Evaluation Brief

Digital and transport connectivity for socioeconomic resilience of rural communities during the post-COVID-19 period in Asia-Pacific countries

Background

The project addressed rural digital and transport connectivity gaps in countries in special situations, which were further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Jointly implemented by ESCAP's Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction Division and Transport Division, it aimed to strengthen government capacity to develop more integrated and actionable connectivity strategies in three diverse country contexts: Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Samoa.

Key facts

Project lead: Information and Communications Technology (IDD) and Transport Division (TD)

Project funding: DA 2225R

Budget: $500,000

Implementation Period: 2022 - 2025

Beneficiary countries: Bangladesh, Lao PDR, Samoa

Contribution to the 2030 Agenda:



Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

This independent evaluation assessed ESCAP's 2022–2025 Development Account project on rural digital and transport connectivity. It examined the project's design, implementation and results, with a focus on government capacity, cross-sectoral cooperation, and lessons for future ESCAP support to integrated rural connectivity planning.

The evaluation applied a theory-based, mixed-methods approach aligned with UNEG and ESCAP evaluation standards. Data collection included a desk review of project documents and outputs, semi-structured interviews with ESCAP staff, national stakeholders, and consultants, and an online stakeholder survey. Findings were triangulated across sources to ensure validity. The evaluation covered all three target countries as well as regional activities.

Main Findings



Relevance

The project was well aligned with national needs and priorities, and country studies reflected diverse contexts (e.g., Bangladesh's density, Lao PDR's landlocked geography, Samoa's island setting). However, part of the project rationale, to explore the integration of ICT and transport planning as an element of strategic innovation in rural connectivity, was not fully operationalized. Workstreams remained largely parallel and mechanisms for exploring the potential of integrating work in the two sectors had not been embedded in the design.

Effectiveness

The project made a meaningful but uneven contribution to awareness knowledge building. Workshops and reports improved understanding of rural connectivity challenges and enabled first-time interactions between ICT and transport stakeholders. Learning was strongest at the sectoral level, with more limited progress on integrated planning. Analytical outputs were valued as reference and synthesis documents, but not widely used as operational tools. Cross-sectoral collaboration remained temporary and workshop-bound, with limited sustained engagement beyond project activities.

Efficiency

The project was implemented efficiently overall, with logical sequencing of studies, workshops, and strategies; a clear division of roles between ESCAP divisions, and the effective use of resources for core outputs. However, the joint implementation model led to parallel sectoral workstreams, limiting the space created to explore the potential for cross-sectoral integration despite smooth operational coordination.

Sustainability

The project created initial conditions for continued engagement on innovative strategies for rural connectivity, including increased awareness of integration opportunities and some examples of prospective uptake of project reports and insights. The project generated entry points for future work, but the chances for sustainability were constrained by contextual factors such as the lack of institutional coordination mechanisms, the limited engagement of senior decision-makers, and the absence of follow-on funding or implementation pathways.

Gender and Human Rights Mainstreaming

Integration of gender equality and disability inclusion was partial and uneven. It was strongest in Samoa, moderate in Bangladesh, weakest in Lao PDR. Gender considerations were present but inconsistently operationalized. Disability inclusion was largely absent. Overall, cross-cutting issues were acknowledged but not systematically embedded in project outputs.

Lessons Learned

- **Dialogue and uptake of learnings:** Dialogue-based capacity-building can be an effective entry point for raising awareness, however, enabling institutional conditions are needed to ensure that participants can continue using, sharing and applying what they learned after project activities end.
- **Trade-offs of efficiency in joint projects:** A clear division of labour and separate technical workstreams can support efficient delivery in joint projects but may also reduce space to address cross-cutting or integrative objectives unless these are built explicitly into workplans, outputs and facilitation processes.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen pathways to implementation:** Complement analytical outputs with clear entry points for follow-on actions, partnerships, and financing in subsequent project phases and other, similar projects.
2. **Introduce differentiated engagement levels:** Combine technical capacity-building with targeted engagement of senior decision-makers in subsequent project phases and other, similar projects.
3. **Support sustained cross-sector collaboration:** Introduce light coordination mechanisms, follow-up processes, and links to regional platforms in subsequent project phases and other, similar projects.
4. **Operationalize integration more explicitly:** Develop joint analyses, integration-focused outputs, and practical demonstrations of cross-sector approaches in subsequent project phases.
5. **Strengthen gender and disability inclusion:** Adopt structured approaches with clear objectives, indicators, and inclusive participation practices in subsequent project phases and other, similar projects.