ANNUAL REPORT ON
ASSURING QUALITY AT THE
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa
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Foreword

Undertaking independent policy research is an important function of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) as a think tank on African development policy issues. The quality of the research of ECA is, therefore, of paramount importance to the Commission’s success and indeed in shaping its identity and reputation. In that regard, the knowledge products of ECA must be credible, applicable, neutral, and above all, forward looking and transformative. ECA seeks to deliver products that generate and enhance public policy debates, promote evidence-based decision-making and influence policy change aimed at making real and sustained improvements in people’s lives. Those products target a variety of audiences, including, among them, government officials, development practitioners and the scientific community.

However, putting in place a system that ensures that the Commission’s research and advocacy result in tangible benefits for society, and to communicate effectively the value of that work, remains a major challenge. This is compounded by the fact that ECA often produces interdisciplinary knowledge in collaboration with diverse actors with varied backgrounds and different perspectives.

To tackle that challenge, the Commission has developed the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 and within that framework, it has prepared quality assurance procedures, established quality assurance panels and continued to organize internal and external peer reviews for its knowledge products. Those are all tools and mechanisms used to measure the quality of the research from think tanks and to improve the quality of their products. I am pleased to note that existing ECA quality review criteria examine the extent to which the delivery of the Commission’s products includes a comprehensive review of relevant literature, the application of sound analytical methods and the use of high-quality data sets. They also examine the extent to which research conclusions are evidence-based; and take into consideration broader aspects of quality, such as the relevance, timeliness, and usefulness of knowledge products.

I would like to commend the director of our Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division and the staff of its Operational Quality Section for developing and operationalizing the above-mentioned tools and mechanisms. I also commend ECA staff who serve as members of various quality review panels for their commitment to that important function.

Despite the strides made in recent years, there is room to strengthen the Commission’s quality review processes and to explore various mechanisms to measure the quality of its work. In that regard, we will continue to conduct quality perception surveys on a regular basis; measure the number of indexed articles published by ECA staff members; and track the uptake of ECA research by policymakers. The Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2018-2021 will elaborate on those and other mechanisms to enhance and measure the quality of the work of ECA.

Overall, we are on the right track in assuring the quality of our products, but we must strive for continuous improvement, which is one of the fundamental principles of quality assurance. Going forward, therefore, we need to redouble our efforts to strengthen the quality of our products, as this would enhance the impact of ECA, for example, in terms of uptake of its recommendations by policymakers; demand for its advisory services by member States and regional organizations; and publications by staff members in academic journals, or citations of their publications in such journals.

Vera Songwe
Executive Secretary
Economic Commission for Africa
Introduction

In the present report, the achievements, challenges and lessons learned in the delivery of the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA) quality assurance function in 2017 are presented. This is the third edition of the annual report on assuring quality at ECA; it is particularly relevant as the report is written at the end of the ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. Accordingly, while the report is focused on 2017, it also reflects on the Commission’s performance in delivering its quality assurance function in the entire period of the Policy and Plan.

The thrust of the ECA quality assurance endeavours in 2017 was to effectively implement quality assurance tools and mechanisms, such as quality assurance procedures and quality review panels, that had been developed or established in 2015 and 2016. The main objective was to ensure that all major ECA products and services delivered in the period under review were quality reviewed and that the divisions and subregional offices that delivered the products and services recognized the value addition of the quality assurance exercises. Another objective was to seize opportunities to improve the understanding of ECA staff of the Commission’s quality assurance function. In that regard, efforts were made to demonstrate how quality assurance is an integral part of programme and project management and not a stand-alone function. It was envisaged that an understanding of this holistic perspective would facilitate the delivery of the ECA quality assurance function.

The aforementioned objectives were largely met. In 2017, the ECA quality assurance function was recognized as being central to the Commission’s delivery of products and services that are fit for purpose. That is reflected by the fact that quality reviews were organized for all major products delivered by ECA during the year, including nine Country Profiles and five STEPS Profiles; the eighth edition of the report, Assessing Regional Integration in Africa (ARIA VIII), the 2018 edition of the Economic Report on Africa (ERA 2018), the fifth edition of the African Governance Report (AGR V), and the African Gender and Development Index Regional Synthesis Report. Quality assurance procedures were also applied in the preparation of major events, including the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development and the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. In addition, quality reviews were conducted of project proposals submitted for consideration by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Matters for funding; strategic planning instruments, such as the 18-month ECA programme performance report and the project specific manual for the renovation of Africa Hall.

Many opportunities were harnessed in 2017 to build the capacity of ECA staff on the principles and practice of quality assurance. This was based on the premise that improved understanding of the role of quality assurance in programme and project management by ECA staff, particularly programme officers, would facilitate the delivery of the Commission’s quality assurance function. From that perspective, efforts to professionalize programme and project management in the Commission provided

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1 STEPS stands for Structural Transformation, Employment, Production and Society.
an excellent entry point for training in quality assurance. For instance, a workshop was organized in March 2017 for ECA programme officers, who generally are also quality assurance focal points for divisions, subregional offices and the Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), as part of the process of developing the ECA Project and Programme Management Manual. The manual is to be used to address the role of quality assurance at all stages in the programme or project development cycle, with emphasis on its contribution to accountability and appraisal and approval functions. Another workshop organized in October 2017 to roll out the manual and give an in-depth understanding of the results-based management approach also provided an entry point to enhance the capacity of programme officers in quality assurance. The workshop included a session on quality assurance in programme and project management.

Similarly, 52 ECA staff members were trained in project management and received the PRINCE2 Foundation certificate in Project Management, while eighteen others obtained the PRINCE2 Practitioner certificate in 2017. Through those courses, a significant number of ECA staff members have improved their understanding of the role of quality assurance in project management, in general, and in the delivery of the Commission’s work programme, in particular. Also, through those courses, the knowledge and skills of ECA staff members of the Operational Quality Section were enhanced in embedding quality in the different stages of the project life cycle.

Many challenges were identified in 2017 that could compromise the effectiveness of the ECA quality assurance function. Among them are: the lack of awareness and buy-in among ECA staff of the role of quality assurance in the various stages of the programming cycle, and of the merits in the delivery of the Commission’s products and services; perception that quality assurance is a cumbersome process and lack of clarity of some ECA quality objectives and quality assessment criteria; and inability to use panels to review the quality of some major ECA products and services because the number of staff who are panel members is limited and panels have not been created for all of those products and services. Another major challenge is to assess the extent to which the quality of ECA products and services have improved as a result of the Commission’s quality assurance function, notably the use of panels and various procedures.

Going forward, the above challenges must be dealt with. Moreover, ECA quality objectives and assessment criteria should reflect the role of the Commission as a think tank, which has been re-emphasized by the Secretary General. In that regard, the ECA quality assurance function should significantly increase the extent to which the Commission’s products and services enhance public policy debates and influence policy changes that make real and sustained improvements in people’s lives.

The rest of this report is structured as follows. In section 2, the results achieved in 2017 under the different ECA quality assurance policy objectives are presented. Section 3 contains a discussion on the challenges and lessons learned in implementing quality assurance practices and section 4 concludes the report by presenting the way forward for the quality assurance function of ECA.
Quality assurance results –
Highlights of 2017

The Economic Commission for Africa continued to strengthen its quality assurance function in 2017, building on the achievements of 2015 and 2016 in rolling out activities in the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. In that regard, quality review mechanisms and procedures developed by the Operational Quality Section of the Commission were used in reviewing the quality of major ECA products and services. The application of lessons learned from past experiences significantly enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of quality assurance processes in the reporting period. This section includes a discussion of the results achieved in 2017 in delivering the planned outputs under the different quality assurance policy objectives articulated in the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. The focus of the discussion is the extent to which the policy objectives were achieved, highlighting the contribution of various tools, processes and activities.

**Policy objective 1: Support ECA to offer innovative thinking for the structural transformation of Africa in line with agreed continental goals**

“Putting Africa First” is one of the ECA quality objectives, implying that the extent to which the transformation of Africa is reflected in a product or service is a measure of its quality. In that regard, the assessment criteria include whether the product or service adequately deals with structural transformation, empowers Africa to tell its own story, and responds to key African development policy priorities, among other issues. Accordingly, ECA quality review panels have emphasized the need for knowledge products, particularly the *Country Profiles*, to adequately address structural transformation. They have also stressed the need for clear articulation of the linkages between the thematic areas of the *Country Profiles* and the structural transformation and the implications of policy recommendations on structural transformation. Indeed, the observation of inadequate treatment of structural transformation in the *Country Profiles* led to the decision to create a new product that focuses exclusively on structural transformation, the *STEPS Profiles*. The ECA quality assurance function has, accordingly, contributed to the Commission’s effort to offer innovative thinking in the effort to achieve the structural transformation of Africa in line with agreed continental goals.

Implementation of the ECA Performance Management Dashboard in 2017 also supported the Commission’s effort to offer innovative thinking in line with agreed continental goals. The dashboard is an executive management tool developed to monitor the performance of ECA related to vital goals and functions of the Commission. It is also an accountability and learning tool that shows progress in critical areas of the Commission’s business model.
The Performance Management Dashboard combines critical strategic, operational and financial information to aid strategic decision-making and reports on efforts to bring together streams of ECA work in policy research and knowledge delivery to achieve greater policy influence.

**Figure I:** Economic Commission for Africa Performance Management screenshots

Results-based management

The dashboard also monitors the implementation of the measures instituted as part of the ECA business model, which is clustered around four blocks: policy influence; credibility and trust; accountability and learning; and operational effectiveness. Assuring the quality of the dashboard, particularly the functionalities of the platform, and the quality of the data that feed into it enhances the credibility of the information, analysis, reports and decisions that are derived from it. This includes assessments of the extent to which ECA offers innovative thinking in support of the structural transformation of Africa.

In essence, the quality assurance function of ECA plays an essential role in ensuring the reliability and validity of information extracted from the Performance Management Dashboard. In 2017, quarterly reviews of data inputted into the Dashboard by various ECA divisions and subregional offices and IDEP were reviewed to ensure that the required standards were met. The quarterly data quality reviews have ensured that strategic decisions made by senior management were based on credible data. Figure 1 provides a screenshot of the ECA Executive Performance Management Dashboard.

**Policy objective 2:** Strengthen the capacity of ECA to achieve high-quality products and services that are relevant, credible and effectively influence policy choices and decisions for the African transformation

Several activities carried out in 2017 contributed to the capacity of ECA to deliver high-quality products. Among them were the roll-out of existing quality assurance procedures and the ongoing development of a procedure for knowledge management; quality reviews of selected products and services; capacity-building through trainings on programme and project management and results-based management and the development of the ECA Project and Programme Management Manual by the Programme Planning and Budget Section of the Commission’s Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division.

Regarding quality assurance procedures, ECA continued to implement the procedures that had been approved by the Commission’s Senior Management Team. The use of approved procedures, particularly quality review criteria, to assess products and services ensured that they were of a high quality. Significant progress was also made in drafting the quality assurance procedures for knowledge management at ECA. It is envisaged that the ECA Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board will be used to review the draft procedure in the first quarter of 2018 prior to approval by the Senior Management Team.
Several quality reviews were conducted by ECA during the reporting period using approved procedures. The list of products and events that were reviewed includes the 2018 Economic Report on Africa (ERA 2018), the eighth edition of the report, Assessing Regional Integration in Africa (ARIA VIII), the fifth edition of the African Governance Report (AGR V), the Performance Management Dashboard, the ECA 18-Month Programme Performance Report, the 2017 Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development and African Development Week, the 2017 African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development and the tenth session of the Committee on Regional Cooperation and Integration. The reviews provided valuable comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the products and services. The resultant high quality of those products and events enhanced the likelihood of uptake of their policy recommendations by African countries, regional organizations and other stakeholders. In essence, rigorous quality reviews that ensured that the ECA knowledge products and policy dialogues were of the highest standard enhanced the credibility of the Commission.

Furthermore, internal reviews were successfully conducted for nine Country Profiles: Burkina Faso; Comoros; Congo; Guinea-Bissau; Namibia; Sao Tome and Principe; Togo; and Zimbabwe (figure II). In addition to the concept note and the quality assurance guidelines, the internal review process was guided by an approved template for producing Country Profiles. The reviews were conducted by English-speaking and French-speaking panels comprised of three to four staff members. The panels provided valuable comments and suggestions for improving the quality of the Country Profiles, and the revised profiles were approved for external review and subsequent publication. During the reporting period, reviews were also conducted to assess the STEPS Profiles of five pilot countries (one per subregion of Africa): Benin; Cameroon; Ethiopia; Morocco; and Zambia (figure II). A panel comprised of internal and external reviewers conducted the reviews and provided valuable comments and suggestions for improving the quality of the profiles. The overall objective of the reviews was to ensure that ECA publications, particularly its flagship products, are of good quality before they are disseminated widely. From a total of 14 Country Profiles or STEPS Profiles reviewed, three were approved,2 10 were approved with modifications,3 and one was disapproved4 by the panel (figure III). Those figures provide a baseline for measuring progress in the quality of draft Country Profiles and STEPS Profiles reviewed by quality assurance panels over time. An increase in the percentage of approved profiles indicate improvements in the quality of the profiles.

Overall, 55 staff members served as panel members and 25 staff members took on the function as divisional focal points for the reviews of the Country Profiles and STEPS Profiles. The aggregate attendance rate of panel members was 64.9 per cent, while the rate for divisional focal points, particularly from the Macroeconomic Policy Division and the Social Development Policy Division was considerably lower – 0 per cent for the Macroeconomic Policy Division and 33.2 per cent for the Social Development Policy Division (figure IV). While increasing the participation of ECA staff at quality review meetings is a major challenge, the number of those who attend those meetings is significant. This suggests that a cross-section of the Commission’s staff members is now familiar with the ECA quality objectives and the corresponding assessment criteria and; accordingly, have enhanced capacity to deliver quality products. Panel members, in particular, have familiarized themselves with quality review procedures and are using those procedures to conduct quality reviews.

Notes:
1. Product ready for delivery, taking into account the (limited) comments made for improvements.
2. Product is ready for delivery taking into account the comments that still have to be addressed.
3. The product is not ready for delivery and is not likely to be ready within a short period of time.
With regard to training, many capacity-building activities carried out in the reporting period contributed to building awareness of the importance of quality assurance and how it fits in the programme management process. Those activities also improved the knowledge and skills of ECA staff in applying quality assurance practices. For instance, in 2017, 70 staff members were awarded certification after receiving training, 52 staff members (23 males, 29 females) were trained in project management and received the PRINCE2 Foundation certificate in project management in 2017 and 18 staff members (12 males, 6 females) received training and were awarded the PRINCE2 practitioner certificate in project management. This is more than double the number of staff who obtained certification in 2016. Nineteen staff members (14 males, 5 females) and eight others (6 males, 2 females) received Foundation and Practitioner certificates, respectively in 2016 – a total of 27 staff members. The Foundation-level course introduces the PRINCE2 project management method, its principles, themes and terminology while the Practitioner level course provides the comprehensive knowledge needed to successfully manage PRINCE2 projects.

PRINCE2 recognizes that quality is a key element of any project and addresses the means by which a project creates and verifies products that are ‘fit for purpose’. It describes the quality audit trail, states the purpose of quality related products and explains the quality review process in a project. Consequently, through the course, a significant number of ECA staff members have gained a better understanding of the role of quality assurance in project management, in general, and in delivering the Commission’s projects and work programme, in particular. Also, as a result of the course, the knowledge and skills of staff members in embedding quality in the different stages of the project life cycle were enhanced, which, in turn, has made the Operational Quality Section better equipped to lead the quality assurance function at ECA.

Efforts to professionalize programme and project management at ECA also provided an excellent entry point for training in quality assurance. For instance, a workshop was organized for ECA programme officers, who generally are also quality assurance focal points for divisions, subregional offices or IDEP, as part of the process of developing the ECA Project and Programme Management Manual. The workshop provided a platform for the programme officers to familiarize themselves with the manual and to validate its content. The manual outlines the role of quality assurance at all stages in the programme or project development cycle, with emphasis on its contribution to accountability and to the appraisal and approval functions. The workshop enabled the Operational Quality Section of the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division of ECA to deliv-
er a presentation on the Commission’s quality assurance approach, tools and techniques thereby improving the understanding of participants of the Commission’s quality assurance function.

Another workshop was organized in October 2017 to roll out the ECA Project and Programme Management Manual and explain in detail the results-based management approach. The workshop served as an entry point to enhance the capacity of programme officers in quality assurance. In that regard, it included brainstorming on quality assurance in programme and project management and reacquainted the participants with the Commission’s quality objectives and review criteria, quality assurance process, quality review techniques and quality assurance procedures for different products and services. More than 50 staff members participated in the two workshops, which were organized with the objective of professionalizing programme and project management at ECA.

**Policy objective 3:** Enhance the use of the results from the ECA quality assurance system to support accountability, programme learning and resource allocation

The essence of this policy objective is to use quality assurance to ensure accountability and foster programme learning as a basis for resource allocation. To that end, a quality recognition programme in which teams are acknowledged and recognized for their exemplary contributions to the work of ECA from a quality perspective was implemented in the reporting period. In that regard, best practices in the delivery of the expected accomplishments of ECA were identified in the programme performance reports of the ECA divisions and subregional offices and IDEP, and various meetings, notably those with ECA partners, provided a platform to share the identified practices with donors and among staff of the Commission. Best practices were presented at meetings with partners in July and September 2017, while those identified from an 18-month programme performance report (figure V) will be presented to ECA partners in early 2018. The criteria for selecting the best practices include, among other aspects, the extent to which the outputs: were strategic and influenced development outcomes, particularly with regard to the African transformation agenda; brought together policy research and knowledge delivery strands of the work of ECA; were based on sound statistics; and mainstreamed a gender perspective.

**Figure V:** Best practices identified in the 18-month programme performance review, 2016–2017
The ECA divisions and subregional offices are aware of the value addition of quality reviews and have used the review results, to a large extent, to improve the quality of their products. For example, the subregional offices have applied the recommendations of quality review panels to improve their editions of the Country Profiles and STEPS Profiles. Notably, indicating how specific recommendations are used is a mandatory requirement in the review process. In cases in which the recommendations have not been applied, the reasons for not doing so were provided. In addition, lessons learned from conducting quality assurance reviews on several ECA products and services are reflected in the quality assurance section of the ECA Project and Programme Management Manual, in order to make the revamped results-based management system of the Commission more responsive to organizational learning.

To enhance the use of the results from the ECA quality assurance system to support resource allocation, the Commission’s quality review criteria were used to select project proposals submitted by the divisions and subregional offices to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Matters for budgetary allocation. In 2017, 22 project proposals were reviewed prior to submission to the Advisory Committee for approval and resource allocation. Eight (36 per cent) of those proposals were not recommended for approval (figure VI), mainly because they did not meet the required standards, notably bringing together the knowledge generation and knowledge delivery strands of the work of ECA.

**Policy objective 4:** Assure that risks that threaten the quality and sustainability of ECA products and services are appropriately and continuously assessed, monitored and managed

The culture of monitoring risks that threaten the quality of ECA events and implementing mitigating measures was strengthened in the reporting period. In that regard, quality assurance action plans were developed to deal with such risks effectively and efficiently. For instance, action plans were applied to organize the 2017 Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, and the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, with the objective of improving the quality of the preparations for the events and the contents of the events. The Operational Quality Section participated in the working groups set up to organize those events. The working groups facilitated the formulation and systematic implementation of risk-mitigating measures in the action plans. Examples of measures to improve the quality of the events include the mandatory use of a standard template for PowerPoint presentations, and providing training on writing conference reports and outcome documents to rapporteurs. Some of the quality identified challenges associated with the organization of the 2017 Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development and the proposed action for mitigation are indicated in the table.

Furthermore, one of the quality review criteria included in the review of products, such as the Country Profiles and STEPS Profiles, is the level and quality of engagement with member States, as this has a bearing on their ownership of the products. Failure to engage with member States at the appropriate level is also a risk to the quality of the product in terms of relevance, timeliness and data quality. In general, the Country Profiles and STEPS Profiles produced with a high level of engagement with key stakeholders were found to be of a high quality.
Policy objective 5: Promote compliance with the mandates of the Economic and Social Council and organization-wide initiatives on carbon footprint and gender mainstreaming

The Economic Commission for Africa is required to comply with legislative mandates and United Nations policies and procedures related to gender mainstreaming and women empowerment. In response to Economic and Social Council resolution 2014/2, the Secretary-General submitted a report on mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system (E/2015/58). The report included a discussion on progress made in implementing the United Nations System Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. It deals with the mainstreaming of gender equality in common programming processes of the United Nations at the country level, including through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and other planning frameworks. ECA has been reporting on the United Nations System Wide Action Plan since 2013, highlighting changes in the Commission's programmatic, operational and finan-
cial architecture in an effort to contribute to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

As 2017 was the pilot year for realizing UNSWAP 2.0, ECA participated actively in developing and finalizing the new methodological guidelines for measuring gender-based development results across the United Nations system. In that regard, the Commission is aligning this methodology with its own results-based management framework. More specifically, the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division is consulting with UN Women and the operational inter-agency subworking groups on gender mainstreaming to initiate a system-wide quality assurance process and develop guidelines for assessing gender-responsiveness.

The Economic Commission for Africa has developed gender markets and integrated them into its annual business plan in compliance with the United Nations System Wide Action Plan framework. This provides the foundation for setting targets for a gender-responsive budget in future planning cycles. In addition, ECA commented on the United Nations Development Group Resource Book on Mainstreaming Gender and Guide for Gender Theme Groups.

Policy objective 6: Ensure that the ECA quality assurance function contributes effectively to building a competent organization

Quality assurance plays a critical role in ensuring that ECA is a successful think tank. To that end, the Operational Quality Section has spearheaded the establishment of mechanisms to assure the quality of the Commission’s products and services since its creation in 2013. Those mechanisms are rooted in the ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, which will be updated in the first quarter of 2018, and include quality assurance panels, peer reviews, and procedures.

The full functioning of quality assurance panels and the application of quality assurance procedures have led to a more systematic delivery of ECA products and services, and have enhanced the robustness of the Commission’s outputs. In essence, ECA has been able to influence policy through the delivery of high-quality products and services. This was the case, for example, for the report, Assessing Regional Integration in Africa and the 2017 African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. The delivery of high-quality products and services enhanced the chances of uptake of policy recommendations by African countries and regional organizations. As stated under policy objective 2, several products and services were quality reviewed in 2017.

Overall, efficient delivery of flagship outputs strengthens the credibility of ECA as a think tank on development policy issues in Africa. To ensure that the Commission’s quality assurance function contributes effectively to building a competent organization, lessons from past experiences are continuously applied to improve the ECA quality assurance function. Going forward, there is an urgent need not only to expand the pool of ECA internal quality assurance panel members but also to motivate the panel members by appropriately recognizing the important role they play in sustaining the image of ECA as a competent think tank.
Challenges and key lessons learned

During the three years of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, as mentioned in previous sections of the present report, ECA designed and rolled out quality assurance procedures and tools to support the development of a corporate culture that fosters quality and to help coordinate fragmented efforts and practices of various divisions, subregional offices and IDEP in assuring the quality of their products and services.

The Policy and Plan emphasizes the commitment of ECA to document and use lessons learned from the application of quality assurance tools to continuously improve the Commission’s products and services. For instance, the STEPS Profile was created in response to feedback received from panel members during quality reviews of the Country Profiles, particularly regarding the gaps in the discourse on structural transformation in the profiles. As such, the objective of the STEPS Profiles, which were piloted in five countries, is to develop a unique analytical document that provides a comprehensive assessment of the status and evolution of structural transformation in African countries over time.

Various challenges were encountered in the period 2014-2017, and based on the lessons learned, actions were taken to address those challenges. Cross-cutting lessons learned are discussed below:

Lesson #1: Improving the overall understanding of quality assurance, particularly within the programme management cycle

Quality assurance should not be viewed as a stand-alone activity, but instead, it should be considered to be part of the programme management cycle. This is particularly important in the light of the ECA goal to enhance its credibility as a think tank, which can be achieved if its products and services are of the highest standard.

Professional staff often overlook or downplay the quality assurance function, as reflected by the limited attention they devote to it. In essence, although quality assurance mechanisms have been established as part of the 2014-2017 Operational Quality Policy and Plan, recognition and appreciation of the importance of quality assurance by ECA staff are inadequate, despite the recent improvement made in this function. This is indicated by the significant proportion of panel members who are absent from quality reviews. For instance, in 2017, up to 31 per cent of the panel members did not attend their assigned reviews, mainly because of other commitments deemed to be more urgent or relevant to them. Moreover, in some cases, divisional focal points and panel members were represented at reviews, but there was insufficient evidence that a systematic and thorough examination of the product under review had been undertaken. In other cases, not all reviewers completed the quality review forms, making the overall assessment of concerned products challenging.

Moreover, the ratings of the quality of the Country Profiles would be more efficient if each panel member were to
make an initial quantitative assessment of the document using the approved criteria prior to the collective assessment by all panel members, who reach a final rating by consensus.

There are clear indications that further discussions are needed on how to create incentives for panel members to get more involved in the quality reviews, as they often see the task of reviewing products and participating in discussions on their quality as time-consuming and unrewarding. This negative view may be explained by an organizational culture that avoids processes, programme management and related matters on the view that they are cumbersome or one that is not familiar with the concept of quality. A better understanding of programme management and quality assurance, therefore, may help to change those erroneous perceptions and lead to the comprehensive and meaningful participation of staff members in activities related to quality assurance across ECA.

As mentioned in the previous section, in 2017, 70 ECA staff members participated in trainings on programme and project management, including on the PRINCE2 project management methodology. The number of participants was 2.6 times more than in the previous year. In the trainings, the participants learned that quality is one of the six elements – together with costs, time, scope, risk and benefits – of a project or programme and received instructions on quality methods and responsibilities, quality review techniques and quality records. The fact that the trainees passed the PRINCE2 examination and received the certification is a good indicator of improved familiarity and understanding of the value of quality assurance.

In the light of the success of the PRINCE2 training at ECA, in the next Operational Quality Policy and Plan, the importance of offering more opportunities for ECA staff members to participate in renowned professional programme management trainings and workshops will be highlighted. It is likely that a better understanding of all the stages of programme management and on how and where quality assurance fits into the programme management cycle would increase their appreciation of the quality assurance function.

Overall, the quality assurance process in the corporate culture of quality can be successfully sustained in the Commission only through a thorough understanding from ECA staff members of the concept of quality and a strong commitment made by them to their respective roles in the quality assurance process.

Lesson #2: Continue to refine quality objectives and quality assurance tools so they are fit for purpose

Quality assurance methods and tools were created to support the strategic reorientation of the Commission to better support the development agenda of Africa. Similarly, the establishment of the quality assurance panels is a significant milestone in building and sustaining a culture of quality and in entrenching results-based management at the Commission. Associated assessment criteria were created to quantify the quality of products and services to understand if and how they fit in the ECA quality objectives.

However, the application of the quality objectives and their assessment criteria, and the interpretation of them, have differed among panel members and between panels. Panel members have stressed that some of the objectives are not easy to understand or are applicable to only certain products. Some of the quality assessment criteria are also considered to be unclear and may lead to inconsistent interpretations. In addition, many of the quality assessment criteria are not applicable to certain products. For instance, panels had disregarded criteria that were not considered to be applicable during the review of the Country Profiles. Lack of clarity on some of the quality objectives and the corresponding assessment criteria may explain why they were, at times, taken into account only marginally in panel members' inputs to the review process. Notably, the selection of applicable assessment criteria for the same product, for example Country Profiles, has differed greatly among different panels, underscoring the need to improve their validity and reliability.

The upcoming preparation of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan for 2018-2021 provides an opportunity to thoroughly review the ECA quality objectives to make them more comprehensible.

Lesson #3: Panels conduct rigorous quality reviews and should, therefore, be created and used for all major ECA products and services

The ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 has provided a coherent quality assurance framework to guide the planning, deployment, monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance activities in the Commission. This framework stipulates the use of quality assurance panels in reviewing major knowledge products. However, such panels have been created only for assuring the quality of the Country Profiles, the Economic Report on Africa, and ECA strategic planning instruments, such as the Commission's
and procedures have not been measured. Moreover, feed-
al Quality Section and the use of quality assurance panels
products has improved since the creation of the Operation-
However, to date, the extent to which the quality of ECA

Overall, quality assurance expertise has been developed
and refined over the past three years at ECA mainly by the
Operational Quality Section. The section has the capacity
to spearhead quality review processes and facilitate the
creation and use of panels in reviewing the major ECA
products and services.

Lesson #4: Going beyond intermediate results to measure the quality of the work of ECA

Undeniably, the establishment of the Operational Quality
Section within the Strategic Planning and Operation Qual-
ity Division of ECA and the formulation of an Operational
Quality Policy and Plan have helped make the manage-
ment of quality assurance processes at ECA more efficient.
Procedures for quality assurance are clearer, follow specific
guiding principles, have been approved by senior manage-
ment and are better understood and regarded by ECA staff.

However, to date, the extent to which the quality of ECA
products has improved since the creation of the Operation-
al Quality Section and the use of quality assurance panels
and procedures have not been measured. Moreover, feed-
back from panel members and focal points of various ECA
divisions and subregional offices given during reviews or
provided as written comments are not being institutional-
ized, even though they are highly appreciated and applied
to the extent possible by the people involved in the pro-
cess to improve ECA products. Such feedback is captured
in the reports of quality reviews in the form of recommenda-
tions to improve the quality of the product and lessons
learned to improve the quality review process. While the
authors – subregional offices in the case of Country Profiles
– provide an account of how recommendations are used
to improve products, there is no evidence that other con-
tributors internalize and take into consideration the feed-
back in making subsequent inputs to products.

Although challenging, measuring quality is fundamental
to improving the products and services of any think tank,
ECA included. Measuring results – improvements in the
quality of products in the case of quality assurance – may
lead to the following: better understanding of processes;
changes in the priorities; greater opportunities to inform
decision-making; and the ability to more effectively target
future actions and plans. This, in turn, would result in higher
quality and more effective outcomes. Accordingly, it is im-
portant that quality assurance experts move beyond being
an intermediary in the review process and develop clear
indicators to measure the extent to which ECA products
have been improving. Those indicators could be variations
of approval rates of flagship products by panel members
through time, and more importantly, the uptake of the rec-
ommendations in those products. Other indicators may be
the profile of readers of the ECA publications, publication
of the products in academic journals and citations in such
journals. After all, the ultimate objective of a think tank is
for its products to reach an increasing number of relevant
readers and policymakers. Through those products, a think
tank seeks to provide innovative thinking and challenge
the status quo with the expectation that its recommenda-
tions would be taken up by governments and other key
stakeholders. Additional indicators that could be used to
measure the quality of knowledge products are provided
in box 1. The Operational Quality Section of the Strategic
Planning and Operational Quality Division has the capacity
and tools to become more effective in dealing with this
area in the coming years.
Figure VII: Think Tank Success Indicators

The following criteria may also be used to measure success of ECA publications:

1. Who is reading key ECA products?
2. Has the product or service stimulated debate or innovate thinking?
3. How did the project or service influence the status quo?
4. Who is attending, reading and thinking about our products?
5. Which action were taken as direct consequence of the product or service being analysed? How many recommendation of the product or service were taken up by the governments over a 5-year period?
6. How many times, and in which outlets, was the publication in question cited? Did the product/service capture any media attention? What was the impact on social media?
7. Did the product/service bring together a new set of stakeholders into the room?
8. Where the texts or language presented in document used in government documents, including legislature?
9. How many times was the product downloaded and what do online reviewers say about it?
Conclusions and Way forward

The creation of the Operational Quality Section in 2013, formulation of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, and the development of quality assurance procedures and establishment of quality review panels in line with the policy and plan, have contributed to building a culture of quality at ECA. The existence of dedicated structures, a policy framework and procedures has enabled the systematic peer review of several ECA flagship products and services, thereby improving their quality. This, in turn, has enhanced the chances of uptake of recommendations emerging from those products and services by policymakers.

Professional training in programme and project management has also helped ECA staff gain a better understanding of the merits of quality assurance and its role in the programme and project management cycle. However, more work remains to be done in that area and related capacity-building efforts need to be an ongoing endeavor.

The organization of quality reviews by panels applying well-defined assessment criteria that are linked to the ECA quality objectives could be used as a proxy for the quality of the Commission’s products and services. However, there is a need to move beyond such intermediate indicators and adopt more precise ones, such as the uptake of policy recommendations by policymakers, which is the ultimate objective of think tanks, such as ECA.

Drawing from the lessons learned in 2017 and the three years of implementing the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, ECA, going forward, will undertake actions in the following areas:

- Training to improve the understanding from ECA staff of the principles of quality assurance and its role in programme and project management;
- Revising ECA quality objectives and their assessment criteria to improve their clarity and relevance in the context of the Commission’s products and services;
- Creating panels for quality reviews of the major ECA products and services;
- Motivating panel members by recognizing their contribution to ECA knowledge products;
- Developing indicators to track improvements in the quality of ECA products and services over time;
- Developing a mechanism to ensure the uptake of feedback and lessons learned from review processes.

Quality assurance falls within the remit of the Executive Direction and Management of ECA, whose objective for the 2018-2019 biennium is to ensure the effective implementation of legislative mandates and compliance with United Nations policies and procedures with respect to the management of the programme of work and of the staff and financial resources. The expected accomplishment of the Executive Direction and Management that is relevant to quality assurance is to “enhance quality of ECA knowledge products and services through an improved quality assurance process”. The corresponding indicator of achievement is “effective quality reviews of the strategic relevance of key ECA products and services, including flagship products”.

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The aforementioned quality assurance actions will be incorporated into the 2018-2021 Operational Quality Policy and Plan. They are also consistent with the outputs related to the ECA quality assurance function proposed in the Commission’s 2018-2019 biennium programme budget, which include:

- Preparation of ECA Quality Assurance Policy and Plan 2018-2021;
- Preparation of reports on quality assurance;
- Training of staff on quality assurance procedures, practices and lessons learned;
- Review and update of quality assurance procedures;
- Review of major ECA products and services.
Bibliography


