No One Left Behind – A Focus on Gender and Social Equity

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Abstract. *This chapter presents the importance of evaluating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a focus on gender and social equity. It analyzes the transformative nature of the new 2030 Agenda, due to its focus on making sure that "no one is left behind." It explains how the SDGs expand and build on the Millennium Development Goals, as well as how heads of states from all over the world have made a commitment to ensure a systematic follow-up and review of the SDGs that is "robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated" in order to track progress, and argues that to ensure that no one is left behind, the follow-up and review should be informed by country-led evaluations that are equity focused and gender responsive. This should be accompanied by strengthening national evaluation capacities through a systemic approach that looks at the enabling environment and at both institutional and individual capacities, from the supply as well as the demand side. Finally, it argues that strengthening national evaluation capacities to evaluate SDGs in such a way as to ensure that no one is left behind is a common endeavor that requires strong partnerships among various actors, such as national evaluation systems, parliamentarians, voluntary organizations for professional evaluation, and civil society.*

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A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA FOR "THE WORLD WE WANT"

We live in a world where a massive concentration of wealth and privilege exists in the hands of a few: the richest 1 percent of the population owns 40 percent of the world's wealth, while the poorest 50 percent of the population owns only 1 percent of the world's wealth. The three richest people in the world own wealth equivalent to the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of the world's 49 poorest countries. It may seem that this is only related to income, but a similar situation exists in the statistics concerning human development as well. Human development indicators from 2015 show that 793 million people are still malnourished (FAO 2015), and that one in three women will be beaten, raped, abused, or mutilated in their lifetimes.[1] These are just a few examples of the many that illustrate the current inequity in the world.

The question is: is this the world we want? Or would we like to live in a world in which inequities have been banished for all humans—everywhere, anytime? Most would agree this is a common goal: so how do we get there?

The good news is that the countries that endorsed the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda recognize the importance of long-term equitable and sustainable development: more and more countries are implementing social and public policies to try to decrease the gap between those with the most (the best-off) and those with the least (the worst-off) (UN 2015b). In September 2015, leaders from around the world adopted the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at a historic United Nations (UN) Summit.[2] Agenda 2030 calls for global transformation that focuses on ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. In January 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intended to implement this agenda came into force. These new goals—built on the success and the unfinished agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—call on all countries to mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities, and tackle climate change, while ensuring that "no one is left behind."

How do the SDGs expand upon and continue the work of the MDGs? There are a number of key differences, both in the process through which the SDGs were identified, as well as the content.

First, the SDGs were identified in a broad and inclusive process. For more than two years, governments, civil society, the private sector, and thought leaders from around the world negotiated and discussed the development of the SDGs. For the first time, 8 million people voted on which of the SDGs were most important to them. This inclusive and participatory process has also encouraged each country to adapt the SDGs to their own national contexts. This will make the level of ownership of the SDGs much stronger.

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[1] UN Women, "Facts and figures: Ending violence against women," http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures.

[2] The United Nations Summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda was held in New York, September 25–27, 2015, and convened as a high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly.

Second, the SDGs are universal. Unlike the MDGs, which had a strong focus on the developing countries (with seven of the eight goals devoted to them), the SDGs are relevant to any country of the world. Rob D. van den Berg, president of IDEAS, has reminded us that "from the perspective of the SDGs, all countries are developing countries."[3]

Third, the SDGs are comprehensive and integrated. While some have noted concern over the large number of goals (17), this also encourages sweeping transformation across a broad number of areas, and encourages the use of partnerships to accomplish these goals. To improve communication and ensure that people understand the ultimate intent of the SDGs and Agenda 2030, the UN has clustered them into "five Ps": people (human development); prosperity (inclusive economic development); planet (environment and climate change); peace (a key component of all development); and partnership (one of the few ways to achieve such sweeping transformation).

As shown in figure 2.1, the SDGs are interrelated and interlinked, which adds to their complexity, but also to their dynamic interaction.

FIGURE 2.1 **The SDGs as a network of targets**
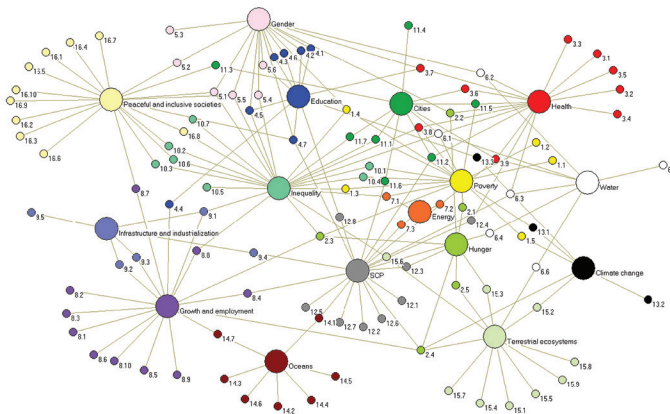
SOURCE: Le Blanc 2015.

Fourth, gender equality and reduced inequalities among and within countries are both stand-alone goals, and they are both mainstreamed to all SDGs. The principle of "no one left behind" is the key principle informing every SDG, and is mainstreamed throughout the entire structure of Agenda 2030.

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[3] Rob D. van den Berg, opening speech at 2015 IDEAS Conference, Bangkok.

Fifth—and very important to those in the evaluation community— Agenda 2030 and the SDGs include a follow-up and review mechanism, operating at the national, regional, and global levels. The principles for this mechanism are voluntary and country-owned; open, inclusive, and transparent; support the participation of all people and all stakeholders; are built on existing platforms and processes; avoid duplication; respond to national circumstances; and are rigorous and evidence-based, informed by data that is timely, reliable, and disaggregated. Most important for those in the evaluation community, the follow-up and review mechanism will be informed by country-led evaluations, and calls for strengthening national evaluation capacities.

THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY AND THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FOR THE GLOBAL EVALUATION COMMUNITY

This is the first time in the history of international development that a follow-up and review mechanism to assess the implementation of a development agenda was adopted unanimously.. This high-level and far-reaching commitment will enable a surge in the demand for country-led evaluation. Key policy makers will request their own national evaluation systems so that they can produce high-quality evaluations to inform the national SDG reviews that countries will be presenting at the UN High Level Political Forum. This is therefore an unprecedented opportunity for the evaluation community.

On the other hand, evaluation of these broad-reaching goals with a central focus on "no one left behind" presents a number of unique challenges:

- How do we evaluate equitable development interventions?
- What are the best questions to use in order to assess whether interventions are relevant, and are having an impact in decreasing inequity, and in achieving results for the worst-off groups?
- What are the methodological, political, social, and financial implications of designing, conducting, managing, and using evaluations that are responsive to issues of social equity and gender equality?
- How can we strengthen the capacities of governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and parliamentarians to evaluate the effect of interventions on equitable outcomes for marginalized populations?

EVALUATING THE SDGS WITH A "NO ONE LEFT BEHIND" LENS THROUGH EQUITY-FOCUSED AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE EVALUATIONS[4]

The 2030 Agenda made a commitment to ensure a systematic follow-up and review of the SDGs that would be "robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated," and that would "make a vital contribution to implementation and will help countries to maximize and track progress in

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[4] This section is drawn from Bamberger, Segone, and Tateossian (2016).

implementing the 2030 Agenda in order to ensure that no one is left behind" (UN 2015b). Country-led evaluations will be a central element used to inform SDG reviews and, together with strong monitoring data, will help support national policy decision making.

Gender equality and reducing inequalities between and among countries are central to the SDG principle of leaving no one behind. This recognizes the need to go beyond aggregate indicators, which only estimate the proportion of the population who have benefited from a particular intervention. There is evidence that aggregate indicators of progress can conceal the fact that some marginal or vulnerable groups are being left behind. In this context, the goal of the SDGs in reducing inequalities is to

- Identify groups that have been left behind;
- Understand why this has happened; and
- Identify strategies to promote more inclusive approaches that will include these groups.

While strengthening the national statistical system is of paramount importance in order to be able to produce disaggregated data that go beyond national averages, the evaluators will have to explain why certain groups have been left behind, and how this can be corrected. This is why equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluation (EFGRE) is vital.

UN Women, the UN entity for advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment, defines gender-responsive evaluation as having two essential elements: what the evaluation examines, and how it is undertaken. Gender-responsive evaluation assesses the degree to which gender and power relationships—including structural and other causes that give rise to inequalities, discrimination, and unfair power relations—change as a result of an intervention. This process is inclusive, participatory, and respectful of all stakeholders (rights holders and duty bearers). Gender-responsive evaluation promotes accountability regarding the level of commitment to gender equality, human rights, and women's empowerment by providing information on the way in which development programs are affecting women and men differently, and contributing to the achievement of these commitments. It is applicable to all types of development programming, not just gender-specific work (UN Women Independent Evaluation Office 2015). UNICEF, the UN agency for children, defines equity-focused evaluation as a judgment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of policies, programs, and projects that are concerned with achieving equitable development results (Bamberger and Segone 2011). This approach involves using rigorous, systematic, and objective processes in the design, analysis, and interpretation of information in order to answer specific questions, including those of concern to the worst-off groups. It assesses what does work to reduce inequities, and what does not, and it highlights the intended and unintended results for the worst-off groups, as well as the gaps between the best-off, average, and worst-off groups. It provides strategic lessons to guide decision makers and to inform stakeholders (Bamberger and Segone 2011). The UN

Evaluation Group, the professional network of evaluation offices of UN agencies, says in its guidance document that integrating human rights and gender equality in evaluations provides a valuable resource for all stages of the formulation, design, implementation, dissemination, and use of the human rights and gender-responsive-focused evaluations (UNEG 2014).

ROLES OF THE VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SDG FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW MECHANISM

The key agencies responsible for the implementation of country-led evaluations within each country are the national governments. Since national SDG reviews (see box 2.1) are voluntary, the commitment of governments is critical, particularly as they are the ones who have to decide how to prioritize their limited financial and technical resources among many different development priorities—which are supported by different groups of international and national stakeholders. Given the broad scope of the SDGs, almost all government agencies will potentially be involved, and the national government will play an important coordinating role. One of the challenges is to avoid the "silo mentality" that has been seen in many of the MDG monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities, where each sector agency works on its own sector-specific studies, with very little coordination between sectors.

At the national level, donor agencies, UN agencies, CSOs, advocacy groups, and foundations can all play important roles in determining the evaluation agenda. But there is always the danger that each donor agency, CSO, and UN agency will conduct their own studies, often with only limited coordination and comparability of data between entities, and with significant duplication. The Inter-Agency Expert Group on SDGs is seeking to avoid these issues by advocating for a global indicator framework for SDGs that would be agreed upon by all member states, with national and subnational indicators used for more localized policy interventions at the country level.

CSOs, including voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs), will play an important role in the country-led evaluations at both the national and local levels, and their contribution will be critical in ensuring a truly inclusive consultation and participatory approach. While many governments collect data on local communities and are willing to involve these communities in the data collection process, government agencies are often less willing to involve them in the interpretation of the findings and in the discussion of the policy implications. Civil society, and particularly human rights and feminist groups will have an important role to play in ensuring that the voices of local communities and marginalized groups are heard.

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY FOR SDGS[5]

Using country-led evaluations to inform the SDG follow-up and review mechanisms goes hand in hand with strengthening national evaluation capacities.

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[5] This section is drawn from Segone and Rugh (2013).

BOX 2.1 **Principles of SDG follow-up and review mechanisms**

The SDG follow-up and review mechanism will:

a. **Be voluntary and country led**; will take into account different national realities, capacities, and levels of development; and will respect policy space and priorities. Since national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national-level processes will be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on official national data sources.

b. **Track progress in implementing the universal goals and targets**, including the means of implementation in all countries in a manner that respects their universal, integrated, and interrelated nature as well as the three dimensions of sustainable development.

c. **Maintain a longer-term orientation; identify achievements, challenges, gaps, and critical success factors; and support countries in making informed policy choices.** This will help mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships; support the identification of solutions and best practices; and promote the coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.

d. **Be open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent for all people**; and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders.

e. **Be people centered and gender sensitive; will respect human rights; and will have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable, and those furthest behind.**

f. **Will build on existing platforms and processes where these exist; will avoid duplication; and will respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs, and priorities.** These will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

g. **Will be rigorous and evidence-based, and will be informed by country-led evaluations and data that are high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable, and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and geographic location and other characteristics that are relevant in national contexts.**

h. **Will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs**, particularly in African countries, least developed countries, small island developing states, landlocked developing countries, and middle-income countries.

i. **Will benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions.**

SOURCE: UN 2015, paragraph 74; emphasis added.

Country-led evaluations are essential in order to bring evidence together with monitoring data to inform the review of the SDGs.

The United Nations General Assembly resolution on national evaluation capacity building (UN 2015a) has set the stage for an understanding of the importance of evaluation capacity development.

This resolution emphasizes the importance of building capacities for the evaluation of development activities at the country level. It calls for interaction and cooperation among all relevant partners, including those of the UN system, and both national and international stakeholders, to coordinate efforts to further strengthen member state capacities for evaluation. Most importantly, the resolution emphasizes that national ownership and national priorities form a strong base for building national capacities to manage and oversee evaluations. Through this resolution, the member states agree that evaluation is an important component of development processes, and recognize evaluation as a country-level tool that can help strengthen and support development results toward the achievement of the SDGs.

National evaluation capacity development is a complex field in which different stakeholders have different roles to play, based on their respective value added. This complexity encourages the use of a systemic approach to national evaluation capacity development, while fully recognizing that each country has its own unique context and realities. This makes it necessary to not only look at actors at different levels and across sectors, but also, crucially, at the network of relationships or connections between them in each country. Such a viewpoint illustrates the fact that weaknesses in capacity at any level, or with any key actor, will affect the capacity of the whole system to deal with a problem in order to achieve a goal. Therefore, a country-specific systemic approach to national evaluation capacity development is needed, particularly when addressing evaluation capacities for country-led evaluations of the SDGs that are equity focused and gender responsive.

Individual and Institutional Evaluation Capacities Enabled by a Supportive Environment

In the past, evaluation capacity development focused on strengthening the capacities of the knowledge and skills of individuals. However, it is by now clear that capacity development should be based on a systemic approach that takes into account three major levels (individual, institutional, and external enabling environment); and two components (demand and supply[6]), and that both should be tailored to the specific context of each country (figure 2.2).

The enabling environment for evaluation is determined by a culture of learning and accountability, by which we mean the degree to which information is sought about past performance; and the extent to which there is a drive to

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[6] "Supply" refers to the capability of professional evaluators to provide sound and trustworthy evaluative evidence. "Demand" refers to the capability by policy makers and senior managers to request sound and trustworthy evaluative evidence, with the aim of using it in strategic decision-making processes.

FIGURE 2.2 **A systemic and integrated approach to national evaluation capacities development**
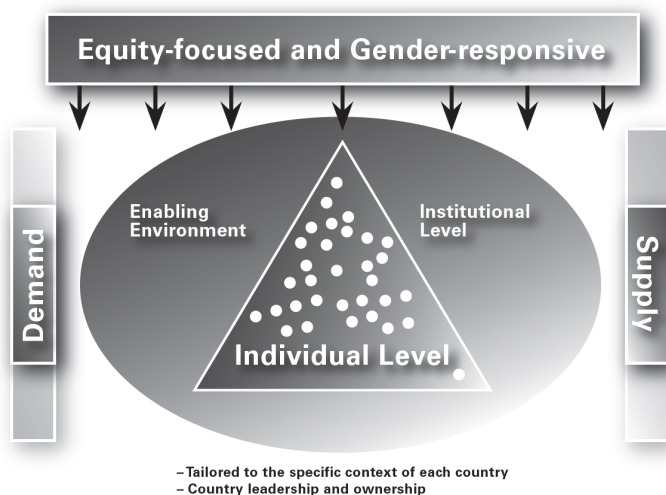
SOURCE: Segone and Rugh (2013), 5.

continuously improve, and to be responsible or accountable for actions taken, resources spent, and results achieved. Such a culture is embedded in tacit norms of behavior, and an understanding of what can and should—or should not—be done; and in many cases, by behaviors being role-modeled by leaders.

An enabling environment is also supported or created through governance structures that demand independent evaluation, be it through parliaments or governing bodies, and that is further enhanced through VOPEs that set standards and strive toward greater professionalism in evaluation. Therefore, VOPEs should be supported, so that they can foster indigenous demand for and supply of evaluation, including by the setting of national evaluation standards and norms. There are also examples of governments soliciting the advice and involvement of VOPEs, not only in formulating evaluation policies and systems, but also in the implementation of evaluations that are consistent with those policies.

The institutional framework for evaluation ensures that a system that can implement and safeguard the independence, credibility, and utility of evaluation within an organization exists. Such an institutional framework has the following characteristics:

- Includes a system of peer review, or assurance that the evaluation function is set up to safeguard and implement the principles of independence, credibility, and utility
- Establishes safeguards to protect individual evaluators, evaluation managers, and the heads of evaluation functions

- Puts in place a multidisciplinary evaluation team that can ensure the credibility of evaluation by understanding multiple dimensions of evaluation subjects and combining the necessary technical competence
- Secures the independent funding of evaluations at an adequate level, to ensure that the necessary evaluations are carried out, and that budget holders do not exercise inappropriate influence or control over what is evaluated and how
- Combines measures for impartial or purposeful selection of evaluation subjects to ensure impartiality on the one hand, and increased utility on the other, by making deliberate choices linked to decision-making processes
- Sets out a system to plan, undertake, and report evaluation findings in an independent, credible, and useful way (to increase objectivity in the planning and conduct of evaluations, systems that increase the rigor, transparency, and predictability of evaluation processes and products are needed)
- Institutes measures that increase the usefulness of evaluations, including the sharing of findings and lessons learned that can be applied to other subjects

An evaluation environment is essential to support country-led evaluations of the SDGs. The UN resolution on capacity building for evaluation at the country level, and the strong commitment of evaluation to support the follow-up and review of the SDGs, are key drivers to enhance evidence-based policy making to achieve the SDGs.

At the individual level, a capacity development strategy should strengthen the ability of senior management to strategically plan evaluations and to identify the key evaluation questions, to manage evaluations for their independence and credibility, and to effectively make use of evaluation results. Mackay underlines the importance of identifying and supporting leaders or natural champions who have the ability to influence, inspire, and motivate others to design and implement effective evaluation systems (Mackay 2007). Leadership is not necessarily synonymous with a position of authority; it can also be informal, and can be exercised at many levels. Therefore, the evaluation capacity development strategy should, especially in the initial stages, identify and support as appropriate, national and local leaders in public administration and intergovernmental monitoring, as well as in evaluation groups and national VOPEs. It should also be linked to the national processes that focus on the country-level review of the SDGs. By giving national M&E departments or agencies responsibility for SDG follow-up and review, evaluation can become a key source of support for these national reviews. On the supply side, a capacity development strategy should enhance behavioral independence—independence of mind and integrity; knowledge of and respect for evaluation standards; and agreed-upon evaluation processes and products—as well as professional competencies through formal education, specialized training, professional conferences and meetings,

on-the-job training such as joint country-led evaluations, and communities of practice and networking, for example VOPEs.

Fostering Demand for and Supply of Evaluation

A distinction should be made between the capacity of policy makers and advisors to use evidence, and the capacity of evaluation professionals to provide sound evidence. While it may be unrealistic for policy makers and advisors to become competent experts in evaluation, it is both reasonable and necessary for such professionals to be able to understand and use the evidence produced by evaluation systems in their policies and practices. Integrating evidence into practice is a central feature of policy-making processes, and in this case, for integrating it into the follow-up and review mechanisms of the SDGs. An increasingly necessary skill for professional policy makers and advisors is to know about the different kinds of evidence that are available; how to gain access to them; and how to critically appraise evidence. Without such knowledge and understanding it is difficult to see how a strong demand for evidence can be established and, hence, how to enhance its practical application. However, it is also important to take into consideration that the national SDG review process is a political process, informed by evidence. The use of evidence in national SDG reviews depends on the combination of the capacity to provide quality and trustworthy evidence on the one hand, and the willingness and capacity of policy makers to use that evidence on the other. The extent to which evidence is used by policy makers depends, in turn, on the policy environment. To strengthen an enabling policy environment, policy makers may need to provide incentives to encourage policy makers and advisors to use the available evidence. These can include mechanisms to increase the "pull" for evidence, for example, requiring spending bids to be supported by an analysis of the existing evidence base, as well as to facilitate the use of evidence, such as integrating analytical staff at all stages of the policy implementation. CSOs, including VOPEs, should play a major role in advocating for the use of evidence in policy implementation. Think tanks, with the help of mass media, can also make evidence available to citizens, and citizens can demand that policy makers make more use of it.

CONCLUSION

The way forward is complex, but one thing is clear: there is no single ministry or organization that can do it alone. Evaluating the SDGs to ensure that no one is left behind is a common endeavor that requires strong partnerships among a variety of actors.

EvalPartners—a global partnership for evaluation capacity development that brings together approximately 60 organizations, including regional VOPEs, UN agencies, multilateral banks, academies, CSOs, and governments from around the world—was launched in March 2012, with the purpose of strengthening evaluation capacity. In 2013, at the Third International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities in Brazil, EvalPartners declared 2015 the International Year of Evaluation (EvalYear). EvalYear was a global,

bottom-up movement acknowledged by the UN General Assembly. It advocated for and promoted demand and use of evaluation in evidence-based policy making and positioned evaluation in the policy arena. It also kicked off the launch of several more initiatives, including The Global Parliamentarian Forum for Evaluation, three new networks (EvalGender+, EvalYouth, and EvalSDGs), and the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020. EvalPartners, together with EvalYear and the new networks, are part of an enabling environment to enhance the use of evaluation to inform SDGs follow-up and review mechanisms.

Because evaluation can be a powerful agent of change, it will be up to evaluators, policy makers, and leaders around the world to make Agenda 2030 a reality. Therefore, we encourage everyone—evaluators, commissioners of evaluation, policy makers, and parliamentarians, among others—to be ambassadors of evaluation within their departments, organizations, and countries. This is essential in order to make the ultimate goal of evaluation a reality, and to help enact the change from the world we have to the world we want.

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