



## United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General  
25 June 2012

Original: English

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### Trade and Development Board

#### Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget

Sixty-second session

Geneva, 3–5 September 2012

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

#### Evaluation of UNCTAD activities

## Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

### Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

#### Introduction

1. This report is an overview that describes UNCTAD's evaluation activities in the previous year. This information is presented to allow fuller reporting on all evaluation activities, and is a move towards strengthening accountability and lessons learned.

#### I. 2011 Evaluation Synthesis Report

2. External evaluations provide credible feedback on the performance of UNCTAD's work. Evaluations are conducted against criteria of relevance, effectiveness (including impact), efficiency and sustainability, in coherence with standards outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group and the OECD Development Assistance Committee. The objective of such assessment is to draw conclusions on the work implemented, make recommendations and identify lessons learned. Such information can help to inform the design, planning and implementation of future iterations. This report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD's programmes and projects undertaken during 2011. The purpose of this report is twofold: to present a synthesis of evaluation results on UNCTAD's performance with regard to implementation of its mandates; and to establish a system not only for reporting such results, but also for disseminating lessons learned that can contribute towards improved programme and project delivery.

3. Broadly, two programme evaluations were mandated and considered by the Working Party in September 2011, and three project evaluations were conducted following the

completion of activities envisaged. The following paragraphs elaborate on the key findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations.

4. In 2011, UNCTAD's Evaluation and Monitoring Unit coordinated two programme evaluations, namely on UNCTAD's programme on science and technology for development,<sup>1</sup> and on its programme of assistance to the Palestinian people,<sup>2</sup> as mandated by the Trade and Development Board.<sup>3</sup>

5. The in-depth evaluation of UNCTAD's programme on science and technology for development was considered at the fifty-ninth session of the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget. The evaluation found that implementation of UNCTAD's programme on science and technology for development had been consistent with its mandates according to the Accra Accord. Another finding was that the consolidation of UNCTAD's work on science, technology and innovation (STI) and information and communications technology (ICT) under subprogramme 4 had strengthened its research and analysis and technical cooperation outputs. However, the evaluation team found that in the conduct of that work, there was an imbalance in favour of ICT in the branch responsible for both areas of work. On the basis of their findings, the evaluation team identified a few areas for improvement with regard to (a) the intergovernmental machinery framework related to consideration of those matters; (b) the role of UNCTAD in its work on science and technology for development and vis-à-vis other United Nations organizations; (c) interdivisional and inter-agency coordination and cooperation on the work on STI; and (d) the planning and reporting framework of work undertaken in that regard.

6. The report was the basis for robust discussions at the meeting, reflecting the relevance of the report's findings and recommendations. The points emerging from the discussion included the following:

(a) There was agreement with the recommendation that more attention should be given to technical cooperation programmes and to transferring skills and knowledge to developing countries by closer engagement of UNCTAD staff at the country level and increased participation by local experts in project activities;

(b) Many delegates concurred with the recommendation in the evaluation report calling for UNCTAD to improve its planning, monitoring and reporting practices with regard to its work programme on science and technology for development;

(c) A few delegates reiterated the necessity of improving coordination within UNCTAD and with other agencies in order to ensure complementarities and better coherence, notably in the area of STI.

7. There was, however, also some concern with a recommendation pertaining to UNCTAD's work on transfer of technology, as member States felt that the recommendation had implications on UNCTAD's Accra Accord mandate on that front. For this reason, there was no consensus within the Working Party at that session as to whether the secretariat should implement the recommendations of the evaluation. Further discussion of the recommendations will take place at the 2012 Working Party session on technical cooperation. Nonetheless, as a result of the evaluation, the secretariat began reflections on how its work could be enhanced, to enable the delivery of better results.

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<sup>1</sup> TD/B/WP/234.

<sup>2</sup> TD/B/58/6.

<sup>3</sup> TD/B/WP/215.

8. The in-depth evaluation of UNCTAD's programme of assistance to the Palestinian people was considered during the fifty-eighth session of the Trade and Development Board. The evaluation, conducted by an independent evaluator, Mr. S.V. Divvaakar, assessed the work implemented since 1990, under UNCTAD's three pillars of work, by the Assistance to the Palestinian People Unit. The evaluation methodology relied on the triangulation and analysis of data generated by (a) desk review of relevant documents and outputs of the Unit; (b) interviews with the stakeholders concerned; and (c) field visits to Jerusalem and Ramallah.

9. The independent evaluator found that despite adverse field conditions and the fact that UNCTAD was a small player in the development assistance canvas in that area of work, its relevance and useful contributions to needs expressed by beneficiaries was undisputed. Furthermore, the report found that UNCTAD's specialized approach provided a number of proprietary tools and techniques, with UNCTAD being an important partner in the enhancement of the customs administration system.

10. The independent evaluator noted that UNCTAD faced potential challenges in responding to new and emerging priorities of the Palestinian Authority and other beneficiaries, which emanated from: (a) the Palestinian Authority's need to mobilize adequate financial commitments in order to more effectively pursue national development priorities; (b) an increasing trend towards donor-supported, field-based interventions for the private sector, which had not received adequate engagement in recent years; and (c) UNCTAD's lack of field presence and partnerships, and its absence from the aid coordination structures in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, all of which limited its ability to make additional contributions despite its relevance, capabilities and expertise.

11. Following active discussion of the report and its recommendations, the secretariat was asked to take into account the recommendations contained in the report, as well as the Trade and Development Board's deliberations, in its continuing implementation of the Accra Accord. The secretariat is in the process of considering if and how the recommendations can be implemented, to enhance its delivery on its mandates.

12. External evaluations were also completed for three projects: (a) the E-Commerce and Law Reform Project; (b) Project N-6 – Promoting Subregional Growth-oriented Economic and Trade Policies towards Achieving the MDGs in Arab Countries of West Asia and North Africa; and (c) Project N-5 – Developing Local Capacities for the Identification of Growth Opportunities through Resource Mobilization.

13. The E-Commerce and Law Reform Project is supported by the Government of Finland and is aimed at supporting decision-makers in their reviewing of cyberlegislation, to establish an environment that enables the developmental potential of the information economy. Project activities included the conduct of awareness-raising campaigns, legal advice and training, and the preparation of legal frameworks. The evaluation, which focused on the project's activities from 2006 to 2010, found that the project had pioneered the introduction of the legal dimension of ICT to its beneficiary countries, initiating cyberlaw reform and harmonization processes. Draft cyberlaws had either been enacted or were standing ready for government endorsement in all beneficiary countries. The project's approach – a mix of legal advice and training, supported by awareness-raising and institutional capacity-building – was found to have been successful in building the confidence and commitment of project partners to achieve compliance with international ICT standards. Cyberlaw is an area where the growing sophistication of ICT implies continuous amending of legal texts, which can result in increasing needs for training and advisory services. In this regard, the recommendations formulated by the evaluator pertained mainly to the sustainability of the project's approach. In particular, the report recommended the identification of comprehensive road maps and exit strategies favouring ownership and uptake of project outputs by beneficiaries. Given the relevance and the

evolving nature of the subject, as well as an expected increase in demand from developing and least developed countries for such assistance, the evaluator further recommended that the project be strengthened with additional resources.

14. Project N-5 – Developing Local Capacities for the Identification of Growth Opportunities through Resource Mobilization was operational from 2006 to 2010, and was supported by the United Nations Development Account (sixth tranche). The project aimed to strengthen the capacity of policymakers in African countries to identify and make effective use of alternative sources of non-debt-creating external and domestic finance in support of poverty reduction objectives. In that regard, its activities included the preparation of country case studies, the organization of an expert group meeting, regional seminars and training workshops, and the publication and dissemination of guidelines.

15. The evaluation found that the project's interventions were relevant for developing countries in their efforts to enhance domestic resource mobilization and to improve the utilization thereof. Despite some delays in the project's implementation and the need to follow up on project activities, project beneficiaries reported positively on the project's activities, and outcomes were considered encouraging and catalytic. Recommendations from the evaluator were directed at the United Nations Development Account office and UNCTAD, including a recommendation aimed at improving project appraisal processes, and a recommendation for project funding mechanisms that encouraged cost-sharing approaches with project beneficiaries and synergies among other Development Account projects. The evaluator further recommended that UNCTAD strengthen its cooperation with other development partners, and that it intensify its awareness-raising efforts in that area through participation in international forums and the integration of the theme in its regular programme activities, given its relevance.

16. Project N-6 – Promoting Subregional Growth-oriented Economic and Trade Policies towards Achieving the MDGs in Arab Countries of West Asia and North Africa was also supported by the United Nations Development Account (sixth tranche) and was operational from 2008 to early 2011. The project aimed to enhance regional trade and its contribution to the achievement of sustained economic growth and long-term structural transformation. Activities included the preparation of country case studies, the delivery of advisory services, and the organization of expert group meetings and regional workshops.

17. Findings on the project, from the independent evaluator, confirmed that UNCTAD was a suitable provider of such assistance and validated the relevance of the project's approach. The evaluator observed that given the project's orientation towards research-led policy advice and networking, concrete results and policy changes at the country level could not be measured at the time of the evaluation. However, interviews of project beneficiaries showed that the project had generated useful knowledge and advice on improving pro-poor and pro-development aspects of trade and macroeconomic policies that would benefit and assist policymaking institutions. In addition, regional workshops, involving roundtable discussions based on country research reports, expert analysis and feedback, had been highly appreciated, and provided an effective participation platform for countries in the subregional integration process and related policy-formation exercises. The evaluator's recommendations focused on the need to strengthen the sustainability of project achievements by institutionalizing the knowledge gained and integrating follow-up mechanisms into project design. To that end, the evaluation recommended that the involvement of regional institutions in the implementation and follow-up of multi-country project activities be strengthened. To do so, it recommended that the formal identification and commitment of these partners or the support to build such regional institutions be integrated into project activities.

18. These evaluations led to several notable "lessons learned" being identified by the evaluators, which included the following:

The performance of research-based projects cannot be assessed on the basis of indicators that attempt to measure the future implementation of research results. This makes the results of the project immeasurable and unaccountable, to a certain extent. In particular, given that the results stemming from research and advocacy activities are usually expected to occur beyond the timeframe of activities, the evaluation of the effectiveness of such projects is often limited to the potential for attaining results rather than showing the actual results attained by the project. In this context, indicators measuring evidence of uptake of research results by beneficiaries (increase in knowledge or awareness, evidence of processes...) appear more suitable than indicators linked to the adoption of policies, as the latter correspond to longer-term changes and are subject to external factors beyond the control of a project.

(a) Inter-organizational cooperation with agencies or institutions that have a field presence has the potential to strengthen the sustainability of project results. Sustainability of results, via active follow-up by national and regional institutions, can be further strengthened if it is initially incorporated in project strategies and activities, and when a clear mandate has been defined with such institutions;

(b) It is important to link the themes of UNCTAD flagship reports to parallel technical assistance “on the ground”, with a view to fostering the application of the key messages of such reports at the regional or country level. Supporting the step from policy advice to policy decisions and their implementation is essential;

(c) Workshops and seminars are important in terms of awareness-building and exposure, but are not necessarily sufficient to build or strengthen capacities. This should be considered when formulating expected outcomes and performance indicators during the development of the project’s logical framework;

(d) The presentation of success stories from other countries in the region on the introduction and enforcement of legislation is likely to generate emulation or peer pressure effect, within the same regional group, while providing a concrete reference framework for decision-makers and lobbying groups to initiate legal reform.

19. Three additional project evaluations funded by the Development Account’s sixth tranche were granted extensions beyond the end of 2011.<sup>4</sup> Their evaluations are under way, and final reports will be posted on UNCTAD’s website when they become available.

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<sup>4</sup> The three are: (a) Project L-6 – Strengthening the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector of six developing countries in the ECOWAS; (b) Project O-6 – Enhancing the effective participation of developing countries in dynamic and new sectors of international trade; and (c) Project 08-09 AC – Strengthening Science, Technology and Innovation policies for development in Latin America.