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External evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 4: Technology and logistics

Management response to the external evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 4: Technology and logistics

Executive summary

At the request of the Trade and Development Board, and as part of the recurrent evaluation programme reviewed by the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget, an independent evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 4 (SP4) on technology and logistics was carried out in early 2017. The evaluation [1] assessed the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the activities of SP4 between 2012 and 2016.

The UNCTAD secretariat takes note of the conclusion of the evaluation that the comprehensive and diverse portfolio of SP4 is of high quality and relevance to the needs of its beneficiaries and stakeholders. Regarding the effectiveness of SP4, the evaluation highlighted the high degree of satisfaction, with 86 per cent of the respondents to a survey mentioning that SP4 interventions helped them to improve their knowledge. Implementation of activities was found to be timely and efficient. The evaluation identified several good practices related to incorporating institutional sustainability considerations into the technical cooperation activities of the Division on Technology and Logistics.

The evaluation further noted that the value added of SP4 lies in the cross-fertilization between the three pillars of UNCTAD, which includes leveraging a wide range of partnerships. Several best practices and useful lessons from SP4 were identified as being of value to the rest of UNCTAD. Some areas where additional efforts could further enhance the value of the work of SP4 were noted, in particular moving towards a longer term, programmatic approach to technical cooperation. The evaluation underscored that additional resources would be required for the Division on Technology and Logistics to deliver fully on the SP4 work programme, especially work on electronic commerce (e-commerce), the digital economy and science, technology and innovation.

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[1] See TD/B/WP/287 and TD/B/WP(75)/CRP.2.

The secretariat commends the effort and dedication of the evaluation team for their independent, objective and professional evaluation, given the particularly complex and comprehensive nature of the activities undertaken by the Division on Technology and Logistics under SP4.

The present note contains three chapters. After a brief overview of the background of the evaluation and its methodology (chapter I), the note presents the main findings contained in the evaluation report and observations by the secretariat (chapter II). The note concludes with a detailed response by the secretariat to the recommendations of the SP4 evaluation (chapter III).

I. Evaluation context

1.   The objective of SP4, on technology and logistics, is to strengthen the capacity of developing countries to participate fully in the global economy through the adoption of effective national policies in the areas of science, technology and innovation and information and communications technologies (ICTs), as well as improved efficiency and sustainability of trade logistics, as they relate to trade.

2.   The Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD, at its sixty-second session, requested an independent and in-depth evaluation of SP4, implemented by the Division on Technology and Logistics.[2] The evaluation assessed the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of SP4 between 2012 and 2016. The scope of the evaluation comprised an assessment of interconnections between the three pillars of UNCTAD with a view to potential economies of scale and scope. The evaluation placed some emphasis on the technical cooperation pillar by focusing on programmes outlined in the *UNCTAD Toolbox* that fall within the Division's work programme: the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), Science Technology and Innovation Policy Reviews, the Trade Facilitation Programme, the Course on Key Issues on the International Economic Agenda (paragraph 166), the port management programme under the Train for Trade Programme and the E-commerce and Law Reform Programme. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming, equity, partnerships, innovation and results-based management were assessed as cross-cutting issues.

3.   The UNCTAD research and analysis pillar was not assessed in depth, as noted by the evaluators, in order to avoid overlapping with the Office of Internal Oversight Services evaluation of 2015,[3] which focused on this pillar. The secretariat emphasizes that SP4 has a strong focus on research and analysis, with the Division on Technology and Logistics developing key research products, among them, three of the seven UNCTAD flagship reports, namely the *Information Economy Report*, *Review of Maritime Transport* and *Technology and Innovation Report*.

4.   The evaluation noted that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gives a greater role to technologies, recognizing that technologies act as a catalyst in most Sustainable Development Goals. The mandate provided by the Nairobi Maafikiano[4] further enhances the leading role UNCTAD plays within the United Nations system in the use of technologies, including information and communications technologies, for sustainable development. The evaluation is cognizant of the increased responsibility in this area of UNCTAD work and the comparative advantage vis-à-vis other bodies.

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[2] The Trade and Development Board, at its sixty-second, took note of the report of the Working Party on the Strategic Framework and Programme Budget (see, respectively, TD/B/62/11 and Corr.1, chapter I, section D, paragraph 13, and TD/B/WP/275, chapter I, section A).

[3] See TD/B/WP/287, paragraph 9.

[4] The outcome document of the fourteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, as contained in TD/519/Add.2.

II. Summary of key findings and secretariat response

5.   This chapter summarizes the key findings and conclusions under the main components of the evaluation, namely the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of SP4. It also contains comments by the secretariat on some aspects highlighted for further actions.

Relevance

6.   The evaluation noted that newly agreed upon international agreements and outcomes, and the Nairobi Maafikiano, reaffirm the importance of the SP4 work programme. Regarding organization, the evaluation noted the efforts by the Division on Technology and Logistics to respond coherently to its evolving work programme. This included adapting the UNCTAD section of the United Nations strategic framework for the period 2016–2017 to the Nairobi Maafikiano, mapping of the activities of the Division against the Sustainable Development Goals and integrating the Sustainable Development Goals focused on in the *UNCTAD Toolbox*. Interviews of the beneficiaries of SP4 conducted by the evaluators revealed a strong degree of endorsement of the relevance of SP4 activities.

7.   The evaluation emphasized the increased focus of the Nairobi Maafikiano on technology, the digital economy and e-commerce compared with the Doha Mandate and underscored that Addis Ababa Action Agenda explicitly reaffirmed UNCTAD as the United Nations focal point for trade and development and for the interrelated issues of finance, technology, investment and sustainable development. Various surveys of member States and beneficiaries undertaken for the evaluation clearly highlighted that science, technology and innovation, especially the digital economy and e-commerce, present an opportunity for UNCTAD to position itself as a global centre of excellence on the development dimension of digitalization.

8.   With regard to the trade logistics programme, most of the stakeholders interviewed have agreed that SP4 is well positioned for delivering on the work programme of the Division on Technology and Logistics due to its holistic approach in covering trade logistics. In this regard, the Nairobi Maafikiano requested that UNCTAD continue and reinforce its work in the field of trade facilitation with specific references to the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization, the ASYCUDA programme and sustainable transport.

9.   The evaluation noted that while the full work programme of the Division on Technology and Logistics remains relevant in light of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Nairobi Maafikiano, and notable efforts have been made to ensure alignment and contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, there are as yet possibilities to further integrate Sustainable Development Goals into the Division's work plan. In this context, the evaluation noted that the current framework for the Science Technology and Innovation Policy Reviews may need to be revised for improved alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. Among the lessons learned, the evaluators listed the need for the Science Technology and Innovation Policy Reviews to be complemented by support to policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. Ideally, a follow-up review would also assess policy implementation after three to four years and provide recommendations for adjustments. The secretariat is pleased to note that efforts are already under way to review the current Science Technology and Innovation Policy Review framework to incorporate inclusive and sustainable development dimensions. The secretariat will also seek to adopt a longer term approach, with follow-up activity, as permitted by resource availability.

Effectiveness

10.   The secretariat takes note of the high degree of satisfaction direct beneficiaries of technical cooperation through SP4. Eighty-six per cent of respondents to the evaluation's technical cooperation survey mentioned that SP4 interventions helped them to improve their knowledge.

11.   In the view of the evaluators, a number of implementation modalities of SP4 technical cooperation activities constitute best practices worth replicating within the United Nations. Among the modalities the practice of holding broad consultation processes used by the Science Technology and Innovation Policy Reviews; institutional capacity-building under ASYCUDA that leads to sustainable results; systematic ex post monitoring of participants' use of knowledge six months after the delivery of the paragraph 166 course; and the concept of delivering training through mobilizing resources of three European partner ports in the Train for Trade port management programme. It was further noted that E-commerce and Law Reform Programme builds on sound cooperation with the Train for Trade programme and has been a highly effective cross-divisional programme that improves the knowledge of participants.

12.   The evaluation stressed the good cross-fertilization among the three pillars of work, with research and analysis informing consensus-building and underpinning technical cooperation activities, and vice versa. One success story identified is the UNCTAD research and consistent awareness-raising over the years, coupled with multi-stakeholder dialogue, that were instrumental in elevating the visibility of the development dimension of e-commerce within UNCTAD mandate. Survey results and interviews illustrated a high degree of satisfaction with e-commerce awareness-raising and capacity-building activities, including through e-trade readiness assessments and the eTrade for All platform recently launched to match donors and recipient countries. Another example highlighted in the evaluation report is the high quality, substantive inputs of the Division on Technology and Logistics to the United Nations Commission on Science Technology for Development, which in turn contributed to Commission resolutions.

13.   Some areas that may benefit from further improvement were identified. While the evaluation recognized the high quality of SP4 support to the UNCTAD intergovernmental machinery, it was noted that the meetings of the Trade and Development Board could be better utilized for disseminating SP4 results. The secretariat agrees with this proposal and is pleased to note that discussions were initiated in order to enhance the Division's involvement in sessions of the Trade and Development Board, including the annual session.

14.   The evaluation report further suggested that strengthening of the alumni network of the paragraph 166 course would help in terms of deeper and lasting engagement with senior policymakers. The secretariat is exploring ways to implement this suggestion, in particular drawing from the successful alumni network under the Train for Trade port management programme.

15.   The evaluation also noted that, while the final dissertations prepared under the Train for Trade port management programme by course participants are published under the UNCTAD port management series, there is no systematic use of valuable information generated within the port network for research purposes. The secretariat agrees that dissertations of port managers provide pragmatic solutions that may increase the efficiency of port services and therefore contribute to the body of knowledge on trade facilitation. The secretariat is taking measures to increase synergies between research and technical cooperation in this area, with the Train for Trade port management programme team preparing inputs, based on dissertations and other material, for the 2017 edition of the *Review of Maritime Transport*.

Efficiency

16.   The evaluation found that implementation of activities was generally timely and efficient, with 70 per cent of direct beneficiaries of technical cooperation programmes confirming that SP4 assistance was delivered in a timely and efficient manner. The evaluation emphasized, however, that "several factors as noted by [Division] staff have affected the overall efficiency of SP4, including a lack of human and financial resources, the unpredictability of funding and administrative burdens, among others."[5]

17.   The evaluation also stressed that "the expanded mandate of UNCTAD on e-commerce and the digital economy, as well as sufficiently facilitating [Commission on Science Technology for Development] sessions requires additional resources if the organization is to maintain and extend thematic leadership on [science, technology and innovation] and ICT for development within the United Nations system."[6]

18.   Recognizing that some technical cooperation activities, such as ASYCUDA and Train for Trade, are embedded in clearly defined, longer term cooperation frameworks, the evaluation report recommended that other programmes would also benefit from a long-term programmatic approach to technical cooperation. Both beneficiary countries and donors interviewed expressed a strong preference for multi-year, larger programmes, especially given that SP4 interventions were designed to deliver long-term results. The evaluation emphasized the need to deepen results-based management approaches in technical cooperation. It acknowledged the positive efforts of UNCTAD in that direction, but noted that more should be done in enforcing and applying the minimum UNCTAD results-based management standards with respect to new projects.

19.   The evaluation noted that partnerships and collaboration with a wide range of development partners has greatly enriched the impact of SP4 interventions, and should be further developed. The secretariat would like to note that the list included in the evaluation is not exhaustive and other important partnerships are being implemented within and outside UNCTAD. These include the work on non-tariff barriers with the Division on International Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities, the inter-agency Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, and the long-standing cooperation with United Nations regional commissions, such as with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific on trade facilitation and ICT for development.

20.   The evaluators also considered that given the lack of a permanent UNCTAD field presence, the following three models for delivering technical cooperation seemed to have worked well: (a) providing inputs to interventions of other development actors; (b) intervening through formalized cooperation with organizations that have a strong field presence; and (c) directly implementing stand-alone projects, where sufficient funding for field-based support staff and monitoring and evaluation is available. The evaluators also saw emerging evidence suggesting that regional approaches are an effective way to address cross-border challenges, where a regional institutional framework exists. The secretariat notes the evaluation team's acknowledgement that these models are already in practice, and ensures further scalability and replicability.

Sustainability of results

21.   The evaluation identified several good practices related to incorporating institutional sustainability considerations into technical cooperation activities of the Division on Technology and Logistics. These include Train for Trade alumni networks, the focus on organizational strengthening of national trade facilitation committees, as well as the ASYCUDA approach to building institutional capacity, for example, by supporting the set-up of training centres. However, the evaluation also identified a key challenge regarding the sustainability of ASYCUDA, in that it relies on strictly earmarked extrabudgetary resources, which cannot be utilized for necessary investments in software development

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[5]   See TD/B/WP/287, paragraph 43.
[6]   Ibid., paragraph 44.

and upgrades, essential for meeting the evolving technological needs of countries in the longer term. In this respect, it should be noted that ASYCUDA is preparing a plan of action for its software upgrades and development, and the secretariat will seek ways to provide resources towards this end.

Cross-cutting issues: gender mainstreaming

22.   The evaluation identified that SP4 integrated gender aspects into several activities. Science, technology and innovation and ICTs for development offer good practices including through advocating for the need to use science and technology to support women's development, and encouraging the role of women in innovation.

23.   The evaluation also noted that despite significant efforts undertaken, there is still room to strengthen systematic gender mainstreaming into SP4 work, particularly in technical cooperation and research. The evaluation concludes that this requires deepening expertise, continued and targeted capacity-building and coaching, as well as clear guidance on applying gender mainstreaming in planning, management and monitoring of technical cooperation projects and research products. The secretariat stresses the commitment of management to further improve the efforts of the Division on Technology and Logistics to mainstream gender into all its activities, including research and capacity-building.

Cross-cutting issues: equity and inclusive development

24.   The evaluation confirmed the presence of an important equity and inclusive development dimension in all subprogramme activities. The majority of beneficiaries of the Division's programmes (67 per cent) surveyed by the evaluation confirmed that interventions entail an equity lens, by enhancing the economic development and competitiveness in developing countries.

III.   Management response to the evaluation recommendation

25.   Responses to each of the six recommendations made in the evaluation report are provided in the following table.

Evaluation recommendation	*SP4 Management response*
To the Secretary-General of UNCTAD and the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics 1. Given the expanded mandate provided by the Nairobi Maafikiano, consider ways of prioritizing existing resources and restructuring, if necessary, to support UNCTAD work on e-commerce, the digital economy and [science, technology and innovation] for sustainable development.	**Recommendation accepted** The management strongly concurs with the evaluation's finding that, to deliver on the work programme and increased demand from beneficiaries on e-commerce, digital economy and science, technology and innovation, the Division on Technology and Logistics will need more human and financial resources than currently at its disposal. The UNCTAD secretariat will explore prioritizing resources to fulfil this recommendation. In addition, the Division is actively seeking additional resources and is in the process of securing additional human resources through the mobilization of several generous contributions from member States, including through the Junior Professional Officers programme. The Division is also engaged in active discussions with several donors for additional extrabudgetary resources for technical assistance using a programmatic, long-term approach, including for e-commerce and the digital economy (e-trade readiness assessments and other capacity-building activities for e-commerce for development) and science, technology and innovation. The secretariat invites countries in a position to do so to consider providing additional extrabudgetary resources in support to UNCTAD work on e-commerce, the digital economy and science, technology and innovation for sustainable development.

Evaluation recommendation	*SP4 Management response*
2. Evaluate, improve and enforce the UNCTAD results-based management framework. At the Division level, ensure strict and consistent implementation throughout its portfolio.	**Recommendation accepted** Within its capacity, the Division will fully cooperate with UNCTAD-wide efforts to evaluate, improve and enforce the organization's results-based management framework. The internal assessment of the one-year results-based management pilot for technical cooperation is currently being finalized through the UNCTAD Project Review Committee. Proposed steps for strengthening the results-based management framework include more training, an information technology-based project management and reporting tool, and more comprehensive programme monitoring and evaluation plans. The Division will provide inputs to the assessment as required and ensure strict and consistent implementation of the enhanced results-based management framework, in dialogue with project managers and the Technical Cooperation Section.
3. Develop and implement a detailed fundraising plan with differentiated strategies by different types of donors, including the private sector.	**Recommendation accepted** The Division will examine various strategies for fundraising in close consultation with the Technical Cooperation Section, and prepare and implement a fundraising plan. In this regard, the Division will also seek to develop partnerships more systematically with the private sector, while ensuring the neutrality and independence of UNCTAD. The secretariat will secure temporary resources to support the efforts of the Division in implementing this recommendation.
Recommendations to the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics 4. Develop and implement an evidence-based results communications strategy, targeting a diverse audience.	**Recommendation accepted** In close collaboration with the Communication, Information and Outreach Section, the Division will undertake to develop a comprehensive communications strategy that better informs a diverse audience of its results. The secretariat will secure temporary resources to support the efforts of the Division in implementing this recommendation.
5. Enhance the delivery of technical assistance in the form of sustainable programmatic interventions with clear intervention logics.	**Recommendation accepted** The Division will seek to further develop long-term, sustainable programmatic interventions in its technical assistance activities. This may take the form of trust fund approaches to funding, which allow multi-donor, multi-year approaches to enhance longer term impacts and sustainability of results. The Division has already taken steps in that direction, with trust fund approaches allowing for long-term interventions, for example in the areas of ASYCUDA, trade facilitation and ICT for development. Project managers may need more training for developing these interventions.
6. Make increasing use of regional approaches where challenges are most effectively addressed through regional organizations.	**Recommendation accepted** The Division will make further use of regional approaches where challenges are most effectively addressed through a regional framework or in partnership with regional entities. As identified by the evaluation report, such regional approaches are already being widely used by various programmes in the Division.