
Chapter 4

Incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals in National Evaluation Capacity Development

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Abstract. *This chapter discusses the efforts of the United Nations Development Programme to develop national evaluation capacities through the biannual conferences and actions promoted by its Independent Evaluation Office. The paper also looks into lessons learned from implementing the Millennium Development Goals that could be useful in evaluating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It further outlines directions and priorities for incorporating the SDGs in national evaluation capacity development efforts, building on what emerged from the consultations that took place during the Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities in Bangkok, which was jointly organized with the 2015 Global Assembly of the International Development Evaluation Association.*

At a United Nations (UN) summit in September 2015, member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” that “seeks to strengthen universal

peace in larger freedom" (UN 2015c). The 2030 Agenda commits all countries and various stakeholders to work together to "free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet," to address inequality and injustice, and to ensure "that no one will be left behind." The 2030 Agenda presents an integrated plan of action with a vision and principles for transforming our world as set out in the results framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, with quantitative and qualitative objectives for the next 15 years; a means of implementation and global partnership; and a follow-up and review process. The follow-up and review framework calls for accountability to the people, national ownership, and country-led evaluative processes. Evaluation practice will provide an important means for raising the voice of stakeholders in this process to inform, support, measure, and assess whether development progress around the SDGs is relevant, sustainable, and equitable. Developing national evaluation capacities will be necessary in order to ensure that the follow-up and review process adds value to the implementation of the SDGs.

UNDP DEVELOPING NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITIES TO EVALUATE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In 2015, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Royal Thai Government cohosted the Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) in Bangkok, in collaboration with the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. The conference was organized jointly with the 2015 Global Assembly of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS).

This conference was the fourth in a series of NEC conferences that have recognized UNDP for its distinct focus on supporting the governments with which UNDP works across the globe, as part of an IEO strategy to support the development of national evaluation capacities. The NEC conferences are held by UNDP every two years, each time in a different region, in partnership with a host government.

The model of the NEC conference has evolved over the years, drawing on lessons learned and emerging demands: but of essence is the focus on supporting governments to build their accountability capacities, of which evaluation is a key part. Over the last 10 years, the event has involved different partners, each of which has provided a particular emphasis and served to enrich the discussions, making it a key global evaluation event.

Each time around, support is focused on a specific region and uses different formats of exchange to promote commitment, cooperation, and action between and beyond senior government officials and to encourage the sharing of responsibility with other key players in the evaluation community. Much effort has also been invested in promoting continued engagement with past participants and institutions to deepen dialogues and foster continuity, partnership, and learning.

The NEC conferences are part of a broader architecture, in which the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) plays a role by bringing together UN agencies and development partners to collaborate with each other. These

occasions serve to enhance the understanding and appreciation of evaluation as a powerful tool of public accountability and learning. They also help to advance the evaluation discourse globally and to align it with a strong call for cooperation in “building capacity for the evaluation of development activities at the country level” highlighted in the UN General Assembly Resolution 69/237 (UN 2015a). This resolution invites the entities of the UN development system, with the collaboration of national and international stakeholders, to support, upon request, efforts to further strengthen the capacity of member states for evaluation, in accordance with their national policies and priorities. Through UNEG, the UN promotes professional norms and standards for evaluation. In addition, UN entities and partners use evaluation to support accountability and program learning; to inform UN systemwide initiatives and emerging demands; and to benefit from and contribute to an enhanced global evaluation profession. The UN plays a particularly important role in enhancing national capacities to monitor and evaluate progress in poverty eradication and other internationally agreed-upon development goals, and therefore its key responsibility in supporting the SDGs.

UNDP’s value added in evaluation has been its contribution as the secretariat and cochair of UNEG, but above all the strong independent mandate of its IEO to evaluate its contributions to development. IEO works with UNDP country offices and bureaus for national evaluation capacity development with a clear division of roles and responsibilities. IEO is responsible for developing guides and standards, and for promoting national evaluation capacity development through discussion forums such as the NEC conferences and associate initiatives of knowledge exchange. UNDP program units are further responsible for following up on the outcomes and partnerships of the conferences, and for supporting more specific programs and partnerships to develop national evaluation capacities in the medium to long term. This division of roles and responsibilities ensures IEO’s independence and ability to credibly evaluate the results of UNDP’s contributions.

UNDP believes that when appropriately tailored to national circumstances and priorities, the evaluation function can be an effective country-led vehicle for greater citizen accountability that can accelerate progress toward national SDG priorities, drawing on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders, including national parliamentarians (UNDP 2016a). Governments are engaged by UNDP to identify national evaluation partners, especially during the NEC conferences, but also as partners in certain evaluations. In these processes they develop their national evaluation capacities to promote greater accountability, learning, and development effectiveness in their countries.

UNDP has been supporting a range of activities to promote national evaluation capacity development, based on the UNDP definition of capacity development as an endogenous process through which individuals, organizations, and societies obtain, strengthen, and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time. Such a process can be described as country-owned if it is operated in a dynamic change process with reflection and learning, and if it is gradual, opportunistic, and adaptive to varying circumstances.

Using this frame of reference, the IEO NEC strategy approaches evaluation capacity development and the purpose and meaning of evaluation from a country, as opposed to a donor, perspective. In this regard, the purpose of evaluation goes beyond accountability to donors, to encompass public sector efficiency and accountability to the citizens of the country. The purpose of evaluation embraces other significant institutional and national goals for learning, and the development of innovation and social capital, knowledge assets, and the intellectual capital needed for growth, development, and contribution to global advancement.

UNDP has been successful in linking theory with practice, vision and ideals with realities, and in the methods we have sought to do the bridging. The Fourth NEC Conference provides a clear example of this approach with the theme “Blending Evaluation Principles with Development Practices to Change People’s Lives.” Together with IDEAS, this conference was an important opportunity to engage decision makers, academics, practitioners, and the UN community in global dialogue and advocacy around evaluation and the SDGs. More than 450 participants from 100 countries and from three key evaluation networks—UNEG, the Evaluation Cooperation Group of the Multilateral Development Banks, and the Evaluation Network of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC)—participated in the conference, indicating the important role evaluation should play in shaping and contributing to the SDGs during the upcoming 15 years. The conferences are also an important opportunity for countries interested in South-South and South-North cooperation to find solutions together for challenges that have no ready-made answers. All can learn from previous experiences, such as what was advanced during the decade of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that can be useful for the SDGs.

In Brazil in 2013, in a previous iteration of the conference, participants discussed solutions to challenges related to the independence, credibility, and use of evaluations. The conference produced 18 NEC commitments to further enhance national evaluation capacities, and encouraged creating greater accountability by setting goals for each country’s NEC journey.¹ The 18 NEC commitments centered around four main strategies to build national evaluation capacities:

- Promote evaluation use through in-country and global advocacy
- Define and strengthen evaluation processes and methods
- Engage existing and new stakeholders in exchange and collaboration
- Explore options for different institutional structures for managing evaluations

In 2015, IEO published a baseline assessment of the countries that have participated in the NEC conferences series in order to document where each

¹The NEC commitments can be found at <http://www.nec2013.org/>.

country stood, and in what direction they were moving regarding national evaluation capacities (IEO UNDP 2015c). This assessment found a variety of institutional settings and legal frameworks among the countries, reflecting a variety of government interests, political contexts, and national developmental stages. These granular aspects of national evaluation capacities are complex, and intrinsically linked to each country's development agenda: therefore they need to be taken into consideration and incorporated into the development of future evaluation agendas.

Over the years, one key lesson was learned through the NEC conferences and the process of promoting and implementing NEC commitments: without clear goals and the appropriate follow-up, governments and partners have a hard time focusing their attention on, and committing to the changes and long-term investments needed in order to build national evaluation capacities. The 18 NEC commitments served as a conversation starter for NEC participants to go back to their countries and reconsider their key national evaluation capacities and needs. These commitments were not necessarily the 18 initial commitments of the 2013 NEC conference, but included specific commitments that the countries agreed made more sense for their unique national contexts, and were therefore equally important.

Expanding on the 18 NEC commitments, in a global partnership effort for 2015, the International Year of Evaluation (EvalYear), the NEC 2015 conference focused on gathering information and commitments from participants to develop a new set of NEC commitments. The outcome was the Bangkok Declaration, a much expanded format that went beyond NEC and incorporated elements that also focused on the evaluation profession and global issues.² The declaration later contributed to another relevant document, the Global Evaluation Agenda, which was the first ever long-term global vision for evaluation.³

The Bangkok Declaration was a collective statement of all participants of the joint 2015 NEC conference and IDEAS Global Assembly: it is an expression of aspirations grounded in the community of practice of professional development evaluation. It is not legally binding on individuals or governments, but it seeks to capture key principles, give a sense of common purpose and understanding, and frame a vision of joint action in future support of individual, professional, and national evaluation capacity as countries shape their responses to the 2030 Agenda.

CONVERGENCE OF THE MDGS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TRACKS FOR THE SDGS

Recognizing the intrinsic linkage between poverty eradication and sustainable development, during the General Assembly Special Event in September 2013, UN member states requested that the Open Working Group and the

²The Bangkok Declaration can be found at http://web.undp.org/evaluation/nec/nec-2015_declaration.shtml.

³The Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020 can be found at <http://www.evalpartners.org/global-evaluation-agenda>.

Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing produce inputs for the post-2015 negotiations of the SDGs.

In August 2014, the Open Working Group submitted its proposal for a set of 17 SDGs, along with 169 associated targets. At the same time, the Committee of Financing Experts produced a set of recommendations on sustainable development financing. In December 2014, the Secretary-General submitted to UN member states his synthesis report, combining the intergovernmental proposals and the full range of inputs from both tracks.

UN member states agreed that the proposed SDGs would form the basis for intergovernmental negotiations of the post-2015 agenda with a text of the new agenda entitled “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” for adoption by the Post-2015 Summit held in New York September 25–27, 2015. The text included a declaration, 17 SDGs and 169 targets, and components on the means of implementation, the global partnership, and a follow-up and review process. The 2030 Agenda was structured around five “Ps”—people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership—and its set of 17 SDGs were officially adopted by the summit on September 25. The comprehensive nature of this new agenda has effectively reaffirmed this convergence, aligning the processes and the scope, and leading to a holistic approach to development.

Three other complementary processes ran alongside the Post-2015 process: one with a focus on disaster risk reduction, another on financing for development, and a third focused on climate change. The 2030 Agenda became an umbrella agreement for these other three agreements as well.

In March 2015, UN member states adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) during the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Japan. This framework, which is the result of several years of consultations and several months of intergovernmental negotiations, contains seven targets and four priorities for action to reduce negative impact, build resilience, and strengthen related international cooperation. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes the importance of disaster risk reduction, and makes reference to the Sendai Framework and the need for development of holistic disaster risk management at all levels in its Goal 11.

In July 2015 in Addis Ababa, UN member states held the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, organized as a follow-up to the Monterrey Consensus and Doha Declaration. This conference led to an agreement entitled “Addis Ababa Action Agenda,” which identifies the key action areas needed in order to provide the means and create an enabling environment for implementing the SDGs. The text of the adopted 2030 Agenda recognizes the concrete policies and actions agreed to in Addis Ababa as supporting, complementing, and contextualizing the means of implementation targets of the SDGs, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda itself as an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The third complementary process is the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) that was held in Paris in late 2015 featured negotiations toward the first universal, legally binding global agreement on climate change, now known as the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement, which is due to enter into force in 2020,

contains an action plan that could allow UN member states to limit global warming to well below 2°C, and aims to limit it to 1.5°C. In addition to actions aimed at the reduction of emissions, it also covers issues related to adaptation, support, loss and damage, and transparency and stocktaking. Such an agreement is explicitly mentioned in the proposed SDGs, and the UNFCCC is acknowledged as the primary forum for these negotiations.

APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MDGS TO THE SDGS

The post-2015 negotiations, and the work to design the SDGs, were led by member states from the outset. The outcome is the result of a consistent global participatory process in which representatives from countries, academia, civil society, and the private sector together formulated the SDGs. The SDGs contain much that critics said was missing in the MDGs.

One thing that was learned from the experience of the MDGs was the importance of reporting and monitoring. However, the 2030 SDG Agenda has a much wider scope than the largely social goals of the MDGs, and takes into greater consideration the need for economic, social, and environmental sustainability. It also recognizes the importance of peaceful societies. With the MDGs, the question was: What are the goals that are lagging the most, where are the gaps, and how can we fill them? With the SDGs, given the fact that the breadth of the 2030 Agenda implies a need to break down silos and adopt an integrated approach to development interventions, the question has become more evaluative. Reporting and monitoring are insufficient; countries need evaluations in order to answer this question: What are the actions required to accelerate progress across a broader range of interlinked goals? Addressing this question requires thinking through the connections and synergies across the goals, and pointing out how actions in one area affect other areas. Evaluative tools are also required to assess and manage trade-offs, and in this context “evaluation methods will need to determine whether the right choices were made to achieve possibly conflicting desirable outcomes, and how the different outcomes should be valued” (Heider 2015).

While much has been achieved during the MDG implementation period, a key criticism of the MDGs was that there was insufficient attention paid to generating evidence on achievements and particularly learning from challenges.⁴ Much greater focus has been on monitoring and reporting, with many countries publishing national and also subnational MDG progress reports, while evaluation of which policies and interventions have worked and which have not were often only conducted at a later stage, and as part of designing MDG acceleration frameworks. MDG progress was largely tracked at the aggregate level, masking disparities in performance and disguising rising inequalities. In order to move forward in such a way as to ensure that no one is left behind, a better understanding of why and how certain policy choices and interventions affect different segments of society will be imperative. Recognizing that “only

⁴ See EvalSDGs, http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/EvalSDG_Overview_Paper_8-12-15_1-pager.pdf.

by counting the uncounted can we reach the unreached" (UN 2015b), SDG targets should be met for all nations, peoples, and segments of society, and should "reach the furthest behind first," but only by evaluating trends, and contributing and hindering factors, can we assess whether progress has been or can be made relevant, sustainable, and equitable.

The 2030 Agenda is also a much more ambitious agenda than the MDGs, aspiring toward the goals of the elimination of poverty and universal access to benefits: this requires addressing the root causes of exclusion and deprivation, which are often deeply embedded in economic, social, and political marginalization. Another key lesson of the MDG implementation was that early strategic planning is important in laying the groundwork for long-term progress, because putting into place priority actions at an early stage can have multiplier effects on development outcomes (IEO UNDP 2015b). Targets associated with the MDGs were only shaped over time, while financing the MDGs was discussed in Monterrey two years after the Millennium Declaration. In contrast, the inclusion from the outset of a detailed results framework in the 2030 Agenda presents an opportunity for early action to link results and resources for results-based management.

From the beginning, the follow-up and review mechanism of the SDGs will also allow for early adjustments, course corrections, and enhanced results. In addition, the "MDG monitoring experience has clearly demonstrated that effective use of data can help galvanize development efforts, implement successful targeted interventions, track performance and improve accountability" (UN 2015b, 10). The MDG framework also strengthened the use of robust and reliable data for evidence-based decision making, with many countries integrating the MDGs into their national priorities and development strategies. Country ownership, leadership, and the participation of a wide range of stakeholders have been vital to ensure MDG progress and accountability.

PRIORITIES FOR NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-2015 SDG DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda states that "Governments have the primary responsibility for review, at the national, regional and global levels, in relation to progress made in meeting the goals and targets over the next fifteen years" (UN 2015c). With the explicit follow-up and review mechanism of the SDGs, countries will need to go beyond the usual monitoring and tracking of the MDGs, and tackle evaluations.⁵

Given the complexity of the SDGs—17 goals, 169 targets, and 230 indicators—the evaluation community has to be prepared to support an SDG platform for measurement, and for improving national evaluation capacities to contribute to accountability and learning. In addition, investment in qualitative

⁵The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and the changing dynamics of development finance and development cooperation also present an opportunity to move from donor-driven to country-led evaluation.

assessment and careful design of national and international platforms and networks for dialogue, information sharing, and debate, with particular attention given to evidence provided by diverse domestic actors, may become central to achieving the SDGs.

The challenge of implementation points to the need for learning what works and what does not; which factors influence and hamper success; which aspects can risk sustainability, under which contexts; and how to break down silos and promote an integrated approach in order to achieve the most effective and efficient results. With that in mind, four overarching priorities emerged from the consultations that took place during the last NEC conference in Bangkok, building on the discussions from previous NEC conferences about independence, credibility, and the use of evaluations.

Promoting country-owned, country-led evaluations, with an emphasis on their use in influencing policies.

One important priority is to respond to national circumstances, to support existing national systems and to avoid duplication of efforts and the famous “reinventing the wheel.” Doing this entails a shift from donor-driven evaluations to country-owned evaluations and developing national evaluation capacities. This process should not be donor-driven but rather localized, contextualized, and culturally sensitized.

Critical for national ownership of evaluations is the need to raise the demand for evaluations, and not just focus on supply. A successful use of evaluations to inform policy, and to promote a change in mindsets within organizations and governments, can be used to advocate for a prominent role for evaluation in the implementation of the SDGs, for learning, and ultimately, to bring about improvement in people’s lives.

Developing and strengthening evaluation process and methods.

A second priority identified at the conference is developing new methods for evaluating progress toward, and the impact of, the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda is committed to developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product. But how do we measure sustainability with the SDGs in mind? Environmental protection is only one of the means to achieve continued ecosystem services to mankind of clean air, water, healthy food, and freedom from disease. Sustainability requires an adaptive dynamic balance between the social, economic, and environmental domains. The SDGs require seeing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection as mutually reinforcing. Whether our measurement and evaluation tools are sufficiently sophisticated to provide evidence on whether such a dynamic balance has been reached, or is within reach, and whether it is adaptive enough to change when necessary are great challenges. Methods that capture social inclusion and environmental protection need to be found in order to assess and evaluate sustainability.⁶

⁶ There has been increasing interest from governments around the world in using innovative techniques to get better feedback from citizens on the effectiveness of their policies and programs, and to improve equity, sustainability, and accountability.

Engaging existing and new stakeholders in exchange and collaboration.

A third priority identified was the importance of promoting more diverse partnerships and greater cooperation between governments, civil society, parliaments, and the private sector, in order to increase the awareness and use of evaluations. Traditional North-South aid models are playing an increasingly small role as private sector and national government resource flows increase, and the evaluation community advocates for more country-driven evaluations. There is a need for more dialogue in order to improve cooperation between the public and private sectors, to create networks and platforms for information and knowledge sharing, and to involve representatives of the private sector, parliamentarians, policymakers, legislators, and individual citizens.

The conference also stressed the importance of citizens as stakeholders, and the importance of raising awareness among citizens of the SDGs and the role of evaluation. There is growing awareness of the importance of people's engagement in monitoring and evaluation, and in accountability mechanisms.

Institutional structures for the evaluation of the SDGs. The NEC Conference revealed that we still have a long way to go in understanding how we integrate the evaluation of the SDGs into institutional structures. Almost every SDG is covered by national policy, so the question governments now face is how to monitor and evaluate all these policies and SDGs without duplicating and wasting resources. The holistic and integrative nature of the SDGs is not reflected in its structure and division into 17 goals. Governments may be tempted to divide out responsibility for the SDGs to respective line ministries, and the integrative perspective may be lost as a result. We need to sustain the discourse on the need to work on all SDGs also in evaluation. In an environment where the resources needed to deliver on the SDGs are scarce, evaluation will continue to gain prominence as a means of ensuring accountability for the use of those resources, and can help nations learn what works best under which contexts, in order to ensure effectiveness. The right institutional structures and national evaluation capacities will be key to the success of these processes.

CONCLUSION

The 2030 Agenda spells out the ideals and goals that will require evaluators and the development community to engage with in addressing a variety of interrelated, complex, and challenging issues, and to be competent at multiple levels in order to make significant contributions. If evaluators are to help give voice to people and countries in a global context where inequality persists at multiple levels, there is a need to start thinking about evaluation of the SDGs now, rather than as an afterthought. The SDGs contain a vision that combines a human capability approach to development with modern

UNDP, through its Innovation Fund, has implemented a number of prototypes with partners that harness technology to improve sustainability and accountability.

reconstructions of traditional economic models of growth. In responding to the SDGs focus on inequity, and in service to the principle of “no one left behind,” the evaluation function can bring methodological validity as well as the legitimacy to empower people as effective evaluation processes help promote social action for development.

Achieving the SDGs depends on country-led evaluations that will produce evidence of whether the outcomes and impacts of policies, programs, and projects are equitable, relevant, and sustainable. Such evidence is useful not only in demonstrating public sector accountability, but also in focusing the attention of civil society and governments on enhancing learning, adaptive management, and innovation. Evaluation does not only identify “what works and what doesn’t,” or simply answer the question of whether we did or did we not achieve our objectives. Its real value is that it can be coupled to learning. For that, the learning and knowledge highlighted in evaluations needs to be used beyond simple accountability for strategic planning and adaptive management. Evaluation is a dynamic and ongoing process that continues to evolve, and is vital to support improving efforts, results, and development.

Therefore, supporting national evaluation capacity development is key to enabling mutual accountability among countries, and promoting learning to further the effective achievement of the SDGs, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

IEO is proud of the role UNDP has played in supporting development, and stands ready to work with partners to advance in supporting the development of national capacities for evaluating progress toward the SDGs.

In 2017, the Fifth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities will take place. The evaluation community should be intensely engaged in discussing how to assess the equitability of SDG outcomes for marginalized populations; how to measure and evaluate new themes that are integral to the SDGs; and how to assess the effectiveness of integrated approaches, in order to understand what works best and under which contexts, to expedite progress toward and the achievement of the SDGs.

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