



United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
12 June 2013

Original: English

Trade and Development Board

Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget

Sixty-fifth session

Geneva, 2–4 September 2013

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Evaluation of UNCTAD activities

Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects undertaken during 2012. This information is presented to allow fuller reporting on all evaluation activities, and is a move towards strengthening accountability and the application of lessons learned.

I. Summary of evaluation findings

2. Evaluations at UNCTAD are conducted against the criteria of relevance, effectiveness (including impact), efficiency and sustainability, consistent with standards outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group. The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions on the work implemented, to make recommendations on improvements needed, and to identify lessons learned. Such information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work.

3. Broadly, five evaluations were conducted in 2012. The following paragraphs elaborate on the key findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations.

A. Evaluation of the UNCTAD Empretec and Business Linkages Programmes

4. In 2012, the Government of Finland commissioned an external evaluation of the UNCTAD Empretec and Business Linkages Programmes with a focus on activities

implemented in the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia that the Government of Finland had financed. The evaluation has the main objective to evaluate the performance of the programmes and to formulate recommendations in order to strengthen the work of UNCTAD in this area. The evaluation also serves a particular purpose to facilitate the consideration, by the Government of Finland, of their further contributions and to review the synergies of the programme with Finnish bilateral cooperation.

5. The evaluation found that the Empretec and Business Linkages Programmes had high relevance for the beneficiary governments and the donor countries, and with the policy priorities of UNCTAD. The evaluator also noted that both programmes are highly relevant for skills and business development needs for micro, small and medium enterprises in the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia. With regard to the effectiveness of this work, the evaluator found that the Empretec and Business Linkages Programmes achieved “outstanding effectiveness” from their work in these two countries in particular. The companies participating in the two programmes in both countries benefited from the programmes and witnessed medium to large increases in employment and revenues. The evaluator commended the approach adopted by UNCTAD of certifying national trainers to bring down the cost in Empretec training, ensuring the sustainability of its activities. The evaluator noted, however, that the programmes could be strengthened by better design of their logical frameworks, that is, the setting of objectives, quantifiable targets and specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) indicators to assess programme performance, and also by improving the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the programmes at the country level. There was some evidence that the funding modality of the programmes resulted in implementation delays and affected the efficiency of the programmes. For instance, the evaluator compared the projects in the two countries with the Business Linkages Programme in Uganda, which has a four-year funding commitment and realized significant results for the participating companies, and allowed for greater sustainability of activities. There was also scope for improving the coherence and synergies of the programmes with other initiatives and policy priorities.

6. On the basis of the findings, recommendations proposed by the evaluator related to (a) improvements to programme design; (b) improving monitoring and evaluation; (c) improving communication with all stakeholders before and during implementation; (d) improving synergies and complementarities with other ongoing United Nations initiatives, including the One United Nations approach; and (e) continued funding of both programmes on a multi-year basis.

B. Evaluation of projects supported by the sixth tranche of the United Nations Development Account

7. External evaluations were also completed for four projects that were supported by the sixth tranche of the United Nations Development Account: (a) Project AC: Strengthening science, technology and innovation policies for development in Latin America; (b) Project L6: Strengthening the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector of six developing countries in the Economic Community of West African States subregion; (c) Project M6: Support to decision-making and policy formulation on foreign direct investment in the context of the Millennium Development Goals and the Monterrey Consensus; (d) Project O6: Enhancing effective participation of developing countries in dynamic and new sectors of international trade.

1. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account Project AC: Strengthening science, technology and innovation policies for development in Latin America

8. Project AC: Strengthening science, technology and innovation policies for development in Latin America was operational from 2009 to 2012. The project aimed to assist developing countries in Latin America in building their capacity in science, technology and innovation (STI), with a view to ensuring that national STI programmes become an instrument for supporting relevant components of the national development agenda. The project activities included the preparation of science, technology and innovation policy (STIP) reviews, involving field visits for data collection and the organization of stakeholders workshops, and the publication of STIP reviews for the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Peru.

9. The evaluator confirmed the relevance of this work, noting that the activities and outputs of the project were consistent with the intended outcomes and expected achievements, and that the positive opinions of the country stakeholders reflect that the project design, choice of activities and the final deliverables have properly reflected the needs of the beneficiaries. With regard to sustainability and impact, the evaluator observed that two out of the three beneficiary countries have put some of the policy recommendations on the top of their political agenda and some initial evidence suggests that some recommendations have either been implemented or would be implemented in the medium term, although it was too soon to evaluate the actual impact of this project. Nonetheless, several of those responding to the evaluator's survey believe that the STIP reviews in the three countries have either generated or will generate a high level of spillover effects in the institutional, legal and economic areas. Concerning effectiveness, the active engagement of UNCTAD with counterparts from the very beginning of project design was considered useful in addressing beneficiary needs and contributing towards the achievement of planned outcomes. The evaluator recognized that the STIP reviews played a good and important role of awareness-raising and facilitated consensus building in the beneficiary countries. On the subject of efficiency, the evaluator received feedback that the project funds were perceived to have been used very efficiently; with a limited quantity of resources, a high level of outputs were reached as each review incorporated extensive data collection and consultations. The evaluator observed that the project experienced delays largely owing to capacity limitations, and developments at the country level. The evaluator also found that the project was not fully successful in using modern communication tools to encourage information exchange and sharing of best practices as initially planned.

10. The evaluator's recommendations were largely directed at enhancing project design and implementation to strengthen the sustainability and impact of the project. For example, the evaluation recommended that UNCTAD should set clear and standard criteria to guide the submission and assessment of requests for STIP reviews, including ensuring indications of full representation of stakeholders in the composition of the national counterpart team. To optimize the field visits used for data collection, the evaluator urged UNCTAD to make all efforts to improve information gathering to prepare thoroughly for the field visits. Another recommendation called for intensifying inter-agency collaboration aimed at facilitating the implementation of policy recommendations resulting from the STIP reviews. The evaluator further recommended that UNCTAD establish built-in mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the recommendations to improve the sustainability and impact of the project.

2. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account Project L6: Strengthening the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector of six developing countries in the Economic Community of West African States subregion

11. Project L6: Strengthening the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector of six developing countries in the Economic Community of West African States subregion was operational from 2009 to 2011. The project aimed to contribute to economic development at a regional, national and local level, by strengthening capacities to optimize gains from the tourism sector. The project was intended to respond to the following issues of development that are equally shared at the national level, while contributing to regional development: (a) the low coverage of the tourism value chain (repatriation of profits abroad); (b) ineffective destination networking and e-business policies; (c) the low level of cooperation and clustering between public and private stakeholders. The main activities of the project were the workshops developed around four pedagogical training modules, and technical training and introduction to an open-source software, organized in six Economic Community of West African States countries.

12. The evaluation team recognized that the project has reached its intended objective of increasing the understanding of decision makers about the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) tools for the development of the tourism sector, the need to structure the touristic offer, the need to adopt an integrated approach to the development of tourism with a multisector range of stakeholders, and the need to develop public and private partnerships. The evaluation team also confirmed the level of efficiency achieved through cost savings during project implementation to provide six additional technical trainings and briefings, which were not originally planned in the project proposal. The majority of the respondents to the survey indicated that the workshops were adapted to the country-specific needs, attesting to the relevance of the activities. At the same time, the evaluation team questioned if the relevance of the project could be enhanced by revising the criteria for inclusion of beneficiary countries.

13. The evaluation observed that some factors such as the changes in project management during implementation of the project, weak collaboration with in-house capacity-building programmes and other tourism initiatives, and limited follow-up beyond the project's activities have undermined the effectiveness, impact and sustainability of the project. The evaluation team considered that the impact of the project remained limited at the time of the evaluation largely owing to the short time they had to carry-out the evaluation, but also because the evaluators perceived the position of the six countries as touristic destinations to be weak. The evaluation team acknowledged that the project correctly included the design of follow-up strategies and noticed that links had been made with the West African Economic and Monetary Union for further funding and follow-up with the World Tourism Organization to set up a subregional development strategy.

14. On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations were made: (a) in planning the project, UNCTAD should avoid spreading resources too thinly and define more precisely the scope of each project in light of the level of funding to ensure impact on the beneficiaries; (b) UNCTAD should move beyond the awareness-raising stage and aim for a more concrete level of achievement; (c) UNCTAD needs to support least developed countries in their ICT development and bridge the digital divide before they can implement tourism-related ICT tools; (d) synergies between divisions/sections need to be identified and operationalized.

3. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account Project M6: Support to decision-making and policy formulation on foreign direct investment in the context of the Millennium Development Goals and the Monterrey Consensus

15. Project M6: Support to decision-making and policy formulation on foreign direct investment in the context of the Millennium Development Goals and the Monterrey Consensus was operational from 2008 to 2011. The project aimed to build the capacity of developing countries to analyse and formulate policies on foreign direct investment (FDI) and transnational corporations (TNCs) in the context of achieving their overall development goals. The main activities of the project were the establishment of a list of core indicators for policymakers in the formulation of FDI-related policies, the organization of 17 national workshops and four regional workshops on FDI and TNC statistics and awareness-building, and a training manual on statistics for FDI and the operations of TNCs.

16. The evaluator confirmed the relevance and importance of the involvement of UNCTAD in this project and recognized its collaboration with regional partners that had also shared quite a big portion of the cost, coorganized activities and took up follow-up actions after the UNCTAD intervention. The evaluator observed that the focus of this project on the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) within Africa is also relevant, to the extent that this economic grouping is the largest in Africa (covering 19 member States) with major FDI inflows. On effectiveness, the evaluator noted that at the regional level, the assistance culminated in COMESA regulation on FDI data compilation and reporting. Furthermore, the publication of the (first) COMESA Investment Report is a result attributed to UNCTAD support, and the project has inspired similar actions in other countries using the same materials. The project has triggered 11 surveys conducted in 11 countries, eight of which were considered successful and comprehensive. Moreover, the evaluator observed that an important outcome of the workshops is the improved networking among stakeholders both at the country and regional levels, which allows experience sharing and learning.

17. With regard to efficiency, although the evaluator appreciated that the project – with its limited budget – reached out to many countries and regions, the question was raised whether this is preferable to a more narrow focus (fewer countries with more follow-up at the country level after the first awareness-building workshop), in line with the capacity-building objective of this project. Synergies between this project and the other work undertaken by the responsible division could also have been stronger. The evaluator also noted that there is a need to review the design of the training workshops, and suggested that they could have a common section for both statisticians and data users (policymakers), followed by separate sessions for each group to consider their different roles and specific needs. On impact, this evaluation was not in a position to assess to what extent the data quality has indeed improved as a result of the awareness-building activities as this would require an independent assessment at the country level comparing the quality of the data before (baseline) and after the workshops. On sustainability, the evaluator observed that the establishment of a national team that is in charge of the annual survey in each country is an approach that is expected to contribute to sustainable efforts to organize and report on such surveys in line with good practice methods.

18. Based on the findings and conclusions, the evaluator proposed the following recommendations: (a) cooperation agreements with development partners such as the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development should be ideally defined and specified during the project design, rather than during project implementation; (b) UNCTAD should foster stronger South–South cooperation by involving experts from regions or countries that are more advanced in the field of FDI and TNC statistics in the next round of awareness-building activities; (c) UNCTAD should offer better customized training according to the profile of the audience

(for example, differences in training content for those who collect and compile the data on the one hand, and for those who analyse and use such data on the other); (d) the Capacity Development Office could consider the utilization of Development Account funding as seed money (for project development, advocacy, awareness-raising, and the like) rather than as funding of technical cooperation activities aimed at capacity-building, due to the funding and time limit of each project.

4. Evaluation of United Nations Development Account Project O6: Enhancing effective participation of developing countries in dynamic and new sectors of international trade

19. Project O6: Enhancing effective participation of developing countries in dynamic and new sectors of international trade was operational from 2008 to 2011. The project aimed to help countries build new competitive supply capacity by using innovative approaches to development, trade, organizational learning and information sharing, with the objective of impacting the sustainable economic development of the beneficiary countries. The main activities of the project were the drafting of three national studies for three developing countries, the organization of three national workshops and three regional workshops, the organization of one study tour, the development of a training module, the development of an analytical framework, and the development of a database of the revealed factor intensity indices (RFII) – a measuring tool to identify sectors/products/related markets with the highest potential for export.

20. Findings on the project from the evaluation team confirmed that the design of the project is very relevant and meets the Accra Accord mandate that “UNCTAD should...help strengthen the participation of developing countries in dynamic and new sectors of world trade”. The project demonstrated flexibility and responded to demands arising during the course of the project, and led to positive outcomes from its activities. At the same time however, the evaluation observed that such flexibility could have been better reflected against the project’s logical framework (logframe). On the subject of the project’s logframe, the evaluation team observed that it could be more pragmatic in its design given the limited resources and time frame of the project, with better use of SMART indicators. The report notes that the goals of the project were defined too broadly and risked spreading the project funding too thinly, which contributes towards reduced effectiveness. On this subject, while the results achieved by the project in the case of its support to Peru were commended, it was observed that more could be done in creating public–private sector networks, as well as in identifying dynamic or new products for the beneficiaries. Concerning efficiency, coordination of the project was observed to create a heavy workload for the implementing officer, particularly in efforts to build synergies with other units or United Nations system organizations in the implementation of this project.

21. On the basis of the findings, the evaluation team recommended the following: (a) project design should ensure internal logic of intervention and consistency between means and scope; furthermore, SMART indicators of achievements at the outcome and impact level should be defined more precisely; (b) human resources arrangements have to be made so that a project coordinator has the support that would enable her/him to fulfil regular duties while ensuring oversight over efficient implementation and providing analytical reporting; (c) in planning the project, UNCTAD could consider focused activities at the country level and avoid using resources too thinly; (d) the project team must not lose commitment to the implementation of the web-supported knowledge-sharing activities that were foreseen by the project, and in particular the training module related to the use of the RFII must be finalized and uploaded as soon as the UNCTAD website is restructured; (e) cross-cutting issues of gender and environmental responsibility must be mainstreamed in project development from the start.

II. Lessons learned

22. Based on these evaluations, the following paragraphs present extracted points that programme managers and project officers may wish to consider in their work.

A. Lessons learned on project design

23. Lessons learned from a project should become a mandatory part of the project reporting. Review of previous comparable projects or project activities prior to the design of new projects or subsequent phases of a work programme allows for the incorporation of the lessons learnt and avoidance of similar pitfalls. Too often, too little or no review at all is done and subsequently the wheel is “reinvented” and the same mistakes made. Divisions need to ensure such discussions are undertaken for programme improvement and reporting to senior management. Alternatively, presentations of project successes and shortcomings could be organized within the context of the Project Review Committee. Where lessons learned and successes are shared, the likelihood of the same errors being made is lessened.

24. A project document has multiple functions; it is a tool for planning and programming, it serves as a management tool, a tool for monitoring and evaluation and finally a communication tool. When drafting the project document all these aspects need to be included.

25. Those responsible for project design (and subsequent management and execution) should ensure that “impact drivers” are set in motion from the outset. These may include:

(a) A detailed analysis of background conditions, including a mapping of key stakeholders and institutional relationships in the areas covered by the project;

(b) A thorough stakeholder analysis – whose capacities will be strengthened, individuals, institutions, society? Providing an analysis that clearly identifies the capacity gaps/needs for each stake holder will greatly facilitate the evaluation/impact of the project;

(c) Establishment of a clear logframe, including appropriate baselines, objectives that reflect results that are realistically achievable and measurable, and SMART process and performance indicators;

(d) The provision of information on existing work carried out by other entities in the area, and a description of the complementarities and synergies to be engendered.

26. Clear and transparent criteria should be set for screening and selecting beneficiary countries and target sectors for intervention (based on needs expressed and the logic of the intervention). A lack of field presence poses challenges to a better understanding of country-specific situations. Thus it could be helpful to have a clearly elaborated framework for potential beneficiary countries to submit formal requests for needs assessment, including firm evidence of government commitment, during the feasibility study.

27. Projects should develop exit strategies that incorporate policy dialogue and advocacy support, in order to promote the sustainability of results and impact at a wider level. Exit strategies should always be formed at the project design stage or envisaged early enough to formalize such strategies.

28. If follow-up actions are envisaged, such as supporting implementation of the recommendations in a report, projects should consider having an explicit strategy to work with governments to define prospective partners for financing the planned follow-up actions.

29. Gender perspectives should be mainstreamed in the project design to ensure balanced and sustained intervention impact in the development agenda.

30. A project timeline should be clearly drafted to indicate different milestones of the project and important prerequisite activities and potential bottleneck areas should be highlighted so that project team and beneficiary countries know very well areas that will require close monitoring and follow-up. Further, when designing a project, project officers need to take into account communication and decision-making delays, and put aside reasonable buffer time for those areas prone to delays.

31. The United Nations Development Account Projects, due to their funding limits and the restrictions of fund use, seem better suited to national/country-level activities rather than larger scale or regional activities.

32. Involvement of local (including community-level) stakeholders in the decision-making processes of a project generates ownership and contributes towards engendering its sustainability.

B. Lessons learned on implementation approaches

33. UNCTAD needs to ensure that adequate staff and staff time are allocated from an early stage of the project planning cycle. In the ePAS plan and performance assessment, such project-management responsibility should be reflected and appraised, as recognition of the additional work this represents and also as a means of project performance management.

34. Turnover of key project staff that results in delays and other inefficiencies in project execution is a risk that needs management. Mitigation strategies may include:

- (a) Ensuring a sufficient number of staff capable of backstopping one another's roles;
- (b) Formal hand-over processes in the event of staff turnover;
- (c) Producing good, informative and up-to-date project documentation.

35. A project should have a very clear structure of the national counterpart team, whether it is a particular office of a ministry or a team of officials and representatives from several ministries, academia, civil society and industry sectors. The reporting line and decision-making mechanism should be clearly defined in the memorandum of understanding or project documents to ensure efficient communication and decision-making.

36. It does not necessarily follow that awareness alone will automatically lead to uptake of information and knowledge – this takes time and is underpinned by reinforcement and repetition. A combined approach to capacity-building, whereby learning by doing is coupled with hands-on training appears to reinforce the overall delivery of results intended by the project.

C. Lessons learned on monitoring and evaluation

37. The design of a project's monitoring and evaluation system in project documents should receive special attention. A baseline study should be included in all projects as part of the project preparatory phase to enable a more impact-oriented monitoring and evaluation process. Sufficient funds should be allocated to monitoring and evaluation implementation and reporting, and deadlines for reporting must be established.

38. Annual project progress reports could be used more effectively as a monitoring and evaluation tool. To this end, reports should include (a) assessment against the logframe indicators and (b) deeper analysis of progress and changes in the logic of intervention. Any such changes should be reflected in the logframe, with related adjustment of indicators of performance. In particular, for United Nations Development Account projects, the terminal report should provide qualitative assessments of progress made towards the objectives (or of their potential to reach the objective) at the higher levels in the logic of intervention. Finally, to the extent possible, project monitoring should also include gender disaggregated data.
