

Projet INT/0T/2CJ

**“Capacity building programme on training in selected international economic issues:
Distance learning techniques”**

Financed by the Government of Belgium
Implemented by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development – UNCTAD

Summary of the evaluation report

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The project “Capacity Building Programme on Training in Selected International Economic Issues: Distance Learning Techniques” (INT/OT/2CJ) for developing countries, in particular the least developed, is implemented by the Human Resources Development Section (HRD) of UNCTAD in the framework of the TrainForTrade programme for strengthening training capacities in the area of trade, investment and trade-related services.

The project under evaluation was carried out on the basis of the HRD section’s approach aiming at improving the use of the distance learning techniques in the framework of training adapted to beneficiary countries’ needs. The training is based on a rigorous methodology for developing pedagogical material which builds local capacities and develops networks of cooperation and exchange.

The project was conceived and supported by the UNCTAD Distance Learning (DL) Strategy developed in 2002 and revised in 2004¹. In this project, the training is delivered to a target training population that is determined by the substantive units and divisions in cooperation with the TRAINFORTRADE programme of UNCTAD.

In this context, the distance learning activities have two objectives:

- To increase the efficiency of training and to expand its reach to a greater number of target countries concerned with specific trade and investment themes;
- To highlight the opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in training.

This strategy is based on a hybrid approach that combines distance learning with face-to-face workshops and seminars within the framework of capacity development projects.

This hybrid approach seems to be appropriate to the needs of the various UNCTAD departments concerned and facilitates horizontal cooperation within the organization.

The evaluation confirms the pilot nature of the project because, for the first time, it applies the DL strategy to the courses developed in the two selected topics “Multilateral Trade Negotiations (Commercial Diplomacy)” and “International Investment Agreements (IIA)”.

Mid-way results:

- The DL strategy has been implemented by the HRD Section and the substantive departments within a precise framework;
- The training curriculum of the two selected themes has been adapted to introduce DL activities;
- High quality distance learning materials have been produced in English and French in the two topics (IIA and Commercial Diplomacy);

¹ On the basis of the recommendations made by the Advisory Group on the strengthening of training capacities and human resources development of the Secretary General of UNCTAD

- Beneficiary countries enabled over 150 participants and 7 tutors to be trained by the project; 105 additional trainees and 10 tutors will have been trained between this midterm evaluation and the end of the project;
- National pedagogical committees² operating in the beneficiary countries visited by the evaluator (Benin, Cambodia and Lao PDR) are now fully engaged in distance learning activities;
- Local technical resources, namely computer equipment, have been reinforced within the means of the project,³;
- Logistical solutions have been found by beneficiary countries for hosting the training sessions;
- Synergies with other programmes both inside and outside UNCTAD were sought and identified.

1. Results of the evaluation

The project was evaluated according to five criteria: relevance and coherence, efficacy, efficiency, sustainability and impact. In addition, the project's comparative advantage in relation to other distance learning projects was analyzed.

Relevance and coherence:

The subjects of the training developed are well adapted to the needs of the beneficiary countries.

The national counterparts have comprehensive pedagogical material, which has been developed by the project. This material should progressively allow them to participate actively in future deliveries at the national level, in particular through the use of the tutors trained by the project⁴.

DL has been recognised as a success and has provided a good solution to the problems of geographic dispersion of the target population and their time difficulties in accessing training.

DL has improved the user-friendliness of the training and increased the interest of the beneficiaries in the use of ICT.

Efficacy:

The large majority of participants confirmed their clear satisfaction with the efficacy of the training (considered good or even excellent). The problems that were encountered were more

² National pedagogical committees are established in the beneficiary countries, where the TRAINFORTRADE activities are carried out, in order to ensure the sustainability of these activities. They gather operators concerned with training and capacity building, representatives of relevant ministers involved in the different topics, decision-makers from the public and the private sector, universities and higher institutions of learning. They decide upon annual plan of actions, monitor their implementation, provide logistical support and advise on actions undertaken or planned.

³ See annex 6 of the full report

⁴ The project INT/OT/2CJ takes place over a 2-year period. This time frame allows only for the training of tutors in DL methods. The training of trainers that is outlined in the UNCTAD Distance Learning Strategy (see annex1 of the full report) will have to be undertaken at a later stage.

of a logistical nature (pace of the training - sometimes judged to be too intensive, technical means available etc.).

National counterparts, often high-level state officials, have been involved in the implementation of the DL. Their contribution as potential future trainers could usefully complement and enhance future training activities.

Efficiency:

Distance learning may create significant costs during the phase of development and updating of pedagogical material; however, this material is subsequently used to train a larger target population and to widen access to the training to more beneficiary countries.

The evaluation estimates that a DL delivery by UNCTAD represents an average cost of around 125 USD per participant and 3000 USD for the training of a DL tutor.

According to participants and their supervisors, the use of DL to prepare participants for the face-to-face training, improves the quality of the seminars delivered by international experts and reduces the length of the local training thereby lowering the cost per participant.

Sustainability:

This evaluation has been conducted mid-way through the implementation of the project: only further time will allow proper judgment of its sustainability. However, at this stage of the project, it is possible to suggest that there exists a combination of factors - the experience gained through the development of the DL material, the training of tutors and the measures taken by the TrainForTrade national pedagogical committees on the institutional level – that should facilitate the sustainability of the training actions.

Impact:

Although the evaluation took place mid-way through the project, the evaluator has estimated that the introduction of DL strengthens the impact of the face-to-face seminars by allowing more dynamic exchanges between the trainees and the trainers and building a potentially sustainable training network. By increasing interaction between trainers and trainees and making available to all actors working material and communication equipment for a longer duration, in any case superior to the length of face-to-face seminars, DL has helped the beneficiaries to better understand the rules, frameworks, processes and perspectives of the new international economic environment.

Whenever some of the trainees become involved in the preparation for, or participation in, multilateral negotiations, they seem to be able to offer advice as well as to alert and clarify the position of their countries' negotiators.

Comparative advantage of the project:

It is not the aim, in this context, to make a detailed analysis of the costs of training activities, but to help estimate the very significant differences in the cost of equivalent training activities in the selected topics of the project.

The evaluator has compared the UNCTAD DL activities with similar programmes undertaken by other international organizations, in particular in the beneficiary countries subject to this evaluation.

Neither Lao PDR nor Cambodia has received any other support in the area of distance learning. The comparative advantage of UNCTAD's distance learning training is therefore very simple to establish in these cases.

Benin benefits from support from several operators, in particular the World Bank, which has a local videoconferencing centre (GDLN). However, the cost of one day of training using this system is around eight times higher than the UNCTAD distance learning training.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) offers a web site for self-learning on similar themes. This has limited pedagogical impact in that it offers no exchange between trainers and trainees nor among participants themselves.

At the same time, the WTO offers face-to-face seminars whose average cost is around 20,000USD per participant.

2. Recommendations:

The pilot distance learning activities undertaken by UNCTAD in the framework of this project should be developed and extended in accordance with the following proposals:

1- UNCTAD:

- The evaluation confirms that the development of distance learning provides UNCTAD with a pedagogical tool appropriate to the needs of developing countries. It is therefore desirable that any UNCTAD technical assistance projects containing a training component should systematically include DL.
- Distance learning should be considered from the initial design of technical assistance projects proposed by UNCTAD, including the organizational, economic and human resource implications.
- Setting up distance learning is highly complex, in particular the design and production of materials and the process of delivering training in the field. This complexity should not be underestimated by the substantive divisions or by the beneficiaries. It is therefore necessary to strengthen coordination at all stages of the DL process.

2- Beneficiaries:

- While pedagogical support, coordination and technical expertise are provided through international technical assistance, an effort should be made at the national level to make sustainable equipment and facilities available for training so as to ensure good quality DL. Beneficiary countries should contribute to the training through organizing logistics and providing human resources.
- The equipment and facilities should be used and managed by specialist centers dedicated to this purpose. However, in the current framework, these centers could initially pool their resources, either nationally or regionally, so as to start this process.

Should the development of such a dedicated structure be impossible, strategic agreements should be concluded with already existing, suitably-equipped centers.

3- Regionalisation of Distance Learning activities:

- The possibility of developing central hosting servers for the distance learning platform, initially on a regional level and then on a national level, should be considered. In the long term, this approach should be cost effective as it will reduce the cost of communications, make available more resources, improve learning conditions and contribute to the development of economic activities on a national and regional level.
- The regional organisations could be the privileged interlocutors, along with beneficiary countries, in the process of developing distance learning. It is at this level that south-south cooperation fulfils its potential and that regional competences can more easily be developed, thereby enabling the sustainability of actions.

4- Seek strategic partnerships for financing DL development:

- It is recommended that UNCTAD and the beneficiary countries present the donors with a comprehensive approach for building training capacities, which includes distance learning and assesses their concrete technological and logistical requirements.

3. Conclusions

The project under evaluation is clearly innovative because:

- It has applied DL techniques in new ways that are relevant and adapted to the particular needs of developing countries, and, specifically the least developed, even if these techniques can be further enhanced or improved.
- It has proved the interest in applying DL within the training methodology of UNCTAD (standardized material of international quality, active participation of national counterparts, good preparation for the face-to-face seminars, results in terms of capacity building etc.).
- It has been particularly efficient in reducing the cost of the training, when compared to similar DL projects put in place by other international organizations.
- Its transnational character as well as the regional context facilitates the sharing of knowledge within and between beneficiary countries. As such, it offers a model for exchanging experiences and building networks.
- It has allowed for a better definition of the countries' technological needs through the specific identification of their requirements for DL.

This evaluation concludes that the project both pilots and validates the use of distance learning.

Taking into account the above proposals and, in the framework of the UNCTAD mandate, it is highly recommended to envisage a potential extension and enlargement of this distance learning project to other training themes, countries or regional organizations.