United Nations | TD/B/WP/342

# United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
27 July 2026

Original: English

**Trade and Development Board**
**Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance**
**Ninety-first session**
Geneva, 5–9 October 2026
Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda

# External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 4: Technology and logistics*


*Summary*

This independent external evaluation assesses the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and sustainability of UNCTAD subprogramme 4, on technology and logistics, over 2022–2025. Strategic lessons and recommendations are identified to inform future programming.

**Key findings**

Subprogramme 4 demonstrated strong relevance, clear comparative advantage and tangible results in supporting developing country efforts to harness technology, innovation and trade logistics for sustainable development. Its demand-driven approach, high-quality analytical outputs and well-established technical cooperation programmes, particularly those of the Automated System for Customs Data, digital economy and trade facilitation, have positioned UNCTAD as a trusted global partner. The full potential of subprogramme 4, however, is constrained by structural funding imbalances, resource constraints, administrative inefficiencies and insufficient integration of results-based management and cross-cutting priorities. Highlights of the key findings are as follows:

- **Relevance**. Subprogramme 4 is well aligned with national development priorities and global frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the Bridgetown Covenant and Geneva Consensus of UNCTAD. It adapted to emerging challenges, such as digital transformation, supply chain disruptions and frontier technologies.
- **Effectiveness**. Subprogramme 4 contributed to policy development, institutional strengthening and norm setting, with strong performance in customs modernization; trade facilitation; science, technology and innovation; and digital economy support. Flagship reports and intergovernmental platforms continue to influence global policy debates. However, translating upstream policy work into sustained country-level


* This evaluation was conducted by an independent external evaluation team comprising Mr. Carsten Schwensen (team leader), Ms. Louise Smed, external consultants; and, in accordance with established practice, representatives of two member States who participated in their personal capacities: Ms. Sylvie Crouzier, Permanent Mission of France; and Ms. Zolzaya Dorjtsoo, Permanent Mission of Mongolia. Supporting materials for this evaluation are contained in document TD/B/WP(91)/CRP.1.

outcomes remains uneven, largely due to limited follow-up, resource constraints and communication constraints.

- **Efficiency**. Subprogramme 4 maintained delivery under challenging conditions, including the United Nations liquidity crisis, through adaptive approaches including online delivery. Efficiency nonetheless reflects coping mechanisms rather than optimal resource allocation, with overstretched staff, scaled-down activities and cumbersome administrative processes that affect implementation. Heavy reliance on earmarked extrabudgetary funding contributes to fragmentation and limits strategic flexibility.
- **Coherence**. Results-based management systems are uneven across branches, limiting strategic oversight and learning. Internal collaboration exists but remains largely ad hoc, limiting synergies across UNCTAD. Partnerships are a major strength but require a more strategic and programmatically coordinated approach.
- **Sustainability**. Sustainability varies across interventions. While programmes such as the Automated System for Customs Data demonstrate strong long-term impact, some interventions lack sustained follow-up, which is compounded by inconsistent resource mobilization and partnership strategies.
- **Cross-cutting issues**. Integration of gender equality, environmental sustainability and inclusion is enhanced but not yet systematic or consistently measured.

**Recommendations to the UNCTAD Secretary-General and the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics**

- Establish a strategic prioritization framework, aligned with mandates and resource realities, to guide subprogramme 4 delivery under constrained financial and human resources.
- Streamline approval processes for field interventions and strengthen communication to improve the efficiency, timeliness and visibility of programme delivery.
- Expand and institutionalize hybrid modalities for intergovernmental and technical processes.
- Develop a more strategic, coordinated and programmatically aligned approach to partnerships and resource mobilization to address fragmentation and funding imbalances.
- Develop and operationalize a more detailed, results-oriented results-based management framework across activities and outputs at the subprogramme level.
- Strengthen accountability and implementation of cross-cutting priorities to move beyond general commitments and contribute to consistent, measurable and accountable results across subprogramme 4.

# I. Introduction

1. At its seventy-eighth session, the Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance initiated a new evaluation cycle for UNCTAD subprogrammes, in line with the administrative instruction on evaluation in the United Nations Secretariat, which requires each subprogramme to undergo an independent external review at least once every six years.[1] Initially planned for 2025, the evaluation of subprogramme 4 was postponed to 2026, in accordance with the agreed conclusions of the Working Party at its eighty-eighth session[2]. The evaluation was conducted from February to June 2026 and covers the period 2022–2025.[3] It is guided by the terms of reference and the UNCTAD evaluation policy,[4] which complies with United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards. The evaluation will be considered by the Working Party at its ninety-first session in October 2026.

2. Subprogramme 4 aims at harnessing innovation and technology, including electronic commerce (e-commerce) and the digital economy, improving trade logistics and increasing human capacities for inclusive and sustainable trade and development in developing countries[5] and economies in transition. Its strategy, deliverables and expected results are set out in annual proposed programme budgets, grounded in mandates from UNCTAD quadrennial conferences (including the Bridgetown Covenant and Geneva Consensus)[6] and relevant General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions.

3. The UNCTAD Division on Technology and Logistics is responsible for delivering subprogramme 4. The last subprogramme 4 evaluation, in 2017,[7] confirmed the continued relevance of subprogramme 4 to the Sustainable Development Goals, while calling for greater Sustainable Development Goal integration, more resources for the expanded Nairobi mandate, more strategic donor engagement, and stronger results-based management and gender mainstreaming.

4. The core mandate of the Division is strengthening inclusive growth and development through science, technology and innovation, including information and communications technology for development; efficient, resilient and sustainable trade logistics; and training and capacity-building. The Division comprises four branches: the Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch; E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch; Trade Logistics Branch; and Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) Programme, the largest technical cooperation programme of UNCTAD.

5. Work is delivered through the three interrelated pillars of UNCTAD: (a) research and analysis (flagship publications, namely, *Technology and Innovation Report*, *Digital Economy Report* and *Review of Maritime Transport*); (b) technical cooperation and capacity-building (ASYCUDA; e-trade readiness assessments; science, technology and innovation policy reviews; digital economy and digital trade measurement; Train for Trade port management programme; e-learning for trade facilitation; the paragraph 166 programme;[8] sustainable and resilient transport and logistics services programme; eTrade for Women Initiative and trade facilitation programme); and (c) intergovernmental consensus-building (servicing the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and expert meetings on the digital economy, transport, trade logistics and trade facilitation, and providing substantive support to the Second Committee of the General Assembly), as well as holding E-week.

[1] ST/AI/2021/3/Rev.1, 6 February 2026.

[2] See TD/B/WP/333, chapter I.

[3] In some cases, the findings also cover activities implemented in 2026.

[4] UNCTAD evaluation policy, second edition, 2023.

[5] Particularly the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, small island developing States and other vulnerable economies.

[6] Respectively, TD/541/Add.2 and TD/561/Add.2.

[7] TD/B/WP/287.

[8] The paragraph 166 programme delivers regional and short courses for developing countries, including the least developed countries, on key issues on the international economic agenda.

6. The table 1 below shows the evolution of regular budget resources for subprogramme 4 from 2022 through the 2026 proposed programme budget.[9]

**Regular budget: Evolution of post and non-post expenditures**

(Thousands of United States dollars)

| | *Posts* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Year* | *Expenditures* | *Number* | *Non-post*[a] | *Total* |
| 2022 | 9,488.7 | 49 | 147.4 | 9,636.1 |
| 2023 | 10,382.7 | 52 | 186.9 | 10,569.6 |
| 2024 | 10,994.8 | 52 | 191.1 | 11,185.9 |
| 2025 | 12,479.8 | 52 | 73.0 | 12,552.8 |
| 2026 | 10,377.9 | 46 | 233.2 | 10,611.1 |

*Source*: UNCTAD proposed programme plans, 2022–2026.

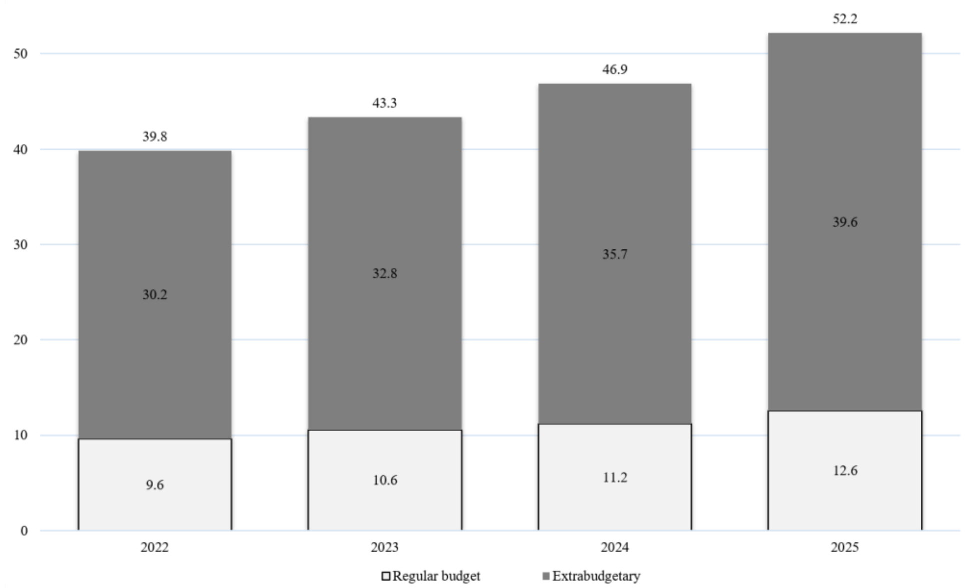
*Notes*: For 2022–2025, actual expenditure; for 2026, planned. Revised 2026 budget figures provided by the Budget and Project Finance Section of UNCTAD.

[a] Includes expenses for consultants, experts, staff travel and contractual services.

7. Over the evaluation period, the total resources of subprogramme 4 increased from \$39.8 million in 2022 to \$52.2 million in 2025. Extrabudgetary funding remained dominant, rising from \$30.2 million to \$39.6 million and accounting for around three quarters of total resources. While regular budget resources also increased (from \$9.6 million to \$12.6 million), they remained a smaller share, making reliance on extrabudgetary funding a defining feature of subprogramme 4 financing. Subprogramme 4 also accounts for the largest share of extrabudgetary resources within UNCTAD, increasing from 63.6 per cent in 2022 to 69.9 per cent in 2025. Extrabudgetary dependence is expected to deepen in 2026, following the abolition of six posts and the recruitment freeze due to the liquidity situation.[10]

**Subprogramme 4, regular budget and extrabudgetary expenditures**

(Millions of United States dollars)




[9] Subprogramme 4 also receives supplementary funding under the United Nations regular programme of technical cooperation.

[10] See TD/B/WP(91)/CRP.1 for a list of posts abolished and vacant posts.

# II. Subject of evaluation

8. The evaluation had two objectives: (a) support accountability by assessing the subprogramme's performance against its planned objectives; and (b) contribute to institutional learning to inform the next annual programme plan. It identified lessons on positioning, portfolio planning, management and implementation to improve subprogramme design and delivery and strengthen performance across UNCTAD.

9. The evaluation assessed UNCTAD work on technology and logistics during 2022–2025, focusing on subprogramme 4 within the Division on Technology and Logistics. It included contributions from other UNCTAD divisions where they supported subprogramme 4 objectives and expected results and covered activities funded through both regular budget and extrabudgetary sources, including the regular programme of technical cooperation. It also examined the impact of the United Nations liquidity crisis on delivery and how resource constraints, including recruitment freezes and reduced operational budgets, may have affected performance.

10. The E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch was scoped out of this evaluation, as it was subject to a dedicated independent external evaluation in 2025.[11] Findings from the E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch evaluation were integrated into the present report.

# III. Methodology

11. The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methods. A comprehensive desk study informed the design of data collection and analysis.

12. Interviews were conducted with 51 stakeholders (26 men and 25 women) across 47 sessions, including four sessions with two interviewees each. Interviewees included internal and external stakeholders: UNCTAD staff, member State representatives, donors and partners, national counterparts and beneficiaries. Interviews were conducted virtually or in hybrid format. Initial interviews with subprogramme management helped refine the scope and situate the evaluation within the broader organizational context and priorities of UNCTAD.

13. An online survey was sent to approximately 730 country stakeholders and Geneva-based member State delegates, with 129 responses received.[12] The UNCTAD Intergovernmental Outreach and Support Service circulated the survey link through its Geneva-based delegate mailing list, encouraging onward dissemination. This snowball approach broadened outreach but precludes calculation of a precise response rate.

14. The evaluation team also observed deliberations at the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation (13–14 April 2026, Geneva) and the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (20–24 April 2026, Geneva), gaining further insight into stakeholder engagement, programme delivery and the relevance of activities within intergovernmental processes.

### Limitations

15. Constrained regular budget resources meant all interactions were virtual, with no fieldwork, limiting insight into on-the-ground implementation across Division on Technology and Logistics branches and stakeholder groups. Given the breadth of subprogramme 4 and limited time and resources, the evaluation triangulated global-level results with more in-depth evidence from selected country-level interventions, combining

[11] UNCTAD, Independent Evaluation Unit, 2025, Independent programme evaluation: UNCTAD e-commerce and the digital economy programme. Available at https://unctad.org/publications-search?f[0]=product:468.

[12] Key survey findings are presented in TD/B/WP(91)/CRP.1, including a breakdown of respondents by type of stakeholder and geographic region represented.

quantitative sources, such as databases and survey results, with qualitative information to strengthen the findings.

# IV. Findings

16. Over the evaluation period (2022–2025), UNCTAD operated under the Bridgetown Covenant, adopted at the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in October 2021, and the Geneva Consensus, adopted at the sixteenth session of the Conference in October 2025. The Geneva Consensus maintains broad continuity with the Bridgetown Covenant on core mandates of the Division on Technology and Logistics, while calling on UNCTAD to reinforce its work on trade facilitation and enhance support to developing countries on e-commerce and the digital economy. These are the only areas in which the outcome document explicitly calls for strengthening UNCTAD work. The three-pillar approach and the emphasis of the Division on technical cooperation remain consistent. The Geneva Consensus asks UNCTAD to support member States in trade facilitation, resilient supply chains, digital transformation, the digital economy, and innovation, including artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. It also places greater emphasis on supporting vulnerable economies, particularly the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.

**Relevance to development needs and mandates**

17. Subprogramme 4 was highly relevant to beneficiary countries, with activities consistently grounded in country demand and aligned with national development priorities, particularly in trade facilitation, transport systems, digitalization and innovation policy. Interventions such as science, technology and innovation policy support, ASYCUDA implementation, capacity-building support for developing e-commerce structures and capacity-building related to national trade facilitation committees have responded directly to identified institutional and policy gaps, for example, through support towards implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization and by enabling new industrial policy approaches, such as science, technology and innovation parks.

18. Subprogramme 4 activities were firmly anchored in the UNCTAD mandate, as articulated in the Bridgetown Covenant and the Geneva Consensus, which emphasized trade facilitation, e-commerce and the digital economy, transport decarbonization, resilient supply chains and technological upgrading. Interviews highlighted the ability of subprogramme 4 to adapt to emerging issues, including coronavirus disease (COVID-19) disruptions, digital trade expansion and frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence, maintaining relevance to evolving global and national contexts.

19. In the evaluation survey, subprogramme 4 outputs were rated highly, with 85–97 per cent of respondents considering them "useful" or "very useful." Flagship reports and the trade facilitation e-learning platform received the highest ratings (97 per cent), followed by artificial intelligence and frontier-technology briefs and core ASYCUDA work, such as training and capacity-building (96 per cent). While still highly positive, the lowest ratings were for the Geneva-based paragraph 166 short courses (85 per cent) and the position of UNCTAD as chair of the United Nations Group on the Information Society (86 per cent).[13]

20. Survey respondents rated the quality of intergovernmental processes highly across all dimensions, with 89–98 per cent indicating satisfaction "to a moderate or large extent." Secretariat delivery received the highest ratings, including responsiveness to requests and appropriate selection of panellists (both 98 per cent), as well as the timeliness and quality of documents (96 per cent). Lower ratings related to the geographical balance of panels, the success at sessions in reaching agreement on policy recommendations (both 89 per cent) and the gender balance of panels (90 per cent).

[13] See TD/B/WP(91)/CRP.1 for the full list of subprogramme 4 outputs and associated ratings.

21. Overall, the survey and interviews highlighted a growing gap between demand and delivery capacity, with resource constraints limiting the depth and continuity of engagements, and beneficiaries calling for more sustained follow-up.

**Alignment with global frameworks**

22. Subprogramme 4 is strongly aligned with key global frameworks, particularly the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals on economic growth (Goal 8), industry and innovation (Goal 9), and partnerships (17). Interviews highlighted subprogramme 4 work on data and statistics as a valuable contribution, benefiting member States and other international organizations. Subprogramme 4 also supported implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization and advanced outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society through the Commission on Science and Technology for Development.

23. Within the United Nations system, subprogramme 4 demonstrated strong complementarities: its global analytical frameworks, data and technical tools were used and adapted by regional commissions (such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) and development partners, reflecting a clear division of labour. UNCTAD served as a normative and analytical anchor in maritime transport, digitalization and trade logistics. Interviewees highlighted a rapid analysis of Strait of Hormuz disruptions [14] as one of the earliest comprehensive assessments of the implications for vulnerable economies and a valuable resource for decision-makers.

24. Subprogramme 4 contributed to global policy dialogue through platforms, such as the yearly Commission on Science and Technology for Development (2022–2025), as well as UNCTAD E-week (2022 and 2023) and the Global Supply Chain Forum (2024), reinforcing its role in debates on technology, digitalization, logistics and development. However, coherence was constrained by internal siloing within UNCTAD, some overlap with external actors (for example, the International Trade Centre and World Bank) and the absence of a fully articulated and monitored theory of change that links outputs to long-term development outcomes.

**Comparative advantage and positioning**

25. Subprogramme 4 has a clear, widely recognized comparative advantage within the United Nations system, based on credible analytical work, statistics, practical technical tools and convening power. Stakeholders consistently identified UNCTAD as a trusted, neutral partner for developing countries, offering high-quality data and expertise, particularly in maritime transport, digital economy analysis and customs automation. This advantage is rooted in the development-focused mandate and role of UNCTAD as a platform for the global South. Demand remains strong, with countries requesting continued support in areas, such as single window systems, artificial intelligence and digital trade.

26. However, the positioning of subprogramme 4 was constrained by structural factors. Compared with some actors, UNCTAD has limited field presence and resources, which affects sustained in-country engagement and the ability to scale up in response to growing demand. Nevertheless, subprogramme 4 has the highest number of field-based staff of any subprogramme, with more than 25 per cent of ASYCUDA staff based outside Geneva. Several member States noted that a limited ability to mobilize funding in response to requests risks affecting the programme's reputation over time. ASYCUDA country teams provide important on-the-ground engagement, but their reliance on extrabudgetary funding limits their capacity to support broader organizational objectives.

**Efficiency and use of resources**

27. Subprogramme 4 generally used resources efficiently through adaptive modalities and extrabudgetary funding, but this increasingly reflects compensatory measures rather than

[14] UNCTAD, 2026, Strait of Hormuz disruptions. The burden of oil price shocks on vulnerable economies, 2 June.

optimal allocation. The United Nations liquidity crisis has resulted in recruitment freezes, limited non-post resources and the scaling down or cancellation of planned activities. Staff reported increased workloads, greater reliance on short-term staff and interns, and reduced capacity for follow-up, affecting delivery quality and timeliness. Previous evaluations had already identified weak follow-up on outcomes as a challenge in achieving results beyond the output level; the crisis has further constrained this. Subprogramme 4 adapted proactively, including through online and hybrid delivery to reduce costs and expand reach. However, hybrid participation is no longer supported for formal intergovernmental meetings under United Nations policy, limiting participation to Geneva-based delegates rather than capital-based experts, particularly from developing countries, and reducing the quality and substance of deliberations.

28. The liquidity crisis affected the delivery of the Division on Technology and Logistics in 2025 across intergovernmental work, training and publications. A multi-year expert meeting was cancelled, only 52 of 75 planned training events were delivered, and regional paragraph 166 courses could not proceed due to limited regular budget resources.[15] Publications were affected by reduced word limits (for example, *Review of Maritime Transport 2025*) or postponed (e.g. “Maritime transport in Africa”). Furthermore, capacity constraints led UNCTAD management to decide to merge the *Digital Economy Report* and *Technology and Innovation Report*. A P-4 post approved by the Fifth Committee for the Commission on Science and Technology for Development working group on data governance could not be operationalized.

29. Heavy reliance on earmarked extrabudgetary funding, mainly for ASYCUDA, enabled delivery but often resulted in fragmented resource allocation driven by donor priorities rather than subprogramme 4 strategic priorities and delivery capacity. Areas with growing demand, including science, technology and innovation, trade and logistics, trade facilitation and e-commerce and the digital economy, experienced reductions in staffing and outputs, indicating mismatches between resources and mandates. By the end of 2025, the ratio of regular budget staff to extrabudgetary staff was less than 1:3. For ASYCUDA, continued extrabudgetary expansion without increased regular budget support presents a sustainability risk, as a drop in extrabudgetary flows could affect the programme.

30. Subprogramme 4 also used flexible, demand-driven financing models, particularly through ASYCUDA, where around two thirds of 2025 funding came from Member States themselves (demonstrating efficient use and strong ownership) and the remainder from partners, mainly the European Union, World Bank, Trade Mark Africa and the United Nations Development Programme.[16] These models enabled rapid mobilization and deployment of resources in response to country requests. However, interviews highlighted that inflexible administrative approval processes increasingly constrained timely responses to urgent requests.[17]

31. While the move towards centralized communications enabled UNCTAD to speak with a more coherent institutional voice, communication modalities were not sufficiently flexible or tailored to support engagement with technical audiences. The discontinuation of specialized branch-level communication channels, such as newsletters serving long-standing technical and practitioner networks, reduced the visibility and uptake of subprogramme 4 outputs among key technical audiences.

### Management, monitoring and internal coherence

32. Results-based management and monitoring systems of subprogramme 4 were partially developed and operational at the project level but remain fragmented and insufficiently institutionalized to support systematic learning, accountability and decision-making. Monitoring practices are widespread: training programmes collect participant feedback,

---

[15] Regional courses are expected to resume in 2026 using an adapted methodology that reduces the duration of the in-person component (for example, in North Macedonia, from two weeks down to one week), while continuing to engage cohorts of 15 to 25 policymakers and academics.

[16] Information provided by ASYCUDA.

[17] Examples were provided of ASYCUDA field staff covering travel costs from their own funds, as they could not wait for headquarters approval due to the urgency of requests.

projects use pre- and post-assessments, and tools such as the reform tracker monitor policy implementation. However, long-term outcomes are rarely tracked systematically, and reporting focuses mainly on activities (for example, number of people trained) rather than measurable changes in policy or institutional performance. Staff interviews confirmed that limited resources for follow-up hampered their capacity to assess results.

33. The E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch is recognized as an example of UNCTAD good practice in monitoring and evaluation and results-based management. Its monitoring and evaluation framework, included in the current work plan (2024–2027), was treated as a living document and regularly updated to support continuous learning. The 2025 E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch evaluation highlighted several improvements to the framework, such as the prioritization of outcome-focused indicators, inclusion of more qualitative indicators and use of statistics on e-commerce and the digital economy to better capture impacts.[18]

34. Internal coherence across UNCTAD is also uneven. There are many examples of effective collaboration, including joint projects on supply chains, science, technology and innovation and trade facilitation, and cross-divisional contributions to flagship publications and events. However, interviews consistently highlighted persistent organizational silos and difficulties presenting integrated solutions to donors and partners. While the liquidity crisis has encouraged greater collaboration for joint funding opportunities, it has also increased pressure on already overstretched staff, limiting the ability of the Division on Technology and Logistics to fully exploit synergies with other UNCTAD divisions.

35. Resource mobilization within subprogramme 4 was uneven and largely ad hoc, resulting in fragmented, unpredictable and at times misaligned funding. Well-established, demand-driven programmes, such as ASYCUDA and parts of the digital economy portfolio, attracted sustained funding, including from beneficiary Governments and long-term donor partnerships, while other areas remained structurally underfunded.

36. Reliance on short-term, earmarked, project-based funding, often driven by existing networks at the branch or section level rather than institutional priorities, and varying donor interest across thematic areas, reduced predictability, the scaling of successful interventions and country-level follow-up. As a result, resource allocation was not always aligned with the strategic priorities of subprogramme 4 and areas of greatest development impact, reinforcing disparities in staffing, programme delivery and long-term sustainability across the subprogramme.

**Partnerships and good practices**

37. Partnerships were a core strength of subprogramme 4 and critical to effective delivery, extending reach, enhancing technical quality and compensating for limited internal resources. Subprogramme 4 worked with a range of partners, including United Nations entities, development banks, donors, academic institutions and the private sector, combining UNCTAD analytical and technical expertise with partners' regional presence, financial resources and sectoral expertise.

38. Partnerships contributed directly to delivery and sustainability. For example, UNCTAD global maritime analysis informed regional work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, while joint projects with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean linked global and regional perspectives. At the country level, partnerships helped institutionalize outputs, including integrating trade facilitation tools into government systems and strengthening national trade facilitation committees. The accelerate trade facilitation programme, delivered jointly by UNCTAD, the World Customs Organization and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was a good example. Now in its fifth phase, it supported developing countries, including the least developed countries, in implementing the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization, with Egypt highlighted as a successful case.

[18] UNCTAD, Independent Evaluation Unit, 2025.

39. Good practices included demand-driven partnerships, where countries requested and co-financed support; integrated capacity-building that combined training, tools, and follow-up; and multi-stakeholder platforms, such as the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, as well as the UNCTAD Global Supply Chain Forum and E-week, which facilitated, respectively, policy dialogue and knowledge exchange at scale. The eTrade for all initiative (E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch), with 35 members, served as a platform for networking and collaboration. Partnerships developed through the science, technology and innovation parks project also promoted South–South cooperation and peer learning.

40. Partnerships were not always embedded in strategic or programmatic collaboration and were ad hoc or dependent on individual relationships. There was scope to strengthen engagement with multilateral and regional financial institutions and to improve coordination across United Nations agencies to reduce duplication. Collaboration through United Nations resident coordinator offices has nevertheless shown positive results in countries such as Ghana and Zambia.

**Contribution to, and sustaining of, results**

41. On effectiveness, survey respondents rated subprogramme 4 highest for demonstrating results to stakeholders (96 per cent), providing timely information following major disruptions (95 per cent), and coordinating with other United Nations agencies and organizations (94 per cent). Though still high, the least positive ratings related to outreach: raising awareness of subprogramme 4 activities (87 per cent) and engaging with member States outside intergovernmental meetings (88 per cent).

42. On support to member States, the highest ratings were for providing useful, evidence-based policy recommendations and modernizing customs administration and increasing customs revenue (both 97 per cent), followed by strengthening institutional capacity through training, developing digital economy capacity and supporting policy dialogue through the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (all 96 per cent). The least positive rating was for ensuring the sustainability of technical capacities after projects conclude (89 per cent). Between 15 and 30 per cent of respondents selected “I don’t know,” with uncertainty highest for specialized areas such as climate-resilient transport and Commission on Science and Technology for Development policy dialogue, and lowest for activities such as training.

**Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch**

43. The Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch demonstrated strong effectiveness in shaping policy frameworks, strengthening analytical capacities and influencing global and national science, technology and innovation debates. Its science, technology and innovation policy reviews, technology foresight exercises and advisory services, for example, helped countries better understand and strengthen their innovation ecosystems, often addressing conceptual and institutional gaps. Support for science, technology and innovation policy design, including science, technology and innovation parks and innovation frameworks, was described by beneficiaries as “eye-opening” and instrumental in informing national approaches to industrialization and technological upgrading. However, evidence of sustained operational outcomes at the country level was inconsistent.

44. At the global level, the Branch played a key normative role through platforms such as processes of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development and the World Summit on the Information Society, positioning UNCTAD as a thought leader on the development implications of frontier technologies, including artificial intelligence and digitalization. However, these upstream contributions did not always translate into sustained downstream implementation, due to limited follow-up, funding gaps and reliance on broader national innovation systems that often lack the institutional capacity and resources to operationalize policy recommendations. Monitoring systems also did not systematically track the long-term uptake or impact of science, technology and innovation policies, limiting evidence of results beyond initial policy influence.

45. The paragraph 166 course was a highly effective and recognized capacity-building tool within subprogramme 4 and provided broad-based training across the full spectrum of UNCTAD work in partnership with United Nations regional commissions and national academia, representing a long-term investment in the human capital of policymakers and academics. A key strength was its blended learning model and training-of-trainers approach, which supported both individual capacity development and broader institutionalization, including within local universities. Interviews showed that participants frequently applied acquired knowledge in their organizations and, in some cases, became trainers themselves, multiplying impact and supporting sustainability. High participant satisfaction and completion rates further confirmed the course's relevance and quality.

**E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch (from the 2025 evaluation)**

46. Progress was evident across all E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch outcome areas, as confirmed by its 2025 independent external evaluation. E-trade readiness assessments provided a unique, holistic diagnostic for the least developed countries and non-least developed countries, although implementation of recommendations was often delayed by political, financial and human resource constraints, including interministerial tensions. The eTrade reform tracker has the potential to support effective implementation of e-commerce strategies and similar policy documents by clarifying roles and responsibilities across government agencies. Under eTrade for Women, masterclasses were reinforced, with evidence of growth in women's companies, strengthened capacities and expanded networks. Greater ownership by community members could further strengthen sustainability.

47. Compared with the previous E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch evaluation (2019–2021), the Branch was more coherent, with stronger complementarity across its three pillars. Interventions of eTrade for Women were increasingly linked with other initiatives, including e-trade readiness assessments, e-commerce strategies and E-week. Research findings were also integrated into other activities, including sessions of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy, eTrade for Women masterclasses and E-week, supporting dissemination. Complementarity work with other parts of the Division on Technology and Logistics was most evident with the Train for Trade Section.

48. The E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch donor base gradually shifted from 2022, when 10 donors and funding partners supported E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch interventions, with four core donors (Germany, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland) accounting for more than two thirds of extrabudgetary resources, alongside significant contributions from Australia through the United Nations Capital Development Fund. Since then, Germany and Sweden have left the core donor group, while new donors have joined, including Australia as a core donor and China and Saudi Arabia as project-specific funding partners. However, most new funding is earmarked, creating challenges for planning and sustainability.

**Trade Logistics Branch**

49. The Trade Logistics Branch generated strong and often sustainable results in strengthening trade facilitation systems and improving logistics performance, with clear evidence of institutional and procedural change. Its support to implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization contributed to the establishment and strengthening of national trade facilitation committees, reform road maps and inter-agency coordination, improving border procedures, reducing delays and enhancing regulatory alignment. Between April 2022 and March 2026, 16 countries declared early implementation of certain provisions of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, of which 10 (63 per cent) were supported by the UNCTAD Trade Facilitation Section.[19] Interviews with member States highlighted the reform tracker as an important accountability and monitoring tool that has reduced implementation time. However, some stakeholders noted the pressing need to move beyond compliance tracking towards supporting countries to implement Agreement on Trade Facilitation measures. Trade portals were considered useful, but their

[19] Data provided by the Trade Facilitation Section of the Trade Logistics Branch, UNCTAD.

sustainability remained a concern. As also highlighted in the 2025 E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch evaluation, government resources following the end of external support were often insufficient to maintain and regularly update these platforms.[20]

50. The port management programme is a well-established, practitioner-led initiative that strengthened port management capacity and facilitated global knowledge exchange, particularly among developing countries. By combining structured training with peer learning, it enabled practical, experience-based transfer of expertise. The neutral convening role of UNCTAD was central, ensuring coordination, continuity and the functioning of an extensive international network of port professionals. Tangible results included enhanced management skills, expanded South–South cooperation and improved market access, even in challenging contexts, such as landlocked developing countries. Continued expansion and sustained demand demonstrated the programme’s relevance.

51. A recent evaluation of a Train for Trade project (2022–2025)[21] under the United Nations Development Account found that the project translated concepts into actionable policy, resulting in 18 validated policy recommendations. Early national outcomes included legislative reforms in Cabo Verde, integration of digital trade reforms into the national budget of Mauritius and new data-sharing protocols in the Dominican Republic. The project also generated a positive unintended outcome: a cross-regional global learning community formed through active alumni networks.

52. A key strength of the Trade Logistics Branch was its combination of policy advice, capacity-building and practical tools, enabling countries to translate commitments into implementation. In many cases, national trade facilitation committees and related mechanisms have become embedded in government structures, providing a foundation for continued coordination and reform.

**Automated System for Customs Data**

53. ASYCUDA stood out as the most effective and sustainable intervention within subprogramme 4, delivering large-scale, measurable and lasting results across more than 100 countries. Widely adopted and fully integrated into national customs administrations, it has become core trade infrastructure, significantly improving customs efficiency, revenue collection, transparency and processing times, with direct, measurable development benefits.

54. A key strength of ASYCUDA was its operational and institutional embedding. Unlike more upstream interventions, it not only served as a software tool but also as a comprehensive system that required and supported organizational change within customs authorities. Its sustainability was reinforced by continuous use, in-country capacity-building, maintenance arrangements and, in many cases, cost-recovery and government funding that reduced reliance on external support over time. ASYCUDA also benefited from a strong demand-driven model, with countries actively seeking to adopt, upgrade or expand systems.

55. ASYCUDA delivered tangible results across diverse contexts. In Zambia, border waiting times fell from several days to around one day, while in the Gambia more than 80 per cent of customs payments are now processed electronically.[22] It has also proven effective in challenging environments, deploying rapidly in fragile contexts, such as Afghanistan, and providing essential automation in Pacific small island developing States where commercial alternatives were often not viable.

56. The Automated System for Relief Emergency Consignments extended ASYCUDA to humanitarian logistics by improving the tracking of relief consignments during emergencies. In Vanuatu, it demonstrated clear potential to prevent unused donations from overwhelming port and customs systems. However, uptake has been uneven because, unlike ASYCUDA, it

[20] UNCTAD, Independent Evaluation Unit, 2025.

[21] United Nations Development Account, project 2225F, “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,” implemented March 2022–December 2025 under the fourteenth tranche.

[22] Interview with member State representatives.

generates no immediate revenue. Wider adoption will depend on sustainable funding, inter-agency coordination at the national level and demonstrated operational benefits.

57. Remaining challenges included limited regular budget support, the need for regular system upgrades to keep pace with technological change, dependence on national technical capacity for maintenance and uneven performance where institutional capacities differ.

### Flagship reports

58. Flagship reports of the Division on Technology and Logistics –*Review of Maritime Transport*, *Digital Economy Report* and *Technology and Innovation Report* – combined strong global visibility with sustained demand and demonstrable policy influence. During the evaluation period, the three accounted for nearly half of all seven UNCTAD flagship report downloads, reflecting their wide reach and relevance. While downloads of full reports declined, access to summaries and individual chapters increased, suggesting growing demand for targeted, policy-relevant content rather than complete publications. Older editions also continued to generate substantial traffic, underscoring their lasting value as reference materials.

59. Beyond web metrics, the flagship reports demonstrated strong policy uptake. They were frequently cited by Governments, international organizations and think tanks, with the *Review of Maritime Transport* ranking among the most influential publications of UNCTAD in external policy citations. Collectively, the three reports provide unique data and forward-looking analysis, shaping global debates and informing strategies across the United Nations system and member States. While their analytical and normative influence was clear, their development impact was not consistently tracked, highlighting the need for stronger links to downstream technical support and better monitoring of use. Due to resource constraints, the plan is for the *Digital Economy Report* and the *Technology and Innovation Report* to be merged.

### Mainstreaming of United Nations cross-cutting issues

60. Subprogramme 4 demonstrated growing, but largely non-systematic, integration of United Nations cross-cutting principles. Integration was stronger in analytical work and policy discourse than in implementation, monitoring and measurable results. Inequality, digital divides, gender gaps and inclusive development were increasingly reflected in research, policy advice and global dialogue platforms, particularly the E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch and Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch work on digital inclusion and science, technology and innovation governance, indicating conceptual and normative alignment. Operational activities, particularly the Trade Logistics Branch and ASYCUDA, also contributed indirectly to inclusion through improved access, transparency and efficiency, although they were rarely framed explicitly as "leaving no one behind" or gender-focused interventions.

61. Cross-cutting issues were not consistently embedded in programme design, indicators or reporting. The evaluation found limited use of gender-disaggregated data, few targeted measures for vulnerable groups, and little evidence of systematic attention to disability inclusion or environmental sustainability across branches. As a result, subprogramme 4 contributions to inclusive and sustainable outcomes were often implicit and uneven, rather than strategic, and inconsistently reported. Limited dedicated resources, insufficient monitoring and reporting of results and the absence of clear accountability mechanisms further constrained effective mainstreaming, consistent with findings from the "Sustainable smart ports" evaluation.[23]

62. Within ASYCUDA, the 2022 gender strategy, developed following a 2021 Office of Internal Oversight Services audit,[24] represented a positive step but saw limited implementation. The target of achieving 50 per cent female staff by 2029 appeared unrealistic given a 15 per cent baseline and the limited influence of UNCTAD over national recruitment

[23] Available at https://unctad.org/about/evaluation.

[24] Office of Internal Oversight Services, 2021, Audit of the Automated System for Customs Data programme at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

processes. Reporting did not track progress beyond the baseline, and interviews suggested that female representation had changed little, apart from isolated improvements (for example, short-term contracts and specific country cases). Annual reports focused mainly on women's participation in training, with limited evidence of broader integration into programming.[25]

63. UNCTAD support to national trade facilitation committees demonstrated more structured progress. Gender considerations were increasingly integrated into training, tools and policy guidance, including dedicated modules under the national trade facilitation committee empowerment programme, helping shift trade facilitation towards more inclusive and participatory governance. Nonetheless, mainstreaming remained at an intermediate stage: only 21 per cent of national trade facilitation committees reported implementing gender-related initiatives, indicating limited translation of awareness into practice.[26]

# V. Conclusions

64. Subprogramme 4 demonstrated strong relevance, clear comparative advantage and tangible contributions to advancing technology, innovation and trade logistics in support of sustainable development. Its demand-driven approach, robust analytical outputs and widely recognized technical cooperation initiatives, particularly ASYCUDA, the digital economy and trade facilitation support, generated measurable results and positioned UNCTAD as a trusted partner for developing countries. Strong and sustained demand from member States, together with consistently positive stakeholder assessments, confirmed both the continued relevance of the mandate of subprogramme 4 and the value of its comparative advantages.

65. Subprogramme 4 was effective in influencing policy frameworks, strengthening institutional capacities, and shaping global and national debates. Its flagship reports, intergovernmental platforms, and capacity-building programmes continued to deliver high value, while partnerships extended its reach and enhanced its impact. However, the evaluation also found that the programme's strongest achievements were concentrated in upstream policy influence and institutional strengthening, whereas the sustainability and depth of downstream results were uneven. Limited follow-up, insufficient funding continuity, fragmented monitoring and varying national capacities to implement reforms constrained the translation of policy advice and capacity-building into sustained development outcomes.

66. Persistent structural challenges affected the performance of subprogramme 4 and, if not addressed, risk undermining its effectiveness despite continued high demand. Heavy reliance on extrabudgetary funding, combined with a constrained regular budget and the broader United Nations liquidity crisis, limited the ability of subprogramme 4 to scale up and respond consistently to growing requests from member States. Outside the E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch, inconsistent application of results-based management, limited outcome-level monitoring and internal coordination gaps further constrained strategic decision-making, learning and coherence across branches. Cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and inclusion were increasingly recognized but were not yet systematically embedded in programme design, implementation, monitoring and accountability.

67. Subprogramme 4 remains well positioned to respond to evolving global priorities, including digital transformation, supply chain resilience and frontier technologies. Realizing its full potential requires moving from incremental adaptation towards a more strategic and integrated operating model that aligns mandates, priorities, resources and implementation capacity. Strengthening strategic prioritization, internal coherence and results management, and more predictable funding aligned with strategic priorities, mandates, planned results and longer-term needs are essential. Greater emphasis on sustainability, systematic follow-up, partnerships and integrated approaches is also required to translate strong upstream

[25] UNCTAD, 2022, *ASYCUDA Report 2021/22*; UNCTAD, 2025a, *ASYCUDA Yearbook 2025*; UNCTAD, 2025b, *ASYCUDA Report 2024: Innovation for a Changing World* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.24.II.D.32, Geneva); UNCTAD, 2023, *ASYCUDA Report 2022/2023: Accelerating Climate Smart Trade Facilitation*, UNCTAD/DTL/ASYCUDA/2023/1 (United Nations publication, Geneva).

[26] UNCTAD, 2025c, *Status and Outlook for National Trade Facilitation Committees 2024*.

contributions into lasting development outcomes. The future effectiveness of subprogramme 4 therefore depends on addressing structural constraints while leveraging its strengths more strategically.

# VI. Recommendations

68. To the Secretary-General of UNCTAD and the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics:

- **Recommendation 1**. **Establish a strategic prioritization framework, aligned with mandates and resource realities**, to guide delivery of subprogramme 4 under constrained financial and human resources, including restructuring and redeploying staff across subprogrammes following workforce reductions. The framework should reflect the mandate set out in the Geneva Consensus, which specifically calls on UNCTAD to reinforce its work in trade facilitation and enhance support to developing countries in the area of e-commerce and the digital economy. Furthermore, the P-4 post approved by the Fifth Committee to support the Commission on Science and Technology for Development working group on data governance should be operationalized. With demand increasingly outpacing delivery capacity and implementation heavily reliant on earmarked extrabudgetary funding, there is a growing risk of fragmentation and misalignment with strategic priorities. The framework should identify areas of comparative advantage and highest demand, rationalize lower-priority work, scale back non-essential activities and prioritize sustained engagement and impact over breadth of outputs. As extrabudgetary resources continue to expand, ASYCUDA, in particular, should be further institutionalized within UNCTAD, and regular budget support for ASYCUDA should increase in parallel to ensure stable financing for essential programme support functions.
- **Recommendation 2**. **Streamline approval processes for field interventions and strengthen communication to improve the efficiency, timeliness and visibility of programme delivery**. UNCTAD should introduce faster internal clearance procedures, while maintaining appropriate controls, to enable rapid and timely responses to urgent member State requests, particularly for ASYCUDA field interventions and joint United Nations delivery. Furthermore, while the move towards centralized communications has enabled UNCTAD to speak with a more coherent institutional voice, the forthcoming UNCTAD communication strategy and guidelines should empower divisions and branches to disseminate specialized content directly to technical audiences, improving visibility and engagement with and responsiveness to specialized stakeholders. This should include identification and prioritization of target stakeholder groups, understanding how they engage with subprogramme 4 outputs and consolidation and maintenance of branch-level contact databases to support tailored dissemination and re-engagement with long-standing technical and practitioner networks.
- **Recommendation 3**. **Expand and institutionalize hybrid modalities for intergovernmental and technical processes**. The Secretary-General should re-engage with the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management to address constraints related to meeting facilities and the use of hybrid participation, with a view to progressively integrating hybrid modalities into relevant intergovernmental processes, particularly expert meetings. This would enhance the participation of the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, as well as capital-based experts, and improve the quality of deliberations. A structured approach to hybrid delivery should be developed, with differentiated modalities, and piloted where feasible. Digital and blended approaches, including e-learning, asynchronous training modules and digital collaboration tools, should be systematically expanded across technical cooperation and capacity-building activities to improve cost-efficiency, scalability and reach, while complementing in-person engagement.

- **Recommendation 4**. **Develop a more strategic, coordinated and programmatically aligned approach to partnerships and resource mobilization to address fragmentation and funding imbalances**. This should include alternative funding models, such as co-financing and contributions from beneficiary countries and member States where clear returns can be demonstrated, and pursuing larger, more strategic joint programming across divisions and United Nations entities. The strong funding base and country relationships of well-established programmes such as ASYCUDA should be leveraged more proactively to create cross-divisional funding opportunities.

69. To the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics:

- **Recommendation 5: Develop and operationalize a more detailed, results-oriented results-based management framework across activities and outputs at the subprogramme level**. Current practices are fragmented and largely project-based, limiting their value. A subprogramme-level results framework should establish a clear theory of change that links outputs, outcomes and longer-term results, in line with the organization-wide results-based management framework, and generate more meaningful results data to inform management decisions and programme adjustments, and support accountability and institutional learning. Given the diversity of the projects and deliverables of subprogramme 4, the framework should combine few common outcome-level indicators for aggregation and reporting, with branch- and programme-specific indicators, and build on existing good practice, notably the monitoring and evaluation framework of the E-commerce and the Digital Economy Branch. To support implementation, subprogramme 4 should introduce standardized planning tools that prompt teams to define indicators, review lessons learned and assign monitoring responsibilities. A monitoring and evaluation officer should be designated to support the Office of the Director in this respect.

- **Recommendation 6**. **Strengthen accountability and implementation of cross-cutting priorities to move beyond general commitments and contribute to consistent, measurable and accountable results across subprogramme 4**. Commitments on gender equality and cross-cutting issues should be translated into clear, mandatory standards and measurable results, embedding gender and "leaving no one behind" indicators in all monitoring frameworks, with systematic reporting and regular progress reviews.