

Board of the Centre

83rd Session, October 2020

CC 83/3

FOR INFORMATION

THIRD ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Independent external evaluation of ITCILO training and learning activities in the area of “Skills Development”**I. Introduction**

1. The 2018-21 Strategic Plan of the International Training Centre of the ILO (the Centre) envisions the Centre to be a world-class provider of capacity development services for ILO constituents.¹ The Results-based Management Framework underpinning the Centre’s Programme and Budget for 2018-19 identifies service quality as one of the key vectors guiding Management in the pursuit of this vision, and tracks participant satisfaction, new knowledge acquisition rates and new knowledge application rates as high-level outcome indicators.² To verify new knowledge application rates after training, the Centre commissions annual independent evaluations of activity clusters linked to one of its areas of expertise.³
2. In 2020, the thematic area of expertise selected for the independent evaluation was “Skills Development”. The objective of the evaluation was to assess the performance and impact of the Centre’s training and learning activities in the area of skills development, to identify relevant contributors and barriers, and to facilitate organizational learning for better planning and delivery of the Centre’s training offers.
3. The evaluation was carried out from May to July 2020 and covered a sample of 15 training activities implemented between February 2018 and September 2019. Twelve training activities in the sample had a primary link to the theme of skills development, i.e. they explicitly focused on the skills and employability approach of the ILO and were by default managed at the Centre by the Employment Policy and Analysis Programme (EPAP). The other three activities had a secondary link to the theme of skills development, i.e. they explicitly referenced skills development as one aspect next to other aspects of the ILO Decent Work Agenda and might have been managed by other Technical Programmes in the Training Department. The sample of skills development activities with a primary link was drawn purposefully to capture the

¹ ITCILO 2018-21 Strategic Plan, p.16

² ITCILO 2018-19 Programme and Budget, p.20f

³ Refer to CC 77/4, CC 78/3, CC 79/2, CC 80/3, CC 81/2 and CC 82/3 for further information on the findings of the evaluations carried out since 2014.

Centre's flagship activities in this area, including the annual skills academy. The sample of skills development activities with a secondary link was drawn randomly. Eight of the selected activities were held on the Centre's campus while seven took place in the field. The activities were chosen to cover a diversity of regions: eight were interregional, three activities targeted Africa, one Asia, one Europe and Central Asia, and two activities targeted the Americas. Four of the selected activities were recurrent courses having had previous editions.

Assessment criteria

4. In line with evaluation framework of the ILO Evaluation Office (EVAL), the evaluation focused on the following criteria: Relevance of the selected activities to the needs of the participants and, where applicable, of the institutions supporting their participation; the validity of the activity design; efficiency; effectiveness; impact and sustainability. The guiding questions for the evaluators are listed below:

| Assessment Criteria | Questions to be addressed |
|---|--|
| <i>Relevance and outreach of the activity:</i> Relevance refers to the extent to which the objectives of the activity were consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, and partners' and donors' policies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well did the activity operationalize the 2018-21 strategic plan and the 2018-19 Programme & Budget of the Centre, and the higher level ILO 2018-21 strategy framework and 2018-19 Programme and Budget? |
| <i>Validity of the activity design:</i> The extent to which the design of the activity was logical and coherent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the result of the skills development training imply that the design of the activities was logical and realistic? Did the end-of-activity evaluation and (where applicable) the follow-up activity evaluation effectively measure results and progress in developing skills for employability? |
| <i>Effectiveness:</i> the extent to which the activities immediate objectives were achieved, taking into account their relative importance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What results have been achieved / what progress has been made by participants / what change has taken place in relation to the performance of their organization since the implementation of the activities? Which gaps remain and how could these be addressed through follow-up activities? To what extent have the activities been an effective instrument to strengthen the institutional capacity of ILO constituents and other ILO development partners? |
| <i>Efficiency of use of resources:</i> A measure of how economically resources/inputs (funds, expertise, time, etc.) were converted to results. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the resources invested into the delivery of the activities been used in the most efficient manner? How economically were resources and inputs (funds, expertise, time, etc.) converted to results? Did the results justify the cost? What time and cost efficiency measures could have been introduced without impeding the achievement of results? |

| Assessment Criteria | Questions to be addressed |
|---|---|
| <p><i>Effectiveness of management arrangements:</i> The extent to which management capacities and arrangements put in place supported the achievement of results.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the roles and responsibilities of the Centre's officials who were responsible for the implementation of the activities clearly defined and understood? • Were the current arrangements for implementing the activities effective? • Were the activities coordinated across technical programmes? |
| <p><i>Impact orientation of the activity:</i> The strategic orientation of the activity towards making a significant contribution to broader, long-term, sustainable development changes, and whether the changes have been durable/were replicated by beneficiaries.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How likely is it that the results of the activities in terms of skills development will be maintained or up-scaled by the participants? • What are the participants' perceived benefits from the activities (differentiated by groups)? What evidence exists of participants benefiting from the activities? • What actions might be required for achieving long-term impact? |

Methodology

5. The evaluation relied on several data collection techniques, including desk reviews, participant surveys, interviews with key informants, focus group discussions with participants and case studies. This “mixed methods” approach combined both hard and soft evidence and involved multiple means of analysis. The evaluation was organized along the following 9 steps:
 - Step 1 - Desk Review: Systematic analysis of existing documentation, including quantitative and descriptive information about the activities, discussion of detailed methodology and timeline with the Evaluation Focal Point of the Centre and the Director of Training.
 - Step 2 - Participants survey: Design and implementation of an online survey to compile responses from participants to obtain in-depth information about their impressions and experiences of the activities. A sample of more than 500 women and men from the participant population has been extracted based on information in the Centre's database for the Management of Activities and Participants (MAP). The questionnaire for this report was administered by way of an online survey on the basis of a pre-written and pre-coded questionnaire.
 - Step 3 - Interviews with involved experts in the Centre: Structured in-depth interviews with the Director, the Deputy Director, the Director of Training, the former Quality Assurance and Evaluation Officer, the Programme Manager, the Activity Managers and Assistants in charge of the training activities in the sample, as well as experts in the Centre from other training programmes who contributed to, and/or participated in, the selected activities.

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- Step 4 - Interviews with institutional clients: Structured in-depth interviews with three institutional clients who sponsored participants linked to technical cooperation projects, to explore tangible and non-tangible changes resulting from the activities.
 - Step 5 - Focus group discussion: A focus group discussion with one group of former participants to explore tangible and non-tangible changes resulting from the activities.
 - Step 6 - Case studies of participants: Case studies of participants documenting the changes resulting from the activities.
 - Step 7 - Preparation of draft evaluation report: Preparation of the draft evaluation report (about 40 pages), including statistical results, interview results, case studies, and other pertinent qualitative and quantitative results.
 - Step 8 - Management reply: Discussion of the draft evaluation report with the Director of Training and the Evaluation Focal Point.
 - Step 9 - Preparation of final evaluation report: Preparation and submission of the final evaluation report to the Centre.

The implementation of the evaluation was slightly delayed due to the outbreak of COVID-19. All face-to-face meetings and interviews had to be conducted with video calls and the evaluation team faced some difficulties to contact former participants, clients and stakeholders due to the lockdowns that were happening in different parts of the world. However, in the end all evaluation tasks could be completed.

II. **Conclusions and recommendations made by the Evaluator⁴**

Conclusions

6. This evaluation comes to the conclusions that the Training Department of the Centre managed to fulfil to a very large extent its own expectations for the design and implementation, at least in regard to the 15 evaluated training courses on the topic of Skills Development. Moreover, several elements assessed during the course of this evaluation can be considered as good or even best practice in the training industry. Notably, the approach of blended learning and the evaluation system with four levels covering quantitative and qualitative elements and in particular the Knowledge Acquisition Tests (KAT).

⁴ The conclusions and recommendations of the evaluator are quoted *verbatim* from the final evaluation report, p. 29ff

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7. In line with the Strategic Plan of the ITCILO for 2018-2021, the Centre manages to fulfil its mandate and provide ILO constituents, ILO staff, and other ILO stakeholders with capacity-building support to promote Decent Work for All, in this case on the topic of Skills Development. It became clear from the discussion and interviews with management and staff that the Centre has a clear idea of being an “evolutionary organization that continuously adapts to a complex world”. The organizational performance in the technical and institutional dimension is well above average when compared to similar training institutions. What this evaluation cannot assess is how well the Centre is meeting its financial needs because the sample of training activities and the insight into the financial data of the Centre was limited.

 8. **In regard to relevance**, the Centre lives up to its own credo and delivers “more than just a classroom”. The Centre’s Activity Managers, staff, and trainers professionally guided participants through a learning journey that started before the actual training featuring workshops, typically included study visits, and the latest educational methods and technologies. The Centre provides a space to meet and fruitfully interact with professionals from different backgrounds, countries, and experiences. This evaluation can verify that the Centre is creating a “forum where development intersects with all forms of knowledge in the world of work, from tripartism to technology”, in the form of “a multicultural hub for learning (...) welcoming everyone, regardless of gender, race, or class. Sponsors and partners confirmed that the content of the training activities was in line with their requirements in regard to the standard training courses at the Centre as well as the tailor-made training activities. The course material of several courses is characterized as “setting the standard” for system change and is being replicated for training courses on Skills Development by several former participants in their respective home country. The topics and methodological approach benefitted the sampled participants individually and institutionally. The courses were consistent with beneficiaries’ requirements, and partners’ and donors’ policies, in a few cases the courses even helped shape the professional sector structurally and / or operationally.

 9. **In regard to the validity of the training design**, the Centre is using an innovative pedagogical framework built on the experience of designing advanced technical and vocational training for nearly 50 years. For the sampled participants, this has led to a comprehensive learning experience, including the “big picture” on Skills Development within the development agenda and ILO’s role as part of the decent work agenda as well as the specific subject-matter elements of the course as such. The training methodology is comprised of a mix of learning methods, the favourite ones being group work exercises, Q&A with experts, and presentations of subject-matter experts. Most of the evaluated training programmes were designed as blended training activity. All participants interviewed appreciated the blended training approach. In conclusion, the Centre manages to design the sampled training courses in such a way as to make “learning happen effortlessly”. Moreover, the Centre actively created and promoted a multiplier effect by fostering communities of practice and professional networks. The sampled participants’ professional needs and demands were met in full. The training design also includes a comprehensive evaluation methodology based on the “New World Kirkpatrick Model”, professionally evaluating the results of the trainings on four levels.

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- 10. In regard to effectiveness** and starting from the individual level, 92 per cent of interviewees confirmed that the trainings met their individual priorities and needs on the topic of skills development. More than half of the participants reported that by attending the training course and understanding the design and methodology they first of all changed their own methodology of work upon returning to their work stations. On the institutional and system level, the training courses enhanced tripartite dialogue on skills development, change in national discourse and discussion on skills development, and change in institutional policy. Also, the training courses introduced standards, methodologies, and good practices that are going a long way to help reshape sector, structures, legislation, often in a very concrete way as reported by sampled participants. This evaluation concludes that the management arrangements of the Training Department for the topic of Skills Development are effective. The design and implementation of the training activities for the topic at hand are being coordinated across five Technical Programmes with EPAP at the centre of the topic. The existing EPAP team is in the position to professionally design and implement the training activities in such a way as to ensure the achievement of desired results. The roles and responsibilities of programme management and staff seem to be clearly defined and understood. Accordingly, the current organizational and management constellation for implementing the training activities is evaluated as highly effective.
- 11. In regard to efficiency**, this evaluation finds that the resources invested into the delivery of the training activities on Skills Development have been used economically, i.e. inputs were converted to concrete and desired results. The EPAP team designed and implemented 81 training activities in five Clusters in 2019, with the majority in Skills with 27 training activities and Employment with 22. The average cost of the training activities of EPAP was EUR 44,945.
- 12. In regard to impact** of training activities, this evaluation measured the behavioural change following the trainings against the target KPI of 66 per cent for 2018-19. This evaluation measured 73 per cent of participants who apply the newly acquired knowledge after the training as defined by the ratio of respondents who have provided concrete examples on their application of knowledge after training, over all respondents to the survey conducted as part of this annual external independent evaluation. Moreover, an impressive 92 per cent of sampled participants reported back that the training activity had either a significant input to their daily work or was helpful in solving specific questions in their work. This evaluation also identified a significant impact of the training activities towards making a contribution to broader, long-term, sustainable development changes. Half of the sampled participants reported back that they are observing an increased attention and discussion on skills development in their respective organization, a better understanding of quality apprenticeships among enterprises, and an improved collaboration on skills development across government agencies in their country as well as a stronger social dialogue on skills development among stakeholders. About 30 per cent of respondents reported the existence of a sectoral approach towards skills developments.

Recommendations

13. **[Recommendation 1]** Some sponsors and partners recommended to better keep the educational and experience level of their participants in mind, i.e. refrain from “over-engineering” courses technically and refrain from using European standards (existing vocational training systems) as benchmark for the course content. Participants expressed their desire to have a closer link of the course content to the participants’ system realities back in their home country.
14. **[Recommendation 2]** The training courses were offered in the language of the target audience, i.e. either in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Russian, sometimes even in more than one language. Participants appreciated this way of accommodating their (business) language. However, several participants observed that the language proficiency across the attendees in their course was rather heterogeneous (business language was not the mother tongue of several attendees) which, at times, made it difficult for lecturers and participants alike to equally understand input and discuss topics. Therefore, we recommend to take a closer look at the language proficiency of participants before the start of course and possibly create more linguistic homogeneity.
15. **[Recommendation 3]** According to the participants, training courses at the Centre were intensive, usually lasting one week or less (13 out of evaluated 15 training activities). Several participants observed that a minority of attendees in the courses had trouble adjusting (due to the time difference in their country of origin) and, thus, fully concentrating on the course, especially when arriving the night before the course started at the Centre. We recommend that the Centre suggest to participants to arrive at least one day ahead of the start of training courses on campus.
16. **[Recommendation 4]** Participants stressed the point they appreciated the digital elements of the blended learning approach, i.e. taking place pre- and post-training as part of the training package, but decidedly not as an alternative for the face-to-face training on Campus or in the field. As one former participant put it: “Nothing can replace the human element for me. Only after having met the other participants in person and spent time with them to build trust, I could appreciate the continued exchange with them afterwards: we had started a WhatsApp group during our course and continue to communicate until today”. We recommend to possibly expand the blended learning approach to all training courses and even increase the quantity of digital elements without rendering the crucial core of the training courses, i.e. the human interaction on campus or in the field.
17. **[Recommendation 5]** The above examples are impressive and demonstrate the effectiveness of design and implementation of the training courses. Without diluting these very positive results, it is important to mention that this evaluation also surfaced some challenges that remain upon the return of the participants to their organizations. The major challenge that participants reported was the difficulty in initiating and ensuring structural change in their organizations and with the major actors in their respective context. In several cases participants complained about them feeling left alone when trying to introduce and bring about change. When asked how this could be addressed a number of participants expressed their desire to be supported by follow-up activities from the Centre, e.g. actively promoting and organizing network

activities of former participants with the aim to create a strong expert community across borders, sectors, and organizations.

- 18. [Recommendation 6]** While five out of the nine Training Programmes of ITCILO already collaborate on the topic of Skills Development, the two Programmes of International Labour Standards, Rights at Work and Gender Equality (ILSGEN) and Enterprise, Microfinance and Local Development Programme (EMLD) seem to have room for an intensified collaboration with EPAP towards a better integration of skills development in their training activities.
- 19. [Recommendation 7]** This evaluation took a closer look at the specific jobs in the EPAP team. It turned out that the functional job responsibilities and the contractual job titles and descriptions of several interviewed staff differ to a good extent. While this does not seem to impact negatively on the training activities as such, it is recommended to review the reasons for the observed differences and to identify potential remedies to introduce an organization chart for EPAP and review the individual job descriptions. Comparing the total number of training activities with the number of professionals and staff it seems that, structurally, no time and cost efficiency measures can be introduced without impeding the achievement of desired quality and results. However, the Centre could explore the option to identify ways to increase the number of training activities in the field over activities on Campus if and when overall cost becomes an issue.
- 20. [Recommendation 8]** This evaluation recommends to possibly expand the capacities of the Skills Programme both on an operational and on a strategic level. Reason being that through the interviews it surfaced that Skills Development clearly is a core topic for ILO constituents that has a cross-cutting character. In turn, EPAP could collaborate even more intensively with other Programmes to share its own knowledge and integrate related fields of expertise in its own training activities. On the strategic level, more capacities would allow for more intense collaboration with the Skills Branch of the Policy Department of ILO Geneva. The idea is to add an extra functionality to the Skills Programme, i.e. to create a “think tank on skills development”. With this additional capacity, EPAP could compile and analyse information based on and closely aligned to the needs and demands of participants, sponsors, and partners to explore future options for the development of the service portfolio and new or modified modes of delivery.
- 21. [Recommendation 9]** The sample and scope of the training activities assessed through this evaluation comprises of 15 activities out of 47 training activities linked directly or indirectly to the topic of Skills Development during the period February 2018 - September 2019. The quantitative character of the KPI alone would be lacking qualitative information. To overcome this methodological challenge, the design of the evaluation invited responses from participants to include concrete descriptions of their knowledge application and result. Additional in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion further added to understanding the qualitative results of the Centre's training activities. This evaluation recommends to increase the number of sampled training activities to at least 20 to increase the robustness of the evaluation results.

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- 22. [Recommendation 10]** During the reference period of this evaluation, the Centre did not deliver online training or non-training capacity development services directly linked to the skills development cluster. As those services are rapidly gaining more importance for the Centre as observed during the period of this evaluation, it is recommended for future evaluations to include distance learning activities and possibly non-training capacity development services in the sampled activities for a complete representation of the service portfolio.
- 23. [Recommendation 11]** In regard to Level 3 of the evaluation methodology of the Centre, it is recommended to make the participant panels a standard tool to assess the impact of all training activities. The most structured approach seems to make such a participant panel an integral part of any training activity to be planned, organized, and implemented by the respective Activity Team, possibly with support from an external evaluation specialist.
- 24. [Recommendation 12]** What remains very challenging for many participants in the sector of Skills Development is advocating national laws and legislation towards skills development (73 per cent). This evaluation recommends to introduce thematic “problem solving fora” for former participants on specific issues that they can suggest themselves with the Centre serving as technical hub for interested participants and organizations to join. This way the impact of training activities could be further strengthened and improved.

III. Management response

- 25.** The Centre welcomes the findings of the independent evaluation. The evaluation has confirmed that a large majority of all participants reported increased knowledge as a direct result of training and that they went on to implement this knowledge to the benefit of their organization. The Centre acknowledges that additional efforts can be undertaken to further refine the training methods applied in face-to-face training and that additional emphasis should be laid in future on the evaluation also of distance-learning activities and non-training advisory services as the scale of these services is set to increase in the wake of COVID-19. The following paragraphs set down the management response to the issues raised and the recommendations made by the Independent Evaluator.
- 26. In response to recommendation 1,** EPAP will seek to more evenly balance European and non-European vocational training and technical education standards in its course curricula. To achieve this balance, stronger emphasis will be laid on involving non-European standard setting bodies as partner organizations in course design and delivery, and by more systematically drawing on participants from outside Europe to present case studies for peer-to-peer learning.
- 27. In response to recommendation 2,** the Centre will consider pre-training online language proficiency tests for participants in order to determine whether additional measures might be needed to facilitate learning, including offering additional language tracks or use of simultaneous interpretation. To control costs of this additional service, the Centre will explore the use of Artificial Intelligence to offer

participants machine-based simultaneous translation services in the online classroom.

- 28. In response to recommendation 3**, the Centre will encourage participants and institutional sponsors in campus-based face-to-face training activities to add one rest day upfront learning interventions to the travel budget. Another option is to promote distance learning.
- 29. In response to recommendation 4**, the Centre will continue promoting the concept of blended learning where face-to-face training and distance learning activities are combined along multi-step learning journeys. For example, the diploma-level certificates introduced in 2019 are based on the concept of blended learning and link face-to-face training and distance learning.
- 30. In response to recommendation 5**, the Centre will combine face-to-face training with the option of follow-up e-coaching. E-coaching has been successfully piloted in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and could be offered as enhancing service to participants eager for additional support. The Centre will furthermore scale up its efforts to link former participants in alumni networks.
- 31. In response to recommendation 6**, the Centre will further encourage joint activities between Technical Programmes anchored under the umbrella of the skills development theme. As shown by the evaluation, skills development is a demand-driven topic that could act as magnet for development cooperation funds when bundled with other themes of the ILO Decent Work Agenda like the combat against forced labour or the promotion of gender equality and diversity.
- 32. In response to recommendation 7**, EPAP will review its team structure in order to refine the internal division of labour and to identify areas for efficiency gains. Intervention points to increase outputs and bring down costs per participant could be to increase the share of field-based face-to-face activities and/or distance-learning activities in the EPAP service mix, and to push for more larger-scale activities.
- 33. In response to recommendation 8**, the Centre will – within the boundaries set by a zero-growth budget in terms of fixed staff expenditure – seek to expand the delivery capacity of EPAP by allocating additional human resources to the skills cluster.
- 34. In response to recommendation 9**, the number of training activities to be sampled for the 2021 evaluation will be increased to at least 20. The increase in sample size has cost implications that might call for an increase in the standard evaluation fee charged to participants.
- 35. In response to recommendation 10**, and mindful of the shifts in the service portfolio of the Centre as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the Centre will include in future evaluations of distance learning activities and, where applicable, also non-training capacity development services.
- 36. In response to recommendation 11**, the Centre will roll out the concept of participant panels as a follow-up evaluation tool linked to level 3 of the Kirkpatrick model. From 2021 onwards, every Technical Programme will be required to run one

panel per year with former participants within six months after treatment. The panel discussions will be coordinated by the Quality Assurance Unit in the Office of the Director of Training and the findings will be documented in an annual report.

37. In response to recommendation 12, the Centre will replicate the successful example of the online community of practice on development cooperation hosted by the Centre on behalf of the ILO's Department of Partnerships and Field Support (PARDEV) and provide former participants in skills development activities on a pilot basis with access to an online thematic "problem solving forum". The forum will be launched before the end of 2020, likely as a follow-up service to the two editions of the online course on the Management of Vocational Training Institutions.

The Board is invited to take note of the findings and recommendations of the independent evaluation and of the management response.

Turin, August 2020