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i-eval Discovery



Independent evaluation of the ILO – Flanders Trust Fund (2020-25)

QUICK FACTS

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Evaluation timing: Final

Administrative Office: DWT/CO-Pretoria, DWT/CO-New Delhi, RESEARCH, SKILLS, ITC-ILO

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Donor(s) & budget: Government of Flanders, ILO-Flanders Trust Fund, 400.000 EUR yearly contributions

Key Words: Sustainable enterprises, training, job creation, clothing manufacturing sector, skills development, youth employment

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

The Cooperation Agreement between ILO and the Government of Flanders, as signed in 2016, has three overarching objectives:

- To progressively realise the objectives of the ILO, within the competences of Flanders, in free discussions with workers' and employers' representatives with a view to the promotion of the common welfare;
- To support the implementation of programmes and projects aimed at the advancement of the Decent Work Agenda through the promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work, employment, social protection, and social dialogue in partner countries;
- To contribute to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Cooperation Agreement provides the arrangements of the Trust Fund established by Flanders and the ILO. The ILO-Flanders Trust Fund aims to support activities of ILO in the field of promoting Decent Work, with particular focus on women and youth, social dialogue, and on Southern Africa. Specific priorities are discussed on a yearly basis, based on Flanders' policy priorities.

Since 2016, 19 projects have been implemented (or are in progress), which are covered by the Cooperation Agreements. Within the scope of this evaluation (2020-2025), eight projects are ongoing or completed. Common objectives and approaches among the projects include the focus on skills gaps and employability; lifelong learning; and job creation and decent work. The projects focus in this regard on institutional capacity-building (e.g. Training of Trainers in VET institutions); piloting new training programmes and curricula; work-based learning; as well as multi-stakeholder engagement and social dialogue. Some of the proposals explicitly mention women and youth as their target groups.

Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation

The evaluation focused on two specific and interconnected components, allowing a review of the overall functioning of the Agreement and Trust Fund as modality for development support

	and collaboration, as well as a review of the achievements of the activities towards the goals of the Agreement listed above: • Review the performance of the Trust Fund supported projects under the current agreement from August 2020 to December 2025. • Review the Trust Fund's modality, with particular attention to its mechanisms for delivering expected results. The main stakeholders of the evaluation are the Government of Flanders and the relevant ILO staff in charge of the Trust Fund and Cooperation overall as well as project and programme staff responsible for activities funded by the Trust Fund. Secondary stakeholders include constituents and other stakeholders.
Methodology of evaluation	The evaluation relied on desk research, interviews, a case study on South Africa, and a Policy Delphi survey to collect data from different sources and methods. In total, 30 people were interviewed for the evaluation, namely: • 23 ILO staff (13 female, ten male) • 4 Flanders staff (Three female, one male) • 4 constituents from South Africa (two female, two male) The recipients of the PD survey were 12 key Flanders staff and key ILO staff who are engaged in the Trust Fund on a more comprehensive manner (not just as staff of one project). However, only seven people replied to the survey. Upon completion of the data collection activities, and analysis of the gathered data, an online stakeholder validation workshop with key staff of ILO and Flanders was organised on 9 December 2025. This evaluation was be guided by the main international ethical considerations applicable to evaluations (e.g., the evaluation will comply with the ILO EVAL Code of Conduct, United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation, UNEG Guidelines for Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations, UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN system UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation). These

considerations were integrated into the design, data collection, and reporting.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Key Findings

► Relevance

The projects funded by the TF during 2020-2025 focused explicitly on ILO priorities described in the P&Bs, focusing on skills and lifelong learning, trade, labour standards, and gender. The TF priorities and portfolio during 2020-2025 aligned largely with the 2019-2024 political priorities for foreign and domestic policies of Flanders. Stakeholders were actively consulted in project design and implementation, ensuring responsiveness to their needs. Gender was integrated in some of the projects, but not all and not always explicitly.

► Coherence

The TF modality contributes to ILO and Flanders' priorities and ambitions for development cooperation, foreign policy, and funding modalities. For ILO, the TF aligned with its Development Cooperation Strategy 2022-2025 focused on Services to constituents; Partnerships for policy coherence; Partnerships for funding, and; Efficiency, decent work results and transparency. For Flanders, the TF aligned with its Multilateral Cooperation guidelines focused on selectivity (focus), added value, predictability (being a reliable and recognizable donor), efficiency and effectiveness. There is sufficient evidence demonstrating that the TF portfolio projects align with the respective project countries' Country Programme Objectives.

► Effectiveness

The TF modality was effective towards its objectives. The modality contributed to efficient project management, predictability and long-term planning of ILO, while maintaining responsiveness to emerging issues. The TF modality also contributed to the visibility of Flanders, through the engagement of Flemish experts in projects and forums, and through dissemination of project results with



Flanders' logo. Some opportunities for networking with other donors were created, though engagement with the EU was limited. The TF project portfolio created results at individual, institutional and policy-level. Several results, such as global tools and methods have the potential to create results across the three dimensions.

► Efficiency

The Trust Fund modality created visible efficiency gains for the ILO, particularly at HQ level. The modality reduces administrative processes, and its flexibility allows for smooth adjustment of project processes. The projects were implemented in an efficient manner, with the efficient and effective creation and reallocation of savings. Various challenges occurred that caused delays in project implementation.

► Impact

The difference made by the TF is largely about the TF providing opportunities to try-and-test new approaches which are subsequently taken up by other donors, and through the TF's support for underfunded areas. The most visible impact of the TF over the past five years is the adoption of ILO Recommendation 208 on Quality Apprenticeships.

► Sustainability

Most results established by the portfolio are sustainable, particularly the tools and research products. Several new partnerships are also continuing beyond project timelines. Additional project phases are needed in some cases to take some results forward.

► Forward-looking reflections

There is no need to change the overall model of cooperation. The way forward for the Trust Fund includes a more coherent and targeted approach to the selection of projects. If the future portfolio becomes more internally coherent the reporting and coordination meetings can also be strengthened by discussing the combined impact of the portfolio towards the objectives. The way forward for the Trust Fund portfolio is to maintain a balance between global projects and country-level projects. In case

of South Africa in particular, the ILO and Flanders should explore how the TF can function as mechanism to support Flanders – South Africa economic cooperation (rather than development cooperation-type interventions).

Considering the nature of ILO and Flanders' priorities, there is potential to address global challenges together through broader cooperation beyond the more standard development project.

Conclusions

The 2020-2025 ILO-Flanders Trust Fund successfully aligned with both parties' strategic priorities through a flexible, lightly earmarked funding model. This partnership improved operational efficiency and enabled the ILO to address underfunded areas, leading to significant results like the adoption of ILO Recommendation 208 and the creation of sustainable research tools. However, the TF's broad scope and annual planning resulted in a "scattered" portfolio that lacked overall coherence and collective impact. While individual projects were successful and sustainable, the portfolio as a whole did not create a unified strategic change. Moving forward, the TF remains highly valuable but requires better long-term planning and a more focused strategy to maximise its impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** Apply a more focused and longer-term approach to the selection of projects, aligned with Flanders' foreign policy objectives and ILO's Strategic Plan.
 - Recommendation 1.1.: Agree on two or three strategic, narrower priorities or objectives that the Trust Fund should achieve over the next five years.
 - Recommendation 1.2.: Select one or two global challenges related to these priorities for which a joint ILO-Flanders approach can create solutions.
 - Recommendation 1.3.: If possible - identify or establish one Global Programme of ILO that aligns with the

	strategic priorities and has a multi-donor funding mechanism and advisory board comprising all donors, to which Flanders can contribute. ○ Recommendation 1.4.: Maintain the current balance of projects targeting South Africa, as it remains a priority of Flanders. ○ Recommendation 1.5.: Align the Trust Fund management approach with the above recommendations. ► Recommendation 2: Pay closer attention to the integration of key crosscutting concerns of the TF in the portfolio, namely women, youth, and social dialogue, but also ILS and environmental sustainability as key priority of both Flanders and ILO. ► Recommendation 3: Explore alternative cooperation mechanisms for the implementation of the Trust Fund, beyond the more traditional project structure. ► Recommendation 4: Identify concrete areas where ILO, Flanders and the Trust Fund can create unique added value.
Main lessons learned and good practices	Lessons learned ► The South Africa portfolio comprised multiple projects and benefited from on-the-ground presence of both Flanders and ILO. However, many decisions on project design in South Africa were made between Geneva and Brussels, with limited opportunities for the Flanders representation in Pretoria and the ILO South Africa office to collaborate on, and influence, the portfolio in the country. In fact, the Flanders representation was not always fully aware of the TF projects in the country. This hindered the representation from being actively involved and potentially liaising with other interventions and activities of Flanders. ► The participation of Flanders in the Global Programme on

Skills and Lifelong Learning was meant to attract other donors to the pooled fund and enable Flanders to cooperate with other donors. However, during this period, no other donors joined. **ILO can encourage, but not control, the participation of other donors.** Therefore, if this interaction is a core priority for Flanders, it could consider joining pooled funds that already have other donors, or first form agreements with other donors to subsequently join together.

Good practices

- **The adjustment of the payment progress for ITCILO significantly reduces the administrative burden identified in the ITCILO Digital Skills project.** During this project, various administrative steps had to be taken to transfer funds from ILO HQ to ITCILO, which caused delays for ITCILO. It was agreed between ILO and Flanders that, in future efforts involving ITCILO, the budget allocated to ITCILO can be transferred to Turin directly, without creating budget lines and reporting systems at HQ. Both ILO HQ and ITCILO staff perceive this as important step to increase efficiency.
- **The modality as a whole enhanced efficiency for ILO and Flanders in terms of administrative workload and trust.** For Flanders, the TF requires only one yearly transfer and no contracts to be signed for each effort. Similarly, at ILO HQ level, the TF allowed better planning and also reduced the administration related to contracts. In the field, the flexibility of the TF facilitated the work of project teams to remain adaptive, and the reporting requirements were also not heavy on the ILO.
- **The Trust Fund supported interventions that are often underfunded or low on donors' priority lists.** This refers to both thematic areas, but also to testing innovative approaches. In several cases, the initial results of the Trust Fund projects received additional funding from other donors to scale-up.

