



Evaluation of UNDA Project 2023N

**“Strengthening Innovation Policies for
SPECA Countries in Support of the
2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development”**

July 16, 2024

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Acronyms

BA	Business Accelerator
BI	Business Incubator
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DSCSD	Digital Solutions Centre for Sustainable Development
EA	Expected Accomplishments
EC	The European Commission
EPR	Environment Performance Review
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GII	Global Innovation Index
ICT	Information-Communication Technologies
I4SDR	Innovation for Sustainable Development Review
IsDB	Islamic Development Bank
KII	Key Informant Interview
MPTF	Multi-Partner Trust Fund
NBIASD	Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPECA	The United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
TTSTI	Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation
UN	United Nations
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission of Europe
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDA	United Nations Development Account

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
EPR	Environment Performance Review
WG on ITSD	Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization of the United Nations
WS	Workstream
VNR	Voluntary National Review

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Executive Summary

1. The evaluation of the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) Project 2023N “Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (hereafter called “the Project”) was carried out by an external evaluator in February-June 2024.

2. The Project was launched in January 2020 and concluded in December 2023. It was financed through the UNDA and had a total budget of USD 483,316. By design, the Project targeted six (6) member States of both the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and one member State of UN ESCAP: Afghanistan¹, Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

3. Pursuant to the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the evaluation (ANNEX 1), the evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC) criteria introduced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for evaluating the development projects and programs: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. The evaluation covered the full duration of the Project and resulted in the following key findings and conclusions:

- The Project's participatory design and implementation modalities, including the sessions and the composition of the SPECA WG on the ITSD and expert groups, allowed for its complete alignment with the national and global development agendas. It is noteworthy that six out of the seven beneficiary countries prioritized innovation and digitalization. At the same time, the project design and implementation modalities were not heavily focused on the inclusion of the third sector (i.e., private sector, associations, and relevant non-state actors).
- The evaluation also validated that the Project was fully aligned with global and regional priorities and four SDGs². Moreover, the Project activities were thematically coherent with and complementary to the interventions (which vary per country) funded by other international donors (including UN agencies).
- The operational, structural, and conceptual arrangement of the Project safeguarded its direct contribution to the UNECE’s overall mandate, and its work programme related to economic cooperation and integration as well as the environment. The key stakeholders highlighted the exceptional position held by the UNECE in securing high-level political support, cross-regional engagement and collaboration, and the provision of multisector technical and analytical expertise.
- The evaluation found that the Project’s objectives and results were achieved at the outcome and output levels. Noteworthy, the most significant results/outcomes of the Project were the development and adoption of the Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy, the development of the SPECA Network of Business Incubators

¹ Afghanistan a member of SPECA but not of the UNECE - participated in subregional activities supported by UN ESCAP, of which Afghanistan is a member.

² I.e., **SDG 8** (“Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”), **SDG 9** (“Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation”), **SDG 12** (“Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”), and **SDG 17** (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”).

and Accelerators for Sustainable Development, and the Project's contribution to the development of the Kazakhstan Association of the Universities Business Incubators and Accelerators (KAUBIA, www.kaubia.kz). The stakeholders reported on the capacity building events conducted within the framework of the Associations mentioned above. However, the overlap between the outcome level and output level indicators³ renders a distinctive qualitative assessment of the reported results impossible.

- The Project provided a platform for policy-level discussions within the framework of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and the 16th session of the SPECA Governing Council. It facilitated science, technology, and innovation gap analysis for all the targeted countries. It also supported the production of a background paper related to the prospects for SPECA regional cooperation on innovation. UNECE posted all the reports online to make them easily accessible to the public. The Project also contributed to building the capacity of the targeted countries through face-to-face and online workshops, side events, and training sessions.
- The Project results framework was aligned with the relevant development priorities of the targeted countries but lacked gender, human rights, disability, and climate-change-sensitive indicators by design. The absence of indicators to measure progress across gender, human rights, disability, and climate change dimensions resulted in an information gap and low awareness among beneficiary countries regarding the correlation between the innovation agenda and these dimensions. This might have lessened the impact of the Project deliverables on the capacity of the participating countries to prioritize progress in the relevant cross-sectoral processes and structures that would eventually contribute to the achievement of the relevant SDGs (i.e., SDG 5⁴, SDG 10⁵, and SDG 13⁶).

Despite lacking gender equality, human rights, disability, and climate change-sensitive indicators, the UNECE incorporated the climate change and gender mainstreaming agenda in the Project's activities. The side event to the 16th session of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships promoted women's entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development and the Work Plan for the SPECA WG on ITSD approved at the 4th Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD referred to climate change dimension.

- The Project experienced some external challenges (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and political changes in the host and beneficiary countries) that delayed the project implementation. The Project team successfully applied an agile management approach to secure an iterative and incremental implementation of the Project, focusing on flexibility, collaboration, and the satisfaction of the participating countries and institutions. This also included the budget modifications that allowed for all the results

³ Outcome level indicator **IAI.1** ("An action plan for the SPECA innovation strategy with performance indicators aligned with the SDGs is developed and agreed with SPECA countries and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council"); Output level indicator **OPI.4** ("Produce a final draft of the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan and secure its formal approval by the SPECA Governing Council, with the attendance of the national focal points and experts (a session within the framework of the SPECA Economic Forum and the SPECA Governing Council)").

⁴ SDG 5: "Gender Equality."

⁵ SDG 10: "Reduced Inequality."

⁶ SDG 13: "Climate Action."

to be achieved as planned at the outcome and output levels and switching to an online capacity building mode. Therefore, the budget analysis showed a significant increase in spending on budget items related to external contractual services and expert fees.

- The Project backstopping and administration were limited to one P-level staff, and a full-time administrative support staff was lacking. According to key stakeholders, the Project's human resource structure needed readjustment to secure advanced backstopping (at the administration level) and continuous engagement of external thematic experts and service providers.
- The evaluation confirmed the interest of the beneficiary countries and a sense of ownership regarding the Project results. At the same time, the evaluation acknowledged that several strategic challenges directly affected the sustainability, scale-up, and replication of the Project results, including the lack of financial resources, political influences from neighbouring countries, changes in the political agenda, staff turnover, and the shortage of a structured knowledge transfer system in the beneficiary countries. The evaluation concluded that the sustainability, replication, and scale-up of the Project's results cannot be guaranteed unless the UNECE and SPECA participating States proactively address the external risks and challenges associated with financial limitations through the sustainability strategy (i.e., SPECA Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF)) to support SPECA participating States across all relevant projects.
- The evaluation also acknowledged the proactive actions of the Secretariat to raise funds and continue supporting SPECA participating States in strengthening their innovation policies. Its new project proposal (pending donor approval) also incorporated inclusive digital transformation and leaving no one behind agenda with a focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

4. Based on the above findings, the evaluation resulted in the following five recommendations:

- ***The evaluation recommends continuing to apply participatory and agile management modalities in future project design and implementation*** to allow the project teams to get real-time insights into project progress and potential issues.
- ***The evaluation strongly advises to continue engaging the private sector, associations, and non-state actors in project activities*** to strengthen in-country and regional collaboration across sectors and secure a better balance of political support and a sense of ownership with industry-specific insights.
- ***The evaluation also heavily recommends revising the formulation of outcome and output level indicators of future projects to avoid overlap and ensure that complex concepts are broken down into measurable components at the outcome level.*** Furthermore, the evaluation recommends incorporating gender, human rights, disability, and climate change indicators into the results framework to enable continuous reporting on progress made.
- ***With regard to the implementation modalities of the capacity building activities, the evaluation recommends the development of online webinars (for general capacity building activities at the national level) with face-to-face meetings (those addressing***

regional, strategic and more advanced knowledge sharing). However, face-to-face regional meetings and site visits would be more relevant for the sort of capacity building activities that would potentially lead to cross-sector strategic partnerships and provide first-hand experience of the practical implications and challenges of the approaches applied in the host countries.

- ***The evaluation recommends reconsidering project staffing patterns*** to align their level of engagement to the lifetime of the project. The Secretariat needs to include administrative support and professional-level staff in the project proposals to ensure the smooth continuity of new project activities. This is particularly crucial, taking into account the level of effort required for quality assurance of the developed concept papers and assessment notes and for organizing cross-country and regional face-to-face capacity building activities, workshops, and side events.

Background

5. The current document presents the evaluation report for the UNDA’s “Strengthening Innovation Policies for SPECA Countries in Support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” project (hereinafter, “the Project”). The Project was initially launched following a decision taken in 2017 at the 12th session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) to develop an innovation strategy to promote sustainable development in the SPECA region. Later, the innovation strategy was submitted for approval to the 2019 SPECA Governing Council, aiming to “...achieve a sustained improvement in the national capacity and capabilities of the SPECA countries to formulate and implement innovation policies for sustainable development and to raise the level and quality of regional cooperation in the implementation of innovations that target and support sustainable development.”⁷

6. In this regard, the Project set out to support and create further sustainable momentum in the course of taking the first steps toward putting the above-mentioned strategy into practice. In addition, it intended to support the seven SPECA participating States in their efforts to spur innovation as a central driver of the increasingly urgent transition from a resource-intensive model of economic development characterized by low productivity to a knowledge-based model delivering more sustainable economic growth, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the Project encompassed the following two main objectives:

- To support and create further sustainable momentum while putting into practice an innovation strategy to promote sustainable development in the SPECA region, as decided at the 12th session of the SPECA Governing Council in 2017; and
- To strengthen the institutional capacities of the landlocked SPECA countries to harness innovation as a driver of sustainable development and regional integration.

7. The Project was implemented in line with two main workstreams (WSs) corresponding to the two expected outcomes and seven outputs (**Table 1**).

Table 1: The Project Structure

Workstreams (WS)	Outcomes	Outputs	Indicator of Achievement (IA)
WS 1	Strengthened co-operation on innovation to promote sustainable development and deliver the Agenda 2030 in the SPECA subregion.	Output 1.1: Develop a subregional gap analysis covering the 7 SPECA countries to inform the first Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy.	IA 1.1: An Action Plan for the SPECA innovation strategy with performance indicators aligned with the SDGs is developed and agreed with SPECA countries and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council.
		Output 1.2: Organize a subregional workshop to present and validate the gap analysis.	
		Output 1.3: Organize a subregional workshop to develop an Action Plan and its performance indicators and develop joint activities between countries on innovation for sustainable development.	
		Output 1.4: Produce a final draft of the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan and secure its formal approval by the SPECA Governing Council, with attendance of the national focal points and experts (a session within the framework of the SPECA Economic Forum and the SPECA Governing Council).	IA 1.2: At least two joint initiatives on innovation for sustainable development involving two or more SPECA

⁷ [SPECA Innovation Strategy English.pdf \(unece.org\)](#).

		Output 1.5: Organize a subregional workshop to measure the implementation progress of the Action Plan based on its key performance indicators.	countries developed and endorsed by the beneficiary countries.
WS 2	Enhanced capacity to design and carry out effective innovation policy and institutional reform.	Output 2.1: Develop training materials on good practices on innovation policies and institutions for sustainable development, including technology transfer and science and technology parks (based on activities with ESCAP and IATT on science, technology, and innovation under A2.1).	IA 2.1: At least 3 of the 7 SPECA countries designed at least one initiative to improve support for innovation for sustainable development.
		Output 2.1: Within the framework of a national capacity building agreement with 3 SPECA countries, organize 6 national workshops (2 for each country) on a specific topic to address key issues at the national level identified by the gap analysis as part of national consultations carried out under OP1.1, as reflected in the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan. In parallel with these events, UNECE and ESCAP will provide targeted support to three countries on three specific issues.	

Source: *The Project Design Document, UNECE (2020).*

8. In total, in accordance with the Project framework, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) team carried out 23 capacity building activities (including face-to-face and online workshops, study tours and side events, SPECA Working Group meetings, and Expert and Technical Group meetings) (**Table 2**).

Table 2: The Project Activities⁸

#	Activity	Date and venue
1	1 st Session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development.	30 July 2020, virtual modality (Country chair - Kazakhstan).
2	Subregional Workshop: Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) gap assessment of SPECA countries.	26 November 2020, virtual modality.
3	Capacity building: 1 st meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of Innovation Support Infrastructure in Kyrgyz Republic until 2025.	9 June 2021, virtual modality.
4	Capacity building: 2 nd meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of Kyrgyz Republic until 2025.	8 September 2021, virtual modality.
5	2 nd Session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and Subregional workshop: Action plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.	20-21 October 2021, Hybrid mode: online platform, (Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic).
6	16 th session of the SPECA Governing Council: Approval of the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.	19 November 2021, (Hybrid session) Tashkent, Uzbekistan.
7	Capacity building: Challenges and opportunities for supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA countries.	23 December 2021, Virtual mode: online platform (Geneva, Switzerland).

⁸ [Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development | UNECE](#).

8	Capacity building for SPECA policymakers on supporting innovative high-growth enterprises in the SPECA subregion.	15 February and 17 February 2022, Virtual mode: online platform (Geneva, Switzerland).
9	Capacity building: "New approaches to innovation policy in the transition economies of the SPECA subregion."	19 May 2022, Virtual mode: online platform (Geneva, Switzerland).
10	Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development: Proposal for a SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development (NBIASD).	19-20 July 2022, Hybrid mode (Almaty, Kazakhstan)
11	3 rd Session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development: Approval of the creation of a SPECA NBIASD with national focal points.	20 July 2022, Hybrid mode (Almaty, Kazakhstan)
12	Capacity building: Fostering innovative entrepreneurship through educational curricula in the SPECA subregion.	19 September 2022, Virtual mode: online platform, (Geneva, Switzerland)
13	Capacity building for SPECA countries "Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators."	27-29 September 2022, Virtual mode: online platform, (Geneva, Switzerland).
14	Capacity building for SPECA countries "Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: training for university management."	21 February 2023, Virtual mode: online platform, (Geneva, Switzerland).
15	Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE capacity building for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA subregion.	16 March 2023, Virtual mode: online platform, (Geneva, Switzerland).
16	Side event to the 70th session of the Economic Commission for Europe: Fostering circular solutions through innovation.	3 April 2023 (online, Geneva).
17	UNECE capacity building workshop for Chief Innovation Officers on innovation for the circular economy.	2 May 2023 (Tashkent, Uzbekistan).
18	Side event to the 16 th session of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships: Promoting women's entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development.	1 June 2023 (Geneva, Switzerland).
19	Study tour to Georgia for innovation policymakers from the SPECA subregion.	10-11 July 2023 (Tbilisi, Georgia).
20	Capacity building: Enhancing venture capital in Azerbaijan.	July-August 2023, Virtual mode: online platform.
21	UNECE B2B capacity building "Innovation for the Circular Economy: Bridging Start-Ups and Corporations").	18 October 2023 (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)
22	4 th Session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and Subregional workshop: Progress Update on the Action Plan of the SPECA Strategy on Innovation for Sustainable Development.	18-19 October 2023 (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)
23	Innovation for the Circular Economy: Empowering Start-ups to Achieve More with Less: UNECE Study Tour for SPECA participating States.	20-21 December 2023 (Tbilisi, Georgia)

Source: *Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development | UNECE.*

Purpose, Scope and Methodology of the Evaluation

9. The evaluation was commissioned by the UNECE and was implemented in February–June 2024. Its aim was to assess the extent to which the objectives of the Project had been achieved. In addition, the evaluation outlined any impacts the Project may have had in relation to progressing human rights, gender equality, disability inclusion, climate change, and disaster risk reduction.

10. The evaluation also addressed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and, where relevant, the UNECE's COVID-19 early response in relation to the Project.

A. Scope and Methodology

11. The evaluation applied a participatory approach by including all relevant stakeholders in the process to achieve a high level of ownership with respect to its output. Furthermore, the evaluation methodology incorporated the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, with particular attention given to the cross-validation of information. Data were collected through different methods, including document review, online mini-surveys among participants of the capacity building activities, as well as online meetings and key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives of the UNECE and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP), international and national experts engaged in the Project's implementation, national delegates who delivered presentations during the Project's implementation, and the key experts from the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development. In addition, the evaluator attended the workshops and discussions that took place in the course of the following selected activities of the Project as a direct observer:

- “The 4th Session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and Subregional Workshop: Progress Update on the Action Plan of the SPECA Strategy on Innovation for Sustainable Development” (8-19 October 2023; Tashkent, Uzbekistan); and
- “Innovation for the Circular Economy: Empowering Start-ups to Achieve More with Less: UNECE Study Tour for SPECA participating States” (20-21 December 2023; Tbilisi, Georgia).

12. Overall, the evaluation consisted of the following main phases: the inception phase; the fieldwork phase; the reporting phase; and the closure phase. *During the inception phase*, the evaluator:

- Reviewed the relevant documentation (primary and secondary data and Project papers).
- Carried out an inventory of the Project's activities.
- Finalized the list of internal and external stakeholders to be reached out to during the evaluation.
- Developed the evaluation framework and data collection tools such as the mini-survey and interview protocols.
- Developed the sampling, data-gathering strategies, and evaluation timeframe; and
- Prepared the inception report for the evaluation.

13. *During the fieldwork phase*, the evaluator gathered data through different methods/sources such as document analysis, KIIs (online and in-person), direct observations of the workshops, and online mini-survey results. Meanwhile, the evaluator ensured adequate interaction and consultation with different internal and external stakeholders in a participatory manner. Overall, the table below (**Table 3**) presents the clusters of key stakeholders consulted during the course of this evaluation and the relevant data-gathering methods (e.g., interviews and online mini-surveys).

Table 3: Clusters of Stakeholders Contacted

Clusters of Stakeholders	Data Gathering Means
The Project Team	In-depth interviews (online)
Participants of the capacity building workshops	Online mini- survey
Invited speakers (workshop presenters)	In-depth interviews (face-to-face and online)
Members/participants of the Working and Technical Groups	Online mini-surveys and in-depth interviews (face-to-face and online)

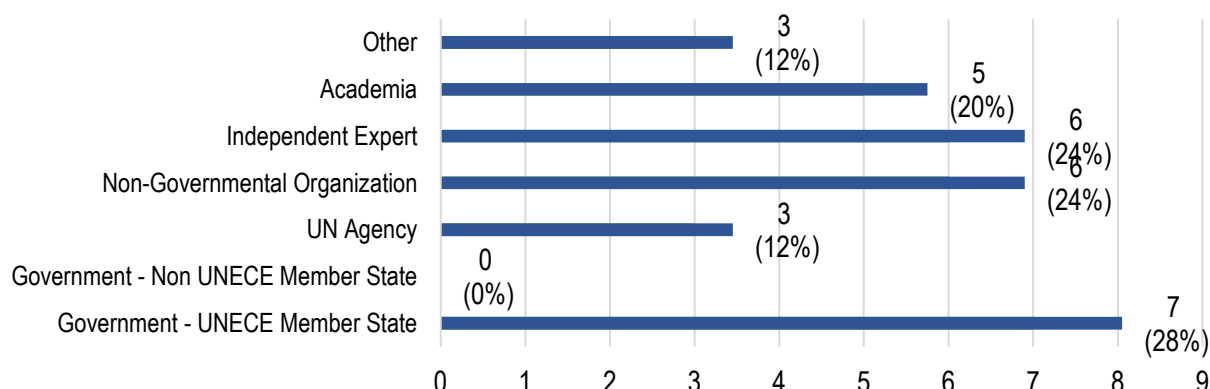
Source: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

14. The evaluator used the most reliable and appropriate sources of information and triangulated (i.e. cross-validated) primary data (e.g., technical and financial reports of the Project, planning and monitoring documents, reviews, and studies) and secondary data (e.g., relevant studies/notes produced by the beneficiary countries, and the UNECE documents and standards).

15. Furthermore, the evaluation entailed the implementation of online in-depth interviews and the distribution of online mini-surveys to the selected beneficiaries of the Project as well as key stakeholders to gather relevant qualitative and qualitative data. In total, the evaluation conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders such as the UNECE staff, independent experts, and the direct beneficiaries/participants of the Project. **ANNEX 2** presents the list of stakeholders interviewed over the course of this evaluation.

16. Furthermore, the evaluation gathered online feedback from 25 respondents, of whom 28 percent (seven out of 25) represented state agencies of UNECE member States, 24 percent (six out of 25) came from the non-governmental sector, 24 percent (six out of 25) were independent experts, and 20 percent (five out of 25) represented academia (**Figure 1**). Notably, some respondents reported several functionalities (e.g., representing both the state sector and academia, or representing a non-governmental organization and academia at the same time). In addition, 42 percent (10 out of 24) respondents were female, and 54 percent (13 out of 24) of them were male⁹.

Figure 1: Profile of the Online Mini-survey Respondents



Source: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

⁹ One respondent did not answer a gender-related question.

14. The *reporting phase* was mainly devoted to the preparation of the evaluation report. Here, the evaluator ensured that the report’s assessments were objective and balanced, that its findings were accurate and verifiable, and that its recommendations were realistic. The evaluator prepared the evaluation report in accordance with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG). Eventually, a draft report was sent to the UNECE to obtain final feedback.

15. During the *closure phase*, the evaluator gathered feedback from the UNECE and incorporated it into the final evaluation report.

B. Key Evaluation Questions

16. The evaluation applied the criteria of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability introduced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹⁰. In addition, the evaluation addressed gender mainstreaming and assessed any potential or actual impact of the Project on progressing human rights, gender equality, disability inclusion, climate change, and disaster risk reduction. The evaluation provided answers to key questions listed below to assess whether the Project had delivered the optimal outcomes in the most efficient way and to identify key lessons learned (**Table 4**).

Table 4: Key Evaluation Questions

CRITERIA	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
Relevance	1. To what extent did the Project respond to the priorities and needs of participating countries?
	2. To what extent were the Project activities consistent with global and regional priorities and aligned with the SDGs?
	3. How relevant were the Project activities vis-à-vis the programme of work of the UNECE? What value have UNECE’s efforts added in this area?
	4. To what extent were gender, human rights, disability perspectives and climate change considerations integrated into the design and implementation of the Project? How can these perspectives be better included in future projects’ design and implementation?
Effectiveness	5. To what extent were the Project design and set-up effective for meeting the needs of the beneficiary countries?
	6. To what extent were the Project objectives and expected results achieved?
	7. To what extent were the Project activities coherent and harmonized with those of other partners operating within the same context, particularly those of other UN system entities?
	8. What were the challenges/obstacles (including COVID-19) to achieving the expected results? How successfully did the Project overcome these?
Efficiency	9. Were the resources adequate for achieving the results?
	10. Were the results achieved on time and were all activities organized efficiently?
	11. To what extent were the resources used economically and how could the use of resources be improved?
Sustainability	12. What measures were adopted to ensure that project outcomes would continue after the Project ended and to what extent have these measures addressed the existing risks for sustainability?
	13. To what extent do the partners and beneficiaries own the outcomes of the Project? How is the stakeholders’ engagement likely to continue, be scaled up, replicated, or institutionalized?

Source: TOR of the Evaluation, UNECE (2023).

¹⁰ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD – DAC)

C. Evaluation Limitations

17. The several inherent limitations in the design of this evaluation include the following:
 - a. Key informants were interviewed on the basis of their availability, which did not allow for proper randomization and left open the possibility of selection bias. In addition, some key informants declined an interview. Accordingly, the sample obtained is not fully representative of the population that is supposed to be analyzed.
 - b. The response rate for the online mini-survey distributed among the Project's key stakeholders was modest.
 - c. Due to the seizure of power by the Taliban in August 2021, gathering data in Afghanistan was less feasible than initially planned, and Afghanistan was thus removed from the scope of this evaluation.

Evaluation Findings

A. Relevance

Finding 1: In-person interviews, online survey responses and desk research confirmed that the Project to a great extent accommodated the needs and priorities of six out of the seven targeted countries. However, due to the challenging political situation in Afghanistan since 2021, the country has not participated in the Project's activities, although it was one of the seven beneficiary countries of the Project.

Finding 2: The evaluation validated that the Project was fully aligned with global and regional priorities and four SDGs, namely **SDG 8** ("Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all"), **SDG 9** ("Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation"), **SDG 12** ("Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns"), and **SDG 17** ("Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development").

Finding 3: In-depth interviews confirmed that all six targeted countries prioritized innovation and digitalization. However, the circular economy concept was not fully reflected in national or regional priorities, largely because this was a new notion for Central Asian countries. Meanwhile, the evaluation found that the Project's scope was entirely relevant to UNECE sub-programme 4 ("Economic Cooperation and Integration"), which contributed to the substantive work being completed under the SPECA framework and was partially aligned with sub-programme 1 ("Environment").

Finding 4: The scope of the Project was aligned with the strategic reviews conducted by the UNECE for the member States - namely the Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews (I4SDRs) and the Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs).

Finding 5: Key stakeholders highlighted the exceptional position held by the UNECE in securing high-level political support, cross-regional engagement and collaboration, and the provision of multisector technical and analytical expertise.

Finding 6: The evaluation confirmed that the Project's results framework did not apply gender, human rights, disability, and climate-change-sensitive indicators by design. Moreover, the Project documents demonstrated uneven reference to gender, human rights, disability, and climate change dimensions; some referred to the climate change agenda, linking it to the Project's thematic areas but neglected to refer to the gender, human rights, and disability dimensions.

Finding 7: Despite lacking gender equality, human rights, disability, and climate change-sensitive indicators, the UNECE incorporated climate change and the gender mainstreaming agenda in the Project's activities. The side event to the 16th session of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships promoted women's entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development and the Work Plan for the SPECA WG on ITSD approved at the 4th Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD referred to the climate change dimension.

Key Evaluation Question 1: To what extent did the Project respond to the priorities and needs of the participating countries?

18. The Project assisted in putting into practice the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development¹¹. It is important to note that the preparation of that strategy was originally proposed at the 12th session of the SPECA Governing Council in December 2017 in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and was prepared by the UNECE Secretariat in cooperation with the SPECA participating States. It was then approved at the 14th Session of the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019. The above-mentioned strategy aimed to strengthen the capacity of the SPECA participating States in formulating and implementing innovation policies for sustainable development and advancing regional cooperation in this regard.

19. The strategy also emphasized that the SPECA participating States should develop and agree on an Action Plan to implement the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.

20. The desk research validated the fact that the Project supported the development of a subregional gap analysis covering the targeted SPECA participating States to inform the first Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. The Project also helped to develop the Action Plan for the strategy with relevant performance indicators.

21. All key informants interviewed over the course of this evaluation confirmed that the Project activities were fully relevant for their countries' needs. The evaluation also noted that, while Afghanistan was included in the list of targeted countries during the design phase of the Project, the country's engagement was no longer feasible after the Taliban came to power in 2021.

22. The Project introduced diverse activities to fulfill its objectives such as the sessions of the SPECA Working Group (WG) on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development (ITSD), capacity building meetings and regional workshops, side events, study tours, Expert Group meetings, and the session of the SPECA Governing Council (**Table 5**).

Table 5: A Snapshot of the Project Activities

Type of the Project Activity	Activity Title
Sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1st session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (30 July 2020). - 2nd session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (20-21 October 2021). - 3rd session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (20 July 2022). - 4th session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (18-19 October 2023).
Session of the SPECA Governing Council	16 th session of the SPECA Governing Council: Approval of the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development (19 November 2021).
Expert Group Meeting	Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development: Proposal for a SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development (NBIASD) (19-20 July 2022).
Capacity building meetings and workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) gap assessment of SPECA countries (26 November 2020) - 1st meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of Innovation Support Infrastructure in Kyrgyz Republic until 2025 (9 June 2021).

¹¹ [SPECA Innovation Strategy English.pdf \(unece.org\)](#).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2nd meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of Kyrgyz Republic until 2025 (8 September 2021). - Challenges and opportunities for supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA countries (23 December 2021). - Capacity building for SPECA policymakers on supporting innovative high-growth enterprises in the SPECA subregion (15 February and 17 February 2022). - New approaches to innovation policy in the transition economies of the SPECA subregion (19 May 2022). - Fostering innovative entrepreneurship through educational curricula in the SPECA subregion (19 September 2022). - Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators (27-29 September 2022). - Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: training for university management (21 February 2023). - Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE capacity building for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA subregion (16 March 2023). - Workshop for Chief Innovation Officers on innovation for the circular economy (2 May 2023). - Enhancing venture capital in Azerbaijan (July-August 2023). - Innovation for the Circular Economy: Bridging Start-Ups and Corporations (18 October 2023).
Side events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Side event to the 70th session of the Economic Commission for Europe: Fostering circular solutions through innovation (3 April 2023). ➤ Side event to the 16th session of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships: Promoting women's entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development (1 June 2023).
Study tours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Study tour to Georgia for innovation policymakers from the SPECA subregion (10-11 July 2023). ➤ Innovation for the Circular Economy: Empowering Start-ups to Achieve More with Less: UNECE Study Tour for SPECA-participating States (20-21 December 2023).

Source: *Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development* | UNECE.

23. All interviewed stakeholders and most of the mini-survey respondents confirmed that the Project was highly relevant to the needs of their countries. Some interviewees also referred to specific legal acts and/or national policy documents that explicitly prioritized innovation in the country's development agenda. The table below (**Table 6**) presents the relevant documents highlighting the importance of innovation within national frameworks.

Table 6: National Policy Documents and Legal Acts Related to Promoting Innovation

Country	Relevant Legal Act/Policy Document	Reference to the Innovations and Circular Economy
The Republic of Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-economic Development (2021).	Refers to five national socio-economic priorities for 2022-2030: (1) a sustainably growing competitive economy; (2) a dynamic, inclusive, and socially just society; (3) competitive human capital and space for modern innovations; (4) a large-scale return to the "territories liberated from occupation"; and (5) clean environment and a "green growth" country.
	Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan as of 10 January 2019.	Mandated the Presidential Administration to develop a national innovation strategy and related action plan.

	"National Strategy for the Development of Information Society in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2014-2020".	Focused on the establishment of an information society, through the use of ICT by citizens, community, the private sector, and government agencies.
	The Law on Science (adopted on 14 June 2016).	Encourages, <i>inter alia</i> , entrepreneurship and innovation among scientists to contribute towards competitive scientific-technological development in the country.
The Republic of Kazakhstan	Entrepreneur Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (dated 29 October 2015).	Increasing the overall innovation activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan, including the promotion of the development of high-tech and knowledge-intensive industries.
	National Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan through 2025.	Emphasizes building a diversified and innovative economy, critical for growth and competitiveness in the global digital economy.
Kyrgyz Republic	National Strategy of Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040.	Sets out that Kyrgyz Republic will have a competitive economy that is focused on the application of innovative and environmentally friendly nature-saving technologies, as well as an economy that is diversified, balanced, and inclusive, with a favorable investment environment. States that Kyrgyz Republic will accelerate innovative socio-economic development and will strive to advance where the country has the greatest competitive advantages in a globally competitive and open economy. The Kyrgyz government's efforts are aimed at significantly improving the investment climate throughout the country in order to turn the country into an "investment oasis" that will be an attractive place for investment, which has a competitive advantage compared to other countries in the region and the Eurasian Economic Union.
	Strategy for Sustainable Industrial Development of the Kyrgyz Republic 2019-2023.	Focused on innovation, and outlined that the transition to an innovative path of development and the formation of progressive structural changes would require the adoption of urgent measures.
	Decree on the approval of the strategy of sustainable development of industry of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023.	Refers to the development of information and telecommunication employment necessary for industrial development, as well as the introduction of new technologies into the industry.
	Concept for the Scientific and Innovative Development of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2022.	Stipulates that the state's policy for the creation of innovation systems should be implemented in a manner which results in a favorable economic and legal framework that promotes innovative activity, and the building of infrastructure for innovative systems and creating a state-backed system for the commercialization of new intellectual property.
The Republic of Tajikistan	National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for the Period up to 2030.	The following three basic principles of future development form the basis for the country's development strategy until 2030: (1) prevention or prediction (reduction) of vulnerability in future development; (2) industrialization or more efficient use of national resources; and (3) innovation or development through the integration of new developments into the country's social and economic mainstreams.
	The Innovation Development Programme of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011-2020.	The programme sets out to stimulate scientific, technical and innovative activity, form a regulatory legal framework for innovation, exploit the country's scientific potential in innovative processes, effectively use scientific and technological developments and inventions, and create and develop innovative infrastructures.
	The Law on Innovation Activity (dated 16 April 2012).	The law outlined innovation activities and established the broad parameters of the state's innovation policy.
The Republic of Turkmenistan	Concept for the Development of the Digital Economy in	Aimed to increase the efficiency of the functioning of all sectors of the economy and the public sector through the use of information technology.

	Turkmenistan for 2019-2025 (dated 2018).	
	Concept for the Development of the Digital Education System for 2019-2025 (dated September 2017).	Sets out to create an information-based educational environment and the effective provision of sufficient technical equipment.
	The Law of Turkmenistan “On innovation activity” (dated August 2014).	Covered the legal, economic, and organizational relationships between/among the subjects of innovation and the factors arising from its implementation..
The Republic of Uzbekistan	Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017–2021	Pledged to stimulate research and innovation activities, create effective implementation mechanisms to apply scientific and innovative achievements, and establish scientific and research laboratories and high-level technology centers, as well as technology parks at universities.
	Development Strategy 2022-2026	In 2019, the Agency for Educational Institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan, established by presidential decree under the Cabinet of Ministers, broke ground on the first four of 14 purpose-built Presidential Schools ¹² with the mission of delivering world-class education to the most gifted and talented students in the country. This represented the first step in the country’s aspirational vision of developing future leaders in sciences, engineering, social spheres and politics, who would contribute to the innovation economy.
	Strategy of Innovative Development for 2019-2021.	Focused on the development of human capital as the main factor determining the country’s competitiveness in the world arena and its innovative progress.

Data: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

24. Over the course of the Project’s implementation, the targeted countries continued with the implementation of structural reforms to advance innovation-supportive ecosystems. For example, pursuant to the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan “On some measures to improve governance in the field of digitalization, innovation, high technologies and communications in the Republic of Azerbaijan” (dated 11 October 2021), the Government of Azerbaijan established the Innovation and Digital Development Agency.

25. Similarly, on 26 January 2023, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan issued a decree to establish the National Council for Science and Technology. The Council was mandated to improve the management of the national scientific system and elaborate recommendations for setting priorities for the development of state policy in the field of science, and the scientific and technical activities of the country. Furthermore, in January 2024, the Government of Kazakhstan adopted the Law on Science and Technology Policy, which set the goal to double GDP by 2029 through, *inter alia*, the commercialization of scientific and technical activities.

Key Evaluation Question 2: To what extent were the project activities consistent with global and regional priorities and aligned with the SDGs?

26. Desk research validated that the Project activities were designed to contribute to the achievement of several SDGs, namely SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12, and SDG 17 (Table 7), as defined in the Project Design Document (hereafter “Prodoc”).

¹² The main purpose of the Presidential schools is to identify and educate gifted children through the use of advanced technologies in the educational process, as well as to support and encourage gifted youth.

Table 7: The Contribution of the Project Activities to the SDGs

SDG	SDG Target
<p>SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.</p>	<p>Target 8.2: Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors.</p> <p>Target 8.3: Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.</p>
<p>SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.</p>	<p>Target 9.4: By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes, with all countries taking action in accordance with their respective capabilities.</p> <p>Target 9.5: Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending.</p> <p>Target 9.b: Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities.</p>
<p>SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.</p>	<p>Target 12.a: Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production.</p>
<p>SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.</p>	<p>Target 17.6: Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism.</p> <p>Target 17.7: Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed.</p> <p>Target 17.8: Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology.</p>

Source: *The Project Design Document, UNECE (2020).*

27. At the Regional Workshop on Innovation and Technology Application for Sustainable Development held in June 2019, the participating parties were informed about the rationale behind developing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. One of the invited experts highlighted that, by 2018, the SPECA participating States already faced

significant challenges in achieving the SDGs and lagged behind countries in high-income regions such as Europe (Table 8). Overall, according to recommendations issued at the 2017 SPECA Economic Forum on “Innovation for the SDGs in the SPECA Region,” the 12th Session of the SPECA Governing Council (organized in December 2017) underscored the importance of elaborating an innovation strategy for the SPECA region to support national governments in achieving the SDGs.

Table 8: Status of the SPECA participating States in Achieving the SDGs (2018 data)

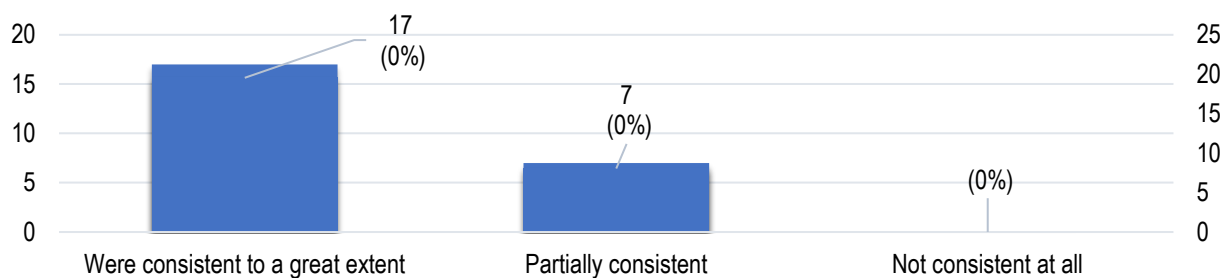
	Sustainable development goals	Afghanistan	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
1	End poverty	insufficient	compatible	compatible	compatible	compatible	compatible	insufficient
2	Food security, sustainable agriculture	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient
3	Healthy lives and wellbeing	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient
4	Inclusive education, lifelong learning	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	n.a.	insufficient
5	Gender equality, women empowerment	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
6	Sustainable water and sanitation	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
7	Sustainable and modern energy	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
8	Inclusive and sustainable growth, full employment	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient
9	Sustainable infrastructure and industrialisation, innovation	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	n.a.	insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	n.a.	n.a.
11	Smart and sustainable cities	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
12	Sustainable consumption and production	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
13	Combat climate change and its impacts	insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient
14	Sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
15	Sustainable use of ecosystems and forests	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
16	Peaceful, inclusive societies for sustainable development	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient
17	Global partnership for sustainable development	insufficient	insufficient	highly insufficient	insufficient	insufficient	n.a.	insufficient

Green	sufficient
Yellow	compatible
Orange	insufficient
Red	highly insufficient
n.a.	not applicable or data not av

Source: “SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development,” Rumen Dobrinsky European Alliance for Innovation (2019).¹³

28. Furthermore, about 71 percent (17 out of 24) of the mini-survey respondents confirmed that the Project activities were consistent to a great extent with global and regional priorities and aligned with the SDGs (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Feedback from Mini-survey Respondents on the Project Alignment with SDGs and Regional Priorities



Data: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

¹³

<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/3.%20SPECA%20Innovation%20Strategy%20for%20Sustainable%20Development.pdf>

29. In-person interviews validated that while the targeted countries prioritized innovations and a digitalization agenda, the concept of a circular economy (as distinct from the concept of the green economy) was still new for the Central Asian countries and was not necessarily aligned with national or regional priorities. This was reported in the policy document produced under the Project: “*Implementing circular economy practices and policies in SPECA countries is still at an early stage, and many challenges need to be addressed, among which are lack of awareness and knowledge, limited access to funding and resources, infrastructure and logistics challenges, as well as cultural and regulatory barriers.*”¹⁴

30. In-depth interviews and desk research revealed that the beneficiary countries¹⁵ confirmed making efforts to achieve SDG targets including SDG 9 which sets out to build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation. Moreover, all beneficiary countries except Afghanistan completed their Voluntary National Review (VNR),¹⁶ thereby prioritizing the achievement of the SDGs (Table 9).

Table 9: Status of the VNRs in the Targeted Countries

No	Beneficiary Country	VNR Completion Date
1	Republic of Azerbaijan	2017 ¹⁷ , 2019 ¹⁸ and 2021 ¹⁹
2	Republic of Kazakhstan	2019 ²⁰ and 2022 ²¹
3	Kyrgyz Republic	2020 ²²
4	Republic of Tajikistan	2017 ²³ and 2023 ²⁴
5	Republic of Turkmenistan	2019 ²⁵ and 2023 ²⁶
6	Republic of Uzbekistan	2020 ²⁷ and 2023 ²⁸

Data: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

31. Azerbaijan was the first among the post-Soviet beneficiary countries to submit two VNR reports by 2019. In addition, the Government of Azerbaijan launched the National Information Portal on SDGs,²⁹ serving as an interactive dashboard that collects consolidated data on the SDGs from selected government institutions and monitors progress made toward the SDGs in real-time.

32. The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan prioritized the SDGs at the Voice of Global South Summit and called on all countries to focus their efforts on achieving the SDGs³⁰. He also pledged to prioritize the development of innovation and achievement of the SDGs. In

¹⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/6.1.%20%20Road%20Map%20NBIASD-Circular%20STEP_0.pdf.

¹⁵ Noteworthy, the evaluation limitations were affected by the political changes in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/agenda-2030/voluntary-national-review.html>; VNRs are reports that countries submit to the United Nations to report on the actions taken and progress made to advance the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 SDGs.

¹⁷ [Voluntary National Review 2017, Azerbaijan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

¹⁸ [Voluntary National Review 2019, Azerbaijan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

¹⁹ [Voluntary National Review 2021, Azerbaijan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁰ [Voluntary National Review 2019, Kazakhstan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²¹ [Voluntary National Review 2022, Kazakhstan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²² [Voluntary National Review 2020, Kyrgyz Republic | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²³ [Voluntary National Review 2017, Tajikistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁴ [Voluntary National Reviews 2023, Tajikistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁵ [Voluntary National Review 2019, Turkmenistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁶ [Voluntary National Reviews 2023, Turkmenistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁷ [Voluntary National Review 2020, Uzbekistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁸ [Voluntary National Reviews 2023, Uzbekistan | High-Level Political Forum](#).

²⁹ [Home - DIM - National Information Portal for Sustainable Development \(azstat.gov.az\)](#).

³⁰ [Kazakh President Tokayev Addresses SDGs, Food and Water Security at Voice of Global South Summit - The Astana Times](#).

addition, in 2019, the country presented for the first time its VNR³¹ at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York, USA. In addition, the second VNR for Kazakhstan was conducted in 2022³².

33. In 2020, *Kyrgyz Republic* conducted a VNR on the implementation of the SDGs in the country. Meanwhile, the SDGs were included in several national policies and reflected in the National Development Strategy (2018–2040) as well as in the Government of Kyrgyzstan’s “Unity, Trust, Creation” (2018–2022) programme.

34. In 2016, *Tajikistan* developed and adopted the National Development Strategy to 2030 (NDS-2030), defining the main directions regarding achievement of the SDGs in Tajikistan. Moreover, Tajikistan also conducted VNRs in 2017³³ and 2023³⁴. Elsewhere, in 2023, *Turkmenistan* was part of a VNR on the progress of the implementation of the Global Agenda for Sustainable Development 2023³⁵.

35. *Uzbekistan* has confirmed its commitment to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, and its 2017-2021 National Action Strategy served as a pathway towards the SDG’s implementation. According to the secondary data “*To fully implement the SDGs, Uzbekistan is actively seeking investment and technology, at the same time strengthening closer ties with Central Asian countries.*”³⁶ Uzbekistan also carried out two VNRs, the first in 2020³⁷ and the second in 2023³⁸.

36. Furthermore, regarding global and regional priorities, several interviewees referred to the Global Innovation Index (GII)³⁹, an annual ranking of countries' capacity for and success in innovation. It is published by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). For ease of reference, the GII scores for some of the Project’s beneficiary countries are presented below (**Figure 3**).

³¹ [Voluntary National Review 2019, Kazakhstan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³² [Voluntary National Review 2022, Kazakhstan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³³ [Voluntary National Review 2017, Tajikistan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³⁴ [Voluntary National Reviews 2023, Tajikistan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³⁵ [VNR-2023 Turkmenistan Report EN.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

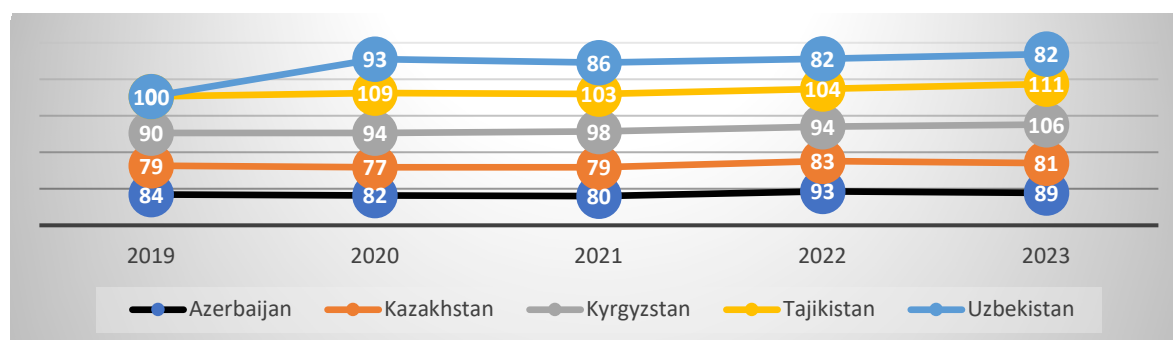
³⁶ [Uzbekistan's National Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Challenges in Achieving the SDGs | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\).](#)

³⁷ [Voluntary National Review 2020, Uzbekistan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³⁸ [Voluntary National Reviews 2023, Uzbekistan | High-Level Political Forum.](#)

³⁹ GII is useful for policymakers, businesses, and others to assess innovation progress based on innovation metrics across 132 economies. It includes themes beyond rankings, i.e., funding for innovation.

Figure 3: Global Innovation Index (GII) for the Project’s Beneficiary Countries (2019-2023)⁴⁰



Source: *GII Reports for 2019-2023, WIPO.*

37. The GII for 2019 emphasized that “*the subregion of Central Asia is noteworthy for starting to prioritize innovation activities and related policies in a sustained manner*”⁴¹ and that while no GII data were available for Uzbekistan in 2019, the country was at that time making continuous progress in data collection to be included later in the GII rankings. Moreover, Uzbekistan has committed to improving its GII position and strives to enter the world’s top 50 by 2030. Meanwhile, no GII data were available for Turkmenistan and Afghanistan⁴² for the selected period (2019-2023).

38. The evaluation also analyzed the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD (a total of four sessions were held)⁴³ conducted under the Project’s framework. An in-depth analysis of the ToR proved that the SPECA WG on ITSD was mandated, among other things, to:

- *[...Provide a platform for supporting progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals with a focus on the SDGs directly related to innovation and technology development (including, but not limited to SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure; SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth; SDG 13 on combatting climate change and its impacts; and SDG 17 on partnerships).*
- *Improve awareness of SPECA countries on the innovation and technology development related SDGs, provide information and share best practice experiences with regard to the implementation of these SDGs, taking into account interlinkages between the SDGs...]*⁴⁴

39. The ToR of the SPECA WG on ITSD also outlined the WG’s composition. Each SPECA country⁴⁵ had to nominate national representatives meeting the following criteria: “*[...senior officials involved in the formulation and implementation or be aware of national policies and programmes, which affect national policies related to innovation and technology development in their respective countries and able to effectively follow up the recommendations and decisions of the WG on ITSD...]*. Further desk research and in-depth interviews validated that the sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD were attended by senior-

⁴⁰ In the context of GII, the lowest rate (i.e., “1”) signifies a stronger innovation environment.

⁴¹ Global Innovation Index 2019, WIPO, 2019.

⁴² Officially, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

⁴³ 1st session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (30 July 2020); 2nd session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (20-21 October 2021); 3rd Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (20 July 2022); 4th session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (18-19 October 2023).

⁴⁴ [UNECE \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org).

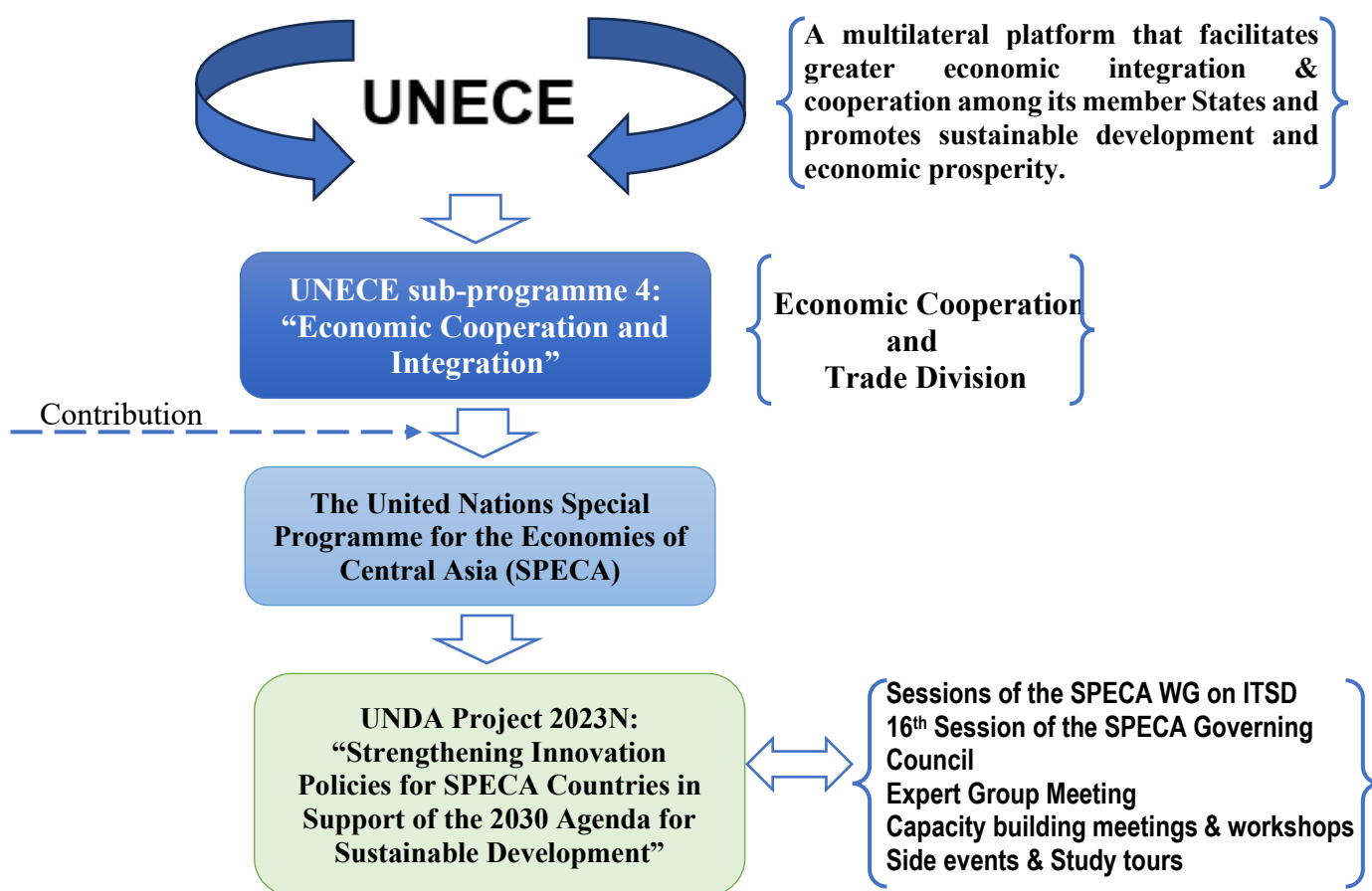
⁴⁵ SPECA participating States: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

level state sector officials (e.g. directors, deputy directors, board members, senior advisors, senior managers, etc.) from the SPECA participating States.

Key Evaluation Question 3: How relevant were the project activities vis-à-vis the programme of work of the UNECE? What value has UNECE's efforts added in this area?

40. Desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that the scope of the Project was determined by the mandate of the SPECA. The evaluation also acknowledged that the UNECE subprogramme 4, “Economic Cooperation and Integration,” implemented by the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, provided a considerable contribution to the substantive work completed under the SPECA framework. That subprogramme aims to support UNECE member States in designing and implementing policies, processes, and initiatives to strengthen good governance practices and build innovative, competitive, and inclusive societies progressing towards the achievement of the SDGs in the areas of innovation policy and public-private partnership (PPP). The figure below (**Figure 4**) delineates the relevance of the Project's activities with regard to the overall scope and structure of the UNECE.

Figure 4: Conceptual Roadmap of the Project and its Link to the UNECE’s Mandate



Source: Evaluation Dataset, 2024.

41. Four sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD were conducted during the Project. Notably, the SPECA WG on ITSD is a subsidiary body within the governing structure of the SPECA, created on the basis of the decision of the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019. The sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD served different objectives including:

- Delivering presentations on the developments in the area of innovation and technology for sustainable development in the SPECA participating States.
- Giving presentations on the status of digital connectivity and e-resilience as a foundation of infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic and related Project implementation progress.
- Discussing the SPECA participating States' efforts to harness innovation and enhance regional cooperation in the area of innovation and supporting implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development, approved by the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019.
- Endorsing the implementation of the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and getting the SPECA participating States to comment on and contribute to the activities of the UNECE and the UN ESCAP in support of the Innovation Strategy and the Action Plan.
- Presenting the main findings and recommendations of the following UNECE handbooks: “Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA

Subregion” (2021)⁴⁶; “Supporting Innovative High-Growth Enterprises in the SPECA Subregion” (2022)⁴⁷; and “New Innovation Policy in the SPECA Subregion” (2023)⁴⁸.

- Issuing presentations on the upcoming activities of the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development targeted at promoting a circular economy.

42. Under the Project’s framework, in November 2019, the UNECE organized the 16th Session of the SPECA Governing Council that adopted 13 decisions, including the decision on the “Tashkent Statement.” The latter was introduced to promote sustainable transport and trade, using the UN’s legal norms, standards, best practice recommendations, and other tools to support sustainable development and a circular economy in the region.⁴⁹ In addition, the SPECA Governing Council approved the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.

43. An Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development was organized immediately after the 3rd session of the SPECA WG on ITSD (in 2022) to discuss the implementation of the SPECA Work Plan on ITSD 2022-2023 in coherence with the Action Plan 2022-2026 of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway. The Expert Group Meeting also served the purpose of reviewing the UNECE tools supporting the implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.

44. Furthermore, according to key stakeholders, the scope of the Project was aligned with other strategic activities of the UNECE such as the Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews (I4SDRs)⁵⁰ and Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs)⁵¹ conducted by the UNECE for its SPECA participating States as per their requests. The table below (**Table 10**) presents a snapshot of the latest I4SDRs and EPRs conducted for SPECA participating States.

Table 10: I4SDRs and EPRs requested by SPECA participating States

SPECA Country	I4SDRs		EPR	
	Status	Year	Status	Year
The Republic of Azerbaijan	Not conducted	N/A	Conducted	2022
The Republic of Kazakhstan	Conducted	2012	Conducted	2019
Kyrgyz Republic	Conducted	2019	Conducted	2022
The Republic of Tajikistan	Conducted	2015	Conducted	2017
The Republic of Turkmenistan	Not conducted	N/A	Conducted	2012
The Republic of Uzbekistan	Conducted	2022	Conducted	2020

Source: Evaluation Dataset, 2024.

45. Moreover, according to the key stakeholders, the EPR team from the UNECE Environmental Policy Division (subprogramme 1: “Environment”) cooperated with the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (subprogramme 4: “Economic Cooperation and Integration”) to integrate EPR recommendations into the I4SDR recommendations⁵² as both

⁴⁶ [Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA Sub-region | UNECE](#).

⁴⁷ [Supporting Innovative High-Growth Enterprises in the SPECA sub-region, UNECE Policy Handbook | UNECE](#).

⁴⁸ [New Innovation Policy for transition economies in the SPECA subregion | UNECE](#).

⁴⁹ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Decisions%20of%20the%2016th%20session%20of%20the%20SPECA%20Governing%20Council_ENG.pdf.

⁵⁰ The I4SDRs focus on evaluating a country’s national and regional innovation system in the context of sustainable development.

⁵¹ The UNECE conducts EPRs to assess how well member countries are doing in terms of environmental protection.

⁵² I.e., the recommendations related to innovative policies in environmental management and environmental policies.

serve the purpose of supporting the member States in achieving and monitoring review-relevant SDGs.

46. In addition, with regard to the UNECE's efforts to add value to the Project's implementation, key stakeholders highlighted the following main strategic contributions:

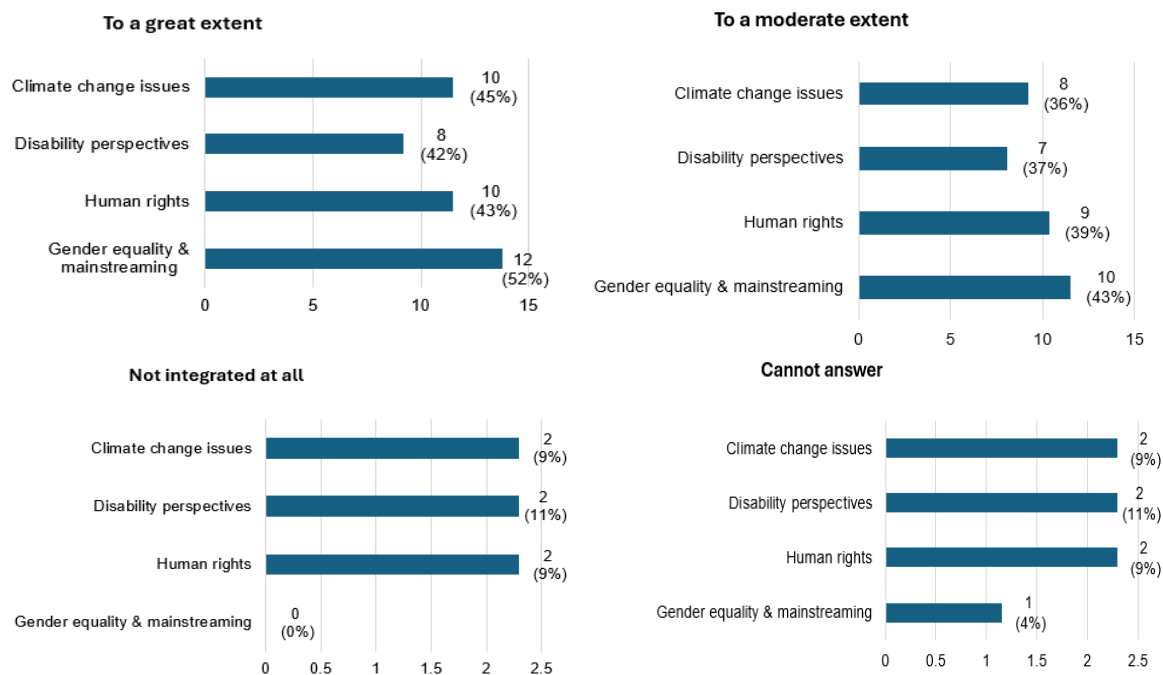
- Participation of key UNECE personnel and experts in, and their contextual contribution to, the Project's activities.
- The UNECE assumed a specific niche in the SPECA participating States by supporting policy and analytical work, and facilitating information sharing and capacity building in particular thematic areas (e.g., the circular economy) not addressed by other international organizations in the targeted countries.
- The UNECE provided a collaborative platform engaging national and international stakeholders and experts, enabling them to address national and regional agendas related to the development of innovation ecosystems.

47. The evaluation also validated that the UNECE, in addition to providing thematic expertise, secured high-level political support for the Project. For example, UNECE and UN ESCAP senior-level staff (namely, the Deputy Executive Secretary, SPECA Coordinator at the UNECE and the Deputy Executive Secretary of the UN ESCAP and SPECA Coordinator at the UN ESCAP) took part in the 12th session of the SPECA Governing Council along with high-level representatives of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (the Project's beneficiary countries). The 12th session of the SPECA Governing Council was followed by the 2017 SPECA Economic Forum on "Innovation for the SDGs in the SPECA Region" (held in Dushanbe on 5-6 December 2017) during which the Governing Council highlighted the importance of developing an innovation strategy for the SPECA region to achieve the SDGs.

Key Evaluation Question 4: To what extent were gender, human rights, disability perspectives and climate change considerations integrated into the design and implementation of the Project? How can these perspectives be better included in future projects design and implementation?

48. In-person interviews and online mini-survey results revealed varying opinions about the extent to which gender equality and mainstreaming, human rights, disability inclusion, and climate change dimensions were integrated into the Project. Many respondents of the online mini-survey expressed a belief that all of the above-mentioned dimensions were integrated to a great extent. For example, 54.5 percent (12 out of 22) were certain that gender equality and mainstreaming aspects were presented and integrated to a great extent, and 45.5 percent (10 out of 22) claimed they were integrated to a moderate extent. Very few respondents believed that all of the dimensions cited in the question were not reflected in the Project's design and implementation (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5: Opinions of Mini-survey Respondents on Gender Equality and Mainstreaming, Human Rights, Disability Perspectives, and Climate Change Considerations



Source: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

49. The majority of the key stakeholders confirmed that in the future there would be a need to strengthen gender equality and mainstreaming, human rights, disability perspectives, and climate change dimensions in the Project’s scope. In addition, a few key stakeholders stated that while the UNECE had advocated a balanced approach to selecting speakers and participants, there was still a discrepancy between the gender-inclusive intentions and the actual distribution of responsibilities in the partnering national institutions in Central Asian countries, which resulted in an uneven gender representation at certain events. With regard to this, some key stakeholders claimed that engaging in dialogue with national partners was crucial to encourage more active participation of female leaders. Some also asserted that additional support, resources, and training would be required to empower women and build a culture of gender equality at decision-making levels. Key stakeholders also mentioned that the beneficiary countries were encouraged to nominate female participants to attend the Project’s events.

50. The evaluation acknowledged the receipt of very diverse feedback from the in-depth interviews regarding the extent to which the Project had integrated gender equality and mainstreaming, human rights, disability, and climate change measurements. Many interviewees were certain that the Project integrated gender equality and mainstreaming and climate change dimensions but was lacking with regard to human rights and disability.

51. The evaluation noted that the project results framework did not apply gender, human rights, disability, and climate change-sensitive indicators. It did not allow the collection of comprehensive data to monitor and track progress in the implementation of the above-mentioned dimensions. Nevertheless, the Project team organized a side event with a specific

focus on the gender mainstreaming agenda, and a side event⁵³ to the 16th session of the UNECE Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships promoted women’s entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development.

52. Furthermore, desk research validated that the documents/reports produced during the Project referred to some of these dimensions but lacked references and/or recommendations related to others. For example, the Work Plan for the SPECA WG on ITSD approved at the 4th Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD incorporated several activities to be conducted between October 2023 and December 2025. One of these activities was focused on the climate change agenda, with the following title: “Capacity development to reduce and mitigate disaster risks in endorheic (inland) water basins in Central Asia.” Meanwhile, the policy document produced under the “Development of Synergies Between the NBIASD and Circular STEP, UNECE’s Stakeholder Engagement Network for Circular Economy Road Map” project outlined the link between the circular economy and climate change agenda, as well as highlighting the priorities of the targeted countries in addressing climate change.

B. Effectiveness

Finding 8: The evaluation validated that the Project’s design and implementation, including the sessions and the composition of the SPECA WG on the ITSD and expert groups, effectively addressed the needs of the beneficiary countries.

Finding 9: The evaluation found that the Project’s objectives and results were achieved at the outcome and output levels. At the same time, the evaluation observed overlaps between the outcome level indicator **IA1.1** (“An action plan for the SPECA innovation strategy with performance indicators aligned with the SDGs is developed and agreed with the SPECA participating States and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council”) with the outcome level indicator **OPI.4** (“Produce a final draft of the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan and secure its formal approval by the SPECA Governing Council, with the attendance of the national focal points and experts”).

Finding 10: The evaluation validated the thematic coherence of the Project activities with the interventions (which vary per country) funded by other international donors (including UN agencies), addressing the development needs of the targeted countries.

Finding 11: The Project experienced some external challenges (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic and political changes in the host and beneficiary countries). The Project team applied an agile management approach to overcome such obstacles and to deliver the planned results.

Key Evaluation Question 5: To what extent were the project design and set-up effective for meeting the needs of the beneficiary countries?

To address this evaluation question, the evaluation reviewed the organizational and decision-making practices applied under the Project. Pursuant to the Prodoc, both were clearly defined among the partnering institutions and partners. Thus, the UNECE Secretariat was fully

⁵³ [Flyer – Side event “Promoting women’s entrepreneurship in transition economies for sustainable development” | UNECE.](#)

responsible for the Project's administration and implementation. In the meantime, UN-ESCAP played the role of a committed equal partner leading or co-leading several activities and/or providing a venue for selected activities. The evaluation confirmed the above-mentioned arrangements over the course of the Project's implementation.

53. Furthermore, according to the Prodoc, the UNECE engaged with other UN organizations through the Inter-Agency Task Team on Science, Technology, and Innovation (TTSTI). The evaluation found no evidence of the meetings of the Inter-Agency TTSTI being conducted under the Project framework. It did, however, confirm that meetings had taken place between the SPECA WG on ITSD and the Inter-Agency TTSTI. Elsewhere, the evaluation noted other strategic meetings having been conducted under the Project such as those of the SPECA WG on ITSD and another of the SPECA Governing Council.

54. According to key stakeholders, the existing intergovernmental structures such as the SPECA Governing Council and the SPECA WG on ITSD oversaw the progress made in implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. In addition, desk research validated their crucial role in addressing the needs of the beneficiary countries: *“The SPECA Governing Council is the supreme management body which provides overall policy guidance to the work carried out within the SPECA framework, oversees the work of the SPECA Project Working Groups, takes stock of progress achieved, identifies priorities for the future, and approves the SPECA’s work plans. It is constituted of senior policymakers at the level of vice prime minister or minister from the SPECA countries, the UNECE, and the UN ESCAP executive secretaries.”*⁵⁴

55. Key stakeholders also reported that the SPECA WG on ITSD served as the main mechanism to ensure that the Project activities were aligned with the needs of the Project's targeted countries. For ease of reference, the SPECA WG on ITSD is a subsidiary body within the governing structure of the UN (SPECA) created by the decision of the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019⁵⁵. As reported, the SPECA WB on ITSD consists of *“the senior policymakers, researchers, decision-makers, and implementers from the SPECA countries responsible for developing guidance and finding practical solutions to problems identified by the countries.”*⁵⁶

56. The evaluation also noted the holding of other strategic meetings such as:

- Task Force Meeting on the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of Kyrgyz Republic until 2025.
- Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development: Proposal for a SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development (NBIASD).
- A side event around the 70th session of the UNECE.

57. The evaluation validated that the events listed above were attended by representatives of key state agencies from the targeted countries to ensure that the consolidated decisions aligned with the national priorities, and to endorse follow-up activities.

⁵⁴ [Governing Council | UNECE](#).

⁵⁵ [Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development | UNECE](#).

⁵⁶ [SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development | ESCAP \(unescap.org\)](#).

58. Finally, all key stakeholders, that were consulted over the course of this evaluation, confirmed that the Project design and setup were efficient when it came to addressing the needs of the targeted countries.

Key Evaluation Question 6: To what extent were the project objectives and expected results achieved?

59. To address this key question, the evaluation reviewed the Project’s results framework to assess the progress made against output and outcome level indicators.

Outcome-level Achievements

60. The desk research validated the full achievement of all three outcome-level indicators by the time of the Project’s completion (**Table 11**). The baseline for the indicators IA1.1 and IA1.2 was reported to be zero as there was neither an action plan in place for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development nor any joint initiatives conducted on innovation for sustainable development involving two or more SPECA participating States by the time of the Project’s commencement.

Table 11: Progress Made Against Outcome-level Indicators

Intended Outcomes (OCs)	Indicator of achievement (IA) at the start of the project	Indicator of achievement (IA) at the end of the project
OC1: Strengthened co-operation on innovation to promote sustainable development and deliver agenda 2030 in the SPECA subregion.	IA1.1: An Action Plan for the SPECA innovation strategy with performance indicators aligned with the SDGs is developed and agreed with SPECA countries and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council.	Fully Achieved
	IA1.2: At least two joint initiatives on innovation for sustainable development involving two or more SPECA countries developed and endorsed by the beneficiary.	Fully Achieved
OC2: Enhanced capacity of national policymakers and stakeholders to design and carry out effective innovation policy and institutional reform.	IA2.1: At least 3 of the 7 SPECA countries designed at least one initiative to improve support for innovation for sustainable development.	Fully Achieved

Source: Evaluation Dataset and Final Report for the 12th Tranche of the Development Account, UNECE (May 2024).

61. By the time of the Project’s completion, the UNECE reported the finalization of the Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. Initially, the draft action plan for implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development⁵⁷ was prepared for consideration at the 2nd Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD that took place on 20-21 October 2021. Later, the final version of the action plan was approved at the 16th session of the SPECA Governing Council conducted in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) on 19 November 2021.

⁵⁷ [2 Action Plan_SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development_Draft_ENG.pdf\(unece.org\)](#).

62. With regard to IA1.2, the UNECE reported the existence of two joint initiatives:
- i. The SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development, endorsed by the beneficiary countries.
 - ii. A proposal to establish the Digital Solutions Centre for Sustainable Development (DSCSD) for the SPECA participating States and Mongolia⁵⁸.

63. Moreover, according to the key stakeholder, *“The project’s activities contributed to the development of an initiative group that launched a series of events to improve the innovation ecosystem and sustainable development goals.”* The stakeholder also reported on the creation of the Kazakhstan Association of the Universities Business Incubators and Accelerators (KAUBIA, www.kaubia.kz). Overall, 22 organizations are members of the KAUBIA: 19 universities, two venture capital funds, and one information technology hub. According to the stakeholder, *“the Association disseminates the knowledge acquired during the UNECE training to middle managers and interacts with the government to create initiatives for the development of innovation.”*

The SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development endorsed by the beneficiary countries.

64. At the 3rd session (on 20 July 2022) of the SPECA WG on ITSD a proposal was presented to set up the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development.⁵⁹ This network was designed to provide a platform for the beneficiary countries to exchange solutions and best practices supporting innovative entrepreneurship through the development of business incubators (BIs) and business accelerators (BAs) for sustainable development in the SPECA countries. In this regard, the anticipated activities of the network included workshops, roundtables, trainings, study tours, and other information exchange initiatives covering broad areas (i.e., the transition to a circular economy, green entrepreneurship, and the commercialization of innovation and technology). In addition, the UNECE produced several policy papers and conducted trainings on the policy topics covered; all were instrumental for the network with respect to building the capacity of BIs and BAs. Specific materials included:

- A policy handbook - “Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA Subregion” (2021) (English⁶⁰ and Russian⁶¹).
- A policy handbook - “Supporting Innovative High-growth Enterprises in the SPECA Subregion” (2023) (English⁶²).
- A policy paper - “New Innovation Policy in the Transition Economies of the SPECA Subregion” (2024) (English⁶³).

65. The network reported delivering online training sessions on the above-mentioned policy agendas:

⁵⁸ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/D5a-RoadmapDSCSD-E.pdf>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/D8a-ConceptNote-SPECA-NetworkBusinessIncubatorsAccelerators-E.pdf>.

⁶⁰ [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/3.%20Business%20incubators%20for%20sustainable%20development%20in%20SPECA-2021-ENG_0.pdf)

[10/3.%20Business%20incubators%20for%20sustainable%20development%20in%20SPECA-2021-ENG_0.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/3R%20SPECA-2021_RU%20Corr_0.pdf).

⁶¹ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/3R%20SPECA-2021_RU%20Corr_0.pdf.

⁶² https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2227804_E_ECE_CECI_33_WEB_144dpi.pdf.

⁶³ <https://drupal-main-staging.unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/NIPTE-SPECA-2023-EN-WEB%20SIGNED.pdf>.

- A webinar - "Promoting Innovative Entrepreneurship through Educational Programs in the SPECA Subregion" (19 September 2022)⁶⁴.
- Online training - "Effective Operation and Development of a Business Incubator and Start-up Accelerator" (27-29 September 2022)⁶⁵.

Establishment of the Digital Solutions Centre for Sustainable Development (DSCSD) for SPECA participating States and Mongolia.

66. In October 2023, at the 4th session of the SPECA WG on ITSD, the participating parties were informed about the initiative of the Government of Kazakhstan, through the UN ESCAP resolution 79/10⁶⁶ and resolution 80/1⁶⁷ to establish the DSCSD. In May 2024, the Government of Kazakhstan issued a concept note for the development of the DSCSD entitled “UN ESCAP Digital Solutions Centre for Sustainable Development.”⁶⁸ The DSCSD was expected to meet the following two main purposes:

- Accelerating digital transformation towards a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient digital economy and society; and
- Strengthening coordination and cooperation among multiple stakeholders in the digital transformation process.

67. The Government of Kazakhstan committed to providing premises for the DSCSD, and in the DSCSD concept note⁶⁹ it presented a collaboration model between the DSCSD and other relevant institutions as follows:

- The UN ESCAP Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology (APCTT) in the area of digital technology transfer.
- The UN ESCAP Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APCICT) to deliver training sessions for the representatives of beneficiary countries.
- The UN ESCAP Asian and Pacific Centre for Development of Disaster Information Management (APDIM) in the field of digital solutions for disaster management.

68. With regard to the outcome-level indicator IA2.1, the Project reported that three SPECA participating States (Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan) out of seven had designed national initiatives to support innovation for sustainable development.

- *Azerbaijan:* The UNECE supported the development of the innovation ecosystem in Azerbaijan by conducting three online consultations⁷⁰ (July-August 2023) with national policymakers on enhancing venture capital in Azerbaijan.
- *Kyrgyz Republic:* Under the Project framework, the UNECE supported the State Agency for Intellectual Property and Innovation of Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzpatent) in creating the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of Kyrgyz Republic⁷¹ and establishing an innovation center in Bishkek as well as BIs at 11

⁶⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNECE_report_webinar_SPECA_Network__19092022_ENG_0.pdf.

⁶⁵ <https://unece.org/info/SPECA/events/371190>.

⁶⁶ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_79_10_E_0.pdf.

⁶⁷ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/240/021/6e/pdf/2400216e.pdf?token=q0LJDmiM00bme5lp1x&fe=true>.

⁶⁸ https://acpr.unescap.org/specialsessions/documents/Explanatory_Note_DSC_for_SD_Kazakhstan_Ver_7May2024.pdf.

⁶⁹ https://acpr.unescap.org/specialsessions/documents/Explanatory_Note_DSC_for_SD_Kazakhstan_Ver_7May2024.pdf.

⁷⁰ [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Questions%20and%20Answers%20-%20Enhancing%20Venture%20Capital%20in%20Azerbaijan.pdf)

[02/Questions%20and%20Answers%20-%20Enhancing%20Venture%20Capital%20in%20Azerbaijan.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Questions%20and%20Answers%20-%20Enhancing%20Venture%20Capital%20in%20Azerbaijan.pdf).

⁷¹ [Roadmap_Development_of_the_Innovation_Ecosystem_in_Kyrgyzstan_RUS.pdf \(unece.org\)](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Roadmap_Development_of_the_Innovation_Ecosystem_in_Kyrgyzstan_RUS.pdf).

universities across the country. In this regard, the UNECE hosted the following two virtual capacity building activities:

- Capacity building: 1st Meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of Innovation Support Infrastructure in Kyrgyz Republic until 2025 (9 June 2021); and
 - Capacity building: 2nd Meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of Kyrgyz Republic until 2025 (8 September 2021).
- *Uzbekistan*: The UNECE supported the preparation of the Innovation for Sustainable Development Review of Uzbekistan.⁷² Furthermore, the country established the Agency for Innovative Development, under the newly restructured Ministry of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation, and adopted the new National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Strategy for 2022-2030.

Output-level Achievements

69. The evaluation acknowledged that while the results framework did not refer to output-level indicators, it did allow for the measurement of outputs in the “output description” section. The evaluation confirmed the achievement of all eight outputs reported in the results framework (**Table 12**).

Table 12: Progress Made Against Outputs

Output number	Output description	Output Status
OP1.1	Develop a subregional gap analysis covering the 7 SPECA countries to inform the first Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy.	Achieved
OP1.2	Organize a subregional workshop to present and validate the gap analysis.	Achieved
OP1.3	Organize a subregional workshop to develop an Action Plan and its performance indicators and develop joint activities between countries on innovation for sustainable development.	Achieved
OP1.4	Produce a final draft of the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan and secure its formal approval by the SPECA Governing Council, with attendance of the national focal points and experts (a session within the framework of the SPECA Economic Forum and the SPECA Governing Council).	Achieved
OP1.5	Organize a subregional workshop to measure the implementation progress of the Action Plan based on its key performance indicators.	Achieved
OP2.1.	Develop training materials on good practices on innovation policies and institutions for sustainable development, including technology transfer and science and technology parks (based on activities with ESCAP and IATT on science, technology, and innovation under A2.1).	Achieved
OP2.2	Within the framework of a national capacity building agreement with 3 SPECA countries, organize 6 national workshops (2 for each country) on a	Achieved

⁷² unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/9789211172966_I4SDR_UZBEKISTAN_2022_web_full%2Bcover.pdf

	specific topic to address key issues at the national level identified by the gap analysis as part of national consultations carried out under OP1.1, as reflected in the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan. In parallel with these events, UNECE and ESCAP will provide targeted support to three countries on three specific issues.	
OP 2.3	Development and launch of the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development, which was established to specifically assist innovative entrepreneurship support institutions in the SPECA subregion.	Achieved

Source: *The Evaluation Dataset (2024) and Final Report for the 12th Tranche of the Development Account, UNECE (2024).*

70. More specifically, under OP1.1, the Project conducted gap analyses/assessments for the targeted countries as follows:

- Science, Technology, and Innovations (STI) Gap Analysis of Afghanistan.⁷³
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Assessment of Azerbaijan.⁷⁴
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Assessment of Kazakhstan.⁷⁵
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Analysis of Kyrgyz Republic.⁷⁶
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Analysis of Uzbekistan.⁷⁷
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Analysis of Tajikistan (English⁷⁸ and Russian⁷⁹ versions).
- Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Gap Assessment of Turkmenistan.⁸⁰

71. In addition, under OP1.1, the UNECE reported producing a background paper entitled “Prospects for SPECA Regional Cooperation on Innovation for Sustainable Development.”⁸¹

72. Under OP1.2, in November 2020, the UNECE delivered an online workshop entitled “Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Gap Assessment of the SPECA Countries: Paving the Way for Action Under the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development”⁸² to present and validate the findings of the STI Gap Assessment papers produced for the SPECA participating States.

73. Under OP1.3, the UNECE organized a subregional workshop on innovation for sustainable development (2nd Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD).⁸³ The UNECE presented a draft action plan for implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development, and the WG on ITSD approved the submission of the draft action plan for consideration at the next session of the SPECA Governing Council.

⁷³ <https://unece.org/eci/documents/2021/03/reports/science-technology-and-innovation-sti-gap-analysis-afghanistan>.

⁷⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Azerbaijan_Report_Yulia%20Alieva.pdf.

⁷⁵ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Kazakhstan_Report_Elena%20Shevchenko.pdf.

⁷⁶ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Kyrgyzstan_Report_%20Aziz%20Soltobaev.pdf.

⁷⁷ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Uzbekistan_Report_Nodira%20Kurbanbaeva.pdf.

⁷⁸ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Tajikistan_Report_%20Bahodur%20Mengliev_0.pdf.

⁷⁹ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Tajikistan_Report_%20Bahodur%20Mengliev_RUS.pdf.

⁸⁰ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/STI%20gap%20analysis_Turkmenistan%20Report_Yuriy%20Aronskiy.pdf.

⁸¹ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/UNECE_%20Background%20paper_SPECA_%20potential%20areas%20for%20cooperation%20on%20ISD_2020_ENG.pdf.

⁸² [SPECA Webinar Report 26 Nov.pdf \(unece.org\)](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/SPECA_Webinar_Report_26_Nov.pdf)

⁸³ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/SPECA_Webinar_Report_26_Nov.pdf.

74. Under OP1.4, the UNECE was expected to produce a final draft Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and secure its formal approval from the SPECA Governing Council. The evaluation noticed a certain overlap between this output and outcome-level indicator IA1.1 (“An action plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development with performance indicators aligning with the SDGs is developed and agreed with the SPECA participating States and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council”). At the same time, the evaluation validated the production of the Action Plan in two languages English⁸⁴ and Russian.⁸⁵ The Action Plan was approved at the 16th Session of SPECA Governing Council: *“The Council approves the Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. It expresses its gratitude to the UNECE and UN ESCAP secretariats and the SPECA participating countries for the development of this document.”*⁸⁶

75. Under OP1.5, the UNECE organized a subregional workshop (4th Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD) to measure the implementation progress of the Action Plan developed for the SPECA participating States. In this regard, the UNECE also produced an assessment report entitled “Assessment Report on the Implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and its Action Plan.”⁸⁷ At the 4th Session of the SPECA WG on ITSD, the WG also expressed its appreciation regarding the nomination of national focal points (by the SPECA participating States) to support the implementation of the Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.

76. Under OP2.1, the UNECE produced/organized several handbooks (serving as a basis for follow-up trainings) and training materials/events, as follows:

- Online workshop - “Fostering Innovative Entrepreneurship through Educational Curricula in the SPECA Subregion”⁸⁸ (19 September 2022).
- Online training for SPECA countries - “Effective Management and Development of Business Incubators and Accelerators in the SPECA Subregion”⁸⁹ (27-29 September 2022).
- Online training for SPECA countries - “Development of Business Incubators and Start-up Accelerators: Training for University Management”⁹⁰ (21 February 2023).
- Online training for the staff of BIs and BAs in the SPECA subregion - “Working with Venture Funds and Business Angels”⁹¹ (16 March 2023).
- A policy handbook - “Handbook on Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA Subregion.”⁹²

⁸⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/SPECA%20Innovation%20Strategy%20for%20Sustainable%20Development_Action%20Plan_Draft%20for%20GC_ENG_FINAL_0.pdf.

⁸⁵ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/SPECA%20Innovation%20Strategy%20for%20Sustainable%20Development_Action%20Plan_Draft%20for%20GC_RUS_FINAL.pdf.

⁸⁶ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Decisions%20of%20the%2016th%20session%20of%20the%20SPECA%20Governing%20Council_ENG.pdf.

⁸⁷ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Assessment%20Report_full%20first%20draft.pdf.

⁸⁸ <https://unece.org/speca/events/webinar-fostering-innovative-entrepreneurship-through-educational-curricula-speca-sub>.

⁸⁹ [Online training for SPECA countries " Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators" | UNECE.](https://unece.org/speca/events/webinar-fostering-innovative-entrepreneurship-through-educational-curricula-speca-sub)

⁹⁰ [Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: training for university management \(Развитие бизнес-инкубаторов и стартап акселераторов – тренинг для менеджмента ВУЗов\) | UNECE.](https://unece.org/speca/events/webinar-fostering-innovative-entrepreneurship-through-educational-curricula-speca-sub)

⁹¹ [Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE practical online training for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA sub-region | UNECE.](https://unece.org/speca/events/webinar-fostering-innovative-entrepreneurship-through-educational-curricula-speca-sub)

⁹² <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Business%20incubators%20for%20sustainable%20development%20in%20SPECA-2021-ENG.pdf>.

- A policy handbook - “Supporting Innovative High-growth Enterprises in the SPECA Subregion.”⁹³
- A policy paper - “New Innovation Policy for Transition Economies in the SPECA Subregion.”⁹⁴

77. Under OP2.2, the UNECE committed to “...organize 6 national workshops (2 for each country) on a specific topic to address key issues at the national level...” In the final report for the Project, the UNECE reported delivering six capacity building workshops and/or consultations: two in the Kyrgyz Republic, one in Uzbekistan, and three in Azerbaijan (**Table 13**). The UNECE arranged a workshop in Uzbekistan jointly with the National Office for Innovation Implementation and Technology Transfer for chief innovation officers from over 100 state-owned enterprises. The workshop aimed to enhance the efforts of the Uzbek government to foster a culture of innovation in the beneficiary state-owned enterprises. Meanwhile, the workshop in the Kyrgyz Republic was conducted as part of the 2nd Meeting of the Task Force on the Roadmap for the Development of the Innovation Ecosystem of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2025.

Table 13: Project Activities Under OP 2.2

Country	Event Title	Implementation Date
Azerbaijan	Three online consultations with local policymakers on enhancing venture capital in Azerbaijan ⁹⁵	July-August 2023
Kyrgyz Republic	Two capacity building activities to support development of a Roadmap for the Development of Innovation Support Infrastructure in the Kyrgyz Republic until 2025. ^{96, 97}	September 2021
Uzbekistan	National capacity building activities to help implement the recommendations of the UNECE Innovation for Sustainable Review of Uzbekistan ⁹⁸ . These included UNECE capacity building workshop for Chief Innovation Officers on innovation for the circular economy ⁹⁹ and UNECE B2B capacity building “Innovation for the Circular Economy: Bridging Start-Ups and Corporations”. ¹⁰⁰	May 2023

Source: *The Evaluation Dataset (2024)*.

78. Under OP2.3, the Project was expected to develop and launch the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development (NBIASD). The evaluation confirmed the achievement of this output. First and foremost, the proposal to develop the SPECA NBIASD was presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development in July 2022. At the 4th session of the SPECA WG on ITSD, the parties were updated on the progress of the creation of the SPECA NBIASD. In 2022-2023, the NBIASD organized several training sessions for BIs (**Table 14**).

Table 14: Project Activities Under OP 2.3

⁹³ [Supporting Innovative High-Growth Enterprises in the SPECA sub-region, UNECE Policy Handbook | UNECE.](#)

⁹⁴ <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/NIPTE-SPECA-2023-EN-WEB%20SIGNED.pdf>.

⁹⁵ [Capacity building: Enhancing venture capital in Azerbaijan, July-August 2023 | UNECE.](#)

⁹⁶ <https://unece.org/info/SPECA/events/357216>.

⁹⁷ <https://unece.org/info/SPECA/events/359822>.

⁹⁸ [UNECE Innovation for Sustainable Development Review of Uzbekistan | UNECE.](#)

⁹⁹ <https://unece.org/info/events/event/378783>.

¹⁰⁰ <https://unece.org/speca/events/unece-b2b-conference-innovation-circular-economy-bridging-start-ups-and-corporations>.

Event Title	Implementation Modality	Implementation Date
"Fostering Innovative Entrepreneurship through Educational Curricula in the SPECA Subregion" ¹⁰¹	Online	19 September 2022
"Effective Management and Development of Business Incubators and Accelerators" ¹⁰²	Online	27 - 29 September 2022
"Development of Business Incubators and Start-up Accelerators: Training for University Management" ¹⁰³	Online	21 February 2023
"Working with Venture Funds and Business Angels: UNECE Practical Online Training for Staff of Business Incubators and Accelerators in the SPECA Subregion" ¹⁰⁴	Online	16 March 2023
"Fostering Circular Solutions through Innovation" ¹⁰⁵	Online	3 April 2023

Source: *The Evaluation Dataset (2024) and Final Report for the 12th Tranche of the Development Account, UNECE (2024)*

Key Evaluation Question 7: To what extent were the project activities coherent and harmonized with those of other partners operating within the same context, particularly those of other UN system entities?

79. Desk research identified other international donors engaged with the targeted countries to support innovation and the circular economy agenda (**Table 15**). The evaluation observed that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported the Accelerator Labs initiative, consisting of 91 labs in 115 countries, including Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan, to accelerate learning to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The Accelerator Lab network, a joint venture of the Qatar Fund for Development and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, serves as an incubator tapping into local innovations to accelerate progress towards realizing the 2030 Agenda. The evaluation also identified targeted country-focused interventions supporting innovative approaches. However, the desk research confirmed that the strategic focus of international donor-funded programs and projects varied per country, as they were adjusted to fit the national needs and realities.

80. The evaluation also noted the UN Global Compact business incubator and accelerators initiative aimed to increase the capacity and awareness of business in support of achieving the SDGs.

The Republic of Azerbaijan

81. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), with a financial contribution from the Government of Slovenia, has been working with the Government of Azerbaijan to strengthen the country's innovation ecosystem and unlock its potential for digital transformation. In 2019, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of the Republic of Azerbaijan requested the UNIDO's support in acquiring knowledge and experience and sharing the best practices in promoting the country's innovation ecosystem and facilitating the competitiveness of innovative enterprises.

¹⁰¹ [Webinar : Fostering innovative entrepreneurship through educational curricula in the SPECA sub-region | UNECE.](#)

¹⁰² [Online training for SPECA countries " Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators" | UNECE.](#)

¹⁰³ [Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: training for university management \(Развитие бизнес-инкубаторов и стартап акселераторов – тренинг для менеджмента ВУЗов\) | UNECE.](#)

¹⁰⁴ [Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE practical online training for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA sub-region | UNECE.](#)

¹⁰⁵ [Fostering Circular Solutions through Innovation | UNECE.](#)

82. The European Commission (EC), through UNDP, supported the development and growth of civil society in the country. It did this by promoting a social entrepreneurship culture and building an enabling ecosystem and capacities for social entrepreneurship and social innovation through the “Developing Innovation-driven and Sustainable Civil Society in Azerbaijan” project.

The Republic of Kazakhstan

83. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) provided funding for the UNIDO to implement the “Global Cleantech Innovation Programme in Kazakhstan - Promoting cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship in small- and medium-sized enterprises for green jobs in Kazakhstan” project. It was aimed at supporting clean energy technology innovations and entrepreneurship in the country through the development of a cleantech innovation platform and accelerator programme.

84. Another notable intervention was the “Fostering Productive Innovation Project for Kazakhstan” supported by the World Bank. It incorporated the following four main thematic components:

- *Development of a knowledge base for innovation* aimed at promoting high-quality, nationally relevant research and development as well as advanced human capital activities through the provision of junior researcher group grants, senior scientist group grants, and PhD research and training grants.
- *Innovation consortia* through promoting collaboration among existing scientific research institutes and design bureaus, as well as scientific and engineering laboratories in Kazakhstan.
- *Consolidation of the technology commercialization cycle* through complementing the existing financial instruments and solutions suitable for different stages of start-up company development.
- *Strengthening coordination of the national innovation system and enhancing the capacity of the existing institutional structures* through complementing the existing financial instruments and solutions that fit the various stages of start-up company development.

Kyrgyz Republic and The Republic of Tajikistan

85. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) allocated GBP 20,000,000 to implement the “Enterprise and Innovation Programme (EIP)” in Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic. The EIP has been implemented by a consortium led by DAI Global Ltd which included the University of Central Asia, VentureHive, IMKON, BizExpert, and International Alert. Under the EIP framework, DAI Global has reported establishing four hybrid “business innovation centres” (BICs) (three in Kyrgyz Republic, and one in Tajikistan), through which 40 business support programmes have been designed and delivered (26 in Kyrgyz Republic, and 14 in Tajikistan).

86. In January 2024, the EU transferred around EUR 3 million to the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic to support digital transformation. Specifically, this assistance is expected to promote the work of the Innovation Center of Digital Competencies under the High Technology Park, and promote the “Sanarip Aimak”/“Digital Aimak” system in all regions of the country. It should ensure the provision of electronic services to the population and enhance the country’s cybersecurity.

The Republic of Turkmenistan

87. UNDP is actively engaged with the Government of Turkmenistan in supporting the implementation of national priorities in the area of digital development outlined in the “Concept for the Development of the Digital Economy in Turkmenistan for 2019-2025” and the “State Programme for the Development of the Digital Economy in Turkmenistan for 2021-2025.” UNDP has also provided support through the “Assistance in the implementation of a pilot electronic data interchange system in Turkmenistan” project. It mainly addresses the issue of developing and deploying a pilot electronic data interchange system in Turkmenistan.

The Republic of Uzbekistan

88. Uzbekistan benefits from various initiatives funded by donors including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), the Republic of Korea, and the UNIDO. In 2022, the Government of Uzbekistan, UNESCO, and the IsDB presented the new National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy of Uzbekistan (2022-2030), which was developed within the framework of a joint IsDB-UNESCO initiative entitled “Strengthening the inclusive Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) system in Uzbekistan.” For ease of reference, UNESCO systematically provides technical assistance and advisory, and capacity building activities to foster the development and governance of STI, and strengthen national and regional STI systems.

89. Furthermore, the Government of Korea sponsored the “UNIDO ITPO Korea Advisory Programme.” It aimed to address the issue of attracting foreign investment partners and accessing innovative technologies to become competitive in the global market. The programme contributed to the achievement of SDG 8 (“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”), SDG 9 (“Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation”), and SDG 17 (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”).

Table 15: International Donor-funded Initiatives to Develop the Innovation Ecosystem in the Targeted Countries

Beneficiary Country	International Donor	Intervention Title	Implementation dates	Budget	Intervention Goal/Objectives
The Republic of Azerbaijan	UNIDO and the Government of Slovenia	Development of an innovation ecosystem and support infrastructure, including a Digital Education and Innovation Centre in Azerbaijan. ¹⁰⁶	January 2020 - June 2023	EUR 199,725.50	The project objective is innovation ecosystem building, including fostering an environment for Start-Ups and Scale-Ups and skill upgrading, as well as raising awareness of the opportunities and challenges of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) for pursuing Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development (ISID) in Azerbaijan. ¹⁰⁷
	EU/UNDP	“Developing Innovation-driven and Sustainable Civil Society in Azerbaijan”	November 2020 - November 2023	US\$ 4,129,704	The project objective is to contribute to building a conducive environment for a vibrant, sustainable and innovation-driven civil society in Azerbaijan.
The Republic of Kazakhstan	GEF/UNIDO	“Global Cleantech Innovation Programme in Kazakhstan - Promoting cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized enterprises for green jobs in Kazakhstan”	January 2020 - December 2023	US\$ 1,817,862	The project aimed to accelerate cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship by SMEs and start-ups, and to strengthen the cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem of Kazakhstan.
	The World Bank	“Fostering Productive Innovation Project for Kazakhstan”	December 2014 - October 2024	US\$ 81.20 million	The project objective is to promote high-quality, nationally relevant research and commercialization of technologies.
Kyrgyz Republic The Republic of Tajikistan	FCDO/DAI	Central Asia Enterprise and Innovation Programme (EIP)	January 2018 - December 2024	£20,000,000	The programme aims at providing technical assistance to promote a stronger, diversified and more inclusive private sector in Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan.

¹⁰⁶ https://open.unido.org/projects/AZ/projects/?_ga=2.93484062.229922146.1716975936-1759072182.1712852663.

¹⁰⁷ [Microsoft Word - UNIDO - ProDoc Azerbaijan Final_101219.docx](#).

Beneficiary Country	International Donor	Intervention Title	Implementation dates	Budget	Intervention Goal/Objectives
The Republic of Turkmenistan	UNDP	“Assistance in the implementation of a pilot electronic data interchange system in Turkmenistan”	March 2023 - December 2025	US\$ 2,488,861	The project goal is to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Agency through the introduction of digital solutions in the work of the Agency in the provision of public services to citizens and assistance in the implementation of a pilot electronic data interchange system ¹⁰⁸ .
The Republic of Uzbekistan	IsDB-UNESCO	Strengthening the inclusive Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) system in Uzbekistan.	Data not available online	Data not available online	Project goal is to enhance Uzbekistan's capacity to leverage science, technology, and innovation as drivers of sustainable development and inclusive growth.
	Republic of Korea/UNIDO	UNIDO ITPO Korea advisory programme	January 2023 - December 2025	\$613,335	This project aimed to address the issue of attracting foreign investment partners and in accessing innovative technologies to be competitive in the global market.

Source: *The Evaluation Dataset (2024)*.

¹⁰⁸ [Assistance in the implementation of a pilot electronic data interchange system in Turkmenistan | UNDP Transparency Portal](#).

Key Evaluation Question 8: What were the challenges/obstacles (including COVID-19) to achieving the expected results? How successfully did the Project overcome these?

90. Based on the in-person interviews and desk research, the evaluation identified several challenges that affected the implementation of the Project activities. It is important to note that all such challenges were external, and thus beyond the control of the Project team. First and foremost, due to travel-related restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Project team had to cancel some in-person activities in 2020-2022, and shift its capacity building activities to an online mode in 2022-2023.

91. Key stakeholders also mentioned staff turnover at the national institutions from beneficiary SPECA participating States (main counterparts) as a hindrance. Changes in this regard delayed the nomination of focal points, which was thus beyond the Project team's control. Some key stakeholders also mentioned the structural changes in Azerbaijan (namely, the establishment of the Innovation and Digital Development Agency) and Uzbekistan (namely, the establishment of the new Ministry of Innovative Development). Others also cited regular changes to the delegates attending the sessions of the SPECA WG on ITSD.

92. Furthermore, due to the fluctuating political situation in Afghanistan, the country's engagement in the Project's activities became unfeasible as of 2021. Further political challenges arose because of the worsening security situation in Israel by the end of 2023 (Q4 2023). According to the Work Plan, the Golda Meir Mashav-Carmel International Training Center in Haifa (Israel) was expected to host a training session for beneficiaries of the Project in November 2023. However, with that being unfeasible, the UNECE replaced this event with a study tour in Georgia that was conducted in December 2023.

C. Efficiency

Finding 12: The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the technical and financial aspects of the Project confirmed that the modified budget allowed for all the results to be achieved as planned at the outcome and output levels.

Finding 13: The Project was completed with a six-month delay mainly caused by external factors. The Project team changed the delivery mode when appropriate to secure a more effective implementation of activities.

Finding 14: The evaluation validated the occurrence of a shift in resource allocation after the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in additional operational opportunities under the Project framework (i.e., organizing regional webinars and producing extra policy handbooks). Furthermore, the budget analysis showed a significant increase in spending on budget items related to external contractual services and consultant and expert fees.

Finding 15: The project staffing was limited to part-time engagement of the UNECE P-Level and G-level staff.

Key Evaluation Question 9: Were the resources adequate for achieving the results?

93. Analysis of the actual expenditures of the Project against the budget allocated thereto at the design stage revealed that the budget utilization rate at the Project's completion was 86.2

percent of the revised budget. More detailed analysis of the actual expenditure per budget item revealed significant changes in actual vs. planned expenditures for some budget items such as “Consultants and experts,” “Travel of staff,” “Contractual services,” and “Workshops/study tours (grants and contributions).” Indeed, the actual expenditure for the budget item “Workshops/study tours” was 29.8 percent of the planned amount, and there was a significant increase in actual expenditures compared to what was budgeted for in “Consultants and experts” (124.7 percent) and “Contractual services” (278.5 percent) (**Table 16**).

Table 16: The Project Budget in USD (Planned vs. Actual)

Budget Item	The budget allocated at the design	The revised budget	Actual expenditures	Funds consumed (% of revised budget)
Other staff cost - General Temporary Assistance (GTA)	25,000	24,000	23,959.00	99.83%
Consultants and experts	221,316	276,478	275,928.00	99.80%
Travel of staff	81,000	12,283	11,145.00	90.74%
Contractual services	23,500	65,598	65,446.00	99.77%
General operating expenses	16,500	6,475	5,545.00	85.64%
Supplies and materials	0	0	0	0.00%
Furniture and equipment	0	147	147.00	100.00%
Workshops/study tours (grants and contributions)	116,000	50,003	34,623.00	69.24%
Total (total)	483,316	434,984¹⁰⁹	416,793.00	86.24%

Source: *The Project Financial Report (2024)*.

94. The above-mentioned budgetary changes were caused by the modalities of the Project having to be altered due to COVID-19-related restrictions. In particular, travel, face-to-face workshops, and study tours were replaced with virtual capacity building activities. This had affected the hosting fees, including the remuneration for contracted consultants.

Key Evaluation Question 10: Were the results achieved on time and were all activities organized efficiently?

95. The initial completion date for the Project was June 2023. However, it was extended (through a no-cost extension) until December 2023. The desk research and in-person interviews confirmed that the delay in the Project’s completion was caused by external factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenging political environment in Israel) that affected the actual delivery and/or mode of the capacity building activities. Yet, the Project team applied an agile management approach to adjust the Work Plan to the changing circumstances.

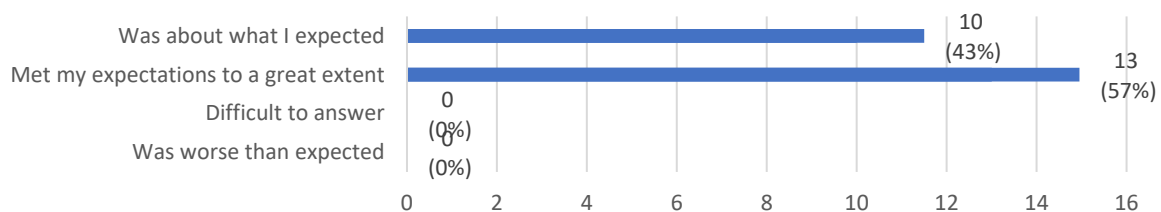
96. All stakeholders that were consulted over the course of this evaluation confirmed their satisfaction with the efficiency of the Project activities (**Figure 6**). Several key stakeholders mentioned that these were well planned as they included an initial analysis of the existing

¹⁰⁹ The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) reduced the project budget to \$434,984 during the course of the project (in 2022).

situation/processes to identify strategic gaps/solutions which served as a foundation for follow-up activities. At the same time, some key stakeholders referred to the preliminary work conducted before the Project’s commencement that was logically integrated into the Project’s design and implementation.

97. Overall, about 57 percent of the respondents (13 out of 23) confirmed that the Project activities met their expectations to a great extent, and 43 percent (10 out of 23) claimed that the activities met their expectations.

Figure 6: Feedback from Mini-survey Respondents on their Satisfaction with Project Events



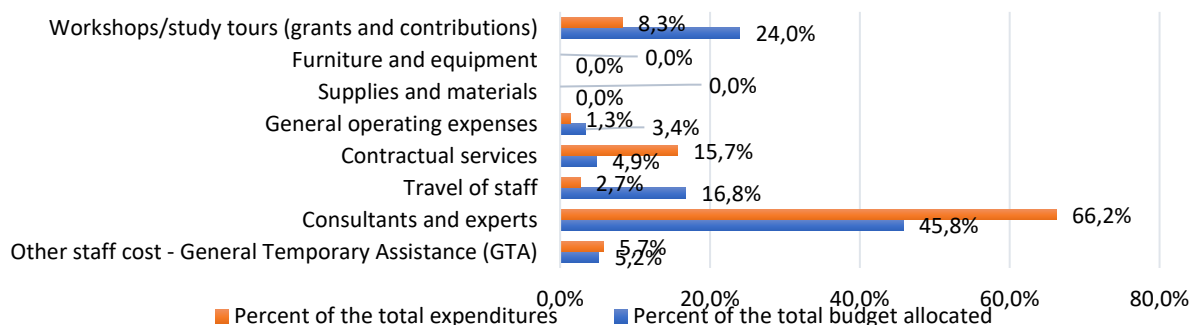
Source: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

98. Many key stakeholders also mentioned that while online capacity building events were useful in terms of providing information on principles and practices, face-to-face meetings and events allowed for continuous information and knowledge sharing in an informal environment (after the completion of the event). In this regard, many beneficiaries referred to continuing open dialogue and brainstorming with the host country representatives and the invited experts and guests, leading to more effective idea generation through the sharing of diverse perspectives.

Key Evaluation Question 11: To what extent were the resources used economically and how could the use of resources be improved?

99. Analysis of the Project spending per budget item proved that the share for some budget items significantly increased after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. In particular, the budget allocated to “Contractual services” and “Consultants and Experts” came to constitute 15.7 percent and 66.2 percent of the total budget, respectively (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Budget Item share to the Total Budget (Planned vs. Actual)



Source: Evaluation Dataset (2024).

100. While the COVID-19 pandemic caused some delays and drove the need for some adjustments, the Project team efficiently reallocated resources (e.g., by reducing travel costs) to provide an alternative to the approved work plan, and carried out additional online subregional events that were not included in the original Work Plan. In addition, the UNECE published three new policy handbooks, which were not part of the approved Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development, as follows:

- UNECE Policy Handbook: Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA Subregion.¹¹⁰
- UNECE Policy Handbook: Supporting Innovative High-growth Enterprises in the SPECA Subregion.¹¹¹
- UNECE Policy Handbook: New Innovation Policy for Transition Economies in the SPECA Subregion.¹¹²

101. The evaluation acknowledged a high level of satisfaction among the beneficiaries of the Project with regard to the quality, importance, and relevance of the Project activities, which were mainly carried out after the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, key stakeholders highlighted the importance of putting more effort, and allocating more of the budget, toward organizing face-to-face meetings and events focusing on lessons learned, such as by introducing case studies of specific reforms in partnering countries and sharing experiences of specific challenges faced and practical solutions applied.

102. The evaluation also noted the Project staffing cost share in relation to the total budget of the Project constituted 5.2 percent at the design stage and 5.7 percent by completion. The UNECE part-time assigned one P-level staff to administer the Project.¹¹³

D. Sustainability

Finding 15: The Project document incorporated a strategy to sustain the results and applied

¹¹⁰ unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Business_incubators_for_sustainable_development_in_SPECA-2021-ENG.pdf.

¹¹¹ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2227804_E_ECE_CECI_33_WEB_144dpi.pdf.

¹¹² <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/NIPTE-SPECA-2023-EN-WEB%20SIGNED.pdf>.

¹¹³ There was a part-time engagement of G-level staff as well.

those directly related to the Project's implementation. Yet, the Project reports and in-person interviews demonstrated a lack of formal commitment on behalf of the donor community to build on the Project results.

Finding 16: The evaluation confirmed the interest of the beneficiary countries and a sense of ownership with regard to the Project results (i.e., the Action Plan for the SPECA Innovation Strategy and SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development). At the same time, the evaluation acknowledged that several strategic challenges directly affected the sustainability, scale-up, and replication of the Project results, including the lack of financial resources, political influences from neighboring countries, changes in political agenda, staff turnover, and the shortage of a structured knowledge transfer system in beneficiary countries.

Finding 17: The UNECE and SPECA participating States accepted there is a need to sustain economic trends and investment in the SPECA region and agreed to set up the SPECA Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) under the UN's management. The evaluation also acknowledged the proactive actions of the Secretariat to raise funds and continue supporting SPECA participating States in strengthening their innovation policies and putting more focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Key Evaluation Question 12: What measures were adopted to ensure that project outcomes would continue after the Project ended and to what extent have these measures addressed the existing risks for sustainability?

103. The evaluation acknowledged that the Prodoc incorporated an exit strategy to sustain the achieved results after the Project's completion. Its exit strategy included but was not limited to:

- Making an essential contribution to secure the agreement on an action plan.
- Piloting selected activities in line with the action plan and national priorities.
- Starting to engage with all countries to explore areas of existing or potential interest.
- Engaging systematically with potential donors and lenders to help countries to formulate new project ideas that would likely attract funding.
- Strengthening long-standing regional coordination mechanisms set up under the SPECA WG on ITSD that served as both a steering entity and a network of policymakers from the subregion.

104. The evaluation verified that measurements were taken for all of the above categories except for systematic engagement with potential donors and lenders. Meanwhile, no evidence was provided to demonstrate that the UNECE had helped the targeted countries to formulate new project ideas to attract donors, with the exception of the DSCSD and KAUBIA¹¹⁴ concepts developed as a result of the UNECE¹¹⁵ and UN ESCAP support.

105. The evaluation also acknowledged the participatory nature of the Project's design and implementation. First and foremost, the Project's initiation and design were fully aligned with the priorities of the targeted countries, as expressed and approved at the 12th session of the

¹¹⁴ Created by the initiative group that was formed under the Project.

¹¹⁵ This was an initiative of the Government of Kazakhstan, through the UN ESCAP resolution 79/10 and resolution 80/1 to establish the DSCSD.

SPECA Governing Council in December 2017 in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and at the 14th Session of the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019.

106. Moreover, the evaluation confirmed that all documents produced over the course of the Project were publicly available in English and Russian. All stakeholders reached out to in the evaluation confirmed that the thematic and policy documents produced under the Project were highly appreciated. A few of them highlighted a need at the local level to transfer knowledge of the conceptual aspects of the produced document further by using plainer language.

Key Evaluation Question 13: To what extent do the partners and beneficiaries ‘own’ the outcomes of the Project? How is the stakeholders’ engagement likely to continue, be scaled up, replicated, or institutionalized?

107. The evaluation also took note of the implementation modalities of the Project (i.e., the sessions of the WG on ITSD) that secured the approval and interest of the participating parties, thereby securing their ownership. At the same time, in-person interviews also revealed that on some occasions the changes in focal points affected the agendas of the beneficiary countries and the consistency of the discussions and consultations to a certain extent.

108. All national stakeholders consulted during this evaluation expressed high appreciation for the achieved results. Many also highlighted that while there is a political will to replicate and scale-up the achieved results, that might not be feasible due to financial constraints.

109. Some stakeholders also mentioned that more engagement from the third sector (i.e., representatives of private companies, associations, and non-government institutions) in the activities of similar interventions would strengthen the “buy-in” at national level and increase the chance of a follow-up improvement at country level as capacity building investment in the third sector would spur proactive cooperation and initiatives to improve the innovative ecosystem.

110. Overall, the key stakeholders reported the following challenges/risks to sustaining, replicating, and scaling-up the Project results:

- Availability of financial resources as some countries struggle to acquire the necessary funds to preserve the results achieved.
- The continuous necessity to build the capacity of human resources.
- Maintaining the level of involvement and participation of stakeholders and partners without a coordination body and funds allocated for these purposes.
- Lack of a structured knowledge transfer mechanism to ensure that the knowledge and methodologies are transferred locally.
- Lack of resources (financial and human) to maintain systematic monitoring and evaluation of the Project results.
- Changes in the political or economic climate of a country or region that may affect the sustainability of Project results.
- Sociocultural factors possibly causing certain resistance or inconsistency of social and cultural norms and values that may in turn influence the implementation and sustainability of Project initiatives.
- Political influence from neighboring countries that are introducing their own initiatives and structures to replace those of the UNECE.
- The need for systematic technical support, advisory services, and updates to maintain the functionality of the systems and technologies created within the Project.

111. At the same time, it is important to highlight that at the SPECA Week (which was beyond the scope of the Project) that took place in Baku (Azerbaijan) in November 2023, the participating countries underlined the importance of collaboration in the SPECA and supported the establishment of the SPECA Multi-Partner Trust Fund (SPECA MPTF) under the UN's management. Around the same time, the UNECE issued the ToR regulating the functional modalities of the SPECA MPTF, stating: *“The SPECA MPTF is a UN-managed pooled fund mechanism established to operationalize stronger cooperation and integration in the SPECA region through programmatic interventions. The scope, theory of change, and governance mechanisms of the SPECA MPTF are specified in its Terms of Reference. The Fund will be governed by the SPECA UN Trust Fund Steering Committee (Azerbaijan). The co-chair(s) of the Steering Committee of the SPECA Trust Fund will present an update on the SPECA Trust Fund’s work to the decision-making bodies of the SPECA upon request, including annual reports, to the SPECA Governing Council.”*¹¹⁶

112. In addition, the evaluation verified the proactive fundraising of the UNECE team to address the requests and needs of the SPECA participating States. After the completion of the Project, UNECE drafted a new project proposal to be submitted to UN DESA¹¹⁷ to continue supporting SPECA participating States in strengthening their innovation policies through analytical work and the production of policy publications, capacity building activities, and facilitation of the digital transformation of innovative enterprises. This new project also considers addressing the challenges related to the gender divide and the exclusion of vulnerable groups from digital transformation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

112. The evaluation reached the following conclusions:

- The Project's participatory design and implementation modalities allowed for its complete alignment with the national and global development agendas. At the same time, the Project modalities were not heavily focused on the inclusion of the third sector (i.e., private sector, associations, and relevant non-state actors). Moreover, the operational, structural, and conceptual arrangement of the Project safeguarded its direct contribution to the UNECE's overall mandate, and its work programme related to economic cooperation and integration and the environment. It also enabled the UNECE to leverage the best cross-sector expertise and resources to deliver the results in the most efficient manner possible.
- The absence of indicators to measure progress across gender, human rights, disability, and climate change dimensions resulted in an information gap and low awareness among beneficiary countries regarding the correlation between the innovation agenda and the above-mentioned dimensions. This might have lessened the impact of the Project deliverables on the capacity of the participating countries to prioritize advances in the relevant cross-sectoral processes and structures that would eventually contribute to the achievement of the relevant SDGs (i.e., SDG 5¹¹⁸, SDG 10¹¹⁹, and SDG 13¹²⁰).

¹¹⁶ [SPECA ToR_EN.pdf\(unece.org\)](#).

¹¹⁷ Under the UNDA 18th Tranche (2026-2029).

¹¹⁸ SDG 5: “Gender Equality.”

¹¹⁹ SDG 10: “Reduced Inequality.”

¹²⁰ SDG 13: “Climate Action.”

- While the Project fully achieved the planned results at the outcome and output levels¹²¹. It provided a platform for policy-level discussions within the framework of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and the 16th session of the SPECA Governing Council and served as an information hub for SPECA participating States. At the same time, the overlap between the outcome level and output level indicators renders a distinctive qualitative assessment of the reported results impossible.
- The scope and objective of the Project exclusively focused on providing harmonized and strategic cross-country and cross-regional assistance across policy and individual capacity building levels.
- The Project team successfully applied agile management practices to secure an iterative and incremental implementation of the Project, focusing on flexibility, collaboration, and the satisfaction of the participating countries and institutions.
- The Project's human resource's structure needed readjustment to secure advanced backstopping (at the administration level) and continuous engagement of external thematic experts and service providers. Likewise, the implementation modalities of the Project highlighted the need for better-balanced face-to-face and online capacity building activities.
- The sustainability, replication, and scale-up of the Project's results cannot be guaranteed unless the UNECE and SPECA participating States proactively address the external risks and challenges associated with financial limitations through the sustainability strategy to support the SPECA participating States across all relevant projects.

113. Based on its findings and conclusions, the evaluation issues the following four recommendations for supporting the SPECA participating States:

- ***The evaluation recommends continuing to apply participatory and agile management modalities in future project design and implementation.*** It will allow the project teams to get real-time insights into project progress and potential issues, identify risks, and mitigate them early on, resulting in increased efficiency and effectiveness of the projects.
- ***The evaluation strongly advises engaging the private sector, associations, and non-state actors in project activities to strengthen in-country and regional collaboration across sectors.*** This would also secure a better balance of political support and a sense of ownership with industry-specific insights, data-driven evidence (providing the data crucial for policy decision-making), and in-country lobbying for policy changes.

¹²¹ Outcome level indicator **IA1.1** (“An action plan for the SPECA innovation strategy with performance indicators aligned with the SDGs is developed and agreed with SPECA countries and adopted by the SPECA Governing Council”); Output level indicator **OPI.4** (“Produce a final draft of the SPECA Innovation Strategy Action Plan and secure its formal approval by the SPECA Governing Council, with the attendance of the national focal points and experts (a session within the framework of the SPECA Economic Forum and the SPECA Governing Council)”).

- ***The evaluation also heavily recommends revising the formulation of outcome and output level indicators to avoid overlap and ensure that complex concepts are broken down into measurable terms at the outcome level.*** This could be done in consultation with the relevant stakeholders to evaluate the validity and reliability of the indicators selected. Furthermore, the evaluation recommends incorporating gender, human rights, disability, and climate change indicators into the results framework to enable continuous reporting on progress made. Notably, some indicators could be developed at the output level (i.e. disability or gender indicators), and others can be elaborated based on outcome-level measurements (i.e. climate change indicators). However, it will be up to the project team to decide on the measurement layer (outcome or output) of the indicators selected, depending on the context of the upcoming projects and the potential availability and reliability of the data pertinent to the given indicator.

- ***With regard to the implementation modalities of the capacity building activities, the evaluation recommends the development of online webinars with face-to-face meetings.*** In this regard, the UNECE is advised to arrange online national capacity building and awareness-raising events for a broader audience. However, face-to-face regional meetings and site visits would be more relevant for the sort of capacity building activities that would potentially lead to cross-sector strategic partnerships and provide first-hand experience of the practical implications and challenges of the approaches applied in the host countries.

- ***The evaluation recommends reconsidering project staffing patterns*** to ensure smooth implementation and efficient continuity of the projects' activities in case of emergencies. While the UNECE staff will remain engaged on a part-time basis, their level of engagement can be increased depending on the lifetime of the project. In this regard, the evaluation recommends including the budget lines associated with the salaries of the support and professional staff in the new project proposal. The availability of the qualified workforce assigned to the specific project is particularly vital for the efficient and smooth implementation of the project activities. For ease of reference, the budget share of both analytical and capacity building activities of the Project under evaluation constituted 86.6 % of the total budget).

Annexes

Annex 1	Evaluation Terms of Reference
Annex 2	List of Stakeholders Interviewed
Annex 3	References

Annex 1: Evaluation Terms of Reference

TERMS OF REFERENCE

UNDA2023N: Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I. Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the extent to which the objectives of the UNECE project 2023N “Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” were achieved.

The evaluation will assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the project in supporting the seven SPECA participating States in their efforts to spur innovation as a central driver of the increasingly urgent transition from a low productivity and resource-intensive model of economic development to knowledge-based and more sustainable economic growth, in line with the SDGs.

The evaluation will also assess any impacts the project may have had on progressing human rights, gender equality, disability inclusion, climate change and disaster risk reduction in the context of this engagement. The evaluation will finally look at the activities repurposed to address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, and assess, where relevant, UNECE’s COVID-19 early response through this project.

II. Background

The project aimed to support the seven SPECA participating States in their efforts to spur innovation as a central driver of the increasingly urgent transition from a low productivity and resource-intensive model of economic development to knowledge-based and more sustainable economic growth, in line with the SDGs. It builds on a clear mandate: the SPECA participating States, recognizing this challenge, formally decided at the 12th session of the SPECA Governing Council in 2017 to “Develop an innovation strategy to promote sustainable development in the SPECA region” – a process that, with UNECE and ESCAP support, has led to a final draft that will be submitted for approval at the 2019 SPECA governing council.

In this context, the project aimed to support and create sustainable further momentum around the first steps towards putting this strategy into practice. Specifically, the objective was to strengthen institutional capacities to harness innovation as a driver of sustainable development and regional integration.

The first target outcome was strengthened cooperation on innovation among the SPECA participating States. Central to this outcome was to work with the SPECA participating States to put together a concrete first action plan under the strategy, including several joint initiatives. This involved a detailed gap analysis covering all seven countries to inform the development of the draft action plan, which was discussed in detail at a subregional workshop before finalization and submission for approval. Towards the end of the implementation period, a subregional workshop served to measure implementation progress based on the indicators in the action plan. In addition to the national initiatives, two initiatives involving cooperation among the SPECA participating States were established: (i) SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development (NBIASD); (ii) Progress towards creation of a subregional Digital Solutions Centre for Central Asia in Kazakhstan.

The second outcome on enhanced capacity to design and carry out effective innovation policy and institutional reform, aimed to address some of the leading constraints in putting the strategy into practice among the SPECA participating States. This involved both a series of subregional seminars on selected issues of common concern, as well as in-depth trainings for at least three countries.

Importantly, this project foresaw substantial flexibility to respond to country requests and priorities and to build on existing or impending momentum.

ESCAP, as the co-lead in providing Secretariat support to the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development, played a role in most activities. There was an aim to engage the donor community throughout, with the clear purpose of finding projects that contribute to the strategy and the action plan that qualify for donor funding – sustaining the momentum beyond the closure of this project.

III. Evaluation objectives, scope and questions

The evaluation will be guided by the objectives and indicators of achievement established in the results framework of the project document. The evaluation will be conducted in Q4 of 2023. It will cover the full implementation of the project, from January 2020 to December 2023 in the SPECA participating States of the UNECE region, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The evaluation criteria are relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

Relevance

1. To what extent did the project respond to the priorities and needs of participating countries?
2. To what extent were the project activities consistent with global and regional priorities and aligned with the SDGs?
3. How relevant were the project activities vis-à-vis the programme of work of the UNECE? What value has UNECE's efforts added in this area?
4. To what extent were gender, human rights, disability perspectives and climate change considerations integrated into the design and implementation of the project? How can these perspectives be better included in future projects design and implementation?

Effectiveness

5. To what extent were the project design and set-up effective for meeting the needs of the beneficiary countries?
6. To what extent were the project objectives and expected results achieved?
7. To what extent were the project activities coherent and harmonized with those of other partners operating within the same context, particularly those of other UN system entities?
8. What were the challenges/obstacles (including COVID-19) to achieving the expected results? How successfully did the project overcome these?

Efficiency

9. Were the resources adequate for achieving the results?
10. Were the results achieved on time and were all activities organized efficiently?
11. To what extent were the resources used economically and how could the use of resources be improved?

12. Sustainability

13. What measures were adopted to ensure that project outcomes would continue after the project ended and to what extent have these measures addressed the existing risks for sustainability?
14. To what extent do the partners and beneficiaries 'own' the outcomes of the project? How is the stakeholders' engagement likely to continue, be scaled up, replicated, or institutionalized?

IV. Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation will be conducted in accordance with: the ECE Evaluation Policy¹²²; the Administrative instruction guiding Evaluation in the UN Secretariat¹²³; and the United Nations Evaluation Group

¹²² [UNECE Evaluation policy](#)

¹²³ ST/AI/2021/3

(UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation¹²⁴. Human rights and gender equality considerations will be integrated at all stages of the evaluation¹²⁵: (i) in the evaluation scope and questions; (ii) in the methods, tools and data analysis techniques; (iii) in the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the final report. The evaluator will explicitly explain how human rights, gender, disability, SDGs, and climate change considerations will be taken into account during the evaluation.

The evaluator is required to use a mixed-method approach, including qualitative as well as quantitative data gathering and analysis as the basis for a triangulation exercise of all available data to draw conclusions and findings. The evaluator shall conduct online surveys and interview a wide range of diverse stakeholders.

The evaluation should be conducted based on the following mixed methods to triangulate information:

1. A desk review of all relevant documents, including the project document and information on project activities (monitoring data); materials developed in support of the activities (agendas, plans, participant lists, background documents, donor reports and publications); proposed programme budgets covering the evaluation period; project reports to the donor.
2. Online survey of key stakeholders and beneficiaries: the survey will be developed by the consultant on her/his preferred platform.
3. Interviews (in-person and/or by telephone/video): the evaluator shall interview a wide range of diverse stakeholders and beneficiaries including policymakers, representatives of the government, international organisations, academia, civil society as applicable.
4. Observation of workshops and meetings, including the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development in Tashkent on 18-19 October 2023.

The evaluator will further elaborate on the evaluation methodology in the Inception Report that will among others include the electronic survey questions, interview guide, and whether any of the six countries will be selected for an in-depth assessment. The evaluation report will be written in English, will consist of approximately 30 pages and will include an executive summary (max. 2 pages) describing the evaluation methodology, key findings, conclusions and recommendations. The evaluator will also produce an Evaluation Brief summarizing key evaluation findings, lessons learned and recommendations, including through images and infographics.

V. Evaluation schedule¹²⁶

August 2023	ToR finalized
August 2023	Evaluator selected
September 2023	Contract signed. Evaluator starts the desk review
October 2023	Evaluator submits inception report including survey design
October 2023	Launch of data gathering, including survey and interviews
November 2023	Evaluator submits draft evaluation report and evaluation brief
November 2023	Evaluator submits final evaluation report and evaluation brief

VI. Resources and Management of the evaluation

An independent consultant will be engaged to conduct the evaluation under the management of the Programme Management Unit (PMU). Payment will be made upon satisfactory delivery of work.

The PMU will manage the evaluation and will be involved in the following steps: Selection of the evaluator; Preparation and clearance of the Terms of Reference; Provision of guidance to the Project Manager and evaluator as needed on the evaluation design and methodology; Clearance of the final report after quality assurance of the draft report.

¹²⁴ [UNEG 2016 Norms and Standards for Evaluation](#)

¹²⁵ In line with UNEG Guidance contained in [Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations](#)

¹²⁶ Final timetable to be agreed following engagement of the evaluator

The Project Manager, in consultation with the Division Director, will be involved in the following steps: Provide all documentation needed for desk review, contact details, support and guidance to the evaluation consultant as needed throughout the timeline of the evaluation; Advise the evaluator on the recipients for the electronic survey and for follow-up interviews; Process and manage the consultancy contract of the evaluator, along the key milestones agreed with PMU.

VII. Intended use / Next steps

The results of the evaluation will be used in the planning and implementation of future activities of the UNECE Economic Cooperation and Integration Subprogramme. Findings of this evaluation will be used when possible to:

- Improve direct project's follow up actions, implementation of products by project beneficiaries and dissemination of the knowledge created through the project.
- Assess the gaps and further needs of countries in the area of this project.
- Formulate tailored capacity building projects to strengthen the national capacity in enhancing innovation.

The results of the evaluation will be reported to the inter-governmental Team of Specialists on Innovation and Competitiveness Policies and the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships, as well as with the Executive Committee if required.

Following the issuance of the final report, the Project Manager will develop a Management Response for addressing the recommendations made by the evaluator. The final evaluation report, the management response and the progress on implementation of recommendations will be publicly available on the UNECE website.

VIII. Criteria for evaluators

The evaluator should have:

1. An advanced university degree or equivalent background in relevant disciplines.
2. Knowledge of and experience in sustainable economic development and/or innovation policy.
3. Relevant professional experience in design and management of evaluation processes with multiple stakeholders, survey design and implementation, project planning, monitoring and management, gender mainstreaming and human-rights due diligence.
4. Demonstrated methodological knowledge of evaluations, including quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis for end-of-cycle project evaluations, including demonstrated experience in conducting questionnaires and interviews.
5. Fluency in written and spoken English and Russian.

Evaluators should declare any conflict of interest to UNECE before embarking on an evaluation project, and at any point where such conflict occurs.

Annex 2: The List of Stakeholders Interviewed

No	Name	Position	Organisation
1	Ms. Aisuluu Mustapakulova	Head of Innovations Division	Kyrgyzpatent
2	Ms. Anastasia Pankova	Consultant	UNECE
3	Ms. Basak Demir	Co-Founder	DCube Circular Economy and Sustainability
4	Mr. Christopher Athey	Economic Affairs Officer	UNECE
5	Ms. Ekaterina Guznova	International Expert	UNECE
6	Ms. Elif Kizildeli	Associate Economic Affairs Officer	UNECE
7	Ms. Elizabeth Tuerk	Director of Economic Cooperation and Trade Division	UNECE
8	Mr. Farid Huseynov	Project Manager of Startups Support and Acceleration Department	Innovation and Digital Development Agency of Azerbaijan
9	Mr. Oleg Dzioubinski	Regional Advisor on Sustainable Energy	UNECE
10	Ms. Sarangoo Radnaaragchaa	Regional Advisor on Environment	UNECE
10	Mr. Serdar Ishangulyyev	Head of Youth Start-ups	Union of Economists of Turkmenistan
11	Ms. Yelena Shevchenko	Head of Projects	Innovation Cluster at Nazarbaev University of the Republic of Kazakhstan
12	Mr. Yerbolat Orazbekuly	First vice-president	Association of Business Incubators and Accelerators based at universities (Kazakhstan)

Annex 3: References

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