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Programme questions: evaluation

Evaluation of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia: subprogramme 3, Shared economic prosperity

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Office of Internal Oversight Services assessed the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability and coherence of the work of subprogramme 3, Shared economic prosperity, of the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) for the period 2018–2021.

According to the evaluation, subprogramme 3 was responsive to the expressed needs and priorities of member States, the priorities established by the Secretary-General and the demands imposed as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The interventions of the subprogramme contributed to member States' access to networks of knowledge, capacity and tools for evidence-based sustainable development. Several intermediate outcomes were also reported by clients and stakeholders across the case studies in the evaluation, including changes in policy and organizational structures arising from the use of the social expenditure monitor framework and the computable general equilibrium model, facilitation of the implementation of the Arab Customs Union and interventions in the areas of transport, competition policy, public finance and financing for development. In most cases, however, the time needed for concrete results to be realized had not yet passed. Challenges to sustainability of subprogramme 3 notwithstanding, programmatic design, targeted solutions and enhanced internal coherence made it possible to replicate several subprogramme 3 interventions across the region, and member States that engaged with the work of subprogramme 3 were satisfied with the quality of its interventions.

* [E/AC.51/2023/1](#).



On the other hand, clients, stakeholders and staff members were largely uncertain about the unique value proposition of ESCWA. There was ambiguity regarding its country-level contributions and regional mandate, and a sense that there was insufficient coordination between ESCWA activities and United Nations country teams. Moreover, the regional mandate of the Commission was not well understood by clients and stakeholders and, according to the evaluation, intergovernmental mechanisms and the regional collaborative platform were inadequately utilized.

The Office makes three important recommendations, namely that ESCWA:

- (a) Communicate its niche and strengths clearly to member States and global and resident United Nations partners, in order to enable them to fully utilize the Commission's potential in a manner that is aligned with its regional mandate;
- (b) In line with its regional mandate, strengthen regional coordination efforts through the regional collaboration platform and contribute to country coordination through ongoing engagement with United Nations country teams;
- (c) Strengthen the strategic utilization of its intergovernmental mechanism as a means to further its regional coordination mandate and the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues, including gender, the environment, human rights and disability.

I. Introduction and objective

1. The objective of the present evaluation was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability and coherence of subprogramme 3, Shared economic prosperity, of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The evaluation topic emerged from a scoping analysis described in the evaluation inception paper.¹
2. The evaluation conforms with the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system.² ESCWA was most recently evaluated by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) in 2017 in a thematic evaluation of statistics subprogrammes across the regional commissions (E/AC.51/2017/8).
3. The comments of ESCWA were taken into account in the preparation of the present report. The response of the Executive Secretary of ESCWA is included in the annex.

II. Background

A. Mandate and organizational structure

4. The mandate of ESCWA is to foster comprehensive, equitable, integrated and sustainable development through effective economic and social cooperation in the region. In accordance with its mandate, the Commission pursues the following objectives:³
 - (a) To support economic and social development in member countries;
 - (b) To promote interaction and cooperation between member countries;
 - (c) To encourage the exchange of experience, best practice and lessons learned;
 - (d) To achieve regional integration and ensure interaction between Western Asia and other regions;
 - (e) To raise global awareness of the circumstances and needs of member countries.
5. A review of ESCWA mandates spanning the period 1974 to 1998 showed broad consistency across the following sets of functions:⁴
 - (a) Identifying and developing consensus regarding regional, subregional and interregional priority areas for economic and social development;
 - (b) Conducting research, collecting data and providing technical assistance to member States,
 - (c) Jointly implementing programmes of work with other United Nations entities;
 - (d) Convening appropriate intergovernmental dialogue;

¹ Office of Internal Oversight Services, Inspection and Evaluation Division, document IED-21-013, inception paper, 16 July 2021.

² United Nations Evaluation Group, "Norms and standards for evaluation", 2017.

³ See <https://archive.unescwa.org/about-escwa> (30 December 2021).

⁴ ESCWA white paper, unpublished.

(e) Coordinating and creating linkages with specialized entities and other United Nations entities operating at the regional and global level, in particular the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP);

(f) Providing secretariat support and conference follow-up functions for the United Nations Secretariat.

6. These roles have been reiterated in Economic and Social Council resolutions.⁵ In the absence of revised guidance for regional commissions as part of the current United Nations reform, these core mandates provided much needed clarity on the envisioned contribution of ESCWA to the United Nations system.

7. Staff across 10 clusters deliver the work of six interdependent and complementary ESCWA subprogrammes: climate change and natural resource sustainability; gender justice, population and inclusive development; shared economic prosperity; statistics, information society and technology; 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal coordination; and governance and conflict prevention.

8. In January 2020, the Commission adopted an internal reform initiative under which delivery of each budget subprogramme is assigned to all ESCWA clusters, rather than maintaining a one-to-one relationship between a subprogramme and a specific division. The restructuring of subprogramme delivery was designed to ensure the integration of the Commission's work, so as to better support member States in adapting and implementing policies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. These reforms were carried out in response to the Secretary-General's call for a more nimble, efficient and effective organization, and a focus on delivery rather than process, as well as in response to the enterprise risk management exercise, the global staff satisfaction surveys and the staff surveys conducted by the ESCWA secretariat.

9. Eleven intergovernmental bodies assist ESCWA in the formulation of its programme of work and act as an interface between specialists of the member States and the Commission's substantive experts. This intergovernmental mechanism is exclusive to ESCWA, and no other United Nations entity periodically convenes a body comprised of member States and other entities. This body includes the Commission's Executive Committee and committees on statistics, social development, energy, water resources, transport and logistics, liberalization of foreign trade, women, technology, financing for development and trade policy.

10. The aim of subprogramme 3, which is implemented by staff across several clusters, is to accelerate economic transformation and inclusive development in the Arab region. Its work is guided by resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Recent General Assembly resolutions entrusted to subprogramme 3 include:

- International trade and development (resolution [74/201](#))
- International financial system and development (resolution [74/202](#))
- External debt sustainability and development (resolution [74/203](#))
- Financial inclusion for sustainable development (resolution [74/205](#))
- Promotion of international cooperation to combat illicit financial flows and strengthen good practices on assets return to foster sustainable development (resolution [74/206](#))
- Role of the United Nations in promoting development in the context of globalization and interdependence (resolution [74/228](#))

⁵ Economic and Social Council resolutions [1818 \(LV\)](#), [1985/69](#) and 1998/46.

- Development cooperation with middle-income countries (74/231)
- Human resources development (resolution 74/236)
- Eradicating rural poverty to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (resolution 74/237)

The key Council resolution relating to the mandate of subprogramme 3 is resolution 2019/30, entitled “Developing the work of the Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade, Economic Globalization and Financing for Development”.⁶

B. Commission resources, distribution across subprogrammes and subprogramme 3 resources

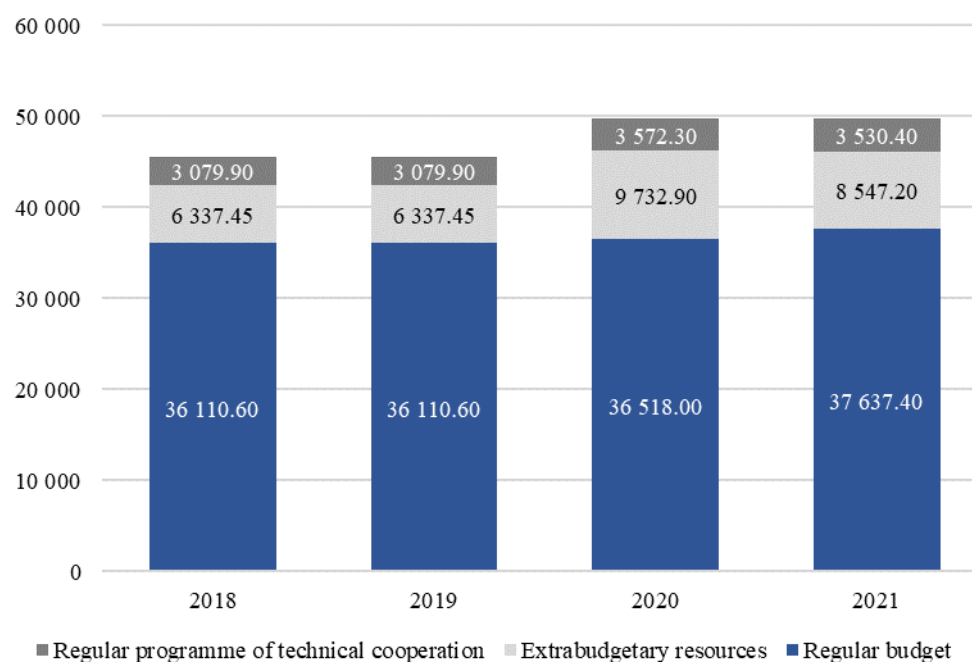
11. During the evaluation period, the budget of ESCWA was resourced through four funding streams: the regular budget, extrabudgetary resources,⁷ the regular programme of technical cooperation⁸ and the United Nations Development Account.⁹

12. The distribution of ESCWA resources across those funding streams is shown in figure I. Total financial resources in 2021 were \$49.7 million.

Figure I

Distribution of Commission resources by funding source, 2018–2021

(Thousands of United States dollars)



Source: Proposed programme budgets for 2018–2021.

Note: For consistency, budget data for the 2018–2019 biennium is presented by year.

13. ESCWA had been expected to partner in the implementation of five Development Account projects in 2021;¹⁰ it had partnered in the implementation five

⁶ A/75/6 (Sect. 22).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A/75/6 (Sect. 23).

⁹ A/75/6 (Sect. 35).

¹⁰ Ibid.

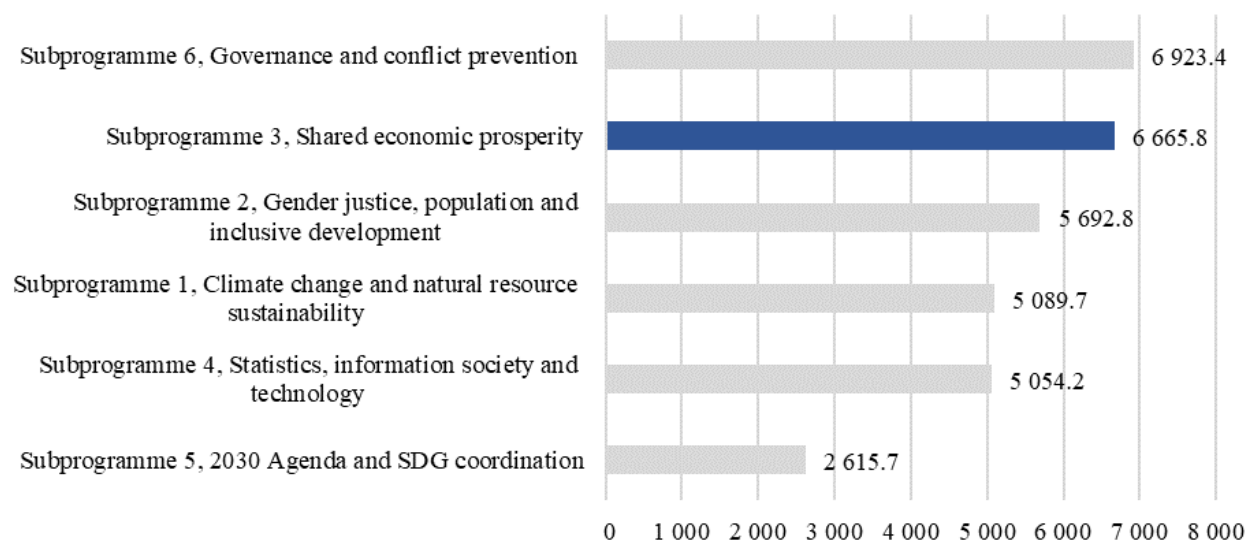
projects in 2020¹¹ and nine projects in the 2018–2019 biennium.¹² The average annual Development Account budget for the period 2018–2021 was approximately \$3.4 million, of which a portion was to be utilized by the Commission for joint implementation of projects with other United Nations partners.¹³

14. The subprogramme 3 budget is subsumed under Part V, Regional cooperation for development, within section 22 of the United Nations programme budget. Subprogramme 3 receives 22 per cent of the Commission's overall programme of work budget, or \$6.3 million of the \$28.6 million total (figure II).¹⁴

Figure II

Budget comparison of Commission subprogrammes by funding source, 2021

(Thousands of United States dollars)



Source: Proposed programme budget for 2021.

15. ESCWA subprogramme budgets varied between 2018 and 2021 as subprogramme 3 resources decreased from \$7.8 million to \$6.7 million, largely because of a drop in regular programme of technical cooperation and regular budget resources.

16. ESCWA had a total of 255 post resources in 2021. The largest number resided under subprogramme 3, which accounted for 32 posts.¹⁵

C. Results framework of subprogramme 3

17. A summary of the expected accomplishments, indicators of achievement and results of subprogramme 3 for the period 2018–2021 is set out in table 1.

¹¹ A/74/6 (Sect. 35).

¹² A/72/6 (Sect. 35).

¹³ This amount represents the average annual budget for projects in which the Commission was one of the implementing partners.

¹⁴ This amount represents the total budget for the programme of work (A/75/6 (Sect. 22), table 22.17).

¹⁵ A/75/6 (Sect. 22), figure 22.1.

Table 1
Consolidated results framework of subprogramme 3, 2018–2021

<i>Expected accomplishments and indicators of achievement</i>		
<i>Proposed programme budget 2018–2019 biennium^a</i>	<i>Proposed programme budgets 2020 and 2021^b</i>	<i>Description of ESCWA results (unpublished)</i>
1. Economic diversification and fiscal policy (Sustainable Development Goals 8, 9 and 10)		
Enhanced, enabling macroeconomic policy environment for regional integration supported by policy assessment tools	Social expenditure priorities in coherence with macro fiscal policy (A/75/6 (Sect. 22))	<i>Planned result, 2021</i>
(a) Increased number of institutions that develop knowledge-based economic tools and strategies with the support of ESCWA	2018: no comprehensive analysis of social expenditure in relation to beneficiaries and purpose	Social expenditure priorities aligned with macro fiscal policies: social expenditure monitor is deployed to help Member States rebalance expenditure across priority sectors, in support of greater socioeconomic prosperity
(b) Increased number of member States that develop and implement policies using ESCWA forecasting tools	2019: a common social expenditure monitor developed for the Arab region	
	2020: social expenditure monitor established for two member States and linked to their budgets	
	2021: social expenditure monitor informs changes in rebalancing social expenditures across priorities between 2021 and 2022 budgets of two member States	
2. Trade openness and regional connectivity (Sustainable Development Goal 11)		
Improved regional coordination among member States for cross-border infrastructure, in particular transport and trade facilitation		<i>New result, 2020</i>
(a) Increased number of member States that adopt and implement regional or bilateral cross-border trade and trade facilitation agreements, such as the Arab Customs Union		Enhanced master plan to rebuild the Port of Beirut
(b) Increased number of member States that adopt and implement ESCWA recommendations to enhance the coordination of their macroeconomic and sectoral policies for trade promotion		
(c) Increased number of member States that adopt the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq agreements and create national committees for transport and trade facilitation		

Expected accomplishments and indicators of achievement

<i>Proposed programme budget 2018–2019 biennium^a</i>	<i>Proposed programme budgets 2020 and 2021^b</i>	<i>Description of ESCWA results (unpublished)</i>
3. Financing for development (Sustainable Development Goal 17)		
Increased effectiveness by member States in filling the financing gap and raising funds from traditional and innovative sources to meet the international development agenda	Financing the Sustainable Development Goals through fiscal consolidation and domestic resource mobilization (A/74/6 (Sect. 22))	<i>Planned result, 2020</i> Financing the Sustainable Development Goals through fiscal consolidation and domestic resource mobilization
(a) Increased number of member States that implement measures to mobilize financial resources for development in accordance with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda	2018: request by member States, including Tunisia, to support fiscal policy reform	(a) Egypt and Tunisia design and implement fiscally sustainable COVID-19 mitigation measures
(b) Increased number of member States that adopt regulatory reforms and legislation to enhance the business environment	2019: development of socially acceptable fiscal policy reform proposals and corresponding economic models 2020: inclusion of a subsidy reform proposal in the financial law submitted by Governments to parliament for endorsement	<i>Planned result, 2022</i> Debt swap for improved climate and development financing (b) Member States and donors/creditors are supported in reaching agreements to convert a portion of debt into funding for climate and development initiatives

Sources: Proposed programme plan for 2021 (E/ESCWA/S-6/16) and proposed programme budgets for 2018–2021.

^a A/72/6 (Sect. 22), table 22.18.

^b A/74/6 (Sect. 22) and A/75/6 (Sect. 22).

18. To fulfil these commitments, ESCWA facilitated forums for regional and subregional dialogue, generated evidence through research and analysis for regional and subregional policy, and provided advisory services and technical assistance to member States.

III. Methodology

19. The evaluation, which covered the period 2018–2021, was conducted using a mixed-methods approach incorporating the following data sources:

- (a) A systematic analysis of subprogramme documents and programme data as represented by 10 structured cases at the project level;¹⁶
- (b) Analysis of the database containing the regular programme of technical cooperation requests made by member States;
- (c) Analysis of subprogramme 3 knowledge products;
- (d) Self-administered electronic surveys of all ESCWA staff members, as well as subprogramme 3 stakeholders and clients, including policymakers, government officials, representatives of other United Nations entities, League of Arab States

¹⁶ Focal points identified 10 main projects and 6 one-off initiatives that contributed to the objectives of subprogramme 3 during the evaluation period. The evaluation team selected the 10 main projects as case studies for this evaluation.

officials and other stakeholders (e.g., academia, think tanks, international financial institutions, the donor community and the private sector);¹⁷

(e) Semi-structured interviews with ESCWA staff members and subprogramme 3 stakeholders and clients, including policymakers, government officials, Resident Coordinator Office staff, United Nations country team staff and other stakeholders at the country, regional and global levels;¹⁸

(f) Direct observation of the second session of the Committee on Trade Policies in ESCWA member States, an intergovernmental meeting that was held virtually on 15 and 16 September 2021.

20. The evaluation had the following limitations:

(a) The theory of change shared by the Commission envisaged at least four years for the emergence of immediate and intermediate outcomes. An additional year in the evaluation scope may have provided greater flexibility to assess the contribution of subprogramme 3 to the outcomes achieved in ESCWA member States;

(b) Performance data on progress indicators for results-based management of subprogramme 3 projects were not available for the entire period covered by the evaluation, as ESCWA rolled out the current system in March 2021. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS mitigated the problem posed by this lack of data by triangulating with other data and seeking additional clarification from subprogramme 3 staff.

IV. Evaluation results

Relevance

A. Subprogramme 3 was responsive to the expressed needs and priorities of ESCWA member States

Subprogramme 3 priority setting was responsive to member State demands and the priorities established by the Secretary-General. Responsiveness to changing demands and priorities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the relevance of subprogramme 3

21. Dual relevance was identified in the case study analysis, as subprogramme 3 priority setting responded to the expressed needs of member States and the priority areas identified by the Secretary-General.

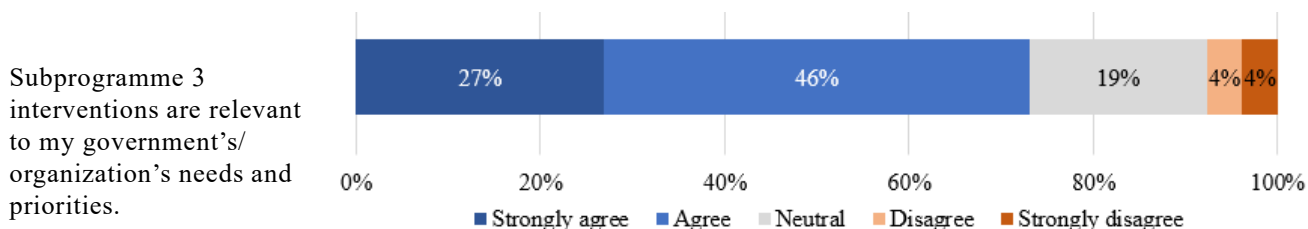
22. Some 73 per cent of survey respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that subprogramme 3 interventions were relevant to the needs and priorities of their government or organization (figure III). During an intergovernmental meeting of the Committee on Trade Policy, a participatory mechanism was adopted in which the representatives of all 14 member States were invited to respond to direct questions regarding their priorities and needs in relation

¹⁷ The ESCWA staff survey had a 67 per cent response rate (117 of 175 eligible respondents). The ESCWA stakeholders and clients survey had a 20 per cent response rate (67 of 331 eligible respondents). Subprogramme 3 stakeholders and clients were identified by evaluation focal points.

¹⁸ A total of 80 interviews were conducted in English, Arabic and French across 12 ESCWA member States and the secretariat of the League of Arab States, and 11 interviews were conducted with ESCWA staff, of whom 10 worked on implementation of subprogramme 3.

to trade policies. At the same meeting, the subprogramme 3 secretariat presented actions taken to address the needs reported at the Committee’s previous meeting.¹⁹

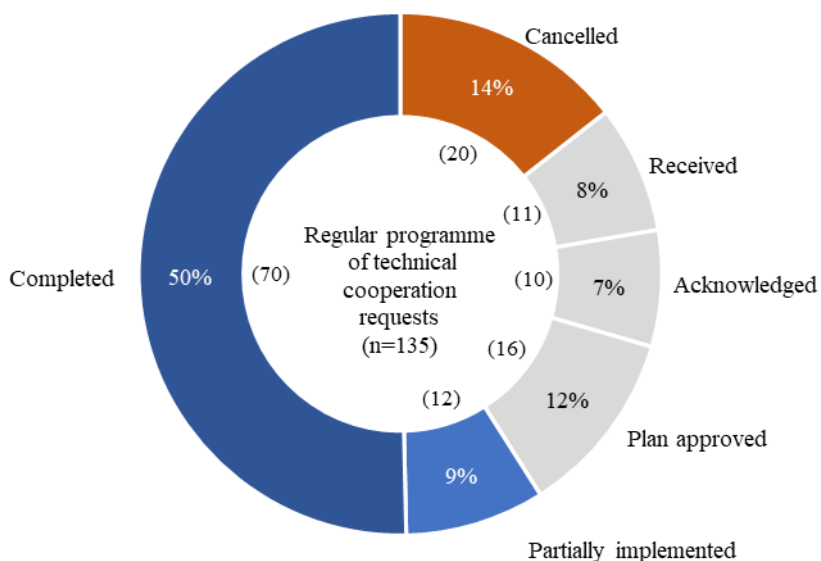
Figure III
Alignment of subprogramme 3 with member State needs and priorities



Source: Electronic survey of ESCWA stakeholders and clients.
 Note: Client statement (n=26).

23. A review of the formal technical cooperation requests received by ESCWA between January 2018 and August 2021 revealed a similar trend. During that period, a total of 135 requests were assigned to subprogramme 3. The subprogramme was able to complete, partially implement or approve 71 per cent of the requests submitted either individually by 16 member States or through regional organizations on behalf of multiple member States (figure IV). Interview data showed that the time it took subprogramme 3 to respond to requests ranged from 15 days to more than 12 months after submission.

Figure IV
Regular programme of technical cooperation requests directed to subprogramme 3, by status



Source: ESCWA regular programme of technical cooperation tracker (6 October 2021).
 Note: Requests submitted by ESCWA member States, January 2018–August 2021.

¹⁹ The second session of the Committee on Trade Policies in ESCWA member States, 15 and 16 September 2021.

24. Case study analysis found that subprogramme 3 interventions responded to four United Nations initiatives at the highest level and that the contribution of subprogramme 3 to the United Nations agenda was commended by stakeholders, who also considered previous or ongoing subprogramme work to be relevant.²⁰ Respondents from several United Nations entities commended the work undertaken by ESCWA on illicit financial flows, citing the Commission's expertise in digital technology and taxation of the digital economy. In only 1 of 10 cases was the intervention neither responsive to member State needs nor the priority areas identified by the Secretary-General.

25. At the same time, ESCWA sought to expand the scope of its work. Some subprogramme 3 staff reported that they actively advocated with member States to secure requests from clients. One policymaker who submitted an official request validated this by noting: "ESCWA has pushed us to see that this is the future [and that we] should grasp this opportunity. They are hammering us and the [...] authorities, but it is not easy to make people change."

26. While the COVID-19 pandemic suspended some planned activities, it also boosted the relevance for three case studies that were initiated prior to the pandemic. The debt swap mechanism became more relevant for heavily indebted member States, and ESCWA received requests in that connection from Egypt and Tunisia, as fiscal pressures on those countries were exacerbated by the pandemic. In addition, the Commission provided Egypt, at its request, with a fiscal multiplier analysis to help it assess the impact of its relief package on affected sectors. Moreover, subprogramme 3 work related to consumer protection gained prominence when commerce went online and digital solutions were underscored in the official United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19.²¹

27. Stakeholders from outside the ESCWA region appreciated that subprogramme 3 staff connected member States with relevant stakeholders. Joint work with subprogramme 3 allowed these stakeholders to implement projects more efficiently (Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)), secure data from ESCWA member States (ECE, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)), propose targeted actions that are relevant to the strengths and weaknesses and appetites of the regimes in the region (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and OECD), integrate regional perspectives and challenges into analyses (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) and forums (UNCTAD) conducted at the global level, and access a rich source of knowledge on the Arab least developed countries (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). Varying economic needs and institutional maturity across the region introduced a layer of complexity that made ESCWA an important part of this process.

²⁰ Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the Secretary-General's Strategy for Financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2018–2021), the Initiative on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond, and the Secretary-General's recommendations on shared responsibility, global solidarity: responding to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.

²¹ Available at <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/UN-framework-for-the-immediate-socio-economic-response-to-COVID-19.pdf>.

Effectiveness

B. Subprogramme 3 interventions achieved several immediate outcomes, including member States' awareness of and access to digital tools. However, the extent to which positive intermediate outcomes were achieved was limited and the subprogramme was unable to convincingly articulate its niche to clients and stakeholders

Benefits from subprogramme 3 interventions included increased awareness of thematic issues and improved access to knowledge networks, capacity and tools for evidence-based sustainable development options

28. Clients and stakeholders reported that subprogramme 3 interventions had improved their access to knowledge networks by an average of 74 per cent, awareness of thematic issues by 73 per cent and capacity and possession of tools by 68 per cent.

29. Immediate outcomes were observed in nine cases, with seven cases displaying stronger evidence of change. In six of these seven cases, projects contributed to improved capacity and tools for sustainable development. For example, efforts in financing for development facilitated linkages between the Government of Jordan and international creditors in order to contribute to the initiation of debt swaps for climate. Preparations for the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries allowed for clients in Mauritania, Somalia and Yemen to brainstorm strategies towards a sustainable approach to development. Fiscal policy contributions enabled customs authorities in Tunisia to make progress towards meeting the specifications of the electronic TIR (eTIR) system of border controls.²² The social expenditure monitor framework created awareness in several member States, including Tunisia and Jordan, regarding the need to calibrate their social sector expenditure against its potential contribution to various Sustainable Development Goal indicators, GDP and economic growth. Clients in each case reported marked improvements in capacity and/or access to tools that facilitated improved economic planning or contributed to economic growth.

30. Improvement in access to knowledge networks was reported by clients in four of seven cases. For example, a Tunisia-based client of the interventions facilitating the Arab Customs Union reported that, after learning about data and impact simulations from other member States, his Government became convinced of the benefits of a uniform customs tariff for all Arab States. Authorities in Tunisia and Jordan benefited from exchanging experiences and best practices through the Development Account-funded project on transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics and in virtual workshops, as well as the connections that they subsequently made with experts from UNCTAD and other regional commissions. Both the intraregional and interregional networks created through the interventions were seen by clients as providing access to knowledge networks.²³

31. Awareness of thematic issues improved in six of seven cases. For example, clients in Jordan and Mauritania reported improved awareness about competition and consumer protection as a result of ESCWA work. In Jordan, clients reported greater understanding of their own strengths and limitations following the workshops that were conducted as part of the Development Account-funded pilot project on the transport-related Sustainable Development Goals in landlocked countries. In most cases, increased awareness was accompanied by access to networks or improved capacity.

²² The Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets was established in Geneva in 1975 and covers customs transit for goods across roads and other modes of transportation.

²³ Available at <https://unctad.org/project/transport-and-trade-connectivity-age-pandemics>.

While the time anticipated for more concrete results to be realized has not yet passed, some intermediate outcomes have already been reported by clients and stakeholders

32. ESCWA, in its theory of change, indicates that four years must pass before the intermediate outcomes of the subprogramme 3 efforts being evaluated can be assessed. Four years had not passed when the evaluation was conducted. Examples of intermediate outcomes were observed, nevertheless, in 7 of 10 case studies, as summarized in table 2.

Table 2

Intermediate outcomes achieved by subprogramme 3 interventions

<i>Member State/territory</i>	<i>Intermediate outcome</i>	<i>Case No.</i>
Bahrain	Removal from the blacklist of non-cooperative tax jurisdictions	7
Egypt	Use of a fiscal multiplier analysis to assess the impact of its COVID-19 stimulus package	2
Jordan	Effective economic planning to avoid recession using the computable general equilibrium model: -1.6 per cent actual vs. -3 per cent forecasted GDP growth	2
	Use of the social expenditure monitor framework in decisions to build schools and health centres	2
Lebanon	Use of the Sustainable Inland Transport Connectivity Indicators	9
Morocco	Change of position in the Arab Customs Union negotiations	4
	Memorandum of understanding with the Turkish Competition Authority	8
Palestine	Use of the Sustainable Inland Transport Connectivity Indicators	9
Tunisia	Change of position in the Arab Customs Union negotiations	4
	Interconnection with the eTIR international system	10
	Use of tools for evaluation and integration of trade for trade negotiations	4
	Application of the social expenditure monitor framework with data taken from budgets (2014–2020)	2
Mauritania	Agreement on a common vision for the Arab Least Developed Countries in the next decade 2021–2030	5
Somalia		
Sudan		
Yemen		

Source: OIOS case study analysis.

33. In most cases, intermediate outcomes took the form of changes in policy that could be attributed to digital tools shared by subprogramme 3. Clients from Egypt and Jordan reported that the social expenditure monitor framework and the computable general equilibrium model enabled them to better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Clients in Morocco and Tunisia used data shared by subprogramme 3 to undertake evidence-based policymaking, including, in particular, by incorporating policy

evaluation as the region approached the establishment of the Arab Customs Union. Tunisia became part of the international eTIR system after the country successfully built the capacity of its customs management system (Système d'Information Douanier Automatisé). In two cases, changes in organizational structure could be attributed to subprogramme 3 efforts, namely, the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the competition authorities of Morocco and Türkiye and the signing of a technical declaration by Mauritania, the Sudan and Yemen in which they articulate their common agenda for the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the second part of which will be held in Doha in 2023. Further intermediate outcomes may be attained after more time has passed.

Member States that directly engaged with the work of subprogramme 3 were satisfied with the quality of its interventions, but member States, other stakeholders and ESCWA staff were unable to articulate the Commission's unique value proposition

34. Clients and stakeholders found subprogramme 3 events to be useful and engaging. Scores for technical services and analytical outputs were lower on average, as shown in table 3.

Table 3
Client and stakeholder scores for subprogramme 3 interventions

	<i>Respondents who experienced these outputs (percentage)</i>	<i>Average score (0–5)</i>
Subprogramme 3 events attended	82	4.04
Technical services received	43	3.90
Analytical outputs used	52	3.74

Source: Client and stakeholder survey (n=67).

35. Stakeholders highlighted various elements of the contribution made by subprogramme 3, including access to the latest economic data, knowledge of local culture and relationships with member State representatives. As shown in table 4, clients and stakeholders view favourably the subprogramme's contributions to knowledge networks, awareness of thematic issues and the capacity of member States. On the other hand, the potential for duplication of effort was highlighted by several stakeholders and clients, who noted that United Nations entities at the country level and subprogramme 3 did similar work. Clients from countries in conflict, in particular the State of Palestine and Yemen, highlighted limitations in absorption capacity on the part of member State governments.

Table 4
Client and stakeholder agreement score for subprogramme 3 interventions, by outcome

<i>Subprogramme 3 contributed to</i>	<i>Client average score (0–5)</i>	<i>Stakeholder average score (0–5)</i>
My/Member State access to knowledge networks	3.6	3.8
My/Member State awareness of regional and global thematic issues	3.5	3.8
My/Member State possession of capacity and tools	3.2	3.6

Source: Client and stakeholder survey (n=67), $p > 0.05$.

36. Stakeholders and clients were unable to articulate the specific value added by subprogramme 3 across the myriad of development agencies operating in the region, and there was uncertainty regarding the Commission's mission and mandate. Nearly 50 per cent of survey respondents reported that despite the contributions of ESCWA, their work would not have been affected if the Commission had failed to offer assistance.

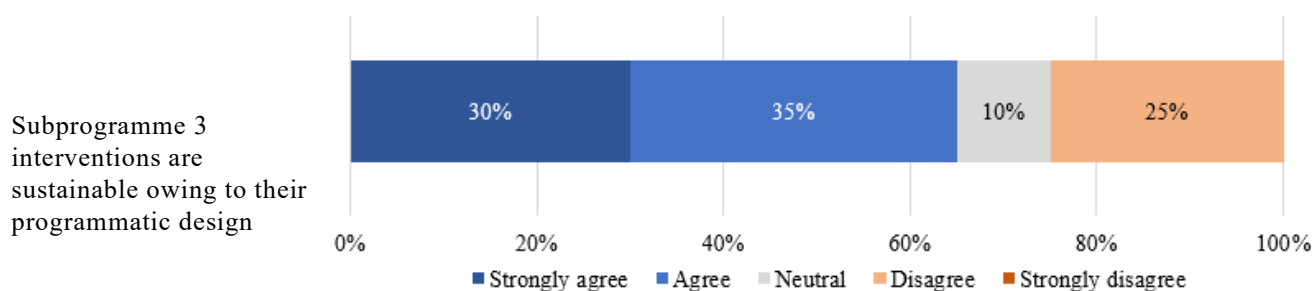
Sustainability

C. While subprogramme 3 interventions were scalable by design, sustainability was challenged by lack of resources

Programmatic design of subprogramme 3 interventions enabled many project coordinators to replicate their interventions in other ESCWA member States, building on previous outcomes. However, the extent of scalability varied by project

37. Some 65 per cent of surveyed subprogramme 3 staff strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that its interventions were sustainable in respect of programmatic design, allowing for replication and relevance in other settings (figure V). During the implementation of 8 of the 10 cases studied, coordinators laid the groundwork for prospective replication of project outcomes in other ESCWA member States. For example, while a single-country project was implemented to interconnect Tunisia with the eTIR system, project outputs were designed to be regional in scope. Those outputs included a report on the application of the eTIR system across a corridor of countries running from Lebanon to the United Arab Emirates and an online workshop on the implementation of the eTIR system in the region. As a result, the eTIR application was extended to the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Similarly, the use of the Sustainable Inland Transport Connectivity Indicators, which had been tested and piloted in Jordan in a single-country project, was adopted by Lebanon and the State of Palestine before the project had been completed.²⁴ The emulation of the computable general equilibrium model interface and the ensuing transfer of technology across member States resulted in significant improvement in output in Jordan in 2020 and was cost-effective owing to the initial financing of substantial fixed costs by Saudi Arabia.

Figure V
Sustainability of subprogramme 3 interventions owing to programmatic design



Source: Electronic survey of ESCWA staff members.

Note: Responses of subprogramme 3 staff survey (n=20).

38. ESCWA member States replicated what they learned from subprogramme 3 interventions. For example, one policymaker noted that ESCWA workshops on trade negotiation in the context of the Arab Customs Union had enabled participants to

²⁴ ECE/TRANS/WP.5/70.

engage in trade negotiations more effectively in other contexts, including with countries outside the region. Similarly, Jordan and Tunisia utilized the computable general equilibrium model as a mechanism to evaluate the structural adjustment packages proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Tunisia was able to use the computable general equilibrium model to help it negotiate its position and made a counter-proposal that was accepted by the IMF.

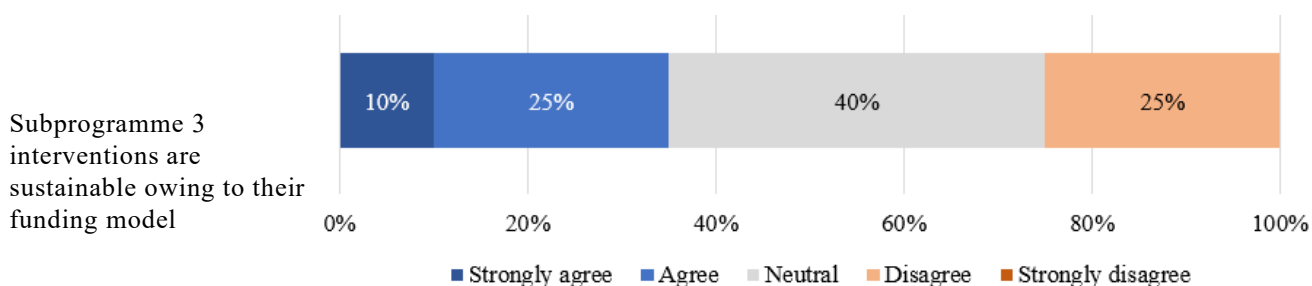
39. Stakeholders were frequently able to reproduce subprogramme 3 outputs in other domains or regions. For example, OECD indicated that it would like to replicate, with the Commission's assistance, the joint ESCWA-UNCTAD-OECD competition forum for the Arab region in the ECA region. The United Nations Children's Fund created a series of knowledge products on the social spending landscape for children and made progress in its work with ESCWA on the social expenditure monitor report. Such measures extend the scope and utility of subprogramme 3 interventions.

Significant challenges to sustainability included lack of resources, and the Commission's work in relation to subprogramme 3 included flexible solutions to mitigate those challenges

40. Interviewees and survey respondents highlighted three challenges to the sustainability of subprogramme 3 interventions: lack of staffing, lack of funds and the high turnover of policymakers and government officials in the region. In response, the subprogramme employed flexible solutions to mitigate these challenges.

41. Subprogramme 3 staff provided muted positive feedback on the financial sustainability of subprogramme interventions. Only 35 per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that subprogramme 3 interventions are sustainable because of their funding model (figure VI). This was one of the lowest levels of agreement across all statements in the survey. Stakeholders from three entities highlighted the paucity of the Commission's financial resources. In response, the subprogramme identified alternative mechanisms to sustain its interventions. For example, one project coordinator increased Development Account and extrabudgetary resources to advance subprogramme 3 work in relation to the social expenditure monitor framework. Problems in Jordanian national accounts were identified through the application of the computable general equilibrium model. As a result, an agreement was concluded with Jordan under which it would finance an ESCWA staff member who would work in the Ministry of Planning in Amman. In addition, subprogramme interventions frequently included easy-to-use online tools to maximize the reach of products.

Figure VI
Sustainability of subprogramme 3 interventions owing to funding model



Source: Electronic survey of ESCWA staff members.

Note: Responses of subprogramme 3 staff (n=20).

42. Lack of staffing was cited as an issue in 4 of the 10 case studies. In response, subprogramme 3 project coordinators consolidated networks in order to devolve responsibility during project implementation. For example, an informal WhatsApp network connecting the competition authorities in the region facilitated exchanges of information and good practices across jurisdictions. Similarly, subprogramme 3 work on debt swap mechanisms led to the establishment of a task force to generate knowledge across different actors and entities and the creation of an advisory board to commission additional technical work.

43. Several subprogramme 3 staff identified staffing challenges as an impediment to implementation. For example, the number of staff specialized in transport declined after an internal restructuring in 2013, but the demand for transport-related technical assistance requests from member States remained high and constituted 37 per cent of all requests assigned to subprogramme 3 over the period 2018–2021.²⁵ Stakeholders collaborating with the subprogramme on transport emphasized interpersonal connections and long-term engagements with partners as enabling factors for delivery. Some staff members viewed internal restructuring as a cost-effective mechanism that made it possible to allocate resources more efficiently across ESCWA.

44. The relatively high turnover of policymakers and government officials in the region was cited as a challenge by subprogramme 3 staff, clients and stakeholders. In response, the subprogramme relied on consolidated networks to secure continuation of interest from government authorities.

Coherence

D. Despite examples of both internal and external coherence, partnerships at the regional and country level were a challenge

Some evidence of internal coherence was observed. For example, one coordinator had responsibility for two or three projects and staff members spending time working across subprogrammes

45. Improved internal coherence, for purposes of staff well-being, greater productivity and improved outcomes for clients, was a stated objective of the Commission's internal restructuring.²⁶ Responding to the survey, most staff members (78 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that cluster 3 coordinated well with other ESCWA clusters, ensuring interlinkages, synergies and benefits of scale. Some 30 per cent of staff (n=35) reported that they were project coordinators. Of that group, most (60 per cent) were responsible for more than one project. Cluster 3 staff reported that they dedicated about 22 per cent of their time to other subprogrammes, while staff from other clusters spent between 3 to 7 per cent of their time on subprogramme 3. In 4 of 10 case studies, however, the elements needed for internal coherence were not observed.

Subprogramme 3 interventions successfully utilized partnerships with global entities and other regional commissions. However, partnerships at the regional and country level were a challenge

46. Strong evidence of horizontal collaboration was observed in 6 of 10 case studies. For example, a letter of agreement was signed between ESCWA, OECD and UNCTAD in relation to the project on improving competition and enhancing consumer protection. With regard to the project on sustainable transport connectivity

²⁵ ESCWA regular programme of technical cooperation tracker (6 October 2021).

²⁶ ESCWA documents on restructuring.

and implementation of the transport-related Sustainable Development Goals in selected landlocked and bridging countries, subprogramme 3 partnered with ECE, which led the Development Account-funded project, and facilitated its work in Jordan, which had been selected for the pilot. Subprogramme 3 provided leadership of the interdepartmental cluster on illicit financial flows as part of the Initiative on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond. Examples of coherence were identified that suggested a readiness to facilitate and coordinate with global entities and some regional commissions. Some 83 per cent of ESCWA staff agreed with the statement that subprogramme 3 was able to constructively collaborate with other United Nations and regional partners.

47. Although eight States members of ESCWA are also States members of ECA, the two regional commissions have few coordination mechanisms linking them.²⁷ ECA staff reported strong working-level relationships in specific areas, for example, in the development of the Assessing Regional Integration Index Report and in relation to the Development Account-funded project on facilitating Arab regional and global economic integration through monitoring, evaluating and facilitating trade negotiations. There was no evidence, however, that there are mechanisms in place for systematic coordination between either subprogramme 3 and its ECA counterpart, the Macroeconomic and Governance Division, or subprogramme 3 and its subregional counterpart, the ECA Subregional Office for North Africa.

48. Commission records confirmed that the Deputy Executive Secretary represented ESCWA on United Nations country teams and supported 10 Resident Coordinator Offices in the development of their common country analyses and their cooperation frameworks through the provision of data, data management and macroeconomic analysis, as well as analysis of transboundary and conflict and governance issues.²⁸ In addition, ESCWA had signed United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks with its member States.

49. Those efforts notwithstanding, only 64 per cent of stakeholders agreed with the statement that subprogramme 3 interventions were well coordinated with other regional and United Nations partners. Interviews with other United Nations country team members revealed prominent gaps in the extent to which ESCWA was able to successfully coordinate its activities with the relevant United Nations country team. Stakeholders reported a lack of awareness about ESCWA contacts with member State officials. Those contacts sometimes resulted in the duplication of established relationships between other country team members and national departments. Some stakeholders reported that integration and communication with subprogramme 3 work was partial. For example, they would be informed of the results of a study, but they would not have been involved in developing its terms of reference. Other stakeholders, including from Resident Coordinator Offices, raised concerns about uncoordinated workplans and insufficient participation by ESCWA in United Nations country teams.

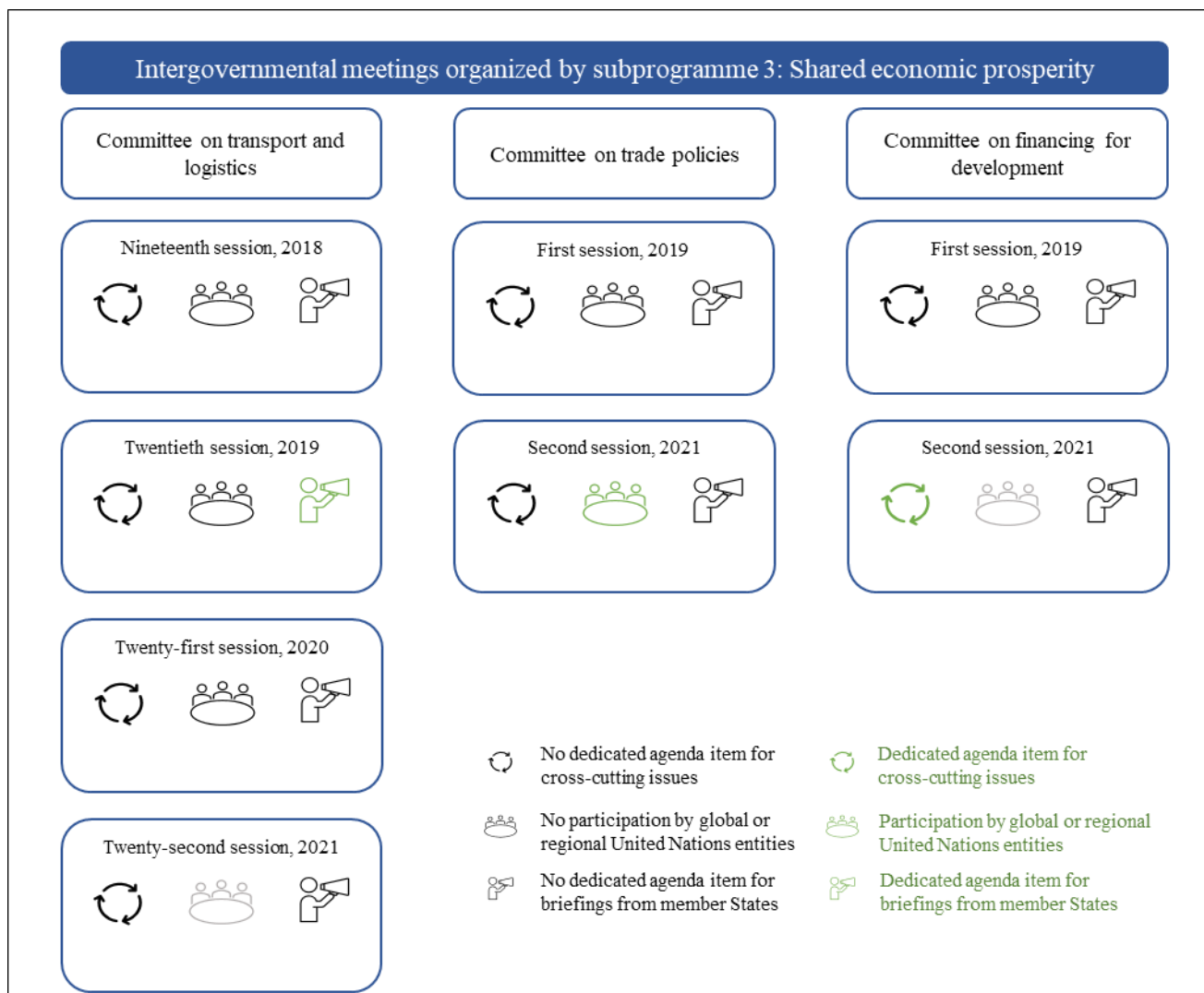
50. The intergovernmental mechanism system was the original means by which ESCWA operationalized its regional mandate, and the Commission regularly convenes sessions of intergovernmental mechanisms with a defined agenda and for which it produces outcome reports. Intergovernmental committees comprised an important audience for ESCWA products, and they contributed to the identification of such institutional priorities as the establishment of a special fund for the State of Palestine. An analysis of eight recent intergovernmental meetings arranged by subprogramme 3 revealed that the meetings were of limited strategic use. The agenda

²⁷ Eight States members of ESCWA are also States members of ECA (year of ESCWA membership in brackets): Algeria (2020), Egypt (1977), Libya (2012), Mauritania (2015), Morocco (2012), Somalia (2020), Sudan (2008), and Tunisia (2012).

²⁸ As at August 2021, the Commission provided support to United Nations countries teams in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

of only one meeting included an item related to such cross-cutting issues as gender, human rights, the environment and disability (see figure VII). The inclusion of other United Nations entities, a useful means of enhancing coordination and shared understanding, was limited to one intergovernmental mechanism. Moreover, the agenda of only one meeting offered member States a clear opportunity to lead the discussion. At the other meetings, discussion was limited to issues identified by ESCWA. The failure to strategically use the intergovernmental mechanism was a missed opportunity to realize the regional mandate entrusted to ESCWA.

Figure VII
Analysis of subprogramme 3 intergovernmental mechanism agendas and reports



Source: OIOS analysis, 2021.

51. The Regional Collaborative Platform for Arab States was launched in 2021 as a new mechanism for bringing together United Nations entities at the regional level in support of sustainable development and issue-based coalitions across eight areas.²⁹

²⁹ The Regional Collaborative Platform for Arab States is supported by a secretariat that is provided by the United Nations Development Programme, the Development Coordination Office and the Commission. The Commission and the Programme serve as co-Vice Chairs of the Platform.

The Platform was established with the objective of generating synergies by consolidating different coordination mechanisms and strengthening strategic direction and accountability for system-wide work at the regional level.³⁰ Although ESCWA and UNDP co-hosted the secretariat of the Platform, both clients and staff did not mention the Platform as a means of regional coordination.

52. Analysis revealed a disconnect between case study scope and outcomes. While all case studies had global, regional or transnational relevance, 8 of the 11 intermediate outcomes observed were at the national level (see figure V). Clients and stakeholders were largely unable to identify the regional mandate of ESCWA, in particular because entities were being encouraged to adopt greater programmatic and operational synergies at the country level as a consequence of United Nations reform.

53. While the participation of ESCWA in the United Nations country team may have played a part in its country-level mandate, OIOS, in a recent evaluation of the resident coordinator system, found that fully coordinated delivery of activities at the country level had not yet taken place and that bilateral policy engagements continued in most countries. OIOS also found that the configuration of United Nations country teams did include regional and Headquarters officials, whose participation is necessary in order to provide optimal support to the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. In addition, the Office found that the quality of coordination between regional commissions and resident coordinators varied, depending on whether resident coordinators were aware of the work the regional commissions and the services that they offered.³¹

54. ESCWA provided assistance to global entities in the implementation of requests. Requests for assistance received by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs illustrated the extent of country-level implementation by global entities. Of the 227 requests that the Department received between 2019 and 2020, 45 per cent were from national governments and 14 per cent were from resident coordinator offices and other sources, including intergovernmental bodies and other United Nations entities. Only 14 of these requests were from ESCWA member States, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia and Tunisia. Department staff reported that implementing such requests presented a challenge for them owing to their global, non-resident status, and that the Department looked to regional commissions for assistance in that regard.

Cross-cutting issues

E. Subprogramme 3 interventions were concentrated in certain member States, and evidence of mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues was not observed

Subprogramme 3 efforts were distributed across member States, but interventions tended to be concentrated in middle-income countries

55. All ESCWA member States were represented in the work of subprogramme 3. Most clients and stakeholders agreed that subprogramme 3 initiatives prioritized countries in conflict (64 per cent) and the least developed countries (66 per cent).³² A case study analysis showed, however, that the work of the subprogramme was

³⁰ Available at <https://www.unescwa.org/about/rcp> (14 December 2021).

³¹ Evaluation of the Development Coordination Office: contribution of the resident coordinator system to country-level programme coherence, report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (E/AC.51/2022/2).

³² Survey of stakeholders and clients.

concentrated in the group of middle-income countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia.³³

56. Clients were generally satisfied with the geographical distribution of subprogramme 3 interventions and pointed to the complementary focus of other subprogrammes as contributing to the overall coverage of member States.

Sustainable Development Goals and the priorities of the Secretary-General were mainstreamed throughout much of the Commission’s work, whereas mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues was inconsistent. Evidence of the capacity-building of member States in relation to the cross-cutting issues of gender, human rights, environment and disability was not observed

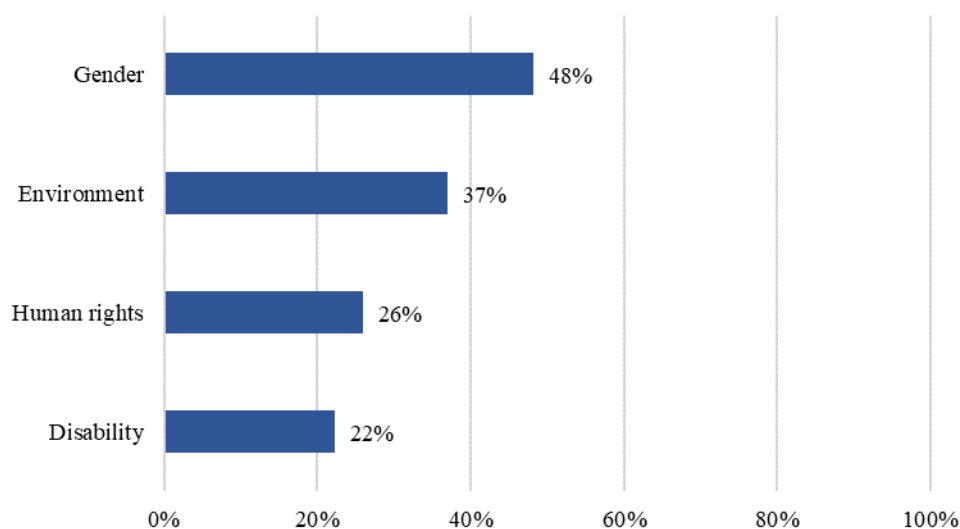
57. Analysis confirmed that the Sustainable Development Goals were mainstreamed into subprogramme 3 work in 9 of 10 case studies. However, the integration of human rights, environment and disability was not fully developed. Most examples of gender mainstreaming were limited to attempts at achieving gender parity among attendees at subprogramme 3 events.

58. Some 71 per cent of surveyed ESCWA stakeholders and clients strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that subprogramme 3 helped member States integrate core United Nations programming principles of gender equality, environmental sustainability, disability inclusion and human rights into national policymaking. Subprogramme 3 staff were more critical, and the extent to which they agreed with that statement ranged from 34 per cent (disability) to 53 per cent (gender equality).

59. In an analysis of subprogramme 3 knowledge products, the Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS found that there was uneven coverage of cross-cutting issues. Gender equality (48 per cent), environmental sustainability (37 per cent), disability inclusion (22 per cent) and human rights (26 per cent) were mainstreamed in less than half of the 27 knowledge products produced by subprogramme 3 during the evaluation period (figure VIII).

Figure VIII

Integration of cross-cutting issues in reviewed knowledge products



Source: OIOS knowledge product analysis of the ESCWA website (n=27).

Note: Knowledge products in this figure include reports, flagship publications and policy briefs attributed to subprogramme 3 on the ESCWA website during the evaluation period.

³³ These countries were represented five or more times as clients across the 10 case studies.

V. Recommendations

60. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of OIOS makes three important recommendations to ESCWA, all of which the Commission has accepted.

Recommendation 1 (Important, result B, para. 36)

61. ESCWA should communicate its niche and strengths clearly to member States and global and resident United Nations partners, in order to enable them to fully utilize the Commission's potential in a manner that is aligned with its regional mandate.

Indicator of achievement: evidence of the development and implementation of a strategy by ESCWA communicating to its member States, global and resident United Nations partners how it can contribute in specific economic and/or social fields in a way that is complementary to, distinct from and not duplicative of the efforts of other organizations

Recommendation 2 (Important, result D, paras. 51 and 53)

62. ESCWA, in line with its regional mandate, should strengthen regional coordination efforts through the regional collaboration platform and contribute to country coordination through ongoing engagement with United Nations country teams.

Indicators of achievement: evidence of (a) ESCWA participation in the regional collaboration platform and (b) increased engagement with United Nations country teams in the region

Recommendation 3 (Important, results D and E, para. 50)

63. ESCWA should strengthen the strategic utilization of its intergovernmental mechanism as a means to further its regional coordination mandate and the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues, including gender, the environment, human rights and disability.

Indicators of achievement: agendas and other documents that reflect varied and purposive agenda-setting and inclusion of relevant United Nations entities in subprogramme 3 intergovernmental mechanism sessions

Annex

Comments received from the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on the draft report

I am pleased to share with you ESCWA's management response in connection with the above-mentioned evaluation report.

ESCWA welcomes this comprehensive report; in particular the evidence and feedback on the relevance, effectiveness, coherence and sustainability of the Commission's initiatives coordinated under the Subprogramme 3 "Shared economic prosperity", both at the regional and country levels.

ESCWA accepts the recommendations of the report and commits to take actions defined in the attached management response.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and the evaluation team for the collaborative engagement throughout the evaluation process.
