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Programme questions: evaluation

Evaluation of the Economic Commission for Europe: subprogramme 4, Economic cooperation and integration, and subprogramme 6, Trade

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) has determined, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, effectiveness, coherence, sustainability and integration of cross-cutting considerations of subprogrammes 4 (Economic cooperation and integration) and 6 (Trade) of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE). The evaluation covered the workstreams under the two subprogrammes within the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) of ECE for the period 2018–2021. The evaluation was based on a mixed-method approach.

Relevance. The work of ECTD was considered aligned with its mandate. The Division largely responded to specific member States' requests and found its niche in a crowded space of trade and economic cooperation. However, two factors had an impact on relevance: ECTD functions and workstreams were still being clarified in consideration of the diversity of the ECE membership; and there was a lack of overall strategy and synergetic approach for subprogrammes 4 and 6.

Effectiveness. The Division's work on facilitating norms and standards setting was largely effective, although the visibility and effectiveness of the work varied across workstreams. Whereas ECTD provided member States with key thematic policy options, the extent of their adoption and implementation of tools, standards and norms was mixed, and challenges were observed in the monitoring of outcomes by ECTD.

* E/AC.51/2023/1.



Coherence. Each ECTD subprogramme was mandated to service its own set of intergovernmental bodies, which inherently affected ECTD internal coherence. Nexus areas initiated by ECE in 2018 to contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provided opportunities for enhanced coordination within the Commission. However, while there was evidence that ECTD cooperated with other ECE divisions, there was limited documentary evidence of joint planning. In addition, while ECTD partnerships at headquarters were coherently managed and coordinated, the same was not true of its activities in programme countries.

Sustainability. Some ECTD workstreams created ground for fostering the sustainability of results, but the war in Ukraine and related resource implications posed significant risks to the ability of ECTD to respond to member States' requests originating from Central Asia.

Cross-cutting. The Division integrated gender and environment considerations into its programming; however, the inclusion of human rights and disability considerations was weak. In the face of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, ECTD maintained its level of assistance to member States and provided them with policy options on post-pandemic recovery.

OIOS made four important recommendations to ECTD:

- (a) Establish technical cooperation request tracking mechanism;
- (b) Develop a division-wide integrated strategic plan;
- (c) Develop divisional action plans to operationalize ECE strategies on resource mobilization, partnerships and technical cooperation;
- (d) Ensure the integration of gender, environment, disability inclusion and human rights considerations in its various workstreams.

I. Introduction and objective

1. The overall objective of the present evaluation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, effectiveness, coherence, sustainability, and integration of cross-cutting considerations in subprogrammes 4 (Economic cooperation and integration) and 6 (Trade) of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE). The evaluation topic emerged from a programme-level risk assessment described in the evaluation inception paper produced at the outset of the evaluation. The evaluation conforms with the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system.¹ OIOS had last evaluated ECE in 2017.²

2. Management comments were sought on the draft report from ECE and considered in the final report (see annex).

II. Background

A. Mandates and context

3. ECE was created on 29 March 1947 by the Economic and Social Council by its resolution 36 (IV) with the primary objective of supporting post-war reconstruction and promoting the integration and economic cooperation of European countries.

4. Initially, ECE was composed of 18 member States from Europe plus the United States of America. Currently, ECE serves 56 member States, comprising countries of Europe, North America, Central Asia and Western Asia. Other United Nations Member States beyond the 56 ECE member States participate in the activities of ECE subsidiary bodies. In addition, more than 70 international professional organizations and other non-governmental organizations take part in ECE activities. The ECE membership is economically and culturally diverse, with a high degree of variation in human development and gender equality, which have been further affected by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

5. ECE is governed by its terms of reference and rules of procedure.³ While the Commission conducts biennial sessions, its Executive Committee meets intersessionally to, inter alia, implement overall guidance set by the Commission. This includes approving the programme of work of the sectoral committees and addressing matters related to programme planning, administration and budgeting, including extrabudgetary funding.

B. Leadership structure

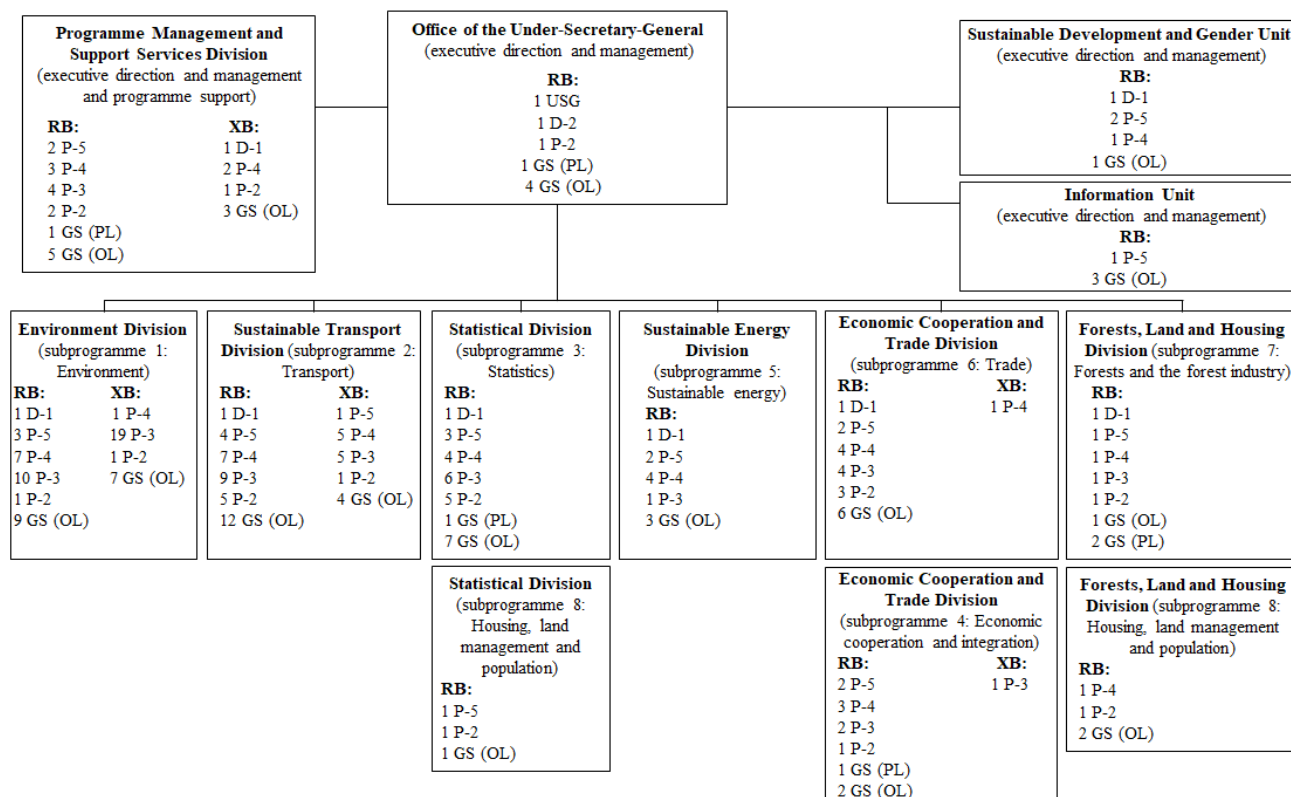
6. ECE is headquartered in Geneva and is headed by an executive secretary, at the Under-Secretary-General level. The organization is structured across six divisions overseeing eight subprogrammes. The organizational structure of ECE is provided in figure I.

¹ United Nations Evaluation Group, “Norms and Standards for Evaluation”, 2016.

² E/AC.51/2017/5.

³ E/ECE/778/Rev.5.

Figure I
Economic Commission for Europe organizational structure



Source: A/76/6 (Sect. 20).

Abbreviations: GS (OL), General Service (Other level); GS (PL), General Service (Principal level); RB, regular budget; XB, extrabudgetary.

C. Resources

7. As at 2021, ECE had 241 staff members. The staff members, including five regional advisers funded under section 23 (Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation), are shown in the table below.

Staff members and budget across divisions

Division	Subprogramme	Regular budget posts	Extrabudgetary posts	Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation	Budget, 2021 (millions of United States dollars)
Environment Division	Subprogramme 1: Environment	31	27	1	17.20
Sustainable Transport Division	Subprogramme 2: Transport	38	8	1	9.60
Statistical Division	Subprogramme 3: Statistics	27	–		5.10
	Subprogramme 8: Housing, land management and population	3	–	1	7.50
Sustainable Energy Division	Subprogramme 5: Sustainable energy	11	2	1	3.73
	Subprogramme 6: Trade	20	2 ^a	1	5.20

<i>Division</i>	<i>Subprogramme</i>	<i>Regular budget posts</i>	<i>Extrabudgetary posts</i>	<i>Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation</i>	<i>Budget, 2021 (millions of United States dollars)</i>
Economic Cooperation and Trade Division	Subprogramme 4: Economic cooperation and integration	11	1		3.60
Forests, Land and Housing Division	Subprogramme 7: Forests and the forest industry	8	–	–	1.92
	Subprogramme 8: Housing, land management and population	4	–		8.70

Source: A/72/6 (Sect. 20) A/72/6 (Sect. 23), A/74/6 (Sect. 20), A/74/6 (Sect. 23), A/75/6 (Sect. 20), A/75/6 (Sect. 23) and A/76/6 (Sect. 20).

^a As at 2022.

8. Over the six-year period from 2016 to 2021, on average, 60 per cent of ECE resources came from the regular budget, while the remaining came from extrabudgetary resources, the United Nations Development Account and Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation appropriations.

D. Focus of evaluation: subprogrammes 4 and 6

9. The ECE reform was adopted in December 2005.⁴ After a series of reviews,⁵ the Division on Trade and the Division on Economic Cooperation and Integration were merged in January 2014 into the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD), with two subprogrammes: Economic cooperation and integration, (subprogramme 4) and Trade (subprogramme 6). The Division comprised four sections. Subprogramme 4 included the Innovative Policies Development Section and the Public-Private Partnerships Section, while subprogramme 6 included the Market Access Section and the Trade Facilitation Section. The Division also had a regional adviser under the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation, who reported to the director and whose primary responsibility was to provide technical expertise on subjects related to trade under subprogramme 6. However, the role also required coordinating with the chiefs of section on specific in-country technical cooperation projects. Subprogramme 4 had no regional adviser.

10. ECTD work was executed through its two sectoral committees: the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships for subprogramme 4 and the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards for subprogramme 6. ECTD sections served as secretariat to both committees, the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, the three working parties (on agricultural quality standards (Working Party 7), regulatory cooperation and standardization policies (Working Party 6) and public-private partnerships), and two teams of specialists (on innovation and competitiveness policies and on environmental, social and governance traceability of sustainable value chains in the circular economy). ECTD also serviced several subgroups of its working parties and, together with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, contributed to the servicing of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and of governing bodies (the Economic Forum and the Governing Council), as well as the Special Programme's thematic working groups on innovation and technology for sustainable development and on trade.

⁴ E/ECE/1434/Rev.1.

⁵ E/2013/37-E/ECE/1464, appendix I.

11. The objective of subprogramme 4 is to strengthen policies on innovation, competitiveness and public-private partnerships, thus contributing to Sustainable Development Goals 8, 9, 12 and 17. The objective of subprogramme 6 is to improve trade facilitation and electronic business, regulatory cooperation and standardization policies, agricultural quality standards and trade-related economic cooperation, thus contributing to Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8, 9, 12 and 17. The thematic areas under each of the subprogrammes are referred to as workstreams throughout the report.



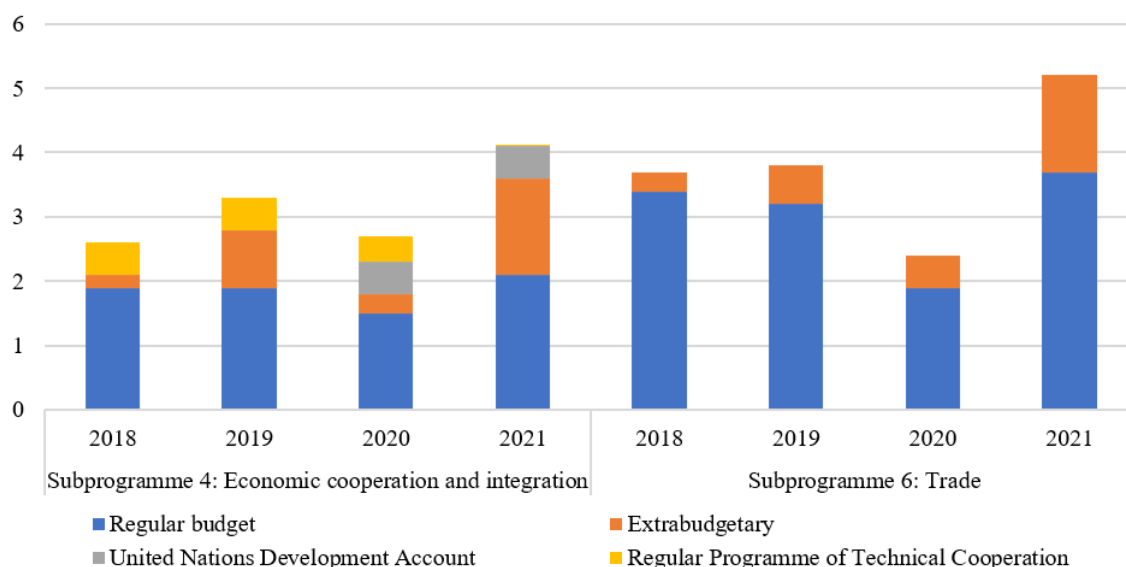
12. To contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ECE created high-impact cross-cutting “nexus” areas in 2018. The objective was to work on areas where multiple Sustainable Development Goals converged and where ECE had strengths. In addition, topics deemed important to member States were discussed at ECE biennial sessions. For example, the theme of the 2021 session⁶ was “Promoting circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in the region of the Economic Commission for Europe” and led to important decisions concerning future work in that area. ECTD, like all ECE divisions, was required to integrate those topics into its programme of work.

13. ECTD accounted for about 19.8 per cent of the total budget for all six divisions in 2021 – the third largest after the Environment Division and the Sustainable Transport Division. For the period 2018–2021, the shares of the regular budget in subprogramme 4 and subprogramme 6 total budgets were 58 and 81 per cent, respectively (figure II).

⁶ See [E/2021/37-E/ECE/1494](#).

Figure II
Subprogramme 4 and subprogramme 6 budgets, by sources, 2018–2021

(Millions of United States dollars)



Source: A/72/6 (Sect. 20), A/72/6 (Sect. 23), A/74/6 (Sect. 20), A/74/6 (Sect. 23), A/75/6 (Sect. 20), A/75/6 (Sect. 23) and A/76/6 (Sect. 20).

III. Scope and methodology

14. The evaluation covered the work of ECE subprogrammes 4 and 6 for the period 2018–2021.

15. The evaluation used a mixed-method approach incorporating the following qualitative and quantitative methods:

(a) A document review of available ECTD key outputs by respective workstreams or thematic areas, including budgets, monitoring and internal evaluation reports, documents from various intergovernmental body meetings (including standards and norms), knowledge products and post-training feedback from key participants;

(b) A structured content analysis of 27 Executive Committee conclusions reports (2018–2022) to establish documentary evidence;

(c) Key informant interviews with 108 ECE staff, member States, national stakeholders and other interlocutors (including policymakers), Resident Coordinator Office staff and other country, regional and global stakeholders (including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the private sector and think tanks);

(d) Two web-based surveys⁷ of: (i) ECTD stakeholders, including government representatives, United Nations entity representatives, development actors, members of academia and think tanks; and (ii) ECE staff members;

⁷ Staff survey: 142 of 229 staff in the survey population (62 per cent) responded; stakeholder survey: 121 of 237 stakeholders (51 per cent) responded.

(e) Four country-level structured case study analyses⁸ to identify progress towards outcomes at the level of the intended beneficiaries, as well as responsiveness, trends, good practices and gaps;

(f) A social media analysis of Twitter data for the period 2018–2021 to identify the themes and keywords associated with ECTD workstreams. This was used to compute the level of audience engagement in terms of “likes” and “retweets”;

(g) Direct observation of one intergovernmental body meetings in Geneva (Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships) and two forums (one on the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, in Geneva, and one on public-private partnership, in Barcelona, Spain);

(h) A secondary data analysis of the annual trade data from the UN Comtrade Database was conducted to construct an intraregional trade intensity index. As a standard measure of trade introversion, the index was used as a proxy indicator for the overall objective of subprogramme 6. The index was computed according to the methodology used by the Asian Development Bank⁹ and ranged from 0 to 1, with a higher value indicating that the country’s trade in goods was introverted and a lower value that it was extroverted.

16. The evaluation had the following limitations:

(a) It was not possible to assess ECTD comprehensive progress towards outcomes owing to the lack of outcome-level data. ECTD largely reported on outputs, and sometimes on outcomes, for which performance indicators were not fully developed and achievements mentioned in the annual reports were insufficient to show ECTD contribution. The evaluation team mitigated this, wherever possible, by identifying information from other sources and assuming that ECTD was one of the many contributors to outcomes. Examples mentioned in the present report are therefore not an exhaustive list of outcomes;

(b) The intraregional trade intensity index did not indicate economic integration. Given the unavailability of relevant country-level indicators to compute a comprehensive index in terms of coverage and the lack of time and resources to collect missing information, the computation of an overall economic integration of the ECE region was not undertaken. The computation of an intraregional trade intensity index was limited to the 17 countries¹⁰ that received technical assistance from ECTD. However, this did not constitute a “subregion” for trade flow analysis. Any movement in an individual country’s index therefore only indicated its integration within the 17 countries.

⁸ Field visits to Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and Uzbekistan.

⁹ Hyeon-Seung Huh and Cyn-Young Park, “Asia-Pacific regional integration index: construction, interpretation, and comparison”, *ADB Economics Working Paper Series*, No. 511 (April 2017), p. 3.

¹⁰ The list of programme countries is provided in a footnote in a document entitled “UNECE technical cooperation strategy” (p. 2) (available at https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Item%207_ECE_EX_2021_11%20TC%20Strategy.pdf). For computation of the index, the Russian Federation was included, as it was a major trading partner for many countries in the region, while Kosovo was excluded for paucity of data (references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)).

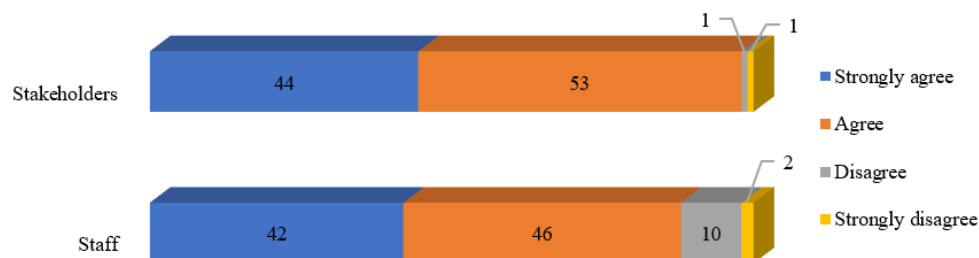
IV. Evaluation results

A. The ECTD work was aligned with its mandates and comparative advantages towards strengthening member States' economic cooperation and integration; however, concerns were raised about some workstreams

ECTD work was aligned with its mandate; however, there was ongoing debate on what functions and workstreams would be more relevant to its diverse membership

17. The ECTD workstreams were found to be aligned with its mandate. The majority of stakeholders and staff survey respondents (97 and 88 per cent, respectively) agreed that the work was in accordance with the mandate provided to the Division (figure III). Similarly, staff and stakeholder interviewees commented that there was a clear link between member States' directions to ECTD regarding the workstreams and ECTD work. This alignment was a result of close coordination between the Division and the Executive Committee, which met every year to guide and review the implementation of the programme of work of the two sectoral committees and the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business.

Figure III
Survey respondents on the alignment of ECTD work and its mandate
(Percentage)



Source: OIOS survey of ECTD stakeholders (N = 112) and ECE staff (N = 98).

18. Some concerns were however identified regarding the introduction and adaptation of the circular economy and value chain traceability, which were included in the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business programme of work and ECE proposed programme. Specifically, two member States voiced concern about integrating the circular economy into Working Party 7, on the grounds that that Working Party was not suitable to discuss such topics, as its members lacked relevant expertise; and some staff members questioned whether work on value chain traceability was compatible with the ECTD mandate. However, there was no expressed objection to the topic, and it was adopted by the Executive Committee.¹¹

19. Interviewed ECTD and non-ECTD staff members suggested that two schools of thought existed regarding the direction of ECTD work: one in favour of standards setting; and another in favour of enhancing technical assistance for the implementation of standards, complemented by strengthening the Division's potential as a "think tank" in servicing the needs of the ECE 17 programme countries.

¹¹ EXCOM/CONCLU/109, para. 43.

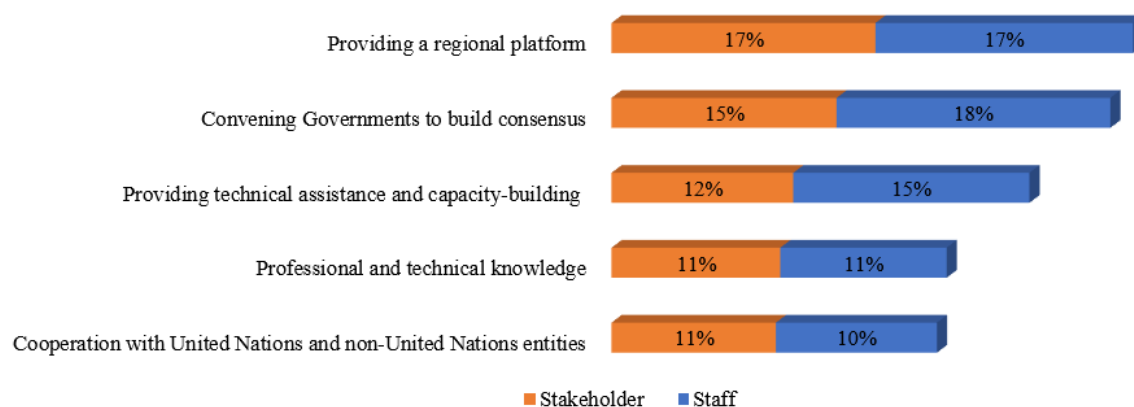
Interviews with member States suggested that the two directions for ECTD work were complementary, not mutually exclusive, and needed to be balanced by the Division.

In a crowded trade and economic cooperation space, ECTD was able to carve out a space for itself

20. Even though several international organizations work on similar themes, ECTD has been able to carve out a space for itself by leveraging its comparative advantages. Figure IV shows the five highest-rated ECTD comparative advantages, as ranked by stakeholder and staff survey respondents.

Figure IV

Five highest-rated ECTD comparative advantages as rated by survey respondents



Source: OIOS survey of ECTD stakeholders (N = 112) and ECE staff (N = 98).

21. Providing a regional platform for international policy dialogue and exchanging best practices among countries in the ECE region was the Division's main comparative advantage. Several national interlocutors, in particular from the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia region, commented that the Division's niche stemmed from its ability to provide countries in transition with a platform to raise their issues, which other organizations lacked. For example, ECTD facilitated a presentation by the Central Asian Working Group on dried apricots in Working Party 7, which allowed the countries to put forward standards that were most applicable to them.

22. Similarly, the "convening power" of ECTD to bring Governments together to build consensus on frameworks, norms, standards and agreements on economic cooperation and trade was the second most mentioned comparative advantage. This advantage squarely fell within the remit of ECTD normative functions and was appreciated by the national interlocutors.

23. In addition, ECTD was seen as a reliable source of technical assistance to specific needs of the member States and of capacity-building services on topics related to economic cooperation and trade. For example, ECTD provided support to Kyrgyzstan in the country's WTO category C notifications¹² and the development of its national trade facilitation road map for 2021–2025. This was complemented by the

¹² Notification obligations under article 16.1 (a), (b), (c) and (d) of the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation. Category C means that WTO country members will need additional time and capacity-building support to implement the measure.

ECTD work on generating knowledge,¹³ research on and analysis of related issues through the conduct of studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade for Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, and innovation for sustainable development reviews for Belarus, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, to name a few.

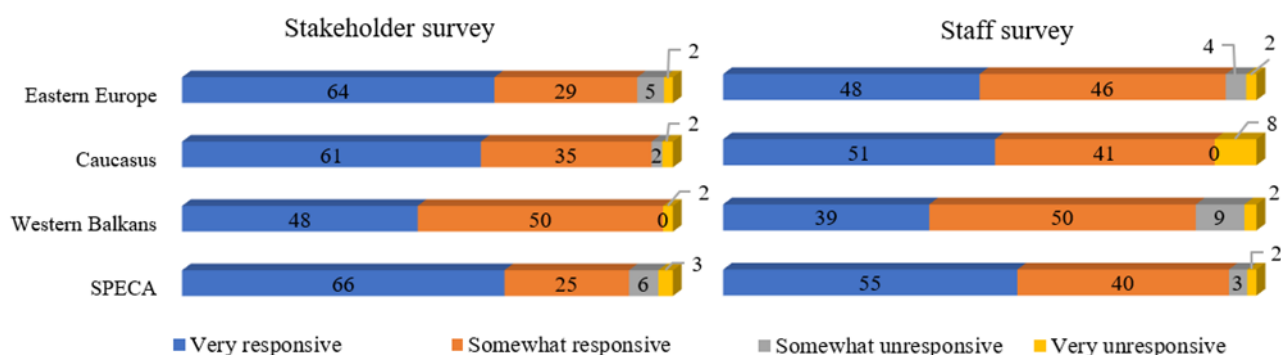
24. In addition, ECTD had comparative advantages in terms of professional and technical knowledge and expertise on its core thematic areas, which most recently included the circular economy, sustainable value chains and the integration of Sustainable Development Goals into member States' national plans. This finding was further validated by interviewees, who mentioned similar ECTD primary comparative advantages, including the unique position of ECTD, which is able to cooperate with United Nations and non-United Nations entities on cross-cutting issues.

ECTD largely responded to specific member States' requests; however, the relevance of a few of its workstreams was limited

25. ECTD had no comprehensive mechanism in place to record or track all requests made by its member States, other than those used by individual intergovernmental bodies in the context of their own deliberations. According to survey respondents, ECTD had been very responsive to the needs of member States from the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and Caucasus regions, and less so to those of the Western Balkans (figure V).

Figure V
ECTD response to needs and priorities of the regions

(Percentage)



Source: OIOS survey of ECTD stakeholders (N = 95) and ECE staff (N = 95).

Abbreviation: SPECA, United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia.

26. Similarly, 91 per cent of interviewees agreed that ECTD provided support to countries in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, followed by 33 per cent for Eastern Europe, 30 per cent for the Caucasus and 18 per cent for the Western Balkans.

27. The variation in responding to the needs of countries from different regions was explained, on the one hand, by the ECTD diverse membership, with varying degrees of specific needs relating to different topics as a function of their economy, geographical positioning and national priorities and, on the other hand, by the availability of extrabudgetary funding. In addition, the lower rating by countries in

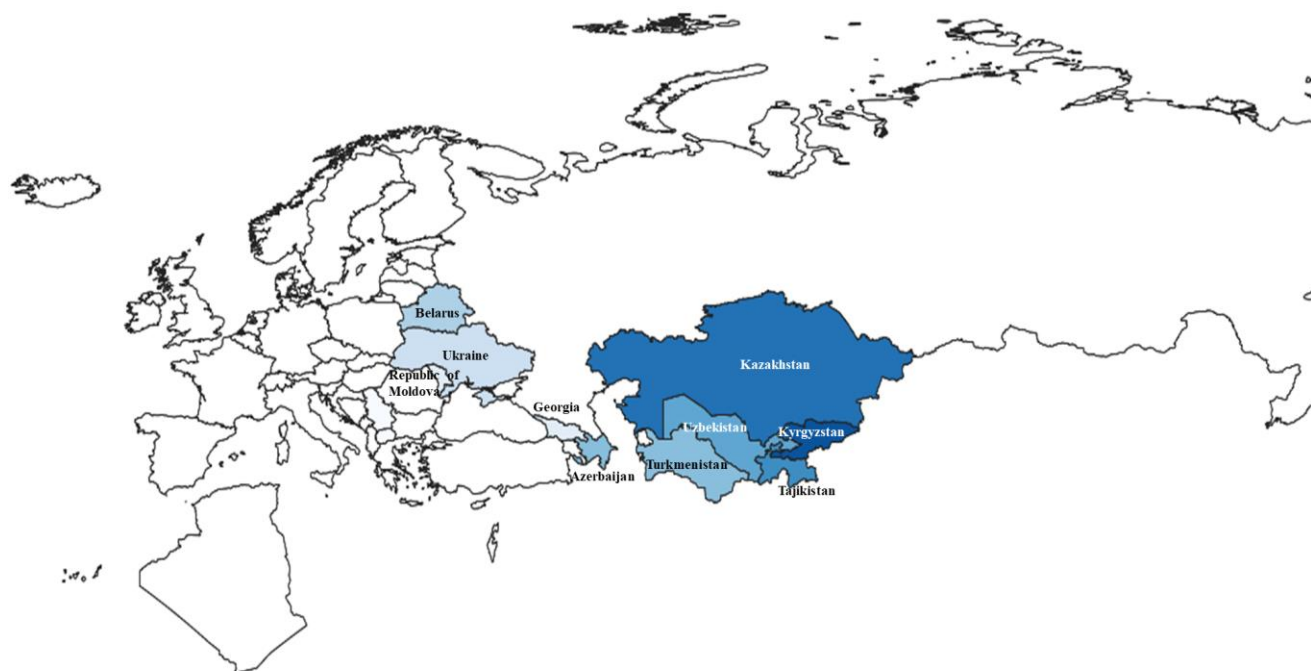
¹³ ECTD studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade were used to prepare WTO trade policy reviews (see the reviews of the Republic of Moldova (2022) (WT/TPR/S/428) and of Kyrgyzstan (2021) (WT/TPR/S/411)).

the Western Balkan region may be due to their receiving support primarily from the European Union.

28. Similarly, the majority of the ECTD extrabudgetary and Development Account projects were concentrated in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and Caucasus regions. While Kyrgyzstan was included in 21 projects, Kazakhstan in 20 and Tajikistan in 18, there was only one project each for North Macedonia and Serbia. About 45 per cent (\$6.5 million) of all extrabudgetary and Development Account projects under the two subprogrammes for the period 2018–2021 included one of the three Central Asian countries. In the absence of data on requests made by member States, the concentration of projects in a small group of countries pointed to an imbalance in support provided to the 17 programme countries (figure VI).

Figure VI

Concentration of ECTD extrabudgetary and Development Account projects in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and Caucasus regions



Source: ECTD programme management documents.

Note: The density of colours depicts the number of projects. Darker areas mean more projects, while lighter areas mean fewer projects. White means no projects.

Disclaimer: The boundaries, names and designations used in the present map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

29. The ECTD ability to respond to the specific requests of member States notwithstanding, the relevance of a few of its workstreams to some of the member States was limited. While the normative tools related to trade facilitation was relevant to the European Union,¹⁴ technical assistance and capacity-building related to those

¹⁴ E.g. regulation (EU) 2020/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 July 2020 on electronic freight transport information and Regulation (EU) 2022/2399 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 establishing the European Union Single Window Environment for Customs and amending Regulation (EU) No. 952/2013.

tools were less relevant to the European Union and its member States. However, the European Union acknowledged the latter's relevance for the 17 programme countries that needed specific technical assistance, especially when acceding to WTO.

30. In terms of the circular economy, national interlocutors commented¹⁵ on its relevance but found it challenging to incorporate in their national strategies. However, 91 per cent of stakeholder survey respondents considered the circular economy and digitization as relevant to ECTD work.

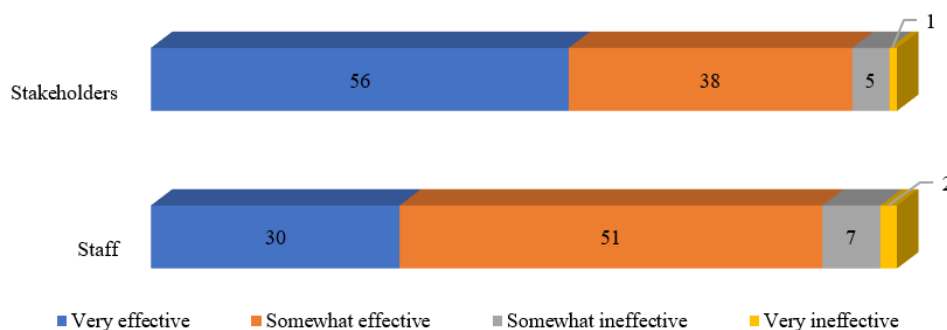
31. The relevance of ECTD work was also hindered by a lack of strategic and synergetic approach (see paras. 48 and 49). While ECTD adhered to the planning and budgeting guidelines, the Division lacked a systematic strategic planning approach to be fully relevant, especially in view of the complexities of its subprogrammes, the impact of COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine. The ECTD workstreams largely worked in silos and the two subprogrammes did not have a joint strategy. ECTD also lacked coherent messaging at the regional and country levels.

B. ECTD has been effective in promoting policy dialogue and facilitating adoption of norms and standards

ECTD normative work has been largely effective and has facilitated the endorsement of norms and standards

32. The majority of survey respondents (94 per cent of stakeholders and 81 per cent of staff) perceived that ECTD effectively discharged its function as a secretariat of intergovernmental bodies and convenor. Similarly, 61 per cent of the interviewed member States found the work of ECTD effective in building consensus and facilitating the development and adoption of standards (figure VII).

Figure VII
Function as a secretariat to intergovernmental bodies
(Percentage)



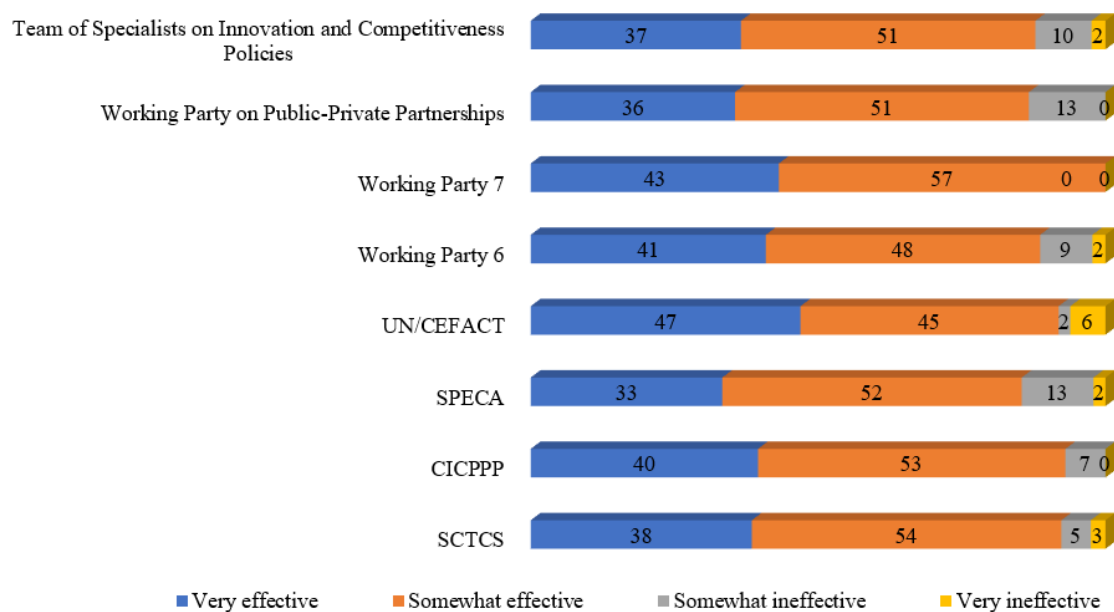
Source: OIOS survey of stakeholders (N = 105) and ECE staff (N = 89).

33. ECTD served as a secretariat to eight intergovernmental bodies that covered various workstreams of the Division. Of those, its functions as a secretariat of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, Working Party 6, Working Party 7 and the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships were considered very effective (figure VIII).

¹⁵ See WTO Public Forum, "Circular economy and trade: opportunities and challenges for transition economies", forum session, Geneva, 30 September 2022. Available at www.wto.org/english/forums_e/public_forum22_e/pf22_session_fullpage_e.htm?session=85.

Figure VIII
ECTD effectiveness as a secretariat to intergovernmental bodies and programmes

(Percentage)



Source: OIOS survey of stakeholders (N = 105) and ECE staff (N = 89).

Abbreviations: CICPPP, Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships; SCTCS, Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards; SPECA, United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia; UN/CEFACT, United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business.

34. One of the primary functions of ECTD as a secretariat is to facilitate the adoption or revision of norms and standards by fostering consensus among member States. For example, Working Party 6 adopted nine standards, Working Party 7 adopted 35 standards and the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships adopted 4 standards in the period 2018–2021. While ECTD was effective on that front, the norms and standards were only voluntary, meaning that member States agreed to them but were not bound by them. This approach therefore provided member States with flexibility to incorporate the norms and standards in their national legislations and, ultimately, to implement them at their discretion.¹⁶

35. There were numerous instances of norms and standards being adopted into national policies or legislation. For example, several United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business standards¹⁷ and some 50 standards on fresh fruit and vegetables¹⁸ (from the work of Working Party 7) were thus adopted by the

¹⁶ The value added and relevance of ECE “soft” normative outcomes of its intergovernmental machinery was noted by ECE stakeholders.

¹⁷ E.g. the standard on Fisheries Language for Universal Exchange and fishery agreements (see https://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?scope=EURLEX&text=cefact&lang=en&type=quick&qid=1625558630474&DTS_SUBDOM=INTER_AGREE), Directive 2014/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 on electronic invoicing in public procurement, the United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Locations, the United Nations Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport and Code List recommendations 21 and 28 (see <https://unece.org/trade/uncfact/cl-recommendations>).

¹⁸ E.g. for about 10 of the most sold fruit and vegetables, such as for apples, in 2020 (see https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/50_Apples.pdf).

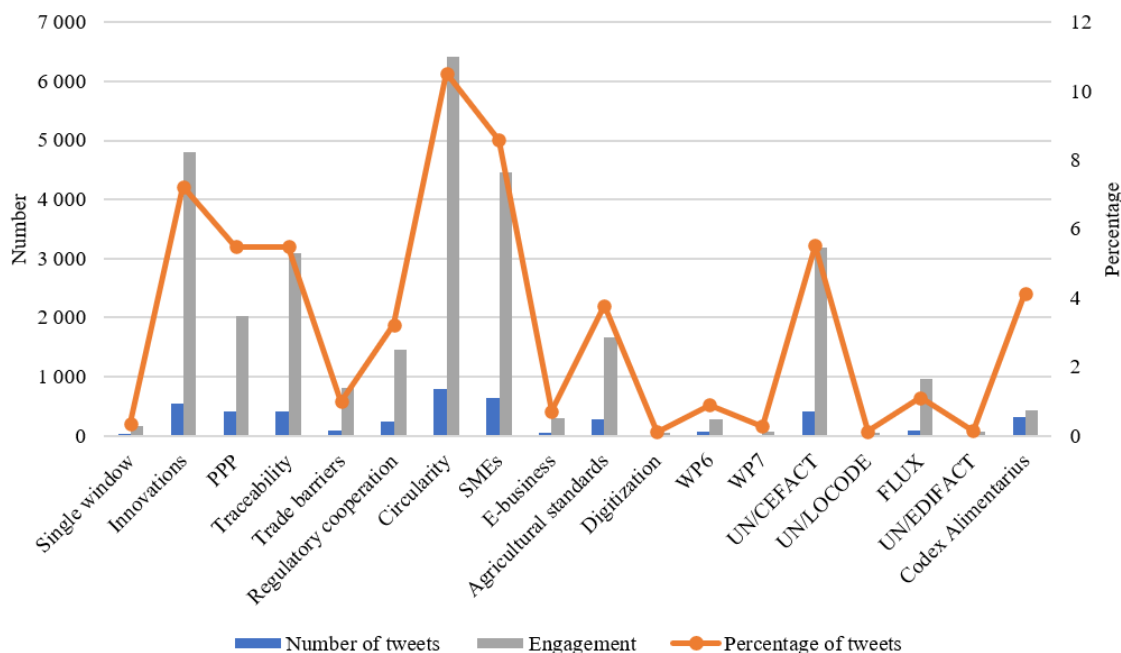
European Union. Similarly, ECTD work on evaluation methodology in public-private partnerships had been gaining traction¹⁹ with the member States.

ECTD visibility and perceived effectiveness significantly varied by workstreams

36. While ECTD was largely seen as effectively serving intergovernmental bodies, workstreams under the two subprogrammes varied significantly in terms of visibility and perceived effectiveness. An analysis of Twitter data for the period 2018–2021 was conducted to identify the themes and keywords associated with ECTD workstreams and compute their level of engagement (figure IX).

Figure IX

Visibility of keywords and themes associated with ECTD workstreams on Twitter



Source: OIOS analysis of Twitter data (2018–2021).

Note: Number of ECE-relevant tweets (40,450) and ECTD-relevant tweets (5,845); engagement = number of likes + number of retweets.

Abbreviations: FLUX, Fisheries Language for Universal Exchange; PPP, public-private partnerships; SMEs, small and medium-sized enterprises; WP, working group; UN/CEFACT, United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business; UN/EDIFACT, United Nations Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport; UN/LOCODE, United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Location.

37. Keywords and themes associated with subprogramme 4 and frontier topics had a higher share of tweets and level of engagement compared with the tools and standards under subprogramme 6, with the exception of mentions of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, small and medium-sized enterprises and value chain and traceability. The reason was that the work of subprogramme 4 was largely “demand-driven”, had gained recent traction with member States and produced outputs that were efficiently disseminated through mailing lists, newsletters or other communication materials. On the contrary, tools

¹⁹ Member States of the European Union acknowledged the significant role that ECTD had in promoting and discussing public-private partnerships (evaluation methodology and environmental, social and governance issues).

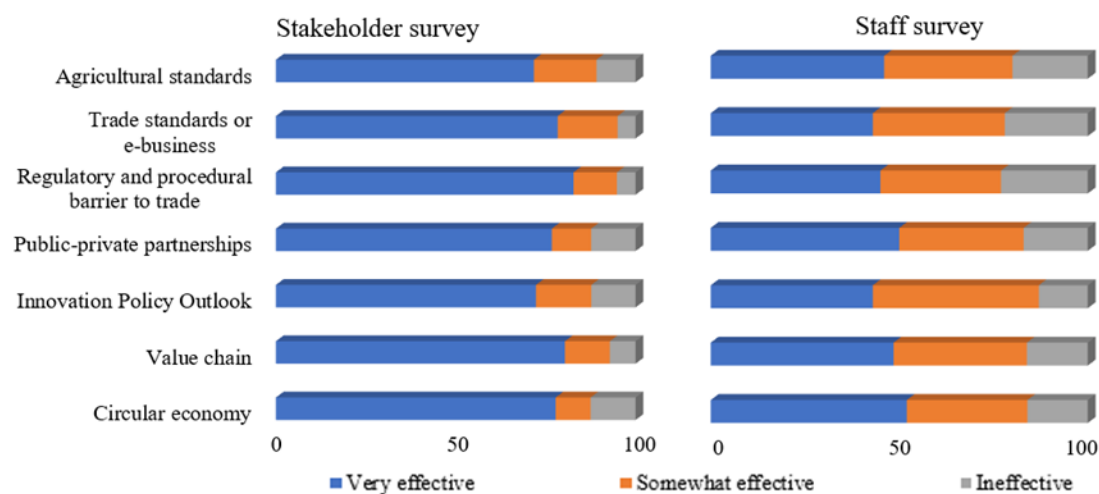
and standards produced under subprogramme 6 were largely perennial in nature and related to setting, updating or maintaining standards that were part of the core work of the Division. In addition, the tools and standards (e.g. the United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Locations and the United Nations Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport) were technical in nature, thereby rendering their understandability limited to their user base and resulting in low visibility and engagement on social media.

38. However, there was evidence that tools, even though technical in nature, had a significant user base. For example, the United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Locations contained over 100,000 entries covering 249 countries, territories and special areas and received 6,760 data maintenance requests in 2021. It was used 1.5 billion times in United Nations Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport messages for international trade every year. The consistent large number of such requests received over the past four years,²⁰ along with that of use cases every year, demonstrated significant utility of the tool among its beneficiaries.

39. Similarly, of 149 interview references where ECTD areas of work were rated as very effective, 44 per cent mentioned tools and standards under subprogramme 6, followed by 35 per cent under subprogramme 4, 11 per cent for value chain traceability and 10 per cent for the circular economy. Likewise, survey respondents rated all ECTD areas of work as effective; albeit with stakeholders having a more favourable picture in general compared with staff, with only marginal differences between the areas of work of the two subprogrammes (figure X).

Figure X
Effectiveness of ECTD areas of work

(Percentage)



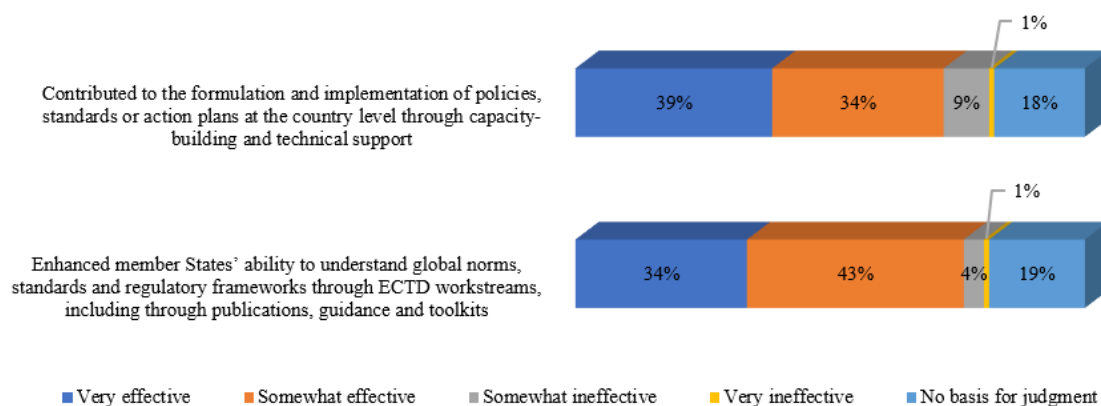
Source: OIOS survey of stakeholders (N = 105) and ECE staff (N = 89).

²⁰ Except for 2020. A total of 3,637 data maintenance requests were received in 2018, 6,397 in 2019, 836 in 2020 and 6,760 in 2021.

C. While ECTD contributed to an enhanced understanding of key policy options and enabled member States' action on critical areas, concrete results were mixed

40. The majority (77 per cent) of stakeholders and 19 per cent of interview references found that ECTD enhanced the member States' ability to understand global norms, standards and regulatory frameworks through ECTD workstreams, including publications, guidance and toolkits. Similarly, 73 per cent of stakeholder survey respondents and 47 per cent of interview references found the Division either very effective or somewhat effective with regard to contributing to formulating and implementing policies, standards or action plans at the country level through capacity-building and technical support (figure XI).

Figure XI
Effectiveness of ECTD in achieving the outcomes



Source: OIOS survey of ECTD stakeholders (N = 102).

41. However, evidence of concrete results varied. For agricultural standards, national interlocutors commented that it usually took two to three years to adopt a standard and longer to implement it at the national level. Any potential impact of such standard adoption can only be documented over a long period. Relatedly, a joint ECE-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study²¹ suggested a significant increase²² in global trade in fresh fruit and vegetables resulting from the adoption of ECE standards and the development of explanatory materials under the OECD Fruit and Vegetables Scheme.

42. National interlocutors found the Subregional Innovation Policy Outlook and the reviews useful and rated the initiatives highly. Implementation of recommendations varied. For example, only a small fraction of recommendations of the *Innovation for Sustainable Development Review of Kyrgyzstan* were implemented. ECTD supported Kyrgyzstan in the development of the concept of scientific and innovation development in the country. The Division was also invited by the Government to help

²¹ In preparation and not yet peer-reviewed. A related presentation is available at https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/WP7_OECD_ECE_joint_study2021.pdf.

²² Of the 37 ECE standards examined, the study found statistically significant effects on trade in artichokes (35 per cent), asparagus (27 per cent), ribbed celery (25 per cent), mangoes (22 per cent) and cultivated mushrooms (82 per cent), among others.

to develop a road map, but only 5 of 80 recommendations were implemented, and only partially, including expert assistance to set up business incubators.²³

43. The ECTD work on public-private partnerships, especially with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Belarus, was instrumental in leading to a national law on those partnerships. Similarly, and more recently, the work on evaluation methodology in such partnerships has gained traction with national authorities in Ukraine, where the proposed law will make it mandatory for any public-private partnerships project in the country to embed an evaluation methodology.

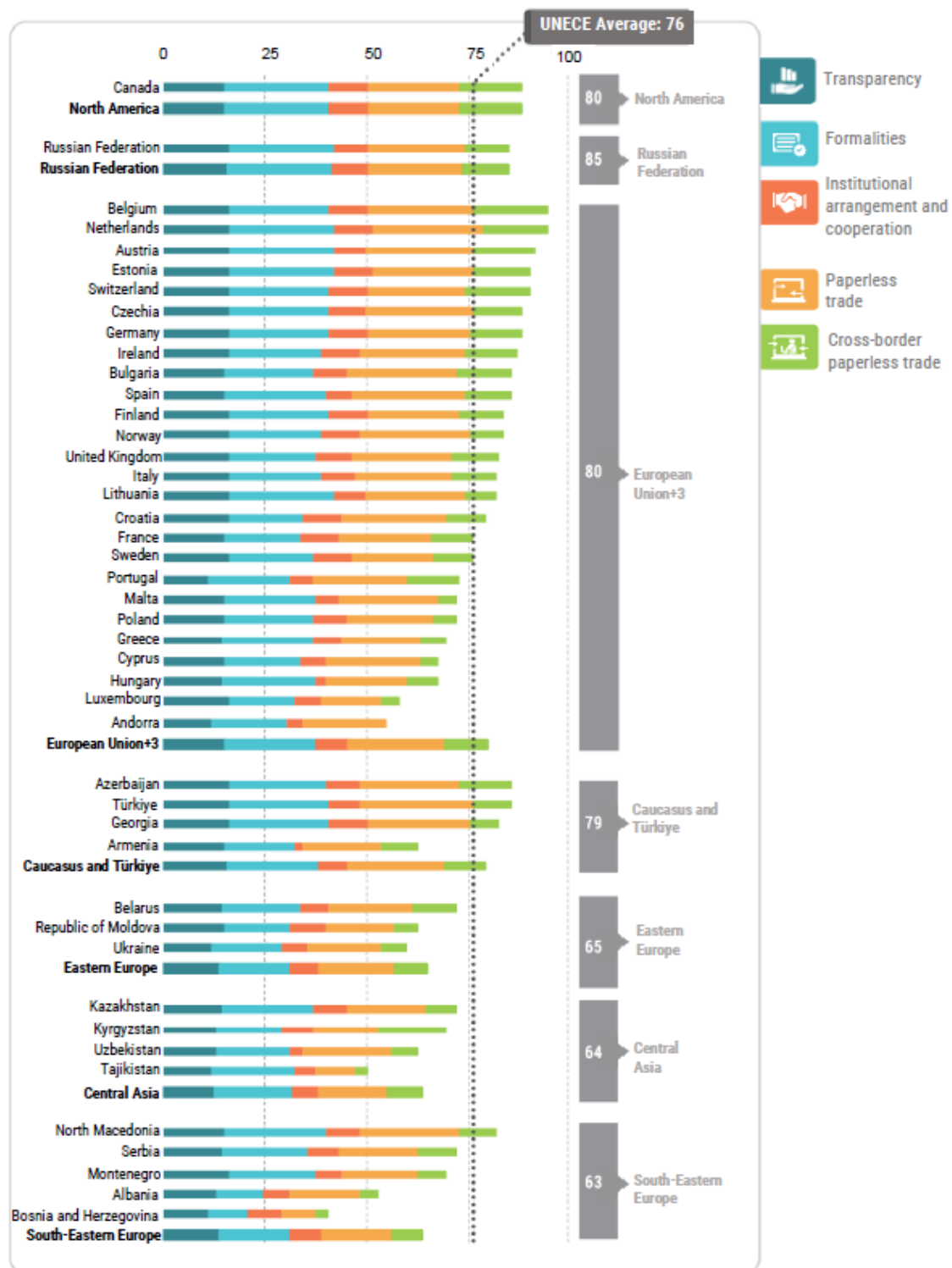
44. Similarly, national interlocutors found ECTD work on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade useful, but progress on the implementation of the recommendations was mixed. For example, while Serbia announced that it would use ECE recommendations to remove regulatory and procedural barriers to trade in goods, interviewed national stakeholders suggested that the implementation of the recommendations was on hold owing to low absorption capacity. In other examples, Kazakhstan developed an automated system for customs and tax administration (ASTANA-I) because of ECTD recommendations, and ECE and Azerbaijan completed a project aligning the country's customs data resources used in its single window system with United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business standards.

45. An overview of the implementation rate of trade facilitation measures conducted in 2021 showed significant variation across member States. The rates in South-Eastern Europe (63 per cent), Central Asia (64 per cent) and Eastern Europe (65 per cent) were below the ECE average of 76 per cent.²⁴ This indicated that several member States needed more focused and specific support from ECTD on trade facilitation measures to make progress on their implementation (figure XII).

²³ In the case of the Subregional Innovation Policy Outlook, there were early signs of broad implementation of the recommendations. All six beneficiary countries displayed implementation efforts of the Outlook recommendations across a broad range of topics only a few months after the release of the publication. Furthermore, the innovation for sustainable development reviews and the Innovation Policy Outlook have shaped national and sectoral action plans and strategies.

²⁴ Six ECE members States with economies in transition were not members of WTO and were therefore not bound by the Agreement on Trade Facilitation.

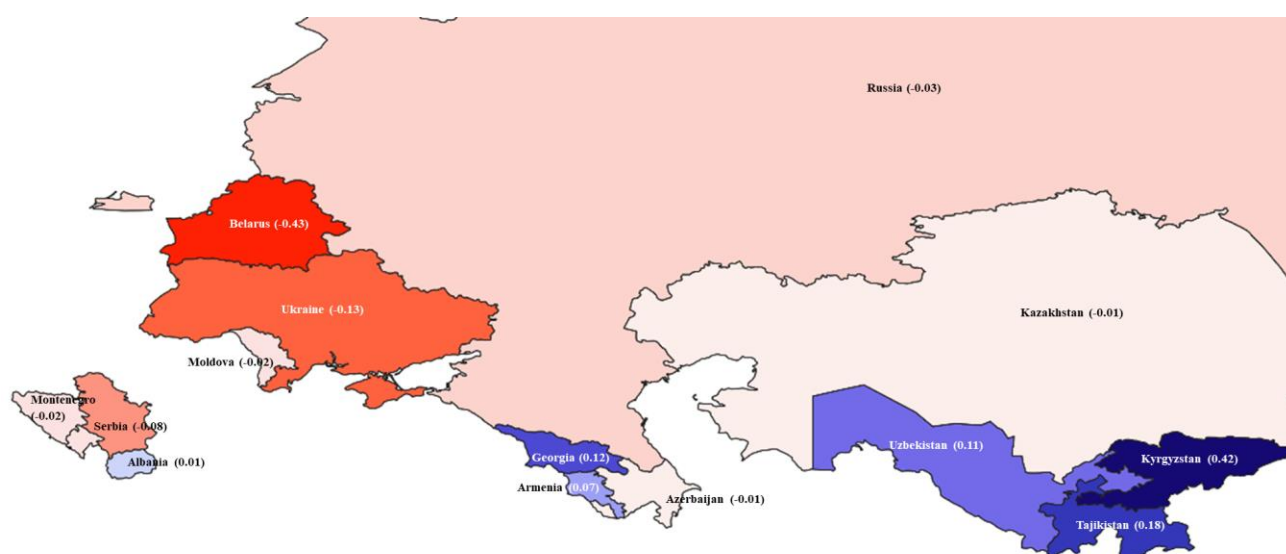
Figure XII
Trade facilitation implementation rates
(Percentage)



Source: ECE, regional trade facilitation survey, 2021.

46. As noted above (see paras. 28 and 29), ECTD work on trade facilitation was of varying relevance to different ECE member States. For example, ECTD technical assistance and capacity-building on trade facilitation were more relevant to the 17 programme countries²⁵ where the Division had implemented some 17 extrabudgetary and Development Account projects under subprogramme 6. However, member States' levels of trade integration within the 17 programme countries varied significantly.²⁶ The average intraregional trade intensity index for the 17 programme countries was 0.395 in 2021. Kyrgyzstan had the highest trade intensity index (0.997), followed by Tajikistan (0.969), Uzbekistan (0.571), Armenia (0.564) and Belarus (0.563). North Macedonia and the Russian Federation (0.002 and 0.004, respectively) had the lowest trade intensity index.

Figure XIII
Change in intraregional trade intensity index, 2016–2021



Source: OIOS computation of the trade intensity index using annual trade data from the UN Comtrade Database.

Note: The density of colours depicts the changes in trade intensity index. Darker colours mean more changes, and lighter ones mean fewer changes. Blue means positive and red means negative changes in the index.

Disclaimer: The boundaries, names and designations used in the present map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

47. The juxtaposition of extrabudgetary and Development Account projects and changes in intraregional trade intensity index (figure XIII) suggested a positive correlation between ECTD interventions and projects and trade integration. For example, Kyrgyzstan, which was included in most (13) projects, witnessed an increase in trade intensity index from 0.576 in 2016 to 0.997 in 2021 (a change of +0.42). Similarly, the trade intensity index for Tajikistan, where ECTD implemented the third largest number of projects (9), changed by +0.18. In contrast, the trade intensity index for Kazakhstan, where ECTD had implemented the second largest

²⁵ For the present evaluation, reference to 17 programme countries include trade data for: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

²⁶ It must be noted that the 17 programme countries did not constitute a “trading block” or a “subregion” for trade flow analysis purpose. Any interpretation of the trade intensity index must be made in conjunction with paragraphs 28 and 29 regarding the locations of extrabudgetary and Development Account (technical cooperation and assistance) projects.

number of projects (11), changed by -0.01. Although not evidence of causality by any means, the positive correlation pointed to the potential impact of ECTD activities. Further research in this area could complement those initial findings.

D. There was limited internal coherence within ECTD and with other divisions; while nexus areas brought opportunities for ECE-wide coordination

Legacy issues related to the ECE restructuring and the resulting ECTD mandates affected coherence between its subprogrammes

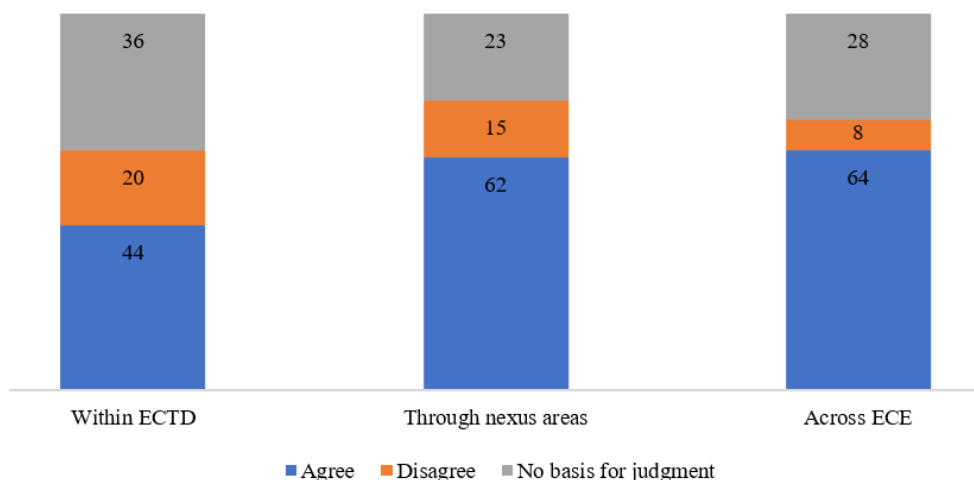
48. The 2013 restructuring²⁷ of ECE merged the Division on Trade and the Division on Economic Cooperation and Integration. This resulted in the creation of ECTD, with two subprogrammes (4 and 6), and four sections servicing eight intergovernmental bodies. Survey responses and interviewed staff and stakeholders suggested that this had affected the internal coherence within the division and created dispersion.

49. According to survey respondents reflecting on challenges faced by ECTD, the two main internal coherence challenges were “very different activities put in one division” and “diversity of the different sections that have no linkages and common vision”. In addition, only 44 per cent of ECE staff believed that there was internal coherence within ECTD, compared with the higher percentages of ECE staff that believed there was coherence across ECE and through nexus areas²⁸ (figure XIV).

Figure XIV

Economic Commission for Europe staff opinion on internal coherence

(Percentage)



Source: OIOS survey of ECE staff (N = 108).

²⁷ 2005 reform of ECE (see [E/2013/37-E/ECE/1464](#)).

²⁸ In 2018, ECE identified four “nexus” areas where multiple Sustainable development Goals converged: sustainable use of natural resources, sustainable and smart cities for all ages, sustainable mobility, and smart connectivity, measuring and monitoring progress towards the Goals (EXCOM/CONCLU/98, para. 23).

50. Similarly, of the interviewees who expressed themselves on coherence within ECE, only 8 per cent believed there was coherence within ECTD. This compared with 51 per cent who believed that there was coherence among divisions and 16 per cent who believed that there was broader coherence in ECE, for example, through nexus areas.

There was limited evidence of planning for joint deliverables between ECTD and other divisions

51. ECTD cooperated with the Environment Division on environmental performance reviews, the Innovation Policy Outlook, reviews on traceability, and public-private partnerships; with the Sustainable Energy Division on natural resource management; and with the Sustainable Transport Division on areas of electronic international transport of goods (e-TIR) and COVID-19 response, among others. However, there was limited evidence of joint interdivisional planning on concrete deliverables. Moreover, some interviewees responded that there were missed opportunities for cooperation with other divisions, owing to limited human resources in ECTD and other internal challenges (see para. 56).

ECE nexus areas provided opportunities for enhanced coordination between ECTD and other divisions

52. The nexus areas approach provided a platform for increased exchanges between ECE divisions. Interviewed staff noted that, at nexus meetings, they “met colleagues whom they had not cooperated with before” and that “nexuses provided opportunities for cross-sectoral thinking”. Staff survey results (see figure XIV) also showed that almost 20 per cent more respondents believed that there was internal ECE cooperation owing to nexus areas compared with that within ECTD.

E. While ECTD diversified its partnerships with relevant entities to collaborate in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there were missed opportunities in programme countries

ECTD coherence and coordination of partnerships at headquarters was largely effective, though disjointed to a great extent and lacking follow-up in programme countries

53. ECTD had a diverse set of partnerships at the regional and global levels and maintained frequent communications with organizations in Geneva. For example, survey respondents and interviewees identified the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development as one of the main ECTD external partners. This was followed by the private sector in regions – largely owing to the proactiveness of the Public-Private Partnership Section in forging partnerships through its centres of excellence, which assisted in developing standards and organizing flagship events. In addition, key stakeholders from international organizations and think tanks mentioned regular exchanges of information with ECTD, such as through participation in the Division’s events and peer reviews of publications. Moreover, ECTD had established good ties with research networks working in similar areas.

54. Survey respondents and interviewees identified the resident coordinator offices in programme countries as the third most important group of external partners. This is quite significant, as ECTD had participated in United Nations country teams’ strategic planning processes, such as United Nations common country assessments

and United Nations sustainable development and cooperation frameworks.²⁹ However, country team case study stakeholders commented that there was limited interaction with ECTD after the signing of such frameworks. In addition, interviewed national stakeholders suggested that there was no coherent picture of ECTD activities and that the Division’s “left hand wasn’t speaking with the right hand” and, therefore, projected a disjointed front at the country level. While ECTD had clear mandates to work on areas related to innovations and single window, a few stakeholders pointed to potential overlap with other United Nations and non-United Nations agencies working on similar issues. Moreover, national interlocutors within the Government were often unaware of ECTD mandates, projects, interventions and potential achievements.

55. In 2019, ECE revised the role of regional advisers by adding the coordination of ECE activities at the programme country level to their responsibilities. However, interviewed key stakeholders in the case study countries suggested that, while regional advisers continued to provide specific technical support in their specialized areas, they did not coordinate ECE activities consistently.

F. ECTD ensured the sustainability of some key normative products. However, sustainability was not fully ensured for all workstreams

Despite some level of sustainability of ECTD workstreams, resources were spread thin

56. The ECTD norms and standards (largely funded under the regular budget), along with technical expertise and capacity-building (largely funded under extrabudgetary resources), ensured the sustainability of tools under its workstreams, for example, the Fisheries Language for Universal Exchange, a standard that provides adequate access to electronic data from vessels and is aimed at preventing overfishing and illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing. Another example is the United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Locations, which is used by most transport companies. The fact that those norms and standards were already agreed upon and were tools developed and used by a significant user base pointed to their higher level of sustainability.

57. However, several factors had the potential to hinder the continuity of ECTD workstreams. About one third of interviewees pointed to a low level of resources for follow-up. Similarly, about 40 per cent of survey respondents mentioned limited financial and human resources as one of the significant internal challenges that ECTD faced. Moreover, the concurrence of vacancies and prolonged sick leaves, including at the senior level, led to reliance on temporary positions. There were concerns that this might affect ECTD ability to maintain or build on previous achievements and follow up on the sustainability of results at the country level.

58. In addition, the non-resident status of ECE presence in programme countries created specific challenges for ECTD ability to collaborate effectively with country teams and other actors to sustain the implementation of its norms, standards and recommendations. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, ECTD worked with UNDP, the German Agency for International Cooperation and Hilfswerk International on raising awareness of ECE standards on dried fruit. This facilitated the adoption of standards by local producers and exhibited greater potential for progress towards outcome-level results in agricultural quality. However, on newer workstreams, such as traceability, national stakeholders commented that, should ECTD no longer implement the project, it would stop, as “there were no players with knowledge, budget and capacity to do [that] work”.

²⁹ ECE is a signatory to 17 United Nations sustainable development and cooperation frameworks in the region (see <https://unsdg.un.org/un-in-action/country-level?tab=countries-listing>).

59. Considering the financial gap in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the importance for ECE to fulfil its mandate, the ECE Executive Committee adopted a resource mobilization strategy. Along with the 2021 Technical Cooperation Strategy, it provided that regional advisers would ensure the alignment of resource mobilization with the programme countries' development needs and priorities, in close coordination with resident coordinators. However, there was no evidence that the strategies were operationalized or that implementation action plans were developed. In addition, on the basis of insights collected from the case studies, a coherent approach to the coordination of ECTD work at the country level, and consequently of country-specific resource planning, was lacking, further affecting the sustainability of the Division's work.

The latest development in Europe posed a significant risk to the sustainability of ECTD work in the region

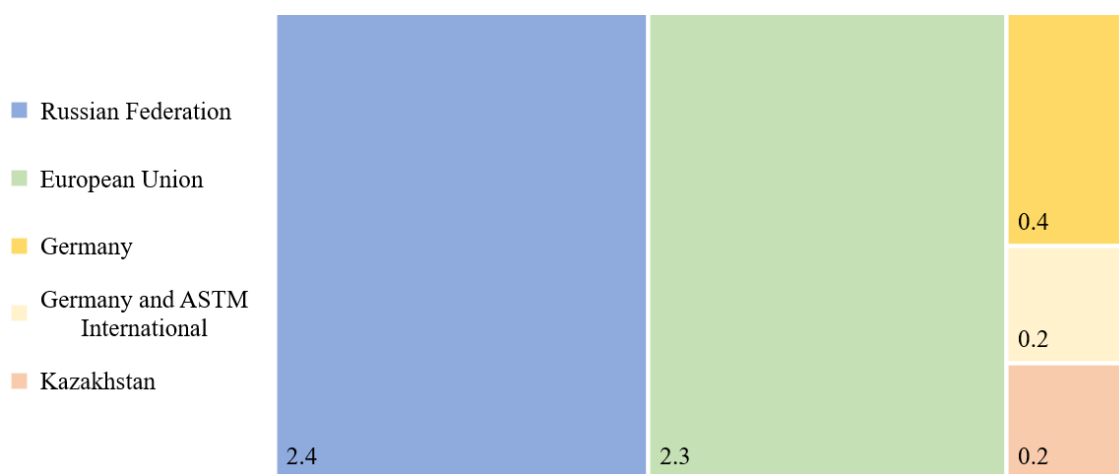
60. The war in Ukraine significantly affected the continuity of those ECTD workstreams in programme countries that relied heavily on extrabudgetary funding from the Russian Federation. Along with the war's detrimental effect on consensus building within ECE,³⁰ the review of all extrabudgetary projects and the subsequent decision³¹ of the Russian Federation to suspend all meetings, seminars and other events in Russian-funded projects particularly affected United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia countries. In the period 2018–2021, the share of funding by the Russian Federation in subprogramme 6 was about 44 per cent of all extrabudgetary resources (figure XV). Since extrabudgetary resources in subprogramme 6 were primarily used to implement projects in United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia countries, the decision by the Russian Federation virtually dried up resources that would have otherwise helped countries on issues related to trade. This had significantly affected the ability of ECTD to respond effectively to member States' needs and to sustain its level of engagement or activities at the country level.

³⁰ Decisions were adopted by vote in 2022 for the first time in ECE history (see [ECE/EX/2022/L.6](#)).

³¹ Letter dated 18 April 2022 from the Russian Federation asking the Secretariat to suspend, with immediate effect, the preparation and conduct of all meetings, seminars and other events planned in the framework of the projects funded by the Russian Federation until further notice. The measure was still in place as at 6 February 2023.

Figure XV
Subprogramme 6 extrabudgetary resources, 2018–2021

(Millions of United States dollars)



Source: Subprogramme 6 extrabudgetary projects (2018–2021).

61. The ECE Resource Mobilization Strategy stipulated that each subprogramme should develop a biennial resource mobilization action plan and integrate resource mobilization metrics into staff e-performance. However, staff responded that the implementation of such a measure was unclear, as the Strategy was not operationalized by divisions. In addition, the Technical Cooperation Strategy referred to divisions and regional advisers as main fundraising actors for technical cooperation. The evaluation team did not find evidence that the revisions or risk analyses of the strategies responded to potential and actual decreases of resources, including in crisis context.

G. While gender and environment were well integrated into ECTD work, the inclusion of human rights and disability considerations was weak

62. About half (49 per cent) of interviewees agreed that ECTD considered gender in its work. Similarly, about two thirds (60 per cent) of staff and 79 per cent of stakeholder survey respondents agreed that ECTD integrated gender into its work. The work on gender responsive standards was the most frequently mentioned area of gender integration in ECTD. Recognizing the need for gender responsive standards and technical regulations, ECTD launched the Declaration for Gender Responsive Standards and Standards Development in 2019, which had collected 77 commitments from ECE region and beyond as at May 2022; and organized respective trainings for standard setting bodies. While it was too early to assess the impact of the Declaration at the country level, post-training reports recorded participants' average satisfaction score at 8.6 out of 10. Other areas of gender integration included: ECTD efforts to ensure gender parity both within the Division and at events; online learning events on information and communications technology during COVID-19 for women entrepreneurs; and gender criteria in public-private partnership evaluation methodology.

63. Regarding the integration of environmental considerations, the ECTD Innovation Policy Outlook and reviews contained environment-related information and analyses and, further to consultations with colleagues from the Environment

Division, included several recommendations related to the environment. Similarly, the public-private partnership evaluation methodology included criteria on environmental sustainability and resilience, and ECTD cooperated with the Sustainable Energy Division on natural resource management and climate change, among others.

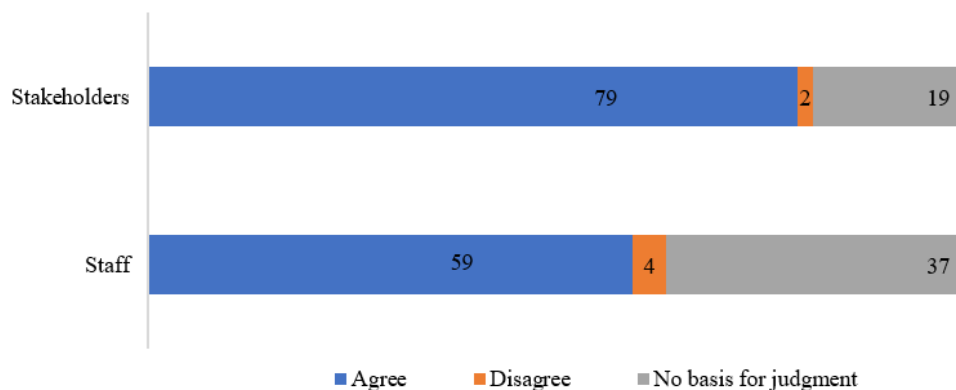
64. Human rights and disability considerations were rarely mentioned by interviewed stakeholders. ECE implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy was discussed at Executive Committee meetings; however, the discussions were limited to the lack of accessible websites and disability-friendly premises. A total of 43 per cent of staff and 66 per cent of stakeholder survey respondents agreed that ECTD integrated human rights into its work, and interviewees mostly questioned whether ECE had any mandate on human rights.

65. ECTD successfully ensured the continuity of its work amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost half (13 of 27) of ECE Executive Committee meetings held in 2018–2022 covered COVID-19-related issues, and issues related to ECTD work were addressed at six of those. Interviewed stakeholders were appreciative of remote and hybrid events in the context of restricted travel. Despite the reduced duration of online events, some interviewees noted increased and diversified remote participation by member States made possible by technology. Overall, 79 per cent of surveyed stakeholders and 59 per cent of ECE staff agreed that ECTD had adapted its support for member States in the COVID-19 context.

Figure XVI

Opinion of staff and stakeholders on ECTD adaptation of its support for member States in the COVID-19 context

(Percentage)



Source: OIOS survey of ECTD stakeholders (N = 104) and ECE staff (N = 81).

66. To support member States in tackling the effects of the pandemic, ECTD provided recommendations on pandemic trade-related response and economic recovery and conducted assessments of the impact on trade and structural transformation in five ECE countries. Whereas the evaluation team did not find evidence of the extent of use of knowledge resources by member States, stakeholders in two evaluation case study countries, Georgia and Serbia, volunteered that the assessments had provided useful recommendations on building resilience in the aftermath of the pandemic.

67. Since 2020, the Division had implemented three Development Account and one extrabudgetary COVID-19-specific projects. It was found in an evaluation of the Development Account project on strengthening the national capacities of selected

ECE countries for evidence-based regulatory and procedural trade policies to achieve Sustainable Development Goals that ECE value added in terms of its COVID-19 response was to provide member States with a trusted, objective overview of multi-agency and cross-departmental issues at a time when each department was operating in crisis mode.

V. Recommendations

68. The OIOS Inspection and Evaluation Division made four important recommendations to ECTD, all of which were fully accepted.

Recommendation 1 (results A and C)

69. In addition to the existing mechanisms, ECTD should develop a comprehensive framework to document, track and report on member States' requests for technical assistance to help the Division to inform its prioritization of available resources, identify relevant potential outcomes and assist in efficient project planning.

Indicator of achievement: a comprehensive framework for tracking member States' requests for technical cooperation discussed, developed and issued by ECE

Recommendation 2 (results A and C)

70. ECTD should engage its staff, the Programme Management and Support Services Division and relevant stakeholders to undertake an integrated strategic planning process to develop a division-wide strategic plan with a view to strengthening interlinkages between its two subprogrammes and identifying at the minimum:

(a) The overall divisional vision and organizational objectives, which should be framed around its mandate, strategic framework, the Sustainable Development Goals and the new nexus areas, including Commission-wide topics;

(b) The most relevant topics in the context of its mandate, including priority themes vis-à-vis the geographical subregions and member States' priorities and need for support, and related potential risks and mitigation measures;

(c) A full results-based framework with clear performance indicators and an articulation of the roles of each organizational unit under ECTD, which includes how each unit will work with the others towards shared objectives within ECTD and outside across other ECE divisions;

(d) An outreach strategy on how the Division will communicate with sister agencies, including the resident coordinator system, to ensure that relevant stakeholders are aware of ECTD mandates, roles and comparative advantages in providing the required assistance.

Indicator of achievement: a common strategy and strategic plan adopted and implemented

Recommendation 3 (results A, C, D, E, F and G)

71. On the basis of the division-wide strategic plan (recommendation 2), ECTD should develop division-specific actions plans to operationalize existing ECE strategies on resource mobilization, partnerships and technical cooperation, upon

adoption, to address identified risks and strengthen partnerships, especially at the programme country level, with implementation deadlines, roles and responsibilities, and a monitoring and reporting framework.

Indicator of achievement: division-specific action plans issued to operationalize the three ECE strategies

Recommendation 4 (result G)

72. ECTD should ensure the equal integration of cross-cutting issues (gender, human rights, disability inclusion and environment) into its various workstreams by establishing respective mechanisms and tools within the Division derived from a mainstreaming strategy, which should include the strengthening of partnerships with relevant United Nations agencies, national partners and think tanks with subject-matter expertise.

Indicator of achievement: common strategy for ECTD on the integration of cross-cutting issues (gender, human rights, disability inclusion and environment)

Annex**Comments received from the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe**

I refer to your memorandum dated 10 February 2023, transmitting the formal draft report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the evaluation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE): Subprogrammes 4 (Economic Cooperation and Integration) and 6 (Trade).

UNECE appreciates the continuous efforts of OIOS to make recommendations on how the secretariat can improve its operations and better support ECE member States, included through strengthened coherence with other United Nations secretariat and United Nations system entities.

Substantive responsibility for subprogrammes 4 and 6 is vested within the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD). In addition to servicing its two sectoral committees, with the same level of resources since 2018, ECTD has strengthened its support to the United Nations Country Teams in the programme countries of the ECE region within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

UNECE notes with satisfaction the report's findings that ECTD "found its niche in a crowded space of trade and economic cooperation" and that ECTD "has been effective in promoting policy dialogue and facilitating adoption of norms and standards", which constitutes the core pillar of UNECE's work.

UNECE accepts the 4 recommendations in the report and would like to share its overall perspective on them:

- a. Recommendation 1: When developing a comprehensive framework to document, track and report on member States' request for technical assistance, ECTD will maximize synergies with existing tracking and prioritization mechanisms. These include: i) the secretariat's regular reporting on technical assistance requests, response actions and respective extrabudgetary financing needs to ECTD-serviced inter-governmental and expert bodies, and ii) the UNECE-wide planning for the use of the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation. In addition to the expected benefits listed in the recommendation, a comprehensive tracking system is also likely to support the mobilization of additional extrabudgetary resources to better respond to member States' technical assistance requests. Strengthened technical assistance is likely to create synergies with the secretariat's core pillar of activities – its normative work.
- b. Recommendation 2: When developing a division-wide strategic plan to strengthen interlinkages between the two subprogrammes, it will be important to recognize the strong normative role of UNECE, where member States drive and shape the many processes for negotiating recommendations and standards and where each such process is typically undertaken by a very specific, focused and clearly delineated intergovernmental or expert body. At the same time, the fact that ECTD's mandates on trade, infrastructure financing/investment and innovation centre around the three "means of implementation" as set out in Sustainable Development Goal 17 provides excellent entry points for building synergies. Similarly, recent experiences gained through ECTD's division-wide focus on circular economy can offer best practices to build on.

c. Recommendation 3: ECTD will operationalize existing UNECE-wide strategies on Resource Mobilization and Technical Cooperation. Upon adoption of the partnership strategy in 2023, ECTD will also operationalize it.

d. Recommendation 4: When working to ensure equal integration of cross-cutting issues into its work streams, ECTD will build on its successes in integrating gender and environment. For example, ECTD's long established work on Gender-Responsive Standards (GRS), the recently established Team of Specialists on GRS, and the inclusion of gender aspects into its Evaluation Methodology on public-private partnerships (PPPs), into its innovation policy reviews, and into its trade facilitation assessments can serve as best practice. Similarly, ECTD can build on its pioneering role in integrating circular economy into its workstreams: among others, ECTD-serviced normative bodies developed two standards on PPPs for the Circular Economy, the Code of Good Practice for Reducing Food Loss, and the Sustainability Pledge, and established the Team of Specialists for Sustainable Value Chains for the Circular Economy. Entry points already exist for disability (e.g. Evaluation Methodology on PPPs) and for human rights (e.g. supply chain traceability).

I take this opportunity to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Report and to commend the professionalism of the OIOS team led by Mr. Juan Carlos Peña.
