditions for intermediate changes and ultimate impact to occur.

In this context, it is considered appropriate to refer here to a statement of UNCTAD in the background section of the comprehensive report prepared under output 1 (2020): *"VSS adoption is more likely to generate benefits to stakeholders in producing countries when:*

- 1. current business contracts encourage VSS adoption,*
- 2. producers are well organized;*
- 3. VSS requirements are simple and easily conveyed;*
- 4. support to VSS adoption is provided by business, development partners or governments;*
- 5. infrastructure and institutions support VSS adoption; and*
- 6. VSS address sustainability objectives that are relevant to local communities."*

6.2.3 Efficiency of implementation

Regarding the use of the resources, the following observations are made:

- the project was managed by devoted and motivated staff that, even when reassigned to other organizational units in UNCTAD, saw to it that the project work was completed;
- overall, there is harmony between the planned budget allocation (by output and by budget line) and that of actual expenditures; there is no breakdown in terms of budget allocation or expenditures by country;
- there was no formal cooperation agreement, MoU or eventual co-signature of the project document by the beneficiary countries; for the countries this is however relevant, inter alia to be able to raise funding for cost-sharing activities;
- no steering mechanism was foreseen nor established that would bring together the main project partners to guide project implementation. According to the project document there was internal (UNCTAD) reporting on project progress in addition to the submission of the annual progress report to the UNDA administrators;
- due to the Covid-19 pandemic the planned regional event could not take place, which explains the remaining balance at the end of the project; there was no reallocation of the expected balance to enable funding of other follow-on activities at country level;

- output 1 received more than half of the total budget - covering the development of the toolkit, preparatory missions, launching events and the country study by the national consultant; to the extent the now tested toolkit is expected to be used on a wider basis, new projects will not have such development costs and be able to gain in time;
- some of the activities would have benefitted from condensing them time wise, in particular the time between the start-up workshop, the training of the consultant and the completion of the country study; namely, keeping momentum seems key in an effort aimed at fostering networking among different stakeholders;
- in the case of the Philippines it took sizeable time to finalize the cooperation with the national counterpart (until early 2019) - apparently not clarified in the project design stage; at that moment, the country study was in fact already in draft form. This being said, the country has thereafter taken a very active role in the project work, wants to move ahead, but expects a proper closure (see also below);
- there was no exchange among the national consultants engaged in the application/customization of the VSS Assessment Toolkit; the networking among the national counterparts of the three beneficiary countries was planned at the end of the project (through the regional event), that could not materialize for reasons beyond the project;
- the process of closure of the project was reported to be "vague"; in particular stakeholders in the Philippines expect a proper closure process, i.e., formal hand-over;
- the comprehensive report (2020) and its cover message for dissemination (September 2020) do not refer to the independent end-of-project evaluation that is however integral part of the project as per its design.

6.2.4 Likely sustainability

At the country level, sustainability of support provided under this project depends on the degree in which the implementation of the NAP will progress and on the countries' ability to continue the stakeholders' networking. In all three countries, the priorities set in the consultations are aligned to the national policy framework, which a priori is a reason for expecting the project work to be carried forward. This being said, the view expressed by UNCTAD that the NAPs do not require any additional financial resources as actions are incorporated in the implementation of the existing national sustainable development strategies needs some nuance, to the extent the availability of resources for NAP implementation is not considered 'automatic'.

In the case of Lao PDR, the state of the NAP is uncertain at this stage. Regarding the LOAF platform, this has been supported by subsequent project funding since its first meeting in 2012. The Lao counterpart is of the view, particularly based on experiences it observed elsewhere, that the sustainability of such networking lies in the private sector leading the process of

establishing and steering the organic movement (LOMA). To the extent the idea of establishing LOMA goes back to the start of LOAF (well before the current project), it is difficult to assess the likelihood of LOMA being established soon.

Regarding the Philippines, there is keen interest of the national stakeholders to finalize consultations on the NAP – provided its scope is narrowed down (which was reported to have been recently agreed with the counterparts – after the submission of the draft evaluation report). This is considered an encouraging sign of appropriation, including of the next steps. It is to be noted that the Philippines has a longstanding experience in the (structured) VCO subsector (relevant sector support; business membership bodies). Given the share of VCO exports and declines therein in the past few years, there is expected to be a country level push to engage in the finalization of the NAP, once validated.

In Vanuatu there is interest in periodically repeating the multi-stakeholder platform called Coconut Summit, the first edition of which was organized with the support of the project under review. The ongoing EDF 11 funding to support inter alia the coconut value chain is reported to complement the UNCTAD project, covering efforts to support diversification (other by-products, in addition to copra) and more value addition. This EDF 11 also supports networking among stakeholders, in the form of the establishment of a Coconut Industry Working Group. There is an issue that constitutes a risk to the future development of the sector, namely the effects of an insect called CRD beetle that already destroyed coconut palms on some islands in the central part of Vanuatu and ongoing challenges to eradicate the same. The evaluator learned about another DA project (12th tranche) based on the request of Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat (2018) Vanuatu is among the countries listed in the project brief of this more recent DA project that focuses on the development of a green trade promotion policy as integral part of their national sustainable development strategies and on strengthening regional collaboration in this regard. In this regards the results of past work of UNCTAD in Vanuatu is expected to be disseminated to other MSG countries

For UNCTAD, the fact that the Assessment Toolkit developed and tested in this project is being offered and rolled out in subsequent projects elsewhere and is reported to being used also by others (the case of IISD) is a positive indication of its use beyond the pilot experience in the three countries. A point of concern is however how UNCTAD management sees the next stages in the implementation of its mandate in the VSS field, as the two staff involved in the project's implementation have been meanwhile assigned to other duties/entities within the organization. Whereas the staff involved remained highly committed to smooth project implementation up to closure, it is not clear what will happen regarding the next steps, such as follow-up in the 3 countries, widening the use of the tool developed and the application of the approach elsewhere.

6.2.5 Cross-cutting issues

As indicated in the section on cross-cutting issues in the assessment of the project design (Section 6.1), in particular gender equality and women empowerment were among the dimensions highlighted in the project strategy, logical framework and were also featured as one of the dimensions covered by monitoring.

In implementation, the main indication of attention to gender equality relates to the provision of gender disaggregated data emanating from the events (the degree of women participation and their feedback on the events as per the returned evaluation forms). The target as per the project document was for at least 40% of the participants in the start-up workshop to be female participants. This was largely achieved in the Philippines (58% female participation) and in Vanuatu (42%), whereas a bit lower than targeted in Lao PDR (31%). According to the final project report (draft, August 2020), female participation in the subsequent national stakeholders went from high (62% in the Philippines and 44% in Lao PDR) to satisfactory (28%) in Vanuatu.

Also, data collected through the survey and interviews in the context of the preparation of the country study were gender disaggregated. Women are engaged in farming (often family farms) and to some extent processing. For example, in Vanuatu about one third of the survey respondents were women farmers and processors. Even if a small percentage of the operations of the respondents was certified, this concerned about 20% of the male run farms/enterprises versus less than 10% of the female operated ones. Another example of gender issues relate to smallholder farming work by women being underreported (of the surveyed coffee producers in Lao PDR only 16 per cent were women), underestimating their role and position as non-paid family members. Regarding the Philippines, the draft NAP does not include gender related strategic actions nor targets. Overall, based on the resolutions of the core events organized during the project life, gender equality and women empowerment do not feature as specific issues/challenges to be addressed – which could be qualified as a missed opportunity.

Finally, it is noted that the project approach focused primarily on the environmental dimension of VSS in Lao PDR (organic coffee/agriculture) and in the Philippines (organic certification of VCO), with a somewhat larger (economic and environmental) focus in the case of Vanuatu. The other dimensions of VSS (social sustainability concerns covering basic human rights, including eventual child labour issues, health and safety of workers) are not reflected in the approach, although listed in the brief project description (cover of project document). A possible explanation for the project to focus on the environmental dimension could be linked to the fact that all support was at policy/strategy level and not 'on the ground'. Interventions aimed at the level of producers would in principle have addressed more directly issues related to eventual child labour and gender gaps.

6.2.6 Synergies and partnerships

Internal synergies

The project could build on prior UNCTAD work in Lao PDR and Vanuatu, which facilitated networking among stakeholders and allowed for anchorage to previously established networks. As UNFSS aims to pool resources and assure coherence, coordination and cooperation among UN agencies around VSS, the project is considered one of its analytical and capacity building activities. The methodology applied also benefitted from earlier UNFSS' experiences in countries such as China and India, in particular the feature of fostering cooperation among multiple stakeholders (resulting in VSS related platforms). As UNCTAD hosts the UNFSS' Secretariat it allowed also for directly contributing to and benefitting from the upstream work conducted under the UNFSS umbrella.

External synergies and partnerships

The project document envisaged cooperation with a range of different external parties, including

- the Resident Coordinator Office in the beneficiary countries;
- UN-ESCAP;
- the other UNFSS member agencies, namely FAO, ITC, UNEP and UNIDO;
- the ISEAL Alliance (an association of sustainability standards operating globally);
- other organisations as appropriate (bilateral projects; NGOs).

During the fact-finding missions and start-up work, links were indeed established with the Resident Coordination office within the spirit of UNCTAD seeking alignment, as non-resident UN agency, with the country level UN coordination mechanism. The project worked actively with UN-ESCAP regarding the organization of the regional workshop planned under output 3 that unfortunately was cancelled at short notice due to Covid-19 pandemic.

Of the UNFSS sister agencies, ITC was most directly involved through its contribution to the start-up workshop in Vanuatu. There was no indication of other occasions of concrete cooperation with the UNFSS member agencies. It is noted that their precise role and contribution were not specified in the project document. In other words, the project was not designed as a multi-agency support intervention in which the different agencies would, based on the needs assessment, mobilize complementary support based on their respective mandates and experience in the field of VSS. In this regard putting all other UNFSS agencies on the cover of the project document as effectively cooperating entities is considered somewhat misleading.

There is reported to be a good inter-agency team spirit among the UNFSS agencies. However, in the absence of concurrently available funding for collaborative efforts in a given country context, donors/agencies risk focusing on 'doing their own thing'. For example, quite soon after UNCTAD's VSS awareness raising events in Lao PDR, ITC's T4SD programme engaged in VSS related capacity building (working with another chief counterpart than UNCTAD, namely the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry), using its own set of tools and targeting the coaching of Lao SMEs in implementing green business practices. The ITC support is focused on addressing resource efficiency issues and supporting SMEs to comply with VSS and position their products in regional/global markets. If there would have been an opportunity to plan VSS work in Lao PDR synchronically, the two agencies could have focused on the same commodity, avoid repeating introductions on what VSS is about and complement each other's support. Similarly, ITC engaged in launching in January 2020 the design of a coffee-sector roadmap in Lao PDR in the context of the EU funded ASEAN Regional Integration Support Plus (ARISE Plus) programme (aiming at fostering exports of organic coffee), whereas UNCTAD completed its coffee sector value chain study in November 2019. From the perspective of Laotian coffee value chain actors, the complementarities of such policy level support are not necessarily obvious.

The ISEAL Alliance is listed as a partner (expected to be among the core partners as figuring on the cover page), but there is no indication which was its role in implementation. When contacted by the evaluator, the representative of ISEAL reported to be not familiar with the

project work and thus not in a position to comment or share ISEAL's perception thereon. Another organisation involved in VSS, the Fair Trade Advocacy, reported to have facilitated the contribution of one of its members, Fair Trade International, to mobilize its country representative in the consultations in the Philippines. This cooperation was reported to be informal (on ad hoc basis) and started late in the process (not from the start-up workshop and country study onwards). Another partner (IISD) is reported by UNCTAD to be using the assessment toolkit in its VSS, but, as per IISD's web based information, there is no reference to the origin of the tool, i.e., the DA account project under which it was developed.

Finally, UNCTAD presented the project work in a number of events, among which Better Trade for the SDGs (July 2018) and the Expert meeting on Making VSS contribute to the SDGs (October 2018). The evaluator is not in the position to assess the results of this participation in these extra-project events.

7. Conclusions

The key conclusions, structured in accordance with the evaluation criteria/questions, are the following:

Project **design** is overall satisfactory in terms of the context, problem analysis, and intervention logic. The implementation strategy is focused on awareness building and stakeholder networking around priority setting culminating in NAPs. The available budget could not cover selected support to the implementation thereof. Envisaged synergies with UNFSS sister agencies proved to be ambitious. The formulation of the logical framework could have been more precise here and there, including the choice of indicators beyond event related participant feedback.

Regarding **project implementation**, there is no doubt about the **relevance** of the project work in terms of the alignment of interventions to national sector/thematic priorities. **Ownership** was overall good, whereas it was found to vary by country and by stage of project implementation. In terms of **effectiveness**, there are encouraging achievements (including country study and multi-stakeholder networking) appreciated by the beneficiary countries. At the time of the evaluation the process of NAP formulation was not fully completed at least in the case of the Philippines and Lao PDR. The Assessment Toolkit was developed and tested in the three countries, has been finalized based on this pilot experience and is now available online. Regarding **impact**, assessing the longer-term effects of the project is considered premature at this stage. Multiple factors will determine if enterprises in the beneficiary countries will be able to apply VSS and thus seize 'green' trade opportunities that in turn are expected to contribute to the achievement of their SDGs. With respect to **efficiency in implementation**, the project was managed by devoted and motivated staff - even when assigned to another organizational unit. There was no project steering mechanism, which could have fostered and deepened the linkages envisaged. In the last year of implementation, Covid-19 affected the project's ability to complete one output (the regional workshop in collaboration with UN-ESCAP) as well as adequate hand-over at its closure. In terms of **likely sustainability**, alignment to the national policy/strategy frameworks is expected to facilitate the use of project

achievements beyond the project. Regarding the toolkit, in addition to it being used by UNCTAD in its VSS work, there is some indication of it being used by others. Of the cross-cutting issues, gender equality was addressed in design and in implementation (with focus limited to gender disaggregated data collection). Other than the environmental dimension, and, more indirectly, the economic dimension of VSS, social aspects of VSS were not addressed. Finally, **synergies and partnerships** covered some but not all the parties with whom linkages were envisaged in the project document. The latter was ambitious in the absence of collaborative funding and joint planning of work on the ground based on the UNFSS guiding principles to pool resources and assure coordination.

8. Lessons learned/good practices

This end-of-project evaluation generated the following main lessons as well as good practices followed or recommended for follow-on work in the three beneficiary countries and in other countries requesting similar support:

- Formalizing cooperation in the form of a MoU or possible co-signature of a project document by the beneficiary countries at the start of the project is considered an appropriate first step in the life of a project.
- It is difficult for countries to engage in cost-sharing of project activities if there is no formal document describing and specifying the project work.
- Anchorage of project efforts to national policy frameworks is crucial and a necessary but not sufficient condition for mobilizing national resources for the implementation of follow-up actions by the beneficiary countries.
- Organizing stakeholder events not only in the capital but also in other regions of the country (as was done in the case of Vanuatu and the Philippines) contributes to the regional outreach of project work.
- As reflecting a market driven approach, VSS adoption requires active involvement of private sector players as main drivers, with policy level work contributing to creating an enabling environment for private sector driven application.
- The adoption of standards and related certification is not an objective in itself; when encouraging producers to engage therein, it should be linked to markets and buyers.
- There are reported to be more than 450 VSS in the global market; even in the same sector there are multiple sustainability initiatives, with associated verification and certification schemes. A crucial first step for policy makers is to guide producers/service providers and other actors along a specific value chain which of the existing VSS is/are expected to generate most benefits for the country.

- VSS priority setting depends on the type of product/service and their actual/potential market. This will in turn determine national efforts to introduce eventual regulatory reforms, to upgrade the quality infrastructure and to put in place effective support to accompany enterprises in the process of seeking compliance with the targeted VSS standards.
- Ultimately, the goal is that a national VSS related dialogue, cross-sector strategic framework, and relevant capacities are in place, with national entities (public/private) able to (i) enhance awareness of VSS in the large sense (covering economic, environmental and social sustainability dimensions), (ii) guide private actors which specific VSS are expected to generate most benefits based on identified trade opportunities and (iii) provide support to enterprises in their application (e.g., through standards bodies).
- When envisaging cooperation with partner UN agencies/other organizations in the context of a project, it is suitable to specify the nature of the planned cooperation in the project strategy and, if appropriate, formalize the cooperation.
- Ending a project with a (draft) National Action Plan ideally calls for a follow-on project (by UNCTAD or other partners) to support the country in selected aspects of the next step, i.e., the implementation of such a plan.
- Conducting a terminal independent evaluation some six months prior to the end of a project gives ample time to reflect on the findings and its follow-up, including adequate closure and possibly design of an eventual next phase subject to country interest and funding.

9. Recommendations

The evaluation findings culminated in the following main recommendations (with some explanatory notes and specifying to which of the stakeholders these recommendations are addressed):

UNCTAD

1. To feature UNCTAD's work on VSS to foster 'green' trade, related tools and inter-agency cooperation more prominently among its core themes on its main web site.

Currently, information on how UNCTAD implements its mandate regarding VSS as per the outcomes of UNCTAD XIV is somewhat 'hidden' in sub-pages of its website. Moreover, 'green' trade service offerings are not listed among the main fields of intervention of the organization. Also, the strategic cooperation among UN agencies under the umbrella of UNFSS of which UNCTAD hosts the Secretariat is not listed among the organization's strategic partnerships.

2. To decide on the human resources needed to design and implement the follow-up of this pilot project, including also the wider use of the tool developed and tested in this pilot project.

Staff involved in the management of the project under review has been meanwhile assigned to other duties/other organisational units. Senior UNCTAD management will have to decide on staff in charge of the implementation of its VSS mandate.

3. To clarify for whom the VSS Toolkit developed and tested through the project is most useful as basis for deciding on its dissemination strategy.

At present the toolkit is primarily a tool used by UNCTAD in its VSS work and can also be applied by other organizations (for now reported to be the case of IISD). If the use of the toolkit is expected to cover also governments, universities, trade support bodies or producer organizations, the dissemination strategy will have to include capacity building dimension on its use (possibly on line). Ultimately recipient countries are expected to be in the position to organize VSS awareness raising and relevant support to VSS adoption/application (multi-sector/multi-dimensional) without external support.

4. To present the findings of the project to the UNFSS partners, in view of seeking interest in strengthening collaboration regarding country level capacity building support, both as follow-up of the policy work done in the three countries and through the development of new projects elsewhere.

Joint project design and joint funds mobilization (targeting one or multiple donors) seems an important step towards implementing the goal of pooling resources and synchronizing country level efforts among UN agencies under the UNFSS umbrella. Based on respective mandates, complementarities and experiences, such collaboration is expected to enhance collective results and to make impact more tangible. While an ideal situation that is not necessarily easy to bring about, such joint work at country level seems a relevant pillar of work under UNFSS beyond its collective efforts at upstream level. The tool developed and experience gained under this project could be rolled out through such on-the-ground cooperation.

UNCTAD in consultation with the three beneficiary countries

5. To ensure a clear hand-over of the project at its closure (a "conclusive exit").

Whereas the project has been operationally closed as at end August 2020, it is suggested that there is a formal (documented) closure of the project in each of the three countries, including sharing of the final report and reaching a common understanding of responsibilities at the level of the country stakeholders regarding the next steps. Whereas this is possibly less relevant in the case of Vanuatu to the extent the country is already part of a follow-up DA project, the exit process in the case of the Philippines shows gaps and is considered "vague" by the local stakeholders. In the case of Lao PDR the NAP was pending at the moment of the evaluation. If UN-DESA rules/procedures do not allow part of the balance of the project budget to be used to complete the work (should there be need for, e.g., national expertise in this 'wrap-up' stage), it is to be decided by the project team in consultation with the counterparts how to ensure a "conclusive exit".

UNCTAD/UN-DESA

6. To include in the project design format/instructions the formulation of an exit strategy at the start of the last year of project implementation.

This recommendation relates to the need for an exit strategy in each project to wrap up projects in a clear-cut manner, also to facilitate the further use of project achievements by the beneficiary countries beyond the project.

UN-DESA

7. To review to what extent budget rules can allow, on an exceptional basis and if required, the extension of the use of (part of) the budget balance for a limited period to ensure a conclusive exit of the project.

While recognizing that the project is operationally closed as at end August 2020, it is noted that there are some loose ends as regards the completion of project work, in particular in the Philippines and in Lao PDR. This is primarily attributed to delays related to the Covid-19 pandemic that also affected the ability to have face-to-face consultations towards the end of the project (including at the occasion of the planned regional event). Based on the principle that the project should be completed in a conclusive manner, it is suggested to use to this end, to the extent needed, resources from the available balance.

8. To encourage the development of Development Account project proposals that cover multi-agency cooperation and multi-funding initiatives.

To the extent the size of DA funding is limited, larger initiatives in which DA is one of several sources of funding seems a way to seek collective efficiencies and enhance impact of DA projects. In the case of country specific work related to VSS, DA funding for UNCTAD could be complemented by collaborative funding from other sources mobilized by the specialized sister agencies of UNCTAD - under the same umbrella initiative.

Annexes

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

External Evaluation of Development Account Project 1617AI - "Fostering the development of "green" exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) in Asia and Pacific"

I. Introduction and Purpose

This document outlines the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the final independent project evaluation for the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) funded project titled "Fostering the development of "green" exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) in Asia and Pacific."

The evaluation will provide accountability to UNCTAD management, the Development Account Programme/Capacity Development Programme Management Office of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), project stakeholders, as well as UNCTAD's member States with whom the final evaluation report will be shared.

The evaluation will provide assessments that are credible and useful, and also include practical and constructive recommendations. In particular, the evaluation will systematically and objectively assess project design, project management, implementation and overall project performance, including consideration of gender equality objectives. On the basis of these assessments, the evaluation will formulate recommendations to project stakeholders, in particular to UNCTAD and/or the Development Account Programme/Capacity Development Programme Management Office of DESA with a view towards optimizing results of future projects, including on operational and administrative aspects.

Context of the evaluation

"Green" exports are those that are produced or provided with more energy efficient and/or low-carbon methods, sustainably harvested products such as organic food, fishery products, timber and natural fibers, ecotourism, and so forth. International markets for "green" products have been demonstrating higher growth and more profitability than their "brown" equivalents. Nevertheless, "green" segments of exports from developing countries represent just a small fraction of their "brown" counterparts.

Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) are norms and standards that are used to ensure that a product in question is produced, processed or transported in accordance with certain sustainability metrics, including basic human rights, labour standards, gender equality and environmental impacts. For instance, a voluntary standard confirming that a product has been produced by women in accordance with core international labour standards (including equal pay for equal work), thereby contributing to their economic empowerment, may increase consumer interests as well as their willingness to pay.

Today, there are over 450 VSS operating in the global market, many of which apply to agricultural commodities such as coffee, cocoa, tea, bananas, sugar, cotton, soya beans and palm oil exported by developing countries. These commodity sectors provide a major source of rural income and employment for women. Indeed, producers and manufacturers relate complying with VSS to better income opportunities via receiving price premium or securing stable access to markets. At the same time, complying with VSS can help developing countries transmit trade-induced economic growth to social development and environmental sustainability.

For developing-country producers and the government to benefit from VSS, however, major challenges remain. These include information gaps and the challenges of a holistic, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach to achieve policy coherence and coordinating actions at the national level.

A country-level problem analysis included in the project document is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 – Country analysis

Country	Status of affairs
Vanuatu	<p>Principle assets/progress so far:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A list of “green” export products and key stakeholders has been identified. • National Plan of Action for green exports has been submitted to the Government of Vanuatu. • Growing tourism at home provide a market for certain products, e.g. coconut-related cosmetics and healthcare products. • International demand for the identified “green” products is high, and VSS can be an effective tool to connect Vanuatu producers to lucrative markets. <p>Principle gap to be addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local producers are aware that their products need to be associated with VSS, but don’t know how. • Stakeholders do not necessarily link export opportunities to sustainable development. Vanuatu’s environmental quality is deteriorating (e.g. deforestation, pollution, destruction of mangroves and fish-breeding areas, etc.). • Institutional capacity may not be adequate for achieving sustainable development. Developmental, agricultural or industrial projects take place without environmental or social assessment.⁸
Lao Democratic Republic	<p>People’s Principle assets/progress so far:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNCTAD has implemented a Swiss-funded UN Trade Cluster Initiative project (2012-2016) on facilitating production and exports of organic agricultural products (e.g. vegetables, tea and silk) to regional and international markets, and strengthening local forums and task forces. • The above project identified core producers and other stakeholders, including future external development partner in this field, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). <p>Principle gap to be addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local producers have limited knowledge on VSS and their potential impact on green exports. • The country has not developed a multi-stakeholder approach to organic products, trade and sustainable development.
Philippines	<p>Principle assets/progress so far:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SDG will be integrated into the long-term vision and goals (Ambisyon Natin 2040) and the national, sectoral and subnational plans and frameworks. • Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) is a multi-stakeholder body for promoting sustainable development. PCSD is composed of the government, civil society, labour group, and business sector). <p>Principle gap to be addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no framework for multi-stakeholders to holistically assess the effectiveness of VSS to different “green” exports.

⁸ [Vanuatu National Assessment Report of MSI+5.](#)

In this regard, the project is designed to address some of these challenges, in particular the information gaps that need to be filled, and development of national action plans, with a view to synergize the potential impact of VSS on trade and sustainable development and a country's sustainable development strategies.

Subject of the evaluation

The ultimate objective of the project is to strengthen capacities of developing countries in the Asia and Pacific region to make the best use of VSS as a tool to foster the development of green export sectors which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The expected accomplishments of the project are as follows:

- a. Increased understanding by multi-stakeholders on the impacts of domestic and international VSS on the development of "green" exports and sustainable development objectives;
- b. Improved capacity of multi-stakeholders to jointly assess and implement the strategic options for making the best use of VSS to develop "green" and sustainable exports; and
- c. Increased understanding at the regional level and beyond of how to make an effective use of VSS to enhance "green" exports and sustainable development in all the three dimensions.

The main activities include:

- Development of an Assessment Toolkit that identifies and scales main concerns of different stakeholders with respect to VSS' potential impact upon (i) export competitiveness and (ii) social and/or environmental sustainability in the country;
- Three country studies based on the Assessment Toolkit, which provide: a comprehensive assessment of key challenges and concerns as regards making effective use of VSS to foster green exports in the country; an assessment of market access/entry conditions facing green exports and regulatory and institutional conditions surrounding VSS; and strategic options for a multi-stakeholder platform. Each study will have one chapter specifically examining the gender implications of VSS and green exports;
- Establishing a national multi-stakeholder platform in each country to discuss and evaluate the strategic options recommended in the country study, with a view to agreeing on the National Action Plan (NAP), and its implementation and monitoring.
- Conducting one regional peer-review workshop that will discuss the usefulness of the assessment toolkit and feasibility of each focus country's NAP, in support of exchange of information and good practices;
- Publication of a comprehensive report on VSS and green exports.

The project is implemented by UNCTAD in collaboration with the UNFSS member agencies (the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Trade Centre (ITC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)). The project is also working closely with the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) on the organization of the national multi-stakeholder platform meetings, as well as on the regional peer-review conference. Cooperating Entities outside the UN system include ISEAL Alliance which is an association of sustainability standards operating globally, other non-governmental entities with special expertise in systematic and science-based measurement of sustainability impacts of production and processing methods in country-specific contexts, and relevant private sector entities.

The project started in February 2017 with an approved budget of \$520,000 and was scheduled for completion by December 2019. The project was granted an extension to 31 May 2020, as it was identified that conducting the regional peer-review workshop as an event at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable

Development (APFSD), organized by UN-ESCAP in March annually, would enable maximum outreach and information sharing among project stakeholders and other participants of the APFSD. Additional information on the project can be found on its website: <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DITC/Trade-Analysis/TAB-Project-1617AI.aspx>

Evaluation scope, objectives and questions

This final evaluation of the project has the following specific objectives:

- Assess the degree to which the desired project results have been realized, including relevant gender equality objectives; and
- Identify good practices and lessons learned from the project that could feed into and enhance the implementation of related interventions.

The evaluation will cover the duration of the project from February 2017 to May 2020.

The evaluation is expected to address the following questions under the below criteria (sub-questions to be further developed in the inception report, as appropriate):

a) Relevance

- Did the project design (its logical framework, results chain, and choice of activities and deliverables) and its implementation properly reflect and address the development and strategies of the selected countries?

b) Effectiveness

- Have the activities achieved, or are likely to achieve, planned objectives and outcomes as enunciated in the project document? Is there evidence of any positive and negative changes produced by the project, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended, in particular against relevant SDG targets?

c) Efficiency

- Have project implementation modalities, and internal monitoring and control been adequate in ensuring the achievement of the expected outcomes in a timely and cost-effective manner?
- To what extent has partnering with other organizations enabled or enhanced the results of this intervention?

d) Sustainability

- Is there evidence that beneficiary countries are committed to continue working towards the project objectives beyond the end of the project and/or have there been catalytic effects from the project both at the national and regional levels?

e) Gender and human rights

- To what extent a human rights-based approach and a gender mainstreaming strategy were incorporated in the design and implementation of the intervention, and can results be identified in this regard?

f) Partnerships and synergies

- How has the project advanced partnerships with national and regional counterparts, international development partners, the civil society and/or the private sector in support of results, and sustainability of results?

Methodology

The evaluation will adopt a theory-driven approach, guided by the project-results framework, and ensure a gender and human rights responsive evaluation. The evaluator is required to use a mixed-method approach, including qualitative as well as quantitative data gathering and analysis as the basis for a

triangulation exercise of all available data to draw conclusions and findings. Methods for data gathering for this evaluation include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Desk review of project documents and relevant materials;
- Face-to-face interviews and/ or telephone interviews with relevant UNCTAD staff;
- Face-to-face interviews and/or focus group discussions with a balanced sample of project participants, project partners and other relevant stakeholders.
- Direct observation;
- Online surveys of beneficiaries of the project, and other stakeholders, as may be required; conduct follow-up interviews via telephone/Skype as may be necessary.

DA project evaluations make use of a participatory approach, including stakeholders in all stages of the evaluation process.

Contribution analysis could be undertaken in particular to assess project results.

As part of the desk review, which will lead to an Inception Report, the evaluator will use the project document as well as additional documents such as mission reports; progress reports, financial reports, publications, studies - both produced under the project as well as received from project stakeholders. A list of project beneficiaries as well as other partners and counterparts involved in the project will be provided to the evaluator.

The evaluator will further elaborate on the evaluation methodology in an Inception Report, determining thereby the exact focus and approach for the exercise, including developing an evaluation matrix to clearly map how the evaluation questions will be operationalized, developing the sampling strategy and presenting a detailed workplan. The methodology should follow the UNCTAD and Development Account Inception Report Guidelines.

The evaluator is required to submit a separate final list of those interviewed in the Annex of the evaluation report. The evaluator is to ensure a wide representation of stakeholders, bearing in mind the need to include those in a disadvantaged or minority positions as appropriate.

Organization of the evaluation Deliverables and Expected Outputs

The evaluation, on the basis of its findings and assessments made on the above criteria, should draw conclusions, make recommendations and identify lessons learned from the implementation of the project.

More specifically, the evaluation should:

- Highlight what has been successful and can be replicated elsewhere;
- Highlight, as appropriate, any specific achievements that provide additional value for money and/or relevant multiplier effects;
- Indicate shortcomings and constraints in the implementation of the project while, at the same time, identifying the remaining challenges, gaps and needs for future courses of action;
- Make pragmatic recommendations to suggest how UNCTAD's work in this area can be further strengthened in order to address beneficiaries' needs and create synergies through collaboration with other UNCTAD divisions, international organizations and development partners, and other international forums; and
- Draw lessons of wider application for the replication of the experience gained in this project in other projects/countries.

Three deliverables are expected out of this evaluation (following EMU templates):

- i. An inception report⁹;
- ii. A draft evaluation report; and
- iii. The final evaluation report¹⁰

As indicated in the previous section, the inception report should summarize the desk review and specify the evaluation methodology, determining thereby the exact focus and scope of the exercise, including the evaluation questions, the sampling strategy and the data collection instruments.

The final report of the evaluation must be composed of the following key elements:

- i. Executive summary;
- ii. Introduction of the evaluation, a brief description of the projects, the scope of the evaluation and a clear description of the methodology used;
- iii. Findings and assessments according to the criteria listed in Section IV of this ToR, with a comparison table of planned and implemented project activities and outputs; and
- iv. Conclusions and recommendations drawn from the assessments.

All the evaluation assessments must be supported by facts and findings, direct or indirect evidence, and well-substantiated logic. It follows that proposed recommendations must be supported by the findings and be relevant, specific, practical, actionable, and time-bound.

Description of Duties

The UNCTAD Evaluation and Monitoring Unit (EMU), in close collaboration with the Division on international trade and commodities (DITC), will facilitate the evaluation as undertaken by an independent evaluator.

The evaluator reports to the Chief of EMU. S/he will undertake the evaluation exercise under the guidance of the EMU and in coordination with the project manager. The evaluator is responsible for the evaluation design, data collection, analysis and reporting as provided in this TOR. The evaluator will submit a copy-edited final report to UNCTAD.

The evaluator shall act independently, in line with United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines and in her/his capacities and not as a representative of any government or organisation that may present a conflict of interest. S/he will have no previous experience of working with the project or of working in any capacity linked with it.

The evaluator should observe the UNEG guidelines, standards and norms¹¹ for evaluations in the UN system, as well as UNCTAD's Evaluation Policy¹², in the conduct of this assignment. The evaluator needs to integrate human rights and gender equality considerations in the evaluation process to the extent possible.¹³ The evaluator needs to ensure a complete, fair, engaging, unreserved, and unbiased

⁹ Quality of the inception report should meet those set out in UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Terms of Reference and Inception Reports: http://www.uneval.org/papersandpubs/documentdetail.jsp?doc_id=608

¹⁰ Quality of the evaluation report should meet those set out in UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/607>

¹¹ United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) "*Norms and Standards for Evaluation* (2016); <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>;

¹² "Evaluation Policy" of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), December 2011. December 2011, http://unctad.org/Sections/edm_dir/docs/osg_EvaluationPolicy2011_en.pdf.

¹³ "Integrating human rights and gender equality in evaluations" by UNEG, UNEG Guidance Document (2014): <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1616>. The UNEG Handbook on "Integrating human rights and gender equality in evaluations: Towards UNEG Guidance" by UNEG, UNEG Guidance Document (2011): <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/980>.

assessment. In case of difficulties, uncertainties or concern in the conduct of the evaluation, the evaluator needs to report immediately to the Chief of EMU to seek guidance or clarification.

The project manager/team will support the evaluation, by providing desk review documents (following EMU desk review documents guidelines), contact details of project stakeholders as well as any additional documents that the evaluator requests. It is the responsibility of the project manager to ensure senior management engagement throughout the evaluation and timely feedback in the quality assurance and factual clarification process coordinated by the EMU. The project manager/team will review and provide comments on the inception, draft and final reports with a view on quality assurance and factual accuracies.

The EMU acts as clearing entity during the main steps of this evaluation. It endorses the TOR and approves the selection of the proposed evaluator. EMU reviews the evaluation methodology, clears the draft report, performs quality assurance of the final report and participates in disseminating the final report to stakeholders within and outside of UNCTAD. EMU engages the project manager throughout the evaluation process in supporting the evaluation and validating the reports.

Timetable

The evaluation will take place over the period 21 February to 30 June 2020. The consultant is required to attend the regional workshop in Bangkok, Thailand, which will take place as a pre-event to the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2020 (24 March 2020). This mission will allow the evaluator to observe and undertake interviews/focus groups discussions and/or a survey with national project participants as well as project partners and other stakeholder.

Monitoring and Progress Control

The evaluator must keep the EMU informed of the progress made in the evaluation on a regular basis. The evaluator will submit the inception report by 9 March 2020. The Report should include draft data collection instruments for review and finalization prior to the mission to Bangkok in March. The first draft of the report should be presented to the EMU by 1 May 2020 for quality assurance purposes. The revised draft report will then be shared with the project manager for factual clarification and comments.

The deadline for submission of the final report will be 30 June 2020.

The contract concludes, and payment issued, upon satisfactory receipt of the final report.

Qualifications and Experience¹⁴

- Education: Advanced university degree in economics, trade, development, public administration, rural development, or related field.
- Experience: At least 10 years of experience in conducting evaluations, preferably on interventions in the area of trade-related technical assistance. Knowledge of non-tariff measures, export promotion, green production and/or green markets is an advantage. Experience in conducting gender and human rights responsive evaluations is desirable.
- Language: Fluency in oral and written English.

¹⁴ The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs.

Annex 2: Project results framework

Intervention logic	Indicators	Means of verification
Objective		
<p>To strengthen capacities of developing countries in the Asia and Pacific region to make the best use of VSS as a tool to foster the development of green export sectors which contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.</p>		
<p>EA1: Increased understanding by multi-stakeholders on the impacts of domestic and international VSS on the development of “green” exports and sustainable development objectives.</p>	<p>IA1.1: At least 80% of participants (of which at least 40% are female) at the start-up workshop understands what are VSS and how they can influence the viability of “green” exports.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation survey asking the participants to rate the usefulness of information they received, and the magnitude of acquired knowledge and networks created at the start-up workshop
	<p>IA1.2: At least 75% of participants in the national multi-stakeholder platform state an increased understanding on the VSS’ impact on “green” exports and social and environmental sustainability in their communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation survey asking the participants to rate the usefulness and the magnitude of acquired knowledge and networks acquired from the country study
Main activity		
<p>A1.1: Design the Assessment Toolkit that identifies and scales main concerns of different stakeholders with respect to VSS’ potential impact upon (i) export competitiveness and (ii) social and/or environmental sustainability in the country. This tool-kit will be used for country studies in A1.5.</p>		
<p>A1.2: Conduct a fact-finding mission in preparation for the start-up workshop.</p>		
<p>A1.3: Train national consultants (web-based) on the use of VSS impact-assessment tool kit developed in A1.1. The national consultant of each country will use the tool kit to prepare a section on the impact of VSS in the country study in A.1.5.</p>		
<p>A1.4: Organize a workshop per country, in collaboration with FAO, UNEP, UNIDO, ITC and Regional Commissions, as a preparation for the launch of the national platform for multi-stakeholder dialogues on VSS. This start-up national workshop will serve as a fact-finding and mapping of the key issues and the key stakeholders that will form the basis of the national platform.</p>		

<u>Intervention logic</u>	<u>Indicators</u>	<u>Means of verification</u>
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A1.5: Conduct a country study on how stakeholders' concerns interact and what actions can be taken by whom to make VSS contribute towards fostering the country's "green" exports in each country in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner. [Ensure the study and the strategic option mainstream the importance of gender equality and economic empowerment of women and girls.] The recommendation of the study will include the strategic options, which in turn forms the basis for the National Action Plan in A2.1.

Share the country case study with the stakeholders who will be participate the national multi-stakeholder platform for their review. For their preparation to the national multi-stakeholder platform, a survey will be sent to verify if the strategic options presented in the study captures key concerns from their perspectives, which will be discussed at the national platform meeting.

EA2: Improved capacity of multi-stakeholders to jointly assess and implement the strategic options for making the best use of VSS to develop "green" and sustainable exports.	IA2.1: At least 75% of participants in the national multi-stakeholder platform consider that the strategic options towards improving effectiveness of VSS, as discussed in the platform meeting(s), is relevant for enhancing "green" exports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation survey asking the participants to rate the usefulness and the magnitude of acquired knowledge and networks acquired from the country study
	IA2.2: In at least 2 out of 3 target countries, the national multi-stakeholder platform adopts the National Action Plan and establishes the process for reviews and monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan, taking into account the need to integrate gender equality into the policy making and implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption of the National Action Plan with a schedule of implementation of the actions

A2.1: Organize the national multi-stakeholder platform to discuss the impact of VSS on the country's green exports, and to **evaluate the strategic options** recommended in the country study. The national multi-stakeholder platform will **develop and adopt the National Action Plan (NAP)** towards making VSS more effective for developing and fostering the "green" export sectors in the country in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner. Activity A2.1 will also contribute to EA1.

A2.2: Conduct advisory mission/services to help each country establish a process for implementing, and for reviewing and monitoring of the implementation of, the NAP.

Intervention logic	Indicators	Means of verification
EA3: Increased understanding at the regional level and beyond of how to make an effective use of VSS to enhance “green” exports and sustainable development in all the three dimensions.	IA3.1: At least 75% of participants at the regional peer-review conference (e.g. representing the governments, producers, businesses, and NGOs) understand the contribution of the VSS-green exports nexus to the achievement of the SDGs in their countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation survey asking the participants to rate the magnitude of knowledge acquired from, and the usefulness of networks created at, the regional peer-review
	IA3.2: At least 3 countries showed interest in developing a project on VSS-green export nexus in their countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Count the number of written requests received by UNCTAD.

A3.1: Organize one regional peer-review workshop (in collaboration with the UNFSS member agencies and UN-ESCAP) to exchange views on the NAP and the Assessment Toolkit, and disseminate information on good business practice and success cases in fostering “green” exports via VSS.

A3.2: Compile the findings, country experiences and the discussion at the regional workshop into **a comprehensive report**, and make it available on the UNCTAD web. Present the report to the UNCTAD inter-governmental process (e.g. the Trade and Development Commission).

Annex 3: Stakeholder mapping/analysis

Stakeholder	Stake in the project and the topic that the project addresses	Level of influence over topic and project/ways in which affected by topic and project	Expected use of the evaluation results	Way(s) to involve this stakeholder in the evaluation process
UNCTAD HQ	Overall responsible for project design and management	In project steering and management position	Lessons for future projects in the topic (focus countries; Asia and Pacific, elsewhere)	At core of evaluation process: source of information, sharing self-perception on performance of project, review of draft evaluation report and drawing attention to factual errors in draft report if any); overall management of evaluation and final clearance of report by UNCTAD's EMU
Project staff (national, international)	Direct role in project implementation	Working based on ToR/specific assignments and under guidance of project manager	Depending on the extent in which involved in current/future related projects on the same topic	Source of information, sharing self-perception on performance of project
Chief counterparts (focus countries)	Source of request for assistance on topic to UNCTAD and project beneficiaries	Expected to be involved in country level overall steering of project, project implementation and follow-up, also after project closure	Use of findings in work undertaken on topic as follow-up of the project (after its closure) or in eventual next phase of external support (UNCTAD/other)	Source of information, sharing perception on performance of project as beneficiary
Public and private project partners (international and at focus country level)	UNFSS sister agencies and other international/national project partners (public and private)	Expected to have played a direct role/provided a direct contribution to (some) project activities at global, regional and country level	Lessons for future projects in the topic (in the focus countries; Asia and Pacific, elsewhere) Sharing experiences and lessons of this projects through UNFSS/other platforms on VSS	Source of information, sharing perception on performance of project as project partners

UNDA Secretariat	Funding source; end-of-project evaluation being compulsory step in DA funded projects	Initial project appraisal and approval; review of annual progress reports; review and acceptance of project/budget amendments and of final project report	Lessons for future UNDA projects in general and regarding the topic of the project	Review of final evaluation report
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Annex 4 : Evaluation Matrix		
	Sources of information	Data collection/ analysis methods
A. Project identification and design		
How were the three focus countries selected (criteria; process) and to what extent was the project design based on a needs assessment (analysis of situation/problems/opportunities and of stakeholder capacities)?	UNCTAD Project Manager (PM) Project document Reports of fact-finding missions	Interviews Content Analysis
To what extent and how could the design of the project build on prior efforts (national; externally supported) with the same or related objectives in the focus countries? To what extent/how were lessons from similar projects elsewhere reflected in the design of the project?	UNCTAD Project Manager (PM) Project document Reports of fact-finding missions	Interviews Content Analysis
To what extent did the design of the project follow a logical framework approach? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the project's design have a clear thematically focused development objective? • Were the project outcomes clear, realistic, relevant, addressing the problems/opportunities identified and providing a clear description of the benefits or improvements that are expected to be achieved after project completion? • Is the results hierarchy in the logical framework -from activities to outputs, outcome(s) to overall objective - logical and consistent? • Can the attainment of the overall development objective, outcome(s) and outputs be determined by a set of SMART verifiable indicators as defined in the logical framework? • Were baselines established to measure progress? 	Project document incl. its logical framework	Content Analysis
Other design aspects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent were cross-cutting issues reflected in the design of the projects? • Were the assumptions adequate and were important external factors and risks that could affect project performance identified (as well as mitigation measures)? • Were the project steering, management, monitoring and reporting mechanisms clearly described? • Were the role and responsibilities of the different project partners (UNFSS/other) clearly described? 	Project document	Content Analysis

B. Project implementation			
Core evaluation questions	Sub-questions	Sources of information	Methods and tools for (i) data collection and (ii) data analysis
Relevance and Ownership			
Q1. To what extent and how did the project design and implementation properly reflect and address the development and strategies of the selected countries (relevance) and to what extent and how are the local stakeholders involved in implementation (ownership)?			
<i>Relevance</i>	How relevant is the projects to national development needs/priorities/strategies in the focus countries	To what extent did the project take into account and was relevant to the national policies and strategies? To what extent is the results sought part of the countries' UNDAF/Cooperation Framework and aligned to national SDG priorities? To what extent were the results achieved so far responding to the needs/opportunities of the target countries? If prior related efforts in this field, to what extent and how was the project different and complementary thereto?	National counterparts UNCTAD PM Project staff (field) Delegates form the Missions in Geneva (3 focus countries) if involved in project design/implementation Project document Progress reports Studies/reports on experiences in the field of green production/exports in the countries
<i>Ownership</i>	To what extent were country stakeholders involved in design and implementation	To what extents were the chief counterparts and other national stakeholders involved in the design stage of the initiative at country level and to what extent are they supporting the implementation of the project? In what forms (political, technical, administrative, financial/other)? To what extent are the national platforms established/utilized by the project multi-stakeholder and multi-sector?	
Effectiveness and impact			
Q2. What are the project's key achievements in terms of progress towards the intended results (effectiveness) and what is the likelihood for the project to achieve the intended objective (potential impact)?			

<i>Effectiveness</i>	Which results have been/are likely to be achieved?	To what extent have the intended results been produced? Is progress measured against baselines? How do the counterparts, UNCTAD and the partners (i) perceive the quality of the results and (ii) use these results? If not, what have been the constraining factors? Has the implementation strategy been appropriate in order to achieve the results? Are there external factors which have affected the effectiveness of the project?	UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field) Project document Progress/other reports	Interviews Content Analysis
<i>Impact</i>	What is the likelihood of impact at this stage?	Have outcomes been or are likely to be achieved through the utilization of outputs? Have developmental changes (economic, environmental, social, inclusiveness) occurred or are they likely to occur as a result of the interventions (including expected contribution towards SDGs)? Are there other catalytic effects of the project at both the national and regional levels? Were there other direct/indirect/foreseen/unforeseen effects (positive/negative) so far?	UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field) Project document Progress/other reports	
Efficiency of implementation				
Q3. <i>Has the project "done things right" in terms of inputs covering: adequacy of human and financial resources; timeliness and quality of inputs; quality and adequacy of planning and monitoring (efficiency)?</i>				
Adequacy, timeliness and quality of inputs	Were all inputs and services provided in an efficient manner?	To what extent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have resources (funds; human resources, time) been allocated strategically and appropriately to achieve the intended results? • have UNCTAD and - to the extent applicable - counterpart inputs been 	UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field) Project document Progress/other reports	Interviews Content Analysis

		<p>provided as planned and were these adequate to meet requirements and provided in a timely manner?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • was the quality of UNCTAD inputs and services (expertise, training, methodologies, etc.) as planned and did it lead to the production of outputs? • were UNCTAD procurement services provided as planned and were they adequate in terms of timing, value, process issues.? 		
Adequacy of steering, management and monitoring	To what extent is a project steering, management and monitoring system in place at project level?	<p>How is the project being steered and managed?</p> <p>To what extent has M&E function been developed and managed (M&E design and implementation) at project level? Are monitoring data adequate? Are these data disaggregated (gender/age)?</p>	<p>UNCTAD PM</p> <p>National counterparts</p> <p>Project staff (field)</p> <p>Project document</p> <p>Progress/other reports such as mission reports, minutes of steering meetings</p>	<p>Interviews</p> <p>Content Analysis</p>
<p>Q4. What is the likelihood that results/benefits will continue after the project ends (<i>likely sustainability</i>)? Is there evidence that beneficiary countries are committed to continue working towards the project objectives beyond the end of the project?</p>				
Likelihood of project benefits to continue beyond the intervention	How sustainable are the results achieved?	<p>To what extent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are the developmental changes that have occurred or are likely to occur as a result of the interventions sustainable? • was sustainability correctly factored in into the project strategy? Were risks analysed and assumptions identified at design stage? Has an exit strategy/approach towards the search for sustainability been formulated and is 	<p>UNCTAD PM</p> <p>National counterparts</p> <p>Project staff</p> <p>Project document</p> <p>Progress/other reports</p>	<p>Interviews</p> <p>Content Analysis</p>

		<p>it appropriately monitored during implementation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is there prospect for technical, organizational & financial sustainability of the support provided by the project? • are the partnerships established sustainable? 		
<p>Q5. To what extent were a gender mainstreaming strategy and, if appropriate, a human rights-based approach incorporated in the design and implementation of the project, and can results be identified in this regard (<i>cross-cutting issues</i>)?</p>				
Gender mainstreaming	To what extent were gender equality issues addressed in the project (design and implementation)?	<p>To what extent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have gender issues been mainstreamed in the design and implementation of the project? • have gender related data collection and analyses been included in baseline studies, monitoring and reporting? • have women benefited from the project or to what extent can they be expected to benefit? 	<p>UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field) Project document Progress/other reports</p>	<p>Interviews Content Analysis</p>
Other cross-cutting issues	To what extent were other cross-cutting issues addressed in the programme/project, such as human rights, other	Tbd which other cross-cutting issues are appropriate in the project context	<p>UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field) Project document Progress/other reports</p>	<p>Interviews Content Analysis</p>
<p>Q6. To what extent has coordination with related efforts (internally) and also partnering with other public and private sector organizations (external complementarities/synergies) enabled or enhanced the project results and the likely sustainability thereof? (<i>synergies and partnerships</i>)?</p>				
Adequacy of coordination among related	Were there efforts aimed at coordination and search for	Were there synergy benefits in relation to other UNCTAD activities at global, regional and country level (internal synergies)?	<p>UNCTAD PM National counterparts Project staff (field)</p>	<p>Interviews Content Analysis</p>

<p>initiatives including complementarities (internal/external)</p>	<p>with a view to generating collective efficiencies?</p>	<p>Were there synergy benefits in relation to related past/ongoing/planned activities of others (in particular UNFSS, ESCAP, ISEAL, other) at global, regional and country level or are there opportunities to establish/ strengthen such linkages (external synergies)? In case of cooperation, what was in concrete terms the nature thereof (by partner)? To what extent have these partnerships (with national and regional counterparts, international development partners, the civil society and/or the private sector) enhanced the likely sustainability of the project results</p>	<p>UNFSS, ESCAP Trade, Investment and Innovation Division, ISEAL, other partners Project document Progress/other reports</p>	
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Annex 5. References to secondary information sources

List of documents by type of document	Year
General project information	
Project document, UNDA 1617AI	20 Jan 2017
Briefing notes on VSS, including Power Point presentations on project	not dated
Annual project reports (covering project implementation in 2017 and 2018), overview as per output list (February 2020) and draft final report (Sept 2020)	Jan. 2018 Jan. 2019 Feb. 2020 Sept. 2020 - draft
Budget status reports	as at 1 Oct 2020
VSS Assessment Toolkit information (general explanation; concept note, summary note on meeting), Ad-hoc Expert Meeting/EM on UNCTAD VSS Assessment Toolkit, 28 March 2019, Geneva	EM, March 2019
Comprehensive final report on the project (output 3) entitled Fostering green exports through VSS, the UNCTAD approach	September 2020
Documents/reports on focus countries	
*Project work/other information - Lao PDR	
Back-to-office mission reports	April 2017 Nov. 2019
Country study, Sustainable commercialization/coffee value chain	Nov. 2019
Reports on events (LOAF 6 and 7)	Dec. 2017 Nov. 2019
ITC and Lao National Chamber of Commerce, Summary of Awareness Workshop on VSS Tool & Project approach	www.lnccci.la Oct. 2020
Lao PDR, Conseil National du Café Lao, Coffee Sector Development Strategy by 2025	
Lao PDR, Sustainable commercialisation in the coffee value chain	2020
ITC, Press release on coffee sector stakeholders meeting in view of design of coffee-sector roadmap	22 Jan. 2020
*Project work/other information - Philippines	
Back-to-office mission reports	Nov. 2019
Country study, Organic certification/coconut oil value chain	Jan. 2019
Reports on events (1 st Technical Working Group on assessment of organic certification in the coconut oil value chain)	Nov. 2019
Draft National Action Plan for strengthening the Philippine Organic VCO value chain towards health, economy & environment	
*Project work/other information - Vanuatu	
Back-to-office mission reports	Feb. 2017 Nov. 2017 Nov. 2019
Country study, Organic certification/coconut oil value chain	Aug. 2019

Reports on events (workshop 1/2017; First National Coconut Summit/2019)	November 2017 October 2019
National Green Export Review	2016
Vanuatu National Coconut Strategy 2016-2025	2016-2025
Vanuatu Agriculture Sector Policy	
UNDA project 2023G, Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesian Spearhead Group	2020-2023
Pacific Community/Pacific Farmer Organisation Network, Coconut value chain market study	February 2018
Other	
Project presentation at 55 th ICC Sessions and Ministerial Meeting, Manila	Aug. 2019
FAO, VSS in agriculture, fisheries and forestry trade, Trade Policy Briefs No. 30	Oct. 2017
UNFSS Flagship Reports	2013, 2018
ITC et al, Linking VSS to SDGs	2020
UNCTAD, The trade impact of VSS: a review of empirical evidence, UNCTAD Research Paper No. 50	2020
IISD – web based information on State of Sustainability Initiatives	www.iisd.org
ISEAL Alliance, Introduction to comparing and benchmarking sustainability standards systems	
UN Development Account, Project Evaluation Guidelines	Oct. 2019
Center for Global Development, Kimberly A. Elliot, What are we getting from VSS for coffee?, CGD Policy Paper 129	Aug. 2018