Report on the evaluation of the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document is submitted pursuant to paragraph 5 of resolution 71/1 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, in which the Commission decided to review the continued substantive relevance and financial viability of each regional institution. The present document contains an overview of the independent evaluation of the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development, which was conducted by an external evaluation consultant, including the conclusions and recommendations for improving the results orientation, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of the Centre. The present document also contains a description of the actions taken by the secretariat to address the recommendations in the evaluation and further actions it may wish to consider in that regard.

I. Background

1. In resolution 71/1, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) decided to review the continued substantive relevance and financial viability of each regional institution every five years. In line with that decision, the secretariat commissioned an independent evaluation of the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development in 2020.

2. The evaluation consultant presented the outcome of the evaluation to the members of the Governing Council of the Centre at its fifteenth session, held online on 26 November 2020. The Governing Council took note of the independent evaluation report and supported the recommendations, contained therein, which would contribute to realigning the Centre’s vision, objective and strategy with regard to the new digital era. The conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation are excerpted from the full report and included in the present document for the information of the Commission.  

* For the full report on the evaluation, see ESCAP/77/INF/2.
II. Purpose and method

3. The aim of the evaluation was to provide information for the Commission’s review of the Centre, including recommendations on how to improve the Centre’s substantive relevance and financial viability, in particular in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the preparation of the Centre’s medium-term strategic plan for 2021–2023. The evaluation comprised an assessment of the Centre’s performance as measured against standard evaluation criteria such as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and the mainstreaming of gender and human rights. It also yielded recommendations for improving the results orientation and performance of the Centre.

4. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the norms, standards and procedures on evaluation as set out in the ESCAP monitoring and evaluation policy and guidelines2 to ensure that the evaluation would be independent, objective and of high quality. The evaluation was conducted from April to July 2020 by Mr. Seán Ó Siochrú, an evaluation professional.

5. The evaluation included a comprehensive review of relevant documents, consultations and interviews of the stakeholders of the Centre. The evaluator consulted with ESCAP staff including from the Centre. Skype interviews were conducted with members of the Governing Council, resource persons, donors and other stakeholders of the Centre. Furthermore, case studies of countries that reflected a variety of subregions and included Bhutan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan were conducted.

III. Conclusions and recommendations

6. The evaluation included conclusions and action-oriented recommendations to enhance the performance of the Centre. According to the findings of the evaluation, the impact of the flagship programmes, when localized and institutionally mainstreamed, is high and sustained. Case studies and interviews reveal notable impact in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Indonesia, India and the Philippines. For example, the Women ICT Frontier Initiative in Cambodia has reached a large number of participants across all provinces including very remote ones and will continue to extend and deepen its impact in the future. In addition, initial adoption and partnership development results have shown the approach to partnership and programme roll-out to be better suited to some countries and subregions than others. The success of the approach depends on long-term collaboration with sustained government support at the appropriate level.

7. The Centre has responded to specific requests from member States, providing technical advice where resources and thematic expertise allowed. The Centre can further enhance its impact by clearly defining thematic focus and modalities of delivery. With regard to geographical coverage, efforts to identify and address the specific needs of the Pacific island developing States have proved difficult given demographics, costs and the lack of Governing Council representation.

8. The overall effectiveness of flagship programmes is high, with an average of more than 10,000 people trained by partner institutions annually. Despite the Centre’s efforts to encourage national partners to implement

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monitoring and evaluation at the national level, the lack of partner incentives and budgetary resources constrained the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation at the national level. While the process of module development was rigorous, participative, well tested and well designed, updates and improvements to modules are desirable, including submodules that could stand alone or be used in conjunction with global case studies and local use cases.

9. The Centre has a steady level of core funding from the host Government. However, diversified funding sources need to be secured to extend Centre activities and long-term sustainability. It is likely that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) will restrain funding contributions from member States. Therefore, the Centre is exploring various cost-saving and efficiency measures.

10. The Centre could further enhance efficiency by taking full advantage of access to ESCAP divisions, subregional offices and regional institutes that offer a wealth of information and insights into areas in which information and communications technology (ICT) can contribute to development. Greater diversity in representation and systematic and strategic engagement among Governing Council members could help the Centre to focus on the needs of member States.

11. The Centre’s record on mainstreaming gender is good, especially in the recent module design. The Centre adhered to the ESCAP Gender Equality Implementation Plan (2019–2023) and mainstreamed gender into the design and delivery of its capacity-building programmes. The Women ICT Frontier Initiative is a positive example of a gender-transformative programme aimed at mainstreaming the use of ICTs among women.

12. The Centre’s modus operandi has enabled the Centre to build capacities in ICT for development among government institutions, youth and students, and women. However, the digital landscape has changed drastically since the Centre’s establishment in 2006. Digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of things and big data processing are transforming the economy, trade and society across all sectors. There is a need for member States to develop the capacity to respond to the constantly evolving new digital era. To ensure its future relevance and impact, the Centre has to realign its vision, objective and strategy to make certain that the use of ICTs in the digital platform economy will contribute to development.

13. The evaluation contains six recommendations, based on its findings and conclusions, for improving the results orientation, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of the Centre. The secretariat welcomed the recommendations and incorporated concrete actions aligned with the recommendations into the Centre’s medium-term strategic plan for 2021–2023. The secretariat expressed its appreciation for the full cooperation that the member States, the host Government and other development partners accorded to the evaluation consultant by engaging in constructive interviews and discussions and providing information relevant to the issues covered in the evaluation.

14. Excerpts from the evaluation recommendations are provided below, together with a description of the actions taken by the secretariat to address the recommendations and further actions it may wish to consider in this regard.

Recommendation 1: The Centre should review and restate its objectives and vision in line with the dynamics of the evolution of the digital era at the global and regional levels.
With regard to recommendation 1, the Centre has formulated its medium-term strategic plan for 2021–2023 in which its future direction is clearly outlined. In accordance with the medium-term strategic plan, the Centre will strengthen its strategic focus and contributions to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic; deepen support for member States, not only through training activities but also through advisory services and technical assistance; implement a more efficient approach to resource mobilization; and improve monitoring and evaluation. The medium-term strategic plan was adopted following its review and endorsement by the Governing Council at its fifteenth session, held in November 2020.

Recommendation 2: The Centre should establish an advisory group comprising technical experts from government, academia, research institutions, non-governmental organizations and other ICT-related entities on the front line of ICT opportunities and challenges.

With regard to recommendation 2, the Centre will establish an advisory group in 2021 comprising technical experts from government, academia, research institutions, non-governmental organizations and other ICT-related entities across a variety of sectors. The group will advise the Centre on global digital trends (such as artificial intelligence and big data) and on the Centre’s strategic direction to further enhance its programme of work and services.

Recommendation 3: The Centre should propose that the Governing Council include in its agenda a regular item on members’ contributions to resource mobilization.

With regard to recommendation 3, the Governing Council has included an item on members’ contributions to resource mobilization in its agenda for its fifteenth session. The Centre has reiterated its encouragement to all Governing Council members to contribute to resource mobilization, which is essential to the operation of the Centre. The Governing Council will continue to include this item in its agenda for future meetings.

Recommendation 4: The Centre should define its strategic focus, identity and positioning for the digital era in the medium-term strategic plan for 2021–2023.

The Centre has incorporated recommendation 4 into its medium-term strategic plan, the focus of which is on providing member States with impactful and forward-looking programmes on using ICT for sustainable development; expanding the Centre’s footprint in the region; and bringing about synergy through meaningful partnerships and closer alignment of the Centre’s work with the initiatives of ESCAP and the United Nations. The strategy is expected to evolve over time to reflect the changing ICT landscape and capacity-building needs of member States.

Recommendation 5: The Centre should undertake a strategic assessment of the needs of ESCAP member States in the area of ICT for development.

With regard to recommendation 5, the Centre will commission a digital landscape study in 2021 to assess capacity-building needs and identify thematic priorities in the new digital era. As part of the study, a systematic in-depth review of the ESCAP subprogrammes will be conducted to explore
areas of interest, with special attention accorded to least developed countries. The Centre will strengthen its engagement and interaction with the subprogrammes by participating in the senior management meetings.

Recommendation 6: The Centre should encourage the participation of representatives from underrepresented subregions and least developed countries in sessions of the Governing Council.

20. With regard to recommendation 6, the Centre invited observers from underrepresented subregions, including the Pacific, and least developed countries to the fifteenth session of the Governing Council. The Centre will continue to encourage the participation of representatives from underrepresented subregions and least developed countries in future meetings.