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## Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

### Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

#### Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of independent evaluation activities at UNCTAD between July 2023 and June 2024. The results of five evaluations of UNCTAD projects and programmes are presented in chapter I; a synthesis of lessons learned from the evaluations is provided in chapter II; an update on other evaluation matters and activities is provided in chapter III; and the evaluation plan for the period July 2024 to June 2025 is presented in chapter IV. The purpose of the overview is to demonstrate accountability to UNCTAD member States and to consolidate lessons learned and good practices for decision-making and future planning, promoting evaluation feedback and learning loops.

2. Evaluations are conducted in accordance with the evaluation policy of UNCTAD.<sup>1</sup> The evaluation policy explains key evaluation concepts, establishes guiding principles, outlines the institutional framework and main evaluation roles and responsibilities, and delineates evaluation processes and mechanisms. It covers all UNCTAD initiatives and programmes under the regular budget as well as projects funded from extrabudgetary sources. The custodian of the evaluation policy is the UNCTAD Independent Evaluation Unit. The Independent Evaluation Unit reports to the Secretary-General through the Deputy Secretary-General and is comprised of two professional staff members. The Chief of the Unit can report on evaluation matters directly to those who commissioned the evaluation, and to management or governing bodies, without any undue influence by any party.

#### I. Summary of evaluation findings

3. Between July 2023 and June 2024, five independent external evaluations were completed of the following UNCTAD projects and programmes:

(a) Evidence-based and policy-coherent oceans economy and trade strategies (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://unctad.org/system/files/information-document/osg\\_evaluationpolicy2023\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/information-document/osg_evaluationpolicy2023_en.pdf)



(b) Global initiative towards post-pandemic resurgence of the microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises sector (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

(c) Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics (funded by the United Nations Development Account);

(d) Seizing the trade and business potential of blue biotrade products for promoting sustainable livelihoods and conservation of marine biodiversity in selected Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States countries (funded by the European Union, through the Commission of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States);

(e) UNCTAD subprogramme 3, on international trade and commodities (funded through the regular budget).

4. The objectives of the evaluations were to assess, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness (including impact) and sustainability of UNCTAD projects and programmes, as well as their mainstreaming of United Nations cross-cutting issues, and to draw conclusions from the work implemented, make recommendations on any enhancements needed and identify lessons learned and good practices, to feed into decision-making and future planning. Detailed findings, recommendations and lessons learned from the evaluations are presented below.

#### **A. Project: Evidence-based and policy-coherent oceans economy and trade strategies**

5. This project, funded by the United Nations Development Account (UNDA), was implemented from February 2018 to July 2022 with a budget of \$650,000. The project aimed at strengthening the capacities of coastal developing countries, particularly small island developing States, in elaborating, adopting and implementing evidence-based and coherent policy strategies to promote the sustainable trade of products and services. It was jointly implemented by UNCTAD and the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea of the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs, based in New York.

6. The project supported Barbados, Belize and Costa Rica in realizing economic benefits from the sustainable use of marine resources within the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the legal framework within which all activities in oceans and seas must be carried out. For each of the three beneficiary countries, a report was produced with analysis around the economic, environmental, social, scientific and governance pillars of the ocean economy. Report recommendations and action plans for implementation were validated during subsequent national and regional workshops with the project stakeholders.

7. The evaluation found that the project was aligned with the national policies and development frameworks of the beneficiary countries. The project's objectives were consistent with development needs and priorities identified by these countries. National Governments were actively involved in the selection of strategies for key ocean-based sectors, ensuring a demand-driven approach. The project was also complementary to, and coordinated with, other initiatives led by organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, World Bank and United Nations Development Programme, which are working alongside UNCTAD to address various aspects of marine biodiversity, the blue economy and coastal management. The project made substantial contributions to Sustainable Development Goal 14, emphasizing the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources. Since project completion, an additional 18 countries have expressed interest in developing such strategies.

8. The project reached or exceeded most of the short-term targets set in its results framework. Workshop participants reported an increased understanding of both key principles and obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for developing ocean sectors and of how to design and implement ocean economy strategies. However, the evaluation noted the unavailability of data sets, required by the project for background and working documents in Belize and to a lesser extent in Barbados, which

negatively impacted these deliverables. Additional and unanticipated research by UNCTAD was subsequently needed to fill in some of these data gaps.

9. The evaluation assessed the working relationship between UNCTAD and the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea as strong. Regular communication was maintained with project stakeholders and the dissemination of project outputs was consistent. Despite some delays, for example, linked with the pandemic and slow decision-making by the beneficiaries, the project achieved a 97 per cent financial implementation rate and delivered its expected outcomes.

10. The evaluation noted that, since the results framework did not include indicators for medium- to long-term results (for example, on implementation of the action plans or the effect on the economy), these data were not systematically collected. Given the nature of United Nations Development Account projects (short-term and small-scale), and the requirement to include project outcomes that are achievable within the project's time frame, the monitoring and evaluation of medium- to long-term results can only happen if the project is part of the overall results framework of the division and/or UNCTAD, or if follow-up evaluations of United Nations Development Account projects are commissioned further down the line.

11. Nevertheless, the evaluation concluded that the project's results are likely to be sustained beyond the end of the project, due to the commitment of the beneficiary countries. Barbados has shown a particularly strong commitment to building on the project's outcomes, and some recommendations are being implemented. Measures to promote sustainability have been incorporated to the extent possible in the project, including strengthening the knowledge and capacities of beneficiary organizations and disseminating the results of the project widely, to multilateral, regional and national audiences through news items, press releases and videos.

12. Based on the findings, the evaluation made recommendations to:

(a) Assess document quality and data availability during the project planning phase, using them as eligibility criteria for evidence-based projects.

(b) Define and share project milestones, deliverables and stakeholder roles early to manage expectations and ensure smooth implementation, particularly when engaging a wide range of stakeholders.

(c) Ensure that there are clear indicators and robust monitoring and evaluation systems to measure immediate, intermediate and long-term project outcomes, including those beyond the project's lifetime.

## **B. Project: Global initiative towards post-pandemic resurgence of the microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises sector**

13. The project, funded by the United Nations Development Account, was implemented from May 2020 to June 2022 with a budget of \$4,490,500. It was one of five joint inter-agency projects launched through the United Nations Development Account in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis.<sup>2</sup> Three of the five projects were led by UNCTAD. Through the development and implementation of capacity-building tools for Governments and microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, this particular project aimed at strengthening the resilience of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises in developing countries and transition economies and, thereby, mitigating the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jointly implemented by UNCTAD, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Economic Commission for Africa, Economic Commission for Europe, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the project built upon the comparative

<sup>2</sup> Guided by [General Assembly resolution 74/270 on global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#) and [A United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19](#).

advantages and mandates of these different entities. UNCTAD was the lead project coordinating entity. The project was executed, and funding made available, in three phases: phase 1 (May–June 2020), phase 2 (July–December 2020) and phase 3 (January 2021–June 2022).

14. Guided by the entrepreneurship policy framework of UNCTAD, the project was implemented through five clusters, each addressing critical areas of the recovery of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises: mobilizing entrepreneurial ecosystems, simplifying business registration processes, improving access to finance and financial literacy, increasing access to technology and innovation, and enhancing access to markets. Project activities focused on creating an enabling entrepreneurship ecosystem by improving regulatory environments, providing access to innovation, technology, finance, and markets, and reaching out to vulnerable groups, such as women and informal workers.

15. The evaluation found that the project, informed by needs and impact assessments, met the needs of Governments and microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises. Selected interventions followed previous work and specific requests from member States and were often coordinated with, or complementary to, existing activities. Outputs were tailored to target users and beneficiaries, despite challenges posed by COVID-19 restrictions and the diverse mandates and capacities of the United Nations implementing entities. The phased approach allowed for adaptive management and the introduction of new activities, maintaining high relevance.

16. Project coordination was complex and demanding, with seven United Nations entities, 96 beneficiary countries and a targeted delivery of around 100 outputs, of which some were composed of multiple activities. The United Nations implementing entities found the project complex and hard to follow outside the interventions under their direct control. Nevertheless, coordination was deemed good overall given the circumstances and resources available. The project benefited from UNCTAD leadership and active support from the Development Account programme management team. The UNCTAD Budget and Project Finance Section undertook the financial monitoring, and the project coordinator tracked delivery through a monitoring dashboard. The evaluation noted that more resources for coordination and monitoring would have further improved efficiency. Some project stakeholders questioned the added value of a global response compared to interregional or regional responses. Furthermore, the United Nations implementing entities were better equipped for supporting medium- and long-term policy changes rather than immediate crisis responses.

17. The project delivered 85 per cent of planned outputs, with effective outcomes in improving national capacities, resilience of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, and access to finance, innovation and markets. There was evidence of:

(a) Improved national capacities on formulating and implementing enabling policies on green, resilient and inclusive entrepreneurship and promotion of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (such as the adoption of a revised entrepreneurship strategy by Seychelles, South Africa and Uganda).

(b) Improved resilience and competitiveness of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (for example, 64.5 per cent of participants opened a new business after attending Empretec-based training<sup>3</sup>).

(c) Facilitated registration and formalization of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (through e-platforms in El Salvador, Benin, Cameroon and Mali).

(d) Improved access to finance, including upskilling in financial literacy (for example, 97 per cent of training attendees reported improved financial literacy in accounting and reporting and improved capacity to manage financial resources).

(e) Increased access of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises to innovation and technology (including through capacity development on green technologies for small and medium-sized enterprises in Southern Africa).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec>.

(f) Increased access to local, regional and international markets through digitalization and knowledge of non-tariff measures (for instance, case studies on competition in Brazil, South Africa and Thailand, and webinars and courses on small and medium-sized enterprises and competition policy for government officials).

18. The project avoided overlaps among the implementing entities and contributed to knowledge exchanges and expanded dissemination. Although some synergies were achieved, having joint outcomes was challenging. Some stakeholders expressed the view that the project lacked a coherent theory of change and was more a compilation of activities than a cohesive intervention. Collaboration between United Nations implementing entities and other United Nations entities, including country teams, was limited. Despite this shortcoming, the project was perceived by national stakeholders as complementary to those of other United Nations entities.

19. The addition of more functionalities to e-government tools, expanding training courses to more countries and the establishment of agreements to implement the project recommendations provided strong evidence of the sustainability of project outcomes. Beneficiaries reported applying new knowledge and skills to their daily work, by including microenterprise and small and medium-sized enterprise issues in policymaking or by improving the management, performance, outputs and, by extension, resilience of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises. Challenges to sustainability include the lack of financial resources, need for follow-up mentoring and unfavourable business environment. Overall, the project's design aligned with United Nations human rights and gender equality frameworks. The UNCTAD component on women and cross-border trade was a good practice in how to design and implement interventions with a strong reflection of the needs of vulnerable women across border areas. Otherwise, in practice, implementation and documentation of these aspects were limited. There was little evidence of the outreach, participation or impact of project activities for people with disabilities or other vulnerable groups.

20. The evaluation concluded that the project made significant contributions to the resilience and development of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises in the targeted countries, and made recommendations for more effective inter-agency collaboration and sustainable practices in future initiatives, specifically that:

(a) United Nations implementing entities map and align entrepreneurship policy framework components to support crisis recovery of microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, enhancing collaboration and policy coordination at all levels.

(b) UNCTAD build on the project's momentum to continue promoting the entrepreneurship policy framework, facilitating knowledge exchange, organizing events and collaborating with other United Nations entities and initiatives to support microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises.

(c) The Development Account programme management team create a framework to evaluate the benefits of global versus regional projects, ensuring responses are based on clear, context-specific assessments.

(d) United Nations implementing entities produce a comprehensive results framework and monitoring plan with specific objectives, measurable outcomes and indicators to track project progress effectively.

(e) United Nations implementing entities ensure sufficient resources for project coordination, technical collaboration and partnership building, integrating these aspects into project design and utilizing tools for continuous knowledge exchange.

### **C. Project: Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics**

21. The project, funded by the United Nations Development Account as part of its COVID-19 response, was implemented from May 2020 to June 2022 with a budget of \$5,565,000. Coordinated by UNCTAD and implemented together with the five United Nations regional commissions, the transport and trade connectivity project progressed

through three funding-dependent phases. The transport and trade connectivity project focused on contactless, seamless and collaborative trade and transport solutions. It targeted the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.

22. It was implemented through three clusters, each led by a different United Nations entity. The Economic Commission for Europe led cluster A, on contactless trade standards; UNCTAD led cluster B, on capacity-building for trade and transport actors to facilitate efficient cross-border trade and transport flows; and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific led cluster C, on strengthening regional and sectoral collaboration for better coordination and synergies in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project involved 15 teams across the six implementing entities.

23. The evaluation found that transport and trade connectivity project activities had broad outreach, with 170 countries benefiting either from direct support or webinars conducted under the project. The project was successful in reaching the least developed countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries through targeted interventions. Beneficiary countries were largely satisfied and considered the support provided highly relevant and in line with their needs and requests. The transport and trade connectivity project produced concrete results. For example, a project to implement the “electronic” Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets, that is, “eTIR”, was piloted in Eastern Europe, Asia and Northern Africa, and the first ever eTIR cross-border contactless transaction was completed through the project. Key actors implemented standards of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business. On smart transport connectivity, the transport and trade connectivity project produced trade and transport guidelines in times of pandemic and promoted an enhanced focus on resilience and safety moving forward.

24. The transport and trade connectivity project strengthened countries’ capacities through the development of information technology systems, e-learning courses, webinars and other mechanisms. Enhancements to the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), Automated System for Relief Emergency Consignments and non-tariff measures database have strong potential for supporting countries’ responses to future crises. The course on international commercial contracts yielded high satisfaction rates and informed policy development. The national trade facilitation committee empowerment programme focused on capacities in terms of crisis response and gender equality and made members’ roles and responsibilities publicly available through the UNCTAD reform tracker tool. The focus on resilience in transport and trade brought member States together for the adoption of a regional action programme for sustainable transport development (2022–2026). Strengthened sectoral collaboration was achieved in the maritime sector with the sharing of resilience lessons learned across ports from around the world, and capacity building for port staff and management allowed for the continued operation of ports in a time of crisis.

25. The governance and management structures of the project facilitated smooth implementation, although reporting and learning processes could have been more efficient. Flexible budgets and implementation mechanisms were crucial for adapting to emerging opportunities and mitigating risks. The three-phased approach of the United Nations Development Account and flexible budget allocations improved resource efficiency, but the unpredictability of the overall project scope and funding complicated planning. The evaluation highlighted the importance of strong leadership and trust among implementing entities. Coordination across 15 teams within six entities was complex but fostered closer collaboration. Joint activities were mainly small-scale inputs supporting larger existing projects rather than significant new initiatives. Despite limited joint action and results, the project enhanced the appetite for future cross-institutional collaboration.

26. The project results framework was vaguely defined and a moving target during implementation. It largely reflected short-term targets defined and formulated by the individual project entities rather than joint outcomes. The website developed through the transport and trade connectivity project enhanced the project’s visibility and continues to serve as a useful source for information sharing after project completion. Sustainability remains a challenge, requiring stronger national ownership and additional funding.

For example, while guidelines for smart transport connectivity were developed, their implementation was largely left up to member States due to limited resources for follow-up. The transport and trade connectivity project did generate demand for continued technical assistance and collaboration, with some entities securing additional funding. Furthermore, the hybrid working modality (with both online and in-person meetings) established during the transport and trade connectivity project continues to be harnessed in new projects.

27. Transport and trade connectivity project documentation reflected United Nations principles of inclusivity, gender mainstreaming and human rights. Efforts to ensure gender representation in events faced challenges in male-dominated fields, such as information and communications technology and transportation. The online courses allowed for more inclusion and several stakeholders highlighted this as an opportunity to engage with more women. Gender-disaggregated data on participants was collected systematically in most cases. There were, however, few concrete examples of how standards for gender equality were applied in practice, and many activities missed the opportunity to highlight gender as an important parameter of transport and trade.

28. Overall, the transport and trade connectivity project achieved its intended outcomes, but broader benefits from its ambitious scope were less evident. Jointly coordinated, complementary actions across organizations do not take place naturally, partly due to traditional differences in project entities' business models, target countries, time and resource constraints and so on. They need to be incentivized through cross-cutting and inter-institutional targets and indicators. Online courses and webinars expanded outreach effectively but require specialized skills to maintain quality.

29. Based on the findings, the evaluation made four recommendations:

(a) Through the United Nations Development Account, pursue joint project development: Collaborative efforts among agencies/entities on nexus issues should be promoted to achieve better, more holistic outcomes for countries through well-planned joint actions.

(b) Through the United Nations Development Account, provide further operational guidance and support: implementing entities need clearer guidance on developing, monitoring and evaluating joint projects to enhance learning and effectiveness.

(c) For UNCTAD and the regional commissions, strengthen internal and regional connectivity among entities with a view to enhancing focus on the trade–transport nexus and support quality.

(d) For UNCTAD and the regional commissions to promote gender equality and human rights: Ensure United Nations Development Account projects define vulnerable populations and include gender analysis to better promote equality and human rights.

#### **D. Project: Seizing the trade and business potential of blue biotrade products for promoting sustainable livelihoods and conservation of marine biodiversity in selected Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States countries**

30. The project, funded by the European Union and the Commission of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, was implemented by UNCTAD and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, in cooperation with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora secretariat. It ran from October 2020 to December 2022, with a total budget of €300,000. This pilot project aimed to empower small-scale Caribbean producers to process and trade Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*) products through the application of sustainability principles and blue biotrade criteria. The project delivered high-quality outputs following a structured methodology. The value chain of the Queen Conch was examined in three beneficiary countries that harvest it: Grenada, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. A study was produced for each, assessing the potential for production and export of conch and conch-based products. Based on the country studies, an Eastern Caribbean regional action plan for conch was then developed.

31. The evaluation found that the involvement of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States from project inception facilitated a tailored response to some of the countries' pressing needs, such as limited capacity to respond to regulation under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and lack of data on the Queen Conch value chain. The project targeted a niche value chain, and the outputs were aligned to the existing regional initiatives regarding conch. It resulted in a series of actionable recommendations for policymakers at the national level. However, tangible benefits for the ultimate target (fisherfolks and local private sector) will take longer to materialize. The project made contributions towards Sustainable Development Goal 14, for example, by raising awareness of sustainable fishing practices and the effects of illegal harvesting and trade.

32. Partnerships and trust building were important factors in achieving results. Despite logistical and contextual challenges, the project team maintained continuous engagement with the different project stakeholders, which was also a key success factor for the quality of outputs, capacity-building and fostering ownership of the action plan. The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States was able to gather political support at the project's regional workshop to secure funds for the creation an aquaculture facility (conch nursery) in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The nursery is likely to have far-reaching impact on the value chain of conch.

33. There was some evidence of contribution towards the project outcome and overall objective, i.e. to "empower small-scale coastal producers from [the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States] OECS member States to produce and trade Queen Conch products... under the blue biotrade criteria". However, it was difficult to assess the level of contribution to or performance against this objective because of the lack of consistent or comprehensive data and reporting against original project targets. There are plans for a second phase of the project, and therefore an opportunity to improve the quality of monitoring and reporting.

34. Adaptations due to COVID-19, such as virtual and hybrid events, created new opportunities. Notably, a virtual biotrade training workshop and a promotional video increased project visibility and stakeholder engagement. Funds were redirected to support Grenada with Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora requirements, and timely interventions helped Saint Lucia avoid a Convention trade ban. The project's success was largely due to the complementarity and commitment of its three implementing partners. However, the evaluation found that the project budget did not reflect the true costs of the project. Costs were underestimated by all parties, especially in terms of staff time required to produce the studies. These are lessons learned to be addressed in planning future work.

35. The project gained significant visibility and high-level support, fostering stakeholder ownership and enthusiasm. The project's knowledge products (stakeholder mapping, case studies and stock assessments) offer valuable data for future initiatives. It contributed, through national and regional validation workshops, to a better understanding of the Queen Conch industry and its regulations. Involvement in project activities also allowed fisherfolks and their communities to learn of good practices and techniques that can be applied in their daily operations. However, challenges to long-term sustainability include limited resources for implementation, the informal nature of the fishery economy, potential turnover of key stakeholders, and logistical and enforcement issues related to the Queen Conch value chain. Considering that fishery is mostly an informal economy, the evaluation noted that follow-up support, particularly to the end beneficiaries (small-scale coastal producers), is necessary to sustain project results.

36. There was limited attention to gender mainstreaming, human rights and disability-sensitive measures during the design phase. There were no gender-specific outcomes or indicators, but gender balance considerations emerged during implementation, with both men and women involved in the Queen Conch value chain. The project encouraged gender-sensitive approaches in its regional plan of action. Human rights were implicitly considered through attention to fishers' livelihoods and safety training. Disability-sensitive measures were discussed late, focusing on prevention of injuries in conch harvesting. Overall,



stakeholders acknowledged the need for clearer integration of these cross-cutting issues and highlighted a lack of expertise in these areas.

37. Evaluation recommendations addressed to UNCTAD and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States were to:

(a) Continuously engage stakeholders at all levels to ensure activities meet beneficiary countries' priorities and needs.

(b) Integrate efforts to find complementarities with other regional initiatives related to Sustainable Development Goals 14 and 15.

(c) Create a monitoring and evaluation framework with meaningful indicators, tools, roles and responsibilities.

(d) Continue outreach to international organizations and forums to promote blue biotrade principles.

(e) Include follow-up activities in resource mobilization plans to attract additional funding.

(f) Identify and account for time-intensive processes during project design, incorporating realistic timelines and budgets.

(g) Include participatory needs assessment and gender analysis at the design stage, defining results and indicators for cross-cutting issues, and seek support from gender experts as necessary.

## **E. Programme: UNCTAD subprogramme 3, on international trade and commodities**

38. The evaluation of subprogramme 3 (SP3) on international trade and commodities, managed by the UNCTAD Division on International Trade and Commodities, was conducted by an independent team from March to June 2024, and covered subprogramme 3 SP3 activities from 2020 to 2023. Detailed results of the evaluation are presented in documents TD/B/WP/331 and TD/B/WP(88)/CRP.1.

39. The evaluation adopted a theory-based approach to assess the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, partnerships and coherence, sustainability and impact of subprogramme 3, and the mainstreaming of human rights, gender, inclusion and equity. The evaluation triangulated findings from multiple data sources and analytical methods, including document reviews, interviews, financial analysis, and surveys of staff of the Division on International Trade and Commodities, member States and external subprogramme 3 stakeholders.

40. Findings indicated that subprogramme 3 was effective in achieving its outputs and outcomes. During the evaluation period, subprogramme 3 made 201 global-level policy recommendations and 399 country-level recommendations and trained 8,000 individuals across more than 2,000 organizations. Survey responses revealed that 97 per cent of the 4,000 ratings for subprogramme 3 activities/outputs were positive, with 76 per cent rating them as "indispensable" or "very useful". Although subprogramme 3 initially lacked detailed results-based management (RBM) data, the adoption of a new UNCTAD-wide results framework in 2023 significantly improved the monitoring of subprogramme 3 results.

41. Subprogramme 3 demonstrated impact at both the national and international levels. It influenced national decision-makers and policies promoting economic diversification and transformation towards sustainable economies. Subprogramme 3 also made contributions to the multilateral trading system at the World Trade Organization and the broader United Nations system, including the General Assembly. However, challenges in monitoring subprogramme 3 outcomes and ensuring their sustainability persisted due to limited financial resources.

42. The trade, gender and development programme led efforts to integrate gender equality in trade, and subprogramme 3 initiated actions that considered the rights of persons with disabilities. Numerous stakeholders appreciated that the Division on International Trade and Commodities coordinated the launch of the *Inclusive Trade and Persons with Disabilities* report.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the UNCTAD Secretary-General launched an inter-agency working group on disability in trade with the International Labour Organization, International Trade Centre and the World Trade Organization, where subprogramme 3 staff will represent UNCTAD. Despite these efforts, however, gender and other cross-cutting issues were not sufficiently mainstreamed across subprogramme 3 activities.

43. The Division on International Trade and Commodities exceeded its planned outputs against subprogramme 3 proposed programme budgets and achieved efficiency gains. The evaluation noted that additional efficiencies could be realized through increased collaboration with United Nations regional commissions and country teams. While there was some collaboration between subprogramme 3 and other subprogrammes, there was a desire for the Division on International Trade and Commodities to be more involved in the *Trade and Development Report*. Overall, due to the lack of disaggregated cost–output–outcome data, the evaluation could not determine the cost-effectiveness of subprogramme 3 resource allocation.

44. Subprogramme 3 aligns with UNCTAD mandates, including the Nairobi Maafikiano and the Bridgetown Covenant, and the Sustainable Development Goals, and is highly relevant to the needs of member States. Nonetheless, resource constraints limit engagement with the least developed countries in the areas of consensus-building and technical cooperation activities. Stakeholders appreciated efforts of the Division on International Trade and Commodities to link outputs to priority topics, such as critical energy transition minerals. Finally, there was a consensus that subprogramme 3 is at a pivotal moment, with an opportunity to craft a renewed, more focused vision.

45. Based on these findings, the evaluation recommended that:

(a) The Division on International Trade and Commodities further embed RBM in subprogramme 3 by developing planning tools with RBM prompts, establishing subprogramme 3-specific indicators and conducting impact assessments.

(b) The Division on International Trade and Commodities develop a communications strategy, prioritize stakeholders, conduct analyses, engage the least developed countries and consolidate contact lists.

(c) The Division on International Trade and Commodities develop an operational strategic plan linked to key deliverables (including meetings), covering, inter alia, people management, resource mobilization and partnership building.

(d) The Division on International Trade and Commodities and UNCTAD should support evolutions to intergovernmental meetings handled by subprogramme 3.

(e) The Division on International Trade and Commodities rebalance subprogramme 3 resource allocation by recording costs against outputs, linking to outcomes and estimating demands on member State representatives' time.

(f) The Division on International Trade and Commodities more fully mainstream cross-cutting issues by training staff in gender analysis, involving disability organizations and collecting disaggregated demographic data.

## II. Lessons learned from evaluations

46. This chapter provides key learnings from UNCTAD evaluations this past year. It adds to and supports lessons learned from previous evaluations, presented in previous evaluation overview reports. These lessons learned are drawn from a synthesis of findings, conclusions and recommendations across all evaluations. Through the synthesis, common

<sup>4</sup> Finland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, Helsinki.

patterns, trends and recurring themes are identified. By comparing and contrasting findings from different evaluations, the synthesis strengthens the validity and reliability of the evaluation process, allows for the triangulation of evidence and reduces the risk of drawing conclusions based on isolated or limited evaluations. The synthesis also serves to generate new insights and knowledge, by integrating diverse perspectives and data sources and uncovering underlying factors or dynamics that may not be evident in individual evaluations.

47. Over the past three years, UNCTAD issued 23 evaluation reports, containing over 120 recommendations. Most of these recommendations were geared to ensuring the sustainability of UNCTAD interventions. Twenty-one per cent suggested having in place sustainability measures or providing follow-up support to beneficiaries in the area of intervention. Another 12 per cent targeted resource mobilization for financial stability and continued support to countries, and another 9 per cent referred to communication as a way of disseminating and sustaining results. Twelve per cent of recommendations targeted partnership building or working with others to enhance the quality of outputs and sustain results. Seventeen per cent of recommendations referred to project management practices, most frequently to the lack of monitoring and appropriate indicators. Finally, 10 per cent mentioned further mainstreaming of United Nations cross-cutting issues, such as gender, human rights and disability inclusion. The synthesis of this year's evaluation reports confirms these as areas requiring further attention, while recognizing that some progress has been made.

## **A. Planning and monitoring**

48. Evaluations recognized the progress made in implementing results-based management at UNCTAD, notably through the new UNCTAD-wide results framework. The latter sets organization-wide indicators, linked to the Bridgetown Covenant, and data for these indicators is collected by divisions and services and aggregated at the UNCTAD-level. Data under the indicators was collected throughout 2023 and retrospectively for 2021 and 2022 and made available to senior management and member States through an online platform. Evaluations noted that, while the UNCTAD results framework is a good start, the current set of indicators is limited and additional indicators should be integrated into divisions' planning to collect more comprehensive and nuanced results data, for example, to capture the outcomes of UNCTAD intergovernmental meetings, the usefulness of specific reports and databases, the longer-term impact of UNCTAD work and qualitative information to supplement quantitative data.

49. Several evaluations of UNCTAD projects deemed that the results framework and indicators developed at the planning stages were not, as they should have been, used as a management tool to monitor project results during implementation and make informed decisions and adjustments as necessary. In a few cases, activities, outputs and even outcomes changed over the course of the project, but these changes were not reflected in the results framework. The misalignment between project activities and goals can result in inefficiencies and diminished impact. It can also cause confusion among project stakeholders, reducing their engagement and commitment.

50. To support project management, evaluations identified the need for more detailed monitoring plans that included not only specific indicators, but information on data collection methods, frequency of monitoring, responsible parties and mechanisms for data analysis and decision-making. In addition, monitoring plans should be agreed upon by all stakeholders prior to project implementation in order for all parties to be clear about responsibilities, particularly for longer-term results monitoring. Monitoring plans require dedicated human and financial resources that should be costed and included in the project budget at the planning stage. Overall, evaluations noted that project management responsibilities, such as project coordination, results monitoring and partnership building, were not adequately planned and budgeted for, and recommended a clear framework for identifying and costing these.

## **B. Sustainability of UNCTAD interventions**

51. Evaluations found that the relevance of UNCTAD interventions and products is high. The specialized knowledge, multidisciplinary approach, high-quality outputs and evidence-based policy advice of UNCTAD staff is greatly appreciated by beneficiary countries and other stakeholders. The unique mandate of UNCTAD to support developing countries and address specific needs that other United Nations entities might not is well recognized. Most evaluations recommended that UNCTAD continue providing support in the area of intervention and/or secure resources for follow-up work to ensure longer-term results. The sustainability of interventions remains a risk that requires mitigation through specific measures and continued monitoring of results.

52. There were good examples of sustainability measures identified through evaluations, such as aligning project results frameworks with that of the overall programme or with the larger United Nations framework, engaging national consultants who can act as local champions for the work post-intervention or establishing clear roles and responsibilities for national stakeholders from the outset to ensure their buy-in and commitment to the longer-term objectives. Another good practice was the setting up of a project website or other platform that continues to be updated with relevant documents and information and/or supports training and exchanges post-intervention. The lack of clear programme and project specific communications plans was repeatedly identified as a weakness, despite efforts made to improve communications at the corporate level. Identifying target audiences for each product and developing communication and dissemination strategies can improve long-term sustainability.

53. Some projects teams had managed to attract additional funding to either continue or expand activities implemented under their projects. However, in most cases, it was the responsibility of beneficiary countries to allocate sufficient resources to build upon project results. Many stakeholders expressed concern that project objectives might be affected by the limited resources of national Governments and beneficiaries and/or their capacity to implement action plans or sustain project results by themselves. Evaluations often recommended that project plans include resource mobilization strategies to sustain results, for example, innovative financing options such as blended finance, public-private partnerships and social impact bonds, or working with Governments, donors and other partners to identify potential funding sources.

## **C. Partnership building**

54. Evaluations highlighted that, by exploring new and innovative partnerships or deepening existing ones, UNCTAD could expand its resources, expertise and networks, enabling more targeted and sustainable technical cooperation efforts. UNCTAD could engage more strategically with bilateral and multilateral donors, development banks and other organizations to secure extrabudgetary funding and in-kind support for projects. Furthermore, collaborating more with civil society organizations could enhance UNCTAD work by incorporating diverse perspectives, local knowledge and grassroots engagement, ensuring that the views of marginalized groups and communities are reflected.

55. There were many examples shared of collaboration with other United Nations entities. The Development Account COVID-19 projects were pioneering in the sense that, while UNCTAD was the lead project coordinator, the five United Nations regional commissions (as well as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, for the project on microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises) all received funds to contribute to various project components. There were regular coordination meetings among implementing entities, as well as joint reporting. Yet, substantive collaboration occurred mainly in the form of smaller inputs and support to larger existing products or tools already established by individual entities rather than on truly joint or new outputs. For example, the 2023 *Review of Maritime Transport* benefited from substantive contributions by all five regional commissions. Additionally, UNCTAD, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Trade Competition Commission of Thailand organized a conference in June 2022 on the contribution of competition policy to the resurgence of

microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises post-COVID-19, to which the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia also contributed.

56. There was a general feeling that the joint projects had brought the entities closer together and encouraged them to explore how they can complement each other's work in the future. Evaluations concluded that joint project development among United Nations entities on nexus issues and holistic approaches should continue. However, there was a need for clearer operational guidance and support to agencies on how to plan and budget for joint outputs and outcomes and establish a joint results framework with indicators for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. There was also a recommendation made to the United Nations Development Account to assess the costs and benefits of global versus interregional or regional projects.

57. In relation to United Nations country teams, evaluations found that collaboration was limited and there was scope to better and more systematically leverage partnerships. Despite this, at the national level, project beneficiaries generally deemed UNCTAD interventions as complementary to those of other United Nations entities. Evaluations recommended that UNCTAD establish mechanisms for more regular and systematic engagement with United Nations country teams by, for example, establishing regular communication channels, such as newsletters, webinars and coordination meetings to keep United Nations country teams informed about UNCTAD expertise and products; offering training and capacity-building programmes to United Nations country teams to enhance their ability to implement and advocate for UNCTAD initiatives; assigning dedicated focal points within UNCTAD to liaise with United Nations country teams, ensuring consistent and direct communication and coordination; and actively participating in the common country analysis and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework processes to ensure UNCTAD priorities are aligned with country-specific needs and strategies.

#### **D. Mainstreaming of United Nations cross-cutting issues**

58. In line with General Assembly resolutions on human rights, gender, disability inclusion and the environment<sup>5</sup> and the UNCTAD evaluation policy, all UNCTAD evaluations consider, throughout the evaluation cycle, questions related to gender equality, disability inclusion, the environment and human rights. Evaluations found that, while progress had been made, to varying degrees, in integrating these considerations into planning documents, there is limited evidence of United Nations cross-cutting issues being addressed through project outputs and outcomes. In most projects, gender-disaggregated data are systematically collected for workshop and survey participants, allowing for analysis of answers for both men and women, but there were few indicators to measure impact on different groups. Evaluations observed missed opportunities where gender could have been highlighted as a crucial parameter in addressing project objectives.

59. There were some good examples collected such as the entrepreneurship policy review in Uganda which included migrants and refugees, in addition to women and youth as vulnerable groups, and informed the Government's new microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises strategy. Furthermore, gender-specific initiatives did demonstrate concrete results, for instance, the adaptation of existing training by the UNCTAD trade, gender and development programme to meet the emerging needs of women traders in Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 300 cross-border traders, mostly women, participated in nine in-person workshops, and tailored traders' guides were produced for each country. Through the blue biotrade project, gender-sensitive approaches were encouraged through the regional plan of action developed, and disability-sensitive measures were discussed around the prevention of injuries in conch harvesting.

<sup>5</sup> A/RES/60/1, A/RES/71/243, A/RES/75/154, A/RES/76/6 and A/RES/76/300. See also ST/SGB/2019/7.

60. Evaluations recommended that UNCTAD more fully mainstream United Nations cross-cutting issues by clearly defining vulnerable populations and including sector-specific gender analysis in projects. Possible measures include participatory needs assessments at the planning stage to ensure the inclusion of diverse stakeholder needs and interests, defining results and indicators for cross-cutting issues and seeking support and/or training from experts. UNCTAD should also strive for data disaggregation by gender, age, disability and other demographic markers. Additionally, sharing good practices and partnering with other United Nations entities can enhance capacity to integrate cross-cutting issues in UNCTAD work.

### **III. Other evaluation matters**

61. In addition to the conduct of evaluations, the Independent Evaluation Unit provides support to UNCTAD project officers and programme managers on evaluation plans, including appropriate indicators and evaluation questions. The Unit participates in the review of new project concepts and proposals and formally endorses new project documents through the UNCTAD project clearance process. As a member of the UNCTAD technical cooperation committee, the Unit keeps the committee updated on policies and developments concerning the evaluation of technical cooperation projects, shares relevant findings and lessons learned from evaluation reports and presents recommendations for consideration by the committee.

62. In the past year, the Independent Evaluation Unit has produced guidance for UNCTAD staff on evaluation standards, procedures, criteria and methodology, including for self-evaluations. The Unit provides support on self-evaluation at the request of programme managers. For example, in 2023, the Unit conducted a workshop for ASYCUDA regional coordinators to review the purpose of, and requirements for, evaluation. In 2024, the Unit conducted a participatory self-evaluation of the South–South Cooperation Assistance Fund project “Promoting economic diversification and resilience in Barbados for a sustained recovery from COVID-19 shock”, implemented by the Division on Globalization and Development Strategies.

63. The Independent Evaluation Unit joined the 2024 United Nations Evaluation Group annual general meeting and evaluation practice exchange, reviewing the workplan and midterm assessment of the Group, gathering best practices to improve evaluation quality at UNCTAD and enhancing professional development. The Independent Evaluation Unit supported the work of the evaluation function working group of the United Nations Evaluation Group throughout the year and contributed to its strategy for small evaluation functions. With the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNCTAD also started a peer learning exchange under the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women<sup>6</sup> to share experiences of gender mainstreaming and, inter alia, obtain an external assessment on the extent to which gender equality was integrated in evaluations. Moreover, the Independent Evaluation Unit is supporting, as required, the United Nations Sustainable Development Group System-Wide Evaluation Office evaluation for the upcoming quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, which aims at synthesizing results and evidence collected across the United Nations system relevant to the themes and priorities of the previous quadrennial comprehensive policy review, enhancing coordination within the United Nations development system, aligning activities with national priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals, identifying best practices and developing actionable policy recommendations.

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2019, United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: Peer review guidance document, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/un-system-coordination/promoting-un-accountability/key-tools-and-resources>.

#### IV. Evaluation plan for the period 2024–2025

64. In line with previous decisions of the Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance,<sup>7</sup> UNCTAD will not conduct an independent subprogramme evaluation in 2025, the year of the quadrennial conference, since the external evaluator contracted for the evaluation is generally supported by two UNCTAD member States representatives who dedicate their personal time to the evaluation. Therefore, the next subprogramme evaluation, of subprogramme 4 on technology and logistics, will be postponed to 2026, thereby continuing the cycle of subprogramme evaluations mandated by the Working Party.<sup>8</sup>

65. The evaluation plan for July 2024 to June 2025 will comprise instead of the following independent evaluations of UNCTAD projects and programmes (see table).

Table  
Evaluation plan, 2024–2025\*

<i>Programme or project</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Overall budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Evaluation budget (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Period of evaluation</i>
Joint COVID-19 project: Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19	Development Account	1 155 270	30 106	Q3 2023– Q2 2024
Facilitation of transit, transport and trade in West Africa for better value chain participation	Enhanced Integrated Framework	1 775 000	15 000	Q4 2023– Q2 2024
Coherent strategies for productive capacity development in African least developed countries	Development Account	590 155	25 155	Q1 2024– Q3 2024
Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesian Spearhead Group	Development Account	576 927	24 927	Q1 2024– Q3 2024
Mobilizing resources for a Green New Deal: Partnerships in Asia for a decade of action in the era of coronavirus	Development Account	624 000	25 000	Q4 2024– Q2 2025
Evaluation of the e-commerce and the digital economy programme	E-commerce and the digital economy multi-donor trust fund	6 300 000	40 000	Q4 2024– Q2 2025
European Union for [EU4] Business support to Central European Free Trade Agreement for non-tariff measures monitoring and reporting and support to the implementation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement dispute settlement mechanism	European Union	1 830 000	54 000	Q2 2025– Q4 2025

Source: UNCTAD.

\* Abbreviations: COVID-19, coronavirus disease; Q, quarter.

<sup>7</sup> See TD/B/WP/304, paragraph 72, and TD/B/WP/273 2015, paragraph 38.

<sup>8</sup> See TD/B/WP/306, chapter I, section A, agreed conclusions on the evaluation of UNCTAD activities.