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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 2024 and June 2025. 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; and the evaluation plan for the period July 2025 to June 2026 is presented in chapter III. The purpose of this 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. Evaluation is integral to the work of the institution and an essential component of the programme management cycle. The function is overseen by the Independent Evaluation Unit, which ensures that evaluation is undertaken according to United Nations Secretariat rules and instructions, the UNCTAD evaluation policy<sup>1</sup> and norms and standards established by the United Nations Evaluation Group.<sup>2</sup>

3. In accordance with the United Nations administrative instruction on evaluation in the United Nations Secretariat (ST/AI/2021/3), UNCTAD is required to “develop an annual evaluation plan and ensure adequate allocation of funds for evaluation capacity to deliver the plan” (section 2.1). In addition, each subprogramme must be evaluated “at least once every six years” (section 2.3). Accordingly, the annual UNCTAD evaluation workplan generally consists of one subprogramme evaluation and, as established by the UNCTAD evaluation policy, independent evaluations of any project with a budget of \$1 million or above, or projects with a budget below \$1 million for which the funding entity has requested an independent evaluation.

## I. Summary of evaluation findings

4. In line with the agreed conclusions of the Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance at its eighty-eighth session,<sup>3</sup> no independent subprogramme evaluation was conducted in 2025, the year of the quadrennial conference. Between July 2024 and June 2025, UNCTAD completed independent evaluations of the following UNCTAD projects and programmes:

- (a) E-commerce and the digital economy programme;
- (b) Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease);
- (c) Coherent strategies for productive capacity development in African least developed countries;
- (d) Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesian Spearhead Group;
- (e) Facilitating transit, transport and foreign exchange in West Africa to improve participation in value chains.

5. The main 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 findings, 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.

<sup>1</sup> UNCTAD, 2023, UNCTAD evaluation policy, available at <https://unctad.org/about/evaluation>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Evaluation Group, 2016, Norms and Standards for Evaluation, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Endorsed by the Trade and Development Board at its seventy-fourth executive session (see TD/B/EX(74)/4, chap. 1, para. 3).

## A. Programme: E-commerce and the digital economy

6. As agreed with core funding partners, the electronic commerce (e-commerce) and the digital economy programme is subject to a periodic independent evaluation every three years. The first evaluation<sup>4</sup> was completed in 2022. A second evaluation, completed in 2025, covered 2022–2024 and reviewed progress made in implementing recommendations from the previous evaluation, as well as the programme’s effectiveness overall across the UNCTAD pillars of research and analysis, consensus-building and technical cooperation.

7. The evaluation found that, during this period, the e-commerce and the digital economy programme moved from a phase of expansion to one of consolidation, focusing on the effective delivery of activities to achieve expected results and ensure sustained impact. Substantial efforts were made to implement recommendations from the 2022 evaluation. The programme continued to be highly relevant, closely aligned with United Nations strategic priorities on digital transformation and bridging the digital divide. Stakeholders reported high satisfaction with the quality and usefulness of programme deliverables, and meaningful progress was demonstrated across all programme outcome areas.

8. *Digital Economy Reports* had considerable reach and are being integrated, to some extent, into policymaking processes. The 2021 edition on data flows significantly influenced global conversations on data governance and the 2024 edition incorporated environmental sustainability, further aligning the programme with contemporary global challenges. Dissemination and communication of research products have improved, but a corporate UNCTAD-wide outreach strategy, suggested in 2022, remains absent. Policy briefs and targeted dissemination initiatives remain underutilized, despite strong demand from stakeholders.

9. A major recommendation, to strengthen capacities for measuring the digital economy and trade, was successfully addressed through updated training, dissemination of a revised *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade* (2023),<sup>5</sup> and collaboration with the International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, World Trade Organization and regional bodies. Inclusion of developing countries in digital trade measurement has improved, but further support was deemed necessary for the least developed countries.

10. Intergovernmental work under the e-commerce and the digital economy programme was assessed positively. The Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy, as well as the Working Group on Measuring E-commerce, continued to serve as vital platforms for dialogue and shaping policy. Improvements in inclusiveness and interactivity since the previous evaluation were noted. The eTrade for All partnership was valued for its networking and collaboration potential, though its full capacity was seen as unexploited. New engagement formats focusing on specific topics, such as a “breakfast on capacity strengthening” event, were well received.

11. Demand from member States for technical cooperation increased during the evaluation period, particularly in areas such as strategies for developing national e-commerce ecosystems and capacity-building for digital trade statistics. E-trade readiness assessments were recognized as providing holistic diagnostics, tailored to least developed countries and non-least developed countries. However, implementation of policy recommendations was a challenge frequently linked to financing and coordination issues within national institutions. Legal reforms remained particularly difficult, though some progress was noted. The e-trade reform tracker, launched to support implementation of e-trade readiness assessments, reflects direct action on previous recommendations regarding sustainability. It was also highlighted as a useful tool for enhancing transparency and clarifying interministerial roles and responsibilities.

<sup>4</sup> UNCTAD, 2022, Independent evaluation: UNCTAD e-commerce and the digital economy programme, available at <https://unctad.org/about/evaluation/reports>.

<sup>5</sup> International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations and World Trade Organization (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.23.II.D.26, Geneva).

12. Gender mainstreaming and social inclusion were found to have improved, with the 2024–2027 workplan reflecting commitments to gender equality, human rights, environmental sustainability and consideration of people living with a disability. The eTrade for Women initiative, particularly its masterclasses, was found to be highly relevant, contributing to business growth and new opportunities for women entrepreneurs. The evaluation found that eTrade for Women community-building efforts were more strategic, incorporating new community leaders and increased advocacy, though participants' engagement levels varied. Full implementation of inclusion recommendations, particularly involving people with disabilities, remains challenging. The evaluation noted that more could be done to encourage participation from marginalized groups in the eTrade for Women initiative.

13. Internal coherence and synergies across the programme, through the pillars, have strengthened. Research findings are being more effectively used in consensus-building forums and technical cooperation activities, such as e-trade readiness assessments and the eTrade for Women initiative. There are good examples of collaboration between the programme and United Nations resident coordinator offices. Collaboration with United Nations agencies and other development partners, however, was identified as an area for further enhancement. The programme's monitoring and evaluation framework was highlighted as best practice within UNCTAD, particularly for its improved analysis and use of qualitative indicators.

14. In light of increased demand for the products and services delivered by the programme, and the need for adaptability and flexibility in implementation and follow-up, the evaluation found that programme reliance on extrabudgetary funds (covering around 80 per cent of programme activities) and inflexibility in budget and resource allocations represent a major obstacle to realizing its full potential and put pressure on limited staff. The evaluation acknowledged allocation of two additional posts from the regular budget in 2022, for a total of nine regular budget posts, as well as some temporary assistance. However, the total number of programme staff decreased overall from 34 at the end of 2022, to 30 by the end of 2024. The evaluation emphasized the need for more regular budget allocation to ensure sustainable programme operations. The following recommendations were made:

(a) For the Secretary-General of UNCTAD to increase regular budget funding for the programme, aligning with the outcomes of the sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

(b) For programme donors to maintain or increase financial support, ideally through the United Nations regular budget, and earmark funds for follow-up initiatives for increased sustainability and impact.

(c) For the programme to diversify funding by engaging emerging and non-traditional donors.

(d) For the programme to enhance targeted dissemination of research outputs to improve policy uptake.

(e) For the programme to prioritize engagement with countries showing commitment to implementing recommendations and further promote the e-trade reform tracker and follow-up support mechanisms.

(f) For the programme to expand data collection on eTrade for Women outcomes and consider including people with disabilities as an additional subcriteria for masterclass participants when applications are high.

## **B. Project: Mobilizing financial resources for development in the time of COVID-19**

15. Initiated following the General Assembly call for a coordinated global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this project aimed to build the capacity in low-income countries and middle-income countries to diagnose macrofinancial vulnerabilities, design policy responses, and support recovery efforts. The collaborative effort involved UNCTAD and three United

Nations regional commissions: the Economic Commission for Africa, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. A total budget of \$1,115,290 was allocated from the United Nations Development Account to the implementing entities, based on their roles and responsibilities. UNCTAD received 55 per cent of the budget, reflecting its leadership in key workstreams.

16. The project's expected outcomes included enhancing capabilities for macrofinancial assessments, diagnosing financial vulnerabilities, designing macroprudential and fiscal policies and providing access to toolkits and analysis through a virtual knowledge platform. To achieve this, the project was organized into three interconnected thematic clusters that addressed macrofinancial, fiscal and debt issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the three clusters, 10 workstreams were established, providing globally relevant research and analysis, as well as targeted assistance to countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saint Lucia, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Zambia. Key project deliverables included the Global Policy Model, Sustainable Development Finance Assessment framework, Financial Conditions Indicator and Global Financial Safety Net tracker.

17. The evaluation found that the project was timely and relevant, effectively highlighting the macrofinancial, fiscal and debt challenges faced by participating middle- and low-income countries, which had been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The project successfully delivered 87 per cent of its planned outputs, including 39 project related research papers and 13 webinars/workshops, with UNCTAD accounting for 41 per cent of total outputs. Despite the constraints posed by the pandemic, the project was implemented efficiently, with UNCTAD and partners successfully executing activities within the allocated budget through virtual methods. The total expenditure was \$1,030,907, which amounted to 92 per cent of the allocated budget.

18. The project had clear internal coherence, effectively building upon existing efforts and research within UNCTAD, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and Economic Commission for Africa, and aligning with their mandates. Regular meetings facilitated collaboration, focusing on the quality and content of outputs. The benefits of the project were underpinned by adaptable macroeconomic models, such as the Global Policy Model for climate change effects and the macroprudential agenda. External coherence, meanwhile, was achieved through collaboration with various international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund and Agence française de développement, further enhancing the project's relevance.

19. Limited dissemination and engagement, stemming from the absence of a clear strategy and physical workshops, were identified by the evaluation as significant barriers to the project's long-term sustainability. Resource constraints adversely affected follow-up activities and capacity-building, with insufficient funds allocated to organizing dissemination workshops and follow-up training. Additionally, technical and capacity challenges faced by project beneficiaries, such as data availability and the complexity of using new models without adequate training, further impeded the project's sustainability.

20. Despite these shortcomings, the project achieved several key results. For example, it raised awareness and improved diagnostics through the Global Financial Safety Net tracker,<sup>6</sup> which highlighted global disparities in liquidity access and was used by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the Ministry of Finance of Japan. Policy modelling was strengthened with enhancements to the Global Policy Model, applied in countries, such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Zambia, to assess the economic impacts of COVID-19 and explore policy scenarios. The Sustainable Development Finance Assessment framework provided an innovative approach to aligning debt sustainability with Sustainable Development Goal financing and was piloted in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

21. However, overall, the evaluation concluded that the translation of outputs into practical benefits for the targeted countries was uneven and that the project's contribution to the participating country government responses to the crisis was limited. Based on the

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/global-financial-safety-net-tracker/>.

available evidence, the evaluation made the following recommendations to UNCTAD and the other implementing entities:

(a) Strengthen planning and develop a clear theory of change with aligned indicators to track changes in awareness, knowledge, behaviour and the use of analytical papers and tools developed through the project more effectively.

(b) Create a targeted dissemination strategy for the project from the start, with clear formats and a dedicated budget; segment stakeholders and customize engagement to their specific needs.

(c) Plan follow-up support and identify knowledge products that require training and capacity-building to be sustained in advance and allocate and/or mobilize resources accordingly.

(d) Improve sustainability by prioritizing the most impactful outputs and develop strategies to institutionalize or integrate them into national or regional systems, forums or policy processes, to ensure long-term use and influence.

### **C. Project: Coherent strategies for productive capacity development in African least developed countries**

22. This project built on a previous Development Account project that developed the conceptual framework for assessing productive capacities as a tool for evidence-based policymaking and priority setting, through the creation of the UNCTAD productive capacities index. The project aimed to support selected least developed countries in Africa in strengthening their capacity to formulate and implement policies and strategies that enhance productive capacities, to foster structural economic transformation and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Requested initially by Rwanda, Burkina Faso and the United Republic of Tanzania later confirmed interest in being included in the project. The project was funded from the Development Account and implemented from February 2020 to December 2023, with a total budget of \$531,140.

23. To achieve its objectives, the project involved a series of activities, including background studies, national and regional workshops, operational frameworks, policy implementation advice and study tours. These efforts sought to focus on coherence between trade and industrial policies for productive capacity development, while taking into account inequality dimensions. Project steering and day-to-day management were concentrated at UNCTAD in Geneva, with periodic consultations with the Economic Commission for Africa, the implementing partner.

24. The evaluation noted that the project's strategic aim, to support both the formulation and the implementation of holistic policies and strategies related to productive capacity development/enhancement, was ambitious in nature given the amount of available funding. Nevertheless, the project was found to be highly relevant to the beneficiary countries, addressing the need to strengthen productive capacities to reduce poverty and inequality. Essentially all planned outputs were achieved, including background studies, national workshops, regional workshops, operational frameworks for each country, policy implementation advice and study tours. Unplanned achievements were also realized, such as the promotion of policy dialogue through collaboration with the Economic Policy Research Network in Rwanda and a comparative study on the gender aspects of productive capacity development between Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. The project's holistic strategy extended its institutional reach beyond typical counterparts, covering a wide range of priority themes.

25. The evaluation concluded that the project was timely, relevant and effectively managed by a committed team, with notable accomplishments across the three countries, despite a small budget and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was found to have been implemented efficiently, maintaining alignment between the initial budget and actual expenditures. Despite a 10 per cent reduction in funding for this Development Account tranche, the project's deliverables remained largely unaffected. In addition, despite starting alongside the pandemic, the project swiftly adapted and sustained its momentum.

26. There was emerging evidence of comprehensive UNCTAD advice, compiled in strategic frameworks for each country, being adopted in Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. The evaluation observed that, during the final year of project implementation, greater focus could have been placed on country-level validation of the different studies and strategies to help prepare the ground at the country level for next steps, after the UNCTAD intervention. Gender dimensions were well considered in the project. Conscious efforts were taken to ensure participation of women in events, including sessions dedicated to gender-related challenges and opportunities. Moreover, gender-related research, comparing the situation in Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania, was conducted and resulted in a separate deliverable. However, incorporating these themes more explicitly into final project publications would have further emphasized their significance.

27. The evaluation recommendations to UNCTAD focused on ensuring the sustainability of project results, specifically to:

(a) Maintain high-level dialogue with beneficiary countries, potentially with the Economic Commission for Africa, to promote adoption of the operational strategies developed through the project.

(b) Leverage project studies and strategies for future interventions in the three beneficiary countries (or elsewhere) and support implementation of specific country priorities, in line with the experience and mandate of UNCTAD.

(c) Assist countries in developing project proposals to mobilize resources for productive capacity development.

(d) Engage, even virtually, in country-level coordination mechanisms with development partners and donors on productive capacity themes to strengthen synergies and impact at country level.

(e) Collaborate with other development partners on special economic zone/industrial zone work to ensure complementarity in technical assistance and policy support.

#### **D. Project: Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesia Spearhead Group**

28. This project was implemented, in partnership with the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat, from February 2020 to December 2023, with a total budget of \$576,927 from the Development Account. The primary objective was to enhance the capacity of Melanesia Spearhead Group member countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) to integrate green trade promotion into their sustainable development strategies, contributing toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This was pursued through two key outcomes: (a) strengthening national capacities for linking green trade policy with sustainable development strategies; and (b) building a subregional Melanesia Spearhead Group partnership for better coordination and promotion of green trade.

29. UNCTAD leveraged its global experience in trade analysis, regulatory transparency and sustainable development integration and brought technical expertise in non-tariff measures, voluntary sustainability standards, green trade policy and trade data systems to the project. Key project activities included non-tariff measure data collection and analysis, assessments of voluntary sustainability standards and the development of national export guides. UNCTAD organized national and regional workshops, trained local consultants, and facilitated multi-stakeholder coordination. It also supported policy alignment through national synergy matrices and a subregional action plan. These activities promoted data-driven policymaking, green export readiness and subregional cooperation among Melanesia Spearhead Group countries.

30. The evaluation found the project to be highly relevant, well-aligned with national priorities and subregional strategies, and effectively tailored to the specific needs of the four Melanesia Spearhead Group countries. UNCTAD technical expertise and a collaborative approach enabled meaningful capacity-building and data-driven policy development. The

project supported national strategies focused on niche green exports: ginger in Fiji, vanilla in Papua New Guinea, kava in the Solomon Islands, and virgin coconut oil in Vanuatu. These products were selected for their export potential and socio-environmental significance. The countries made progress in sustaining project outcomes. Papua New Guinea, for example, institutionalized project outputs (guides and data tools were launched, follow-up workshops convened and digital trade infrastructure advanced) to ensure continued implementation and integration of green trade practices into national systems.

31. Critical success factors for the project included strong alignment with national needs and contexts, national ownership, use of local consultants, sustained engagement with government stakeholders and strategic partnerships, particularly with the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat. Adaptive project management during COVID-19 and synergies with other initiatives, such as the European Union-funded programme for support to rural entrepreneurship, investment and trade of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the UNCTAD improving Pacific islands customs and trade project,<sup>7</sup> enhanced its effectiveness. One shortcoming was the limited engagement of national planning and budgeting entities during project implementation in some countries, which reduced opportunities to embed green trade promotion into long-term policy frameworks and sustain project results. Additionally, the project's theory of change lacked a clear policy focus, making it harder to articulate higher-level impacts. Nonetheless, the project was greatly appreciated by national counterparts and partners.

32. It was proposed that continued support should be provided to the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat in terms of guidance, technical assistance and advice on implementing the subregional action plan. The evaluation made five recommendations to UNCTAD:

- (a) Deepen collaboration with the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat under the new memorandum of understanding to support subregional action plan implementation.
- (b) Improve results frameworks and maintain intervention logic during project revisions, particularly the linkages between outputs and higher-level results.
- (c) Invest in strategic communications and accessible knowledge product formats and translate key products, such as export guides, into local languages.
- (d) Assist target countries and the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat in identifying opportunities to upscale and leverage project results through partnerships.
- (e) Engage further with national planning entities to integrate green trade into policies and budgets.

## **E. Project: Facilitating transit, transport and foreign exchange in West Africa to improve participation in value chains**

33. This project was implemented between August 2020 and September 2023, with a total budget of \$1,775,000, funded under the Enhanced Integrated Framework. It aimed to improve transit, transport and trade facilitation in Benin, Burkina Faso, the Niger and Togo and strengthen their integration into global value chains. It built on previous diagnostic trade integration studies by UNCTAD and provisions of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization to address regional logistical and regulatory inefficiencies. The intervention logic was to conduct an analysis of national obstacles, then develop a framework for regulatory convergence between countries, followed by a common road map. This would create an environment conducive to coordinated reforms in transit, transport and trade facilitation, in line with regional conventions and the Agreement.

34. The evaluation assessed the project positively overall. The project was deemed relevant, responding to the needs expressed by the beneficiary countries. Capacity-building and awareness-raising workshops were well received, with a high level of participation and positive impact on the participants' perspectives. Collaboration with the Framework's National Implementation Units and involvement of public and private stakeholders

<sup>7</sup> See <https://unctad.org/project/improving-pacific-islands-customs-and-trade>.



strengthened national ownership and laid the foundations for future reforms. The signing of the Quadrilateral Declaration by eight ministries from the beneficiary countries underscored this collaboration and demonstrated the high level of ownership that participating countries had throughout the project. For example, Mali and Burkina Faso are actively taking steps to implement the trade facilitation road maps and recommendations developed through the project, particularly those focusing on digitalization and streamlining of border procedures.

35. Regarding limitations, the project suffered from delays linked to the Framework's internal processes, political instability (particularly in Burkina Faso and the Niger) and financial management difficulties. The initial results framework was considered too ambitious for the resources available, leading to modifications in activities and outputs. Project monitoring was patchy and lacked rigour, with gaps in documentation and the absence of clear indicators for certain results. The evaluation noted that the project did not fully utilize the technical expertise of other UNCTAD sections, such as the Trade Facilitation Section and the Automated System for Customs Data programme. Also, while project documents acknowledged the relevance of cross-cutting issues (such as gender, disability inclusion, human rights and the environment), their integration was superficial in the project design and largely absent during implementation, given budget and time constraints.

36. In line with these findings, the evaluation made five recommendations to UNCTAD:

(a) Continue supporting countries to implement the Quadrilateral Declaration road map, overcome political setbacks in Burkina Faso and the Niger and advance to transit agreements and implementing planned road map stages.

(b) Adopt flexible implementation procedures in future Enhanced Integrated Framework projects and review theories of change and monitoring frameworks at key stages, ensuring realistic, coherent designs without delaying progress and discussing necessary adjustments with donors.

(c) Optimize internal coherence in project design and reflect interdivisional collaboration in work plans and budgets to leverage strengths and improve project effectiveness.

(d) In technical cooperation projects where inclusion and environmental considerations are not central to the proposal, introduce awareness-raising and training activities early in the project on relevant linkages.

(e) Given the positive feedback on the training courses on transport costs and standardized commercial trade terms,<sup>8</sup> develop a strategy to strengthen private sector capacities, including through Empretec.

## II. Lessons learned from evaluations

37. The main lessons learned from UNCTAD evaluations in the period covered are highlighted in this chapter, adding to and supporting those from past evaluations presented in previous evaluation overview reports. Common patterns, trends and recurring themes are drawn from a synthesis of findings, conclusions and recommendations across all evaluations. 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.

38. Over the past three years, UNCTAD issued 22 evaluation reports, containing 116 recommendations. Most of these recommendations (30 per cent) are directed towards ensuring the sustainability of UNCTAD interventions. Twenty-six per cent of recommendations target project management practices, 19 per cent target partnership building and multi-agency collaboration, 17 per cent refer to more strategic communication

<sup>8</sup> See <https://iccwbo.org/business-solutions/incoterms-rules/incoterms-rules-history/>.

or targeted dissemination, and 8 per cent mention enhanced mainstreaming of United Nations cross-cutting issues, such as gender, disability inclusion and the environment, in UNCTAD work. These recurring themes are explored further below.

### **UNCTAD specialized knowledge and high-quality outputs: Member State and partner appreciation**

39. Strong confidence is expressed through evaluations in the capacity of UNCTAD to deliver high-quality insights, methodological guidance and analytical frameworks that support development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals. The integrated, multidimensional UNCTAD approach to development, promoted through its three pillars of work, is assessed as highly relevant to the needs and priorities of member States. UNCTAD introduces policy options from the perspectives of developing countries. Its technical cooperation projects translate complex global issues into actionable, context-specific recommendations for the country or region. The analytical frameworks enable countries to assess development challenges in a holistic, evidence-based manner and identify structural constraints, institutional gaps and opportunities for more inclusive and resilient development pathways.

### **Programme/project result sustainability: An ongoing challenge and central to evaluation recommendations**

40. Evaluations find that the sustainability of project results is often hindered by the lack of clear exit or transition strategies, short project cycles, inadequate follow-up mechanisms, limited integration of activities into national systems and vulnerability to external factors, such as political changes, capacity constraints within national institutions, high staff turnover and insufficient national budgeting for implementing recommendations. Many national and regional stakeholders consulted mentioned that, to implement recommendations or action plans developed through UNCTAD projects, they require follow-up technical support or additional resources. Evaluations note that, unlike resident agencies or larger field-based organizations, UNCTAD is not structured to deliver ongoing, continuous in-country support. It is therefore essential that sustainability measures are considered carefully and incorporated from the start into programme and project design. While beneficiary countries are expected to commit resources to sustain results, evaluations stress the need for UNCTAD to support this process through proactive follow-up, continued technical support (including through formal set-ups, such as helpdesks) and the integration of resource mobilization strategies into project plans.

41. Evaluations highlight several good examples of sustainability measures introduced by project teams and recommend strengthening and replicating these. They include aligning programme/project results frameworks with broader development initiatives, anchoring interventions in existing processes and policy cycles, such as United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, engaging a diverse group of national stakeholders, including think tanks, civil society and the private sector, and embedding knowledge within national institutions and training curricula. The deployment of staff to local institutions is also effective in anchoring initiatives and fostering ownership; for example, an UNCTAD project coordinator was temporarily based at the Melanesia Spearhead Group secretariat in Vanuatu for the project “Green trade for sustainable development in Pacific small island developing States of the Melanesia Spearhead Group”.

42. Post-intervention, the establishment of alumni networks or communities of practice<sup>9</sup> provide opportunities for continued dialogue and for beneficiaries to adapt and build on knowledge shared. Evaluations emphasize the importance of continued monitoring, post-intervention, to safeguard the achievement of medium- to long-term outcomes. Tools such as the e-trade reform tracker can clarify roles and responsibilities for the implementation of recommendations, particularly when different ministries and stakeholders are involved, and enhance accountability and coordination. Additionally, the use of country compacts or

<sup>9</sup> For example, creation of the Africa Inequality Learning Group following the “Coherent Strategies for productive capacity development in African least developed countries” project.

memorandums of understanding formalize national commitments to project outcomes and ensure structured follow-up.

**Inconsistent programme/project management practices across the institution:  
Hindered results**

43. Evaluations assess across projects and programmes the application of results-based management, information-sharing and coordination processes, adaptive management, risk management, knowledge management and other good management practices as inconsistent and, at times, superficial. Although UNCTAD interventions are generally responsive to country priorities, evaluations found, in certain cases, deviations in planned versus actual beneficiary countries, activities or outcomes. These changes were often not reflected in the results framework, pointing to a disconnect between planning and implementation. This indicates that results frameworks and indicators developed at the planning stage are not used as intended for monitoring and adaptive management, thereby undermining accountability and project impact.

44. At the project level, results frameworks often have vague outcomes, missing baselines and unclear theories of change. The type of data collected (mostly quantitative) is incomplete and does not necessarily support learning, course correction or evidence-based decision-making. Evaluations recommend the inclusion of qualitative data to provide a fuller picture and more actionable insights. While there are some UNCTAD-wide indicators at the activity, output and outcome levels, the introduction of standardized tools, templates, guidance and training to monitor results will strengthen data aggregation and learning across the institution.

45. Evaluations find that risk management is not fully developed as a core project management function. While some risks are acknowledged in project plans, such as upcoming elections or changes in government focal points, there is no systematic approach to monitoring or mitigating risks throughout the project cycle. The absence of linkages to the Organizational-level risk register, contingency planning or responsibilities for managing risks at the project level means that when disruptions occur, continuity depends heavily on ad hoc responses and project implementation is delayed. Mitigation plans could include designating backup focal points within ministries, maintaining institutional memory through shared documentation, joint working groups and regular communication, aligning timelines to avoid politically sensitive periods and reinforcing partnerships with stable institutions, such as regional or technical bodies.

46. In some cases, evaluations also noted that irregular and unstructured communication with national stakeholders negatively impacted project efficiency and results. Setting up in-country or regional coordination mechanisms, such as working groups, joint steering committees or technical task forces, and more formal communication channels would help keep partners informed and engaged throughout the project cycle, increase transparency and shared responsibility and strengthen ownership. Overall, despite UNCTAD internal guidance noting that project budgets should include all costs related to project staff and project management, limited dedicated human and extrabudgetary financial resources for key project management functions means that these are not adequately costed or included in project budgets, leading to capacity gaps and overburdened teams. Evaluations recommend embedding these functions into the programme/project design and budget, strengthening institution-wide standards for project management and delivering practical, ongoing training to staff.

**Increased efforts: Working with resident coordinator offices and other partners to sustain results**

47. UNCTAD is increasingly engaging with resident coordinator offices and other United Nations partners with substantive inputs, enhanced reporting and participation in fund mobilization efforts. Building on cooperation with agencies of the United Nations Inter-Agency Cluster on Trade and Productive Capacity, UNCTAD was involved in 46 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, a record high. Several evaluations highlighted concrete examples of collaboration. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, UNCTAD facilitated technical sessions jointly with the Resident Coordinator Office as part of the national e-commerce strategy development process, aligning with early stages of the

Cooperation Framework (2026–2030). In Ghana, UNCTAD worked through the Resident Coordinator Office to launch a joint project with the United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Capital Development Fund under the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund, aimed at enhancing digital capabilities and financial inclusion for microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly women and youth-led enterprises. Direct engagement with the Melanesia Spearhead Group and Pacific Islands Forum secretariats on the project on green trade in the Pacific helped to institutionalize outcomes within regional governance structures.

48. Despite this progress, evaluations conclude that project-level engagement remains largely sporadic and more structured and strategic partnerships with resident coordinator offices and other United Nations bodies are needed for sustained results and impact. Recommendations include seconding UNCTAD experts to United Nations country teams, assigning dedicated focal points to Cooperation Framework outcome groups, thematic results groups and other resident coordinator office platforms, establishing clear memorandums of understanding or joint work plans, and formalizing UNCTAD participation in common country analysis and Cooperation Framework planning processes. Furthermore, working through the resident coordinator office platform to engage with development banks, bilateral donors and regional organizations could help mobilize the resources needed to sustain technical cooperation over time.

#### **More targeted dissemination of programme/project outputs: Benefits for future initiatives**

49. From 2020 to 2024, UNCTAD communication efforts have included improving its website, expanding social media engagement, offering more accessible research products and increasing livestreamed and multilingual events. Overall website traffic to [unctad.org](https://unctad.org) rose by 4 per cent, to 7.1 million visits, traffic to publication pages increased by 57 per cent, video views grew fivefold and the UNCTAD social media presence expanded with 180,200 new followers (a 76 per cent increase). The UNCTAD rebranding exercise served to create a unified, multilingual visual identity, improve global visibility and centralize brand resources to ensure consistent, cohesive messaging across the institution.

50. Specific examples collected of enhanced dissemination include the *Digital Economy Report 2024*, which was developed through a highly participatory process, drawing partners in early and strengthening ownership and use. The report was also disseminated to resident coordinator offices through the Development Coordination Office policy bulletin. Joint authorship of the 2023 *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade* with the International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and World Trade Organization meant the *Handbook* was promoted and accessible through all partner organization communication channels and websites, substantially broadening its audience beyond that of UNCTAD.

51. Despite these efforts, evaluations find that, though there are some examples of use, evidence of direct adoption of UNCTAD knowledge products by policymakers in target countries is not highly visible, suggesting that, while UNCTAD produces valuable tools and insights, they are not always reaching or resonating with the intended audiences. Evaluations recommend more targeted dissemination, including developing comprehensive communication plans tailored to different stakeholder groups (particularly policymakers), adapting formats for easier policy uptake (for example, briefs, toolkits, localized summaries), using appropriate and diverse channels, and aligning messaging with national development planning cycles. UNCTAD can also create tailored, user-friendly collections of key outputs, tools and learning resources for policymakers. Evaluations noted that dissemination should be built into programme/project design from the outset, with clear objectives, stakeholder mapping and feedback loops to measure reach and effectiveness.

### **Ensuring long-term relevance: Continued attention to mainstreaming United Nations cross-cutting issues**

52. In line with relevant General Assembly resolutions<sup>10</sup> and the evaluation policy,<sup>11</sup> all UNCTAD evaluations consider, throughout the evaluation cycle, questions related to gender equality, disability inclusion, environment sustainability and the principles of leaving no one behind. Evaluations highlight several good examples of mainstreaming these cross-cutting issues in UNCTAD programmes and projects. For example, environmental considerations were mainstreamed in the *Digital Economy Report 2024* and are being integrated in the e-trade readiness assessment for Indonesia. Through the project on green trade in the Pacific, UNCTAD supported the application of voluntary sustainability standards in value chains, such as for vanilla and kava. The productive capacity project in African least developed countries included a comparative gender analysis of Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania, contributing to greater awareness of how policy reforms impact men and women differently. For e-trade readiness assessments, women's organizations are often included in consultation processes. The eTrade for Women initiative has strengthened skills and networks of women digital entrepreneurs through regional masterclasses, established structured communities for ongoing engagement and demonstrated evidence of participants growing their businesses and accessing new opportunities.

53. Despite these good examples, evaluations point to missed opportunities for deeper and more consistent mainstreaming of these cross-cutting issues across planning and implementation. Recently introduced "gender tagging" for technical cooperation projects, through the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting tool, should strengthen the integration, tracking and accountability of gender equality commitments throughout the project life cycle. Where available, UNCTAD can also use data disaggregated by gender, disability and socioeconomic status to conduct meaningful analysis of the differential impacts of programmes and projects, and to design interventions that effectively address the specific needs of diverse groups. Additionally, implementing regular training programmes and workshops, alongside appointing dedicated focal points for each cross-cutting area, will enhance staff capacity to apply these tools effectively. Finally, increased efforts can be made to include organizations of persons with disabilities as project stakeholders, while recognizing that in some countries there are few such formal organizations. Evaluations note that sharing lessons learned and success stories will help build institutional knowledge and motivate continuous improvement in mainstreaming efforts.

## **III. Evaluation plan for the period 2025–2026**

54. As noted in paragraph 4 above, an independent subprogramme evaluation was not conducted in 2025; the cycle of subprogramme evaluations will resume in 2026 with subprogramme 4, on technology and logistics.

55. In light of the financial situation of the institution, including restriction on regular budget funds for consultancy, the evaluation will need to be conducted by the Independent Evaluation Unit and, according to established practice, supported by two UNCTAD member State representatives acting in their personal capacity. The evaluation will draw on the results of the recently completed independent evaluation of the UNCTAD e-commerce and the digital economy programme, as well as recent subprogramme 4 project evaluations.

56. In addition to the subprogramme 4 evaluation, the evaluation plan for July 2025 to June 2026 includes eight independent project evaluations (see table).

<sup>10</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.

<sup>11</sup> UNCTAD, 2023.

Table  
Evaluation plan, 2025–2026

<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>
Developing integrated programmes to alleviate binding constraints to development by fostering structural transformation, building productive capacities and enhancing investment opportunities and linkages with China	2030 Agenda Subfund	1 070 000	30 000	Q3 2025
Mobilizing resources for a Green New Deal: Partnerships in Asia for a decade of action in the era of coronavirus	Development Account	624 000	17 000	Q3 2025
Integrated Policy Strategies and Regional Policy Coordination for Resilient, Green and Transformative Development: Supporting Selected Asian Belt and Road Initiative Partner Countries to Achieve 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	2030 Agenda Subfund	1 198 400	30 000	Q3 2025– Q1 2026
Independent evaluation of subprogramme 4	Regular budget	10 000 000	-	Q4 2025– Q2 2026
European Union for 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	50 000	Q4 2025– Q2 2026
Sustainable smart ports for African countries, including small island developing States, to “recover better” from COVID-19	Development Account	600 000	24 000	Q4 2025– Q2 2026
Train for Trade blended learning strategy to boost the digital economy in small island developing States of Africa, the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific	Development Account	600 000	24 000	Q4 2025– Q2 2026
Automated System for Relief Emergency Consignments for innovative coordination and facilitation of relief consignments in times of disaster in the Pacific region	Development Account	650 000	26 000	Q1-Q3 2026

<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>
Science, technology and innovation parks for sustainable development: building expertise in policy and practice in selected Asian and African countries	2030 Agenda Subfund	1 014 360	31 000	Q1-Q3 2026

*Source:* UNCTAD.

*Abbreviation:* Q, quarter.