



## ILO SKILLS 21 PROJECT – EMPOWERING CITIZENS FOR INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH (2017-2024)

### QUICK FACTS

<b>Countries:</b>	Bangladesh
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<b>Administrative Office:</b>	Country Office Bangladesh
<b>Technical Office:</b>	SRO New Delhi
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This evaluation has been conducted according to ILO's evaluation policies and procedures. It has not been professionally edited but has undergone quality control by the ILO Evaluation Office.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

**Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure** The project was funded by the European Union and jointly implemented by the ILO and the Directorate for Technical Education (DTE). Skills 21 continued earlier TVET system reforms of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to increase productivity and employment opportunities for young people through support for the development of an inclusive technical and vocational training system responding to the needs of the labour market. The project had three outcomes a) improving quality of the TVET System Development; b) Improving access to and equity within the TVET system through TVET model institutions and c) Fostering an enabling environment through improved governance and coordination of the TVET/Skills Development System.

**Present situation of the project** The programme is about to finish a third no cost extension (30 June 2024) and might continue for another 3 years as a fourth cost extension. However, this is outside the scope of the evaluation.

**Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation** Assess the overall performance, impact, and potential sustainability of the project. This evaluation also provides insights on partner coordination, achieved results and challenges encountered and identifies unintended effects, lessons learned and good case practices. The extent of addressing transversal themes were addressed - Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), Tripartism, International Labour Standards and Environmental Sustainability were assessed and strategic recommendations for future skills projects and the EU-funded Talent Partnership project are provided. Clients include the ILO Country Office in Bangladesh, Skills 21 team, ILO constituents and the European Union; it also benefits project partners and ultimate beneficiaries (women, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities).

**Methodology of evaluation** The evaluation was formative and included a self-assessment by national programme coordinators, reflective dialogues, and feedback sessions in field offices and headquarters, as well as interactions with NORAD representatives. It employed a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods, desk research, review of project documents and excel sheets on beneficiaries and case studies. The evaluation was participative, involving input from relevant stakeholders to assess the project's alignment with their needs and ensure a comprehensive reflection of achieved results and challenges. It involved face-to-face and online interviews and some focus group discussions with beneficiaries and recipients during missions to Geneva, Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania. Analysis was based on primary and secondary data and included findings from self-assessments. The evaluation matrix was used as reference for collecting data, the analysis and discussion of the results. Triangulation of findings was done through de-briefing with NPCs and other staff.

**MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS** Overall, the project performance is satisfactory and fulfils all the DAC requirements.  
**Relevance:** The Skills 21 project is appreciated by all stakeholders as highly relevant, aligning well with 7th and 8th Five Year Plans of the GoB, national skills policies (NSDP 2022) and various action plans (NSDA and TMED) which prioritize harmonization of skills systems, competency-based training (CBT) and inclusive lifelong learning opportunities for all. The project contributes to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-4, 5, 8 and is consistent with ILO's DWCP and Programme and Budget outcomes, besides holding a key place on the European Union's portfolio nationally and globally. Workers' and employers' organizations consider the project highly relevant for their members, confirm project relevance and highlight their increased interest and willingness to actively engage and shape the skills ecosystem.

**Coherence and project design:** The project shows high levels of coherence, having built on earlier TVET Reform and B-SEP projects implemented by the ILO and building synergies with similar ongoing ILO implemented projects. The project has made considerable progress to strengthen collaboration with external agencies to generate external coherence for larger impact, however, more efforts are required to proactively reach out for potential collaboration. The project was overly ambitious for the short 3-year time span. It would have benefited from a more realistic Theory of Change with an overarching results chain with well-defined indicators, which could have highlighted causal effects and could have better communicated higher level impact. The project design and coherence show some inconsistencies regarding impact logic; some outcome and output indicators are not clearly defined, and levels (output-outcome) mixed up. The project is still very much focused on delivering outputs instead of outcomes.

**Effectiveness:** While the project faced several challenges, which slowed down implementation, it is considered effective in achieving outcome and output targets, since it made good progress by achieving significant milestones at policy level (endorsement of BNQF, NSDP 2022 and action plan), professionalizing and enhancing capacities of Technical Teacher Training Institutes (TTTIs) with state of the art competency based training and assessment (CBT&A) at L4/L5/L6 and accelerating digitalization of teaching and learning. The RPL system is further strengthened by developing an E-RPL system (yet to be launched) in response to the request by the government for online enrolment and assessment of migrant workers, which also paves the way for more large scale RPL for skills acquired informally by informal sector workers. Progress was also made at institution level to introduce standards and procedures, quality improvement processes and guidelines and self-assessment tools to prepare these institutes to become Centres of Excellence (CSEs) and in the case of seven vocational training institutes and polytechnics to become Model Training institutes (MTIs). With the introduction of multistakeholder advisory boards, these TVET institutes got guidance on strategic matters, identification of skills needs, financing, quality improvement, research, introduction of access and inclusion, and greening. Collaboration with the private sector on entrepreneurship training of teachers (start and improve your business-SIYB), setting up of business incubation centers, and holding employment for them, jointly with the local community, led to visible success: more enrolment, more placement, more awareness amongst learners, parents, and enterprises. The project also addressed governance and coordination issues at sector level by facilitating multistakeholder planning for policies and Sector Wide Integrated Framework for TVET (SWIFT). It built capacities of officials in budgeting and governance and skills anticipation. It also facilitated the formation of the national steering committee (NSC) and technical working groups to strengthen the TMED's/MoE's capacities to systematically steer multistakeholder engagement for the development of the BNQF and policies and plans.

**Efficiency:** The project overall delivered good value for money and was efficiently managed. It benefitted from the three-time extensions and hence could ensure budget spending according to the revised plan, reaching 91% use of resources by 2024. The Skills 21 Project was closely implemented in collaboration with GoB and used the government's steering and coordination mechanisms. Involvement of social partners and other important stakeholders, however, was low, which might have affected impact and sustainability of the project. Skills 21 had a robust centralized M&E system in place, which was built on external reporting and internal learning and supported by regular backstopping and field monitoring. An activity tracker was used, which made reporting and communication within the team and with the steering and monitoring & coordination committees easy. The project benefitted from a strong communication strategy increasing effectiveness of interventions at policy and local levels. More could have been done in knowledge management, impact assessments and systematic documentation of interventions.

**Impact:** Overall, Skills 21 has created impact, demonstrating higher capacities and ownership of partners in addressing skills policy and implementation challenges and better labour market outcomes for trained and certified graduates. However, aside from three tracer studies on impact created through CBT, entrepreneurship, and RPL on employment status and income of end beneficiaries, the project has gathered some qualitative information, however, has not systematically assessed the impact on 'higher capacities and ownership.' Additionally, the project has not documented the extent to which increased capacities have led to changes in daily practices and behaviour of a) implementation partners in planning and implementing TVET, b) teachers'/trainers' training on CBT&A, c) principals managing TVET institutes more effectively, or d) enterprises showing more interest and ownership. There is a need for systematic impact assessment with clearer conceptual understanding, underlined by more robust data collection and tracking systems. The ILO is recognized as a lead agency capable of mobilizing the private sector and workers, thus can leverage multistakeholder engagement in TVET system reforms. With the project being held and governed by the GoB, its multi-stakeholder engagement during the project was limited. Despite the growing interest from social partners, their capacity building and proactive involvement were insufficient. It is felt that this could have slowed down expansion of CBT&A through public private partnerships or private sector funding.

**Sustainability:** The project achieved several milestones within the TVET reform process, which provide a good foundation for sustainability (BNQF, Teacher/Trainer Training L4/L5/L6, IMDC, CSE/MTI management). However, GoB and other stakeholders highlighted that continued technical support is needed to advance institutional mechanisms and capacities so that interventions are institutionalized and scaled. The GoB plans to continue several interventions by either using own funds or integrate learnings in large scale projects (ADB, World Bank, GIZ) to ensure institutionalization and larger roll out. It is crucial that the ILO consolidates and documents learnings from the Skills 21 project experiences so that 'know how to do' and proof of concept are used as a basis for developing a longer-term operational plan and quality assurance. In this regard, sustainability depends on continued technical and financial support from the ILO.

**Finally, ILO's transversal themes** were incorporated into project design and reflected in the implementation of interventions and reporting. Specific GESI and greening TVET that guided interventions were observed and showed promising results for institutionalization at TVET institute level as well as in training and learning materials. While progress was made, there is a lack of systematic follow up regarding progress made towards mainstreaming of these themes as part of institutionalization. Data indicate that the project did not fully address access and inclusion at TTTI and MTI levels for people with disabilities, less educated women and ethnic minorities and returning migrants. A more systematic approach is needed for mainstreaming, underpinned by adequate human resources. Less explicit focus was given to strengthening tripartism as mentioned earlier.

### **Conclusions**

The project has achieved significant milestones, ranging from endorsement of a harmonized BNQF to expanding capacities of TVET trainers and assessors (L4/L5) and principals (L6) and strengthening quality of teaching/training through the setting up of digital e-learning campus for instructional materials development (IMDC). The project also successfully tested localized TVET delivery modalities, introduced multi-stakeholder advisory boards, quality improvement mechanisms, employers' forum, career guidance & placement, entrepreneurship, and business incubation to ensure stronger private sector linkages in MTIs and CSEs. The project proposed a sector perspective to TVET and facilitated several feasibility studies and thematic workshops, besides providing capacity building on sector specific areas (e.g., financing and monitoring).

It is important to acknowledge that TVET system reforms take decades, as international experience shows. The project has made progress, but remaining tasks include BNQF enactment, establishing the legal basis and mechanism for BNQF rollout, and getting the SWIFT document endorsed to address governance and coordination challenges. It is felt that the team's stakeholder engagement and high-level advocacy efforts directed at MoE and NSDA and the prime minister's office over the years were significant. With all the contribution made through the project it is up to the GoB and other stakeholders to take full ownership and decide the pace of continuation based on country priorities set, and resources and capacities available. This decision is beyond the scope of the project.

The TVET system in Bangladesh is at a turning point, with social partners and key TVET stakeholders keen to participate. Local training provision in MTIs shows promising results if given flexibility and adequate resources for greater autonomy. While the government must provide an enabling environment for TVET, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility, it is crucial to start sharing control over decision making, implementation and funding with key partners. Bangladesh has a dynamic private sector and a large pool of private training providers currently operating mostly outside the formal training system. Mobilizing and intensifying these to ensure training and labour market integration meet standards will require buy-in and a shared vision.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES**

- Recommendations**
- ***Recommendation 1: The ILO, as the lead agency for TVET system reform in Bangladesh should leverage its convening power to unite social partners and stakeholders, reinforcing their roles in the reform process. To maintain its leadership, the ILO must sustain high-level efforts and secure follow-up funding to support GoB in prioritisation, governance and coordination efforts.***

GoB currently sees the ILO as an implementing agency but also values its technical contributions. The ILO should negotiate a more active facilitative role and continue advocating for BNQF enactment, policy dialogue, and implementation and should facilitate the review of the NSDP action plan with stakeholders to enhance clarity and coordination in prioritization and financing. In an advisory role, the ILO should support the GoB in sector planning, monitoring and implementation and support NSDA in strengthening sector performance and monitoring systems by consolidating existing MIS and developing a just-in-time MIS. The ILO should promote closer collaboration with the private sector and social partners.

- **Recommendation 2: Capitalize learnings, sharpen intervention clarity and consolidate approaches to support GoB preparing for larger scale replication of Skills 21 interventions.**

Capturing evidence of promising interventions and documenting lessons learned for dissemination before replication is critical at this point. Ideally, a fourth extension enables capitalization, including examination of both strengths and weaknesses and assessment of the effectiveness of project's initiatives and under which conditions they might continue. Develop proof of concepts, which give clarity to approach and target group served, stepwise implementation plan and monitoring framework, and information detailing required time, human resources, and funding requirements. Proof of concepts can guide the government in planning, replication and financing/roll-out.

- **Recommendation 3: Strengthen tripartism within the skills development space: this is the core competence and mandate of ILO as stated in the DWCP.**

Increase awareness about benefits of multistakeholder engagement and tripartism in TVET. This can be achieved by developing tailored strategies and capacity-building roadmaps for all, including BEF, NCCWE and GoB partners.

- **Recommendation 4: Strengthen private sector engagement and social partners as a priority across all levels in TVET system.**

Develop capacity building plans and strategies for each social partner with a longer-term perspective.

- **Recommendation 5: ILO should continue to support GoB's capacities to systematically expand CBT&A vertically and horizontally (incl RPL) by using a system perspective.**

Sharpen conceptual understanding of TVET offers (apprenticeships, internships, paid and subsidized attachments, depending on the target groups), deliver more need-based training and assessment responses, which address diversity of skills needs from both private sector and beneficiaries. Continue strengthening the supply side of the TVET system and foster private sector engagement with more clarity where private sector finances, contributes or needs to be incentivized.

- **Recommendation 6: Address Gender and Social Inclusion and Environmental Practices systematically and integrate indicators into the performance matrix.**

Mainstreaming transversal issues requires not treating it as an add-on but rather as an integral part of project design, implementation, reporting and M&E practice. It requires a change of culture within the organization. Stakeholders should be trained how to proactively approach transversal issues in all project activities by using an institutional and programming perspective. Resources need to be put aside for capacity building of project partners and to ensure that evidence is provided through monitoring of results and assessment of impact on ultimate beneficiaries. Indicators should be developed as part of performance matrix.

- **Recommendation 7: Address Talent Partnership by matching skills needs from destination countries with trained and certified workers, by collaborating with employers' and workers' organizations.**

The ILO should maintain its advisory function as a technical agency, which collaborates independent with diverse stakeholders. The project therefore should be situated outside the MoEWOE premise Leveraging the power of tripartism, by engaging NCCWE and other workers' organizations, and BE and other employers' associations, is essential in effectively addressing the complexities of skilled and certified circular migration.

#### Main lessons

#### learned and good practices

#### Lessons Learnt

- Long-term engagement and financing are essential for sustained reform: ILO's support for Bangladesh's TVET reform, backed by strong partnerships with Canada and the EU, has been crucial for achieving quality outputs and ensuring sustainability over several decades.



- Time-bound projects need realistic objectives, strong results chains, well-defined indicators, and risk mitigation measures. Log frames should operationalize intervention strategies, ensuring that milestones are achieved, and long-term monitoring is maintained by all stakeholders.
- The Skills 21 project underutilized its tripartite platform, resulting in weak private sector engagement and limited collaboration, which slowed the expansion of CBT&A.
- While CBT&A has a high impact on employability, it hasn't expanded as expected. Higher-level skills at L3/L4 are needed for long-term employability, but most RTOs and assessment centers can only provide L1/L2 or L3 training and assessment thereof with limited capacities. Engaging the private sector could accelerate CBT&A expansion by developing higher-level competencies and improving training contents and duration.

**Good case practices**

- *TVET Communication and Campaign:* The project worked with government agencies and TVET institutes on a campaign launched in 2022, expanding in 2023 to reach more institutes and the community through targeted messaging and partnerships. Increased government resources supported broader awareness, and since 2024, the project has provided technical support for sustainable campaigns. Continued commitment is expected to boost TVET awareness and enrollment.
- *Local Initiatives and Private Sector Engagement:* Local initiatives have engaged the private sector as advisors, trainers, and employers, making VTIs dynamic spaces for career guidance, business incubation, and training. Continuous engagement with local industries is essential. The project mobilized IMABs and Employer's Forums, strengthening partnerships between TVET institutes and local industries. More autonomy and resources for VTIs, along with capacity building for IMAB and Employer's Forums, are needed for sustained efforts.
- *Continued multistakeholder process to develop BNQF* through a well-planned and inclusive approach, facilitated by a single coordination body (National Steering Committee) and supported by technical working groups, increased visibility, capacities and ownership of stakeholders to take BNQF forward towards building a harmonized qualification system.

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