

2021 Annual Evaluation Synthesis Report

Review of the ITC Strategic Plan 2018-2021

ITC Independent Evaluation Unit



2021 ANNUAL EVALUATION SYNTHESIS REPORT

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is the joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. ITC is the only international agency dedicated to the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Formed in 1964, ITC is the focal point for trade-related technical assistance within the United Nations system.

For all of ITC's interventions, evaluation is a key instrument to ensure accountability against expected results and to support organizational learning. Evaluations inform ITC's decision-making in policy, programme, and project management, with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing ITC's contributions towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This is an independent publication by the ITC Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU), which established a team formed by the Head of the IEU (Mr. Miguel Jiménez Pont), one independent external consultant (Ms. Carolina del Campo Vara), an outside evaluation reviewer (Mr. Wayne MacDonald), and Mr. Simon Bettighofer (IEU Evaluation Officer) and Ms. Marianne Schmitt (IEU Associate Evaluation Officer) for overall quality assurance.

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Executive summary / Review of the Strategic Plan 18-21

Conceptual framework

SIGNIFICANCE – *Why?*

Corporate rationale linked to ITC's mandate, mission, values, and theory of change

RESOURCES – *How?*

Inputs, activities & outputs that contribute to the desired result (i.e., human, financial, material and information resources)

RESULTS – *What?*

"Value-added", outcomes and impacts on the groups reached by the resources used

REACH – *Who?*

Breadth and depth of influence on the stakeholders that ITC wants to affect

High level findings

SIGNIFICANCE

- Plan provided clear rationale in line with ITC's mandate
- It strengthened managing for results, growth agenda, and staff sense of purpose

RESULTS

- Strong rationale for the role of ITC's 'good trade' approach

REACH

- Greater staff engagement in the design process would have benefits and is desirable
- Importance of partnerships was emphasized
- Needs assessments practice can be strengthened

RESOURCES

- Products and services were offered through "integrated or modular solutions"
- Balance needs to be struck between tailor-made solutions and clear value chains
- Accountability and coherent target-setting have been improved
- Sub-strategies would have been helpful, especially for crosscutting functions
- Efforts in good quality project development and the matching of staff skills to projects were strengthened
- Effective data management was paramount and is in progress
- Coordinators, integrators, and multipliers needed to enhance internal collaboration
- Innovation and learning were key drivers

Conclusions

- The Strategic Plan 2018-2021 has proven to be an effective tool that has provided ITC with a directional and yet flexible operating framework
- It conveyed a clear sense of purpose and has built trust, both inside and outside ITC
- Next strategic plan should be the starting point and map of *a four-year journey*
- Strategy implementation will require an implementation framework bridging between high-level medium- to long-term corporate objectives and annual operational objectives
- Progress and lessons learned from strategy implementation to be reviewed on a regular basis

Recommendations for next Strategic Plan

Message 1: underscore Strategic Plan results-focus

- Determine limited number of high-level, medium- to long-term objectives for the organization (aligned / contributing to SDGs)

Message 3: ensure strategic allocation of resources

- Develop internal value chains about of how best to combine individual products and services, in which order and context, to achieve specific goals
- Develop coordinated solutions for the achievements of the high-level objectives
- Develop blueprints for general models of solutions that meet the needs of specific clients groups or contexts and the same for different types of partnerships

Message 2: maintain corporate focus throughout strategy operationalization

- Bridge between high-level objectives and operationalization on an annual basis
- Prioritize all corporate objectives and determine which sections contribute
- Develop sub-strategies to guide work necessary to achieve high-level objectives
- Incorporate lessons learned

Message 4: create momentum for stakeholders' mobilization

- Insert the values of coordination and collaboration in the next Strategic Plan
- Keep an on-going dialogue with beneficiaries on their needs in relation to high-level objectives
- Ensure full understanding and adherence of staff to Strategic Plan

Table of contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Significance – the “Why” of the Strategic Plan</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Resources – the “How” of the Strategic Plan</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Results – the “What” of the Strategic Plan</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Reach – the “Who” of the Strategic Plan</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Annexes</i>	<i>14</i>

Annex 1: Overview of 2020 self-evaluations and funder-led evaluations

Annex 2: Project Completion Report Synthesis 2020

Annex 3: Status of 2020 AESR recommendations

Annex 4: Implementation Status of Past Evaluation Recommendations

Introduction

1. The International Trade Centre (ITC) is a joint agency of the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). ITC's mission is to enhance inclusive and sustainable growth and development in developing countries, especially least developed countries, and countries with economies in transition through improving the international competitiveness of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). With support from funders and development partners, ITC works with policymakers, business support institutions (BSOs), exporters, and other stakeholders in the public and private sectors.
2. This is the **ninth Annual Evaluation Synthesis Review (AESR)**. Its goal is to provide ITC stakeholders – ITC management and staff, including member states and beneficiaries – with a synthesis of key evaluation messages for accountability and learning purposes. The AESR is a public document. It is presented at the annual meeting of ITC's Joint Advisory Group (JAG) to support a better-informed dialogue.
3. **Focus.** Usually, the AESR provides a synthesis of findings from evaluations of ITC's projects, programmes, and policies conducted during the previous year. Overviews of funder-led evaluations and self-evaluations, and project completion reports (PCRs) conducted in 2020 are provided in Annexes 1 and 2.¹ This year, however, the AESR focuses on a review of the ITC Strategic Plan 2018-2021, which overall goal is defined in its subtitle "Trade Routes to Sustainable and Inclusive Development".
4. The review's primary emphasis is on organizational 'learning', with an eye towards ITC's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan. Findings of the review have been provided to the team that has worked on the new Strategic Plan 2022-2025, to ensure that lessons learned could be integrated. Specifically, the objectives of this AESR are to:
 - a) support ITC's accountability to its member states and other ITC stakeholders; as well as learning within the organization.
 - b) understand how well the Strategic Plan has served to set organizational goals focusing on sustainable and inclusive development, and how it has helped ITC to manage and monitor the results related to these goals.
 - c) understand the extent to which the implementation of the Strategic Plan has enabled ITC to adapt to changes in the global context and emerging priorities while keeping the organization focused on its strategic direction; and
 - d) contribute to a better-informed planning and decision-making process for the upcoming Strategic Plan 2022-2025.
5. **Approach.** This review is an assessment of ITC's Strategic Plan 2018-21 as a tool to improve the organization's performance in the areas related to vision, planning, measurement, reporting, and decision-making. It is 'process-based', not 'outcome-based', and is more 'formative' than 'summative'. This report is structured into key findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
6. The United Nations (UN) does not have a single clearly-articulated definition of strategic planning. For the purpose of this review, strategic planning is defined as "*The process by which an organization's medium- to long-term goals, as well as resources and plans to achieve them, are defined, and a documented plan is developed to monitor achievement of these goals*".²

¹ Other annexes comprise the implementation status of the 2020 AESR recommendations (Annex 3), and a report on the implementation of accepted or partially accepted recommendations of previous ITC's independent evaluations (Annex 4).

² OIOS (2021). *Evaluation Synthesis of Strategic Planning*. IED-21-001, p.iii, <https://oios.un.org/inspection-evaluation-reports>.

7. This review also builds on the guidance provided to strategic planners of UN Agencies, which determines that a good Strategic Plan should combine the following dimensions:³
- What we exist to do* – Identity, which is defined in the Mission,
 - Why we need a strategy* – Momentum or sense of urgency, which relates to challenges to be addressed,
 - Where we need to go* – Direction, which is provided by the Vision,
 - How we will achieve it* – Alignment and coherence of resources and processes (financial, people/knowledge, processes, service/programmes, customer/stakeholder), and,
 - What beliefs we will follow* – Values we need to share internally and externally with our partners.
8. The assessment of ITC's Strategic Plan 2018-2021 steps outside the traditional evaluation paradigm. It focuses on the 'operational' or 'practice' aspects of strategic planning linked to decision-making, implementation, and performance management. Guided by a simple *conceptual performance framework*,⁴ the review focuses on, and is structured according to the following four areas:

Significance - Why? -	<p>Significance refers to the corporate rationale. It is linked to ITC's mission, mandate, values, and theory of change. It focuses on the vision for achieving the desired high-level outcomes or impacts of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021.</p> <p>The 'why' also is about coherence, doing the 'right thing', prioritizing (given various opportunities) and updating priorities as circumstances change.</p>
Resources - How? -	<p>Resources refer to the inputs, activities, and outputs that contribute to the desired results of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Resource utilization is connected to efficiency.</p> <p>The 'how' includes human, financial, material, and information resources. It is about time, money, and/or energy and the type of resources used. In terms of human resources, it is about the type of skills and competencies required.</p>
Results - What? -	<p>Results refer to the outcomes and impacts on the groups achieved through the resources used. Desired results usually include the achievement of a desired mental or physical state.</p> <p>Added value is provided if the results are desirable. With respect to stakeholders/clients/partners, this means they are satisfied and/or that they achieve a desired change.</p>
Reach - Who? -	<p>Reach refers to the breadth/depth of influence attained by the distribution of resources. Physical (spatial) reach is a dimension as well as the groups one intends to affect.</p> <p>For ITC, a team's or individual's reach refers to the amount, type, and extent of stakeholders served by the Strategic Plan 2018-2021. It also encompasses suppliers, delivery partners, and other groups who are directly involved in the service delivery or related processes.</p>

9. **Methodology and limitations.** It is worth clarifying that the 2021 AESR is not an overall evaluation of ITC's performance concerning its Strategic Plan. Such an endeavor would require a large-scale

³ See UN Strategic Planning. Guide for Managers, https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/4.5.1.6_Strategic%20Planning%20Guide_0.pdf

⁴ The framework used is adapted from the work of Steve and Carolyn Montague, Performance Management Network (PMN), <https://www.pmn.net>.

corporate evaluation like the 2014 Independent Evaluation of ITC, which was funded by a group of donors, designed and managed by the Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU), and conducted by an external service provider.⁵

10. A mixed-methods approach was used, which included extensive document reviews, a survey of ITC internal staff (with 77 respondents), and interviews with 23 ITC senior- and mid-level staff. No external stakeholders were consulted, nor field work conducted. Instead, a fit-for-purpose approach was implemented, examining practical and operational aspects of the strategic planning function linked to vision, decision-making, implementation, and performance management.

Significance – the “Why” of the Strategic Plan

Findings

11. **Rationale for ITC’s work and corporate identity.** The Strategic Plan 2018-2021 specified that the central purpose of the organization was to increase its capacity to generate “good trade” – meaning trade that contributes to sustainable and inclusive growth and development – by improving the international competitiveness of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) with a focus on priority countries and populations. The Plan also emphasized the ambition to significantly expand ITC’s technical assistance during the period through larger, deeper, and longer-term country and regional interventions.
12. The Strategic Plan has balanced specified high-level objectives, target groups, and thematic priorities with flexibility in scope. The vision and mission set out therein are value-driven and ambitious, with a focus on improving the international competitiveness of MSMEs as *the* lever to deliver on its reasserted trade and sustainable development agenda. It established a clear understanding of what the organization wants to accomplish and provided a foundation for a strong sense of purpose and identity for the organization – the *why* of work.
13. **Priorities regarding target groups, sectors, and countries.** The Strategic Plan identified micro, small and medium-sized enterprises as the organization’s primary clients. At the same time, it was emphasized that ITC would not act with a one-size-fits-all approach but instead offer customized solutions for informal and small-scale producers; aspiring exporters in the formal economy; passive exporters (exporting only from time to time); active exporters; and women and young entrepreneurs.
14. The Plan also identified national governments and trade and investment support institutions as other main client groups, as they form part of national trade support systems. Moreover, the Plan identified targeted sectors with strong potential for employment creation and inclusive growth: agriculture; the green economy; and the service sector. It also established a strategic focus on ensuring that at least 80% of its country-level interventions benefit least developed countries (LDCs), land-locked developing countries (LLDCs), small-island developing states (SIDS), small vulnerable economies, post-conflict and fragile states, and sub-Saharan Africa.
15. ITC’s purpose and these priorities were in full alignment with the needs communicated by clients and other stakeholders during the Strategic Plan 2018-2021 design process.

In the overall, do you consider the Strategic Plan 2018-21 a useful tool for the organization?

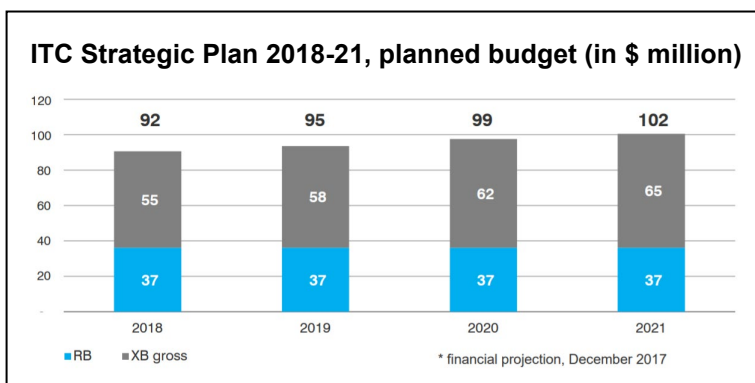
“Yes! It gives all staff a common understanding of ITC vision and objectives.”

“It helped to steer ITC on a more dynamic course and better position the organization vis-à-vis donors. [...]. The focus areas brought clarity and purpose from an outside point of view. The main challenges have been to reflect these new focus areas into the organizational chart.”

“The current plan was very broad, the focus areas had overlaps.”

⁵ Saana Consulting (2014). [Independent Evaluation of the International Trade Centre \(ITC\)](#)

16. **Focus areas and thematic priorities.** The Strategic Plan emphasized the organization's commitment to six focus areas⁶ and related key initiatives, which covered a broad range. The focus areas, in particular 'Providing Trade and Market Intelligence' and 'Strengthening Trade and Investment Support Institutions', were also coherent with ITC's mandate as it was originally defined in 1964 to "provide developing countries with information on export markets and marketing" and "help them develop their export promotion services and train the personnel needed for these services".⁷
17. **Managing for results and organization-wide intervention logic.** The Plan included a corporate results framework, clearly identifying linkages between outputs, intermediate outcomes, and contributions to achieving the SDGs. This framework, which had been approved in 2017, was defined at a high-level yet was already much more concretely elaborated than comparable elements in the Strategic Plan 2015-17.⁸
18. **Growth targets.** The Strategic Plan laid out that ITC intends to grow to accomplish its mission and meet demand. To achieve this, the Plan envisaged an increase in budget⁹ (see graph on the right) based on increased extrabudgetary contributions; better leveraging of funds; more partnerships; and showing the value-for-money contribution to the SDGs. So far, the organization has significantly exceeded the targeted budget increase, with an operational budget of \$135 million in 2020¹⁰ instead of the originally targeted \$99 million. This increase indicates that ITC succeeded in maintaining and/or generating high levels of trust among its funders¹¹, which led to historically exceptional growth of its extrabudgetary funding and delivery.
19. **ITC's business model.** Finally, it is worth reminding that ITC's strategic planning must be understood against the backdrop of ITC's business model, which relies for the most part on extrabudgetary funds for its technical assistance activities. Therefore, any sound strategic planning approach must take into account the priorities of funders and the extent to which they are willing to make long-term and advance commitments.



Conclusions

20. **A significant Strategic Plan 2018-2021.** The plan has proven to be an effective tool that has provided ITC with a directional yet flexible operating framework. It conveyed a clear sense of corporate purpose, highlighted the benefits of "good trade" and clearly articulated the rationale of how the organization contributes to sustainable and inclusive development. Improving the international competitiveness of

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