

Country-led evaluation to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals

A guide for evaluation
commissioners, managers
and evaluators



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland



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This second edition of the guidebook provides a step-by-step guide on conducting evaluations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It emphasizes the role of national governments in steering the evaluation process in a participatory way. Building on examples and lessons from several countries around the world, it aims to serve as a practical, hands-on resource for evaluation commissioners, managers and evaluators.

To support customized local or national journeys towards sustainable development, this second edition of the guide:

- Identifies key 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation characteristics and approaches.
- Lays out the main steps involved in initiating, scoping, designing, conducting and using a 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation.
- Discusses the ways in which the 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation processes and results can be used to inform policy and support national progress on sustainable development.
- Provides key guidelines to ensure SDG evaluations influence in high-level decision-making.
- Looks at how 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation can be integrated into national monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Shows how 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation can enrich or complement Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting.

This second edition was co-produced by

The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' experience of development evaluation contributes to evaluating progress on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at national level and identifying local solutions to global challenges.

The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) was established in 2012 to provide governmental and non-governmental development cooperation organizations with independent and scientifically sound evaluations, which they can feed into their strategies, instruments and programmes.

IDEAS is a global network aimed at improving and extending the practice of evaluation, refining knowledge, strengthening capacity and expanding networks and partnerships for development evaluation.

The UNICEF evaluation function helps deliver results for children by fostering evidence-based decision-making in the organization and at the national and international levels.

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Insights on
sustainable
development



Principles and
concepts under-
pinning the
2030 Agenda



In summary



Evaluation
resources,
tools and tips



Lessons from
practice

Acronyms and abbreviations

BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEval	German Institute for Development Evaluation
DNP	National Planning Department (Colombia)
ECD	Evaluation Capacity Development
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
GPFE	Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation
HELSUS	Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IAEG-SDGs	Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators
IDEAS	International Development Evaluation Association
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank)
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NDP	National Department of Planning of Ecuador
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSSAP-SDGs	Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SEI	Stockholm Environment Institute
SINGERIA	National System for the Evaluation of Management and Results (Colombia)
SLEVA	Sri Lanka Evaluation Association
SNP	National Secretariat of Planning (Ecuador)
SYKE	Finnish Environment Institute
ToC	Theory of Change
TWG-SDGsEval	Technical working group on SDGs evaluation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VNR	Voluntary National Review
VOPE	Voluntary Organization for Professional Evaluation

Preface

The 2024 Pact for the Future calls for the urgent production of reliable information on progress and for analysing and synthesizing evidence around the SDGs. We have found that the SDGs have helped bring people together to work on a common agenda.

Bringing people together is powerful. The first edition of this guide was inspired by a workshop attended by 33 government representatives and evaluation specialists from 22 countries, entitled “Evaluation to connect national priorities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”. The workshop, hosted in Helsinki in March 2018, took place two years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and was jointly organized by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Finland, EVALSDGs, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The four partners came together to create the first edition of this guidebook, which replicated the workshop title, capturing and sharing learnings on how evaluation can accelerate national journeys to a more sustainable future.

After four years of experience in using, disseminating, and building capacities for SDG evaluations based on the guidebook, the same partners decided to produce a second edition as a valuable resource. The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), MFA Finland, UNICEF, and a new partner International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), collaborated on the revised version of the guidebook, drawing on several key sources of insight:

1. The progress made by Costa Rica, Finland, and Nigeria in completing SDG evaluations and using the findings to influence national public policies. By the time of the second edition, all three had completed two evaluations.
2. Examples from new countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, and Uganda, in conducting country-led SDG evaluations.
3. The feedback received from various capacity development workshops delivered by the partners in different regions and languages.

In response to feedback, the second edition includes updated examples of 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluations and introduces two new chapters: “Initiating an SDG evaluation” and “Using the results of an SDG evaluation for influencing policy and decision-making”. Rather than a one-size-fits-all manual, this guide seeks to support evaluation commissioners, managers and professional evaluators to create tailored plans and approaches to 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation. It argues that a successful evaluation must both be built around existing national context and underpinned by the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

This guide also promotes the implementation, by countries, of the UN General Assembly Resolution “Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-Led Evaluations” (A/RES/77/283).¹ Endorsed on 26 April 2023 without a vote, this new resolution is considered a key milestone. The process leading to the resolution was a true country-led initiative, spearheaded by Nigeria and co-sponsored by 23 countries. By the resolution, the United Nations General Assembly encourages all member states to use evidence from evaluations of the SDGs implementation for decision-making and reporting on their progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

With only five years to go, there is an urgency to evaluate progress towards the SDGs. Countries need to demonstrate accountability for actions taken towards implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and learnings on how to improve policy formulation and implementation. Evaluators and commissioners need support to design, undertake, guide and accompany SDG evaluations, applying tailored approaches. Through this guidebook, we seek to provide this support and motivate country-led evaluations that embody the principles of the 2030 Agenda: integration, equity, resilience, environmental sustainability, universality, mutual accountability and leaving no one behind.

On behalf of the partners,

Antero Klemola

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The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, DEval, IDEAS, and UNICEF are the partners that have co-produced the second edition of this guide.

The feedback of participants at the various capacity development workshops implemented by the partners has been critical to validate and improve the guidebook contents.

The real-world experiences of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda have provided invaluable learnings about using the 2030 Agenda to conduct country-led SDG evaluation and improve national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. The practices and lessons distilled from and by these countries allowed the revision of the guidebook and the release of its second edition.

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- The evaluation teams of the Finnish 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluations, the Office of the Prime Minister of Finland, and all stakeholders responsible for SDG implementation and evaluation.
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- The SDG Secretariat, Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda.

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1. Evaluation and national commitments on the SDGs

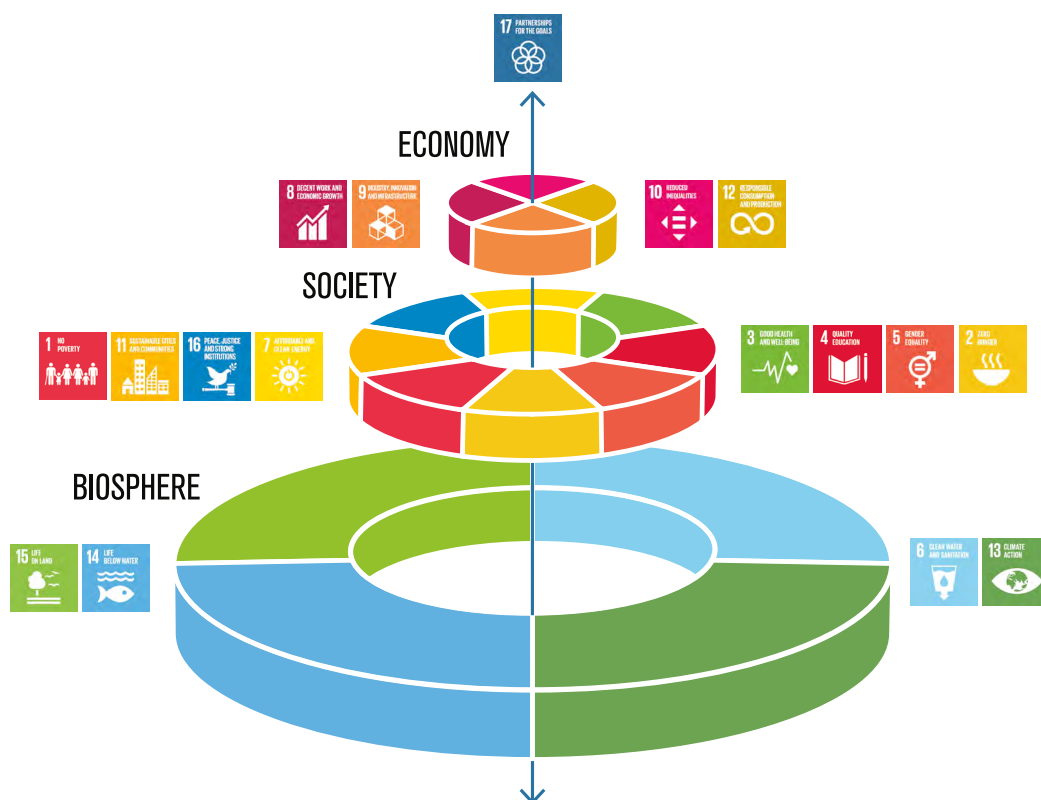
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations (UN) member states in 2015, outlines an ambitious global agenda for change. This ambition is embodied in its 17 SDGs and the principles around which it is framed. The 2030 Agenda represents a paradigm shift proposing transformational changes that establish the framework for the interconnections between development and environmental dimensions. For the first time, an international agreement included both the Global South and the Global North.

The 2030 Agenda was approved just a few months before the Paris Agreement was endorsed at the Paris Climate Conference COP20. Although the timing is coincidental, it highlights the need for both processes to support and reinforce one another. Nine years have passed since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and during this time, progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 has slowed due to

multiple environmental, political, and humanitarian crises. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had devastating effects worldwide, causing significant regression in many countries, particularly in the Global South, in their progress towards the SDGs. The coming years will be crucial for accelerating efforts to achieve these goals. Evaluation, especially country-led evaluation, will play a vital role in providing evidence for informed policy decision-making. This guide aims to raise awareness about the importance of country-led evaluations and enhance the effectiveness and influence of SDG evaluations.

As noted in the Preface, the second edition of the guidebook intends to support the dissemination and implementation of the UN resolution “Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-led Evaluation” (A/RES/77/283)³ adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 26 April 2023.

Figure 1. The SDGs “wedding cake”



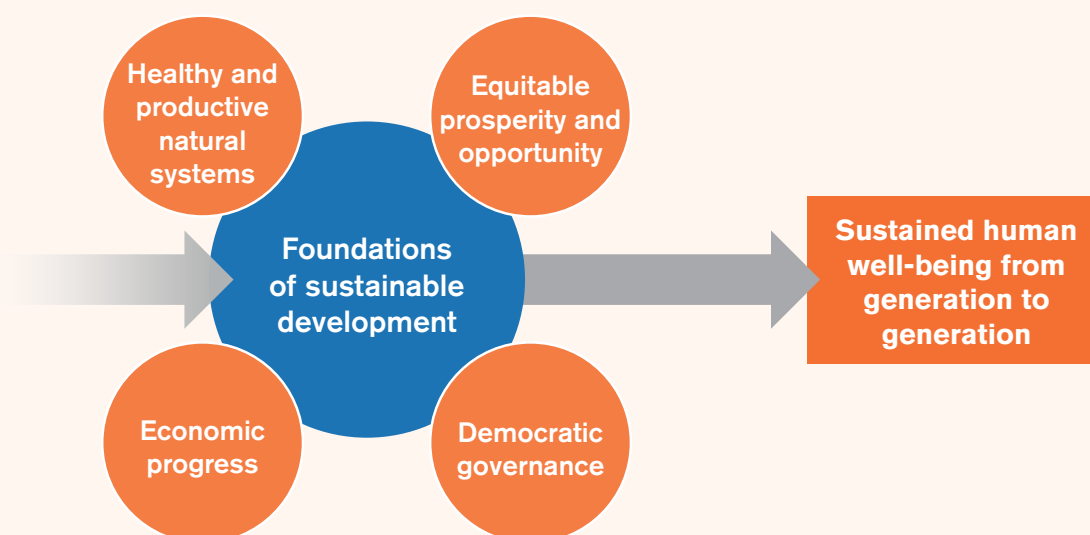
Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre.



Box 1. What is sustainable development and where did it come from?

Sustainable development recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic and governance systems and the intergenerational impacts of human action on those systems. It assumes that sustained well-being depends on balanced attention to securing equitable prosperity and opportunity, a healthy planet, economic progress and democratic governance.

Figure 2. The foundations of sustainable development



Source: adapted from IRF (2013)

UN summits – particularly the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro – helped establish the concept on the international agenda. At the same time, the growing scientific understanding of the ecological limits of planetary growth added urgency to the need for a new approach to development.

The idea of creating a new global agreement based on sustainable development to replace the Millennium Development Goals was raised at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development and resulted three years later in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

To come close to achieving the 2030 Agenda within its 15-year timeframe, every country will need to contribute collectively and individually. Since 2015, countries have been developing national SDG strategies and action plans and thinking about how to assess progress on such a complex agenda. This process was disrupted in 2019, for at least two years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SDGs have targets for each goal and the Inter Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs)⁴ has developed a set of global indicators related to these targets, which provide tools for countries to adapt to their monitoring needs.

Although these tools are important for describing the state of progress, more can be done to understand how progress towards one goal might contribute to or undermine progress on others. In assessing progress towards the SDGs, countries must also analyse the extent to which this progress is underpinned by the principles embedded in the 2030 Agenda such as reflecting the core tenets of equitable and sustainable development (see *Box 2*). To achieve that type of assessment, countries need more flexible and comprehensive evaluation frameworks.



Box 2. 2030 Agenda principles that are useful in evaluation processes

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents a vision for sustainable development rooted in international human rights standards. It prioritizes equality and non-discrimination, addressing economic, environmental, and social rights as well as civil, political, and cultural rights. Key principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda that are valuable for evaluation include:

Integration/coherence

The social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of development are inextricably interlinked. Any action in one dimension will have reverberations in the others and none of the SDGs can be fully achieved without the achievement of all.

Leave no one behind (LNOB)

No goal is met unless it is met for everyone; meeting the needs of those farthest behind should come before meeting the needs of others.

Equity

Rights, opportunities and access to benefits and services are provided to all under terms that are just and fair, with the aim of increasing social and economic equality (intra-generational equity). Equal consideration is given to meeting the current generation's needs and the needs of future generations (intergenerational equity).

Resilience

Individuals, social groups, human systems and/or ecosystems have the capacity to withstand social, economic or environmental stress, recover quickly from shocks and thrive under adverse or changing conditions. In social systems, resilience is particularly important for poor, marginalized and otherwise vulnerable groups.

Environmental sustainability

A continuous flow of environmental goods and services essential for human development and healthy ecosystem function is maintained and to the extent possible enhanced over the long-term.

Universality

The SDGs are framed around global problems requiring global solutions and are applicable to all countries. It is not enough for a country to make progress on the goals within its own borders; it must also support – and not undermine by its policies or actions – the efforts of others. The principle of universality is also informed by the international environmental policy principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. This recognizes that, while all countries have a responsibility to address global problems, their responsibility should reflect their level of contribution to the problem and their capacity to contribute.

Mutual accountability

There is mutual respect and trust among all those working to achieve a sustainable development objective. Their roles and responsibilities are commonly agreed and equitably allocated, and they are equally accountable to one another for their actions and results.

Learning from experience

Evaluation can help countries understand how they are progressing on their SDG strategies and targets. It can also contribute to evidence-based decision-making. However, designing a national SDG evaluation is no easy task. It implies, among other things, reaching consensus on the relevance of undertaking these evaluations. SDG evaluation is also a complex process given the scope and complexity of the 2030 Agenda. While many countries have adapted SDG targets and indicators to their specific contexts, few have attempted to design and implement a comprehensive evaluation of how they are doing in these efforts. As of the drafting of the second edition of this guide, only a handful of countries had completed SDG evaluations. These include Colombia, Costa Rica (two evaluations), Ecuador, Finland (two evaluations); Nigeria (two evaluations), and Uganda. These experiences have paved the way for other countries to learn from them. The material in this guide has largely been derived from that learning.

Chapter 1 provides the background and context.

Chapter 2 describes the SDG evaluation experiences of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda. We largely build on the experience and lessons from those countries to illustrate approaches and concepts throughout the rest of the guide.

Chapter 3 looks at the six main steps of evaluation design:

- **Step A** uses country cases to examine the importance of triggering the political decision to conduct an SDG evaluation.
- **Step B** explores the purpose of an SDG evaluation as well as its potential use and users. It also explains how the intended use informs SDG evaluation purpose and objectives.
- **Step C** presents the choices that commissioners face in deciding the scope and focus of an SDG evaluation. It also proposes some pragmatic approaches to engaging relevant stakeholders throughout the evaluation process to ensure ownership, inclusion and informed decisions.

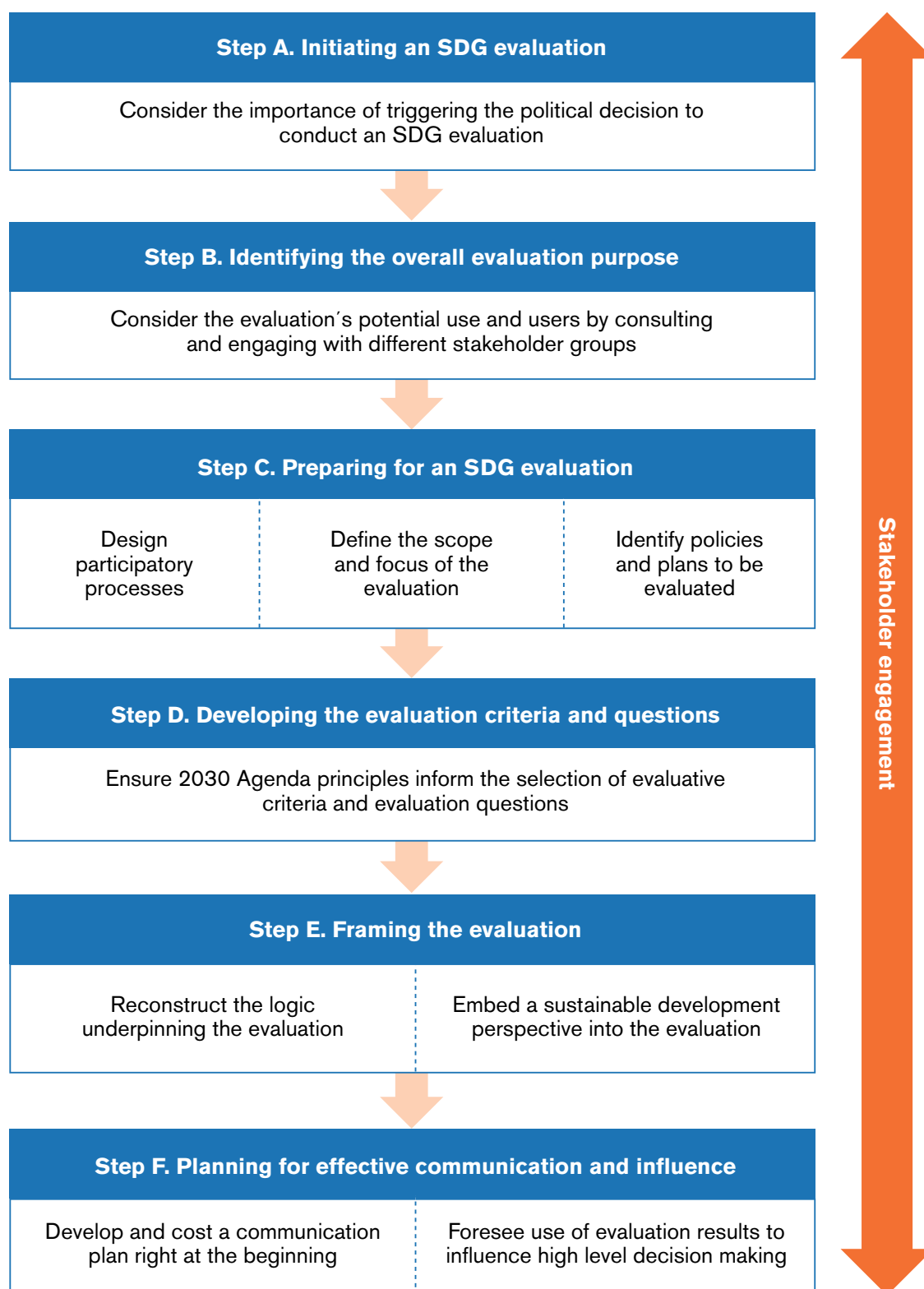
- **Step D** explains the relevance of using the principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda to inform evaluation criteria selection and develop evaluation questions.
- **Step E** provides guidelines on how to frame the SDG evaluation building upon the logic that underpins the subject to be evaluated (policies, strategies or programmes). It also proposes arrangements for oversight, and ongoing stakeholder engagement. It covers methodological issues related to SDG evaluation design, particularly how to embed a sustainable development perspective and how to assess trade-offs and synergies between actions on different goals.
- **Step F** highlights the need to plan for effective communication and influence from the start of the evaluation.

Chapter 4 looks at approaches to ensure that the results of SDG evaluations are used to inform and influence policy and decision-making as a path towards sustainable change. The potential influence for fostering more equitable and just public policies at the national level and informing VNRs are highlighted.

Chapter 5 looks at the relevance and practicalities of integrating SDG evaluations into existing or emerging national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, as well as the development of relevant indicators.

Chapter 6 provides some conclusions and key takeaways from the experiences with SDG evaluations.

Figure 3. Six main steps of an SDG evaluation



2. Experiences of SDG evaluation

Offering case studies from six different regional contexts, this chapter describes experiences of country-led SDG evaluations in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda.

Based on the newly adopted UN Resolution on “Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-Led Evaluation”, all countries are expected to report on progress towards the SDGs based on evidence from country-led evaluations. Countries need to consider how they will integrate the global indicators into their national plans and policies and track progress, including SDG evaluations. The hope is that those countries that have pioneered SDG evaluations can provide the evaluation community and decision-makers with ideas and good practices to apply in their own countries.

Finland: Towards a transformative sustainable development policy

Finland was the first country to complete an evaluation of its national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. By the time of the second edition of this guidebook, Finland has completed two national SDG evaluations.

2019: PATH2030 Evaluation

In 2018, the Finnish government commissioned an independent and comprehensive evaluation of sustainable development policies.⁵ It examined the state of sustainable development in light of national sustainability indicators, key sustainable development policy objectives and national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It also considered the status of sustainable development in its foreign policy sector.

The process resulted in a series of concrete recommendations on the future direction of Finland's sustainable development policy, many of which the government took on board.

The government assigned the task of conducting the evaluation to an interdisciplinary team with members from three Finnish organizations: Demos Helsinki, the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE)⁶. The core research team⁷ also benefited from external support from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

The evaluation, known as PATH2030⁸, was conducted over six months, with oversight from an official steering group and a broader support group, both appointed to provide advice and comment on its content and process. The official steering group included representatives from the ministries of environment, finance, foreign affairs, agriculture and forestry; the support group was a hand-picked group of respected sustainability experts from different strands of the Finnish society. The Expert Panel on Sustainable Development⁹, comprising mainly academic experts from different fields also played an important role, with

its members offering valuable advice throughout the process. Before and during the evaluation, the evaluation team got advice from the international evaluation community, through EvalPartners and EVALSDGs.

The 2019 evaluation analysed a mix of information sources and gathered expert opinions through workshops, interviews and surveys. Focusing on policy documents available within government, the analysis aimed to shed light on the state of Finland's sustainable development policy. One of the main documents consulted was the 2017 Government report on the “Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”¹⁰ which gives an overview on how change towards the SDGs is meant to happen in Finland. The team consulted the international SDG index¹¹ and Finland's national sustainable development indicators which helped highlight the country's strengths and weaknesses, and led to the reaffirmation of its national priorities.

In its analysis of key documents and other materials, the team was guided by the 4Is approach. This political economy framework developed by Brockhaus and Angelsen (2012) is based around four pillars: institutions, interests, ideas and information. The team analysed the underlying theory of change (ToC) and implementation of Finland's sustainable development policy principles outlined in the government report, data from interviews with 78 experts and material from two national workshops to discover what hinders or enables change in a specific context. The analysis revealed that, although Finland has a well-developed sustainable development policy coordination model, it was poorly integrated in its day-to-day administration. It also revealed that policymakers rarely used sustainable development research findings and indicator data when formulating policies. Instead, more narrow perspectives and interests – often economic ones – prevail.

The report also offered recommendations on how to evaluate the 2030 Agenda in the future – for example, by establishing a systemic, cross administrative evaluation system to support sustainable development policy and exploring sustainability impact evaluation tools to assess key

legislative and reform projects. “Such a tool could increase knowledge of the interconnection of activities between different administrative sectors. Both monitoring information and impact assessment should be better linked to decision-making”.¹²



Table 1. Results from Finland's analysis (2019), adapted from the 4Is framework

	Strengths	Challenges
Institutions	<p>There is a diverse participatory approach to sustainable development.</p> <p>The pursuit of sustainability is fairly visible – for example, in the strategies of different ministries.</p>	<p>Sustainable development has not been sufficiently integrated into all government sectors and management systems.</p> <p>Governmental work on sustainable development is poorly resourced when taking the required workload into consideration.</p> <p>Compartmentalisation remains a core problem.</p>
Interests	<p>Widely shared aims and processes (such as the 2030 Agenda government report) and reviews with a sustainable development angle (such as budgetary review) help to mediate conflicts of interest.</p>	<p>Short and long-term conflicts of interest – such as different dimensions of sustainable development – decrease the coherence and transformational power of politics.</p> <p>Tightly defined commercial interests tend to outweigh sustainable development policy based on human rights.</p>
Ideas	<p>Sustainable development is a widely shared and mainstreamed aim.</p>	<p>In practice, there are many disagreements over sustainable development solutions.</p>
Information	<p>There is a wealth of information on the state of sustainable development and different solutions.</p>	<p>The systematic use of indicators and research data in decision making and societal learning is not enough.</p> <p>Understanding of cross-sectorial sustainable development themes is underdeveloped and information on Finland's foreign policy aims is fragmented.</p>

2023: Assessing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Finland

The aims of the second evaluation were to analyse 1) the progress made in the implementation of Agenda2030 since the previous evaluation published in 2019, as well as 2) the extent of central government guidance and direction supporting the achievement of the 2030 Agenda goals.¹³

The starting point for the evaluation was a framework based on international practices, intervention logic, and change theory. The “impact pathways” of the various governance mechanisms were examined concerning goals, measures, and outputs leading to results and impacts in line with the national governance system for the 2030 Agenda.¹⁴

The evaluation used the evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Special attention was given to the coherence of 2030 Agenda implementation and its compatibility with governance mechanisms. Another important

perspective was the efficiency of implementation, particularly referring to the government's control system's ability to effectively advance the goals of the 2030 Agenda in this context.¹⁵

This second evaluation assessed progress achieved since the first one. It was primarily based on qualitative methods such as document analysis, interviews, surveys and benchmark analysis. A total of 45 experts from the central government, ministries, agencies and other stakeholders were interviewed. In addition, 40 people participated in two workshops that focused on two distinct questions: What is the role of guidance by the government in implementing the 2030 Agenda and how can the various actors of society be engaged in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Expert opinions on effects as well as strengths and weaknesses in the control system were gathered through a survey from 119 respondents in various government sectors (e.g., the sustainable development coordination network and individuals responsible for performance management), government agencies, and key external actors in sustainable

development. The benchmark analysis covered three reference countries (Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden) and examined the implementation and guidance related to 2030 Agenda as well as identified practices that Finland could also consider.¹⁶

The evaluation found that, overall, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda has become clearer and the systemic approach in the implementation has been strengthened.

The goals of the 2030 Agenda are visible in the strategies and results management of different

administrative branches, although there is a variation in practices. The strength of central government guidance and direction is its long-term and wide-ranging commitment to promoting sustainable development. Finland has challenges in achieving the goals of sustainable development by 2030, especially related to ecological sustainability and global responsibility and spill-over effects. The evaluation further identified bottlenecks in the governance model and made recommendations for further development of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.¹⁷

Nigeria: Progressing towards the SDGs through evidence-based policymaking

Nigeria is the first African country to have completed two national evaluations on its progress towards the SDGs. The president's commitment has facilitated the mainstreaming of the SDGs into national policies, plans and programmes as well as the government's ongoing dedication to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Nigeria has put in place a multi-layer institutional framework – the Office for the Senior Special Assistant to the President on the SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) – to coordinate and mainstream the SDGs. Its main responsibility is ensuring coherence and integration of the SDGs into national and subnational development plans, policies and strategies. Its mandate extends to developing a national SDG sensitization and advocacy programme as well as M&E, documentation and reporting duties.

Nigeria has prepared itself for evaluating two SDGs aligned with national priorities – SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education) – through a series of activities carried out over the last years. This work started in 2015, when the country developed its transition strategy, 'From the MDGs to the SDGs'. Underpinned by the principle of 'Leave no Nigerian behind', the strategy outlines three phases for achieving the 2030 Agenda:

- **Phase 1:** Consolidating lessons learned from the MDGs legacy (2016–2020)
- **Phase 2:** Scaling up the SDGs (2021–2025)
- **Phase 3:** Envisaging a practical roadmap for implementing the SDGs (2026–2030)

An important outcome of Phase 1 is the creation of national platforms or advisory groups in the private and civil society sectors and a donor partner forum. The common thread between the three phases is the emphasis on the importance of obtaining political buy-in during consultation and integrating the SDGs into existing national, subnational and sectoral policy frameworks.

The transition strategy reveals a need for building a solid statistical base to evaluate progress against the national SDG strategy. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published an SDG indicator baseline report in 2016 in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), providing the benchmark for monitoring and evaluating progress in Nigeria's SDG implementation. The result of extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, the report aimed to make sense of global indicators within the Nigerian context and examined the feasibility of developing them for informed decision-making. As part of the process, a data mapping exercise across the 17 SDGs and related targets explored the extent to which existing national priorities were aligned to the SDGs.

The report's main recommendation was that the government should build capacities to respond to gaps encountered during the data collection exercises. As a follow-up to the report, the OSSAP-SDGs supported the NBS to realign the national statistical system with SDG requirements and indicators to ensure timely tracking and reporting of SDGs in Nigeria.

To strengthen its VNR and inform policy decision-making, the Nigerian government approved the independent evaluation of priority SDGs. At the end of 2018, OSSAP-SDGs, in partnership with the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, UNICEF Nigeria and UNDP, established a technical working group on SDG evaluation for brainstorming, prioritizing and addressing capacity gaps.

Nigeria has completed the evaluation of SDG 3¹⁸ and SDG 4¹⁹ with support from UNICEF Nigeria. Findings from these evaluations are being used to inform high-level decision-making and to improve the quality of the country's VNR (See chapter 8 on Evaluation Use and Influence).

Costa Rica: A passionate regional advocate for the SDGs

Costa Rica has taken a leading role in the region by establishing the necessary structures and procedures to achieve the SDGs. Other countries such as Guatemala and the Dominican Republic view Costa Rica as a model of good practices, with Ecuador and Colombia also seeking to exchange experiences.

In 2016, Costa Rica became the first Latin American country to sign a national pact for the achievement of the SDGs.²⁰ This commitment involved the state, civil society, and the private sector adhering to the principles of sustainable development and aligning their plans, programmes, and policies with the 2030 Agenda. In early 2017, an executive decree established a high-level council on the SDGs and a technical secretariat to plan, implement, and monitor the 17 SDGs in the country.²¹ The council identified three priority areas for focus: poverty reduction, responsible production and consumption, and sustainable infrastructure and communities. These priorities, directly linked to specific SDGs, reflect the interconnected nature of social, environmental, economic, and political dimensions of sustainable development. The objective was to translate the SDGs into concrete actions based on the 2030 Agenda. The government also committed to a four-year initiative under the auspices of the UN, emphasizing the principle of LNOB, which involved strengthening national agreements for the implementation of the SDGs.

After presenting its first VNR to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2017, Costa Rica's National Institute of Statistics and Census conducted a diagnosis of the statistical capacities needed to measure progress towards the SDGs. The country developed a mapping of SDG targets and indicators and compared them with national targets. This resulted in a baseline that is used to determine the evolution of specific indicators for Costa Rica across 13 strategic sectors. In 2023, efforts included publishing the methodology for defining the National Goals Strategy of the SDGs. Its purpose is to "guide and coordinate the various public and private actors involved in the 2030 Agenda, for the formulation, allocation of budgetary resources, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of this SDG planning instrument".²² Additionally, the SDG Secretariat prepared a third voluntary report, which was presented at the 2024 HLPF.

With support from DEval and the Focelac+ project, Costa Rica has developed two evaluations using an SDG approach, both addressing environmental issues, specifically biodiversity and climate change. The first evaluation in 2020 examined non-reimbursable international cooperation in biodiversity and climate change. The second evaluation, started in the latter half of 2023, assessed the National Biodiversity Strategy 2016-2025 and was completed in August 2024. This latest evaluation utilized the first edition of this guidebook as input for managing the evaluation process.

Both evaluations have incorporated principles of the 2030 Agenda, addressing participation, gender, equity, and environmental sustainability.

The above-mentioned evaluations represent the initial efforts by the public administration to adapt the SDG approach to the National Evaluation Agenda. Due to their characteristics, they have been innovative within their contexts. As noted by the deputy director of DEval and head of the Competence Centre in Evaluation Methodologies, "if universality is a central feature of the 2030 Agenda and transparency is key to its fulfilment, it is essential that partner countries are prepared to evaluate the interventions of international donors in their countries."

The 2024 evaluation of the National Biodiversity Strategy 2016-2025 fed directly into Costa Rica's 2024 VNR, which includes a chapter dedicated to "Mechanisms of evaluation and accountability".²³

Colombia: Evaluation of the SDGs to improve public policy performance

Colombia has established an institutional framework to meet the commitments associated with the SDGs. This framework is based on Government Decree 280 of 2015, which created a national level decision-making committee called the High-Level Commission for the Implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and its SDGs (also referred to as the High-Level Commission). In line with this, the public policy document CONPES 3918²⁴ of 2018 was approved, defining the strategy for implementing the SDGs in Colombia and assigning specific roles and responsibilities for executing actions associated with each SDG.

The High-Level Commission is responsible for coordinating sectoral, multisectoral, and subnational agendas. It also evaluates processes to identify good practices and set guidelines for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The National Planning Department (DNP) acts as the technical secretariat, and its members are ministerial entities.

Colombia has a monitoring system for SDG indicators and has submitted four VNRs²⁵ to the HLPF. It has also created guidelines to encourage voluntary reporting at the subnational level.

Additionally, the country has the *Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de Gestión y Resultados* (Sinergia)²⁶, which prioritizes an annual agenda of strategic policies or programmes to be evaluated, aiming to make evidence-based public policy decisions. Under the leadership of the DNP, these annual agendas are executed, and various evaluations are conducted through external firms. Evaluation designs are developed collaboratively between the Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies of the DNP, the technical directorate associated with the specific issue, and the entity or entities responsible for the intervention being evaluated.

In 2021, Sinergia identified the need to conduct an evaluation process focused exclusively on the SDGs. The “Evaluation of policy coherence between the SDGs and other strategic agendas based on institutional and operational analyses” aimed to assess institutional progress and the effectiveness of public policies contributing to the SDGs. It also aimed to perform a policy coherence analysis of the SDGs as a catalyst for their implementation. The evaluation was financially supported by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), with technical assistance from DEval’s Focelac+ project. The evaluation took place in 2022, and the final report was released in January 2023.

The evaluation focused on four SDGs: Zero hunger (SDG 2), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13). A mixed methods approach was used to ensure a comprehensive analysis, including surveys, interviews, and workshops. The methodology also involved formulating indicators and categories. Consistency was sought between documentary research, qualitative testimonies, and quantitative indicators to obtain a comprehensive understanding. An external evaluation firm conducted the evaluation.

The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Analyse the institutional capacity at the national, regional, and territorial levels to identify strengths and weaknesses in implementing SDG 2, 11, 12, and 13 (CONPES 3918 targets of 2018).
- Analyse the operations of CONPES Document 3918 of 2018 to identify bottlenecks in implementation and achieve the targets set within the framework of SDG 2, 11, 12, and 13.
- Analyse progress toward the SDGs and determine the influence of public and private actors and civil society on this progress.
- Establish the progress made since 2018 in achieving policy coherence in implementing various strategies aimed at achieving the selected SDGs.
- Formulate recommendations to the SDG technical commission to improve management processes and strengthen the achievement of SDG results.

The evaluation process provided important lessons for the country, among others:²⁷

- 1. Coherence:** There are strong links with the four main strategic sustainability agendas, and coherence exists between public policies and the prioritized SDGs.
- 2. Institutional capacity:** There is national capacity to plan SDG implementation, although some sectors are stronger than others. The evaluation recommended strengthening institutional capacity for better implementation and control.
- 3. Coordination:** The evaluation revealed self-evaluation processes, coordination levels between civil society and the private sector, and linkages between national and territorial levels, although some tensions exist. The evaluation highlighted the need to propose strategies to strengthen coordination and inter-linkages.

Ecuador: Evaluating the SDGs to inform national public policy

The Ecuadorian government adopted the 2030 Agenda as a framework for public policy. This commitment designates the governing body of planning, in coordination with relevant entities, as responsible for aligning the 2030 Agenda with national planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems.

To fulfil this mandate, the National Planning Secretariat (NPS) recommended evaluating the public policy on chronic child malnutrition through an SDG-focused approach. This recommendation emerged from a participatory process involving a series of steps:

- A pre-evaluability assessment of nationally prioritized policies.
- A ranking exercise to determine the evaluability of each pre-selected policy.
- A workshop to identify the top three policies for evaluation.

All line ministries were involved in the pre-evaluability assessment and participated in a dual-purpose workshop aimed at establishing linkages between public policies and the SDGs while reaching a consensus on which policies were ready for evaluation. Based on this process, the NPS prepared a report for the Office of the Presidency, recommending the policy for evaluation.

The evaluation, initiated in 2023 and finalized in 2024, was led by the NPS with the involvement of independent evaluators and technical support from DEval and the Focelac+ project.

Ecuador's 2024 VNR incorporated a sub-chapter dedicated to its first country-led SDG evaluation titled "Ecuador at the vanguard in SDG evaluation". The VNR is also characterized by its comprehensive approach, incorporating evaluations in the reporting on six SDGs (2, 3, 4, 6, 15, 16).²⁸

Uganda: Evaluating the 17 SDGs through a LNOB and five pillars (5Ps) lens

In 2023, the Government of Uganda completed a comprehensive evaluation of the LNOB principle in development and humanitarian contexts. This exercise was commissioned by the SDG Secretariat, Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda and aimed to understand "who is being left behind" in the implementation of the SDGs in Uganda.

The scope included all 17 SDGs and was guided by the five pillars of the 2030 Agenda (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships). The evaluation concluded that, despite several efforts, many LNOB sub-groups continue to suffer from inequality and discrimination due to policy, legal, and institutional dysfunctions. Remoteness and spatial isolation exacerbate their predicament, and high levels of

vulnerability to shocks worsen their situation.

Recommendations directed to various line ministries included: Improving data generation on LNOB sub-groups; strengthening partnerships among government, development partners, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector; and enhancing measures to address the needs of LNOB sub-groups in development and humanitarian interventions.

A key finding from the evaluation emphasized that achieving the LNOB principle demands collective efforts from all stakeholders to dismantle systemic barriers, produce comprehensive data, and implement inclusive policies and programmes.

Summary of lessons learned

A summary of lessons learned and next steps in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda is outlined below (see *Table 2*).



Table 2. Summary of lessons learned and next steps in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda

Country	Experience	Key lessons learned	Next steps
Colombia	SDG evaluation's scope included four SDGs plus an in-depth analysis on institutional coherence.	The evaluation demonstrated importance of coordination between civil society and the private sector. It also highlighted existing linkages between national and territorial levels.	The evaluation is in its dissemination and use phase. The evaluation is also expected to inform forthcoming VNRs.
Costa Rica	Embedded the SDGs into national M&E systems	Aligning national development planning processes with the SDGs represented an opportunity to undertake two national evaluations of the SDGs. The evaluations were highly useful to inform Costa Rica's 2024 VNR.	The conduct of two national evaluations with an SDG component has entered its utilization phase. The evaluation of the National Biodiversity Strategy was completed in 2024, the results of which will be used to update the National Biodiversity Strategy. It will also serve as a foundation for further studies on the state of biodiversity in the country.
Ecuador	Credibility gained through a pre-evaluability assessment and a participatory process	The decision to evaluate the SDGs was made possible by the existence of a robust national framework and a credible participatory process. The evaluation demonstrated the critical importance of assessing the readiness of public policies for evaluation. SDG evaluations can lead to evidence-based VNRs. Ecuador used the evidence from its SDG evaluation to inform its 2024 VNR.	Dissemination and use phases are being discussed and will soon be implemented. Lessons learned have been distilled to guide the design of future evaluations.
Finland	Carried out two national evaluations of sustainable development policies	The timing of the evaluations was a crucial success factor for impact. Developing a dissemination plan early on helped get the message out. Designing a participatory evaluation ensured ownership among decision-makers.	Undertake ongoing (annual) monitoring of key sustainability targets. ²⁹ Report to the parliament on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. ³⁰

Nigeria	Commissioned evaluation of three priority SDGs	<p>Committing to evaluation and sustainable development in key political documents (such as the Country Transition Strategy) was the first important step.</p> <p>Investing in national SDG evaluation capacity building for key officials (from ministries, departments, agencies and so on) secured adequate capabilities for engaging with the 2030 Agenda.</p>	Conduct an additional independent SDG evaluation on SDG1. Further disseminate, use and evaluate the influence of completed evaluations on national public policies.
Uganda	Evaluating the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs through the lens of the LNOB principle and the 5 Ps	Achieving the LNOB principle requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders if systemic barriers are to be addressed.	Implementation of evaluation recommendations, dissemination and use.

3. Designing an SDG evaluation: Step-by-step

This chapter provides an orientation around the most important steps in initiating, planning, and designing a country-led SDG evaluation. In addition to planning the objective and scope of the evaluation, it makes a case for preparing for effective communication and maximizing use of the evaluation right from the beginning.

Step A: Initiating an SDG evaluation

Since the first edition of this guidebook, many evaluators, managers and commissioners have followed the advances in country-led evaluations of the SDGs. However, many of those who consider initiating such a process have been left with the question, what does it take to initiate an SDG evaluation, how to trigger the political decision to evaluate the SDGs, what level of readiness is there, and what are the critical ingredients needed for an SDG evaluation to get underway. This chapter explores these questions and draws on the experiences from Ecuador, Finland, and Nigeria.

Based on previous lessons, the key factors for initiating 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluations involve a foundational political commitment to the agenda. Including evaluation requirements in government programmes and securing reporting obligations to national parliaments facilitates the process of initiating national country-led evaluations. These evaluations should be timed so that they align with internal country policy cycles, such as election periods, to facilitate continuity and ensure that findings can influence new administrations. Employing a collaborative, whole-of-society approach right from the beginning, with participation from relevant government ministries, civil society, private sectors, and other key stakeholders, enhances the credibility and impact of SDG evaluations. These participatory frameworks can foster trust among stakeholders and facilitate cross-sectoral leadership essential for SDG success. Lastly, sustainable funding and institutional support are vital.

The following actions have been taken by countries to initiate the process:

- Engage relevant stakeholders using participatory methods.
- Ideally, identify the prospective timing for the evaluation as part of the national policy cycle or election periods.
- Secure political commitment and will through consultations and through existing policy and legal frameworks.
- Work with, and through, existing institutional frameworks and actors and their mandates. Where mandates might not exist, work with formalized steering bodies for the evaluation, ensuring that the government steers the process.
- Identify and secure funding sources and modalities, prepare a resource mobilization strategy. Consider partnering with international organizations interested in supporting country-led evaluation efforts.
- Start with broad discussions and consultations about the prospect of initiating an evaluation, first among relevant government actors then with key stakeholders. Experiences show that the lead on such discussions can be taken either by SDG offices linked to the Presidency (Nigeria), the Prime Minister (Uganda), or the Ministries of Planning (Ecuador, Colombia and Costa Rica).

Finland: Accountability beyond party politics

Effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level requires well established follow-up structures, but also regular and independent evaluation of sustainability policies. The Government of Finland is committed to commissioning independent evaluations of the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda every four years. The purpose of independent evaluation, organized towards the end of the electoral period is to produce fact-based content on sustainability issues and government's progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Initiating an evaluation on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs takes time. In Finland, the process started with discussions between government ministries and other parties in 2017 and planning for the evaluation started in 2018 under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office. The first national SDG evaluation report was published in 2019.³¹ Its findings and recommendations were brought into pre-electoral debate, and the recommendations supported the new government in the preparation of the government programme. The subsequent government commissioned an independent external evaluation on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda during 2022–2023, to track progress made since the first evaluation. The second SDG evaluation³² assessed the actions of the central government to guide the implementation particularly focusing on the government's guidance and steering system and elements such as strategic guidance, budget processes, performance management, regulation and performance agreements.

In the case of Finland, the mandate for carrying out the evaluation in 2018 stemmed from the first national implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda, prepared in 2016–2017. The national implementation plan included a chapter on follow-up and review, in which the government stated that “A comprehensive and independent assessment of Finland's sustainable development policy and the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be conducted every four years, starting in 2019. The implementation plan will be updated to ensure consistency with the recommendations made.”

The decision to include evaluation in the national implementation plan significantly facilitated the implementation of the evaluation when it became topical. It also facilitated the inclusion of the appropriation needed for the evaluation in the budget of the Prime Minister's Office during the year of the evaluation.

In Finland's case, a strong cultural emphasis on knowledge-based decision-making can also be considered as an element that aided the decision to evaluate national implementation. To justify the need for a national evaluation, reference was made to Article 74(g) of the 2030 Agenda, according to which “Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles: [...] They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data...”

The national implementation plan was submitted to the parliament as a government report. In Finland, such reports contain certain specific responsibilities of the government, such as an annual reporting obligation. Consequently, the government was obliged to report annually to the parliament on the progress of implementation, including the evaluation. Active contact between the officials responsible for national implementation, the National Commission on Sustainable Development, and the parliament helped to keep the issue on the agenda of the parliament.

The decision to include regular reporting to the HLPF in the national implementation plan supported the evaluation exercise, which was seen as a means of producing independent information.

Finland's experience also argues that political leadership is crucial but sustainable development should not be politicized. The 2030 Agenda needs to be everybody's agenda, not just for some political movements or parties. Finland is committed to reaching the SDGs by 2030, and continues towards that aim, with a coherent and inclusive approach.

To make evaluations relevant to both internal policy cycles and global reporting, countries can also adopt a phased approach, allowing time for the evaluation to feed into key political moments and inform VNRs; this was experienced also in Finland.



Box 3. Critical ingredients of successful initiation of an SDG evaluation – Lessons from Finland

- Political will that is based on national commitments beyond party politics.
- Government programmes that supported all three dimensions of sustainability as well as evaluation.
- Policy environment that incorporates the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- Evaluation included in the national implementation plan of the 2030 Agenda.
- Obligation on the government to regularly report to the parliament on implementation the 2030 Agenda.
- Trust between government ministries and strong cross-administrational leadership.
- A positive and collaborative whole-of-society approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda.
- Participatory nature of initial discussions and preparations as well as the evaluation approach.
- Culture of knowledge-based decision-making.
- Timing and alignment with parliamentary elections.
- Leveraging synergies between SDG evaluations and VNRs, including a phased approach.
- An entity for the funding and implementation existed under the Prime Minister's Office for analysis assessment and research activities.
- A 30-year history of implementing sustainable development-related politics.

Nigeria: Commitment to SDG evaluation

As part of Nigeria's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the SDGs, appropriate institutional frameworks were established at the national and subnational level. OSSAP-SDGs was established by the presidency to provide horizontal and vertical inter-governmental planning and coordination; advocacy and partnership development; resource mobilization and management; and monitoring evaluation and reporting on the SDGs. The OSSAP-SDGs, led by a senior presidential aide, is well-resourced and capacitated from within and outside the public service.

In July 2017, Nigeria participated at the workshop “Embedding evaluation in VNRs” in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This event was organized by UNICEF and CLEAR Anglophone Africa. Workshop participants included senior government officials from across Africa, accompanied by UNICEF M&E staff of the country. Participants were encouraged to conduct country-led evaluations with support from UNICEF as needed. Nigeria was the first country in the Global South to do so.

After the workshop, the senior special assistant to the president on SDGs (SSAP-SDGs) was briefed on the outcome of the workshop and the need to use evaluation findings to inform national policies and strengthen Nigeria's future VNRs. This recommendation was promptly approved by the SSAP-SDGs and directed the relevant units to commence the process of conducting an SDG evaluation.

Nigeria's country-led evaluation of the SDGs began with the establishment of a multi-stakeholders technical working group on SDGs evaluation (TWG-SDGsEval) to drive the process. The institutional members of the TWC-SDGsEval include relevant government ministries, departments and agencies; UNICEF; UNDP; private sector advisory group on SDGs; civil society strategy group on SDGs; Nigeria Evaluation Association; and academia.

With technical and financial support from UNICEF, the TWG-SDGsEval successfully organized the initial capacity building workshop on evaluation in Lagos, Nigeria in February 2019. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness and build the capacity of relevant government officials in preparation for the country-led evaluation of the SDGs. About 50 participants attended and a key outcome of the workshop was the prioritization and ranking of five SDGs to be evaluated.

With sustained commitment by OSSAP-SDGs, UNICEF and other key stakeholders, Nigeria successfully completed two country-led evaluation of SDG 3 and SDG 4 in 2021.³³ With this, Nigeria became the first country in the Global South to have completed this process. Additionally, with the support of 23 member countries, Nigeria led and sponsored a new UN Resolution on ‘Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-led Evaluations’ in 2023.

Evidently, from Nigeria's experience, the decision to conduct an evaluation is more of a political than technocratic undertaking. Indeed, personal commitment of political leaders and policymakers is required to initiate and sustain evaluation processes.

Ecuador: A participatory process leading to the selection of the public policy to be evaluated

Ecuador's National Secretariat of Planning (SNP) is responsible for regulating and overseeing M&E of goals and indicators under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In alignment with this mandate, and with support from DEval and Focelac+, the SNP produced a report for the Office of the Presidency to obtain approval to initiate a country-led evaluation of the SDGs. The public policy selected for evaluation, identified through a participatory process, was the reduction of chronic child malnutrition in Ecuador.

This participatory process included three key activities: a desk review, pre-evaluability assessment, and participatory workshop.

1. Desk review: The desk review was aimed at analysing implementation of national public policies. A critical tool used was the instrument for the prioritization of policies with the greatest multiplier effect in achieving the SDGs in Ecuador.³⁴

2. Pre-evaluability assessment: The SNP prepared and distributed a pre-evaluability assessment form to line ministries to assess policy readiness for the evaluation. This process led to the preliminary selection of eight public policies.

3. Participatory workshop: Representatives from line ministries of the eight pre-selected policies attended a workshop, were guided by SNP and DEval/ Focelac+ facilitators, ranked policy readiness, assessed each policy's link to the SDGs, and determined the relevance of the policy to the current national priorities. This process resulted in the selection of three prioritized policies, listed as follows:

- Intersectoral strategic plan for the prevention and reduction of chronic child malnutrition.
- Positioning the mining sector as a key industry for national economic development, with a focus on sustainable and competitive investment.
- National multisectoral strategic plan for HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections response.

The report submitted to the Office of the Presidency underscored the significance of conducting a country-led evaluation of the SDGs taking a public policy as the subject of analysis, documented the selection process, and recommended the first-ranked policy, prevention and reduction of chronic child malnutrition, as the initial focus for evaluation.

Step B: Identifying the overall evaluation purpose

In this section, the potential use and users of an SDG evaluation are explored and how this informs its purpose and objectives. To formulate the purpose, the following central question would need to be answered: How is the evaluation intended to be used and by whom?

In the context of the SDGs, evaluation relates to determining the merit, worth, significance and sustainability of strategies, policies and programmes that contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in different countries and globally. It investigates the complex interactions between the human, economic and natural systems. It looks at the effects of laws, regulations, and procedures within and beyond the geographic boundaries in which they are adopted. This chapter explores why and with what purpose a country might choose to conduct an SDG evaluation.

SDG evaluation produces evidence that can be used by decision-makers to inform national public policies; report on progress towards the SDGs; and contribute to national, regional and global learning. Evidence from SDG evaluations can also be used by different

national stakeholder groups for accountability and learning (see *Table 3*). Additionally, civil society can use the evidence produced by evaluations to hold governments accountable and to inform "shadow" VNRs.

When initiating an SDG evaluation, it is important to identify and engage with all stakeholders early in the process, through a stakeholder mapping and analysis. This will help determine how the evaluation can best influence public policies and serve the needs of society, especially the most marginalized groups. Involving stakeholders from the outset helps decide the main purposes of the evaluation and identify potential use of SDG evaluation.

**Table 3. Uses of SDG evaluation, by stakeholder group**

Stakeholder group	Policymaking and accountability	Learning
Decision-makers, managers and planners	<p>Demonstrate countries' accountability towards the commitments to the 2030 Agenda by reporting on progress against the SDGs.</p> <p>Generate evidence to inform public policies.</p> <p>Produce evidence-based VNRs on the progress towards the SDGs.</p>	<p>Feed findings into the strategic and planning cycle and inform policymakers about the need to adjust public policies based on progress towards the SDGs.</p> <p>Influence national policies to make them more equitable and just; ensure they are environmentally friendly and guarantee that no one will be left behind.</p>
Civil society organizations	<p>Assess the government's performance against the country's commitment towards Agenda 2030.</p> <p>Report based on parallel reviews ("Shadow Reports") to the HLPF.</p>	<p>Use findings and recommendations to reflect on the role they play in advancing progress towards the 2030 Agenda.</p> <p>Draw evidence-based lessons to inform advocacy activities.</p>
Parliamentarians	<p>Carry out oversight function and promote coordinated efforts across government to address the SDGs.</p> <p>Demand governments conduct and report on SDG evaluations.</p>	<p>Inform investigations carried out in parliamentary audit committees and parliamentary commissions.</p> <p>Elaborate and submit bills based on evidence proceeding from SDG evaluations.</p>

Informing policymakers and feeding into the strategic and planning cycle

Three key distinct uses of SDG evaluation feed into the strategic planning and programming cycle, which emerged from the Finnish and Nigerian experiences: influencing the national political debate; informing policymaking and feeding into the strategic planning; and programming cycle and informing country VNRs.

Evidence generated through SDG evaluation can inform better policies and provide decision-makers and other stakeholders with evidence and lessons about what is working to achieve the SDGs and why. It can help decision-makers answer the following questions:

- Are we doing things right?
- Are these the right things to do?
- Are there better ways to do things?

It can also help answer more detailed questions, such as:

- How adequate is policy expenditure and public investment?
- Was the policy or strategy's reach acceptable and equitable? Did it serve enough people, including the most marginalized, in the right way, to the level expected?

- How well was the programme or policy implemented?
- How substantial and valuable were the outcomes and impacts?
- How were benefits distributed?
- Is this approach to the problem better than others?³⁵

SDG evaluation should ask questions about fundamental aspects of sustainable development policies and programmes. These include their unintended positive and negative consequences; their environmental, economic, social and political sustainability; and their relevance to the diverse needs of different groups of society.



Box 4. Integrating evaluation into the SDG policy cycle

The national experiences with SDG evaluation show concrete examples on how governments can use evaluative tools and approaches at each stage of the SDG policy cycle (see *Figure 4*). They can use these to provide evidence to inform policymaking, help decision-makers reflect on the rationale behind their policy choices and identify ways to improve them.³⁶

In **agenda-setting**, evaluation can help identify cause-and-effect relationships between previous policies and national or subnational sustainable development challenges. Analysing data across different evaluation studies can play a similar function, helping decision-makers identify the reach and effectiveness of policy and programme options. For example, the findings of a mapping and structured synthesis of evaluations conducted by 17 UN and bilateral evaluation bodies helped researchers assess the effectiveness of different initiatives to achieve progress towards SDG 4.³⁷

At the **policy formulation stage**, evaluative evidence analysis can help question assumptions that underpin different policy choices. After identifying the issues, planners can use evaluative tools to identify processes or social mechanisms that affect outcomes. Planners can use ToCs or system mapping to explore different pathways to change. In-depth assessment of positive or negative cases can shed light on contextual conditions that support or hinder sustainable development.

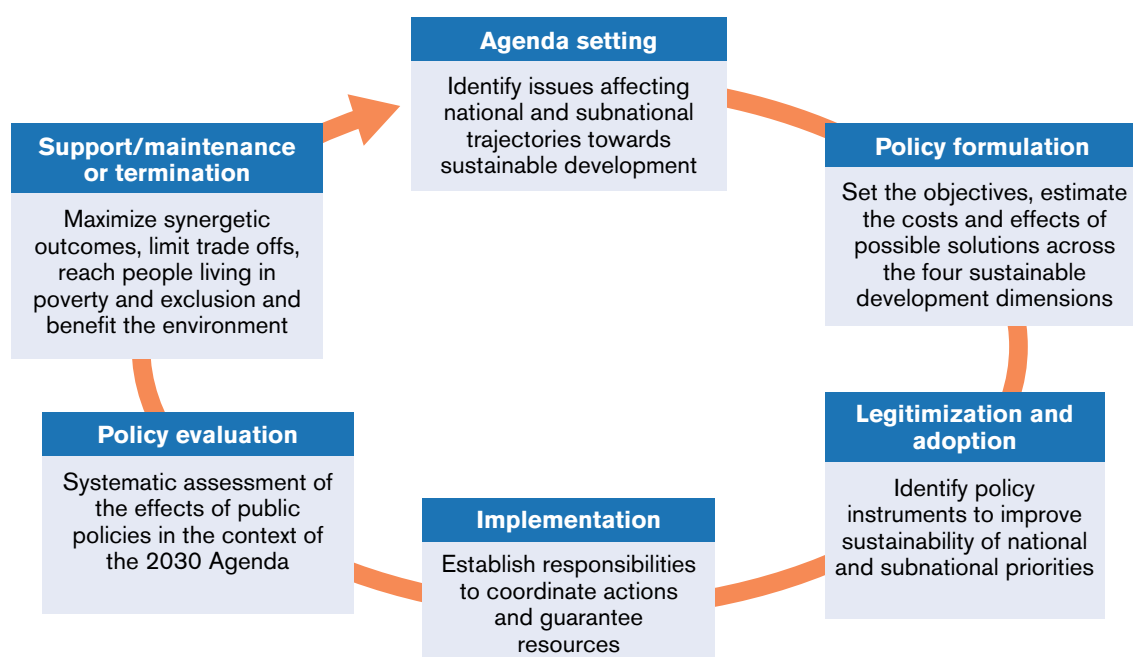
At the **legitimization and adoption stage**, forecast-based evaluation that uses participatory approaches such as stakeholder mapping and engagement can help gather multiple perspectives to create consensus among stakeholders. It can also shed light on different stakeholders' interests by facilitating participatory assessment of possible benefits and trade-offs of different policy solutions.

At the **implementation stage**, formative and developmental evaluations can help planners develop interventions by assessing their relevance, efficiency, and integration with other initiatives.³⁸ This can shed light on how to best use resources, help identify initial outcomes and provide recommendations to adjust plans.

A **policy evaluation** is a key step for assessing the effects of public policies in the context of the 2030 Agenda. There are several tools and methods available, and they should be tailored to the specifics of the evaluation needs.

Finally, at the **support/maintenance or termination stage**, decision-makers can use the findings of previous evaluative activities to decide how to support and refine a policy or take a new policy direction to maximize the synergies with other policies and accelerate the achievement of sustainable development outcomes.

Figure 4. The role of evaluation in the SDG policy cycle





Box 5. Learning from countries' experience: Using evaluation as part of the policy cycle

As well as Colombia, Cost Rica, Finland, Nigeria, Costa Rica, and Uganda, other countries are using evaluation to inform their decision-making on sustainable development. Examples of several countries' successful experiences of integrating evaluation into policy cycles are provided below.

Agenda setting: Nigeria examined data trends and used impact assessment to draw lessons from its experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to develop a country transition strategy to the SDGs and identify which SDGs to prioritize first. Similarly, the Kenyan government studied the 2000–2015 period to assess progress against the MDGs and document the experiences, challenges and lessons learned. This informed the country's new medium-term plan and its roadmap for implementing the SDGs. Ethiopia conducted a national review of its performance against the MDGs, which fed into its national agenda for the SDGs.³⁹ Finland used evaluation to analyse the relevance, coverage, and coherence of national policies by assessing how these addressed the findings of sustainable development research and analysis of indicator data.⁴⁰ In addition to the previous evaluation criteria, the 2023 assessment looked at efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Special attention was given to the coherence of 2030 Agenda implementation and its compatibility from the perspective of various governance mechanisms.

Policy formulation stage: Finland's 2019 SDG evaluation used an analytical framework to understand what helped or hindered sustainable development progress in the past as a first step in developing new policy directions. This assessment helped identify key sustainable development issues that require policy action.⁴¹ The 2023 evaluation examined progress made since the first evaluation and the extent that central government guidance and direction supports the achievement of 2030 Agenda's goals.⁴²

Legitimization and adoption stage: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, and Nigeria have all used a range of approaches – including workshops, surveys, advisory groups and interviews – to engage with stakeholders at various stages of their SDG evaluation processes. Moreover, Ecuador selected the public policy to be evaluated through a participatory process that included stakeholder mapping, a pre-evaluability assessment, and a participatory analysis linking public policies to the SDGs.

Implementation stage: The first Finnish SDG evaluation recommended conducting follow-up evaluations on different aspects of implementation every four years in line with their elections. It also recommended commissioning a public evaluation by a significant external institution such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). Indeed, a second evaluation has already been completed.

Policy evaluation stage: Costa Rica recently evaluated its National Biodiversity Strategy, while Ecuador conducted a public policy evaluation on child malnutrition. Both processes resulted in national policy recommendations.

Influencing the political debate: While local and national authorities can use learning from evidence and analysis from SDG evaluation to improve programming, policymaking and service provision, parliamentarians and civil society can use evaluation findings to hold governments accountable and influence decision-making.

SDG evaluation commissioners may want to consider engaging parliamentarians in the evaluation to maximize its use. Parliamentarians can play a unique role in creating the demand for the conduct and use of SDGs evaluation as part of their oversight function. Indeed, they “could strive for coordinated efforts across government that respond to the SDGs' complexity and interconnectedness and avoid piecemeal policymaking”.⁴³

Finland, for example, has reported progress on sustainable development as part of its government annual report findings since 2016, well before its first SDG evaluation and results are discussed in parliament, giving members the opportunity to monitor measures for sustainable development.



Box 6. SDG evaluation sparks political debate in Finland

Finland's experience teaches an important lesson about the feedback loop between policies and evidence. The timing of the evaluations was crucial, with the prime minister's office (PMO) purposefully tying it in with the rounds of parliamentary elections. The findings of the 2019 evaluation were published during the electoral campaign, and additional time dedicated to communicating them to the main political parties.

The evaluation team held meetings with the country's six main political parties and the National Commission on Sustainable Development held a workshop in May 2019 to discuss how to move on from the report's recommendations. This attention to timing enabled the main political parties to engage with and respond to the evaluation findings. The leading party also reinforced its commitment to the SDGs by adopting the 2030 Agenda as the basis of its government programme. Benefits of this approach were clearly demonstrated in the government's plans, which endorsed two of the evaluation's key recommendations: adopting the 2030 Agenda as a base for government policy and developing a national roadmap to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Similarly, the 2023 assessment was published before the parliamentary elections and the subsequent government programme formulation.

Informing country VNRs

SDG evaluation can also inform a country's VNR, providing valuable evidence and analysis about the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of different policies; and the extent to which they are reducing disparity gaps and progressing towards LNOB 'As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to 'conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven'.⁴⁴ These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the HLPF, meeting under the auspices UN Economic and Social Council. As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews by the HLPF are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders.⁴⁵

Despite this recommendation, very few countries have fed evaluation findings into their VNR preparations to date.⁴⁶ This evaluation gap highlights the risk that countries will passively report data gathered for the indicators rather than analyse it within the context of national planning, decision-making and successful implementation. To make evaluations relevant to both internal policy cycles and global reporting, countries can adopt a phased approach, allowing time for the evaluation to feed into key political moments and inform the VNRs.

Study on evaluative evidence in VNRs

In December 2022, DEval, CLEAR-AA and CLEAR-LAC published the study "VNRs and SDG Evaluations in Anglophone Africa and Latin America: A Mapping of Common Challenges and Emerging Good Practices".⁴⁷ The paper aimed to assess the use of evaluative evidence in VNRs, identifying other evidence sources used in VNRs, and highlighting good practices and challenges from eight sampled countries.

The study involved desk reviews, interviews, and feedback loops to assess VNR processes, planning, public policy, and evaluation capacities in Botswana, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Lesotho, Malawi, Mexico, and Uganda. It found that performance monitoring and statistics are the main evidence sources for VNRs and highlighted the limited integration of SDG evaluations in VNR processes and public policy planning and that national evaluation systems have been slow to respond to the SDGs.

Several challenges were identified, such as a lack of a learning culture in implementing the 2030 Agenda and confusion about what SDG evaluation entails.

Countries like Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Uganda are highlighted for their innovative approaches in integrating SDGs into national policies and evaluations. Examples include Colombia's sector policies for SDG achievement, Costa Rica's SDG-aligned policy cycle, Mexico's evaluation of public financial management in relation to SDGs, and Uganda's use of SDG roadmaps.

The study's main findings, conclusions and policy recommendations are also reflected in the policy brief "Limited use of evaluative evidence in public policy, planning and Voluntary National Review (VNR) development".

Conclusions of the study:

- While all countries mapped for this analysis have integrated the SDGs in their national planning, only limited progress has been made to ensure that SDGs are taken as key references for sector-level planning.
- There is a profound need to raise awareness as well as a common language on what SDG evaluation entails since there is a concentration of efforts on data-driven monitoring of the SDGs that has led to a shortage of time and resources to invest in building the necessary conceptual and methodological ground for SDG evaluation.

The recommendations, among other aspects, call for:

1. Governments to update policy guidelines for integrating SDGs and investing in evaluation mechanisms; and incorporate qualitative analysis into VNRs and promote a learning culture for the 2030 Agenda.
2. Evaluation stakeholders to advocate for greater participation in VNR development processes.
3. Evaluation Capacity Development institutions and development partners should augment their capacity building activities.
4. Evaluation communities and international partners to promote the use of evaluative evidence in VNRs and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
5. Stronger collaboration between governments, the evaluation community, and international partners to enhance the use of evaluative evidence in SDG reporting.

The paper calls for increased use of evaluative evidence in SDG reporting and implementation, recommending that all stakeholders involved enhance their efforts to integrate evaluations into public policy and VNR processes to achieve the SDGs effectively.

A follow-up study by DEval analysed selected VNRs that were presented at the 2024 HLPF and found that, while all countries included in the analysis presented at least three VNRs, evaluation remained in most cases a marginal element. Costa Rica and Ecuador stood out with a consistent set of references to evaluations in their most recent VNRs (DEval, forthcoming).

Acknowledging the urgent need to embed evaluation evidence in VNRs, on 26 April 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/77/283 on “Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-led Evaluation” without a vote. The resolution was initiated as many countries were falling behind in achieving the SDGs, and only few had conducted country-led evaluations of the SDGs, despite the direct call to do so in the 2030 Agenda.⁴⁸



Box 7. The 2023 UNGA Resolution on “Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-led Evaluation”

By Resolution A/RES/77/283, the UN General Assembly encourages member states to use evidence from evaluations of the SDGs implementation for decision-making and reporting on their progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. Among other provisions, the General Assembly also requests UN agencies to provide support at the request of member states regarding their efforts to undertake evaluations of the implementation of the SDGs and to facilitate exchange of experiences and knowledge products from those evaluations.

It further encourages member states to present regular VNRs with a country-led evaluation component as deemed relevant and useful at the country level in partnership with relevant stakeholders.

It is important to emphasize that VNRs and country-led SDG evaluations are different but complementary instruments to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda. VNRs are the cornerstone of the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda, which are prepared by member states based on agreed principles laid out in the 2030 Agenda and subsequent resolutions. Country-led evaluations of the SDGs can feed into and significantly strengthen such VNRs, but their use and value go far beyond that.

Using a specific set of methods, country-led evaluations can provide reliable evidence on which interventions worked to achieve progress towards the SDGs, and why – or which ones did not achieve the desired results. Such evidence is crucial to improve countries’ policies and programmes for sustainable development, support governments in making better-informed and evidence-based decisions, and contribute to a global pool of evidence around what works to achieve the SDGs. Thus, by implementing the resolution and conducting country-led evaluations of the SDGs, governments are not only able to produce more robust VNRs in line with the principles and requirements set forth in the 2030 Agenda; they will also be in a stronger position to take important, evidence-based decisions for the good of their country.

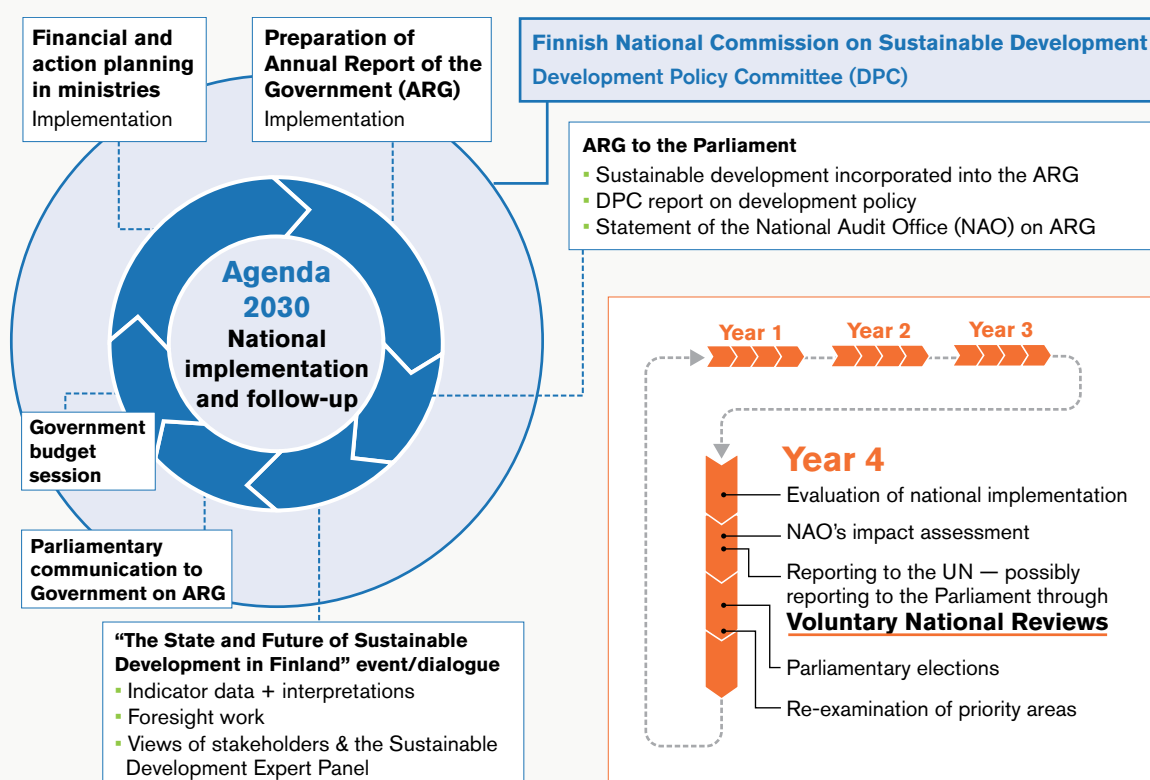
The resolution was led by Nigeria and co-sponsored by Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, Central African Republic, China, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Gambia, Guyana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Malawi, Mongolia, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Philippines, Russian Federation, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Togo, and Zambia.

Making the most of VNRs

Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, and Nigeria timed their national evaluations to feed into the VNR cycle:

- Nigeria planned two independent evaluations of SDG 3 and SDG 4 so that their key findings would feed into its 2020 VNR.
- Finland linked its evaluation to the 2019 national elections and its next VNR reporting cycle in 2020 (see Figure 5).
- Costa Rica's evaluation of the National Biodiversity Strategy 2016-2025 assessed the strategy's contribution to achieving SDG 13, 14, and 15 and produced recommendations for updating the strategy. The results fed directly into Costa Rica's 2024 VNR.
- Ecuador undertook its first country-led evaluation on its chronic child nutrition policy (SDG 2). Ecuador's SDG evaluation facilitated a dialogue between officials responsible for VNRs and those responsible for evaluation. This led to the inclusion of a dedicated chapter on evaluation in the 2024 VNR.

Figure 5. Finland's national implementation plan's annual and quadrennial follow-up and review cycles



Step C: Preparing for an SDG evaluation

Having identified the evaluation purpose and the evaluation users, the evaluation management team can now consider the different ways they could use the evaluation to inform decision-making; to learn about SDG implementation and its relationships with existing strategies, policies, and programmes.

Designing participatory processes and institutionalizing participation

The 2030 Agenda principles are relevant to the way in which evaluations are conducted (see *Box 2*). They can also help different stakeholders decide their level of engagement and determine the design of evaluation management processes. For example, the national follow-up and review chapter of 2030 Agenda calls for the active participation of a wide range of stakeholder groups and political representatives and accountability to citizens by making evaluation findings public. The principle of LNOB underlines the importance of meaningfully engaging vulnerable and marginalized groups, whose interests are often overlooked. The principles of integration and coherence support conducting the evaluation in collaboration with commissioning agencies from different sectors or with inputs and advice from cross-sectoral and cross-departmental advisory bodies.

When preparing an SDG evaluation, the evaluation management team may wish to reflect on when different stakeholders can meaningfully participate in the exercise and how different groups can contribute to the:

- Choice of evaluation questions
- Theoretical framing
- Methodological principles and approaches

Stakeholder engagement throughout the evaluation process must be clear and transparent. It is important that commissioners establish participatory bodies to ensure stakeholders actively contribute to the process including, to the extent possible, in decision-making (see *Box 8*). Involving all stakeholder groups in drawing and analysing evaluation; validate findings and recommendations. Participation of stakeholders and other relevant actors can also enhance the ownership and usefulness of the evaluation.

Setting up cross-sectoral participatory bodies for management and advice

To ensure participation throughout the evaluation process, the evaluation management team may consider institutionalizing participation by setting up cross-sectoral management and advisory bodies in support of the evaluation process and use. These can enhance the ownership and overall quality of the evaluation and its value to stakeholders. They can help to conduct a comprehensive analysis by providing a wider understanding of the effects of different policy options, including their potential for synergies, for example, a steering group or advisory board with decision-making power. This group could be made of members from different ministries and government departments, can improve evaluation design and quality, and facilitate the uptake of findings to improve policy coherence. A support group of representatives from civil society and the private sector can also provide advice, feed into the evaluation design and data collection, and analyse and debate the evaluation findings. Including CSOs that represent groups in vulnerable and marginalized situations, such as persons with disabilities, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous peoples, can help integrate LNOB perspectives in designing and analysing the evaluation.



Box 8. Reinforcing ownership and inclusion

In **Finland**, involving different stakeholders at various stages of the 2019 evaluation reinforced feelings of ownership and inclusion. But most importantly, it ensured political buy-in.

The evaluation management structure included a cross-administrative steering group and a support group. The former was chaired by the PMO (who also commissioned the evaluation) and comprised representatives from various ministries, including environment, finance, foreign affairs, agriculture and forestry. Its main role was providing quality assurance by reviewing the evaluation design, methodology and reporting. The support group was representative of key sectors in Finnish society and included delegates from different ministries as well as universities and research centres, sustainable development committees, 2030 Agenda youth groups, among others. Their main function was to provide advice and comment on the content and process of the evaluation.

The evaluation itself was highly participatory, offering many opportunities for engagement through national and international workshops, interviews and surveys. The two national workshops, targeted at representatives of municipalities, CSOs and the private sector, were particularly useful in identifying key issues for Finland to achieve its sustainable development objectives. This contributed to the co-creation of the final recommendations. The material gathered from the 78 stakeholder interviews, which included members of the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development, ministries and other government actors, also helped shape the recommendations. Similarly, the 2023 assessment was conducted using a multi-method approach, utilizing document analysis, interviews, surveys, benchmark analysis of peer countries, and workshops.

In **Nigeria**, SDG evaluation discussions took place in participatory spaces such as the SDG capacity building evaluation workshop. The workshop convened participants from academia, evaluation associations, senior government and statisticians – and sector-specific communication platforms. The aim was to facilitate interaction between the private sector and CSOs to formulate and exchange ideas as part of Nigeria's transition strategy from the MDGs to the SDGs.

Nigeria's SDG evaluations were led by the OSSAP-SDGs alongside the Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning and other relevant ministries, departments and agencies. UN agencies and development partners, including the UNICEF representative, provided technical and financial support to the process.

A national steering committee on SDG evaluation was established in 2020 to ensure political commitment, ownership and high-level technical guidance. The committee also aimed to ensure adequate visioning, decision-making, engagement and buy-in among governments and development partners and that the respective ministries, departments and agencies, and UN agencies and development partners take up the independent evaluation findings to accelerate SDG progress in Nigeria.

Deciding the scope and focus

SDG evaluation comprises several exercises that differ in scope and focus. Commissioners face the challenge of deciding how broad or narrow the object of the evaluation should be. In terms of focus, that means deciding which policy area is worth investigating. In terms of scope, national SDG evaluation can cover three interlinked levels of policy and programme design and implementation (see *Box 9*).

The first step is whether to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all sustainable development policies or focus on a few goals that are linked to priorities identified in national plans or the governments' agenda.

SDG evaluation experiences in Colombia, Ecuador, Finland and Nigeria suggest that both options are valuable for informing a country's trajectory towards sustainable development.

The Uganda case demonstrates that all 17 SDGs can be evaluated, through the lens of a key 2030 Agenda principle such as LNOB.

An initial assessment and consultation with key stakeholders will help commissioners decide which option to take. Issues to consider include:

- What are the social, economic and environmental priorities of the country? Is there an SDG implementation strategy?
- What resources are needed to conduct the evaluation? Are they available or can be leveraged?
- What is the timespan of the exercise in relation to key policy moments?
- What data or previous assessments are available for use in the evaluation?
- Are any additional data collection activities required?

The next step is deciding whether to focus the exercise on assessing the appropriateness of policies and plans, or also investigate their operationalization by assessing their implementation strategies. If commissioners decide on the latter, the evaluation should also assess, if possible, the trade-offs and synergies between sector-specific policies, implementation systems and interventions and how they affect progress overall.

The principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda can also help narrow down the scope and focus of SDG evaluation (see *Box 2*). For example, evaluation commissioners and stakeholders may decide that achieving the SDGs is especially contingent on improving policy coherence (see Colombia case) or increasing economic and social benefits for marginalised and vulnerable groups (see Uganda case). Looking at and discussing the purpose and scope of an evaluation in this way can bring to light critical issues and challenges that could be overlooked in an evaluation focusing more specifically on priority goals or targets. In Finland, the 2019 evaluation team used the LNOB principle to focus part of the analysis on foreign and private sector policies.

Each choice presents different benefits and challenges for commissioners to consider as well as key actions to undertake the exercise. A decision-making tree with some key decision points that commissioners will face in defining the scope and focus of an evaluation is presented below (see *Box 9*).



Box 9. The scope of national effort on the SDGs

National SDG efforts can occur at three interlinked levels: regional, national and subnational plans and broad policy frameworks;⁴⁹ implementation strategies; and discrete local to national-scale programmes and interventions.

1. At the policy and plans level, evaluation aims to identify relevant regional, national and subnational priorities to assess the contribution of their related policies and plans to the SDGs by looking at their positive and negative consequences. Evaluating policies and plans can be a discrete exercise in reviewing appropriateness against relevant evaluation recommendations and research findings. But it could be broader in scope, aiming to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation strategies set in motion by local and national authorities to operationalize said policies and plans.
2. To assess implementation strategies, evaluators can examine: the formal coordination mechanisms set up by national governments to integrate sustainable development approaches into the design and implementation of legislation, regulatory frameworks, policies and plans⁵⁰; the systems and capacity for collecting, managing and analysing relevant information; and/or the less visible internal ways of working that contribute to an institutional culture that is supportive of interdepartmental cooperation and integrated policy processes. Evaluating implementation strategies can generate useful findings about the extent to which different policies reinforce or complement one another and shed light on policy coherence.
3. At the programme and intervention level, SDG evaluation investigates the effects of programmes, projects or activities on the four interrelated dimensions of sustainable development: economic, human and social, environmental and inclusive governance, peace and security. It should also look at how effectively national programmes have been adapted to local contexts, which can vary. At this level of analysis, SDG evaluation addresses questions related to the design and operationalization of programmes and projects, and how they have helped or hindered the achievement of sustainable development outcomes.

Steps for defining the scope and focus of an SDG evaluation:

1. Consult stakeholders to identify need and purpose of the evaluation.
2. Institutionalize and plan for participation throughout the process.
3. Assess feasibility of the exercise, especially in relation to presence of an SDG implementation strategy, time and availability of data.
4. Comprehensively assess sustainable development policies or assess priority goals linked to priorities in national plans and the government agenda.
5. Define criteria to identify regional, national and subnational priority goals
6. Select relevant SDG principles for the assessment.
7. Identify the level(s) of assessment and select policies, plans and implementation strategies to be evaluated.



Box 10. Finland and Nigeria: Two approaches to SDG evaluation

The 2017 government report on the 'Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'¹⁵¹ envisaged an evaluation of Finland's sustainable development policies and cross administrative foreign policies as one of the main actions to take forward. As well as assessing the state of sustainable development in Finland, the evaluation would produce concrete recommendations for the next governmental mandate on the future direction of the country's sustainable development policy. The 2018 evaluation analysed all sustainable development policies while the 2023 assessment focused on progress follow-up and management aspects.

Nigeria, on the other hand, focused its SDGs evaluations on three specific goals: SDG 1, SDG 3 and SDG 4, which largely correspond to the cardinal objectives of its Economic Recovery and Growth Plan 2017-2020. For example, under SDG 4 (quality education), the evaluation object was to assess whether Nigeria's Education Strategic Plan 2016-2019 is contributing to achieving target SDG 4.1: "Ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."

Nigeria's aims in evaluating the priority SDGs are to assist its government at all levels with key evidence to understand the drivers of success and the challenges in achieving the priority SDGs; to hold the government accountable for increased investment in those SDG-related sectors; and to strengthen evidence-based reporting for its subsequent VNR.

Nigeria used a matrix score to select the priority SDGs. Key actors agreed on the criteria, or main issues to look out for, when embarking on a national SDG evaluation (see *Table 4*). This was done during an SDG evaluation capacity building workshop in early 2019. Facilitated by UNICEF Nigeria, the workshop helped narrow down the priority SDGs to three from the five identified in the country's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan. The highest-ranked goal based on the available evidence was SDG 3 (good health and well-being), followed by SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 1 (poverty).

Criteria developed during the workshop were the result of joint efforts between key actors from the OSSAP-SDGs, the Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, relevant ministries and departments, agencies, government and UN agencies, development partners, academia and CSOs.

Table 4. Criteria mapping for selecting national priorities for SDG evaluation (Nigeria)

Criteria mapping
A. Sectoral plan(s) linked to relevant SDGs
B. Government flagship programme(s) (high contribution to the SDGs)
C. Leadership commitment of the relevant ministries, departments and agencies for SDG evaluation
D. Nationwide geographic coverage/spread
E. Large-scale public financing
F. Existence of multi-level partnership
G. Availability of baseline survey/assessment
H. Availability of monitoring data
I. Availability of recent evidence from surveys or assessments
J. Availability of previous credible evaluation or study
K. Subjective view of respondents

Step D: Developing the evaluation criteria and questions

After designing the participative elements and establishing the focus and scope of the evaluation, the next step is to identify the evaluation criteria and develop the questions that the evaluation will respond to.

Setting and tailoring the evaluation criteria

We can use the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda as evaluation criteria where their selection is part of the evaluation design and not necessarily predetermined by the commissioning institution. For example, an evaluation can use the principle of resilience to assess the sustainability of natural or human systems.⁵² Where evaluations use set criteria, it may still be possible to supplement these with one or two additional principle-based criteria. For example, DEval suggests supplementing the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) standard criteria for evaluating development assistance with criteria based on 2030 Agenda principles (see *Box 11*).

Developing the evaluation questions

Once commissioners and evaluators have defined the criteria, they can use the 2030 Agenda principles to develop questions covering the governance, environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.

A major challenge in selecting evaluation questions in the context of the 2030 Agenda is how to capture the integrated, non-linear and intergenerational qualities of sustainable development. One of the 2030 Agenda principles that can help in examining these qualities is LNOB. Evaluators can use this principle to explore whether a policy is reaching all those who could usefully benefit from it, or whether

some members of society are falling behind because of broader policies and budgetary decisions. They can also explore what specific affirmative actions are being taken to support most marginalized groups and individuals and how effective those actions are.

This depth of understanding might not come to light in an evaluation that looks more generally at numbers and beneficiary types, even those that use disaggregated data and look for unintended impacts.

Evaluations generally have a limited number of key questions linked to their evaluative criteria, and a range of lower-level questions to address specific dimensions of those criteria.⁵³ Possible evaluation questions derived from the 2030 Agenda principles that are relevant when evaluating national plans, policies, programmes or interventions are listed below (see *Table 5*). These are examples to consider when examining how the 2030 Agenda principles can help develop both higher and lower-level questions.

Questions of this sort are appropriate for evaluations that use principle-based or standard, pre-determined policy and programme evaluation criteria. Evaluators may use some of the questions or craft new ones in consultation with all relevant stakeholder groups. Participation of different stakeholders is key to selecting relevant questions.



Box 11. Connecting SDG evaluation to the OECD DAC evaluation criteria

To respond to the 2030 Agenda and connect SDG evaluation to the use of the OECD DAC evaluation criteria, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation (BMZ) released a guideline on how to integrate the principles of the 2030 Agenda into the evaluation criteria relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.⁵⁴

Using the DAC criteria as the conceptual basis, the BMZ guideline promotes the integration of SDG-specific evaluation dimensions and questions into evaluative thinking and practice. Based on this, all evaluations should include a summary of the development intervention's contributions to the 2030 Agenda. The summary of contributions focuses on the principles of universality, shared responsibility and accountability, the interaction of economic, environmental and social development, and inclusiveness.

Universality, shared responsibility and accountability

- To what extent and in which ways do the intervention contribute to achieving the SDGs? (see impact criterion)
- To what extent is the intervention designed to use existing systems and structures (of partners/other donors/international organizations) for the implementation of their activities and to what extent are these used? (see coherence criterion)
- Is division of labour with other donors and development partners used when implementing the intervention? If so, to what extent? (see coherence criterion)
- To what extent are common systems used for monitoring, learning and accountability? (see coherence criterion)

Interaction of economic, environmental and social development

- To what extent does the intervention follow a holistic approach to sustainable development (social, environmental and economic)? (see relevance criterion)
- To what extent were there intended or unintended positive or negative interactions between the social, economic and environmental outcomes and what was the overall impact of the intervention? (see effectiveness and impact criterion)
- What contribution did the intervention make to promoting intended or unintended positive or negative interactions between the social, economic and environmental outcomes and what was the overall impact of the intervention? (see effectiveness and impact criterion)

Inclusiveness

- To what extent is the intervention consistent with international norms and standards on the participation and promotion of particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups? (see coherence criterion)
- To what extent were there intended or unintended positive or negative overarching developmental changes at the level of particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (possible differentiation according to age, income, gender, ethnicity, etc.)? (see impact criterion)
- What contribution did the intervention make to the intended or unintended positive or negative overarching developmental impacts at the level of particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (possible differentiation according to age, income, gender, ethnicity, etc.)? (see impact criterion)
- To what extent did the intervention contribute to strengthening the resilience of particularly disadvantaged or vulnerable groups (possible differentiation according to age, income, gender, ethnicity, etc.)? (see sustainability criterion)

The criteria should be applied thoughtfully to support high-quality, useful evaluation⁵⁵ and should be contextualized – understood in the context of the individual evaluation, the intervention being evaluated, and the beneficiaries and stakeholders involved. How the criteria are applied depends on the purpose of the evaluation and the needs of the evaluation stakeholders. The application of the six evaluation criteria is binding for all bilateral implementing agencies and provides orientation for non-governmental development cooperation organizations as well as for the BMZ and DEval. The evaluation criteria are embedded in the framework of the principles and standards of development cooperation evaluation set out in the BMZ's evaluation policy.⁵⁶

The guideline was developed in a BMZ working group, including GIZ, KfW Development Bank (KfW), *Physikalisch Technische Bundesanstalt*, and the Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources, supported by DEval.

**Table 5. Suggested evaluation questions derived from 2030 Agenda principles**

Integration/coherence
<p>To what extent:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National policy frameworks consider the interconnected nature of sustainable development? 2. The implementation mechanisms are adequate to ensure effective integration? 3. Implementation mechanisms require or encourage interdepartmental or public-private sector collaboration? 4. The policy/plan/programme resulted in unconsidered negative environmental or social externalities? 5. The intervention produced any unexpected economic, environmental or social co-benefits? 6. What is the level of coordination between government departments and the different geographic levels of government?⁶⁷
Leave no one behind
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there public policies and plans that have been adopted to leave no one behind? Who is benefiting and who is not benefitting from national policies and priorities? To what extent has the social and economic situation of vulnerable people, and those living in economic, social, and/or geographic exclusion, changed? 2. Were the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and excluded, as defined by themselves, considered during design and implementation? How were these needs addressed? 3. Are data on results at various levels collected and disaggregated to ascertain the effects on the poorest and most marginalised, including disaggregation by sex, age and disability?
Equity
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have the benefits reached all groups and individuals? Are there groups that have experienced negative effects? 2. To what extent are public policies and plans reducing or increasing inequality gaps? 3. To what extent were the differential interests of affected stakeholders considered in the design, particularly those representing gender equality, persons with disabilities, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous peoples? How were conflicting interests negotiated and accommodated? 4. Have adequate measures been taken to mitigate immediate or long-term impacts on specific stakeholder groups? 5. Have policies been adjusted or established to bridge the gaps in inequality between groups that often face discrimination, such as based on gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, age, race, ethnicity or religion?
Resilience
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent the policy/plan/programme makes individuals, communities, social groups and ecosystems vulnerable to social, economic and/or environmental disasters, shocks and other unexpected change? 2. What are the effects in terms of increase of human and/or environmental resilience to such changes and shocks? 3. To what extent does it contribute to improving resilience of poor, vulnerable and excluded communities, households and individuals, particularly, for example, persons with disabilities, older persons, single-headed households?
Environmental sustainability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent the policy/plan/programme contribute to the depletion or degradation of any natural resources or environmental services? 2. If so, what measures have been taken to mitigate those impacts? 3. Are the long-term effects on natural resources and ecosystems positive, negative or neutral?
Universality
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent the policy/plan/programme support or undermine other countries' efforts to contribute to the SDGs and national progress towards sustainable development? 2. Does it facilitate collaboration with other countries on shared goals?
Mutual accountability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are the roles and responsibilities of all partners clearly stated and agreed? 2. Are mechanisms in place to hold partners accountable for honouring their responsibilities? 3. To what extent institutional arrangements have been negotiated and established in a fair and equitable way?



Box 12. Using 2030 Agenda principles to inform criteria and questions in Costa Rica, Finland, Nigeria, and Uganda

Some of the evaluation questions formulated as part of Finland's sustainable development policies evaluation 2019 draw on the 2030 Agenda principles.

Policy coherence was one of the leading principles of the Finnish government's report on the 2030 Agenda, alongside ownership, participation, long-term action and transformation. The 4Is framework (institutions pillar) used by the evaluation team highlighted one of the key challenges of policy coherence in Finland, namely that actors and ministerial departments often work in separate silos, making it difficult to ensure that knowledge, decisions and measures are compatible, and their interconnections considered.⁵⁸ In this sense, institutional mechanisms that countries put in place have a prominent role in the successful implementation of the SDGs.

The 2019 evaluation call for proposals specifically required assessments to use the LNOB principle. The main evaluation questions related to this principle examined how Finland's sustainable development policy addresses the 2030 Agenda's human rights-based approach.⁵⁹ Due to limited resources, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all sustainable development policies from a LNOB perspective. So, the evaluation team decided to focus this part of the investigation on foreign policies related to the private sector with an emphasis on impact on human rights.

One of the final recommendations of the 2019 evaluation referenced the need for Finland's sustainable development policy to reduce inequality in accordance with the LNOB principle and expand future evaluation efforts to the human rights impact of all foreign policy.

Nigeria included the 2030 Agenda principles of universality, equity, LNOB and sustainability in the terms of reference of their planned SDGs evaluations and used them to develop the evaluation questions alongside the DAC criteria.

For the evaluation of its National Biodiversity Strategy, Costa Rica engaged in an inter-institutional dialogue to agree on the principles of the 2030 Agenda that would be used as evaluation criteria. The principle of sustainability was identified as key due to the evaluation's focus on the environment and energy sectors. Additionally, the criteria of equity and shared responsibility were adopted to guide the formulation of some of the evaluation questions.

The LNOB evaluation spearheaded by the Government of Uganda, formulated the evaluation questions guided by the 2030 Agenda Principles, LNOB and equity.

**Table 6. Evaluation questions based on SDG principles (Finland (2019) and Nigeria)**

Coherence/integration	Nigeria	Finland
Will the current sustainable development policy and measures help achieve societal changes that promote permanent socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development? Are the activities coherent and comprehensive from the sustainable development point of view?		✓
Do the central policy actions have an impact on the status of sustainable development?		✓
Does the achievement of central aims pose challenges? What are the challenges and existing strengths?		✓
How can policy be evaluated with regard to coherence, coverage and relevance?		✓
What are the policy measures that would significantly improve the coherence and effectiveness of external policies in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?		✓
How coherent is Finland's foreign policy in terms of achieving the SDGs?		✓
Leave no one behind		
How are the human rights-based approach and the 'Leave no one behind' thinking of Agenda 2030 realised in Nigeria for universal basic education?	✓	
To what extent was the human rights-based approach integrated into education sector programming within key flagship programme design and implementation?	✓	
To what extent did the programme target the poorest?	✓	
What was the role of the private sector in foreign policies related to sustainable development and what was its impact on human rights?		✓
Equity		
To what extent did it help to reduce inequalities between the wealthier groups and the poorest groups?	✓	
To what extent were the barriers (and their causes) to access basic services in education in the targeted local government areas identified and addressed as part of the overall programme strategy priorities?	✓	
To what extent are all children's rights for a fully integrated universal education package of services available and benefiting children and mothers?	✓	
Mutual accountability		
To what extent is the effective systematic participation of all stakeholders (individuals, communities, local institutions, states and federal stakeholders) in the design, implementation, financing and M&E of education sector's programmes functioning to sustain the gains made in achieving impact, outcomes and outputs?	✓	

Sources: Berg et al. (2019) and OSSAP-SDGs et al. (2019)

The importance of incorporating the gender equality and inclusion lens

Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is crucial for achieving a sustainable future. Gender equality is not only a distinct goal of the 2030 Agenda (SDG 5), but also a catalyst for the advancement of the other SDGs. According to a 2024 synthesis of UN evaluations, the world is not on track to achieve this goal by 2030. With the deadline fast approaching, it is urgent that gender equality is addressed, including through evaluations. There are considerable evidence gaps on SDG 5 that need to be addressed through conducting evaluations and syntheses that incorporate a clear and explicit gender equality perspective. In addition, there is great variation in the degree of gender mainstreaming across UN agencies. One of the recurring recommendations from evaluations on this SDG is to generate knowledge, data and research; closing evidence gaps and sharing knowledge.⁶⁰ Similarly, an analysis of VNRs found that this kind of reporting was not incorporating equity-focused and gender-responsive evidence.⁶¹

Evaluations that address gender equality and human rights foster inclusion and participation. This requires ensuring gender parity in those who participate in the evaluation process and focusing on persons who are marginalized or face discrimination. There is a need to pay attention to which groups benefit, and which groups contribute to the intervention under review, to ensure that balanced and complete evaluation evidence is generated.⁶² Applying a gender equality and inclusion lens is also essential to the analysis of the principle of LNOB.

When incorporating a gender lens to evaluation, it is important to consider the linkages to broader human rights and inclusion aspects as well as intersectionality, looking at factors that intersect with gender including, but not limited to age, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, indigenous origin, minority status, poverty and other socio-economic factors. The participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities and others who may face discrimination, marginalization or exclusion may need special measures built into the evaluation assignment. Integrating a gender and human rights lens calls for due attention by evaluation managers at different stages of the evaluation process, from preparation to dissemination. The design should consider mainstreaming, targeted action and/or policy dialogue activities as relevant to the assignment.⁶³

There are tools available for applying a human rights and gender equality lens to the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Using the OECD DAC gender equality and disability markers is another practical tip. Yet, it is important to remain sensitive to socio-cultural and political contexts ensuring that no harm is done to those participating in evaluation.⁶⁴

Among good practices in country-led evaluations that include a gender perspective are a) addressing issues of intersectionality, b) addressing gender equality challenges through a combination of different, cross-sectoral interventions, and c) working through multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms to create important synergies.⁶⁵



Box 13. An assessment of LNOB in development and humanitarian contexts in Uganda

The LNOB evaluation, commissioned by the SDG Secretariat, Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda aimed to understand “who is being left behind” in the implementation of the SDGs in the country. Its objectives included an in-depth analysis of:

- Factors causing and reinforcing inequality and discrimination.
- Exclusion practices and attributes leading to exclusion.
- Factors contributing to spatial isolation and vulnerability.
- Governance and institutional frameworks affecting persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations.
- Setbacks due to climate change, natural hazards, violence, conflicts, and other shocks.

The assessment scope included all 17 SDGs and was underpinned by the five LNOB intersecting factors prescribed by the UNDP framework⁶⁶ that identify who is likely to be left behind and why. These five intersecting factors include geography, discrimination, social economic status, governance, shocks and fragility. It covered 15 districts representing various regions and sub-groups.

A mixed methods approach was used for data collection. Main tools were key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and desk review of relevant literature.

The assessment was guided by the five SDG Pillars (or 5Ps) of the 2030 Agenda.

The report concluded that, despite several efforts, many persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations continue to suffer from inequality and discrimination due to policy, legal, and institutional dysfunctions. Remoteness and spatial isolation exacerbate their predicament, and high levels of vulnerability to shocks worsen their situation.

Recommendations directed to various line ministries include improving data generation on persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations; strengthening partnerships among government, development partners, CSOs, and the private sector; and enhancing measures to address the needs of persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations in development and humanitarian interventions.

The report's key messages can be summarized as follows:

1. Inclusive development is critical

- The principle of LNOB is essential for achieving the SDGs in Uganda. Inclusive development must address the needs and rights of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations.

2. Identification of marginalized groups

- Various sub-groups were identified as being left behind, including persons with disabilities, older persons, women and girls, ethnic minorities, refugees, rural and urban poor, youth, orphans, and internally displaced persons.

3. Systemic barriers and discrimination

- Discrimination based on identity (gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.), geographical isolation, poor governance, and socio-economic status are significant factors contributing to exclusion and marginalization.

4. Impact of shocks and vulnerabilities

- Climate change, natural hazards, conflict, health emergencies, and economic shocks disproportionately affect marginalized groups, exacerbating their vulnerabilities and hindering their ability to participate in and benefit from development progress.

5. Data gaps and need for comprehensive data

- There is a critical need for comprehensive data on LNOB sub-groups to inform targeted interventions. Data gaps hinder effective planning, implementation, and monitoring of programs aimed at reducing inequality and promoting inclusion.

6. Role of governance and institutional frameworks

- Effective governance and institutional frameworks are crucial for promoting inclusivity.
- Collaborative efforts involving government, development partners, CSOs, and the private sector are essential to address the needs of persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations. Partnerships should be strategic and focused on resource mobilization, capacity building, and effective service delivery.

7. Good practices and policy reform

- Policy and legal reforms that prioritize the needs of marginalized groups have shown positive impacts. Examples include affirmative actions, social protection programs, and inclusive policies that ensure equal opportunities and access to services.

8. Urgent need for action and recommendations

- The report provides specific recommendations for improving the inclusion of persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations, including data generation, strengthening partnerships, enhancing governance mechanisms, and addressing the specific needs of vulnerable populations through targeted interventions.

9. Commitment to human rights and equity

- A strong commitment to human rights, equity, and non-discrimination is vital for achieving the LNOB agenda. Ensuring the dignity and well-being of all individuals, especially those at the margins of society, is paramount for sustainable development.

The report emphasizes that achieving the LNOB principle requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders to address systemic barriers, generate comprehensive data, and implement inclusive policies and programmes.

Step E: Framing the evaluation and methodological considerations

After establishing the evaluation criteria and questions, a crucial step for the evaluation management team and evaluators is to frame the evaluation based on underlying logic of policies and programmes.

Reconstructing the logic underpinning national policies

To better understand the cause-and-effect relationships between a policy, strategy or plan and observable changes, it is useful to reconstruct the logic that underpins policy or strategy choices. Evaluators can include such exercises in the terms of reference of the SDG evaluations, through tools such as:

- Theory-based evaluation, which helps develop complex theories by considering dynamics that are hard to predict, and
- Systems thinking, which aims to define the boundaries of the system(s) affected by different policy frameworks and map interactions between actors and changes within the systems.

These tools can be used to develop non-linear, multi-faceted ToCs that explore different pathways and complex cause-and-effect relationships that consider challenges of integration. A ToC can be narrative or visual. It outlines the causal chain between immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes and presents the main assumptions underpinning the logic of the interventions.

ToC analysis is useful for clarifying the aims of existing policies and strategies, the logic that underpins them and the ways in which agents perceive them.⁶⁷ It explores a hypothesis about how a policy or strategy will bring about change by describing the chain of influences over intended results. Commissioners, managers and evaluators can reconstruct the causal linkages between a policy or strategy and its planned impact by consulting the relevant literature and engaging policy designers and programme implementers in facilitated participatory processes.⁶⁸



Box 14. Considering complexity when developing Theories of Change

Policy or programme Theories of Change (ToCs) can be informed by the complex aspects of interventions, including.⁶⁹

- **Multi-site and multi-governance issues:** Policies and programmes that address sustainable development are often implemented through multiple agencies operating in very different contexts.
- **Simultaneous or alternative causal strands:** Sustainable development outcomes are often brought about by the combination of different causes, which generates complicated pathways to change. In other cases, different pathways may lead to the same outcome, and the effectiveness of one pathway over another is due to context-specific conditions.
- **Recursive causality:** Once a programme or a policy is in operation, it is unlikely to progress linearly from implementation to initial and subsequent outcomes. Achieving results usually “depends on activating a virtuous circle where an initial success creates the conditions for further success”. This, in turn, reinforces previous achievements in a cyclical process of improvement with multiple feedback loops.
- **Tipping points and emergence:** Successful interventions do not always anticipate outcomes that emerge during policy or programme implementation. These unexpected changes are generated by new conditions created by interactions between stakeholders and the context in which a policy or programme operates. In these cases, the outcomes and the means to achieve them evolve during the implementation of the intervention.

Methodological considerations

SDGs evaluations occur in different social, economic and institutional contexts and therefore differ in scope and purpose. Thus, this guide does not aim to advise on specific methods. Rather, it reflects on some key issues to consider when selecting the methodology for an SDG evaluation; and discusses one of the greatest challenges of such evaluations: how to assess integration.

Effective SDG evaluations draw on evidence from various sources, not just monitoring systems and SDG indicators.⁷⁰ Using different methodologies and approaches will help evaluators draw overall conclusions from multiple findings by addressing the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda.

Processes to synthesise value judgments should confront, weigh and balance different perceptions and evidence sources, considering existing knowledge of – and multiple viewpoints on – the nature and contexts of and solutions to social and environmental problems.

How appropriate evaluative approaches and methodologies are depends on the questions, aims and expected use of the evaluation.

Detailed publications that explore the benefits and limitations of different evaluation designs are listed below (see *Box 16*).



Box 15. Reconstruct the logic of national policies in Finland

Finland used ToC analysis to understand “what a policy process entails, and how and when different steps are expected to be realised”.⁷⁴ The work in Finland was based on theory-based evaluation and aimed to understand the preconditions and mechanisms of implementing policies. The 2019 evaluation team tried to deconstruct the different steps of the policy processes and how and when those steps had been realized. The main material they analysed to trace back the ToC was the government report on the ‘Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’⁷⁵ and the perspectives of ministries, representatives and sustainable development experts.

They used the ToC to answer two main evaluation questions:

1. What are the most important aims and methods of Finland's sustainable development policy?
2. How are these understood in practice by most central stakeholders?

The ToC shed light on the policy aims, which the evaluation team subsequently validated by interviewing key stakeholders about their perceptions and understanding of those aims.

The team found that there was no clear path linking the (broad and general) objectives of the ToC with the measures to achieve the SDGs. They also noted that the stakeholders involved in sustainable development policies often had different views and understandings of sustainable development. As a result, there was no shared theory of political change.

This lack of clarity in the ToC led the evaluation team to recommend creating a well-defined national roadmap to 2030 to “strengthen the goal-oriented and systematic nature of policy with regard to sustainable development”.⁷⁶ The team also recommended that the government lead the process to create the roadmap, with support from the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development. The roadmap is meant to show how Finland can achieve the 2030 Agenda and goals and support the European Union and rest of the world to do the same.

The 2023 assessment, with its focus on management, utilized a logic model of state administration's governance system and impact paths. However, the assessment team recognized that the state governance model was a simplified version of a much broader systemic whole. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the overall governance system is significantly more complex, with various actors being closely interconnected. This led the team to broaden the approach to consider the cultural characteristics of society as well as macro-level factors at the national level that promote or hinder success. Therefore, the assessment also used a general impact model of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Using a sustainable development lens

There has long been recognition of the need for approaches to evaluation that take account of complex system interactions and unintended long-term effects of interventions.⁷¹ SDG evaluation demands a varied set of tools to investigate complexity.

In 1997, an international group of sustainable development measurement practitioners came together to develop a basic set of principles for assessing sustainable development that remains valid and comprehensive today. The principles emphasize the need for a holistic perspective, attention to intra- and intergenerational equity and considering the underlying ecological conditions and non-market contributors to human and social wellbeing as well as economic ones. They note the importance of stakeholder participation in the assessment process, highlighting the importance of involving decision-makers, “to secure a firm link to adopted policies and resulting action”.⁷²

Since then, evaluators have grappled with developing concrete methods to address the complexities, uncertainties and contested understandings inherent in sustainable development programmes and interventions.⁷³ Although their methods vary widely, the growing body of research points consistently to several key attributes of sustainable development evaluation.



Box 16. Resources for selecting evaluation methods and approaches

The resources listed here can guide commissioners and evaluators when choosing a methodology or approach for a specific evaluation.

TEEB AgriFood evaluation framework⁷⁷: Presented in Chapter 6 of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity's 'TEEB for Agriculture and Food: Scientific and Economic Foundations Report', this framework proposes using the four dimensions of sustainable development capital – natural capital, human capital, social capital and produced capital – to guide holistic assessment of policies and interventions.⁷⁸

Impact evaluation: A guide for commissioners and managers⁷⁹: Published by Bond, this guide proposes a practical approach to identify appropriate impact evaluation designs based on the evaluation questions that commissioners want to answer.⁸⁰

Choosing appropriate evaluation methods tool⁸¹: Published by Bond, this hands-on tool will help commissioners and evaluators make informed choices about evaluation methodologies and gain greater understanding about their characteristics.⁸²

Manager's guide to evaluation (Better Evaluation): An interactive online guide that covers nine critical steps for designing and managing an evaluation.⁸³

Participatory impact assessment: A design guide⁸⁴: Published by the Feinstein International Centre, this guide presents a flexible framework to design robust participatory impact assessment, based on a collection of good practice from the field.⁸⁵

Participatory learning and action (IIED): Published from 1987 until 2013, this journal collects practices to conduct participatory research and evaluation. All 66 editions are available online in the participatory learning and action archive.⁸⁶

How do we know if a programme made a difference? A guide to statistical methods for program impact evaluation⁸⁷: Published by MEASURE Evaluation, this guide presents the main traditional statistical approaches to conducting impact evaluation.⁸⁸

Evaluation of humanitarian action guide⁸⁹: Published by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance and developed primarily for the humanitarian sector, this guide contains useful general advice on and information about evaluation designs and management for commissioners of evaluation in other sectors.⁹⁰

Writing terms of reference for an evaluation: a how-to guide⁹¹: A practical resource to writing terms of reference published by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group.⁹²

Cost-benefit analysis for development: A practical guide⁹³: Published by the Asian Development Bank, this guide provides an overview of recent methodological developments in cost-benefit analysis. It also illustrates the application of suggested methodologies through sector-specific case studies.⁹⁴

Better Evaluation portal: Better Evaluation is a knowledge platform and global community. It contains a wide range of guides and methods for monitoring and evaluation as well as resources.⁹⁵ A compilation of SDG resources is also available on the platform.⁹⁶

EvalParticipativa portal: EvalParticipativa is a community of practice and learning in participatory evaluation for Latin America and Caribbean. It is a joint initiative between the Labour, Environment and Society Studies Programme of the National University of San Juan (Argentina) and Focelac+. Focelac+ is a project of DEval.⁹⁷

EVALSDGs is a network of interested and skilled policymakers, institutions and practitioners who advocates for the critical role of evaluation for achieving the SDGs.⁹⁸

Gender responsive evaluation – EIGE – The European Union's knowledge centre on gender equality. It contains publications and resources on gender equality and evaluation and a gender-statistics database.⁹⁹

Attributes of an evaluation with a sustainable development lens:

1. Stakeholder engagement and co-generation of recommendations: A central precept of sustainable development is stakeholders' right and responsibility to be meaningfully involved in processes and decisions that affect them. Ongoing stakeholder involvement in evaluation respects that precept, creating a valuable space for shared learning that can feed into decision-making. Stakeholder involvement helps explore the multiple dimensions of sustainable development and the diverse ways that it can affect stakeholders. Their involvement can uncover a range of perspectives and understanding among policymakers, policy implementers and other stakeholders about the purpose or objectives of a sustainable development policy or programme. It also encourages constructive dialogue and debate between stakeholder groups and facilitates learning.

2. Mixed approaches to generating evidence: Examining a development process from multiple perspectives raises several issues regarding evidence collection. Quantitative data may not be enough for assessing the multiple dimensions of a sustainable development intervention or may not be sufficiently disaggregated to get a clear picture. Evaluators may wish to use not only conventional but also non-conventional information sources – including local experts and informed stakeholders providing empirical evidence – to fill gaps and build a comprehensive picture.

3. Integrated analysis: This broader approach to collecting evidence is essential to the SDG analysis. For sustainable development evaluation, it is important to examine the policy or programme under review from multiple – economic, social, environmental and political – perspectives. It is also important to examine the connections between those dimensions. Human and natural systems are actively and dynamically coupled.¹⁰⁰ There are often multiple causes to any changes in human well-being, which throws up challenges around establishing causality and accounting for impacts.¹⁰¹ Assessing causality thus requires understanding all the causes of change and their interactions with one another. To do this, sustainable development evaluation designs and methodologies need to consider changes in patterns; weigh the effects of different interventions; establish the likelihood of alternative explanations; and account for the rise of emergent causes and tipping points.

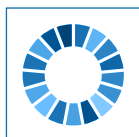
4. Alternative pathways and dilemmas: There is no single 'right' pathway toward sustainable development and all options throw up trade-offs around: distribution of benefits and responsibilities among stakeholders; present versus future impacts; allocation of social, economic, environmental and political costs and benefits; or attention to local versus national and global objectives. An effective evaluation at any scale should consider the possibility

of such dilemmas and assess the choices made in view of accepted sustainable development principles, such as environmental sustainability, distributional equity, the precautionary principle and common but differentiated responsibilities.¹⁰² See Step C for a discussion on the use of sustainable development principles in evaluation.

5. Context specificity: A sustainable development evaluation cannot adequately assess an intervention or process in isolation from its spatial, temporal, socioeconomic and environmental context.¹⁰³ Evaluations can consider the geographic scope and other contexts and cross-analyse results to identify the influence of different contexts on results found and process effects.

6. Upstream drivers and downstream effects: Equally, to fully assess a policy, plan or programme's "merit, worth or significance"¹⁰⁴, an evaluation must take account of both the upstream forces that led to and shaped it and any unintended or unacknowledged impacts on other sectors or domains across time and space. In economic terms, we refer to these as externalities. In some cases, impacts on natural systems only become visible years after project completion. They also often transcend project or jurisdictional boundaries. Sustainable development evaluation must therefore apply systems thinking and be alert to the possibility that the subject of an evaluation is influenced by or is itself generating multiple conflicting drivers, complex feedback loops, thresholds and tipping points, across ecological, social and jurisdictional boundaries. Policies and interventions in one place should never deplete natural resources or preclude progress elsewhere, nor should short-term gain in one sustainable development objective compromise long-term benefits in others.

7. Impacts beyond national boundaries: Upstream drivers and downstream impacts can reach far beyond national boundaries. A plastic straw dropped on a beach in New York can kill a turtle in the South Pacific and civil war in Syria can create a humanitarian crisis in Europe. The principle of universality enshrined in the 2030 Agenda implies that development is only truly sustainable when it is being sustained everywhere and that all countries have an obligation to support the efforts of others.¹⁰⁵ So, examining a policy or programme's impact on other countries or regions is another dimension of sustainable development evaluation. European agricultural subsidies and some carbon offset programmes are examples of programmes that might benefit their countries of origin but damage other countries.

**Table 7. Seven types of positive and negative interaction between SDG objectives**

Interaction label		Meaning
+3	Indivisible	Progress on one target automatically delivers progress on another
+2	Reinforcing	Progress on one target makes it easier to make progress on another
+1	Enabling	Progress on one target creates conditions that enable progress on another
+/-0	Consistent	There is no significant link between two targets' progress
-1	Constraining	Progress on one target constrains the options for how to deliver on another
-2	Counteracting	Progress on one target makes it more difficult to make progress on another
-3	Cancelling	Progress on one target automatically leads to a negative impact on another

Source: Griggs et al. (2016)

Evaluation for transformational change

Evaluation for transformational change involves evaluations that support the transformational and systemic changes needed in countries and globally, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Achieving a sustainable balance across governance, social, economic, and environmental domains is crucial amid the existential threats of the climate crisis, mass extinction of species, growing local and global inequality, and the ultimately unsustainable use of planetary resources. When evaluating progress towards the SDGs, evaluation for transformational change should assess how well the transformational nature of the 2030 Agenda has been incorporated into the evaluation. One key question evaluations of the SDGs should address is: To what extent have the principles underlying the 2030 Agenda been embedded in the evaluation design?

Perhaps the greatest challenge for sustainable development evaluation is assessing how policies and strategies deal with integration across the multiple dimensions of sustainable development, including examining the trade-offs and synergies between different sustainable development objectives.

The 2030 Agenda goals and targets have made that challenge a little easier by providing a framework for assessment. For example, the International Science Council used this framework to measure how interventions in one dimension could affect progress in another, identifying seven possible types of positive and negative interaction between the social, economic and environmental, and political objectives reflected in the SDG targets (see *Table 7*). See also the matrix “Climate indicators and relevant Sustainable Development Goals”.¹⁰⁶

This type of technical assessment of synergies and trade-offs is a useful starting point for defining a good outcome in terms of integration. However, more methods are needed to assess the causal linkages between an integration outcome and the policy or programme being evaluated.

Evaluators need other methods to address ethical dilemmas and decide which objectives to prioritise when there are trade-offs to be made. Questions to explore could include:

- What stakeholders were involved or consulted in the decision-making?
- Which constituencies benefited from the decision, and which were hurt?
- Were conflicts of interest involved and how were they dealt with?
- Was decision-making transparent?
- Did the decision respect the principles of LNOB, equity and environmental sustainability?

Some of the tools that can be used by evaluators to address these questions are listed below (see *Box 17*).



Box 17. Addressing integration in evaluative activities

This list of evaluative tools and approaches that evaluators can use to better understand the integration challenges is by no means exhaustive.

Expert judgements: The challenge of assessing integration underlines the value of engaging to the extent possible experts in all spheres of sustainable development, including sociologists, economists and natural scientists. Engaging experts with strong understanding of the context can be a practical and inexpensive approach to better understand integration challenges.

Participatory assessment of synergies and trade-offs, either before implementing a policy or programme or after completion. Evaluators can use participatory approaches to confront other types of evidence with the views of different stakeholder groups, including policy designers, programme implementers and intended beneficiaries from across the governance, environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.

Drawing systems: Combining tools from system thinking with participatory approaches can help evaluators better understand how a policy or programme works across the different sustainable development dimensions. For example, they can use tools from system thinking to map the components of the human system and its interactions with the natural world.¹⁰⁷

Mental modelling: Mental modelling can be useful for understanding complex interactions between socioecological systems. Evaluators can use participatory processes to reveal the mental models and values of stakeholder groups and shed light on how different people conceptualise and understand the issues affecting sustainable development.¹⁰⁸

In-depth assessment of extreme cases: To better understand the effects of policies and programmes on the interlinkages between social and environmental systems, evaluators can investigate extremely positive or negative outcomes that have affected different dimensions of sustainable development. Investigating extreme cases is a well-established research strategy for conducting causal assessment¹⁰⁹ that can also be used to assess integration. When using this approach, evaluators focus on cases where they have observed outcomes resulting from extremely positive synergies or extremely negative trade-offs. When using Griggs et al.'s interaction table (see *Table 7*), their focus is on either the indivisible or the cancelling effects to better understand a policy or programme's complex causal linkages with different sustainable development dimensions. Evaluative methods based on in-depth, case-based investigations include contribution analysis, process tracing and contribution tracing.

Comparing cases with positive and negative outcomes: Another useful approach for identifying policies and programmes' effects on trade-offs and synergies is conducting several case studies for comparison through different methods. Qualitative comparative analysis is a rigorous approach for this type of assessment that helps identify the different combinations of conditions that can lead to indivisible or cancelling outcomes.

Network analysis: This type of analysis can help to understand the structure of physical, biological, social and economic networks, assess the extent to which they are interdependent and discover the effects of their interactions. As well as providing insights into how networks form, network analysis also helps to identify the core attributes of different types of networks, including their strengths, weaknesses and how they function. Social network analysis, for example, can help improve understanding of the role that different stakeholder groups' networks play in implementing programmes and projects across the four dimensions of sustainable development.¹¹⁰

Cost-benefit analysis of externalities: In economics, an externality is a cost or benefit not originally anticipated by an actor, policy or intervention. Externalities can be positive or negative and are usually conceptualized as effects of the economic activities or unanticipated results of transactions between economic agents. Thanks to the development of non-market valuation techniques, we can use cost-benefit analysis to estimate the effects of interventions targeting one SDG on another and the positive or negative value of externalities of policies, programmes and projects across the four dimensions of sustainable development. To properly assess environmental externalities, an evaluation must consider sustainability constraints. Therefore, cost-benefit analysis is usually complemented by an environmental impact assessment, to ensure it identifies the necessary preventive expenditure, avoiding the worst form of degradation of environmental assets. This approach is usually effective in evaluating the environmental costs of projects but is usually more challenging for estimating the costs of programmes or policies.¹¹¹

Finland's versatile and participatory approach
In both the 2019 and 2023 evaluations, the evaluation teams decided to use versatile and extensive data analysis and a participatory approach to address

these methodological challenges. The key activities undertaken in the 2019 evaluation to analyse, validate and discuss data and evaluation findings are summarized below (see *Table 8*).



Table 8. Key evaluation activities used by the Finnish team (2019)

Data sources	Summary
Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SDG index and dashboard indicators¹¹²• National sustainable development indicators (10 indicator baskets)• HELSUS policy dialogue material
Key policy documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government sustainable development programmes and strategies• Planning documents for development cooperation projects
Survey (n=238)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Closed survey of key sustainable development actors and practitioners• Open survey of all interested stakeholders
Interviews (n=80)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key professionals in sustainable development• Representatives of all ministries• Scientific advisory panel for sustainable development• Key press stakeholders
Workshops (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two open stakeholder workshops (around 80 and 40 participants)• One international workshop (30 participants from 21 countries)

The 2023 assessment also applied a benchmark analysis of three reference countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden). The benchmark analysis examined the implementation of sustainable development strategies in key partner and cooperation countries for Finland and aimed to identify examples and practices from these countries that could be utilized in the implementation of Finland's 2030 Agenda. It was conducted as a document review of the implementation and governance of the 2030 Agenda, covering the three peer countries as well as an EU-level analysis.

The analysis conducted country specific reviews, mapping out practices affecting the implementation, and summarized key lessons identified from the peer countries to answer the respective evaluation question.

Step F: Planning for effective communication and influence

This final step highlights the importance of developing a dynamic communication plan and thinking ahead about opportunities for influencing policies right from the design of the evaluation.

A communication plan should be outlined and budgeted from the outset and should be included in the evaluation terms of reference. It should encompass communication products, tools and stakeholders. A variety of products such as reports, briefings, videos, blogs, summary of policy pointers, etc. is recommended. Examples of tools include multi-stakeholder workshops and presentations. Products should be tailored to stakeholder needs and informed by an analysis on the most effective communication strategies for influencing decision-making.

A common shortcoming of long reports full of technical jargon is that they are inaccessible to most of the stakeholder groups targeted by the evaluation. Evaluators can avoid this pitfall by considering which type of evaluation products would suit different audiences. Identifying different evaluation deliverables in advance can help commissioners to develop realistic budgets that consider communication needs over the course of an evaluation.

A variety of knowledge products and a solid communication strategy are usually needed throughout the evaluation process and beyond. For example, short reports written in plain language can inform meetings with non-technical stakeholder groups. Managers, civil servants or academics, on the other hand, may need detailed reports with substantial technical appendices to demonstrate the credibility of findings. Short briefings with recommendations, policy pointers at the top of the document or short videos can be impactful in meetings with policymakers or parliamentarians.

Communication strategies can be more effective by utilizing new technologies and creative solutions. Innovative ways of communicating and reporting include:¹¹³

- Developing interactive webpages or sites with evaluation results
- A public exhibition of the results for non-technical stakeholders
- Producing videos for non-technical audiences, and
- Doing joint conference presentations that involve the evaluator, the evaluation commissioner and ideally other stakeholders.

Commissioners can integrate all these deliverables and activities into an overarching communication and influence strategy or plan that is developed at the beginning of the evaluation and updated throughout. As discussed in Step A, identifying the intended use and users of an evaluation's findings is often a precondition of their uptake. An effective communications strategy would therefore identify:

- Key decision-makers who need to be informed about evaluation results and recommendations.
- Individuals or groups that may be interested in the evaluation findings.
- Key processes and timings for when the findings are needed
- Key activities for presentation, justification and discussion of the findings e.g. policy dialogues.
- How these findings feed into a series of analyses and reporting cycles.



Box 18. Audience-focused communication

Finland produced a wide range of communication products tailored for different audiences, including:

- An 80-page report with appendices in Finnish and English
- A shorter policy briefing in Finnish and English.
- Several blogs
- Social media material, and
- PowerPoint presentations.

4. Using the results of an SDG evaluation for influencing policy and decision-making

This chapter discusses the importance of ensuring that the results of SDG evaluations—namely findings, recommendations, and lessons—are effectively utilized to inform and influence high-level decision-making. It also explores the potential impact of these evaluations in fostering more equitable and just public policies.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines an ambitious and transformational vision aimed at achieving 17 interconnected goals that span economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The agenda is based on human rights principles and standards. Accordingly, SDGs evaluations should have a clear intent to contribute to the transformative changes the agenda seeks to achieve.

Guidelines for ensuring influential SDG evaluations

To maximize the influence of SDG evaluations, consider the following key guidelines:

1. Define purpose and intent

Clearly articulate the evaluation's intent, specifying the policies or programmes it aims to influence and the mechanisms by which this influence will occur.

2. Engage decision-makers early

Evaluations gain greater traction when discussions about transformational changes are initiated with high-level decision-makers, such as government leaders and policy decision-makers, from the outset.

3. Institutionalize stakeholder participation

Embed stakeholder engagement throughout the evaluation process to ensure diverse perspectives are represented and to build ownership of the findings.

4. Develop an influence strategy

Communicate findings and recommendations through a well-crafted influence strategy. This could include organizing policy dialogues with influential actors such as parliamentarians, international organizations, and civil society representatives.

5. Create enabling environments

Establish conditions that encourage the translation of evaluation findings into action, fostering discussions on how recommendations can lead to long-lasting and transformative changes.

6. Integrate transformational aims from the start

Incorporate a vision for transformational change into the evaluation's planning and design stages. A key question to be answered at the early stage could be: *Does the evaluation aim to advocate for more equitable and just public policies?*

Although all country-led evaluations highlighted in this guidebook served different purposes, distinguishing between use and influence is essential. Evaluations are considered useful when their recommendations are implemented. However, recommendations can be instrumental, operational, or influential.

This section highlights examples of evaluation influence. Notably, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, and Uganda conducted evaluations with a clear intent to be influential:

- 1. Costa Rica** evaluated its National Biodiversity Strategy to ensure greater alignment with the 2030 Agenda and 17 SDGs and to provide input for updating the strategy following the establishment of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- 2. Ecuador**, through a rigorous and participatory process, selected its national public policy on child malnutrition as the focus of its SDG-related evaluation. This evaluation aimed to improve processes of inter-institutional coordination and contribute to achieving SDGs linked to the policy.
- 3. Finland** aimed to generate evidence to inform and influence adjustments to its national sustainable development plan, ensuring steady progress towards the 2030 Agenda. It also sought to influence public elections by timing the release of evaluation results during the election campaign. Finland was the first country to create a roadmap for achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- 4. Uganda** evaluated the principle of LNOB to generate robust data and evidence. The goal was to mobilize various stakeholders, including line ministries, to design, adjust or implement inclusive national programs and policies.

Finland: influencing the road towards implementing the 2030 Agenda

Finland carried out two independent evaluations of the nation's sustainable development policy.¹¹⁴ The findings and recommendations of the 2019 evaluation were widely disseminated to political parties prior to 2019 parliamentary elections, and were also used by political parties in the negotiations of the 2019 government programme. For instance, there were presentations and discussions held in several ministries, six discussions with political parties, and a discussion by four parliamentary committees on the evaluation results and recommendations.

The 2019 evaluation was also used in Finland's VNR in 2020. The second evaluation was published in the spring of 2023, and it was useful when the new government programme was under planning, and the administration raised key needs for improvement identified by the evaluation. In addition, the evaluation was used when the government wrote its report to the parliament on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.¹¹⁵ Lastly, the evaluation will inform the preparation of the 2025 VNR of Finland as well as serve as one of its sources of information.

External independent evaluations have been very useful both in planning national sustainable development policies and preparing VNRs in Finland. The use of evaluation in the VNR was seen as a channel to feed findings into the strategic and planning cycle, and inform policymakers about the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of different policies. Doing this was also a way to increase the visibility and use of the evaluation domestically in Finland.¹¹⁶

In addition, the two evaluations have received international attention, and Finland has shared lessons in various fora. After the first evaluation, an international seminar was organised in Helsinki by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, IIED, EVALSDGs and UNICEF. Inspired by the seminar, the first edition of this guidebook was jointly developed. With the second SDG evaluation completed in Finland, the international collaboration continues, including the second edition of this guide.

Nigeria: Multi-stakeholder engagement in policy-dialogues to ensure use and influence

Nigeria was the first country in the Global South to undertake country-led evaluations of the SDGs, with two evaluations focused on SDG 3 and SDG 4. These evaluations have been highly influential. Below examples of high-level influence:

As a result of SDG 3 evaluation, advocacy and community sensitization is now mainstreamed as part of national primary health care strategy. This is aimed at addressing the deeply rooted social and cultural barriers preventing primary healthcare uptake in some parts of the country.

SDG 4 evaluation led to an increase of the budget and in investments in school infrastructure by relevant national and subnational ministries, departments and agencies. This was following the official launch of the SDG evaluation reports by His Excellency the Vice President of Nigeria.

5. Tailoring national M&E systems

This chapter takes a step back from the process of designing individual country-led evaluations and discusses the significance of integrating the SDGs into the broader national M&E systems. It presents lessons from three cases of successful integration: Costa Rica, Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

Having SDGs already integrated into the national M&E system not only helps in conducting individual country-led evaluation assignments but also bares the potential of system-wide policy effects from evaluations. At the same time, it is entirely possible to conduct country-led evaluations even without pre-existing systems. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and their indicators can serve as a common “denominator” for different stakeholders even without a formalized system in place. This chapter lays out an idealized way for integrating SDG evaluation into national policy frameworks.

The relevance of the national M&E system and practice

Ideally, countries will be able to integrate SDG evaluation into their existing national systems for monitoring and evaluating development, environmental and humanitarian-related policies, strategies and programmes. But not every country has such systems. Case studies by the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group suggest that national approaches to M&E include:

- Loose networks of national, sectoral (or ministerial) and subnational institutions
- Systems based on parliamentary oversight
- Highly centralized systems within or independent of government
- A mix of any of those.¹¹⁷

While the global trend appears to be towards greater institutionalization, there is no sign of approaches converging and no one approach has been shown to be inherently better than others.¹¹⁸

Regardless of the approach taken, institutionalizing M&E serves several useful functions, including providing a structure for systematic data collection and analysis and facilitating learning and integration of evaluation findings and recommendations into the policy cycle.¹¹⁹ But too much institutionalization runs the risk of compromising the evaluation's function of providing critical assessment through independent thinking and questioning the assumptions that underpin policies and programmes.¹²⁰

Regardless of their form or extent, national M&E systems can provide a foundation for integrating the SDGs into national policymaking, monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, SDG evaluations can be – and have been – conducted successfully irrespective of a system in place, as long as they are properly designed, contextualized to the national context, and there is political will. Such evaluations can also serve as a learning or capacity building experience for the country to further strengthen its national M&E systems.



Box 19. National evaluation ecosystem in Sri Lanka: A global example

Sri Lanka boasts a rich history in the field of evaluation, further invigorated by the recent financial crisis, which has catalysed efforts to strengthen its evaluation ecosystem. This ecosystem is sustained through collaboration among the government, parliamentarians, academia, the Sri Lanka Evaluation Association (SLEvA), and development partners.

As one of Asia's pioneers in evaluation, Sri Lanka initiated steps toward establishing a national evaluation system in the early 2000s. The Department of Project Management and Monitoring, the country's first national evaluation agency, was founded in 2002 and since its inception, it has effectively promoted national evaluation capacity development.

Parliamentary advocacy and policy milestones

Parliament has historically been a strong advocate for evaluation. In 2016, a group of like-minded parliamentarians established the Parliamentary Forum for Evaluation, which played a pivotal role in passing motions to introduce a national evaluation policy and allocate public funds for evaluation.

In 2018, Sri Lanka became the first South Asian country to approve a national evaluation policy. Following this milestone:

1. The Cabinet of Ministers spearheaded the development of a National Evaluation Policy Implementation Framework, launched in 2023 to operationalize the policy.
2. Parliament established a Select Committee on Evaluation, which recommended the enactment of the "National Act on Evaluation of Development Interventions and Policies."

The 2023 framework includes dedicated budget lines for evaluation and ministry-level allocations to strengthen M&E units. This effort was reinforced by the Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies' Project Management and Monitoring Circular No 1/2024¹²¹, mandating all ministries to conduct evaluations in 2024. The circular highlights the urgent need to build evaluation capacity among public officials.

Capacity building and institutional support

To address this need, Sri Lanka established a Centre for Evaluation at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura that develops curricula, mobilizes universities for M&E education, and enhances lecturer capacity. It currently offers a postgraduate diploma, an advanced certificate in M&E, and plans to launch an Master of Sciences programme soon.

Role of SLEvA

Established in 1999, SLEvA actively supports the national evaluation processes, collaborating with the government and parliament. SLEvA unites evaluation practitioners from academia, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the public and private sectors, fostering a robust evaluation culture. It also facilitates knowledge exchange through national and international conferences and training programmes. Notably, SLEvA played a key role in founding the Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation (GPFE) and is recognized as a leading organization in the region.

International collaboration

In 2018, the GPFE hosted EvalColombo 2018: Responsible Parliaments – Embracing Evaluation for Agenda 2030, an event bringing together parliamentarians and parliaments from around the world. The event aimed to raise awareness of the critical role parliaments and parliamentarians play in advancing the 2030 Agenda and to promote the collaborative use of evaluation in decision-making among parliaments, governments, civil society, and the evaluation community.

A key outcome of EvalColombo 2018 was the Colombo Declaration¹²², a document designed to build consensus among delegates on the values and principles underpinning the importance of measuring progress toward the SDGs, supporting the global evaluation agenda, and reinforcing the role of parliaments in achieving these goals.

Sri Lanka was also one of the co-sponsors the 2023 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/77/283 on "Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews through Country-led Evaluation."

Development partners that have supported national evaluation efforts and culture in Sri Lanka include UNICEF, UNDP, UN Population Fund, World Food Programme, and United States Agency for International Development.

Integrating the SDGs into national M&E systems

The SDGs are not meant to create a new layer of policy on top of existing ones. Rather, countries should aim to address internationally agreed development goals by integrating sustainable development principles into their national policy frameworks. "Implementation and success will rely on countries' own sustainable development policies, plans and programmes, and will be led by countries. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be a compass for aligning countries' plans with their global commitments."¹²³

Although not all countries have comprehensive national plans accompanied by an integrated statistical system, they can all map their existing policy frameworks and instruments with the SDGs. Indeed, many countries have already done so. It is possible to do these exercises at national level, particularly in smaller countries with well-defined national development or government plans.

These kind of mapping exercises may point to aspects of policies or programmes where greater alignment with 2030 Agenda principles or goals could improve their sustainable development contribution. Countries can then use that information to create SDG roadmaps tailored to their national, sector or subnational context and indicators for their national priorities. Even countries that have not (yet) fully integrated the SDGs into their national policy frameworks can use these exercises to frame their evaluation of national progress on the SDGs at a range of levels.

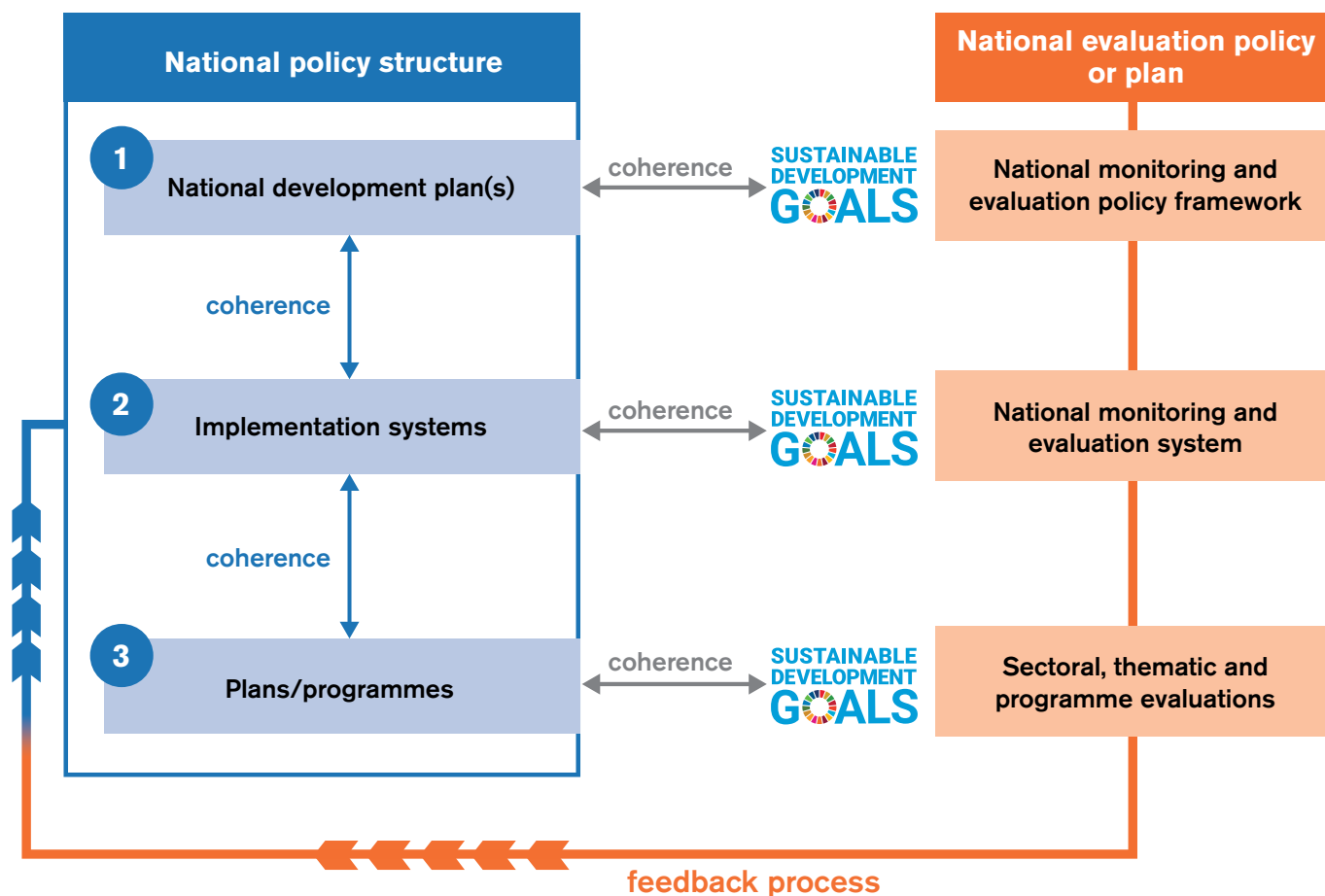
Adapting national M&E systems to SDG evaluation involves reviewing — and where necessary, revising — standard evaluation processes, criteria and questions while also considering the nationally prioritized 2030 Agenda goals and principles. In doing that review, countries need to focus on what matters in terms of national and global sustainability and priorities without placing too much emphasis on global SDG targets, indicators and timeframes, which are not necessarily adaptable to national or local scales or purposes. Countries with piecemeal or non-existent national M&E systems may find it useful to look at evaluation processes, criteria and questions from an SDG perspective. This may help them develop or strengthen their systems.

To be useful for SDG evaluation, national M&E systems must generate relevant information, which may be different from the information generated by their existing systems. For example, countries may choose to incorporate data on selected national indicators of SDG progress into their national statistical systems.

Countries will find their own way to integrate the SDGs into their national development priorities, plans and linked evaluation systems based on their own trajectory towards sustainable development. An idealized approach that countries can use for guidance is laid out below (see *Figure 7*). Issues to consider include establishing a national evaluation policy, or at least, a national evaluation agenda, developing M&E strategic plans and building national capacity in data management, evaluation and decision-making.



Figure 6. An idealized approach for integrating SDG evaluation into national policy frameworks



Source: figure by García Acuña, M and Lucks, D adapted from from Geoghegan et al. (2019)

Developing relevant indicators: Lessons from Costa Rica and Nigeria

For countries that are trying to align their national M&E system to the 2030 Agenda, developing indicators that are relevant to the SDGs is an area of major concern. The lessons learned from mapping exercises in Costa Rica and Nigeria, two countries that have integrated the SDGs into their statistical infrastructure are showcased below.

Step-by-step approaches to mapping indicators against the SDGs

In 2015, Nigeria's OSSAP-SDGs mapped SDG indicators with data production sources at national and subnational levels, in collaboration with the National Bureau of Statistics and UNDP in Nigeria. The objectives were to use the SDGs as a framework for results, build an indicator performance database by setting performance targets and foster a practice of open data principles.

As a result of the exercise, Nigeria assessed its data gaps, mapped its data needs and identified a set of indicators that are regularly monitored by national authorities. As well as strengthening data reliability in the country, these were critical steps towards monitoring progress in SDG implementation, defining indicator performance targets and creating a comprehensive list of data holders and a statistical information benchmark. The exercise also reinforced awareness of the SDGs in ministries, departments and agencies, identified critical funding and revealed

that some indicators were incompatible with the Nigerian statistical context and scope.

Thus, Nigeria has now successfully realigned its national statistical system with the requirements and indicators of the SDGs. Going forward, Nigeria will be tracking the 230 indicators on annual basis through the national statistical system. Additionally, Nigeria now has a national monitoring and evaluation policy to guide the M&E of government policies and programmes.



Figure 7. Step-by-step indicator mapping exercises in Nigeria and Costa Rica

Nigeria	Costa Rica
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Creating an SDGs indicator dictionary through consultation with stakeholders. This meant they defined each indicator within the national context and explored methods for data collection 2 Developing data templates on each of the SDG indicators and rolling out training 3 Consulting key administrative data production sources 4 Data mining 5 Designing a baseline indicator survey to realign the National Statistical System with the SDGs 6 Publishing a baseline data report on some of the SDG indicators 7 Establishing an indicator performance database with performance monitoring indicators 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Developing tracker of SDG indicators based on a survey of national statistical capacities for producing SDG indicators developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2 Mapping information/data sources 3 Evaluating SDG indicators with methodological records linked to the indicators proposed by the UN 4 Consulting with 48 institutions and looking at the availability of information to figure out indicators and possible sources 5 Revising and validating the responses received 6 Updating the list of indicators

In a similar exercise, Costa Rica mapped its national indicators against SDG indicators. Like Nigeria, Costa Rica put its National Institute of Statistics in charge of the task. The institute started by identifying the national statistical capacities needed to produce monitoring indicators for achieving the SDGs.

The results showed that as of 2023, Costa Rica has sufficient data to cover 62.1 per cent of the 248 indicators proposed by the United Nations Statistical Commission. This means that information is available for monitoring 154 indicators. However, 31 indicators are pending the identification of an information source to be created, 15 cannot be produced with the existing information in the country, and 48 are not applicable to Costa Rica. Over the past six years, the

country has increased its capacity to measure SDG indicators by 15.1 per cent.

Costa Rica continues to work periodically on the national system of SDG indicators, a key input for the preparation of country reports by the SDG Technical Secretariat, led by Mideplan. This work includes identifying areas that pose challenges for indicator development, financing new sources of information, and incorporating gender and ethnicity aspects. These elements have been included in Costa Rica's VNR.¹²⁴ The country is also developing new instruments such as the national strategy for statistical development and the national statistical plan, demonstrating its commitment to providing timely, accessible, and high-quality statistics.¹²⁵

6. Conclusion and key lessons

Robust and influential evaluation is a critical component of any country's M&E system and the challenges posed by the SDGs offer a real opportunity to further promote and support country-led evaluation efforts. Where country-led evaluation is still developing, there are many resources available internationally and lessons to be derived from the experience of other countries.

To help countries develop their own approach to the 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation, this guide has presented real-world examples and offered a pragmatic approach, based on the following key lessons:

- Initiate the evaluation process with policy dialogues with the aim to prompt high-level decision-makers, to undertake the SDG evaluation.
- Emphasize the relevance and potential benefits of SDG evaluation for the country.
- Foster partnerships between government, international cooperation agencies, parliamentarians and Voluntary Organization for Professional Evaluations to kick-start the evaluation process.
- Think about evaluation use and influence and engage different stakeholders to define the SDG evaluation objectives.
- Identify scope and focus of SDG evaluation through participatory processes.
- Use the principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda such as LNOB, equity and others, as evaluative criteria and to inform the evaluation questions.
- Frame the evaluation around the logic that underpins complex policies and interventions and develop dynamic plans to communicate findings and engage evaluation users.
- Ensure the evaluations' results are effectively utilized to inform and influence high-level decision-making.
- Use evaluations of the SDGs to strengthen their country's VNRs, as called for by UNGA Resolution 77/283.

While there is no single way to monitor and evaluate progress against the SDGs, building SDG evaluation into existing policy and programme cycles can be a useful way for countries to achieve sustainable development. For this reason, identifying the intended users and uses of the evaluation early on is key. The 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation comprises a range of different exercises inspired by the principles of integration/coherence, leave no one behind, equity,

resilience, environmental sustainability, universality, and mutual accountability that underpin the 2030 Agenda. These can be used as additional evaluative criteria, to develop the evaluation questions and design the evaluation engagement process.

This guide is based mainly on real-case examples of SDG evaluation design, implementation and use. We hope that other countries and local authorities will build on the practices and lessons included in this guidebook and see SDG evaluation as an opportunity to learn and improve their policies, strategies and programmes.

Nonetheless, the 2030 Agenda and SDG evaluation should not be perceived as a bureaucratic and burdensome requirement but rather, as a reflective and strategic exercise. To maximize its benefits, every country and local authority should develop tailored approaches that work for their own journey towards sustainable development. To achieve this, governments should partner with international cooperation organizations, parliamentarians, academic organizations, Voluntary Organization for Professional Evaluation and other relevant stakeholders. The cases presented in this guidebook demonstrate the effectiveness of partnerships in the process of SDG evaluations.

Since the launch of the first edition of this guidebook, the world has changed significantly – not the least because of the COVID-19 pandemic, wars and armed conflicts in different parts of the world, and the acute global climate crisis. In 2023, the United Nations' Secretary General called for a global rescue plan for the SDGs. The same year, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 77/283 to strengthen the evidence-base and reporting on the SDGs through country-led evaluations to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The 2024 adopted Pact for the Future acknowledges the urgent need to produce reliable information on progress and for analysing and synthesizing evidence around the SDGs. While the international community is under huge pressure to fulfill their commitments and solve the many new and urgent challenges, emerging technologies and cutting-edge developments around artificial intelligence may provide new tools to speed up our efforts and find timely solutions. Still, governments are the duty-bearers for achieving the SDGs and keeping track of their progress by conducting country-led evaluations of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are important international commitments and serve as guideposts for collective efforts in solving today's biggest

challenges. Solutions are urgently needed, and we need to do our best to achieve the SDGs by 2030. However, we must not disregard the medium- and long-term and work towards creating a more equitable and sustainable future beyond 2030.

The 2030 Agenda's global goals – such as overcoming hunger and poverty, tackling the sources and effects of global warming, safeguarding wildlife, and working towards peace and justice in the world – will remain relevant well after 2030.

The principles enshrined in the 2030 Agenda are consistent with many other development agendas and approaches, such as the human rights-based principles.

With this in mind, we, the partners, foresee that the contents of this second edition of the guidebook – on how to evaluate progress towards the SDGs and in tackling the world's biggest challenges – will remain relevant and provide a valuable resource in the years to come.

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- 6 Demos is an independent think tank working with the public and private sectors and civil society organizations to build fair and post-industrial sustainable societies. HELSUS is a cross-faculty research unit in sustainability science within the University of Helsinki and SYKE is a research institute and government agency under the Ministry of Environment focusing on changes in the environment.
- 7 Consisting of: Satu Lähteenoja (Demos), Annukka Berg (SYKE), Kaisa Korhonen-Kurki (HELSUS), Matti Ylönen (HELSUS), Tyrrälänko (Demos), Kirsi-Marja Lonkila (Demos), Jari Lyytimäki (SYKE), Anna Salmivaara (HELSUS), Hanna Salo (SYKE), Paula Schönoch (HELSUS) and Ira Suutarinen (HELSUS).
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- 49 While this guidance focuses on the national level, it is possible to address some national sustainable development issues at state, province or municipal level through sub-national plans and programmes or at regional level through institutions such as the European Union or intergovernmental groupings such as the Small Island Developing States.
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This 'real life' introduction to evaluating progress on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is based on emerging country experience from North and South, as well as wider past learning on sustainable development evaluation.

It is the second edition of a guidebook first published in 2020, now containing additional country experiences of SDG evaluations as well as two new chapters, one on initiating an SDG evaluation and one on using the results of SDG evaluations to inform and influence policy and decision-making as a path towards sustainable change.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all manual, this guide seeks to support evaluation commissioners, managers and professional evaluators to create tailored plans and approaches to SDG evaluation. It argues that a successful evaluation must be both built around existing national context and underpinned by the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

To support customised local or national journeys towards sustainable development, this guide:

- Lays out the main steps involved in scoping, designing and conducting an SDG evaluation
- Discusses the ways in which SDG evaluation processes and results can be used to support national progress on sustainable development
- Identifies key SDG evaluation characteristics and approaches, and
- Looks at how SDG evaluation can be integrated into national monitoring and evaluation systems.

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