Enabel

Executive summary

Evaluation report on the VET TOOLBOX 2 PROJECT

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Presentation of the evaluation

In Sub-Saharan Africa, companies frequently report a persistent mismatch between the skills of young graduates and the actual needs of the labour market. This disconnect undermines youth employability and limits the potential for inclusive economic growth. In response, the VET Toolbox 2 initiative was developed to support the emergence of more responsive, flexible, and demand-driven vocational education and training (VET) systems that are better aligned with enterprise needs and investment opportunities. The initiative aimed to strengthen the links between training supply and labour market demand, ultimately fostering local employment and sustainable development.

This **final external evaluation** of VET Toolbox 2 assesses the programme's contribution to improving the relevance, quality, and inclusiveness of skills development across 11 Sub-Saharan African countries. Coordinated by Enabel, and implemented by a consortium of five European development agencies – the British Council, Enabel, Expertise France, GIZ, and LuxDev, the initiative was deployed through 14 projects between 2020 and 2025, in 11 countries in West, Central and East Africa with diverse economic and institutional contexts (Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda). It was supported by a total budget of €16.25 million, including €15 million from the European Union and €1.25 million from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH).

The evaluation was carried out in a context marked by several structural and operational **challenges**: fragmented VET systems, outdated training content, weak collaboration between stakeholders, and insufficient mechanisms to align training with labour market needs. VET Toolbox 2 sought to address these gaps through an opportunity-driven approach that encouraged dynamic cooperation between public and private actors, the co-development of training, and the adaptation of training provision to real economic opportunities.

The evaluation had three **main objectives**: (i) to assess the extent to which the initiative improved the alignment of human capital with economic opportunities; (ii) to evaluate the effectiveness of the opportunity-driven and skills development approaches; and (iii) to analyse achievements under the three intervention areas – stakeholder cooperation, capacity building, and policy learning. Additionally, the evaluation examined the added value of the opportunity-driven methodology and the consortium-based implementation model.

The **main users of the evaluation** are the European Commission (DG INTPA), Enabel as consortium lead, and the five partner agencies. The evaluation also provides evidence for national and local stakeholders in employment and training, as well as for development actors engaged in skills development in Africa. Its findings aim to inform future programmes and contribute to broader learning on employment-focused VET reforms.

The **scope of the evaluation** covered all 14 projects implemented between 2020 and 2024 (or 2025, depending on the country), without focusing on individual country-level assessments. The evaluation adopts a cross-cutting perspective to identify commonalities and divergences across contexts, as well as to analyse the governance mechanisms of this multi-agency initiative.

Methodologically, the evaluation followed a qualitative approach structured in four phases: (1) development of the evaluation framework and data collection methodology; (2) data collection; (3) analysis and synthesis; and (4) finalisation of the report following stakeholder feedback. It drew upon a comprehensive document review, interviews with 27 central stakeholders (DG INTPA, Steering Committee, Operational Monitoring Committee, the Coordination Hub, and country teams), and participation in two Peer Learning Workshops in Brussels (December 2024 and June 2025).

Five country visits – Malawi, Senegal, Republic of the Congo, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (remote visits) – were conducted between January and March 2025. In total, more than 160 individuals were interviewed in one-on-one, paired, or group formats. These included institutional actors, EU Delegations' staff, members of public-private dialogue platforms, business leaders, VET centre staff and learners. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with consent, contributing to a rich and high-quality qualitative dataset.

Findings and conclusions

Coherence	A	VET Toolbox 2 demonstrated strong overall coherence, both internally within the consortium and externally in relation to national and international frameworks. Internally, the initiative was well aligned with the strategic orientations of the implementing agencies, which shared common priorities around private sector engagement, inclusive and demand-driven vocational education and training, and employment promotion. The multi-agency structure fostered synergies while allowing for diverse implementation modalities, and facilitated the emergence of a shared, opportunity-driven approach adapted to each agency's practices. Strategic continuity was also ensured through links with existing or previous interventions led by each agency. Where such continuity was possible, the project reinforced institutional anchoring, stakeholder engagement, and operational efficiency. However, coherence was more difficult to achieve in contexts where agencies lacked prior presence or established networks, thus limiting their ability to build on existing momentum. Externally, VET Toolbox 2 was designed with the intention of aligning with national development strategies and the European Union's investment priorities – particularly those focused on job creation and skills for economic transformation. While this strategic orientation enhanced the relevance of the initiative, its practical articulation with major investment programmes remained limited. In many cases, timing and coordination challenges prevented the full operationalisation of this intended alignment. Despite these limitations, the initiative largely avoided duplication, promoted dialogue among partners, and contributed to a more coherent and integrated approach to skills development in Sub-Saharan Africa.
Relevance	A	The VET Toolbox 2 initiative proved highly relevant in addressing structural challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa's VET systems, including skills mismatches, weak public-private coordination, and youth unemployment. Its 'opportunity-driven' approach reversed the traditional approach by starting from company needs, involving the private sector in both curriculum design and certification. While conceptually aligned with national priorities and EU strategies focused on job creation and emerging sectors, operational links to investment dynamics remained limited due to institutional and coordination challenges. However, the initiative supported national reforms and helped develop training in high-potential sectors such as renewable energy, agro-industry, and digital services. It fostered structured collaboration among stakeholders and provided a flexible, demand-driven response to labour

		market needs – though its impact was constrained by insufficient focus on women's needs and the absence of longer-term training pathways.
Efficiency	B	VET Toolbox 2 delivered a substantial volume of outputs within a short timeframe, leveraging existing agency networks and shared tools. However, efficiency was affected by delays in procurement, differing procedures, and a country-based allocation of responsibilities that limited cross-agency synergies based on technical expertise. More coordinated planning, and earlier alignment of operational processes, could have enhanced overall efficiency.
Effectiveness	B	VET Toolbox 2 met several of its goals, notably by setting up public-private dialogue platforms and creating new training courses co-designed with businesses. These achievements helped to make training more relevant to labour market needs, especially in fast-growing sectors. Short, practical training formats and internships boosted the initiative's appeal. However, the effectiveness of the initiative was limited by slow accreditation, weak institutional buy-in, and tight timelines. The 'opportunity-driven' approach was not always clearly understood, which slowed the identification of real economic opportunities and affected employment outcomes. Despite these challenges, most targets were met – especially in terms of people trained, centres supported, and training content developed. The inclusion of informal sector actors was a key success factor in several countries. That said, the participation of young women remained too low, due to male-dominated sectors, limited outreach, and a lack of gender-sensitive measures.
Sustainability	C	Sustainability was a mixed outcome for VET Toolbox 2. While some activities showed promising signs of continuation – particularly those aligned with national strategies or embedded within existing structures, many remained dependent on external support. Public-private dialogue platforms proved more sustainable when they built on pre-existing mechanisms with established governance and financing models. In contrast, newly created platforms often lacked the institutional and financial foundations to endure beyond the initiative's duration. The initiative adopted several strategies to promote sustainability, including the alignment of training programmes with national certification systems and development priorities. Although accreditation processes are still ongoing in many countries, early involvement of national authorities increased the likelihood of eventual recognition. Where curricula were embedded in formal frameworks, the prospects for continued use and delivery were stronger. However, several structural constraints limited sustainability. The short project cycle, limited integration into national VET systems, and the absence of exit strategies hindered long-term institutional anchoring. While VET Toolbox 2 aimed to initiate change rather than transform systems, the uptake of innovations beyond partner institutions remained modest. Ensuring sustainability in future initiatives would require earlier

		planning, stronger coordination with national stakeholders, and more deliberate use of domestic financing and institutional mechanisms.
Impact	C	VET Toolbox 2 aimed to support UN SDGs 4 and 8 by improving youth employability and better aligning vocational training with private sector needs. As a pilot initiative, its goal was not system-wide reform, but to demonstrate more flexible, opportunity-driven approaches to workforce development. A standardised tracer study methodology was implemented across countries, but its design – focusing on individual status three months after training – limited the reliability of results. Indicators aggregated diverse trajectories (e.g. new jobs vs. job retention), thus preventing a clear assessment of actual transitions from unemployment to employment or the quality of employment gained. Overall employment outcomes were modest. Internships were often unpaid and loosely supervised, with few mechanisms supporting the transition to jobs. Most companies involved in training were pre-identified through public-private platforms, and broader employer recruitment remained limited. However, the initiative generated tangible institutional changes. Dialogue platforms helped to improve trust and coordination between companies, training centres, and public authorities. Despite methodological weaknesses in employment tracking, the behavioural shifts among key actors are a notable impact and a foundation for future scaling.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Structure inter-agency coordination around their recognised areas of expertise (curriculum development, insertion, decent work, entrepreneurship, etc.) rather than around countries. This approach should promote greater coherence and a stronger capitalisation of the consortium’s internal expertise.
Priority: Medium- to long-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 2: Revise the opportunity-driven approach in light of the lessons learned from VET Toolbox 2, by making it more explicit and operational, as well as by establishing stronger linkages with national vocational training funds, centres of excellence, or enterprise-based training centres.
Priority: Medium-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 3: Pilot the creation of enterprise-based training centres in targeted sectors where current vocational training systems are lacking or insufficient, in order to support upskilling of employees, skills acquisition for jobseekers, and to stimulate greater private sector engagement.
Priority: Long-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 4: Continue building the capacity of private sector companies to strengthen their engagement in skills development and improvement. The hiring potential of small and medium-sized enterprises could be significantly enhanced by providing greater support to their development of HR policies, anticipation capacity, and recruitment practices.
Priority: Medium-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 5: Continue and strengthen vocational training interventions that are based on real work-based learning and skills certification, with a stronger focus on supporting girls’ access, participation, and success. This type of intervention proved to have a positive impact on youth employability and encouraged stronger engagement from private sector companies.

Priority: Short-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 6: Design individualised and modular training programmes that are adapted to beneficiaries' entry levels and allow for progression along a training pathway. This would support a more holistic approach to training, leading to greater inclusion and enhanced employability.
Priority: Short-term. **Type**: Operational.

Recommendation 7: Add, in the Terms of Reference for external evaluations, the organisation of a collaborative workshop to discuss findings and recommendations. This would enable constructive input from stakeholders, prior to the submission of the final evaluation report.
Priority: Medium-term. **Type**: Operational.

Recommendation 8: Support the development of regulatory frameworks for hosting interns in companies, in order to facilitate the expansion of work-based training for young people and to contribute to strengthening VET.
Priority: Medium-term. **Type**: Operational.

Recommendation 9: Strengthen the MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) system by developing more robust and tailored methodologies to assess programme outcomes. Improvements are needed on three levels:

- Survey tools should be enhanced to collect more precise information on the beneficiaries and their companies.
- Data processing and indicator selection should be reinforced to better capture the actual effects of training.
- Indicator harmonisation across countries should be strengthened to ensure better comparability of results.

Priority: Short-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Recommendation 10: Better coordination is needed between VET programme teams and EU Delegations or Member State representations in partner countries. Leveraging existing programmes that support 'business climate' reform would strengthen the relevance of skills development initiatives. Aligning more closely with these actors would enhance the strategic use of the opportunity-driven approach and foster more sustainable interventions.
Priority: Short-term. **Type**: Strategic.

Lessons learned

The value of a contextualised and sector-specific approach
VET Toolbox 2 demonstrated that tailoring vocational training to local economic and institutional contexts can generate effective solutions. A flexible yet structured approach enabled adaptation across countries, grounded in real sector needs. Key to this strategy was bringing together public, private, and training actors within local dialogue platforms. These fostered mutual understanding, joint action, and alignment with local constraints, thereby laying the groundwork for broader coordination frameworks. A bottom-up approach encouraged business engagement, including that of smaller enterprises.

Early and supported private sector involvement
Involving companies in co-designing curricula proved relevant and effective. However, this engagement requires facilitation, incentives, and identification of the right stakeholders. Where economic organisation or human resources capacity were weak, sustained involvement was harder to secure. Hence, embedding actions within value chains and strengthening business ecosystems is essential. Over-reliance on project structures may limit companies' ownership and long-term commitment.

Operationalising the 'opportunity-driven' approach

The ‘opportunity-driven’ approach, while conceptually strong, showed promising applications in some contexts but it requires clearer operational guidance to be fully effective. The approach’s success relies on robust value-chain analysis and active partnerships. In practice, limited labour market data and weak coordination with investment actors reduced its effectiveness. Many teams struggled to link sector studies to real employment opportunities. The lack of incentive-based frameworks meant that few private sector commitments to recruitment were secured. Stronger contractual tools and clearer benefits for companies are needed, while training centres must be more adaptable in order to respond to business needs.

Inclusion: women and informal sector actors

The initiative faced challenges in including young women, particularly in male-dominated sectors. Greater outreach, adjusted logistics, and a diversified offer are needed to improve gender inclusion. Similarly, tailored strategies are required to engage the informal sector. Although initially focused on formal enterprises, the initiative ultimately worked extensively with informal actors. These sectors, often linked to large companies’ supply chains, require methods such as skills recognition and flexible training pathways: approaches like these were already tested in VET Toolbox 1 but were not integrated in VET Toolbox 2.

Complementary institutional anchoring

Private sector engagement must be complemented by institutional support, in order to ensure recognition and sustainability. Early involvement of public authorities in programme design and certification processes was a key success factor. Where this involvement was delayed, accreditation was slow or incomplete. Dialogue platforms helped improve coordination, but their future depends on stable funding and institutional integration. Ultimately, transforming vocational training systems requires dual action: strengthening public institutions while deepening private sector collaboration. In most countries, public vocational systems remain underfunded and in need of technical and financial support.