

Evaluation of the Trade for Sustainable Development (T4SD):

An emerging brand service in connecting voluntary sustainability standards to achieving SDGs

Background

This Evaluation Communication Note aims at conveying the key learning messages generated from the evaluation of the T4SD project. To enhance its utility, the evaluation team took a participative approach, with ITC management, project team, donors and other stakeholders participating actively during the evaluation process and endorsing the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The project started in 2009 with building up the Standards Map, a repository of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS). Co-funded by SECO and BMZ and subsequently by GIZ and the European Commission, it evolved enormously over the years. Today its service portfolio includes a global forum, customized services for the private sector and technical assistance in developing countries.

With many activities ongoing or completed recently, T4SD has been in a dynamic growth phase. Given this context, an assessment of overall project outcomes or impact would have been premature. Instead, the evaluation attempted to identify useful learning aspects of the work in progress, facilitate consensus building, and advise ongoing and future operations.

Performance and results

The overall rating based on ITC's evaluation criteria is satisfactory, with particularly good performance in terms of relevance and innovation.

Main result 1: The global VSS repository (Standards Map) offers easily accessible, reliable and neutral information in responding to the public interest in VSS transparency. Data is currently accessible through the Sustainability Map portal, which contains the Standard Map module that references approximately 240 VSS in over 80 sectors and 180 countries. In the past years, Standards Map has evolved into a brand that positions ITC as one of the key international public stakeholders in the field. Transparency on VSS complements the WTO rules relating to mandatory standards (SPS, TBT), and potentially facilitates international market access for developing countries.

Main result 2: The T4SD Forum convenes a wide range of stakeholders, including the private sector, international organizations, policymakers, NGOs and research institutions, to discuss VSS-related issues. It serves as an important networking and communication platform, which promotes the utility of the repository. In the past four years, the T4SD Forum, a three-day event held at ITC and WTO, has established itself in the VSS field and has become one of four ITC global events (with World Export Development Forum, World TPO Conference and Awards, and She Trades Global).

QUICK FACTS: T4SD project

Implementation unit:
SIVC/DEI

Project duration:
2009 – ongoing

Duration of evaluation:
2013-2016

Major funders:
SECO, BMZ/GIZ, EU

Budget of 2016-2020 cycle:
USD 13,174,218

Main project deliverables:

- Sustainability Map portal and VSS Repository (Standards Map)
- T4SD Forum
- Customized tools tailored to the needs of private firms
- Technical assistance projects in developing countries

Pilot and innovation:

As an innovative service, the project had been using a learning-by-doing pattern since its beginning, with a view to creating a niche service in the VSS field, and responding with new products and services to clients' demands.

As the project was approaching a more mature stage where core products were recognized broadly, the 2016-2020 project plan outlined a better developed results framework. This results framework will be reviewed in 2018, taking into account the results of the evaluation.



A Panel session of T4SD Forum 2017 held at ITC. (Photo source: T4SD Forum 2017 photo album)

Main result 3: Customized services for the private and non-governmental sectors enriched the contents of the repository, and promoted the use and transparency of the VSS repository. Developing customized VSS tools is a service of a commercial nature, and private sector contributions to these activities have been essentially a service fee. For certain donors, clear rules on the use and reporting of private contributions are important for the neutrality and credibility of the core service. Looking forward, it is pivotal that partnerships with the private sector are not merely for fundraising purposes, but aligned to specific ITC objectives and relevant SDGs.

Major result 4: To achieve results on the ground, VSS-related services has to be integrated in value chain operations in developing countries. In Colombia, T4SD's pilot service in the cacao sector progressed in the right direction. It worked with Swisscontact Colombia to design a self-assessment tool (LBCS) to match the quality of cacao products with global VSS, which facilitated the assessment of small producers and exporters on the export potential of local cacao products. This tool was an important component of Swisscontact's value chain project, although it has not been used for other intended purposes (trade linkages, generating market information). Experience from this project indicates that VSS-related technical assistance has to be delivered within comprehensive value chain projects to achieve sustainable results.

Key learning messages to take away

Need for a strategy on further deploying T4SD's innovative tools. A flexible design and open formulation of objectives was the right approach to piloting VSS-related work. T4SD has built the VSS Repository as a core product and has been adding new services. As T4SD is reaching a more mature stage, there is a need to sharpen its strategic focus on VSS transparency and related utility to MSMEs and consumers and to implement an effective strategic steering mechanism on rules of cooperation, which should be agreed with Steering Committee members.

Balancing the diverging interests of the North and the South. VSS have traditionally come from the global North; the costs of compliance however have been mostly felt by smallholders in the South. Given the diverging interests between developed and developing countries on applying VSS and other compliance measures, it is necessary for the project to communicate explicitly on ITC's neutrality and clarify its position in bridging the two sides. Efforts should be taken to enhance the risk management on neutrality and communication in selecting VSS and engaging with the private sector, and attention should be paid to including VSS from developing countries.

Mainstreaming T4SD's work into ITC's existing capacity building and advisory services should be included as a project component in the next project plan, as it would enhance the relevance of T4SD to other ITC operations and build synergies within ITC. Clearly, less efficient are donor-driven, one-off, ad hoc capacity building activities delivered through headquarter missions, which are also rather unlikely to lead to sustainable outcomes.

Good practices to be used in future operations

Tailoring VSS-based tools to the local context, language and specific sector is a key success factor in enabling small producers and SMEs, such as the LBCS platform applied in Colombia. Moreover, using this type of tool in a rural context often requires off-line functionalities, and strong hands-on coaching by local advisors is pivotal.

Partnership with development actors that have a track record in implementing value chain projects in developing countries is an effective and efficient way for T4SD to achieve concrete results on the ground, as T4SD neither has the operational resources nor the necessary experiences to ensure follow-up and upscaling of implementation results in many countries.

| Evaluation criteria | Rating |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| Relevance | 6 |
| Effectiveness | 5 |
| Efficiency | 5 |
| Impact | n/a |
| Sustainability | 5 |
| Innovation | 6 |
| Gender mainstreaming | n/a |
| Overall performance and results | 5 |

ITC rating scale 1-6: 6 represents highly satisfactory, 5 satisfactory, 4 moderately satisfactory, 3 moderately unsatisfactory, 2 unsatisfactory, 1 highly unsatisfactory