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Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

Introduction

1. An overview of the findings from external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects conducted between April 2020 and April 2021 is presented in this report. The aim is to report on all evaluation activities and to promote accountability and lessons learned. Evaluation synthesis reports are knowledge products and a means of consolidating and sharing acquired knowledge and strengthening UNCTAD evaluation feedback and learning loops.
2. Evaluations are conducted against the 2011 evaluation policy of UNCTAD and the updated Norms and Standards for Evaluation outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group.¹ The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions from the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and best practices. This information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work. Programme managers at UNCTAD are encouraged to refer to previous reports and overviews of evaluations of UNCTAD activities in designing, implementing and monitoring programmes.²
3. In this report, the results of four external evaluations of projects, including findings, recommendations and lessons learned, are presented in chapter I; a synthesis of lessons learned from these project evaluations, in chapter II; and an update on evaluation matters and activities at UNCTAD in 2021–2022, in chapter III.
4. During the period between April 2020 and April 2021, four external evaluations of projects were completed. Three projects were supported by the United Nations Development Account and one project was supported by the West African Economic and Monetary Union, as follows:

¹ See www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1189 and www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914.

² See <https://unctad.org/about/evaluation/reports>.



(a) Informal cross-border trade for empowerment of women, economic development and regional integration in Eastern and Southern Africa.

(b) Fostering the development of “green” exports through voluntary sustainability standards in Asia and Pacific.

(c) Trade and agricultural policies to support small-scale farmers and enhance food security.

(d) Strengthening statistics on international trade in services for countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union.

5. Some highlights of key findings from these four evaluations are as follows:

(a) All of the projects were found to be relevant to the needs of beneficiary countries and fully consistent with the UNCTAD mandate. In addition, the comparative advantage of UNCTAD in the areas of work evaluated, such as trade policies, were validated.

(b) With regard to outcomes and effectiveness, the evaluations found that all projects have enhanced the technical knowledge, awareness and capacity of policymakers and practitioners in developing countries in a variety of topics, including cross-border trade, voluntary sustainability standards and the collection of statistics on trade. However, long-term impacts remain to be seen, as some projects have recently been concluded or require additional support and resources to ensure the adequate dissemination of results.

(c) All projects demonstrated high degrees of efficiency in the timely and cost-effective utilization of resources, despite some internal and external constraints.

(d) Under many projects, partnerships had contributed to enhancing efficiency and impacts. However, it was found that under a number of projects, expected partnerships had not taken place or had not been developed to a meaningful degree, including with other United Nations agencies.

(e) Gender and human rights mainstreaming had been incorporated well in some project concepts or activities but neglected in others or favoured less than other measures such as environmental or economic impacts.

(f) The sustainability and continuity of project work was questioned, as follow-up work or scaling-up activities would require more financial commitment and technical support.

(g) Several projects would have benefited from a greater emphasis on and incorporation of results-based management in the project design, including a theory of change, in order to more effectively guide project implementation and results.

I. Summary of evaluation findings

A. Informal cross-border trade for empowerment of women, economic development and regional integration in Eastern and Southern Africa (Development Account project 1617J)

6. This project was implemented in March 2016–December 2019 with an approved budget of \$547,000. The project aimed to strengthen national capacities in Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia to leverage informal cross-border trade for the empowerment of women, economic development and regional integration. Three sets of activities were undertaken. First, research and analysis to identify the characteristics of informal cross-border trade, its drivers and the barriers to formalization and expansion. Second, use of this information to develop five six-day capacity development workshops reaching 142 informal and small-scale traders. The objective was to transfer knowledge on the processes and requirements of formalized trade and the entrepreneurial skills needed for small business diversification, growth and formalization. Third, engagement with national and regional policymakers in policy dialogue, aimed at identifying and reducing the obstacles currently dissuading women from using formal trading procedures, such as information

barriers, bureaucracy, inadequate infrastructure and rent-seeking behaviour. The project had been implemented with a close liaison with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, Trade Mark East Africa and the World Bank, including through a staff cost-sharing agreement. New collaborations had also been forged, including with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Customs Union.

7. The evaluation concluded that the project had been highly strategic. It had provided women traders with the tools to overcome the principal obstacles preventing business profitability and also increased the awareness of policymakers with regard to the constraints faced by women traders and to complementary areas of regulatory reform. The project had been strongly aligned with the broader goals of UNCTAD related to poverty reduction and sustainable development and led to impacts among a group of economic actors traditionally overlooked in programming. Participants acquired new knowledge and there was strong evidence that they would use their new skills towards constructive ends. Beneficiaries had gained the skills to accumulate profits and save and thereby move closer to the formal economy. Despite limitations in data collection, the reports produced under the project had highlighted important policy issues with regard to women engaged in informal cross-border trade. The project might have made a unique contribution in the analysis and reporting of primary data, yet national stakeholders had requested that this activity be scaled back. Following the regional workshop held at the end of the project, participants had expressed in particular their appreciation that the workshop had: addressed an important but rarely discussed subject; been participatory and practical; and brought together government officials, technical staff and civil society stakeholders on an equal playing field. Given their high level of impact and potential sustainability, the efficiency of the microschemes was positively noted. This component of the project had used around 17 per cent of the project budget and had delivered high-quality training aimed directly at closing identified gaps in knowledge and capacity. Such efficiency gains had largely accrued from the strategic use by the project team of the existing Empretec methodology and pool of trained facilitators. The project had effectively adopted a gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach. The needs of and constraints faced by women traders were central themes in the reports, trader's guide and training curricula. They were also appropriate for and appealing to a general trader audience. Training participants would almost certainly exploit their new skills and knowledge towards positive ends, yet to consolidate learning and exploit secondary spillovers, national stakeholders would need more sustained support to make progress in promoting cross-border trade. Finally, the evaluation noted that, in a scaled-up iteration of this project, activities to support policymakers in implementing identified reforms needed to be prioritized.

8. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) Project teams need to be equipped to undertake risk assessments and put in place contingency strategies. This project gave rise to certain do-no-harm concerns that, although not deemed high risk, had not been identified and therefore not (or not sufficiently) guarded against. The lesson learned is that when organizations branch into new areas of programmatic work, staff may not have the requisite skills to undertake risk assessments rigorously. Investing in such areas of staff capacity and creating opportunities for staff to enrich their skills should be prioritized.

(b) Programme managers need to ensure that an effective and value adding research methodology is developed to support evidence-based programming. For agencies with strong research functions, staff skills in qualitative and quantitative methods need to be regularly updated and built upon to ensure that best practices in research and publication are followed. UNCTAD might consider peer-to-peer mentoring and creating opportunities for staff to participate in short courses in research methods, data reporting and simple statistical applications.

(c) Project managers need to ensure that deviations from project activities remain aligned with the intended project results while remaining responsive to stakeholder needs. With regard to the scaling back of research activities, national stakeholder views must always be prioritized, yet project teams should feel empowered to advocate for programming goals.

(d) Project managers should design monitoring and evaluation frameworks that support results-based management. The project results framework failed to reflect best practices in results-based management programming.

(e) Project managers need to rethink assumptions and gender relations and how women's empowerment can best be supported. Women-centred programming is not always the most effective way to achieve gender-related goals and, in certain cases, can create new vulnerabilities. There is some evidence that the more active inclusion of men in the project may have had positive spillover effects, including by building a stronger community of informal traders to advocate for their rights.

(f) UNCTAD should scale up the training activity and/or consider other activities that further contribute to improving the enabling environment for informal cross-border women traders. Given the high value added and cost efficiency of the training activity, scale-up is warranted. Other activities with significant potential include facilitating access to capital; supporting trade fairs aimed at women small-scale and cross-border traders; developing online and offline tools that provide information on trade and customs rules; and capacity-building aimed at improving compliance on the part of border officials.

B. Fostering the development of “green” exports through voluntary sustainability standards in Asia and Pacific (Development Account project 1617AI)

9. This project was implemented in February 2017–August 2020 with an approved budget of \$520,000. The project aimed to strengthen capacities in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines and Vanuatu to make the best use of voluntary sustainability standards as a tool to foster the development of green export sectors, contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

10. The evaluation concluded that the project design had been satisfactory in terms of the context, problem analysis and intervention logic. The implementation strategy had been focused on awareness-building and stakeholder networking with regard to priority-setting, culminating in the validation of national action plans. Yet the available budget could not cover support for the implementation of such plans. The evaluation observed that the formulation of the logical framework could have been more specific. With regard to implementation, the project had been relevant in relation to the alignment of interventions with national sectoral or thematic priorities. Broadly, there had been a good level of ownership by participating Governments and there were encouraging signs of appreciation by the three beneficiary countries of the project outputs, such as the country studies and the multi-stakeholder networking that had been enabled. An assessment toolkit had been developed, tested in the beneficiary countries, finalized and made available online. However, at the time of the evaluation, the process of formulating a national action plan had not been fully completed in the Lao People's Democratic Republic or the Philippines. The implementation of national action plans, once validated, was expected to play a crucial role in carrying forward the work of the project.

11. With regard to impacts, the evaluation noted that it was premature to assess the longer-term effects of the project. Multiple factors would determine whether enterprises in the beneficiary countries would be able to apply voluntary sustainability standards and thereby take advantage of green trade opportunities. The project scope and resources supported analyses as inputs for policymaking and priority-setting, as well as networking among multiple stakeholders. There were encouraging signals in terms of policy-level attention to voluntary sustainability standards; tangible actions showing the implementation of validated national action plans would be the first indicators of medium-term results. With regard to efficiency of implementation, the project had been managed by devoted and motivated staff. A project steering mechanism had not been established, which could have fostered and deepened collaboration and the linkages envisaged. In the final year of implementation, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had affected the ability to complete one output, namely, a regional workshop in collaboration with the Economic and Social

Commission for Asia and the Pacific, as well as to ensure an adequate handover to national counterparts at the end of the project.

12. With regard to likely sustainability, alignment with national policies or strategy frameworks was expected to facilitate the continuation of project achievements following its conclusion. In the Philippines, for example, there had been significant interest among national stakeholders in finalizing consultations on the national action plan and, in particular, given the long-standing experience of the Philippines in the virgin coconut oil subsector and recent declines in the share of exports of this commodity, a national-level engagement in the finalization of the national action plan was expected. Further, in addition to its use by UNCTAD in activities related to voluntary sustainability standards, there was some indication that the assessment toolkit was used by other stakeholders.

13. The evaluation found that gender equality had been addressed in design and implementation, although the focus had been on the collection of gender-disaggregated data. Among the core events organized during the project, gender equality and the empowerment of women had not featured as specific issues or challenges to be addressed, which could be seen as a missed opportunity. The evaluation noted that the project approach had focused primarily on the environmental and economic dimensions of voluntary sustainability standards. The social dimension, covering concerns such as with regard to basic human rights, including child labour issues and the health and safety of workers, had not been reflected in the project approach.

14. Finally, the evaluation found that, although collaborations had been envisaged and pursued, envisaged synergies with others such as partner agencies of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards had remained limited. To carry the work forward at the national level, taking into consideration complementary mandates, inter-agency collaboration was necessary, to effectively pool resources and synchronize the efforts of different agencies.

15. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) UNCTAD should present the findings of the project to partner agencies of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards, with a view to seeking interest in strengthening collaboration regarding national-level capacity-building support, both as a follow-up to the policy-related work conducted in the beneficiary countries and in the development of new projects elsewhere.

(b) At the start of the final year of implementation, UNCTAD should have included in the project design the formulation of an exit strategy and ensured a clear handover of the project at its closure.

(c) UNCTAD should decide on the human resources needed to design and implement the project follow-up, also including wider use of the assessment toolkit developed and tested during the project.

(d) UNCTAD should clarify for whom the toolkit would be most useful, as the basis for deciding on the dissemination strategy.

(e) UNCTAD should feature its work on voluntary sustainability standards, to foster green trade, related tools and inter-agency cooperation, more prominently among the core themes featured on its website, as information on how UNCTAD implements its mandate regarding voluntary sustainability standards in accordance with the outcomes of the fourteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development is not easily found.

(f) The Department of Economic and Social Affairs could encourage the development of Development Account project proposals that cover multi-agency cooperation and multi-fund initiatives.

C. Trade and agricultural policies to support small-scale farmers and enhance food security(Development Account project 1617I)

16. This project was implemented in July 2016–December 2019 in Guatemala, Malawi and Vanuatu, with an approved budget of \$646,000. The project aimed to support the Governments of these countries in enhancing food security and improving the income of small-scale farmers through sound and complementary trade and agricultural policies. Implementation involved two main types of activities, namely, knowledge generation, through data collection and processing and policy-relevant analysis; and capacity-building, through workshops and hands-on training.

17. The evaluation concluded that the project and activities had been highly relevant in the different national contexts and regions. It had been crucial to address the different problems associated with market and institutional failures and trade restrictions and distortions. However, the evaluation observed that while broad national specificities had been analysed during the project design, the roles different stakeholders needed to play in solving problems could have been better addressed to better inform implementation. Moreover, the project had focused mostly on enhancing the knowledge of individuals and, to some extent, had overlooked the organizational level and the enabling environment dimensions of capacity development. There was evidence that the project had contributed to increased knowledge and understanding at the individual level by gathering and presenting new and original information. The project had also contributed to enhancing capacities among senior officials in the relevant ministries to design and implement complementary and coherent trade and agricultural policies in each country.

18. Of respondents to the evaluation survey, 62 per cent confirmed that the main outputs of the project, namely, thematic reports and workshops, had contributed to increasing their understanding of the complementarities between trade and agricultural policies, to achieve sustainable development objectives. The majority considered that the activities and information would contribute to or influence policymaking, initiatives, actions plans and/or strategy plans, among others. Most stakeholders also highlighted the high level of quality of the different activities and outputs, including the reports and workshops. However, few stakeholders were able to provide concrete results at this level. Further, only five respondents reported having used the publications and over 46 per cent had never used the publications or studies in their daily work, mostly due to the fact that they did not know about them. Most interviewees highlighted that the objectives could have been more clearly defined; in some instances, the project had been seen as interesting but mainly a theoretical exercise. It was broadly agreed that more work was needed to generate and influence public policies.

19. With regard to project management, the evaluation found that there had been an efficient division of tasks within UNCTAD and different measures implemented to ensure good collaboration among the different counterparts. In general, both project managers and beneficiaries stated that the project had responded to difficulties and changing needs. The implementation period had not been extended, leading to the cancellation of important activities such as the interregional workshop and a pilot test proposed in the market and information system feasibility study for Vanuatu, which had impacted the ability of the project to achieve the improved capacities targeted under the second expected accomplishment. The logical framework had been useful at the project proposal stage and in supporting oversight and management by UNCTAD and under the Development Account. It had, however, been less useful in informing project implementation as it had not included indicators that comprehensively captured project performance.

20. There was insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the project sustainability. The activities implemented had contributed to generating interest and some steps forward were being considered in response to the policy recommendations in the three beneficiary countries, yet there was no evidence of formal commitment and high-level support for the action plans and project recommendations. Despite efforts under the project, the work completed, including the publications, needed broader dissemination to increase political support and strengthen appropriation by beneficiaries.

21. A significant number of stakeholders stated that the project had contributed to improving their knowledge about integrating gender equality and human rights into trade and agricultural policies. Efforts had been made to incorporate a gender perspective into the project design and, during implementation, to prevent the under-representation of women. Particular challenges for women had been addressed, including providing new opportunities and addressing gender-related risks and constraints. The project had delivered a toolbox that included some gender-specific conclusions and policy recommendations at the national level in two of the beneficiary countries. In addition, it had been implemented with a clear human rights perspective, by contributing to integrating considerations of social inclusiveness and sustainability into trade and agricultural policies. However, the extent to which the project had considered and addressed the particular challenges faced by marginalized groups, along with the point of view of civil society, was less clear.

22. The project had mobilized and leveraged expertise from within UNCTAD, which was, in general, considered the right institution to support Governments in developing complementary trade and agricultural policies. However, the expected broad collaboration with other institutions had been limited. In particular, existing mechanisms had not been sufficient to promote or ensure thorough cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations or the regional commissions, which had implemented similar projects in the same period.

23. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) All projects should be underpinned by a theory of change that investigates causal relationships as comprehensively as possible, including those not directly addressed by the project. For example, it is important for both supply and demand constraints to be considered, as well as the three dimensions of capacity development (individual, organizational and enabling environment). This should be accompanied by a thorough stakeholder analysis, including assessing and promoting partnerships to effectively and fully address the identified problems. This would also help to identify contributions to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

(b) In order to enhance its results-based management culture and learning focus, UNCTAD could consider regularly assessing project evaluability, implementing results-oriented monitoring and/or mid-term evaluations and organizing structured learning events. In particular, more attention should be paid to obtaining opinions from seminar participants and collecting information from beneficiaries.

(c) It is crucial for project findings to continue to inform the work of UNCTAD by identifying synergies with ongoing work, including other Development Account projects. This could include a meta-analysis of the three case studies to uncover cross-country results and lessons that could be presented at regional or international events organized by UNCTAD or other stakeholders.

(d) The Department of Economic and Social Affairs should maximize the impact and efficiency gains of the Development Account portfolio by putting in place effective coordination mechanisms aimed at identifying complementarities among projects and promoting synergies at all levels (institution, sector, country, region, etc.). A step forward in this direction has already been taken as, for new projects, the Development Account team shares the concept notes among 10 implementing entities, to allow for the identification of potential synergies and partnerships.

(e) Gender-related issues should be mainstreamed into the logic and activities of all projects, through the undertaking of a comprehensive gender-based analysis at the outset, with targeted activities included if necessary. The possible different effects on women and men should be thoroughly analysed. Further, UNCTAD should continue to encourage specific analysis at the national level, to identify gender-based patterns and constraints in agricultural trade and rural development.

(f) An exit strategy should be envisaged at the outset, to maximize project sustainability, including targeted activities such as wrap-up sessions. This should include interinstitutional participation and commitment to tracking implementation and results, for example, through a core group of stakeholders and by empowering sectoral champions.

(g) UNCTAD should ensure that the relevant publications are disseminated among key stakeholders. This should be accompanied by targeted discussions with high-level representatives at line ministries, to help increase their ownership and commitment to adopting the recommendations and implementing the action plans. To strengthen institutionalization, UNCTAD could consider developing short informational notes or concrete implementation toolkits. Focal points are crucial in this effort but other champions at line ministries should also be identified. Further, UNCTAD should actively pursue the provision of support for action plans from the offices in the field of United Nations agencies (such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the regional commissions) and other stakeholders.

(h) All Development Account projects should realistically estimate the allotment needed to cover the technical and administrative support required, including with regard to monitoring and collecting information from beneficiaries; allocating enough time for local teams and consultants; and ensuring close coordination with other international organizations, in particular United Nations agencies with offices in the beneficiary countries. In addition to the project officer, it may be necessary for at least one additional UNCTAD staff member to provide assistance during project implementation.

D. Strengthening statistics on international trade in services for countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union

24. This project was implemented in 2015–2020 with an approved budget of \$3,393,684, funded by the West African Economic and Monetary Union. The project aimed to improve the quality and harmonization of statistics on international trade in services in eight member countries of the Union, namely, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, the Niger, Senegal and Togo. Others, such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the Economic Community of West African States, participated as observers or followed developments. The overarching objective was to create, at the Union level, statistical tools for observing the exports and imports of services and for economic analysis, in order for member countries to be able to put in place policies in the area of services that were adapted to their economic and social development objectives and to monitor the impact of such policies.

25. The evaluation concluded that overall, the project design, choice of activities and deliverables had reflected and met the needs of the participating countries. The data and information collected during the evaluation had revealed needs related to the availability of reliable statistics on and comprehensive mapping of international trade in services, as well as capacity-building in institutions that collected, processed and disseminated such statistics. The evaluation found that the secretariat of the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the member countries had been sufficiently involved in the project design and implementation, to ensure its alignment with the needs of the countries. Some of the activities originally planned had been modified as a result of participant requests, thereby increasing relevance. The evaluation also noted the added value of having a regional consultant who could adapt the project implementation based on local knowledge.

26. UNCTAD had developed, in collaboration with all stakeholders, a draft acte communautaire that incorporated the data collection questionnaire and guidelines for capacity-building among relevant actors with regard to statistics on international trade in services. Of respondents to the evaluation survey, 73 per cent considered the regional objective of harmonizing procedures for the collection, processing and dissemination of statistics on international trade in services in member States a high priority for their country and the relevant institutions; and over 86 per cent expressed satisfaction with this key expected result. Broadly, the evaluation found that the project had contributed to building the capacity of member State representatives to use the statistical tools developed through the project. Due to the lack of performance measurement indicators, it was not possible to assess the effectiveness of the project against a specific database or targets. However, most of the activities related to the planned objectives had been completed and most respondents had expressed satisfaction with the implementation of these activities.

27. Data collected during the evaluation showed that beneficiaries had actively participated in the development and refinement of the questionnaire, the implementation of the questionnaire and the validation workshops and had taken the related online training to strengthen their technical skills. The evaluation noted that some elements would be missing at the end of the project, namely, the components not planned at the time of project design but that would need to be addressed to ensure that the statistics on international trade in services were fully useful. Two issues in particular would need to be addressed as a matter of priority by the West African Economic and Monetary Union and its member countries, namely, the capacity-building of key stakeholders with regard to extrapolations from sample data and the integration of the travel sector into the questionnaires; these could be addressed in the online training modules.

28. Further, several respondents to the evaluation survey noted that data collection was challenging due to human resource constraints, accounting difficulties or perceptions of the disclosure of confidential information. In this regard, it was important to convince companies to actively participate by recalling their legal duty to collect data. This context underlined the importance of adopting the *acte communautaire*, which would formalize the process.

29. In general, the evaluation considered that the project implementation had been efficient, although delays were noted in the implementation of activities, which had led to the project being extended twice. Compared with other similar projects, including the implementation of large-scale survey processes, the evaluation considered that this project had been neither the most nor the least expensive. With regard to approaches to reducing costs, several respondents to the evaluation survey found that face-to-face meetings and workshops had been a good approach that effectively contributed to capacity-building but that videoconferencing and face-to-face approaches should be alternated, to increase the number of capacity-building workshops and indicator discussions and to enhance concept mastery, data processing and extrapolation methodologies at the national level. Face-to-face meetings were preferred for working, discussing and finding solutions together, while continuing online training.

30. The evaluation found that the work could continue after the end of the project provided that certain measures were put in place in member countries. The project sustainability would therefore vary by State. Of respondents to the evaluation survey, 9 out of 15 stated that it was more or less likely that the work would continue and the issue of lack of funding was noted as the main factor affecting project sustainability. In addition, the project had provided data on a sector about which data were difficult to capture and the initiation of collaboration with professional organizations and companies would help to improve the quality of the data collected. To take better advantage of the changes, it was necessary to rely on the willingness and availability of stakeholders, the involvement of general managers and the commitment of users of the statistics.

31. Some of the actions that needed to be taken to ensure the project sustainability included the following: national statistical institutions needed to be provided with adequate and sufficient human, material and financial resources; such institutions needed to include services data collection in their programmes of activity; and member countries could put in place a budget to take over and sustain the project achievements. The data collection process required a significant budget and some respondents noted the lack of necessary funds at the national level. Close collaboration by UNCTAD with the West African Economic and Monetary Union had underpinned the activities and pace of the project. However, few partnerships and synergies had been established with other organizations and stakeholders. Some respondents noted a lack of synergy between the project and other initiatives within the Union. On the basis of the information gathered, the evaluation observed two main reasons for this, namely, that this had been a specialized project implemented directly with the Union and its member States and that the project management team had been small and the budget limited, so that the option of coordinating activities with other entities therefore seemed beyond the project scope.

32. Based on the findings, the evaluation proposed the following recommendations:

(a) In future, when developing similar projects, results-based management should be emphasized from the design stage. Project managers should therefore begin with an

analysis of the targeted problem, then develop a solution to the problem, based on a theory of change, and the latter should be based on clear outcome statements at all levels and accompanied by performance indicators and baseline and target data. Implementing a project in this way would allow for better management overall.

(b) During the third annual survey cycle, the survey should be revisited and updated, ensuring that the indicators are the most relevant and continuously adapted. In addition, the volume of the survey should be reduced. In the longer term, it is important to ensure that a specific survey to collect data on the travel sector is developed for relevant respondents.

(c) If possible before the end of the project, a document describing and providing evidence of how data on international trade in services can be useful for States should be prepared. This could be used to encourage decision makers in member countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union to invest in the annual survey. In addition, after the end, to the extent possible, the accessibility of the electronic learning courses should continue to be extended to other staff members of institutions interested in the issue of international trade in services, to ensure knowledge transfer.

(d) At the end of the project, the process of the consolidation, aggregation and analysis of national data from the second round of the survey, conducted in 2019, should be supported. It is necessary to ensure that data is consolidated at the regional level and to pay attention to duplicate transactions. For example, in the context of a member country exporting a service to another member, each survey will count the same transaction; at the regional level, care should be taken to ensure that transactions are not double counted.

(e) In future, when developing similar projects, special attention should be paid to the themes of gender equality and human rights. For example, the different effects of various trade policies on women and men can be explored in order to develop policy strategies that will help to enable Governments to reduce negative consequences. There are information and data gaps that prevent stakeholders from better taking into account gender-related elements in similar projects. In addition, before such projects are launched, the links with cross-cutting themes such as gender equality and human rights need to be explored and tested, then fully integrated into the project design.

II. Lessons learned from project evaluations

33. Evaluation plays a crucial role by contributing to the enhancement of the impacts and results of United Nations system support to Member States in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Guided by the principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group and the updated norms and standards, the UNCTAD secretariat is committed to efforts to enhance the use of evaluation and improve evidence-based decision-making and accountability. Evaluations provide a comprehensive, systematic, transparent and objective approach to assessing the performance of programmes and the work of UNCTAD. The secretariat advocates to all stakeholders the importance of applying such lessons to a broader range of programme management aims at UNCTAD, to feed into UNCTAD programme planning and strategic decision-making. Lessons learned from previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities presented in the reports and overviews of evaluations remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing their programmes and projects. This report focuses on lessons learned extrapolated from the four evaluations completed during the reporting period. The lessons learned have been consolidated under the following three broad categories: enabling elements for results; the fostering of buy-in; and capacities required for successful project management.

A. Enabling elements for results

34. Projects should be designed in a way that ensures the engagement of national counterparts throughout project development and implementation. Some projects achieved concrete results by allowing national stakeholders to prioritize key issues, identify problems

and craft solutions. In addition, the validation of the process and reports by participating Governments is another key step, to ensure country ownership and sustainability with regard to the follow-up of recommendations.

35. Projects promoting market linkages require the active involvement of private sector actors as the main drivers; policy advocacy work as part of such projects needs to contribute to creating an enabling environment for the private sector. More proactive efforts in promoting or ensuring cooperation and exploring synergies among similar and complementary projects would be beneficial. For example, the emphasis of one of the projects was on building national supply-side capacities. It would have been beneficial to link this project with other projects funded by the same source and aimed at facilitating the dialogue between exporting and importing countries and addressing the effects of market barriers in product value addition and diversification.

36. Successfully targeting actors operating at the grassroots level in contrast to traditional UNCTAD entry points reflects the utilization of UNCTAD core strengths to generate impacts among a group of marginalized economic actors. This type of programmatic expansion, whereby an agency uses its experience and institutional knowledge to add value in new areas in which other agencies are not active, should be encouraged. For example, during a recent project, UNCTAD targeted cross-border women traders operating outside the legal and regulatory framework of the State and therefore often overlooked in programming, and such targeting may be seen as both strategic and consistent with United Nations objectives, in particular with regard to the aim under Agenda 2030 to leave no one behind. Similarly, the participation of customs and other border officials in the related training course is an example of the positive ends that can follow the inclusion of a non-traditional group.

B. The fostering of buy-in

37. Involving the central actors of a project in design and implementation can increase the relevance of the initiative and the chances of success. Moreover, a participatory approach to multi-stakeholder projects has proven effective as it allows for the exchange of good practices between countries and institutions implementing similar tools and approaches. It is difficult for countries to engage in the cost-sharing of project activities if a formal document describing and specifying the project work is not in place. Formalizing cooperation in the form of a memorandum of understanding or co-signature of a project document by beneficiary countries at the start of a project could be considered an appropriate first step in the timeline of a project.

38. In formulating exit strategies, consideration should be given to the fact that anchoring project outputs to national policy frameworks is crucial and a necessary element in engendering commitment yet not a sufficient condition for mobilizing national resources for the implementation of follow-up actions in beneficiary countries. Moreover, ending a project with deliverables such as a national action plan, strategy, road map or similar outputs ideally requires a follow-on project by UNCTAD or other partners, to support countries in selected aspects of the next step, that is, the implementation of such outputs.

39. Finally, the organization of stakeholder events not only in capital cities but also in other national regions contributes to the regional outreach of the work and to project results.

C. Capacities required for successful project management

40. It is important to account for and, if possible, properly budget for the level of effort required by the managers and administrators involved in the implementation of projects. The administrative support needed should not be underestimated, including managing the identification and recruitment of short-term consultants.

41. The project team should have a good balance between experts with knowledge of the national and/or regional situation and the international expertise essential to achieve contextually appropriate results based on internationally recognized practices.

42. When envisaging cooperation with partner United Nations agencies and/or 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, to formalize such cooperation.

III. Evaluations at UNCTAD

43. The mandate for conducting, coordinating and overseeing evaluations at UNCTAD is vested in its Evaluation Unit. This mandate covers all programmes and projects under the regular budget and projects funded from extrabudgetary sources that are implemented by UNCTAD. The Evaluation Unit undertakes these evaluations in accordance with the requirements of the United Nations General Assembly and the Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD and in conformity with the Norms and Standards for Evaluation of the United Nations Evaluation Group. This chapter provides an update of evaluation matters and activities in 2021–2022.

A. Office of Internal Oversight Services assessments

44. The Office of Internal Oversight Services conducts an assessment every two years of the state of evaluation in Secretariat entities and identifies key organizational performance as assessed in the evaluations, as well as the challenges for strengthening evaluation. The report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on strengthening the role of evaluation and the application of evaluation findings on programme design, delivery and policy directives, covering the biennium 2018–2019, was issued in March 2021 and considered by the Committee for Programme and Coordination in June 2021.³ Broadly, the report noted that evaluation practices remained highly uneven across the Secretariat, with meaningful practices limited to only a handful of entities with established functions and dedicated resources, mostly under the development and human rights pillars and largely project-focused and donor-driven. The quality of evaluation reports was good and had improved slightly from the previous biennium. The demonstration of evaluation use had also been enhanced, although past weaknesses with regard to use and tracking systems persisted. The overemphasis on project-based evaluations also limited the transferability and broader use of evaluation findings and recommendations. To inform the report, one of the primary activities conducted had been a systematic assessment of the evaluation function at each Secretariat entity against objective indicators regarding evaluation capacity. The assessments were presented in *United Nations Evaluation Dashboard 2018–2019*, which provided data under the following four areas: framework; resources; evaluation expenditure, outputs and coverage; and report quality. As noted in the Dashboard, UNCTAD had a robust evaluation system, as a strong evaluation policy, procedures and planning were in place. The estimated expenditure on evaluation reports was 0.23 per cent of the total programme budget and had remained below the minimum benchmark of 0.5 per cent for evaluation expenditures. Four out of five sampled reports (80 per cent) were rated as good or very good for their overall quality. However, there were gaps in integrating gender and human rights considerations into evaluation practices and in including more actionable recommendations in reports. Accordingly, areas in which to strengthen evaluation included the following: report spending, output and coverage, whereby expenditures on evaluation could be increased to meet a minimum of 0.5 per cent of programme expenditure; and report quality, whereby evaluation reports could more fully meet the quality standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group, including with regard to increasing the integration of gender and human rights considerations and ensuring that report recommendations are targeted and actionable.

B. Evaluation plan for 2021–2022

45. In accordance with the decisions of the Trade and Development Board, the secretariat will launch a new evaluation cycle of the five subprogrammes after the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, starting with the evaluation of

³ A/76/69.

subprogramme 1 on globalization, interdependence and development strategies.⁴ The evaluation will commence in October 2021, to be presented for consideration by the Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance at its eighty-fourth session in 2022. In addition, the UNCTAD evaluation plan for 2021–2022 will include a number of independent evaluations of projects funded through extrabudgetary sources and United Nations Development Account projects set to conclude in this period (see table). These include the evaluations of three joint projects supported by the Development Account developed to support Governments (in the areas of small and medium-sized enterprises, debt and development finance and trade and transport) in responding to the socioeconomic challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The three projects have a total value of about \$11.5 million. The evaluations are scheduled to be completed by December 2022.

Evaluation plan: Third quarter 2021 to fourth quarter 2022

<i>Title of programme or project</i>	<i>Period of evaluation</i>
UNCTAD subprogramme 1 on globalization, interdependence and development strategies	Q3 2021–Q3 2022
Electronic commerce and the digital economy for development	Q3 2021–Q1 2022
Evidence-based and policy coherent oceans economy and trade strategies	Q3 2021–Q1 2022
Leapfrogging skills development in electronic commerce in South-East Asia in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	Q3 2021–Q1 2022
Joint COVID-19 project: Global initiative towards post-pandemic resurgence of the microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises sector	Q3 2021–Q3 2022
Joint COVID-19 project: Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19	Q3 2021–Q3 2022
Joint COVID-19 project: Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics	Q1–Q4 2022
Integrating landlocked commodity-dependent developing countries into regional and global value chains	Q1–Q2 2022
Enabling policy frameworks for enterprise sustainability and Sustainable Development Goal reporting in Africa and Latin America	Q1–Q2 2022
Strengthening capacities of African countries to compile and disseminate statistics on illicit financial flows	Q1–Q2 2022
South–South integration and the Sustainable Development Goals: Enhancing structural transformation in key partner countries of the Belt and Road initiative	Q2–Q3 2022
UNCTAD subprogramme 2 on investment and enterprise	Q3 2022–Q3 2023

Abbreviation: Q, quarter.

⁴ TD/B/67/6 and TD/B/EX(68)/5.