



Independent evaluation of the ILO-Norway programme cooperation agreements on skills development (2016-2023)

QUICK FACTS

Countries:	Global, African region, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lebanon, Malawi, Senegal and Tanzania
Date of the Evaluation :	November 28, 2023
Type of Evaluation:	Final independent evaluation
Evaluation timing:	1. August – 12 November 2023
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DC/symbol:	GLO/20/26/NOR (GLOBAL: GLO/20/61/NOR, REGIONAL: AF/20/53/NOR; ETHIOPIA: ETH/20/54/NOR; GHANA: GHA/20/51/NOR; LEBANON: LBN/20/50/NOR; MALAWI: MWI/20/50/NOR; SENEGAL: SEN/20/50/NOR AND TANZANIA: TZA/20/51/NOR)
Donor Country and Budget USD\$:	ILO-Norway programme cooperation agreement (PCA 3) 2020-21 of a value of USD 6,704,776
Key words:	capacity development, COVID-19 pandemic, decent jobs, digital platforms, digital transformation, digital occupations, gender equality, green skills, knowledge sharing, migration, partnerships, private sector engagement, recognition of prior learning, skills anticipation, skills mismatch, skills to combat forced labour, skills systems, skills, sustainability, service tracker, training, tripartism.



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	The Programme Cooperation Agreement is a multi-phased collaborative effort between the ILO and the Government of Norway to enhance the capacity of constituents in target countries to better identify and organize labour market requirements, as well as to collect, distribute, and provide training in the utilization of global knowledge in this field. Key thematic areas encompass strengthening skills systems, improving skills programme delivery, enhancing access and inclusion, and developing knowledge products with a focus on gender, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and digitalization. The current phase of the programme (hereafter PCA 3) has eight components, enforcing each other: One global component to develop and disseminate knowledge products and solutions; one regional component to build partnerships and foster cross learning on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and harmonization of qualifications; and six country components (Ethiopia, Lebanon, Ghana, Malawi, Senegal and Tanzania) to strengthen local capacities, test innovations, and for the application of global products.
Present situation of the project	The programme has just finished a no cost extension of Phase 3 and has started Phase 4, which will end in 2024.
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	The evaluation assessed the partnership between ILO and the Government of Norway, which has been a four-phased programme from 2016-2024. It aims to guide decision-makers, including ILO-SKILLS Branch and EVAL, NORAD and constituents at global and national levels for more effective interventions and better management arrangements. The evaluation covers a final assessment of the most recent project phase, PCA 3, extended to October 2023, where it examines relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. It also covers synthesis review of evaluations from previous phases and ex-post evaluations of Phases 1, 2, and 3 and assesses the feasibility for use of the Service Tracker and whether an ex-post impact assessment should be undertaken. Finally, it identifies lessons learned and good practices for future phases and recommendations. The evaluation also assessed the extent to which transversal themes were addressed.
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	Relevance and Strategic Fit: The programme is considered highly relevant by all partners involved and aligns with country, donor, and SDG priorities and frameworks. However, it requires greater constituent (even more valid for social partners) involvement in programme design and oversight of implementation. The programme would benefit from multi-phase funding for improved predictability and clarity of direction, where the programme wants to go. This also requires setting up tripartite ‘plus’ steering committees to empower constituents and enhancing their local capacities in a systematic way. This might also require top up funding to the existing funding available.

Coherence: The programme demonstrates good coherence with other ILO initiatives and has made significant progress to strengthen collaboration with external agencies to generate external coherence for larger impact. At national level, more efforts are required to proactively participate in donor facilitated skills platforms and proactively reach out for potential collaboration. There is internal programme coherence across all phases. ILO services are deemed relevant and useful for system building. However, staff and constituents highlight that there's a lack of clarity about the programme's direction. There are concerns that activities were not conclusively taken to the next phase, or that there was not enough follow-up support provided to conclude them in the phase itself due a to lack of funding or prioritization. The programme 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 programme is still very much focused on delivering outputs and is weaker on outcome performance.

The programme would benefit from more prioritisation and a longer-term programme perspective in each country which is based on a vision jointly developed with the constituents. It should also further clarify its Theory of Change (ToC) and results chain conceptually and with better defined indicators and milestones, which stay valid over multiple phases, and are supported by a strong M&E system. Within this programmatic frame, several two-year PCA phases can be better fitted and funded. This shall contribute to greater coherence, while at the same time become the basis for improved reporting of progress and evidence-based management.

Effectiveness: The programme is considered effective in achieving outcome and output targets, with generally positive stakeholder feedback. There have been inconsistencies on reporting targets which need to be addressed so that systematic reporting and monitoring of progress can be made. Thorough evaluation of the actual effectiveness of interventions requires systematic feedback and impact assessments, which are at this point of time not available.

At global level: The Innovation Facility has demonstrated notable growth and response resulting from innovation challenges and Innovation Labs. Digitalization of courseware and knowledge products experienced valuable dissemination and local adaptation within the region with a good response. The Knowledge Sharing Platform's (KSP) update and the internal help desk are acknowledged as valuable and global products and services are considered relevant for planning and implementing programmes at the national level. However, the shortage of staff at the global level affected its effectiveness in supporting national teams and reaching out to a broader audience for increased visibility.

At regional level: The regional component played a critical role in addressing low skilled labour migration in the African region by focusing on mutual skills recognition and harmonization of skills between African countries. It showcased its importance through partnerships, joint frameworks, and successful pilot projects. This created a positive momentum, fostered discussions on various skills-related challenges and facilitated the sharing of valuable lessons in the region. The significant reduction in funding for PCA 4 has unfortunately resulted in its discontinuation. However, the evaluation recommends reconsidering this decision.

At national level: PCA 3 led to a deeper understanding of constituents about the benefits of demand-driven skills systems with tripartite governance and private sector involvement. Exposure visits, training and multistakeholder engagement led to joint policy and strategy development and generated enthusiasm. However, stakeholders have requested for further support from the ILO to translate policies into practice, requiring additional financial, institutional, and technical assistance for long-term sustainability. The relatively new role of social partners in skills development calls for an active and coordinated approach within the ILO country programme. Social partners and the government seek a longer-term programme perspective. STED, workplace-based training initiatives, SSCs and well-targeted short-term

upskilling initiatives for vulnerable groups show promising results to effectively addressing challenges in the short run, but funding shortages for follow up activities or for the scaling of pilot programmes affect institutionalization.

Efficiency: The programme overall delivered good value for money and was efficiently managed. Decentralized coordination is generally appreciated, though occasional delays in fund disbursements have impacted activities in the countries. Structural staff issues and staff shortages have affected the programme's efficiency and effectiveness, impacting the performance of the innovation facility, KSP, internal and external communication and partially also the depth of technical support for country offices. The lean team structure at the country level makes staff members feel stretched and in need of additional capacity building to meet the heightened demands from constituents. It requires expansion of teams at all levels and more effective technical and programming guidance and capacity building of national staff and constituents. Shortage of knowledge management and communication staff should be addressed. Funding should be made available for internal project reviews and backstopping missions.

Project monitoring, reporting quality and knowledge management is insufficient and needs to be enhanced with more streamlined online tools and mentoring support. Challenges have been identified, such as discrepancies in reporting, missing key performance indicators (KPIs), and incomplete disaggregation of data by gender, disability status and for migrants. To ensure consistent and accurate tracking of the programme, it's necessary to streamline log frame figures, provide training for both staff and recipients, and allocate resources for quality data reporting at both national and global levels.

Impact orientation: The outcome-based funding modality has been instrumental for the ILO's Skills and Employability Branch, enabling flexibility to enhance activities and strengthen thematic expertise at the global and national levels. NORAD emphasizes a long-term partnership and is committed to flexibility for adjustment of the funding modality to ensure best impact in countries. Aligning global efforts with national priorities and contextualizing global products are priorities. A focus on innovation, documentation, and cross-learning also exists.

The programme was instrumental in supporting constituents within the African region to assume a more active role in the skills ecosystem, resulting in 28 countries requesting ILO support. Impact on recipients within countries has been significant and has shaped the perspective of how constituents perceive and want to assume their role in the skills ecosystem. The programme contributed to stronger multistakeholder engagement and cross-learning in skills anticipation, policy dialogue and governance and made important contributions to aligning TVET programmes with market needs and engaging the private sector in workplace-based learning and apprenticeships. Overall, recipients of services and capacity building provided by the ILO have observed an enhancement in their capacities and shown ownership to take interventions forward. However, this improvement has not been systematically assessed by measuring 'increased capacity' adequately.

Assessment of the impact of training and post-training services on ultimate beneficiaries (learners, vulnerable groups) has been done only in few incidences until now, and more tracer studies are planned for the next phase using the service tracker. Measuring impact on ultimate beneficiaries, currently, remains vague and ambiguously defined. Instead of using "being employed or self-employed" as categories, measuring income increase would be more adequate. Overall, there is a need to systematically assess impact with more conceptual clarity and more solid data collection and tracking systems. **The service tracker is a very critical tool to increase visibility and transparency of ILO's skills interventions and is a very timely tool to be further developed and expanded. However, the design needs to be reviewed** and requires a stronger conceptual foundation and more research rigour. It requires well-qualified staff with social science backgrounds and M&E experience to manage

the service tracker, mentor its roll out and ensure the quality of data collection, aggregation and analysis. **An impact assessment of the multi-phased programme is highly advisable, but only if the M&E system is enhanced and data collection is streamlined beforehand.**

Sustainability

The programme made some progress on sustainability of interventions in the African region and in all countries. Deeper thematic understanding and increased capacities in collaboration led to joint policy revisions, improved and more relevant competency standard and curricula development and training practices, and some financial commitments from governments towards replicating tested pilot initiatives and programmes. Some strategic partnerships with other development partners led to continuation of piloted initiatives, and contributed towards institutionalisation and larger scale interventions. While these important milestones provide a foundation for sustainability, the programme's timeframe and lack of a well consolidated proof of concept as a basis for developing a longer term operational plan remains an important barrier for continuation and hence sustainability. In this regard, sustainability depends on continued technical and financial support from ILO.

Transversal topics were incorporated into programme design and reflected in the implementation of interventions and reporting. Data reporting, however is limited, and there is a lack of systematic analysis regarding the extent of mainstreaming of these themes. A more systematic approach is needed, with dedicated indicators for mainstreaming as part of the performance matrix.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Consolidate Experiences and Learning at all levels

Consolidate and build upon the experiences gained from the programme across different levels. At the global level, this involves assessing the impact of interventions, creating a typology of countries based on institutional maturity and capacity building needs, and developing prototypes/proof of concepts (with costing and information detailing required time and funding commitment) for sustainable interventions. Regionally, the focus is suggested to be on evaluating impact and exploring the reinstatement of a regional component, with an emphasis on South-South cooperation. Nationally, self-assessments and prioritization of interventions should be facilitated based on budget constraints, capacity building needs and contextual factors. Finally, there is a call to sharpen the ILO's value proposition by clarifying and communicating its strengths (convening power and technical capacity) to support development of proof of concepts and operational plans.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen joint programming, M&E and reporting

It is recommended to establish steering committees or skills task forces for enhanced tripartite governance and for strengthening and ensuring programming focus. The scope of engagement with the ILO should be defined based on available resources. Priority areas for deeper engagement should be identified for impactful interventions with a long term perspective (4-6 years). A revision of the Theory of Change, results chain and programme roadmap are suggested to guide strategic efforts. Additionally, the implementation of a robust monitoring and evaluation system linked to SMART outcome and institutional indicators, coupled with capacity building for staff and project partners, is proposed. An overall emphasis is required to increase quality assurance for data collection, monitoring, and reporting at all levels to ensure accuracy and reliability in assessing programme effectiveness.

Recommendation 3: Expand funding to take existing achievements to the next level

For ILO to respond to the requests from constituents and implementation partners to continue assistance in the operationalisation and next level of institutionalisation of ongoing interventions, top up funding is required for all components. It is recommended that the ILO supports the institutional capacity building of social partners, particularly workers to enable them to engage more effectively in skills development. A programme developed jointly with

constituents and relevant ministries involved should provide a good foundation for the ILO to approach donors more easily for funding.

Recommendation 4: Address staffing and capacity issues

Expand teams globally, regionally and nationally so that the complexity of the programme can be addressed. Synergies can be strengthened between ILO programmes in a country as well as for similar interventions between countries (e.g., exchanging about RPL, SSCs between countries). The potential of communities of practise for capacity building can be significantly expanded by offering focused thematic exchanges with the support of specialists and experts from different countries. Constituents, implementation partners and NPCs will benefit from these need-based exchanges.

Recommendation 5: Address Transversal Issues 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 programme design, implementation, reporting and M&E practice. It requires a change of culture within the organization. Therefore, NPCs and stakeholders should be trained how to proactively approach transversal issues in all programme activities by using an institutional and programming perspective. Resources need to be put aside to ensure that evidence is provided through monitoring of results and assessment of impact on ultimate beneficiaries. Indicators should be developed as part of the performance matrix.

Main lessons learned and good practices

1. Strengthening Tripartism by involving constituents and systematically building their capacities, pays off:

There's growing interest from stakeholders, particularly the private sector, to actively participate in VET, resulting from ILO's focused efforts of capacity building of constituents. However, the ILO needs to fully leverage its convening power to take advantage of tripartism in VET and build capacities of constituents more systematically. Meaningful engagement requires social partners to assume their role as competent representatives who jointly hold a long-term vision and ownership in the skills system. This entails an institutional development programme with tailored capacity-building plans for each constituent.

2. The Malawi Work integrated learning approach (WIL) and the Zanzibar dual Apprenticeship interventions demonstrate that piloting small initiatives is effective but not enough. A proof-of-concept approach and certain enabling conditions are required to ensure sustainability:

Pilot initiatives showed promising results. They have, however, not yet become well tested initiatives with a proof of concept with the right framework conditions so that institutionalization and mainstreaming have been slow. Governments face uncertainty in operationalizing these initiatives, and the essential framework conditions to motivate private sector involvement are often not yet in place. Consolidating pilot initiatives for institutionalization demands a programme perspective with longer-term funding assurance.

3. The effectiveness of NORAD's contribution to achieve sustainability depends on the maturity level of a country's governance and skills system:

The evaluator acknowledges the benefits of the two-year funding approach to mobilise the right stakeholders, build understanding and ownership for innovations; however the effectiveness and potential sustainability depends on the country's context, the maturity of the VET system, and the government's ability to absorb these new innovations. In situations where the ILO lacks a presence, and where countries have weak VET governance and institutions, longer commitment and stronger team presence are required and is critical for institutionalization. An assessment tool to better understand the strategic entry points and determine required length and depth of engagement in a country can strengthen the planning of initiatives and the ILO's position when negotiation with funding agencies.