



**2015**

ANNUAL REPORT ON  
ASSURING QUALITY AT THE  
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

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ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa

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# Foreword

Quality assurance is a central component of the strategic direction of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to achieve a higher level of policy influence in support of Africa's transformation agenda; to earn greater credibility and trust through the production of high quality evidence-based and "good fit" policy research and knowledge delivery services; to enhance its accountability mechanism and deepen the learning culture across all streams of work at the Commission; and to strengthen operational effectiveness to better support the timely delivery of its knowledge production and capacity development services.

In 2015, we rolled out the ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan for the period 2014-2017, followed by the introduction of a quality assurance manual to facilitate the implementation of the Policy. Furthermore, a set of procedures to review the quality of major products and services is under production. While such initial efforts are commendable, experience reveals that the culture of quality assurance has yet to be inculcated into the knowledge generation and knowledge delivery of ECA products and services. This suggests the need to continuously share experiences, periodically appraise quality assurance instruments and incorporate new lessons learned into the design and application of these instruments. It would also require us to continuously use lessons from past experiences to improve the quality of our work. Such an exercise is pivotal in leading to a deep-

er understanding and appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of ECA quality assurance mechanisms, which in turn is expected to enhance the culture of quality in delivering on our mandates. This will require the collective action of all ECA divisions, sub-regional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning.

The present report demonstrates that we are moving in the right direction and building a solid foundation for a culture of excellence at ECA.

I therefore urge all ECA staff to read the report and to take on board the lessons learned from the ECA quality assurance activities in 2015 and the recommendations outlined, with a view to improving the quality of our products and services.

**Carlos Lopes**

*United Nations Under-Secretary-General  
and Executive Secretary of the  
Economic Commission for Africa*

# Introduction

The present report examines the function of quality assurance at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in 2015, focusing on the results achieved, challenges encountered, lessons learned and future prospects, including anticipated risks. ECA made impressive strides in 2015 in strengthening its quality assurance function, particularly as it rolled out the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. That Policy and Plan, as well as the conceptual framework for the ECA quality assurance manual and procedures for quality reviews of ECA country profiles, were all endorsed by the Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board and approved by the Senior Management Team. In the period under consideration, quality reviews were successfully undertaken of 21 country profiles, the performance management dashboard, the ECA programme performance report for the biennium 2014-2015 and the ECA draft strategic framework for the biennium 2018-2019. Quality assurance procedures for other products and services are being prepared and will be finalized in 2016.

Quality assurance is enshrined in the programme budget of ECA for the biennium 2014-2015 and its business model, which is anchored on policy research, knowledge generation and knowledge delivery. In that regard, the objective of ECA Executive Direction and Management for the biennium is to ensure effective implementation of legislative mandates and compliance with United Nations policies and procedures with respect to the management of

the programme of work, staff and financial resources<sup>1</sup>. One of the expected accomplishments of Executive Direction and Management is that the programme of work and resources thereto are effectively coordinated, managed, evaluated and quality assured. An indicator of this expected accomplishment is the effective external reviews of the strategic relevance of key ECA products and services, including flagship publications.

The strategic business priority of ECA — to transform itself into a reference think tank on Africa's development policy issues — hinges on the development of high quality products and services. The importance of the quality of ECA products and services is further underscored by its strategic direction to: (a) achieve a higher level of policy influence in support of Africa's transformation agenda; (b) earn greater credibility and trust through the production of high quality evidence-based and "good fit" policy research and knowledge delivery services; (c) enhance its accountability mechanism and deepen the learning culture across all streams of work at the Commission; and (d) strengthen operational effectiveness to better support production and capacity development services.

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<sup>1</sup> Executive Direction and Management comprises the Office of the Executive Secretary, the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division and the Public Information and Knowledge Management Division.



The quality assurance function is indispensable to sustain the position of ECA as a more purposeful organization that is poised to offer higher quality products and the timely delivery of its knowledge services in order to deliver better results and a greater impact. This explains why ECA is systematically implementing activities that aim to provide confidence that its products and services fulfil its own requirements and those of its beneficiaries and the United Nations in general. To that end, the Operational Quality Section, created in 2013 within the Strategic Planning and Operational Quality Division, spearheads all ECA quality assurance activities and works closely with divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in achieving its objectives.

The ECA Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 adopts the International Organization for Standardization definition of “quality” as the “degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirement”. In the context of ECA, the requirements to be fulfilled by its products and services are guided by its strategic direction and the objectives of its work programme. They are embodied in the quality objectives of ECA that are described in its capacity development strategy. The relative importance of the quality objectives and the relevant characteristics to measure the extent to which the objectives are met vary across products and services. In essence, the quality objectives, while being generally valid for all strategic ECA products and services, are contextualized to the specificities of each product and service in the quality review process. Quality assurance is conceptualized as the series of activities that aim to assess and improve the merit or worth of ECA products and services in relation to their compliance with given standards, such as those outlined in a quality assurance manual, product support guides and concept notes.

Section 2 of the report contains an examination of past and present quality assurance practices at ECA, followed by highlights in section 3 of the results achieved in 2015. Section 4 includes a discussion about the challenges and lessons learned, while section 5 contains the risks and mitigation strategies in assuring the quality of ECA products and services. Finally, section 6 of the report includes a conclusion and a presentation of the strategy moving forward.

## ECA QUALITY OBJECTIVES

- Putting Africa first
- Integrated and coherent approach
- Good fit
- Quality of engagement
- Evidence-based
- Development traction
- Partnerships
- Gender mainstreaming
- Environmental sustainability
- Capacity development
- Operational quality



## Quality assurance practices at ECA: past and present

A core principle in delivering the mandate of ECA is to ensure that its research activities and technical assistance services are subjected to quality assurance and oversight measures in order to foster their relevance, adequacy, accuracy and credibility. In essence, quality assurance in the context of delivering the mandate of ECA entails that all the Commission's analytical outputs and advisory services meet the highest quality standards, exhibit good practices and achieve the desired results.

Over the years, ECA has made several strategic efforts to assure the quality of its products and services. In fact, quality assurance has been a feature of various ECA reforms, including those in 2006 that focused on meeting the special needs of Africa and promoting regional integration. Those reforms introduced standard processes that were underpinned by clear guidelines to assure the quality of ECA outputs and linked directly with the Commission's knowledge management system. They reaffirmed that the delivery of results to member States and regional economic communities were highly dependent on the quality of ECA products and services.

The quality assurance system proposed as part of the 2006 reforms included a quality enhancement component with clear quality criteria and a methodology for measuring quality and monitoring quality trends. Managers were to be held accountable for compliance with the standard business processes and for the quality of products and services under their responsi-

bility. The Quality Assurance Section was established in December 2009 to drive the quality improvement agenda. However, an assessment undertaken in 2011 concluded that there were considerable variations in quality assurance practices for different products and services at ECA.

In 2013, in the light of global and regional developments, ECA repositioned itself to boost its support to member States and regional economic communities in addressing major development challenges.

That recent reform was imperative in strengthening and enhancing the capability of ECA in telling its story in an innovative and persuasive manner and also in advancing the "Africa First" agenda<sup>2</sup>. To achieve that goal, robust data was required to support policy research and analytical work towards development effectiveness on the one hand, and a strong performance management system for building confidence among partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries on the other hand. Within the framework of the recent reform, the quality dimension emerged as a cross-cutting theme during the extensive internal and external consultations to reposition ECA in support of Africa's transformation agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> Driven by the principle of putting Africa first, ECA outputs respond to key African development policy priorities by taking advantage of key opportunities to advance the African development policy agenda. Those outputs are also designed to influence the priorities and programmes of key partners working on African development policy issues.



The repositioned ECA has a new programme orientation that is accompanied by supplementary business standards aimed at fostering improved delivery of its products and services. In the structure that emerged from the retooled ECA, programme planning, budgeting, evaluation, quality assurance and partnership were consolidated under the new Division of Strategic Planning and Operational Quality, of which the Operational Quality Section is part. In addition, the Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board was created to review the applicability, validity and usefulness of the quality assurance guidelines developed by the Division, including the tools and instruments designed by the Section.

The current quality assurance approach of ECA is different from the approach used in the past as interventions have been systematized through the adoption in 2014 of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017. The Policy outlines the objectives of the new quality assurance system as presented above. The refocused quality assurance framework is guided by the new ECA business model, and is an integral part of the broader strategic planning and accountability system, encompassing all ECA knowledge products and services, strategic planning instruments and business processes as well as cross-cutting issues, such as environmental sustainability and gender mainstreaming.

The adoption of the Policy was followed by the development of a conceptual framework for the ECA quality assurance manual to guide the development of quality procedures for specific products and services (see figure 1).



*The adoption of the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 reaffirms that quality assessments are squarely in ECA products and services mainstream.*



## **ECA QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY OBJECTIVES**

### **Policy objective 1**

Support ECA to offer innovative thinking for Africa's structural transformation in line with agreed continental goals

### **Policy objective 2**

Strengthen the capacity of ECA to provide high quality products and services that are relevant, credible and effectively influence policy choices and decisions for African transformation

### **Policy objective 3**

Enhance the use of the results from the ECA quality assurance system to support accountability, programme learning and resource allocation

### **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

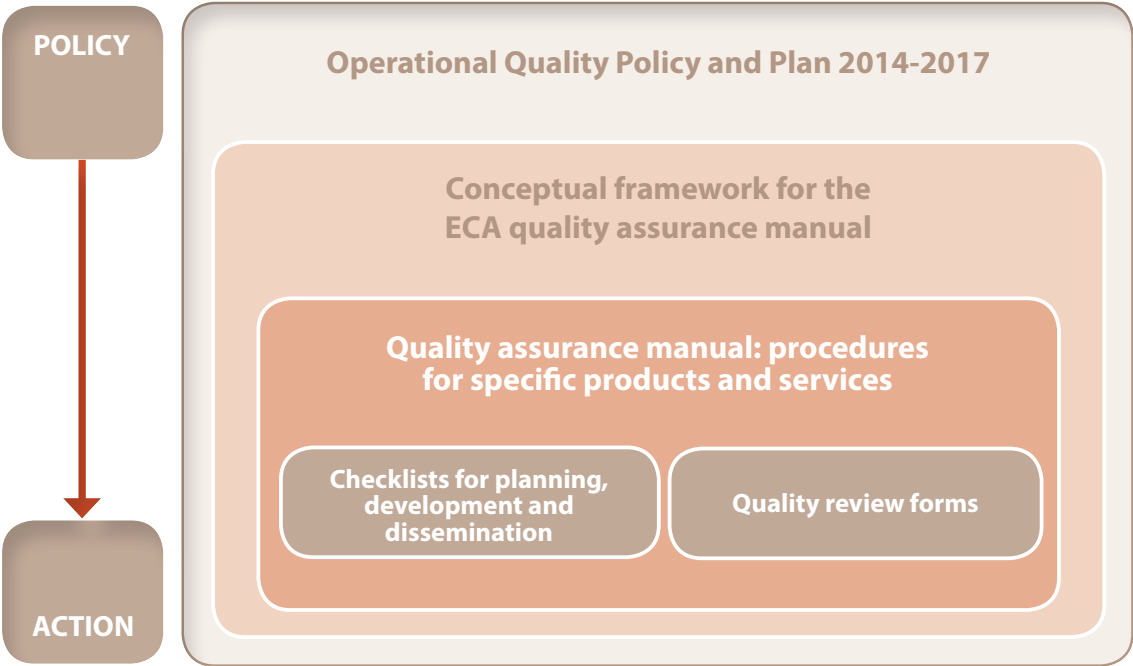
### **Policy objective 5**

Promote compliance with the mandates of the Economic and Social Council and Organization-wide initiatives on gender mainstreaming

### **Policy objective 6**

Ensure that the ECA quality assurance function contributes effectively to building a competent organization

**Figure 1:** Hierarchy of quality assurance documents



# 3

## Quality assurance results – highlights of 2015

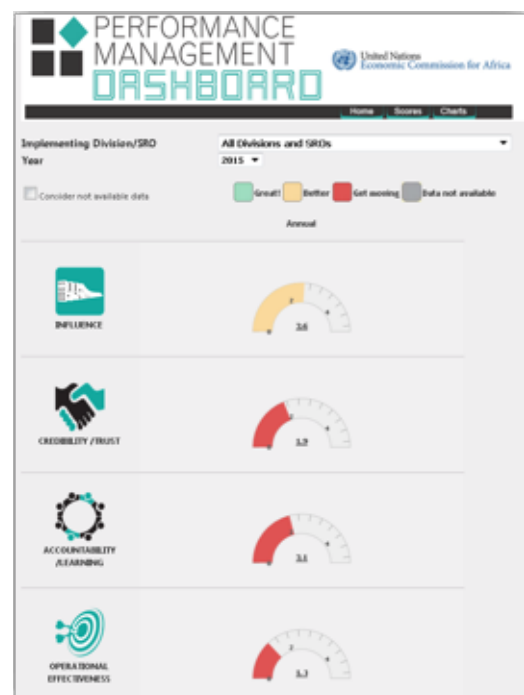
The ECA quality assurance function has successfully achieved the policy objectives outlined in the previous section. Many activities and associated results pertained directly to one policy objective, i.e., strengthening the results-based management system at ECA.

### **Policy objective 1** **Support ECA to offer innovative thinking for Africa's structural transformation in line with agreed continental goals**

The development of the performance management dashboard contributed greatly to the strategic direction of ECA to offer innovative thinking for Africa's structural transformation in line with agreed continental goals. The dashboard supports the commitment of ECA to continuous performance enhancement and aversion of quality bottlenecks if and as they happen.

The dashboard, which is operational, was developed as part of the new ECA business model mentioned in the introduction above, and the new ECA framework for managing results. It is an executive management tool that 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. It aims to

support sustained, integrated and coherent performance management and is responsive to the overarching aspiration of ECA to be the leading authority on African development policy issues. The dashboard also monitors the effective implementation of the measures instituted as part of the new ECA business model through four clusters: policy influence, credibility and trust, accountability and learning and operational effectiveness.



The ECA quality assurance function plays an essential role in ensuring the credibility and usability of information extracted from the dashboard. Quality assurance activities were regularly undertaken in 2015, focusing on all stages of the development and application of the dashboard: development and implementation of the user manual and online platform and quarterly data collection and reporting.

## Policy objective 2

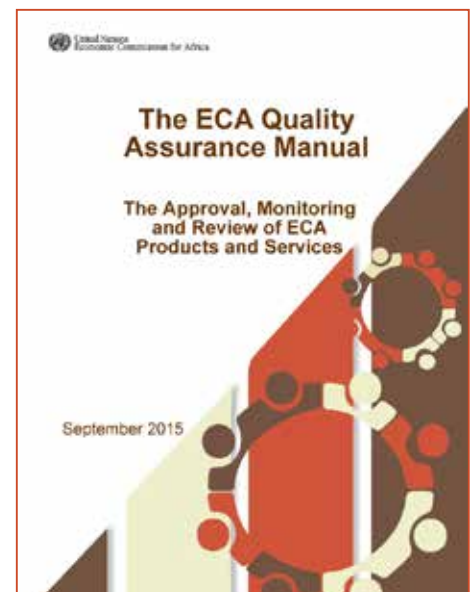
**Strengthen the capacity of ECA to achieve high quality products and services that are relevant, credible and effectively influence policy choices and decisions for African transformation**

The quality assurance system of ECA ensures that its subprogrammes produce quality products and services that are relevant to beneficiaries, credible and effectively influence the African development agenda.

To fully realize that objective, based on the Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017, ECA has developed a conceptual framework for the ECA quality assurance manual, on the basis of which quality assurance procedures are being produced for specific products and services. The comprehensive framework supports the implementation of operational quality at ECA by guiding the approval, delivery, monitoring and review of its programmes and ensuring that its products and services and the processes that support them are of high quality.

Following the overarching guidelines prescribed in the framework, specific quality assurance procedures are currently under development, aimed at assisting divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to improve the quality of their products and services. The procedures for the different strategic products and services are to be compiled to produce the overall ECA quality assurance manual.

In 2015, quality assurance procedures, including tools such as guidelines and checklists, were finalized for the ECA country profiles and are being developed for the products and services described in figure 2.



## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE QUALITY ASSURANCE MANUAL

The conceptual framework for the quality assurance manual outlines the objectives, scope, guiding principles, processes, implementation, management authority, responsibilities and oversight in relation to the quality assurance system at ECA.

The framework was developed in line with the ISO 9000 family of standards and will be updated regularly to reflect lessons learned from the application of the quality assurance procedures, new business strategies and policies, changes in United Nations rules and regulations and United Nations-wide initiatives.



**Figure 2:** Status of the development of quality assurance procedures

COMPLETED/ADVANCED	TO BE COMPLETED IN 2016
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Country Profiles	<input type="checkbox"/> Strategic planning instruments
<input type="checkbox"/> ECA corporate databank	<input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge management and ICT
<input type="checkbox"/> Performance management dashboard	<input type="checkbox"/> Communications
<input type="checkbox"/> Events	<input type="checkbox"/> Business processes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ECA indices	<input type="checkbox"/> Carbon footprint
<input type="checkbox"/> Publications	<input type="checkbox"/> Gender marker

To ensure the quality of selected products and services, and in accordance with the conceptual framework and accompanying procedures, ECA undertook quality reviews during the reporting period of the following:

- ECA strategic planning instruments (proposed programme budget for the biennium 2016-2017; strategic framework for the biennium 2018-2019 and 18-month programme performance report for the biennium 2014-2015)
- Performance management dashboard (user manual, online platform and data quality for each quarter in 2015)
- ECA indices (African Regional Integration Index, African Social Development Index and African Gender Development Index)
- 21 ECA country profiles

Those reviews are considered as external because they were undertaken by an entity that is separate to the producers of the outputs; in all of the cases, the Operational Quality Section reviewed the outputs delivered by other ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning. In addition to the above external reviews, the Operational Quality Section monitored the internal quality assurance activities for two flagship publications — Assessing Regional Integration in Africa VII and the African Social Development Report

2015: Informality and Inequality in Africa — produced respectively by the Regional Integration and Trade Division and the Social Development Policy Division. The reviews of ECA indices and country profiles provided insights into the status of data quality at the corporate level, with a focus on the product development process and the final product itself, taking into account the quality of design, implementation and dissemination activities, with a specific focus on risks and mitigation techniques and lessons learned for product improvement.

In 2015, quality assurance panels were set up for the quality review of 21 ECA country profiles prepared by the five subregional offices (see figure 3). As the first real-time application of the quality assurance procedures, the reviews were instrumental in refining the ECA quality assurance function and its various tools.

Once the procedures for country profiles had been reviewed and approved by the Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board and the Senior Management Team, the terms of reference for internal, ECA-wide panellists and external reviewers were developed. Internal review panels were coordinated by the Operational Quality Section, including communication with the panel members and the provision of relevant documentation, while the recruitment of external reviewers was handled by the Office of the Deputy Executive Secretary for Knowledge Delivery with the support of the Section. The deliberations of the panel for each country profile including the recommendations for improvement of the profiles were carefully recorded and the minutes

of the review meetings shared with the subregional offices for their action. Updated profiles were later provided to the external consultants to provide further substantive edits and recommendations before final publication of the country profiles.

### Policy objective 3

#### Enhance the use of the results from the ECA quality assurance system to support accountability, programme learning and resource allocation

ECA subregional offices used the results from the quality reviews of the country profiles to improve the quality of the profiles, which are also being reviewed by external consultants and data experts. In addition, follow-up mechanisms are being put in place to ensure that results from the quality reviews are used for strategic decision-making and organizational learning. Efforts have also been made to enhance the exchange of knowledge and best practices in programme management within ECA. Furthermore, a quality recognition programme is being developed to acknowledge and recognize individuals and teams for their exemplary contributions from a quality perspective and to highlight best practices. For example, best practices in bringing together knowledge generation and delivery to influence policy, in line

**Figure 3:** Country profiles reviewed



with one of the endorsed business strategies of ECA, namely, capacity development, were identified and presented at both the internal and external reviews of the 18-month programme performance of ECA for the biennium 2014-2015 (see table 1).

**Table 1:** ECA best practices identified in 18-month programme performance review

● Financing for development, particularly curbing illicit financial flows in the context of domestic resource mobilization
● Supporting Africa's economic transformation through industrialization
● Supporting African Continental Free Trade Area agenda, particularly in the context of boosting intra-African trade
● Natural resources management, climate change and the blue economy
● Mainstreaming human development concerns into policies and strategies, with a focus on the African Social Development Index
● Agricultural production, climate change, agricultural trade and food security in the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States
● Improving governance of large-scale land-based investments in Africa

#### **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**

ECA identified the risks faced by managers throughout the lifecycle of the production of the country profiles. The performance management dashboard and quality of other products were reviewed and reflected in the quality review reports prepared to help the divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to ensure that their products are of high quality and meet approved standards.

As discussed in section 4 of the report, ECA programme managers face a number of risks when planning, developing, producing and distributing the products and services for which they are responsible. This may significantly affect the ability of subprogrammes to produce quality products and services on time and within budget. As a result, ECA identified and assessed the risks and monitored the extent to which those risks are effectively addressed and mitigation measures taken.

#### **Policy objective 5**

### **Promote compliance with the mandates of the Economic and Social Council and Organization-wide initiatives on gender mainstreaming**

To achieve objective 5, the Operational Quality Section and the African Centre for Gender are working closely to develop specific procedures and tools to track gender mainstreaming throughout the programming cycle of ECA products and services. This is mainly implemented through the quality assurance procedures developed for the African Gender Development Index. In addition, an ECA gender parity marker and guideline have been developed to track the resources devoted to advancing gender equality.

Moreover, ECA has started to develop specific procedures as part of the quality assurance manual to assist ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to estimate and manage their carbon footprint. In line with the planning and design of their outputs and services, ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning are expected to ensure that due consideration is given to the achievement of carbon footprint targets. As part of the planning process, they are expected to set goals based on the ECA quality objectives and opportunity markers and to report on whether or not they have met their carbon footprint target. The Operational Quality Section will ensure that there is compliance with the carbon footprint criteria of ECA throughout the programming cycle.

#### **Policy objective 6**

### **Ensure that the ECA quality assurance function contributes effectively to building a competent organization**

ECA manages and maintains an effective quality assurance function as part of its quality management system. As a result, it has developed its quality assurance Policy and Plan, as well as procedures for specific products and services. The conceptual framework for the ECA quality assurance manual describes the processes, tools and information necessary to undertake quality assessments and provides guidance on the form, content and frequency of assessments and reports of the assessments. The present report is produced with a view to contributing to the objective of using quality assurance to build a competent organization.

# 4

## Challenges and lessons learned

The Operational Quality Policy and Plan 2014-2017 underpins the commitment of ECA to systematically mainstream lessons learned from past experiences in its programmes and projects to support continuous product and service improvement. Despite numerous challenges, valuable lessons were learned

in 2015 in the process of assuring the quality of key knowledge products, notably in reviewing the quality of those products. The reviews concluded that ECA puts the concept of quality at the forefront of planning and programming. Three key lessons that cross-cut all product and service categories included:

- 1** ECA has designed and rolled out quality assurance procedures and tools to support the development of a corporate culture of quality and to help coordinate fragmented efforts and practices of various divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in assuring the quality of their products and services. Much remains to be done, however, in sustaining that corporate culture in the light of new global and regional mandates that will anchor the work of ECA on more nuanced knowledge outputs that require more complex quality assurance system.
- 2** The 11 quality objectives of ECA derived from the capacity development strategy have promoted a common corporate approach to assuring quality, but the relevance and validity of each of those objectives differ across corporate outputs owing to their varying nature, uses and impact.
- 3** The ECA quality assurance function has made major contributions to the improvement of strategic products and services before their dissemination, particularly by enabling a wide range of engagement within the Commission and with external actors. However, ECA needs to continuously refine and sharpen its quality assurance function in order to increase its relevance and utilization by all divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning.

Notwithstanding these positive lessons, ECA has much room to improve its quality assurance function. The following section highlights the specific

challenges and key lessons learned from the quality review of individual products and services in 2015 for their continuous improvement in 2016 and beyond.



## COUNTRY PROFILES



Country profiles constituted one of the primary knowledge products of ECA in 2015, and their internal and external quality reviews significantly shaped the quality assurance function at the Commission. Production of the country profiles entails close collaboration between the subregional offices and various Headquarters divisions, which enabled the ECA quality assurance function to strike an optimal balance between the corporate approach and on-the-ground implementation. In essence, lessons from the reviews of the profiles were used to refine the corporate approach.

The quality reviews encountered critical challenges, including a lack of understanding of the quality assurance process and procedures; lack of awareness and buy-in for some of the quality objectives, in relation to their relevance for country profiles; lack of clarity in the respective roles of ECA divisions and subregional offices in handling data; and difficulties in recruiting external reviewers. Country profiles often involve sensitivities, such as the collection of national data and interpretation of political and economic events in the country, that require the careful engagement of multiple parties with competing demands. Those sensitivities put pressure on already scarce time for producing and reviewing the publications. Other challenges entailed heavy workload for the staff of subregional offices in collecting information from various country sources; a lack of in-country data; and inadequate staff capacity to meet the demands of profiles.

In spite of the challenges, key practical lessons were learned from the experience of reviewing the quality of 21 country profiles in 2015, including:

- The 2013 concept note on ECA country profiles offers a rationale for developing consistent, coherent and impactful publications. As such, it needs to respond to the planning, implementation and dissemination needs of subregional offices. It is imperative for the concept note to lay out a robust yet realistic methodology to consistently collect, validate, analyse and disseminate the latest available country data to the targeted audience in order to increase uptake. It should also clearly articulate the niche or added value of the country profiles.
- The ECA quality function has yet to fully streamline the procedures for internal and external quality reviews, complete with roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability for various actors involved in the production and review process. Various tools used in the quality assurance process are being refined. This is not surprising, as the Quality Assurance Policy and Plan 2014-2017 is new and was rolled out for the first time in 2015. It is important that, while refining the various tools, stakeholders' concerns and feedback are taken into account to support the use of procedures.
- The process of developing country profiles is a significant asset in quality assurance that helps to fine-tune the final product. The process demonstrates the level of engagement, ownership and commitment across and within organizational units invested in producing influential analytical outputs. Efforts should be made to move from making recommendations for the final product only to carefully monitoring the lifecycle of the product to identify and overcome quality bottlenecks if and when they happen.
- Country profiles are time-sensitive knowledge products for which the scheduling and sequencing of production and review activities must be carefully balanced. Profiles generally require advance planning as several organizational actors need to allocate human and financial resources within their own subprogrammes. Timing the release of the profiles can enhance the uptake of information and recommendations. It therefore is important that the production timeline and all related activities are properly reflected in the ECA business plan. Furthermore, in order for profiles to be timely and impactful, their planning should be in alignment with country-imposed timelines for data release or other related activities.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING INSTRUMENTS



The commitment of ECA to results-based management and accountable programming and implementation of its work programme is manifested through the streamlined production and dissemination of various strategic planning instruments, such as the strategic framework, programme budget, annual business plan and programme performance reviews.

The key challenges with respect to developing and reviewing those instruments included a lack of sufficient time for comprehensive deliberations within and across ECA entities to establish a common strategic focus, and varied levels of understanding of the guidelines.

Valuable lessons were learned by assuring the quality of the 18-month programme performance review and the strategic framework for the biennium 2018-2019, including:

- Strategic planning instruments should feature a healthy balance between the predetermined, substantive focus of each subprogramme and the broad, emerging policy issues and global development frameworks — such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the African Union Agenda 2063, gender equality and climate change — that need to be mainstreamed into programming. Advance planning for internal deliberations among ECA entities on the meaning and implications of those global and regional mandates can enable the articulation of a common and coherent response from ECA.

- All ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning should be fully involved at every stage of developing the strategic planning instruments in order to establish a common understanding of major guidelines, mandates and potentially conflicting political agendas at the global, regional and national levels, and should cultivate a sense of ownership and accountability. It may be of strategic benefit to harness multiple viewpoints of relevant parties across organizational units through facilitated discussions.
- Cohesive messages and lessons learned from strategic planning, budgeting and programming need to be effectively disseminated in order to continuously influence, refine and improve thematic areas and subprogrammes.
- Sharing best practices is key to continuous quality improvement and strategic alignment and convergence across different subprogrammes in support of the objective of ECA to become a think tank of reference on African development issues. Forums such as the 18-month programme performance review provide space for dialogue across subprogrammes to ultimately activate innovative, responsive and coherent thinking, and therefore programming, in the Commission.

## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT DASHBOARD



Guided by the ECA think tank model, the dashboard seeks to keep each subprogramme in continuous alignment with the new business model, to enhance improvement and impact. In 2015, the second year of its implementation, quality assurance interventions revealed significant room for improvement of the dashboard.

Critical challenges affected the implementation of the dashboard, including inadequate stakeholder buy-in for the system; a lack of consistent understanding of key performance indicators; an inability to achieve targets within the specified time period; and the heavy

burden that data collection places on focal points in the absence of common data collection tools. Other challenges entailed failure to provide documentary evidence for required data and technical issues with the online platform.

The key lessons learned through the quality assurance activities at entry, implementation and exit included:

- To support evidence-based decision-making at ECA, it is imperative to review and update key performance indicators and establish standard operating procedures<sup>3</sup> in line with the programme of work, recent senior management decisions and user feedback. Clarity, common understanding and ownership of the data and information produced by the dashboard is key to increasing uptake of managerial recommendations and encouraging programmatic dialogue.
- Consistent, complete and timely data collection has been problematic. It is necessary to design complementary data-collection tools (i.e., Excel database, questionnaire, etc.) in order for divisions and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to streamline data entry in the online platform in a timely and consistent manner. That would not only reduce the burden of uncoordinated data-collection processes on concerned parties, but also enhance the credibility of the resulting data and its uptake.

- In addition to consistency in data-collection instruments, consistency in documentary evidence contributes significantly to credibility and the robustness of results that drive managerial decisions. Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining the type and nature of evidence to be provided for each key performance indicator, it is necessary to provide concrete guidelines to focal points in accumulating related documentation to confirm the reliability of their data points.
- The effective implementation of the dashboard depends highly on the availability, commitment and capacity of focal points. Turnover of focal points and their varying levels of buy-in impair effectiveness of the system.
- It is imperative to involve all stakeholders in the process of designing, implementing and modifying the dashboard to increase buy-in and uptake of data.

## ECA New Business Model



**Think Tank of reference on Africa's development agenda and policies**

- A** Strengthening its policy influence in support of Africa's transformation agenda
- B** Earning greater trust and credibility through the production of high-quality, evidence-based and "good fit" policy research and knowledge delivery service
- C** Enhancing its accountability mechanisms and deepening learning culture across all streams of its work
- D** Strengthening its operational effectiveness to ensure better support for the timely delivery of its knowledge production and capacity-building services.

<sup>3</sup> For periodicity, setting targets and baselines, data-collection timeline and responsible divisions.

## DATA AND STATISTICS

The data and statistics produced by ECA divisions, subregional offices or the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning were implicitly quality assured in 2015. In that regard, the overarching lessons learned about the quality of data produced are derived from the quality review of such products as country profiles and ECA indices (African Regional Integration Index, African Social Development Index and African Gender Development Index). ECA gathered practical lessons from those reviews about data quality and its implications for knowledge generation and delivery. Some key lessons included:

- A common, central data repository should be introduced in order to enable the consistent pro-

duction of credible evidence for all knowledge products. There is a chance and renewed impetus to achieve higher data quality and continuous validation checks with the ECA corporate databank, which is currently under development.

- The ECA standard operating procedures for collecting, validating and disseminating data for the Commission's knowledge products are the most significant enabling factors for assuring data quality at ECA. Common understanding, ownership and buy-in for the procedures are needed to streamline data practices within ECA and eliminate siloed and fragmented data collection and access.

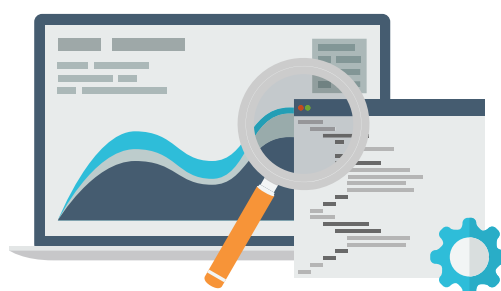
## PUBLICATIONS

By monitoring quality self-assurance interventions for two ECA publications — *Assessing Regional Integration in Africa VII* and the *African Social Development Report 2015: Informality and Inequality in Africa* — the ECA quality assurance function identified key lessons to be taken into account in planning and implementing the publications, including:

- It is imperative that due diligence be paid and advance planning undertaken to develop clear and influential concept notes for publications. Such concept notes not only outline the arguments and justification of the review publications and increase audience buy-in, but also help to identify quality bottlenecks from the outset and ensure that the final products are of high quality.

As mentioned above, the ECA quality assurance function takes a life cycle approach, providing interventions at the planning, implementation and dissemination stages of all products and services. At the planning stage, the quality of the concept note should be thoroughly assessed in order to reflect the quality of the final product.

- It is key that the quality self-assurance activities for flagship publications be documented by the main producers in order to maintain institutional memory and systematically address quality bottlenecks. It may be strategic to discuss ways to capture the steps taken in assuring the quality of products beyond the quality assurance plan provided by the Operational Quality Section.



# 5

## Risk analysis and mitigation techniques

All systems are inherently subject to known and unknown threats, uncertainties or weaknesses that ultimately jeopardize their success. Quality assurance system at ECA is no exception. This section summarizes the anticipated risks for 2016 and mitigation techniques to overcome the risks, based on the lessons learned through 2015 activities (see table 2). Risks are

not only described but also prioritized in accordance with their likelihood of occurrence and the level of danger they pose to successful implementation. The risk analysis presented here is intended to provide guidance in moving forward with implementing the quality assurance function at ECA.

**Table 2:** Risk analysis and management for quality assurance function at ECA

<b>Risks Encountered</b>	<b>Grades of measurement<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Mitigations measures taken</b>
Failure to understand roles and responsibilities	Certain (3) Major threat (3)	Targeted communication of key elements of policy and manual
Complexity of the system	Possible (2) Major threat (3)	Continuous streamlining and targeted modification of procedures and guidelines based on client feedback
Lack of staff capacity	Possible (2) Moderate impact (2)	Capacity development services to programme management focal points

<sup>4</sup> Risks are analysed based on the probability of occurrence and the level of danger they pose to the operations. On the scale of probability (1-3), a risk can be probable (1), possible (2) or certain (3) to occur. On the scale of danger (1-3), a risk can pose major threat (3), moderate impact (2) or no danger (1) to success.

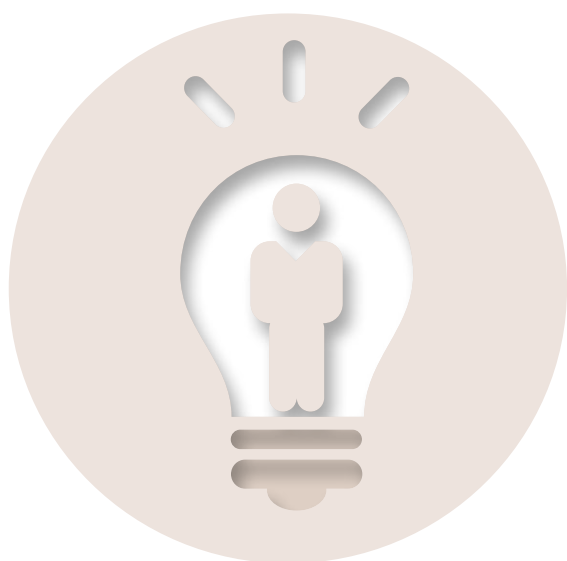
As previously mentioned, the quality assurance function at ECA assigns different roles and responsibilities to various entities. The function essentially relies on quality self-assurance by substantive divisions, sub-regional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, while the main role of the Operational Quality Section, as a major player, is set out to guide and monitor the self-assurance interventions through approved procedures and to coordinate external reviews in case of strategic outputs. Quality reviews during 2015 pointed to a major risk of misunderstanding the distinctive roles. Various actors in the system expected the Section to undertake all quality activities externally, and there was limited evidence of engagement in self-guided interventions. That risk remains for 2016. To alleviate the risk, it is imperative to implement a targeted communication strategy that entails the widespread distribution of copies of the Policy and Plan as well as the conceptual framework for the ECA quality assurance manual, and procedures for specific products. In addition, briefings with staff members on their specific roles and responsibilities within the quality assurance function are essential to eliminate misunderstandings.

In 2015, several staff at various ECA divisions, sub-regional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning expressed concerns about the risk of creating a complex, burdensome and bureaucratized quality assurance function at



the Commission. ECA thus has the challenging task of establishing an intellectually accessible, practically manageable and comprehensive quality assurance system so that no output falls off the quality radar. To avert that risk, the quality function needs to feature a rapid client feedback mechanism to continuously modify and refine the system and its various components, that is, procedures, checklists and quality reviews, in order for there to be a more responsive and user-friendly application.

Another possible risk with a moderate impact is the human resources and technical capacity of ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning to adequately and effectively undertake quality self-assessments. While demonstrating the application of quality procedures for the profiles, it was apparent that ECA staff may not have enough time or sufficient experience in consistently and coherently conducting quality self-assessments. This risk is still threatening the effectiveness of the quality function. Addressing it requires strengthening the capacity of subregional offices or reducing the number of self-assurance activities undertaken, that the function heavily relies on. To this end, tailored capacity-development activities for focal points and programme managers in applying quality assurance procedures are essential in sustaining the culture of quality at the Commission.





## Conclusion and way forward

The present report comes at a historical juncture, when the Sustainable Development Goals, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, International Year of Evaluation and twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change all have underscored the role of quality in development results that the ECA quality assurance function adheres to. Furthermore, 2015 was a transitional year for the function in critically reflecting on the organizational planning and programming practices, with a view to sustainably improving influence, credibility, accountability and learning and effectiveness in the coming years.

On the basis of the lessons learned and risks identified, the ECA quality assurance function will continue to undertake quality reviews by way of monitoring self-assurance activities of all corporate outputs planned for 2016 and undertaking external reviews for strategic products. Quality procedures and accompanying tools will be revised, refined and reviewed by the Results-Based and Operational Quality Sounding Board, followed by the Senior Management Team, as prescribed in the policy and plan. The Operational Quality Section will play a lead role in effectively disseminating lessons learned across ECA entities and in being the first point of contact regarding questions on the overall function.

Moving forward, the quality assurance function will administer a three-pronged strategy in improving and sustaining the culture of quality:

- Continued focus on a systems-based approach to mainstreaming the culture of quality across the Commission, feeding from close collaboration and targeted and early communication with all ECA entities, and contributing to synergies between the Commission and Organization-wide mandates and guidelines for planning and programming.
- Providing technical support to improve the uptake of quality procedures and objectives to help ECA divisions, subregional offices and the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, and focal points in particular, to overcome constraints with planning and administering self-assurance interventions.
- Creating user-friendly guidelines and procedures for sustained quality, taking advantage of innovative ideas and technologies and cultivating exchanges of good practices and knowledge-sharing across organizational units.

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