EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report covers the independent Evaluation of the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) for the strategy period 2020-2024 and was commissioned from Project Economics Consulting by the World Trade Organization (WTO) on behalf of the STDF. It was guided by professional standards, WTO requirements, and STDF’s monitoring and evaluation guidelines, which are aligned with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluation criteria. Management of the evaluation process was provided by the Working Group, as represented by a Steering Group sub-committee and by the STDF Secretariat.

2. The findings presented here are based on a mixed methods approach that includes context analysis, contribution analysis, and elements of outcome identification. Findings have been triangulated across data sources and have been validated by the STDF Working Group (WG).

WHAT WE DID

3. The evaluation includes three primary workstreams, intended to cover and triangulate across twenty-one evaluation questions which were defined in the evaluation Terms of Reference and revised in the Inception Report. Those workstreams are: (1) A Partnership Assessment, aimed at understanding the structure, strengths and weaknesses of the global platform; (2) A Results Analysis which assesses performance over the strategy period and the extent to which outcomes and impacts were achieved and sustained, and (3) Three Project Impact Evaluations used to add to the evidence base across all questions and to better understand the experience of grant recipients and beneficiaries on the ground.

4. Information collected via these workstreams was arrayed against an evaluation matrix to assure that findings by evaluation question could be triangulated across sources or, if that were not possible, could be appropriately identified.

5. Following field work and an initial assessment of the information collected, preliminary findings were presented to the Working Group in a sensemaking process to ensure that the evaluation team’s assessments were fact-based and to co-create the recommendations presented in this report, based on those findings. A draft of this report was made available to the entirety of the STDF WG for review. One hundred and twenty comments, made by 12 WG members plus the Secretariat were addressed.

THE DATA WE USED TO ARRIVE AT OUR FINDINGS

6. Data used to support the evaluation findings were collected from a variety of sources and represent both quantitative and qualitative information. These include:

- Two surveys of the partnership
- A Secretariat staff survey
- Two project beneficiary surveys
- STDF monitoring data
- Interviews with over 130 stakeholders (founding & other partners, donors),
DATA WE COLLECTED

7. Two surveys of the partnership were undertaken for the evaluation. One covered the network and interactions between partners and sub-networks around SPS issues and the second covered opinion on the performance of the STDF over the current period. A third survey of current and former Secretariat staff covered staff, administrative and Human Resources (HR) issues. The overall, collective response rate was 81 of 136 distributed.

8. Online surveys of beneficiaries and other stakeholders were conducted for two of the project impact evaluations. One was in Latin America, in Spanish, and the other in Mozambique and South Africa in Portuguese and English.

9. The evaluation also relies on data collected from the STDF Secretariat and third parties. These include STDF’s monitoring data collected from LogAlto, Annual Reports, and project reports. Also collected were World Bank data on international economic performance, trade data collected from the United Nation’s Comtrade database, SPS alert data collected from the WTO, and aid-for-trade data collected from the OECD.

10. The primary limitations to the data collected were limited survey response rates (about 60%), the lag in trade data reporting to Comtrade, the lack of cross-national income data by sector, challenges rolling up STDF monitoring data to programmatic indicators and the limited number of in-scope projects with existing ex-post evaluations.

WHAT WE READ

11. In addition to quantitative data, the evaluation relies extensively on qualitative information collected from STDF and partner reporting and communications. These included Strategy documents, Guidance and Guidelines, Annual Reports, Project Reports and Evaluations, STDF Evaluations, Knowledge Products, Grant Applications, and Internal and External Communications.

WHO WE TALKED TO

12. A significant portion of the field work for the evaluation consisted of collecting input from a wide variety of stakeholders. Approximately 130 were spoken with over the course of the evaluation. These included donors, founding partners, other partners, implementing partners, developing country experts, diplomatic missions, representatives of external development and aid-for-trade organizations,
and beneficiaries in developing countries. Interviews were conducted both in person and on-line. In addition, the evaluation team observed the November 2023 Working Group meeting and attended several on-line STDF events.

WHERE WE WENT

13. Field work for the evaluation was conducted in Switzerland, Thailand, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mozambique, and South Africa.

WHAT WE FOUND

14. Detailed findings by evaluation question are included in the main body of the report. The table below summarizes these by the Evaluation Criteria laid out in the Terms of Reference.

<table>
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<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
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<td><strong>Relevance</strong></td>
<td>The STDF¹ remains relevant: the demand for, and need for, support of SPS capacity development continues to grow. Applications for technical assistance demonstrate that developing countries still require support to attain international standards and benefit from a funder of innovative projects. The evaluation identified sufficient evidence to clearly determine that all three of STDF’s workstreams have not only remained relevant but are poised to become even more so over the next strategy period. Concerns related to the relevance of the STDF, as expressed by a few partners during previous evaluations of STDF, appear to have been addressed through the latest co-created strategy.</td>
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<td><strong>Coherence</strong></td>
<td>STDF’s work largely aligns with its partners and with other major SPS and safe trade initiatives. The global platform is strong and holds the capacity to realize significant synergies. While this occurs to some extent, more can be done. Understanding the role of STDF as a ‘network of networks’ and making better use of, and better serving the sub-networks – geographical and institutional, for example – will support improved value addition, synergies and co-financing.</td>
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<td><strong>Efficiency</strong></td>
<td>The STDF model has made efficient use of time and resources to deliver results, even as the global pandemic, 2020-2021, slowed delivery of some key workstream elements. In part, this is because the STDF’s governance and operational structures are broadly efficient. All of the 2019 programme evaluation recommendations that were accepted by the WG have been implemented, with the exception of two that are currently mid-implementation. The implementation of the monitoring, evaluation and learning framework was seen as the only area that had not yet been advanced fully in line with the expectations of a few stakeholders who expressed frustration with the challenge of identifying and tracking key performance indicators.</td>
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¹ Unless otherwise noted, “STDF” refers to the partnership and fund as a whole, including founding partners, other partners, donors, developing country experts, the Secretariat, and other relevant stakeholders.
The STDF has met both of its programmatic objectives\(^2\) by delivering significant and tangible results, across all three work streams\(^3\). Key enablers include the network and the role of the developing country experts especially; the ability to pilot and successfully scale up innovative approaches; the capacity to broadcast and promote uptake of knowledge products; and the established programme management capacity to support and oversee the delivery of a sizeable portfolio of technically challenging projects across the world.

The barriers to achieving the objectives relate to the financial scale of STDF, the demand-driven nature of project development that limits STDF to responding to requests, and the capacity of STDF to deliver outreach. While the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruption and delivery risk to all of STDF’s key operations, these were managed diligently, though project delivery and engagement with developing country experts were still affected.

While substantial work has been done to design and implement the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework, there remains more to be done. The STDF has thus far been only partially successful in measuring its progress, with an important recommendation from the 2019 evaluation not yet fully implemented. Correspondingly, while the roll-out of the new Communications Plan has been well received, STDF has yet to commence regular reporting of performance metrics.

### Impact

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<th>STDF has increased SPS capacity in developing countries as measured through contributions to legislation, strategies, structures and/or processes relating to SPS, and improved implementation of trade-focused measures for enforcement of food safety, plant and animal health. The target countries and sectors that have benefitted from STDF support have seen stronger export growth in plants, animals and foods than their comparators. Project level data suggests that STDF support established new markets and that improved capacities helped ensure that trade was conducted safely. Stakeholders also report that SPS management capacity increased. This has resulted in improved food security through reduced food safety contaminants or other food safety issues, and/or improved animal and plant health capacity that can also contribute to food security, increased food access, and reduced waste. The evidence of STDF projects contributing to poverty reduction was more mixed.</th>
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<td><strong>The Gender Assessment &amp; Action Plan have been highly influential in helping develop the collective understanding of the role that gender has in the SPS domain.</strong> However, the implementation is only currently underway. The effort to mainstream environmental</td>
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\(^2\) These are described in the STDF Strategy 2020-2024 as, Outcome 1: “More synergies and collaboration driving catalytic SPS improvements in developing countries; Outcome 2: “Greater access to, and use of, good practices and knowledge products at global, regional and national level.

\(^3\) STDF defines its three workstreams as: the global platform, knowledge work, and project and project preparation grants.
considerations through the STDF has made some progress, with a note on recommendations to strengthen the mainstreaming of environment and climate change in SPS work generated. This work, however, has yet to be substantively commenced.

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<th>Sustainability</th>
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<td>Centering STDF’s strategy around safe trade and aligning with the SDGs has helped put sustainability at the core of STDF’s work. Mainstreaming and prioritizing these issues as central considerations for projects has significantly contributed to the achievement of sustainability. The results emerging from knowledge work and fostering the network have been sustained, as STDF has been able to continue to support successful workstreams. At project level, there is some concern about the ability of some projects to sustain achieved results following the close of the projects. STDF will continue to be constrained by generic development challenges, such as lack of ownership by partner institutions or changing staff. More could be done by the STDF membership, particularly by donors and partners, to promote and disseminate STDF knowledge and better align with lessons arising from STDF projects. This includes more attention to, and promotion of, STDF by senior leadership in partner institutions.</td>
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<th>Other</th>
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<td>Stakeholders, overall, are highly satisfied with the progress and performance of STDF, especially given the challenges faced during the strategy period. A key opportunity for strengthening the existing partnership would be through expanding the network. While the ability to fund and deliver projects is central to STDF, its core comparative advantages are its ability to act as an ‘honest broker’ in creating knowledge products and forging partnerships through the STDF’s expanding membership. One key avenue is recognizing the potential for STDF to act as a “network of networks” where it can produce high value knowledge products and materials that can then be transmitted through regional or thematic sub-networks. Ensuring that the Secretariat has sufficient resources to execute these workstreams is a central requirement for the model to operate at its maximal potential. Encouraging further co-financing as well as public-private-partnerships may also increase the potential for project delivery. Similarly, the role of the developing country experts, including after their term with the STDF, may provide further opportunities for expanding the partnership’s reach and footprint.</td>
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**OUR CONCLUSIONS**

15. The evaluation was able to identify sufficient evidence to support the claim that STDF is contributing to increased SPS capacity across developing countries. This is seen in contributions to legislation and policy, the growing capacity to effectively conduct SPS services, the strong demand for STDF support, the transfer of knowledge work into project work, and based on the assessment of knowledgeable stakeholders representing a cross-section of SPS institutions in both development and developing country circumstances.
16. Further, this growing capacity appears to be contributing to improved safe-trade conditions, which are observed through survey work conducted by the United Nations\(^4\), the reduction in global notifications aimed at developing countries and the growth in global exports in food, animal, and plant products from developing countries.

17. The on-the-ground project impact evaluation work conducted for this evaluation, included beneficiary outreach which highlighted the transmission mechanisms to the higher goals of poverty reduction\(^5\) and food security. This includes limited evidence that domestic value chains were benefiting from STDF capacity enhancement interventions and improving the quality and safety of food products for national consumption, in addition to export-market consumers.\(^6\)

18. Given the STDF’s nature as a global platform, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruption and delivery risk across STDF’s key operations. The Secretariat was able to manage these risks diligently and in a timely manner, ensuring that disruption remained contained. Regardless, project delivery and engagement with developing country experts were nevertheless affected during the pandemic, with both implementation of projects and overall spending slowing across the period. However, the new tools and ways of working established by the STDF and the Secretariat in response to the pandemic enabled STDF to “catch up” to plan and are potential major drivers of future performance. The pandemic experience also demonstrated that flexibility around the global platform and online meeting approaches is highly effective.

19. In aggregate, during the current period, STDF has demonstrated its ability to convene and connect diverse stakeholders, deliver demand-driven activities, and learn from and disseminate results. These attributes have allowed the partnership to catalyze and influence change. The partnership has successfully grown its scale to just under USD 7 million per year across the strategy period, driving increases in project spending, stronger and more effective Secretariat support, and investments in monitoring and evaluation and knowledge work that are expected to bear fruit in the coming period. At the same time, WG networking, including on-line forums like the newly created practitioner groups, have succeeded in mobilizing a relatively large number of participants from STDF Working Group members, organizations implementing STDF projects, and other organizations involved in SPS capacity development.

20. However, the partnership is not without its limitations. These include, limitations in capacity to conduct outreach and distribute knowledge products and challenges in measuring and reporting on progress.

\(^4\) UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation.

\(^5\) The evaluation sought to identify impacts of improved SPS capacity on income and well-being with limited success, due to the limited ability to collect national data on incomes for specific sectors and the overall time it takes to transmit improved trade conditions to income change.

\(^6\) Note that the main objective of STDF’s projects is to facilitate safe trade, in either or both export and domestic markets, and therefore effects on domestic markets would be indirect or spillovers and are not measured by projects.
WHAT WE ARE RECOMMENDING

21. While the STDF is performing well, has largely met its goals, and can demonstrate effective and efficient delivery, the twentieth anniversary of the STDF is an opportune moment to think about the established ways of working and considering if changes may help improve on delivery of value addition. To that end, the evaluation team presents six strategic recommendations. These recommendations were either co-created with, or presented to and considered by, the Working Group and are listed in order of priority.

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+”**.

   STDF was founded to address barriers to trade and standards, including SPS and technical barriers to trade (TBT), but has primarily focused on SPS capacity development since inception. The twentieth anniversary of STDF and the need to design the next strategy are an opportune moment to consider whether it is time to expand STDF’s mandate to also address non-SPS issues which may be critical for market access. As emphasized by stakeholders and observed in the project evaluations, exporters and traders tend to look at trade requirements for their agri-food products as a whole and from their perspective, improving SPS compliance without addressing other barriers is insufficient to create market access and further safe trade.

   To that end, we recommend that the WG engage in an open discussion about STDF’s mandate, widening the scope of its areas of investment, areas of knowledge work, and eligible project criteria for future PG applications, to include issues of **quality** in addition to **safety**, and make a recommendation to the Policy Committee (PC). This might include projects that are designed to address TBT requirements, market intelligence, trade facilitation, or other areas of investment that are **complimentary** to a primary SPS issue. We are not recommending the PC make specific changes, but rather that there be a full discussion of the positive and negative consequences of doing so as a platform for considering the future direction of STDF. We believe having an open discussion on this issue will benefit STDF and help clarify the shared vision of STDF’s role, even if changes to the mandate are ultimately rejected.

   In particular, potential new categories of eligibility might include:

   - TBT issues that relate to specific SPS capacity shortfalls or issues.
   - Infrastructure that supports improved SPS capacities and/or strengthens food safety systems.
   - Investments that cross trade facilitation, SPS and TBT needs.

2. **Increase the impact of the global platform by strengthening, expanding and servicing the partnership further**

   The STDF operational rules emphasize the role of the founding partners and traditional organizational hierarchy, whereas many new partners would be designated observers or “other”.
The evaluation highlights that success is being driven by being in the “room” together, and engaging on an even level with like-minded organizations that have the will and capacity to tackle real SPS problems.

We therefore recommend that the PC consider:

- Changing the operational rules to reflect the *de facto* practice and simplify the categories of membership to “founding partners” and “other partners” (which would include donors, other international/regional organizations, private sector bodies, etc.)
- Conducting outreach to private sector representative organizations, regional development banks, and regional SPS organizations to participate as other partners
- Expanding and funding the sub-network model and productizing support (practitioner groups, regional groups, etc.)
- Advocate for inclusion of STDF on International Standard Setting Bodies standing agendas.

Of note, though we are recommending the PC consider simplifying the categories of membership, we are not recommending that the PC be reformed or altered, or that the role of donors in guiding the STDF change from the current system.

3. **Improve co-financing of project activities via a strategy-wide target for project finance leverage.**

STDF has been successful at leveraging external finance for projects with over 30% of project funds in this strategy period coming from a mix of financial and in-kind external contributions, inclusive of mandatory matching per STDF operational rules.\(^7\) Growing this will increase both leverage and ownership of SPS capacity value additions.

The PC should therefore consider:

- Working toward a strategy-wide target for leverage, including a specific financial leverage target that can be considered during PG application discussions. For example, this can include complementary investments in food safety infrastructure that directly support or supplement capacities to be added by the proposed PGs.
- Piloting an agreed-upon target during the current strategy period, and based on the results, setting a target for future strategy periods, and, potentially, including that target in a revision of the operational rules.
- Further exploring the legal and technical barriers to allowing private sector participation in co-financing projects.

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\(^7\) STDF projects (ongoing or approved since 2020) have mobilized on average an additional 32% of the STDF financial contribution as external contributions to projects. This includes financing (USD17,022,781), as well as budgeted in-kind contributions (USD53,041,125).
• Setting an ambitious but realistic target for the PPG to external finance pipeline and allowing for consideration of leveraged projects outside of the financial scope of STDF contributions.

• Exploring the potential for more shared or jointly funded and developed knowledge products with institutional and/or private sector partners.

4. **STDF should consider improving its results-based management culture to match growth in scale.**

In response to the 2019 evaluation recommendations, STDF and the STDF Secretariat have put substantial time and investment into strengthening the MEL system. Despite this, monitoring, in particular, is not yet meeting the needs of a few donors or supporting results-based management. The STDF MEL Framework sets out very clearly the importance and value of rolling out a results-based management system for the partnership. The partnership should review what are the objectives of the results-based management system.

Therefore, STDF should consider embedding monitoring data into decision making\(^8\) by ensuring there is clarity on what information is needed when and where, with a clear path to obtaining it. Doing this may require:

• Reviewing and revising the logframe to ensure it meets results-based management needs
• Establishing baselines and targets for each logframe metric as a component of the new strategy development
• Ensuring logframe metrics are operationally sound & report on them on agreed intervals via LogAlto.
• Including nested indicators for tracking the project portfolio at programme level (e.g. “% of projects that achieve outcome-level results within 1 year of completion”)
• Including logframe metrics and targets in Annual Reporting.
• Mapping donor reporting needs to ensure that regular M&E and reporting processes provide all necessary outputs without any supplementary reporting requirements

5. **STDF should consider strengthening the role of the Developing Country Expert and finding avenues for post-role engagement.**

In the context of STDF’s 20\(^{th}\) year, STDF should re-consider the role of DCEs, how they are identified and recruited and how they are engaged with over the long term.

STDF is investing in the capacity of its DCEs and then benefiting from that capacity for two years with limited follow-on engagement thereafter. Former DCEs represent a significant available and largely willing resource that is going under-utilized.

Therefore, the PC should examine ways to improve partnership with DCEs while also capitalizing on a network-strengthening opportunity to improve regional engagement by:

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\(^8\) Management decision making may include recommendations on PPGs and PGs, project management, knowledge work dissemination, and other outreach efforts, among others.
• Converting the DCE role from individual to institutional, recruiting DCEs via nomination by Regional Economic Communities, Development Banks and other multi-lateral entities with specific focuses in trade or SPS.
• Extending the period of DCE participation to three years.
• Continue to give priority when recruiting and vetting DCEs to technical knowledge and experience (among other criteria).
• Working to develop an alumni role with more limited (once yearly) engagement at the regional level.
• Support former DCE’s to engage on PG and PPG proposal development. Including with limited financial and/or non-financial support.

6. **The Policy Committee should add either one additional Secretariat staff member OR support a secondment programme to supplement the existing capacity of the Secretariat.**

   An important finding of the network analysis is the central role played by the Secretariat in the operationalization of the partnership. The analysis indicates that the capacity of the Secretariat will continue to be a constraining factor as the partnership grows and expands and as the needs and interests of the partners increase and diverge.

   The 2019 Evaluation recommended adding two staff positions (MEL and Communications) and seven secondment positions to the existing Secretariat. Two staff positions were added but the secondment programme was rejected. The Secretariat is at current workload capacity to the point that the WG had to defer some knowledge work during the current period to accommodate other priorities. If accepted, this evaluation is recommending further MEL, more systematic facilitation of sub-regional groups sub-regional groups, and DCE support work to the existing workload. The Secretariat is unlikely to be able to accommodate the additional burden without further staff resource.

   To ensure a more reliable resource to deploy knowledge work and global platform activities, and to accommodate the WG priorities and the evaluation recommendations, either an additional programme officer position, a secondment position rotating between the Founding Partners\(^9\), or any other mechanism for adding to Secretariat capacity that is agreeable to the PC will be necessary.

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\(^9\) Excluding WTO, who already fund one staff position.