

Foreword

Since 2015, when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted and the Paris Agreement was concluded, the concept of development has transformed in two major directions. First, the old distinction between “developing” and “developed” countries has disappeared in the face of global threats, particularly of climate change. All countries are now perceived as “developing” toward a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive future. Second, the scope and ambition of development in the coming decades has grown dramatically, and has now integrated the peace and conflict agenda as well as humanitarian efforts in response to natural disasters, including a focus on ecosystem services that are essential for humankind to survive. To tackle these issues, the traditional social and economic development agendas are changing beyond recognition, with innovation, new partnerships, and efforts focused on green societies and economies taking shape. Into this mix of change and ambitious perspectives, evaluation is challenged to provide evidence on what works, where, for whom, and under what circumstances in a labyrinth of new policies, program, and interventions. This book provides inspiration for an emerging new role for evaluation in the global push toward a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive world.

The Independent Evaluation Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) are to be applauded for their initiative to start up the discussion on the role of evaluation in the SDGs just a month after these goals were approved. They organized two conferences that took place in parallel, with joint keynote addresses and special sessions: one from the perspective of governments, the other from the perspective of the professional development evaluator. These conferences took place in Bangkok, Thailand, in October 2015. They ended with the Bangkok Declaration on National Evaluation Capacity for the Sustainable Development Goals, which was subsequently included in the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020. While conference proceedings were published in 2016, IDEAS and UNDP’s Independent Evaluation Office also approached the most innovative and

forward-thinking contributors to the conference to update their insights for this book, which provides a stimulating array of subjects.

This is of the utmost importance. We need to understand the way forward on the many challenges in the SDGs. If we truly want to “leave no one behind,” we need to learn from our mistakes and from efforts to build inclusive and equitable societies that can sustain themselves, not just economically, but in an enduring relationship with nature. While achieving insight is not just an effort of evaluation, it is one of the few systematic and independent assessments of interventions and innovations that we have. In its best incarnation, it includes perspectives from civil society, the private sector, government at all levels, and academia. In Agenda 2030, evaluation has a recognized role to play in understanding the progress that is made toward the SDGs. It is therefore crucial that the discussion started in Bangkok continues, and this book provides fuel to this fire.

This book provides an overview of some of the crucial transformations we see in development, and how evaluation plays an important role in these changes. First and foremost is the shift from donor-centric evaluation to country systems for monitoring and evaluation that can provide evidence for decision making in these countries. The chapters in part I make important points on how evaluation contributes to some of the most significant issues of our time, such as inclusive societies, reducing the carbon footprint of our economies, and gender and equity. Capacities and capabilities for evaluation of progress toward the SDGs are explored in part II. Part III is devoted to regional and national perspectives, underscoring that evaluation is becoming increasingly relevant to countries’ development priorities in many regions of the world. Part IV deals with safeguards and resettlement, and demonstrates the negative impacts of development displacement that governments need to be aware of. The book’s last part addresses some of the enduring problems of evaluation: how to evaluate impact in complex circumstances; how to evaluate new partnerships and new forms of private sector involvement, such as social and environmental impact investing.

In the meantime, the debate continues, as we see it taken up in new conferences and in deliberations of governments and societies on the potential role evaluation could play in understanding progress toward the SDGs. I hope this book contributes to informing that debate.

Achim Steiner
Administrator, United Nations Development Programme