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► Executive Summary

 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

This high-level evaluation covers the period January 2018 to June 2024 of the current ILO Development Cooperation strategy and implementation plan (which covers the period 2020–25) and briefly considers the events and discussions during the transitional period 2018–19 that contributed to their development. The adoption of the Development Cooperation Strategy in the 340th GB Session included a request to submit an implementation plan to accompany the ILO Development Cooperation Strategy 2020-25. This plan was discussed and adopted by the Governing Body at its 341st Session (March 2021). Additionally, a mid-term review of both the Strategy and its implementation plan was undertaken upon request of the Governing Body in 2023. This evaluation assesses what worked well and what did not in the Strategy and its accompanying plans, with the aim of supporting the Office and constituents in making informed decisions about future directions in development cooperation. The scope of the evaluation does not include the results or impact of the ILO's large development cooperation portfolio per se, but aims to address the value added by the strategy itself. The high-level evaluation was based on a document review, a meta-study of 206 project evaluations, over 260 stakeholder interviews,¹ a global survey of constituents and two ILO staff surveys with a number of data challenges as outlined in paragraph 1. The team selected five country studies and four thematic case studies.²

FINDINGS**Relevance****KEY FINDING 1**

The strategy lacks a clear vision for improvement and does not effectively outline desired impacts beyond activity completion. Its purpose and measures of success are unclear, and it lacks a theory of change.

KEY FINDING 2

The strategy broadly addresses findings from the 2015 ILO HLE of technical cooperation and the 2021 Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) assessment, but more attention is needed on some critical issues.

The Strategy lacks a clear purpose and success measures. Although the Implementation Plan detailed deliverables and responsibilities, these were sometimes quite broad and HQ-oriented. There was little direction set for staff in the field, where most DC occurs. Some parts of the strategy were de-emphasised in the Implementation Plan and vaguely worded, leaving them too open to interpretation rather than guiding an intentional process towards a specific and measurable objective. The strategic intent of many actions was not explicit. The Strategy cross-references other strategies and plans but the value it adds to these in terms of clear actions and deliverables is not always evident.

¹ Interviews were held with 117 women (44 per cent) and 145 men (55 per cent). The surveys were sent to 1,018 constituents in the three languages, with a response rate of 23.8 per cent. A general ILO staff survey was sent to 2,000 ILO staff members, with a 23.2 per cent response rate; and a curated survey for corporate institutional services staff was sent to 65 staff members, with a 23 per cent response rate.

² These country case studies were: Bangladesh, Jordan (remotely), Paraguay, Uganda and Uzbekistan. The thematic case studies were Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, Better Work, the Partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced persons and host communities (PROSPECTS), and the International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization (ITC-ILO), Turin.

Some issues raised in the 2015 ILO HLE and in the 2021 MOPAN assessment remain unresolved. Projects continue to struggle to deliver results on time, due in part to over-ambitious design and slow start-ups. Small scale projects with limited impact persist, and no consistent shift has been made to large scale longer-term programmes. Efficiency in some important areas remains poor and data on DC impact are still lacking. Poor project monitoring hinders timely action on individual poorly performing projects and the development of structural, accountability-based incentives for continual improvement. To address these issues, the Strategy needed sharper, more specific goals and clear action pathways toward intended results.

Coherence

KEY FINDING 3

The DC strategy broadly follows directions set by key ILC documents and other ILO plans, but the level of coherence is inconsistent. Its efforts to better align DC with constituent needs and to specific P&B outcomes lack detail and measures of success.

The Strategy covers the priorities set out in the 2018 ILC Resolution on DC but offers minimal practical guidance. Coherence is stronger in the areas of capacity development, transparency, and inclusive partnerships, but weaker in the areas of adopting a programmatic approach, coordination, and inclusion. It echoes the Resolution's call for improved constituent engagement but does not demonstrate a coherent and measurable approach to achieving this.

As P&B documents reference the need to direct DC resource mobilization to areas where funds are scarce, the Strategy is an important means of providing clarity on how this can be achieved. While the Strategy cross-references the P&B, it lacks detail on how it would mobilize resources to address gaps in DC coverage across the eight policy outcomes or on systematic initiatives towards this end.

The Strategy emphasises improving coherence between the ILO, the UN system and a range of other stakeholders. Actions set out in the Implementation Plan on this are more detailed.

Effectiveness

KEY FINDING 4

The mechanism to drive and implement the strategy was ineffective. Monitoring and reporting of the Strategy dropped off after the 2023 Mid-Term Review.

KEY FINDING 5

With Pillar3 1 - Services to Constituents, tools and guidelines were introduced to foster national ownership of DWCPs and to support South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC). DC often aligns with national priorities, but challenges persist in ensuring this. Gaps remain in using DC to promote social dialogue and tripartism and contribute to the organizational needs of constituents.

3 The Strategy refers to four "focus areas". For brevity, the evaluation uses "pillars".

KEY FINDING 6

With Pillar 2 - Partnerships for Policy Coherence, the ILO maintained its trajectory in promoting decent work through better policy action, but evidence of added value from the strategy's actions is unclear. The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions has established its management structure, and volunteer "pathfinder" countries are formulating "road maps". The Global Coalition for Social Justice shows promise for improved coherence but is still in its early stages.

KEY FINDING 7

With Pillar 3 - Partnerships for Funding, the HLE found little evidence that the Strategy significantly contributed to the recent increase in DC funding, much of which relates to geo-political events. Funding partners emphasized the need for the ILO to promote its unique blend of normative mandate, technical expertise and country-level activities more strongly for sustainable results.

KEY FINDING 8

Under Pillar 4 - Efficiency, Decent work results and Transparency, the ILO delivered most of the planned tools, guidelines, training initiatives, and communication products. It improved transparency in DC work and took steps to enhance social and environmental safeguards. However, progress was less evident in introducing systems to support continuous improvement in the way the ILO delivers and supports DC.

The strategy lacks an effective organizational arrangement for implementation. The Multilateral Partnership and Development Cooperation department (PARTNERSHIPS) is the custodian, but shares the responsibility with many other actors, leaving final accountability remaining unclear. A network of "focal points" is responsible for delivery and progress updates. Work on the strategy is expected to occur both with and without PARTNERSHIPS' involvement. Oversight and management of this process is loose. Reporting since the Mid-Term Review has been patchy.

Pillar 1 of the Strategy is built upon existing ILO strategies and plans covering capacity development, social dialogue and tripartism, and SSTC. It reinforced these as continuing priorities and launched many initiatives to improve services to its three constituent groups. SSTC emerged as a growing area of ILO support. There is evidence that increasing engagement of constituents in ILO DC planning and implementation, and in UN planning processes improves overall project performance. DC programming generally responded to national constituents' needs and agendas; however, gaps persisted, where differing funding partner interests took precedence.

Under **Pillar 2**, new agreements were made with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) on decent work and capacity development work in this area for constituents. ILO participated in several policy-focused, multi-stakeholder partnerships, though often in areas where policy coherence was already strong. While ILO participated in joint programmes with several UN agencies, growth in this area is not evident, and stakeholders questioned the benefits versus increased procedural complexity.

The Global Accelerator is an example of coherence promoted by the DC Strategy, reflecting the "common agenda" advocated by the UN Secretary General. ILO has played a core role in developing its approach and 15 countries have volunteered as "pathfinders", with some starting to develop "roadmaps" for implementation. The new Global Coalition for Social Justice holds considerable promise for improved coherence.

Pillar 3 has been modestly effective. While the HLE found little evidence that the Strategy had directly led to changes in the type and volume of DC funding, it has emphasised the importance of DC in enacting its normative agenda. DC partners would not be drawn to ILO if not for its technical expertise and normative work. Tension remains within ILO between those emphasising the normative agenda and those promoting the immediate benefits of DC for ultimate beneficiaries.

External stakeholders value how the ILO's DC work combines its normative mandate with its specialist technical expertise. They cautioned that an overemphasis on DC growth could lead it to appear as "just another implementing body" with low comparative advantage, reducing its attraction as a partner as there are other bodies with higher implementing capacity – especially in countries where the ILO is not resident. The ILO is now also grappling with the issue of "organizational overstretch" and risks reputational damage if the quality of its DC deteriorates because of unconstrained growth.

In this important respect, the Strategy failed to provide a bold strategic vision for the ILO's role in development cooperation, resulting in unclear objectives and directions on where the ILO should be going. The Strategy's approach to funding partnerships and modalities lacks clear purpose, direction and boundaries. Any new DC Strategy would need to establish more explicit objectives and targets to drive the direction and scope of ILO's ambitions as implementer. Funding partners reported that they focus on ILO's unique position as a "specialized agency" rather than as a broad-spectrum implementer and view funding proposals in this light.

Pillar 4 included disparate activities, mainly offering tools and resources to enhance existing DC delivery. These activities comprised developing an online training platform and modules for DC staff by ITC-ILO, improving transparency to meet international standards, and advancing an environmental and social sustainability framework. However, no progress was reported in implementing a new DC costing model or in systemic efforts to boost efficiency.

More ambitious and potentially more effective actions under this Pillar were not pursued. Consistent with many internal and external reports, there is a need to improve the monitoring of ILO DC at both the project level and portfolio wide. Improved monitoring would enable action on underperforming projects, identify and correct system inefficiencies, and improve project impact.

Enhancements to the project appraisal system can also improve the quality, sustainability and impact of DC projects and ensure that the lessons of past projects are considered, that the focus of ILO DC work is clear, and that its strengths are maximised.

Efficiency

KEY FINDING 9

The strategy paid little attention to the overall efficiency of the ILO's delivery of development cooperation projects, despite ongoing concerns about this issue. Various internal and external reviews have highlighted problems with the speed and complexity of systems and procedures, and these concerns were further highlighted by the high-level evaluation.

While ILO processes and procedures are rigorously monitored from a compliance perspective and evaluations assess past performance and highlight lessons learned, the systems that support DC delivery need closer monitoring and continuous improvement. MOPAN assessments, ILO HLEs, project evaluations, meta-studies, synthesis reviews and internal and external audits have consistently highlighted efficiency problems. Staff involved in DC delivery and the technical units that support them, whether in HQ or in the field, are frustrated by the lack of responsiveness to their needs.

Time taken to recruit key DC staff remains a major "pain point", despite some improvements reported by the ILO Human Resource Department (HRD) and the introduction of an online toolkit. Efficiency of DC delivery could be enhanced through changes to staff mobility and contracting

arrangements and giving more attention to DC talent management and retention (e.g., through recruitment rosters and eligibility lists), but ILO rules need to be adjusted to enable this.

Procurement is being streamlined and digitalized, but further improvement is needed. Procurement oversight mechanisms in some regions add further delays. Work in fragile and crisis situations often exposes the ILO's weaknesses in these areas compared with more agile partner agencies.

Through pooling of staff resources and by creating economies of scale, a programmatic approach to DC delivery enhances efficiency – as historically the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour piloted, and as the HLE found with Better Work, PROSPECTS and in Bangladesh where a “cluster” approach has been adopted.

Impact and sustainability

KEY FINDING 10

The Strategy mainly reaffirms existing practices rather than providing innovative guidance for future priorities and approaches. Its development lacked transparency and engagement with DC practitioners, leading to low staff ownership. To ensure impact and sustainability, future efforts should emphasize “what success looks like”.

ILO stakeholders saw the Strategy confirming what ILO was already doing rather than as guiding innovative approaches that would have a measurable impact on DC. Its development lacked transparency and broad stakeholder engagement, resulting in low staff ownership. There was a strong opinion that the ILO's DC instead needed more strategic guidance to enhance impact and to address longstanding problems in its management and delivery.

Future efforts should emphasize inter-connectivity of the four pillars, and improve monitoring and data collection, so that long-term progress towards impacts can be measured. In its current form, the Strategy fails to describe what success looks like.

CHART 1: OVERALL ASSESSMENT⁴

FIGURE 1 PRESENTS THE EVALUATION TEAM'S OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE ILO'S 2020-25 DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION STRATEGY, 2018-24.



⁴ 6 = Highly satisfactory; 5 = Satisfactory; 4 = Somewhat satisfactory; 3 = Somewhat unsatisfactory; 2 = Unsatisfactory; 1 = Highly unsatisfactory

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

While the Strategy touches on many of the key issues and broadly aligns with the 2018 ILC Resolution on DC, it fails to clearly outline where we are, where we need to be, and this is how we will get there". Instead, it focuses on activities, which, while potentially valuable, could not be evaluated for their contribution to improved development cooperation. The ILO's DC strategy and Implementation Plan mirror a criticism often levelled at its individual DC projects i.e., they are activity-driven, lack Theories of Change, and are inadequately focused on measuring progress towards impacts. Lessons learned for the new strategy to consider include the following:

Need for a more focussed but ambitious DC Strategy: The existing strategy covers many strategic issues but largely focusses on "tweaking" what is already in place, rather than seeking to be more transformative and addressing entrenched systemic weaknesses. Stakeholders expressed a need for innovation, rather than a slightly upgraded version of "more of the same".

See Recommendation 1.

Need for a strategy that provides clarity on the centrality of development cooperation: Many people consulted stressed how vital DC now is in deepening the delivery of the ILO's core role. Others, however, noted that some people in the ILO see DC as secondary to this role or even a distraction. The centrality of the ILO's approach to DC – built on tripartism, social dialogue, and normative action - needs to be unapologetically reinforced as a primary mechanism for the ILO to achieve its goals and to meet constituent needs. Messaging from senior management is needed to encourage two-way accountability between administrative and DC delivery units.

See Recommendation 3.

Need for a strategy that emphasises the importance of balanced growth, diversification and focus on development cooperation work – "doing fewer things better": Funding partners seek clarity on the ILO's priorities, but it struggles to articulate these beyond the P&B, which covers the full gamut of the ILO's work. Saying that "everything we do is a priority" lets the ILO cast its net very widely when seeking DC funding, but it leads to resource mobilization gravitating more towards meeting the strategic priorities of funding partners. Being more intentional in setting DC priorities is needed so that the ILO can, as the 2018 ILC Resolution urged, "promote all the pillars of decent work in a balanced manner" as well as a "longer-term, programmatic and focused approach". See Recommendations 1 and 4.

Need for a strategy that enhances national ownership and constituent empowerment: While the HLE found some improvement in constituent involvement in DC, mechanisms to consolidate this trend are needed, including a more robust and transparent framework to ensure constituent satisfaction. See Recommendation 1.

Need for a strategy that strives towards continuous improvement of ILO systems and approach for developing, delivering, monitoring and supporting DC projects: There is no one part of the ILO that has a span of control that covers all the critical functions necessary for the effective and efficient delivery of DC. The mechanism used by the current strategy left nobody ultimately accountable. A new approach is needed, either through a dedicated DC monitoring function or through a system driven by senior management mechanisms that can achieve change (as was demonstrated in the COVID-19 pandemic). See Recommendations 2 and 3.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Office response: The Office welcomes the high-level evaluation of the Development Cooperation Strategy and its recognition of the central role of development cooperation in delivering a wide range of services to ILO constituents and advancing the ILO mandate. The increase in voluntary funding and in the diversity of partnerships demonstrates the continued interest of partners in development cooperation activities and their trust in the ILO. While highlighting that this High-Level Evaluation is focused on the Development Cooperation Strategy itself and does not assess ILO's DC projects and activities, the Office is committed to address the evaluation findings and integrate the recommendations provided into the implementation of the current strategy and other related initiatives, as relevant. It is worth mentioning that the Office started in 2023 a process to review the implementation of ILO's development cooperation activities with the aim of identifying potential bottlenecks and areas of improvement.

Recommendation 1

Initiate consultations on the need, form and scope of a new ILO Development Cooperation Strategy for 2026-29, aiming for possible submission to the GB by late 2025 via a transparent process involving constituents, senior management, policy specialists, DC project practitioners, oversight functions and administrative and financial management specialists. This process should:

- ▶ Consider identifying and pursue opportunities for a more focused and strategic approach to resource mobilization, emphasizing links with the ILO's normative role and addressing resource gaps in key policy areas outlined in the Strategic Plan 2026-29, P&B Proposals for 2026-27 and Priority Action Programmes.
- ▶ Consider how best to ensure an ILO-wide commitment to improving the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of DC implementation, and to promote two-way accountability between administrative and DC delivery units.
- ▶ Consider ways to implement the 2018 ILC Resolution's principle of a more programmatic approach to DC, drawing lessons from successful larger-scale programs and considering mechanisms for enhanced integration and clustering of efforts.
- ▶ Consider how the new proposed architecture for the P&B 2026-27 (e.g., outcome 10 and enabling outcome A, output 45) might subsume the current "partnerships for policy coherence" pillar and allow future DC strategies to focus on resource mobilization and efficiency in delivering quality services to constituents.
- ▶ Consider how DC project appraisals can be strengthened to ensure quality design and better specify how inputs from ILO units will be actioned.
- ▶ Consider options for a more robust framework to ensure constituent involvement in crucial stages of DC development and implementation.
- ▶ Consider whether a "DC operations unit" responsible for monitoring and managing the DC portfolio is needed for a whole-of-ILO approach. This unit would identify and maximise DC linkages with the P&B and ILO norms and standards, and ensure that projects have optimal human resources and staff training.

5 Draft Programme and Budget (version August 2024 Outcome 10: Enhanced Policy coherence and amplified action for better social justice and Outcome A.4 Partnerships and Resource Mobilization for enhanced Social Justice.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Director-General's (DG) Office (regions and Decent Work Technical Support Teams (DWTs)) ▶ Assistant Director-General (ADG)/External and Corporate Relations (ECR): PARTNERSHIPS ▶ ADG/Corporate Services (CS): Programming and Management Department (PROGRAM) ▶ Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACTEMP) and Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) ▶ ADG/Governance, Rights and Dialogue (GRD) and ADG/Jobs and Social Protection (JSP)		Immediate	Variable

Office response: The Office welcomes the recommendation and its proposed actions. As has been the practice, an inclusive and transparent consultation process will begin in 2024 to develop a more focused and forward-looking strategy that considers the evaluation findings and responds to the needs of ILO constituents and the priorities of development partners in line with the strategic plan for 2026–29 and the related programmes and budgets 2026–27 and 2028–29.

Recommendation 2

Develop a new policy and mechanism for monitoring DC that promotes accountability, compares planned outcomes with results, allows flexibility to respond to changing needs, and makes visible not just what has been spent, but what projects have done and what they have achieved. This should:

- ▶ Provide **real-time monitoring and visibility of project performance** for agile DC portfolio management (as opposed to the endline or retrospective view currently provided by evaluation and audits) supported by effective IT platforms and appropriate training packages.
- ▶ Consider the feasibility of creating a **dedicated function responsible for DC monitoring as practiced in other peer UN agencies**.
- ▶ Gather data on **administrative bottlenecks affecting delivery** which can be used for continuous improvements of these systems.
- ▶ **Enhance accountability and performance management of DC programme and project managers**, identifying their capacity development needs, and improving the processes used for their selection.
- ▶ Progressively improve **evaluation and measurement of progress towards impact** on beneficiaries of DC activities enabled through improved monitoring.

Responsible Unit	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ DG ▶ ADG/CS: PROGRAM ▶ ADG ECR: PARTNERSHIPS ▶ with Financial Management (FINANCE), Information and Technology Management (INFOTEC)		Immediate to medium term	High

Office response: Despite the fact that this recommendation relates more to the implementation of DC projects, rather than to the Strategy itself, the Office agrees with the need to further develop policies and tools for monitoring development cooperation activities, enhance coordination and planning, and reinforce accountability for programmatic delivery. As earlier indicated, the Office started in 2023 an analysis of the administrative processes in the implementation of DC activities to identify areas of improvement. The Office will build upon the findings and recommendations in this evaluation and integrate them into its ongoing analysis. New or updated internal governance policies and procedures might be required to enable swift responses to performance issues of technical or operational nature in development cooperation, ensuring the programmatic fit of development cooperation with the priorities of ILO constituents as reflected in the programme and budget and in DWCPs or other national frameworks.

Recommendation 3

Either as part of the new DC strategy or under the plans of the relevant Corporate Services cluster in HQ and Regional Offices, identify and implement specific and measurable steps to improve the efficiency of support provided to DC practitioners working in the field.

This should:

- ▶ Promote **two-way accountability between delivery units and support services** (with relevant efficiency/timeline key performance indicators) and seek to bridge the “cultural divide” between the two.
- ▶ Explore **innovations in DC recruitment** such as appointment eligibility lists, DC talent management, and funding to bridge gaps in project phases.
- ▶ Clarify how **Programme Support Income** raised by DC projects can be better allocated to support projects without the time lags currently occurring.
- ▶ Review options to provide additional targeted **support to non-resident country** programmes at key points of the DWCP/Common Country Assessment/UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) cycles or to meet surges in demand.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time Implication	Resource Implication
▶ ADG/CS: FINANCE, HRD, PROGRAM ▶ ADG ECR: PARTNERSHIPS		Immediate to medium term	Low to Medium

Office response: As indicated under recommendation 2, the Office aims to strengthen accountability systems and, as far as possible, simplify and standardize functions and services across the operating environment, including the provision of technical support provided to DC staff. Further alignment of human resource policies, processes and contracts, improved induction and training, along with greater use of standardized information systems across all activities, will aim to improve efficiency and consistency. Focused risk analyses need to be strengthened at the onset of projects to ensure that the Office has the capacity and capability to deliver results within the negotiated timeframes.

Recommendation 4

Strengthen communication strategies tailored and adapted for different audiences covering the unique contributions of the ILO in Decent Work and on the humanitarian development nexus, emphasizing the major value added by its normative underpinning high-quality technical research and the tripartite approach. This should:

- ▶ Build on **success stories**.
- ▶ Address **challenges and how to overcome them through the ILO approach**.
- ▶ **Highlight the benefits** of longer-term investments to address decent work challenges by showcasing impacts achieved over time in specific countries or through a programmatic approach.
- ▶ **Train ILO staff** with resource mobilization responsibilities on communicating ILO's added value to potential funding partners.
- ▶ **Promote collaborative approaches** combining ILO comparative advantages with key strengths of other stakeholders.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
▶ ADG/GRD: International Labour Standards Department (NORMES) ▶ ADG/JSP: Social Protection and Employment ▶ ADG/ECR: All technical units including Department of Communication and Public Information (DCOMM) ▶ DWTs		Immediate to medium-term	Medium

Office response: The Office will strengthen its communication strategies, products and staff skills by using communication technologies and tools to further emphasize the Organization's unique value added based on its normative and tripartite approach, and to enhance its reputation as a knowledge leader, effective development partner and dynamic collaborator in the multilateral system. Communication efforts will focus on the results achieved by DC projects and the broader impact and contribution of programmatic activities to the Decent Work Agenda. It will also continue to highlight the added value that the ILO's work brings to constituents and development partners.