
Chapter 10

The Role of Monitoring and Evaluation in the MENA Region, with a Focus on the Arab Uprising Countries

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Abstract. *The demands of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for the Sustainable Development Goals in the Middle East and North Africa region are particularly challenging. The diversity of the 22 countries; a large and youthful population; unprecedented political transitions; and a variety of conflicts and humanitarian crises have created a cluster of complex development needs. Development aid activity in the region is now operating in a landscape of high accountability demands and traditionally poor governance practices. This chapter explores the way these regional transitions are cultivating a new paradigm that promotes national capacities and country M&E systems in which local M&E professionals are valued and supported in the development of their own countries and region.*

The Arab region is comprised of 22 countries in Northern Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula. This region, which is known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has a population of approximately 350 million, the majority of which is under the age of 25.¹ The current challenges affecting this region are partially tied to an unprecedented wave of political transition that has swept the region since 2010, coupled with an increasing number of conflicts. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):²

Weak social, political and administrative accountability mechanisms and politically oriented socioeconomic planning models have resulted in the neglect of large parts of the population. These nations face the challenge of forming new, accountable governments that reflect popular aspirations.

THE ARAB UPRISING

The Arab Uprising refers to a series of antigovernment protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions across the Middle East that surfaced in 2010. By 2012, the rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen had been pushed out of power; civil uprisings had erupted in Bahrain and Syria; there were major protests in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan; and minor protests had occurred in Djibouti, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Western Sahara (Smith 2016). This revolutionary atmosphere in the Arab region was tempered in the Gulf states, where a more reformist approach took root (Abdalla 2012). The Gulf monarchies demonstrated the ability to adapt to regional shifts and to address internal issues with policy measures, by using their “oil wealth, historical legitimacy, Bedouin culture, demographic scarcity, extensive security services, patriarchal regimes, and the absence of an opposition and political parties” (Abdalla 2012, 30).

Moreover, according to UNDP’s 2015 *Human Development Report*, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are ranked among the top countries in the Arab region in terms of average income per capita (UNDP 2015) and the economic competitiveness index,³ which creates a certain level of comfort for their people. For example, the United Arab Emirates leads the Arab states, and is considered globally as one of the happiest countries: in the 2015 *World Happiness Report*, it is given special mention as an example of a country in which well-being has been made a central tenet of the design and delivery of the national agenda (Heliwell, Layard, and Sacha 2015).

¹ Source: United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/regioninfo.html#introduction>.

² Ibid.

³ World Economic Forum, “Competitiveness Rankings,” <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-report-2015-2016/competitiveness-rankings/>.

However, for the purposes of this chapter, we will discuss the challenges with an emphasis on the majority of the region, where there has been revolutionary upheaval and a large impact on development. We focus on the impact of more than 11 million people forced from their homes in Syria;⁴ an estimated 7 million internally displaced people within Syria; and more than 4 million who have fled Syria as refugees, a large portion of them landing in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. We focus on the impact of an initially peaceful uprising in Libya that quickly became an armed conflict with Western military intervention. According to Amnesty International,⁵ once Libya had become deeply divided, the internal conflict has caused civilians to live in a constant state of threat, with nearly 2.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, clean water, sanitation, and food since 2014. In this chapter, we focus on the areas in crisis, which has drawn international attention and aid, because the potential to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets in the region is increasingly bleak.

DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY

The key driver in this unprecedented regional call for change is the call for greater accountability from the government to the people. This root demand has thrust the role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to a new level of significance, giving it greater value for all stakeholders. As M&E and accountability have been becoming more important to the local populations, donors are more interested in the *effectiveness* of aid in the region. The SDGs that are key priorities in MENA countries focus on ongoing and intersecting issues of poverty, hunger, health, education, energy, equity, economic downturns, climate, peace, and stability in the region.

As aid funding increased in a progressively complex and challenging region during the aftermath of the Iraq War, so did attention to developing specific mechanisms to ensure aid effectiveness. This promoted solutions like the application of results-based management to program, thematic, and sectoral evaluations, rather than simple project evaluations (UNDG 2011). Solutions such as country-level evaluations that consider coordinating the efforts of multiple donors with joint criteria will contribute to ensuring the effectiveness of the evaluation processes (Baradei, Abdelhamid, and Wally 2014). Although this shift is not restricted to the Middle East and North Africa, the region has grave challenges in adopting these solutions because of traditional social, political, and economic practices that are unaccustomed to the three key pillars of results-based management: accountability, national ownership, and inclusiveness (UNEG 2011), pillars that happen to align with the reverberations of the Arab Uprising.

⁴ Source: Syrian Refugees website, "A Snapshot of the Crisis in the Middle East and Europe," <http://syrianrefugees.eu/>.

⁵ Source: Amnesty International website, "The Arab Spring' Five Years On," <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/01/arab-spring-five-years-on/>.

Given this reality, the M&E community in the region has been increasingly focused on accountability, national ownership, and inclusiveness. Some of the issues of core importance to the M&E community follow:

- **Accountability** as it pertains to the extent of the relationship between the impact of aid effectiveness and the level of effort from implementing and donor organizations; and the value added of M&E processes in terms of corrective program actions and policy changes
- **Inclusiveness** as it pertains to the role of the beneficiaries of aid efforts in relation to implementing partners; the traditional North-South paradigm, in which development interventions and M&E are conducted primarily for donors; and the lack of shared accrued knowledge derived from M&E that adds to the future independence of local actors and organizations
- **National ownership** as it pertains to the extent of local M&E capacity and professionalism; and the extent of involvement of local leadership in assessing the effectiveness of the aid received

These areas of focus align tightly with evaluation of the SDG plans and programs that necessitate the involvement of national efforts to cultivate appropriate evaluation capabilities at all levels and across all stakeholders (El-Saddik et al. 2016). It is noteworthy that although accountability is a shared value across the globe, with good governance as a core element, the Arab region lagged behind other regions in most governance indicators in 2015 (UN 2013). Given that good governance is not only essential for accountability, but is also a gateway to inclusion and national ownership, M&E efforts in the region are arduous and highly political. Local M&E professionals work within very challenging parameters in their attempts to change the landscape on the path to meeting the SDG targets.

An illustrative example of the limited role of M&E in the region is the need for the Taqeem Initiative, which was established in 2009 by a partnership between the International Labour Organization, Silatech, the World Bank, the Jacobs Foundation, and the Swedish International Development Foundation. Taqueem was specifically created to support youth employment policy makers and practitioners in enhancing the M&E of their programs (ILO 2009).

The lack of evaluation information on youth employment programs in the region is telling, given that it is mostly populated by youth,⁶ and that the youth employment challenge is a critical issue that threatens the already fragile economic and political state of many countries in the region. Creating opportunities for Arab youth has long been a leading policy priority for international organizations, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and social entrepreneurs. Traditional and nontraditional programs, projects,

⁶ Source: UNDP, <http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/regioninfo.html/#Introduction>.

initiatives, and partnerships have been thrust upon the region by both local and foreign organizations. The Taqueem Initiative targets these particular solutions and helps local organizations drive quality M&E while creating a regional database of evaluation information that will help policy decisions concerned with solving the youth employment challenge.

Although institutionalization of the Taqueem Initiative is laudable, it is regrettable that the culture of the region did not already have the demand and supply of M&E for these solutions to meet a vital regional challenge. The reality of the situation is well summarized in a recent study of the state of M&E in post-revolutionary Egypt, in which the authors highlight the fact that the government urgently needs effective support “to demonstrate and measure the results of each policy” (Baradei, Abdelhamid, and Wally 2014).

THE CHALLENGES OF EVALUATING RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The regional M&E community has been sharing knowledge to identify key issues that contribute to promoting the demand for the evaluation of development results in response to a rising public demand. A series of strategic discussions and debates across MENA countries have taken place to better appreciate the current situation of M&E processes and practices in the region (El Kabbag 2011). The following key challenges have been identified as barriers to normalizing supportive M&E in the region.

A deterring culture of evaluation (El Kabbag 2011). In most MENA countries evaluation is tightly coupled with undesirable beliefs about the impact of the results. In this context, evaluation has either no influence at all, or grave consequences for local stakeholders and projects. Evaluation is believed to be restricted to audits and financial reviews that demonstrate inefficiencies or corruption, or public reviews that expose fraud. It is also believed that it is only relevant to donors for the purpose of satisfying bureaucratic requirements; that it is conducted apart from the beneficiary communities; and that it is tied solely to outputs, with no regard for outcomes and impact, and all of the other traditional high-stakes and potentially harmful ways evaluation has been used in the past.

The status quo is the norm. Most of the organizations in MENA have a culture of following evaluation processes that are stagnant within the organization. This static reality is in contrast to an evaluation approach that focuses on a dynamic and holistic perspective designed to transform the organization for the better.

National capacities are not ready for change. Given that the MENA region has not had a strong historical integration of M&E into their public governance, it is not surprising that there is a less than adequate national capacity in many of the countries, at both the governmental and civil society levels. In particular, evaluators in the region generally do not have ready access to accredited M&E training, and have gaps in some of their knowledge and

skills. For example, there are gaps in adopting minimum standards of ethics during the evaluation process. There is also a gap in knowledge on how to use system-level data, because many governments have incomplete, inaccurate, insufficient or dated data.

Lack of good governance affecting good evaluation. As previously stated, the Arab region has one of the poorest governance records globally. When we consider the indicators of good governance, such as voice, accountability, and governmental effectiveness, it is evident that poor governance will have a significant influence on evaluation practices (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2010). This situation is part of the overall socio-political context that is being called into question with the Arab Uprising.

A non-enabling environment for developing evidence-based policy. Evidence-based policy is rooted in responsible government, which has become a mantra in the post-Arab Uprising MENA region. Evidence-based policy is expected to reduce wasteful spending, expand innovative programs, and strengthen accountability (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2010). Part of the framework for this approach, which enables governments to make better choices, is program assessment, outcome monitoring, and targeted evaluation. Regrettably, a lack of good governance is often tied to a lack of evidence-based policy. The situation in the Arab region is such that the tracking of progress at the policy level for SDGs and Millennium Development Goals has been, and continues to be, a key challenge. This means that in addition to a low supply, there is a low demand for M&E.

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF M&E IN THE MENA REGION

The challenges presented in the previous section are directly tied to the systematically poor governance that created the conditions for the Arab Uprising. M&E supply and demand have been less significant in the past, but the uprising, and the subsequent attention to SDGs have exposed an urgent need for M&E. Local governments and the international community are now promoting accountability and unveiling a substantive demand. At the same time, the M&E communities of professionals have been working to create an enabling environment for M&E. The regional professionalization of M&E specifically promotes national ownership and inclusion, and activates an evolved accountability that goes beyond the conducting of external audits to appease donor distrust (Segone 2009).

The increasingly high demand for M&E professionals in the MENA region is an issue, especially since quality M&E requires an investment of time and resources in order to plan, collect data, and report appropriately. Increasing efforts to professionalize the field are leading to improved evaluations and better evidence. This increases the demand for more and better evidence, which in turn stimulates further improvements in professionalism. However, program and operational funds in organizations in this region often neglect to budget for appropriate M&E, for various reasons. The key issue, a lack of data culture, which makes for a situation in which it is difficult to

cultivate M&E professionals, has been addressed with multiple efforts by international and local organizations.

In particular, the launch of the Middle East and North Africa Evaluators Network (EvalMENA) in 2012 galvanized M&E professionals at the regional level. EvalMENA is an informal network of stakeholders who are dedicated to professionalizing M&E in the region. It aims to promote and strengthen M&E culture and practices in all the MENA countries by encouraging country-level professional M&E associations, and by offering a networking platform for thoughtful debate about local issues and solutions.

The work of EvalMENA is practical and addresses local issues. The success of the organization is largely due to the fact that inclusiveness was—and continues to be—a fundamental building block of the organization and all the practices of EvalMENA. This success includes lobbying for M&E, networking events, capacity building, creating new evaluation associations, and professionalization efforts. The inception of the organization was a research and development project championed by the Environment and Sustainable Development unit of the American University of Beirut, with technical and financial support provided by the International Development Research Centre in Canada (IDRC). However, even with donor funding and appropriate supportive guidance from IDRC, the leadership and working teams have always been local Arab professionals. Since its inception in 2008, EvalMENA has managed to achieve the following (Moussa 2015).

Bringing MENA evaluators together, in the region and around the world.

In 2013, the membership was made up of 146 evaluators from 23 countries. By 2015, the membership had grown to 360 members from 38 countries. Most of the members were from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia, with a small minority from North America. Currently, the membership is over 500 members, indicating a growing interest and support for the vision of EvalMENA.

Promoting and supporting seven new national evaluation associations.

National ownership and local inclusion has been a top priority of EvalMENA since the inception of the network. The formalization and maturation of the Moroccan Evaluation Association (MEA) has been an important catalyst in the region. MEA has now matured to the point where its work with policy makers in Morocco is allowing them to take an important seat at the same table with the highest level of government. The success of MEA has proved to be a catalyst in the formalization of six more new networks: the Egyptian Research and Education Network (EREN) in 2012; the Palestinian Evaluation Association (PEA) in 2013; the Jordan Evaluation Association (EvalJordan) in 2014; the Tunisian Evaluation Association (RTE) in 2014; the Lebanese Evaluation Association (LebEval) in 2014; and the Egyptian Development Evaluation Network (EgDEval) in 2015.

All of these new associations are now actively contributing to the leadership and management of EvalMENA, and are promoting its vision at the national level.

Organizing five annual regional conferences between 2012-16. The Arab culture places a high value on face-to-face networking. Given the critical importance of bringing M&E professionals together to share and create knowledge that is localized for the region, it was—and is—important to hold local conferences. As the membership and national ownership has grown, EvalMENA has shared and distributed leadership and responsibilities among the participating countries, while offering them ongoing support. As table 10.1 indicates, the national organizations have taken ownership of the regional vision. This is especially impressive after the initial IDRC funding ended, as the national and regional organizations collaborated to find other funding sources to continue the work.

Promoting MENA to an international audience through active leadership in the global evaluation movement. The context within the MENA region is becoming increasingly challenging, with humanitarian crises becoming the norm. The stunted progress in many Arab countries is cultivating high-risk zones. This creates a two-pronged problem with respect to local capacities. First, local M&E professionals are not plentiful in the region, and donors are more comfortable with M&E professionals who have more experience and formal training. Second, local M&E professionals are in greater demand, because foreign M&E officers are less and less able to access the zones where information is most needed.

EvalMENA has been working strategically to achieve recognition for the region's M&E professionals from the international community. Given that most donors are part of the international community, this recognition is important for donor trust of local capacity.

As regional annual conferences have gained traction in the region, M&E professionals have gained increasing access, awareness, and encouragement

TABLE 10.1 EvalMENA conferences

Year	Location	Key donors
2012	Lebanon	International Development Research Center (IDRC)
2013	Lebanon	International Development Research Center (IDRC)
2014	Jordan	International Development Research Center (IDRC)
2015	Egypt	UNICEF Regional Office for MENA (MENARO) IDRC IOCE/EvalPartners International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector (ICD) Environment and Sustainable Development Unit of the American University of Beirut (AUB-ESDU)
2016	Tunis	Tunisian Evaluation Network (TEN) International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) UN Women-Regional office IOCE/EvalPartners

to be actively involved in the global evaluation movement. For example, active EvalMENA members have become executive board members of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), the Africa Gender and Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN), and the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), including the AfrEA presidency in 2012 and the IOCE presidency and EvalPartners cochair for 2015–16. These leadership roles have demonstrated to many members of the international community that high-level M&E professionals are present, and ready to contribute to the work in the MENA region. It has also shown Arab M&E officers that there are opportunities to grow professionally, and to engage with global networks.

Launching of the first online training course on development evaluation in Arabic. The first online training course on development evaluation in Arabic was launched in 2014 on the “My M&E” portal. This is a significant accomplishment because it is an Arabic course that is listed on a high-profile site along with courses from UNICEF and UN Women. This course boasts a credibility that is valued by donors and international agencies. Since it was launched, 276 Arab-speaking individuals with an interest in learning about M&E have successfully completed the course. It is noteworthy that many of the participants are from Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, countries where there is no national network for evaluators. This online course helps Arabs who have limited local access to opportunities learn and share knowledge about development evaluation overcome an important barrier to joining the M&E community. This is particularly important as online learning, as an information and communications technology (ICT)–based solution, becomes increasingly vital for promoting access to learning in conflict and poverty-affected areas. The course continues to be accessed by Arabs who are hopeful about further developing their M&E knowledge, skills, and professional network.⁷

Facilitating South-South collaboration on evaluation within and beyond the MENA region. As we move into a new paradigm that values and promotes inclusion and national ownership in M&E, it is essential that there is a shift from the traditional North-South donor-recipient mentality to a shared values and joint work mentality. South-South collaborations promote the notion that all parties to the partnership are equally valuable, and that they aim to achieve a shared goal. In strategically bringing together and supporting so many actors in the region, EvalMENA has cultivated a culture for knowledge sharing and creation. In addition to the EvalMENA-sponsored national workshops and events organized in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco, three projects won the 2014 Peer-to-Peer small grants from IOCE:

⁷The course is available at <http://www.mymande.org/elearning/course-details/6>.

- **Media Promoting Evaluation Culture in MENA.** A joint partnership between EREN, the Faculty of Communication at Cairo University, and Environment and Sustainable Development Unit /EvalMENA;
- **Integrating Evaluation in Legislative Bodies** A joint partnership between EREN, the Secretariat of the Egyptian Parliament, and the Parliamentary Forum for Development Evaluation in South Asia; and
- **The Evaluation Database Enhancement Project.** A joint partnership between the Palestinian Evaluation Association and the Jordan Development Evaluation Association.

All of these accomplishments in professionalizing M&E in the region would be notable at any time. But it is particularly impressive and relevant given that all of these activities took place in the aftermath of the Arab Uprising, one of the most turbulent periods in the recent history of the region. The instability of the region necessitates rethinking M&E approaches in general, but especially in areas where there are humanitarian emergencies. This is particularly true where there is an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with predictions for worse to come, as is the case in this region. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the conflict and violence in Iraq and Yemen have displaced 4.5 and 2.18 million people, respectively; and the conflict in Syria has displaced 4.8 million people who are seeking safety in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and beyond.⁸

The commitment of the national M&E communities to develop national evaluation capacities for the SDGs was exemplified by Egypt's willingness to conduct a voluntary review of the SDGs at the United Nations High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2016. More than 60 representatives from the private sector, civil society organizations, foundations, academia, youth, special interest groups (women, environment, startups, etc.), and development partners were invited by the government of Egypt to discuss the road map for implementing and monitoring the SDGs. The meeting was hosted by the Ministry of International Cooperation, and co-organized by UNDP and the World Bank, as part of their joint effort to raise awareness about the SDGs in Egypt. This group focused on Egypt Vision 2030, the national sustainable development strategy.

In a spirit of accountability, Egypt volunteered to report on their efforts to achieve the agenda: they reported that engaging with local interest groups is pivotal to building ownership of the SDGs; capitalizing on local efforts for knowledge and resources; and increasing mutual accountability of national development results.⁹ The practical outcome of the report is a series of elements that need to be addressed through collective action. These are as follows:

⁸ Source: United Nations High Commission for Refugees website, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

⁹ Source: UNDP website, "Building Ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals in Egypt," <http://www.eg.undp.org/content/egypt/en/home/presscenter/articles/2016/june/building-ownership-of-the-sustainable-development-goals-in-egypt.html>.

- **Tackle the data gap, and map national status.** The local groups expressed their readiness to support the monitoring and follow-up of the SDGs. They identified the need to set baselines for all SDG goals and targets.
- **Integrate the implementation efforts of local groups led by national authorities.** A big challenge is to integrate the efforts of government bodies and ministries for the implementation of the SDGs with other nonstate actors. Terms of reference will be developed for different goals where a multidisciplinary working group composed of government and key group representatives will support the implementation of the SDGs.
- **Build partnerships with nonstate actors, especially the civil society sector.** In parallel with the review work, Egypt Vision 2030 was formulated through an extensive nationwide consultation process. The 2030 agenda provides a platform for government and nonstate actors to initiate discussions around common areas of work, and to complement their efforts to achieve national priorities.

As in Egypt, all of the countries in the region are promoting greater local capacity and ownership of M&E as a key element in strengthening M&E practices in connection with the SDGs. The notion that local M&E talent should be used is obvious within a modern paradigm where inclusion and national ownership are core values. For those organizations that have yet to shift into this approach, there is a more practical reason to leverage local M&E capacities. According to a study released in 2015 on M&E practices during humanitarian emergencies (Jansury et al. 2015), M&E is a means for international organizations to use in addressing issues of access and security in complex emergencies. Organizations can choose to either work through local partners (nongovernmental organizations), or to employ local staff.

Although there are challenges to including local M&E professionals, the benefits have been shown to be important. For example, in 2010 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) mission implemented the Yemen Monitoring and Evaluation Project. This project used third-party local partners to provide on-the-ground performance monitoring, verification, and evaluation of USAID activities. They were able to successfully identify problems in the quality of some of the Community Livelihood Project's rehabilitation activities, and of goods delivered. This was especially important as security deteriorated after the Arab Uprising, and U.S. employees could no longer access some regions of the country to monitor and identify problems with project activities (Office of Inspector General 2015).

These are the kinds of success stories that demonstrate that local M&E professionals can, and should, be involved in the work of foreign aid projects. It is unfortunate that this is not a normative practice despite the discourse concerning local engagement among many donors and foreign aid organizations. For example, the USAID Office of Inspector General conducted a survey to identify the challenges USAID faced during the early transition period (Q4 2010–Q3 2014) in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. One of their conclusions

was a recommendation to employ third-party monitors in transitional situations because they “can help an office gain access to regions of a country that become inaccessible to U.S. direct hires or when U.S. personnel are ordered to evacuate” (Office of Inspector General 2015).

Moving beyond the “absolute necessity” argument of international organizations delivering foreign aid, local M&E professional communities are shifting the role of M&E within their local governance systems. For example, PEA has offered training on the evaluation of humanitarian programs that is focused on evaluation design and methodology; facilitated national round-table discussions on the evaluation of SDGs; and collaborated with members of the Palestinian Legislative Council to systematize M&E activities within government initiatives. Another example is EREN, which has co-offered seminars on evaluation for improving governance practices with Plan International, and workshops with government officials on results-based management with UNICEF. They have also been working with local governments’ policy briefs, and through a national conference on country-led M&E have focused on promoting transparency and efficiency with policy makers.

These efforts have been matched with those of other local organizations committed to including M&E professionals on staff despite the supply challenge. For example, a recent study in Egypt found that most organizations involved with development M&E provide training internally, in which “much of the training conducted is done through on-the-job learning” (Baradei, Abdelhamid, and Wally 2014). In addition, local organizations face a high turnover in the M&E role, in part because qualified M&E officers are in short supply and thus often highly sought after by other organizations (ILO 2009). This often means that when local organizations do dedicate the time and budget to training program officers to become M&E officers, other organizations—often international ones with greater resources than local ones—poach talented and trained program officers once they have the experience and background to conduct M&E work in the region (Boitnott 2015).

CONCLUSION

Well-intentioned external parties often treat the MENA region as a monolithic entity. But the countries within the MENA region are very diverse. UNDP identifies four distinct groups of countries within MENA: the Mashreq and Maghreb countries, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the least developed countries (UN 2013). International organizations that do not differentiate the needs within the region learn their lesson after implementation issues have been identified. For example, in the evaluation of the Media Cooperation under the Danish Arab Partnership Programme (2005–12), which was commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was found that the cultural context differs in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia, creating conditions in which a uniform regional approach across all Media Cooperation Programme themes is not conducive to achieving the best results (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark 2013). In this regard, it is worth saying that commissioners of evaluations tend to lay the responsibility for the findings with the evaluators, not with themselves.

The inclusion and national ownership movement is essential for finding sustainable solutions for one of the most volatile youthful parts of the world. The paradigm shift in terms of development in the MENA region is tied to the current state of development in general. Cultivating accountability, inclusiveness, and national ownership is a challenge in a region where there is a continuing war, and a growing humanitarian crisis. (More than 5 million people have fled Syria since 2011, seeking safety in neighboring countries, and millions more are displaced inside Syria.¹⁰) The unprecedented challenges in the region are drawing international attention and funding, with various solutions to help minimize the loss of life, hope, and health, and to reduce the conditions of indignity for many people. These solutions are being constructed as aid provided with a traditional approach, which has yet to move beyond external accountability, and to value inclusiveness and national ownership. At the same time, measuring aid effectiveness in hazardous areas is opening new opportunities for local M&E professionals to gain experience, trust, and training from international agencies simply because these are the M&E people who are on the ground with access to the conflict areas (Jansury et al. 2015).

The evaluation efforts tied to the SDGs in MENA are increasingly aligned with the key principles of accountability, inclusiveness, and national ownership. This triad cultivates accountability for sustainable development when public policies are subject to local evaluations whose purpose is to ensure the best solutions for local issues. This approach means explicitly addressing the data gap and mapping national status along the SDG indicators; integrating the efforts of major groups involved in implementation, led by national authorities; and building partnerships with nonstate actors, especially with civil society. This can only be achieved when local M&E systems and professionals are involved in the process.

The country and regional efforts that have been contributed by local M&E professionals have been impressive. These initiatives are directly addressing the challenge of a low enabling environment coupled with restricted M&E skills and trustworthiness, which places Arab countries in an opinion-based as opposed to an evidence-based system (Segone 2009). The region's M&E systems, capacities, demands, and professionalism are maturing. Dedicated local actors, such as the advocates and participants of EvalMENA, EREN, PEA, EvalJordan, RTE, LebEval, and EgDEval, are cultivating the culture for national evaluation processes to be aligned with other planning, budgeting, and statistics processes to drive the 2030 Agenda (El-Saddik et al. 2016). The demands of this era call for more international organizations and foreign donors to adopt the perspective of the IDRC and the Taqueem sponsors, in which local actors are regarded as partners with the capacity to support M&E and learning, and are appreciated as valuable assets to the development of their own countries and region.

¹⁰ Source: United Nations High Commission for Refugees website, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

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