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Programme questions: evaluation

Triennial review of the implementation of recommendations on the programme evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The present report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), prepared by the Inspection and Evaluation Division, is submitted in accordance with the decision taken by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its twenty-second session to review the implementation of OIOS recommendations three years after the Committee had decided to endorse them (see [A/37/38](#), para. 362). The present triennial review serves to determine the extent to which the recommendations emanating from the OIOS evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs ([E/AC.51/2021/5](#)) have been implemented.

At the conclusion of its sixty-first session, the Committee recommended that the General Assembly endorse all five recommendations contained in the OIOS report. In the triennial review, OIOS determined that all five recommendations had been implemented by the Department and that there was some evidence of positive outcomes resulting from their implementation.

Recommendation 1 addressed the need for the Department to further strengthen its strategic plan to cover major Department activities at the subprogramme level, including identifying opportunities for joint work across the Department's divisions and identifying action points to support integrative approaches to Sustainable Development Goal implementation and to support interlinkages among the Department's functional areas. In response to the recommendation, the strategic plan included six action areas that would remain the focus of the Department's efforts until 2028. A departmental communication strategy and plan, and editorial board guidelines helped with coordination across the work of the divisions. Results

* [E/AC.51/2024/1](#).



frameworks, including the strategic management application module, were aligned with the strategic plan. OIOS considered this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 2 was focused on further leveraging the principals of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs core group in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Capitalizing on emerging opportunities, the Department galvanized the core group around the preparation for major intergovernmental processes. The strengthened coordination resulted in further collaboration on preparation for the high-level political forum on sustainable development, financing for development processes, and the work of the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance. OIOS considered this recommendation implemented.

In recommendation 3, OIOS had requested that the Department fully implement the steps outlined in its strategy for capacity development, with additional requirements for strengthening the monitoring and evaluation system, increasing coverage of evaluations and ensuring that lessons learned from evaluations and reviews informed project planning and design. In response, the Department updated its evaluation guidance, established the Technical Advisory Group and subsequently tasked it with incorporating lessons learned into its planning. OIOS considered this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 4 was focused on the assessment of the dissemination and utility of publications. In response to the recommendation, which was also supported by recommendations from an internal evaluation, the Department took several steps, including setting up a new publications catalogue, introducing a download user survey and developing a communications plan for each major publication. Data on utility and reach were disaggregated by division and publication and periodically shared through the communications monitoring report and the Department monitoring report. OIOS considered this recommendation implemented.

In recommendation 5, OIOS called for improved action plans for the operationalization of organizational reform, in particular with respect to the Department's support to the resident coordinator system, its thought leadership role, clarity for the role of the United Nations Economists' Network, and the tracking and communication of departmental reform. In response, the Department improved its guidelines for the resident coordinator system, clarified its assistance offer for the common country analyses and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and further delineated the role of the Network through correspondence. It also implemented recommendations from an internal thought leadership evaluation focused on its analytical work, which was aimed at enhancing internal coherence, external coordination and dissemination of products. OIOS considered this recommendation implemented.

I. Introduction

1. At its sixty-first session in 2021, the Committee for Programme and Coordination considered the report of Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), prepared by the Inspection and Evaluation Division, on the programme evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (E/AC.51/2021/5).¹
2. The Committee expressed appreciation for the report and the recommendations made therein and recommended that the General Assembly endorse the recommendations contained in paragraph 659 of its report (A/76/16).
3. The present report is issued pursuant to a triennial review of the recommendations and serves to examine the status of the implementation of the five recommendations contained in the evaluation that were endorsed by the Committee. In the review, OIOS also addressed, where possible, the extent to which the implementation of the recommendations contributed to programme changes. There is substantial evidence of concrete positive outcomes resulting from the implemented recommendations.
4. The methodology for the triennial review included:
 - (a) Review and analysis of the biennial progress reports on the status of recommendations, which are monitored through the OIOS recommendations database;
 - (b) Analysis of relevant information, documents and reports obtained from the Department related to the recommendations;
 - (c) Remote interviews conducted with a purposive sample of Department staff.
5. The report includes comments received from the Department during the drafting process. A final draft was shared with the Department for its formal comments, which are contained in the annex. OIOS expresses its appreciation to the Department for the cooperation extended in the preparation of the report.

II. Results

Recommendation 1 Strategic planning

6. Recommendation 1 reads as follows:

Building on its improvements, and within the confines of its mandate, the Department should further strengthen its current yearly strategic plan to cover major Department activities at the subprogramme level. In addition to the mapping of subprogramme activities, outputs and outcomes to identify departmental priorities, the strengthened strategic planning document should include identification of:

 - (a) Additional concrete opportunities for joint work planning across the Department's divisions at the activity/output level, including support for shared outcomes and expected results;
 - (b) High-priority action points for the upcoming year, in consultation with subprogrammes, regional economic commissions and other United Nations

¹ A programme manager evaluation report was issued by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) in June 2020 (document IED-19-015) before being processed as a report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination. At that time, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs accepted the recommendations and started implementing them.

entities, including to support integrative approaches to Sustainable Development Goal implementation across the economic, social and environmental dimensions and a plan for the systematic sharing of that information with regional economic commissions and other United Nations entities;

- (c) High-priority action points for the upcoming year to support interlinkages among the Department's functional areas.

Indicator of achievement: a strengthened strategic plan that incorporates items (a) to (c) above.

Identifying additional opportunities for joint work planning

7. In response to the first part of this recommendation, the Strategic Planning and Communications Service of the Office of the Under-Secretary-General strengthened the strategic planning process by revamping the implementation of an annual questionnaire that was completed by all substantive divisions and offices of the Department. The questionnaire led to a set of strategic priorities upon which senior managers deliberated in an annual brainstorming meeting. Resulting priority action areas were identified for the Department, which were subsequently integrated into an annual plan of action that was in alignment with the objectives, strategy and results narratives in the Department's proposed programme plan and budget.

8. Through the strategic plan, the Department mainstreamed its support to the Sustainable Development Goals in the action areas identified for the plan of action. For 2024,² these action areas included:

- (a) Accelerating action on the Sustainable Development Goals and strengthening multilateralism;
- (b) Ensuring sustainable financing for recovering from pandemic and realizing the Goals;
- (c) Putting data and science to work for Goal progress;
- (d) Protecting our planet through fostering synergy between implementing the 2030 Agenda and advancing climate action;
- (e) Addressing poverty and inequality, thereby leaving no one behind in the recovery from the confluence of crises;
- (f) Strengthening the Department's work on projection and frontier issues.

9. The action areas highlighted in the 2024 plan of action were carried over from the 2022 and 2023 plans, signalling a consistency in approach and strategic direction. The strategy specifically served to highlight the departmental approach of action, agility and accountability, emphasize joint work across the divisions and partnerships with the United Nations and other entities and underscore the rigour applied to the objective-setting process and the evaluation of the Department's work, including the accountability of senior managers. There has been ongoing reflection on alignment with priority areas in biweekly directors' meetings, biannual editorial board meetings and ad hoc engagements throughout the year.

10. Furthermore, the Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the Office of the Under-Secretary-General supported divisions in providing output monitoring data in the Secretariat-wide strategic management application module of Umoja. The strategic management application is the official system of record for capturing the approved programme plan and monitoring its implementation. All divisions were

² The action areas are due to be revised in 2028.

expected to enter performance monitoring information into the strategic management application on a quarterly basis. Data on the status of implementation of deliverables and results were reviewed by the Business Transformation and Accountability Division of the Department of Management, Strategy, Policy and Compliance and presented in the Department monitoring report. Divisions were required to ensure that figures reported in the strategic management application aligned with those reflected in the proposed programme plan and budget document of the subsequent period.

11. Data reflected in the 2023 Department monitoring report (issued in December 2023) indicated that, of 34 total results due in 2023, 32 had been achieved and 2 delayed; and of 189 deliverables due in 2023, 184 had been completed, 3 delayed, 1 terminated and 1 postponed.

12. Finally, the annual Department highlights report, produced by the Strategic Planning and Communication Services in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General, utilized inputs authored across the Department. Specific divisions lead the preparation of individual report chapters, in conjunction with colleagues from other divisions, allowing for the integrated reporting of results. The highlights report was also aligned with the action areas underscored in the plan of action.

Identifying action points for integrated support to the Sustainable Development Goals

13. In addressing the second part of the recommendation, an integrated approach across the economic, social and environmental dimensions in support of Sustainable Development Goal implementation was framed as the overarching goal of the strategic plan. The plan included provisions to work closely with United Nations entities, such as the regional economic commissions and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The Department strengthened its collaboration with UNCTAD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in developing the Secretary-General's policy briefs on "Beyond GDP" and on reforms to the international financial architecture to support Our Common Agenda and the Goals. The Department also continued to collaborate with United Nations entities, including the regional economic commissions, in preparing major publications, including the World Economic Situation and Prospects report, the report on financing for sustainable development of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on African Economic Recovery and Development and the annual progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Identifying action points for interlinkages across the Department's functional areas

14. In response to the final part of the recommendation, the strategic plan included provisions to strengthen the integration across the three key functions of the Department: intergovernmental support, analysis, and capacity-building. The strategic plan informed and was complemented by internal policies that guided coherence across the Department, such as the communication strategy and plan, and editorial board guidelines. The Department established the editorial board ad-hoc working group as a subsidiary body of the senior management-level editorial board, to meet periodically and identify areas for comprehensive analysis that fell outside the expertise of a particular division. The ad-hoc working group is led by the Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and provides space for working-level staff to articulate a departmental view on their analytical work, and a venue for strategic debate and for refining coordination and collaboration across the Department's subprogrammes.

15. The Department's internal evaluation of thought leadership and analytical work, commissioned by the Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the Office of the Under-Secretary-General, was aimed at ensuring effective coordination across the

work of its divisions and its alignment with priority areas. In the evaluation, the Department proposed six recommendations that were first presented to the editorial board in December 2022. Following a series of in-depth consultations with divisions, supported by a memorandum from the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs on 6 July 2023 and a further presentation to the editorial board in December 2023, 33 action items were rolled out, and progress has been tracked by the Office (see para. 45 of the present report for further discussion of those recommendations).

16. Owing to this strengthened strategic planning, the Department was able to respond in a more agile fashion to the challenges that it subsequently faced. For example, the Department's support to the resident coordinator system was seamlessly mainstreamed across the work of all divisions, as evidenced by subprogramme plans in the annual budget fascicle. Improved cross-divisional collaboration also allowed for pooled resources to produce specific products, such as the Department's recent publication on ageing.

17. On the basis of the above, OIOS considers this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 2

Leveraging the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs and the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs Plus

18. Recommendation 2 reads as follows:

Given the criticality of effective coordination in support of the 2030 Agenda, as the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs convener, the Department should further leverage the potential of the Executive Committee as a mechanism for effective coordination across Secretariat entities in the development pillar. Upon consultation with key stakeholders, it should develop a plan to implement improvements that includes clear deliverables, timelines and an assessment mechanism.

Indicators of achievement: a proposal for strengthening the operation of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs and the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs Plus; evidence that the proposal was shared and discussed with key stakeholders, including the Development Cooperation Office, regional economic commissions and other United Nations stakeholders, and issued.

19. In response to this recommendation, the Department harnessed its role as convener to leverage the coordination capacity of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs and the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs Plus. As an alternative to developing a proposal to strengthen the operation of the two Executive Committees, the Department focused on fulfilling its role as convener of the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs core group (principals of the regional economic commissions and UNCTAD). For example, a meeting of the core group was convened on 13 July 2022 to examine preparation for the Sustainable Development Goals Summit and discuss the impact of the Ukraine crisis on globalization, including shrinking fiscal space and implications for financing and food security. Both of these engagements provided the opportunity for joint work, meaningful collaboration, and strengthened connections between the core group members.

20. Moreover, the core group members also joined the High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs as ex officio members. Integration of the members into the Board ensured greater representation of regional voices while strengthening the linkage of the Board's recommendations with the work of the United Nations.

21. Through strengthened coordination among the core group at the principal level, as well as through inter-agency collaboration at the working level, the Department successfully organized the high-level political forums and the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Summit. The Department also co-led, along with core group members, the drafting and launch of key analytical products to inform intergovernmental processes and the drafting of the Member States-led political declaration of the Summit, including:

- Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance brief No. 1, “Global impact of war in Ukraine on food, energy and finance systems”
- Secretary-General’s Sustainable Development Goal Stimulus to deliver Agenda 2030
- Our Common Agenda policy brief No. 4, “Valuing what counts: framework to progress beyond gross domestic product”
- Our Common Agenda policy brief No. 6, “Reforms to the international financial architecture”
- Flagship publications such as the World Economic Situation and Prospects report and the annual progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals

22. Other outcomes from strengthened coordination with the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs core group included collaboration on the Global Crisis Response Group during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, discussions related to development financing and “beyond GDP”, and the consolidation of lessons learned from voluntary national reviews to be shared at regional development forums.

23. On the basis of the above, OIOS considers this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 3 Strategy for capacity development

24. Recommendation 3 reads as follows:

The Department should fully implement the steps outlined in its strategy for capacity development. It should put in place additional requirements and/or mechanisms to:

- (a) Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation framework of its capacity development work, including the measurement of expected outcomes;
- (b) Increase the coverage of evaluations to ensure that high-expenditure projects, including extrabudgetary resources, have sufficient coverage based on consultation and revised agreements with the donors;
- (c) Ensure that lessons learned from those evaluations and related reviews are used and integrated into its planning and design phases, including fundraising to ensure continued support for countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Indicator of achievement: improved monitoring, quality and coverage of evaluations, factoring in items (a) to (c) above

25. In response to the recommendation, the Department’s strategy for capacity development was operationalized through a seven-point plan that was executed in 2021 and 2022. The Department implemented most of the outlined actions.

Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation of the Department's capacity development work

26. In response to the first part of this recommendation, the Capacity and Development Programme Management Office strengthened the monitoring and evaluation framework of its capacity development work through a focused effort on collecting better data, by integrating newly and jointly developed common reporting standards; it consequently updated its guidelines and reporting templates, including a master tracker for monitoring activities of the regular programme of technical cooperation. In addition, a concerted effort was made to streamline data from cross-cutting issues such as gender, human rights and disability inclusion. It was required that all project documents and evaluations measure and reflect the extent to which cross-cutting issues had been incorporated into the respective capacity development activities.

27. Despite a deficit of trained evaluation capacity, the Department ensured that the focus of all internal evaluations was on outcomes, as well as on the integration of cross-cutting issues. The focus on outcomes was emphasized in the revised departmental guidelines for the evaluation of capacity development projects.

Increasing evaluation coverage

28. In response to the second part of the recommendation to improve coverage of internal evaluations, the Department emphasized the importance of project-level evaluations in its negotiations with donors and the respective allocation of funds. Independent terminal evaluation was encouraged for all multi-year projects with a lifespan of two years or more and for projects with over \$300,000 in donor funding or cost-sharing. At least one Development Account project was selected for evaluation each cycle. Notwithstanding these measures, the number of capacity development project evaluations fell sharply in 2023. Three Development Account projects ended in 2023 at a total cost to the Development Account budget of \$1.59 million. One Development Account project valued at \$547,236 was selected for evaluation. The total budget allocated for the evaluation was \$18,000.

Integrating lessons learned into planning and design

29. As part of the capacity development strategy, the Department introduced mechanisms to help feed outcome data resulting from capacity development monitoring and evaluation into the development and planning of capacity development projects. For this purpose, the capacity development technical advisory group was established and tasked with considering evaluations from prior projects. This mechanism complemented guidelines for the preparation of project documents for the fourteenth tranche, in which lessons were highlighted from prior evaluations to be integrated into proposals.

30. In addition, a departmental recommendations tracker was established to provide a comprehensive overview of the status of evaluation recommendations, providing a platform for monitoring progress, identifying recurring themes and recommendations that could benefit from joint action and facilitating reporting to oversight bodies. It also facilitated reporting to oversight bodies. The tracker included internal evaluations of the Department's capacity development projects and programmes, as well as thematic and cross-cutting evaluations (see table 1).

Table 1
Recommendations in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs evaluation tracker, 2021–2023

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Implemented or in progress</i>	<i>Progress to be updated</i>
Recommendations from capacity development evaluations	25	16	9
Evaluating the impact of Department of Economic and Social Affairs publications	13	12	1
Evaluating effectiveness of the Department’s thought leadership and analytical work	6	6	–
Preparation of reports of the Secretary-General by the Department	6	6	–

Source: Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

31. Interviewed staff noted that the evaluation of the interdivisional project “strengthening the capacity of least developed countries to develop evidence-based, coherent and well financed strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda” was impactful in informing project design. The evaluation of Development Account project 1617AH was also cited as having a positive impact, by creating the impetus for seeking complementary funding.

32. On the basis of the above, OIOS considers this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 4 Dissemination and utility of publications

33. Recommendation 4 reads as follows:

The Department should continue to strengthen the assessment of intended outcomes, including through the strengthening of the dissemination and utility of its research and analysis outputs. It should strengthen the reach and utility of its publications through:

- (a) A study that includes clear and actionable recommendations for improving the assessment of the dissemination and utility of the Department’s publications;
- (b) Developing a template for assessing the reach and utility of the Department’s publications that integrates the recommendations from the study;
- (c) Completing periodic reviews of the Department’s publications using new guidelines, tools and sources, as identified in the template for assessing the reach and utility of the Department’s publications.

Indicator of achievement: strengthened ability to assess intended outcomes of publications.

Improving the assessment of the dissemination and utility of the Department’s publications

34. In response to the first part of this recommendation³ the Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit conducted an internal evaluation of the impact of the

³ OIOS completed the evaluation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs as a programme manager’s report in June 2020 (document IED-19-015), and the Department started implementing the recommendations contained therein. That report was subsequently issued as the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination (E/AC.51/2021/5) on which the present evaluation is based.

Department's publications. This self-evaluation was finalized in January 2021. The recommendations action plan from the internal evaluation included 13 recommendations containing actionable steps to improve the assessment of the dissemination and utility of the Department's products. As of January 2024, 5 of the 13 recommendations had been implemented. These included performing one-time actions, obtaining licences for two software packages, creating a publication catalogue with a pre-download survey on the Department's homepage and introducing a Google analytics traffic filter for web page monitoring. Seven recommendations were in progress, including exploring opportunities to repackage report findings in more accessible formats, timing publication releases to coincide with relevant events or milestones and exploring wider marketing and communication campaigns publications. The final recommendation, which has yet to be implemented, was for the readership survey to be repeated on a biannual basis; it is currently expected to be rolled out in the fourth quarter of 2024.

35. In response to the internal evaluation recommendations, the Department introduced a publications catalogue, including a download survey to capture detailed information about publication users. The catalogue provided a consolidated list of all major departmental publications and was integrated with the editorial board guidelines at the back end. The catalogue was fully searchable and provided instant, free access to Department publications. The Department publications download survey was regularly monitored, and data from the survey were included in the annual Department monitoring report. In the 2023 survey, the Department asked 224 users how useful they had found the downloaded publication (89 per cent reported useful or very useful) and how much the publication had contributed to their knowledge of economic, social and sustainable development issues (85 per cent reported a fair amount or a great deal).

36. In addition, under editorial board guidelines, each major publication must be accompanied by a communications plan, to be submitted to the editorial board for review at least six months prior to issuance, to help clarify the envisioned outcomes of each publication. Each major publication was also accompanied by a launch event with media attention. This was followed by a communications campaign on the Internet and on social media.

Developing a template for assessing the reach and utility of the Department's publications

37. To address the second part of the recommendation, the internal evaluation provided a template for an impact dashboard, in which Internet, social media and citation metrics were analysed and summarized as an aggregate "North Star" metric that was used to assess how various channels were performing over time. Data from the dashboard were fed into the quarterly communications monitoring report which, along with the Department monitoring report, was shared with the Under-Secretary-General, the Assistant Secretary-General, directors, communication focal points, monitoring and evaluation focal points and the strategic planning and communications network.

Completing periodic reviews of the reach and utility of the Department's publications

38. In response to the third part of the recommendation, data on the reach and utility of the Department's publications were published every quarter in the communications monitoring report and, in abridged form, in the Department monitoring report. In addition, outcome-level results were published in the annual Department highlights report, available on the Department's website. The highlights report was focused on selected thematic areas, and divisions jointly drafted chapters on the basis of where their work had made a contribution. The methodology and templates for the

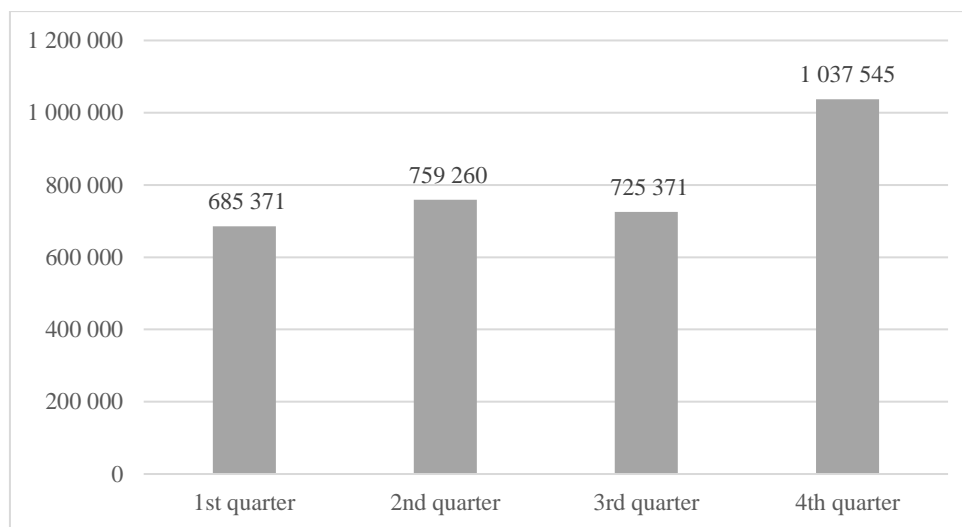
preparation of the highlights report allowed for the cross-fertilization of ideas and the efficient use of resources and reinforced that divisions were not planning, operating or assessing outputs in silos.

39. The highlights report contained outcome-level results from the intergovernmental strengthening, capacity-building and research and analytics work undertaken by the Department. For example, the 2023 Financing for Sustainable Development Report formed the basis for discussion at the Economic and Social Council forum on financing for development follow-up and informed the Sustainable Development Goals Investment Fair, a platform that brings together government officials and investors for sustainable investment opportunities that support the achievement of the Goals.

40. The launch of the publications catalogue and download survey, combined with enhanced outreach and communication for each major publication launch, significantly improved the reach and utility of departmental publications, as called for in the recommendation. For example, the number of visits to the main Department website⁴ nearly doubled between the first and fourth quarters of 2022, as shown in the figure below.

Figure

Visits to the main Department of Economic and Social Affairs website between the first and fourth quarters of 2022



Source: Department of Economic and Social Affairs communications monitoring report, fourth quarter of 2022.

41. On the basis of the above, OIOS considers this recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 5 Organizational reform

42. Recommendation 5 reads as follows:

The Department should continue to develop Department-level reform operationalization action plans and guidance for phase 3 of the organizational reform. Subsequently, guidance from the Under-Secretary-General should

⁴ Available at www.un.org/en/desa/.

continue to be systematically communicated to the Department's staff and key stakeholders. Continued steps to operationalize the Department's reform should:

- (a) Build on the identified modalities for the delivery of support to the resident coordinators, including the continued dissemination of concrete guidelines on the strategic and substantive support that the Department will provide;
- (b) Build on work under way, with a concept note that clearly spells out the Department's thought leadership role, objectives and goals and the concrete actions, deliverables and mechanisms that it will support to strengthen its work in this area, articulating the methods that it will utilize to support integrative approaches to Sustainable Development Goal implementation across economic, social and environmental dimensions;
- (c) Include further development of the concept note of the United Nations Economists' Network in full-fledged terms of reference and guidance for key stakeholders;
- (d) Establish monitoring indicators to track the operationalization of departmental reform;
- (e) Continue to communicate the most pertinent related information to the Department's staff and key stakeholders.

Indicators of achievement: Department-level reform phase 3 operationalization plan; related staff and stakeholder guidance incorporating items (a) to (e) above.

Supporting the resident coordinator system

43. In response to the first part of the recommendation, the Department continued to provide guidelines for its approach to supporting the reformed resident coordinator system.⁵ This included a 2021 strategic approach to support the common country analysis, which has evolved into a departmental policy for country-level support in the context of the resident coordinator system adopted in May 2023. In the policy, priority areas and countries are identified for Department country-level support through the common country analysis and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The policy complemented early standard operating procedures adopted in February 2020 on engaging resident coordinators in Department in-country activities. In acknowledgement of the limited resources available, the new departmental approach to the common country analysis served to prioritize support to the formulation and review of common country analyses for small island developing States, least developed countries, and landlocked developing countries that were also least developed countries and/or were in Africa. The Department provided support for the preparation of common country analyses and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks by increasing consideration of macroeconomic and other socioeconomic development issues, depending on the country needs and context.

Providing thought leadership

44. To implement the second part of the recommendation, the internal evaluation of the Department's thought leadership and analytical work discussed in paragraph 15 of the present report was conducted to help strengthen the role of the Department in providing thought leadership on sustainable development. The draft evaluation was finalized in October 2022 and was presented to senior managers at the retreat for the editorial board of the Department on 9 December 2022. On the basis of the evaluation

⁵ In accordance with the instructions that the Department received in a letter from the Secretary-General dated 28 December 2018.

recommendation, the Department, in an inter-office memorandum dated 6 July 2023, formulated its working definition of thought leadership as follows:

This entails presenting foresight on emerging issues in sustainable development, developing effective, inclusive, innovative and strategic solutions building capacity and mobilizing the global community to take actions that protect the future of the people and planet.

45. The internal evaluation contained six recommendations, on the basis of which 33 action items were identified to enhance collaboration within the Department and with external stakeholders, dissemination of its products, and human resources and training. Through consistent leadership, mentoring and accountability from the Office of the Under-Secretary-General, implementation of the recommendations continued across all nine divisions in the Department.

46. As noted above, updated editorial board guidelines issued in 2023 served to operationalize the action items with respect to the preparation of publications by standardizing the mechanisms, processes and templates to be followed for editorial review. Initial informal discussions on integrated approaches and the Department's thought leadership role were also evident in its contribution to advancing the role of science, technology and innovation in achieving the 2030 Agenda and helping Member States to prepare for the next century through the Department's various mandates and programmes on science, technology and innovation.⁶

47. As an example of its enhanced thought leadership, the Department, together with UNCTAD, has served as the secretariat to the annual multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals since 2015. With the Department's support, several countries rolled out road maps on science, technology and innovation for the Goals – multi-stakeholder collaborative plans for building research, development and innovation infrastructure and capabilities and enhancing gender equality. In addition, at the global level, the Department initiated the partnership in action on road maps on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals, while at the regional level, the Department, together with the Economic Commission for Africa, offered support to the Science, Technology and Innovation for Africa Coalition. These initiatives created stronger synergies and complementarity in the field of science, technology and innovation policy, technical assistance, and related capacity development in Member States. In addition, the Department served as the secretariat to support an independent group of scientists to produce the Global Sustainable Development Report on a quadrennial basis. The report formed part of the effort to strengthen the science policy interface, as requested by Member States in the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference.

48. With respect to its thought leadership role in other areas, the Department regularly implemented the United Nations E-Government Survey and the local online service index, which examined how e-government could facilitate integrated policies

⁶ The key science, technology and innovation instrument in support of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals was the Technology Facilitation Mechanism to which Member States agreed in 2015 through General Assembly resolutions 70/1, on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and 69/313, on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs has served as the secretariat for all components of the Mechanism since their inception. As part of the Mechanism, the Department was the coordinator of a 48-member consortium of United Nations entities known as the United Nations inter-agency task team on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals. The task team met regularly and organized several workstreams aimed at promoting coordination, coherence and cooperation within the United Nations system on science, technology and innovation-related matters around capacity-building initiatives.

across Member States. Finally, the Department supported the Internet Governance Forum, which brought together people from various stakeholder groups in discussions on digital public policies. The Forum's intersessional work culminated in annual meetings, and resulting outputs were transmitted to global and national decision-making bodies and relevant organizations.

Evaluating the United Nations Economists' Network

49. In response to the third part of the recommendation, and despite the continued absence of terms of reference on the role of the United Nations Economists' Network, guidance in the form of a letter from the Under-Secretary-General of the Department was sent to heads of entities, encouraging relevant colleagues to join the Network while summarizing its key achievements and the way forward. The Network was unfunded, and members contributed in their individual capacities as professional peers rather than as institutional representatives. Network meetings were held quarterly in a virtual format, with presentations and discussions around upcoming global events, recent or forthcoming reports, or thematic issues of interest to Network members.

50. Since the OIOS evaluation, the United Nations Economists' Network has gained further prominence in advancing thinking and policy research on key current and emerging economic, financial and social development issues, specifically in the context of the 2030 Agenda. More than 150 country economists have been integrated into the Network, with the active participation of more than 50 economists in each meeting. Increased participation of country economists enabled the Network to become an established platform for bringing together United Nations system economists to share perspectives from the local, national, regional and global levels. The increased participation contributed to enhanced support at the country level and support for country-level needs informing discussions at the global level. At the same time, discussions at the global level highlighted the important policy perspectives that country economists could bring back to their work, such as through the selection of topics for study by the Network in 2021. Briefs on selected topics were published, and webinars were organized to present them to the Network. Subsequently, a global survey was launched in 2022 and served to identify three topics in relation to which the Network could make a key contribution: informal economy, taxation and the Sustainable Development Goals, and migration. The briefs are to be published in the first quarter of 2024. Country economists played a leading role in the preparation of several of the briefs, ensuring that country experiences were highlighted and that the recommendations were relevant for the work of the resident coordinator offices.

51. Furthermore, throughout the integration of country economists into the United Nations Economists' Network, there was close coordination between the Development Coordination Office and the Department to streamline communication and enhance effectiveness. For example, in March 2023, the Executive Committee requested the Network to facilitate substantive and technical collaboration and to support resident coordinator offices and United Nations country teams in developing a set of standard key messages and talking points on United Nations engagement with international financial institutions. The Department, together with the Development Coordination Office, established a drafting team of relevant entities, including several country economists, to respond to this request.

Monitoring indicators for departmental reform

52. In response to the fourth part of the recommendation, several mechanisms were used to monitor the actions taken by subprogrammes to further the priority areas identified by the Department. These included a matrix administered internally by the Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit to monitor the implementation progress

of the internal thought leadership evaluation. The Department's proposed programme plan and budget and the annual Department highlights report provided further results-oriented tracking of subprogramme activities and performance, as previously discussed under recommendation 1, in paragraph 12 of the present report.

Communicating reform to staff and key stakeholders

53. In response to the fifth and final part of the recommendation, the Department's management undertook several initiatives to communicate with staff, other entities and external stakeholders about the initiatives carried out by the Department in fulfilling its obligations to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the quarterly publication of the communications monitoring report and the Department monitoring report, the development of communication on resident coordinator system reform, and Department support to the common country analysis offered useful insights into the Department's work. Collectively, these initiatives enhanced the extent to which information about reform initiatives was communicated to staff and key stakeholders.

54. On the basis of the above, OIOS considers this recommendation implemented.

III. Conclusion

55. The Department took important steps to implement the five recommendations in the evaluation, which led to several positive outcomes. Strengthened strategic planning improved internal coherence and in turn allowed for pooled resources for cross-divisional products and more coherent support to the resident coordinator system. Key analytical products, including those prepared through close collaboration with the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs core group, informed Member States' deliberations at the high-level political forums and the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Summit. Recommendations from the evaluations of capacity development projects were systematically tracked, and a technical advisory group was tasked with considering evaluations from prior projects in project development and design. Through the implementation of the recommendations, the Department was able to institutionalize key practices in its programme plans, strategies, policies and guidelines. Finally, as a result of stronger guidance, the Department was able to fulfil its support to the resident coordinator system more effectively. This also strengthened its role as a global thought leader and convener of the United Nations Economists' Network.

Annex*

Comments received from the Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs on the draft report

Thank you for the memorandum dated 21 February 2024 (IED-2024-00361) and the draft report on the triennial review of the implementation of Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) recommendations on the programme evaluation of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) ([E/AC.51/2021/5](#)).

The draft report has been reviewed and the Department agrees with the results of the review and the conclusion by OIOS that all 5 recommendations of the evaluation have been considered as implemented by UN DESA. We welcome OIOS' observations and findings on the positive outcomes from the implementation of these recommendations.

UN DESA will continue to strengthen its strategic planning in a coherent and integrated approach and in alignment with its priority areas. The Department will also further enhance its role as a global thought leader by strengthening collaboration with key stakeholders to produce key analytical products and enhance the support to resident coordinators. Lessons learned from evaluations will continue to inform the Department's programme and capacity development planning and design.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS, in particular Mr. Juan Carlos Pena and Ms. Zainab Latif, for the collaboration and support to UN DESA during this review process.

* In the present annex, the Office of Internal Oversight Services sets out the full text of comments received from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The practice has been instituted in line with General Assembly resolution [64/263](#), following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee.