

External Evaluation of the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF)

DFAT Management Response to Partner-led Independent Evaluation

The Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) is a multi-donor WTO trust fund which was established in 2004 to support developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to strengthen their application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) standards, improve food safety and animal and plant health practices and facilitate safe trade in agricultural commodities. The STDF implements SPS projects in developing countries and LDCs and provides a global platform for SPS stakeholders to share best practice and knowledge.

Australia's \$2.9 million (2022-2024) contribution to the STDF focusses on assisting Indo-Pacific partners to improve biosecurity approaches and build access to international markets and trade. Strengthening SPS systems also helps to mitigate the negative effects of climate change on agricultural production, and supports women's economic empowerment. Women play a vital role in agri-food production and trade in developing countries and LDCs.

The 2024 External Evaluation of the STDF, undertaken in close consultation with donors, including Australia, involved three workstreams: a partnership assessment, a results analysis, and three evaluations of STDF projects. The Evaluation included interviews with over 130 stakeholders, including STDF members, partners, and beneficiaries, field visits to five beneficiary countries, and analysis of STDF project monitoring and evaluation data and international trade data.

The Evaluation found that the STDF remains relevant, with the demand for SPS capacity building in developing countries and LDCs continuing to grow. Since the last evaluation in 2019, the STDF has increased SPS capacity in developing countries, including through reforms to legislation, strategies, structures, and processes relating to SPS, and improved implementation of trade-related measures concerning food safety, plant, and animal health. Countries that have received STDF project support have experienced stronger overall export growth in plant, animal, and food products. Project level data suggests that STDF support has helped to establish new export markets through improved adherence to international regulatory requirements.

The Evaluation found that the STDF's Gender Assessment & Action Plan have been useful in developing understanding of the role of gender in SPS projects. The STDF's work to mainstream environmental and climate change considerations has progressed but remains in its early stages.

The Evaluation provides six key recommendations. Recommendation 1 did not receive support from the STDF membership and will not be taken forward. Recommendations 2-6 were agreed to by the STDF membership and will be taken forward under the new STDF Strategy 2025-2030.

DFAT's response to the Independent Evaluation:

DFAT accepts the Evaluation's findings and agrees or partially agrees with each of its six recommendations.

DFAT welcomes the Evaluation's findings about the effectiveness of the organisation in undertaking SPS capacity building in developing countries and LDCs, including in our region. This aligns with Australia's experience with the STDF the Working Group and the STDF's activities in the Indo-Pacific.

DFAT notes the finding that the Gender Assessment and Action Plan have positively influenced understanding of the role of gender in SPS capacity building work. We recommend the STDF continue to make progress on gender reporting, including through the collection of gender disaggregated data. We also look forward to working with the STDF to mainstream climate change and the environment in STDF programming.

DFAT is an active participant in the STDF Working Group and was involved actively in the Evaluation of the program and in discussions about its recommendations.

| Recommendation | Response | STDF membership response ¹ | DFAT response | Timeframe |
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| 1. As a component of the development of the next strategy, engage the partnership in a moderated discussion about the mandate of the STDF and whether or not to widen the scope of STDF's work to "SPS+". | Partially agree | There was no consensus among members to have a moderated discussion on the STDF's mandate, including possibly extending STDF support to help developing countries meet other (mostly TBT) standards and requirements to gain and maintain market access for their food and agriculture exports. This recommendation was not accepted. | DFAT partially agrees with this recommendation. We recognise that there are non-SPS issues, such as technical barriers to trade (TBT) that can limit market access in agricultural trade. Should this recommendation be supported in the future, we encourage consideration of how the STDF could avoid duplication with existing TBT initiatives. | N/A. Recommendation not supported by the membership. |
| 2. Increase the impact of the global platform by strengthening, expanding, and servicing the partnership further. | Partially agree | There was no consensus by the membership on changing the current structure of membership as stated in the Operational Rules. However, the membership did not oppose exploring avenues for outreach cases or expansion of the partnership. Members welcomed additional opportunities for | DFAT partially agrees with this recommendation. We recommend the STDF develops more prescriptive guidance through STDF Working Group deliberations and the new Strategy to determine how this work | Further discussion throughout 2024 in the STDF Working Group and through implementation of the new STDF Strategy 2025-2030. |

¹ STDF Policy Committee Summary Report, 12 June 2024, https://standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/Summary_Report_PC_June24_Final.pdf

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| | | <p>awareness raising and outreach and considered that a discussion in the Working Group on how to further engage and involve other organisations with an SPS mandate (regional economic communities, technical bodies, regional development banks, private sector) would be useful. They also welcomed further consideration of options to expand STDF's sub-network model (including practitioner groups) as part of the development of STDF's next Strategy. Some unease was expressed related to the proposed expansion of the role of representative private sector organisations in the Working Group. Members agreed that further discussion in the Working Group would be needed to analyse how to take forward this recommendation, including to understand the implications of an increased role for private sector bodies.</p> | <p>will shape future deliberations and decision-making processes.</p> | |

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| 3. Improve co-financing of project activities via a strategy-wide target for project finance leverage | Agree | The Evaluation highlighted that the STDF has been successful at leveraging external finance support for projects, with over 30% of project funds under the current strategy coming from a mix of financial and in-kind contributions. Members generally agreed with the concept of co-financing but did not agree to set a specific, ambitious strategy-wide target or requirement for leveraging. Donor members felt this would be complex for them to put into practice. Members welcomed a further discussion on co-financing in the Working Group to take forward aspects of this recommendation. | DFAT agrees with this recommendation noting the benefits it could derive for STDF projects in increasing financial resources available and maximising synergies with other multilateral programs, the private sector or donor development programs. Australia has recent experience with this, through a co-financing arrangement with the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat on an STDF project preparation grant focussed on apiculture in Pacific island countries. | Implementation through the term of the new STDF Strategy 2025-2030. |
| 4. STDF should consider improving its results-based management culture to match growth in scale | Agree | Members generally agreed on the recommendation to further improve implementation of STDF's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework, though cautioned against the additional burden this may have on the Secretariat and project implementing organisations. | DFAT strongly agrees with this recommendation. We welcome further strengthening and improvements to the STDF's data collection of the medium- and long-term outcomes of projects and gender disaggregated data collection and reporting. | The MEL framework will be revised by the STDF following the launch of the new STDF Strategy in 2025. |

² STDF Policy Committee Summary Report, 12 June 2024, https://standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/Summary_Report_PC_June24_Final.pdf

| Recommendation | Response | STDF membership response ³ | DFAT response | Timeframe |
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| 5. STDF should consider strengthening the role of the Developing Country Expert (DCE) and finding avenues for post-role engagement. | Agree | Members agreed to strengthening the participation of developing country experts (DCE) in the STDF to further support regional outreach and dissemination of STDF's knowledge and other work. They welcomed aspects of this recommendation related to creation of an alumni group of previous experts. Some members cautioned against "institutionalising" the role of developing country experts linked to regional organisations, as recommended by this Evaluation (as well as the 2019 external STDF evaluation). The membership agreed that the Working Group should further discuss the role and selection criteria for developing country experts to take forward this recommendation. | DFAT agrees with this recommendation. We see value in having DCE nominations from Indo-Pacific countries and small island developing states, who bring unique views and experiences from their work within their countries' SPS regulatory bodies. We support the recommendation to develop an ongoing role for DCEs when they leave their positions, including to engage them in future PG and PPG development. | Implementation through the term of the new STDF Strategy 2025-2030. |
| 6. STDF should add either one additional Secretariat staff member or support a secondment programme to supplement the existing capacity of the Secretariat. | Agree | Members generally supported this recommendation. Some members pointed to opportunities to further improve processes for increased efficiencies. To avoid that additional staffing reduces funding available for projects, consideration may be given to slightly increase STDF's annual target level of funding under the new STDF strategy. There was agreement that in the medium to long-term, secondment programmes (including from STDF donors or academic organisations) could also be considered, recognising that time would be required to set up such programmes. | DFAT agrees with this recommendation. We appreciate the ongoing strong demand for STDF projects and activities as highlighted by the Evaluation and support the STDF expanding its Secretariat capacity to manage programming and resources. | Implementation through the term of the new STDF Strategy 2025-2030. |

³ STDF Policy Committee Summary Report, 12 June 2024, https://standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/Summary_Report_PC_June24_Final.pdf