



Australia – EVALSDGs: A Platform for Advocacy, Learning and Innovation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a brief analysis of the importance of strengthening national evaluation capacities towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It explores the need and opportunities for bringing evaluation practice closer to national policymaking and evidence-based decision-making. This requires a stronger and broad-based platform to advocate for evaluation, to innovate in development and evaluation practice, and ensure that learning is captured into a dynamic knowledge management framework. Based on these needs, it introduces the pathway that has led to the development of the EVALSDGs network as a global network for sharing information on evaluation of the SDGs. It also articulates the contribution that a more explicit policy environment for evaluation and stronger evaluation practice can make towards achievement of the SDGs.

Background to the Sustainable Development Goals

From 2000-2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused global efforts on development and spurred progress towards achievement of human development goals around the world. Much has been achieved⁸⁰, but a key criticism of the MDGs was that there was insufficient attention paid to generating evidence on achievements and learning from challenges⁸¹. The UNDP report on the MDGs found that “Better data are needed for the post-2015 development agenda”, and particularly high quality, disaggregated data.⁸² Furthermore, the report highlights the importance moving forward of national capacities in relation to measuring progress in development.

80 UNDP. 2015. ‘Millennium Development Goals Report 2015’ p. 12.

81 Fehling et al. 2013. ‘Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals: a literature review’, *Global Public Health*. vol 8. No. 10: 1109-1122.

82 UNDP. 2015. ‘Millennium Development Goals Report 2015’ p. 12.

The SDGs are the basis of the post-2015 global development agenda (2030 Agenda) formally adopted in New York on 25 September 2015. Seventeen goals were developed through an extensive process of global consultation, each with a set of associated targets. Indicators for measurement of the targets are currently under development and expected to be completed in March 2016. The 2030 Agenda emphasises the importance of every national government defining and measuring their own objectives and targets to measure their progress, representing a shift from the previous focus of the MDGs on developing countries.⁸³

Importance of Evaluation to the Sustainable Development Goals

The final '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' includes acknowledgement of the importance of evaluation as part of the principles on which follow up and review of progress towards the goals should be based:

"They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country led evaluations and data which is high quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts."

"They will require enhanced capacity building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes."⁸⁴

The importance of evaluation to the SDGs, and particularly at the national level, is supported by a recent report from the United Nations Evaluation Group which highlights the contribution of evaluations to accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making, important especially to achieving and measuring results at a national level.⁸⁵

Evaluation aims to support learning, transparency, accountability and improvement. Evaluation evidence can inform, orient and strengthen efforts and interventions under the SDGs. Evaluation of what is working, for whom, and under what conditions will accelerate progress both towards "The World We Want" and towards "Blending evaluation principles with development practices to change people's lives". Evaluation processes also have the potential to support and empower national governments and their citizens to navigate complex problems and take effective actions that will ultimately contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

Introducing EVALSDGs

EVALSDGs is an emerging initiative of the EvalPartners network. EvalPartners was formed by the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE)⁸⁶ in partnership with

83 United Nations. 2015. 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.

84 Ibid.

85 United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) 2015. 'Evidence Changes Lives: Realizing Evaluation's Potential to Inform the Global Sustainable Development Goals'.

86 See <www.ioce.net>.

the United Nations in March 2012⁸⁷. EvalPartners and IOCE have been working to contribute to improved country-led evaluation systems and policies, to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage in a strategic and meaningful manner in national evaluation processes, and for evaluations that are equity-focused and gender responsive.⁸⁸ EVALSDGs has been formed as part of EvalPartners in partnership with UNEG, which is taking an active role in assessing the evaluability of the SDGs and associated indicators and the processes by which they will be evaluated. The concept of EVALSDGs is:

“EVALSDGs is a network of interested and skilled policy makers, institutions and practitioners who advocate for the evaluability of the performance indicators of the new SDGs and support processes to integrate evaluation into national and global review systems.

“EVALSDGs members work to support the evaluation community to be prepared for evaluating initiatives towards better outcomes for the SDGs and ultimately, the ‘World We Want.’”⁸⁹

EVALSDGs was formed in response to the need to improve effective monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs in a way that maximizes participation of and influence on national systems as well as realizing the potential of evaluation to strongly contribute to the global agenda of the SDGs. In this respect it is strongly aligned with the NEC theme of “Blending evaluation principles with development practices to change people’s lives”.

DISCUSSION

Progress towards “The world we want” – the headline of the SDGs extensive consultative process – requires efforts at every level to turn aspirations into realities. The focus of the SDGs on all national governments to define and measure their own targets is a new process and a significant shift from the preceding MDGs that opens potential for a wide range of benefits to national governments, though also represents major challenges and a high level of complexity.

Evaluation adds value to the follow-up and review processes of the SDGs

Each of the 17 SDGs has a set of global targets and indicators that will help countries develop implementation strategies and allocate resources towards achieving the goals.⁹⁰ However, the focus of the SDGs process has mainly been on review and reporting as a report card approach against the chosen indicators. Evaluation has the capacity to step beyond compliance into engagement in performance assessment, learning, strengthening of account-

87 See <<http://www.mymande.org/evalpartners>>.

88 Attuned Research and Evaluation & Basi Consulting Group Inc. 2015, *Evaluation of EvalPartners: The Global Movement to Strengthen National Evaluation Capacities*.

89 Lucks, D. and Kirk, C. 2015. *EvalSDG Concept Paper*.

90 United Nations. 2015. IAEg-SDGs: Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators. <<http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/>>.

ability mechanisms, as well as contributing to policy- and decision-making processes. Strengthening of global and national evaluation capacity will add substantial value to the SDG implementation process and assist in achieving long-term outcomes.

Embedding evaluation theory and practice in the monitoring and review of the SDGs enhances opportunities for greater impact, including amplifying the voice of national stakeholders and local people in SDG initiatives. A deeper understanding of the unique theory of change in local contexts can be gained through building evaluative processes at the commencement of respective SDG implementation activities. Recognition of diversity within countries can be assisted through aligned, but distinct evaluative processes.

National evaluation policies could contribute to the achievement of the SDGs

Given the above highlighted potential contributions of evaluation to the achievement of the SDGs, it is important to discuss the 'enabling environment' for evaluation at the national level. Consultations to date by IOCE and EvalPartners as part of EvalYear 2015 have established the importance of the national policy environment in supporting a positive enabling environment for evaluation.⁹¹ Barbara Rosenstein, supported through the EvalPartners Parliamentarians Network, conducted a mapping exercise of national evaluation policies worldwide. She found a high level of variation in the current status of national evaluation policies and the ways they are administered.⁹² As Rosenstein (2015) argues, there remain many unanswered questions for further exploration around the links between evaluation policies, evaluation culture, and how these ultimately contribute to improved outcomes for countries and their citizens. In the context of the SDGs this is an important area of uncertainty – evaluation does have potential to contribute to greater achievement towards the SDGs if it successfully supports evidence-based and responsive decision-making. Considerations of social equity and gender equality in relation to national evaluation policies should also be important priorities in relation to evaluation of the SDGs.⁹³

Strengthening national evaluation systems is crucial to evaluation of SDGs and national and local outcomes

Evaluation draws from and synthesizes a wide range of data sources, including quantitative and qualitative, short-term and long-term, and seeks to ensure that findings are meaningful. Independent evaluation can contribute to a credible, more adaptive, learning-oriented process for implementation in any thematic area. It helps to measure, analyse and demonstrate clear evidence of achievement and challenges. Rigorous, and often mixed, methods in evaluation practice ultimately contribute to improved accountability and evidence-based

91 EvalPartners and IOCE in partnership with UN Women and SLEVA. 2014. 'Summary Report of the South Asia Regional Consultation on National Evaluation Policies'.

92 Rosenstein, B. 2013. *Mapping the Status of National Evaluation Policies*.

93 Bamberger, M., Segone, M. and Reddy, S. 2014. 'National Evaluation Policies for Sustainable and Equitable Development: How to Integrate Gender Equality and Social Equity in National Evaluation Policies and Systems'.

decision-making, stronger leadership, as well as facilitating learning and innovation. In relation to national governments, evaluation findings and recommendations can help to guide resource allocation, improve outcomes, and to empower governments to demonstrate their success and improve accountability to their citizens.

The lack of good data is challenging in the context of evaluation of development globally and at national levels.⁹⁴ There are new opportunities arising due to technological advancements for new sources of data that could facilitate easier tracking of the SDG indicators.⁹⁵ Collaboration between actors in development is needed to capitalize on opportunities as they arise and to share knowledge and build operational data capture and flow systems at the national level. Building this capacity at the national level has potential to enhance the collection and analysis of data at the national level and contribute to development outcomes.

Providing a platform for collaboration on 'blending evaluation principles with development practices'

Given the high level of complexity associated with the SDGs and thus with measuring progress towards them at all levels, there is much to gain from having a platform for open dialogue and creating strategic links to share lessons and advances as they occur and to share lessons learned from approaches or methodologies. Such collaboration should be a priority for national governments seeking to develop their national evaluation capacities and in some cases national evaluation policies. EVALSDGs has the potential to provide such a platform for collaboration around the development of national evaluation capacities and policies as they relate to the SDGs.

EVALSDGs, through the EvalPartners network, recognizes the importance of linking national governments and donor organizations with the evaluation sector and evaluation practitioners, particularly the Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) that are springing up at global, regional and national levels. UNEG, a partner in EVALSDGs, emphasizes the importance of the higher levels of ownership of initiatives by stakeholders that can be generated through evaluations, and especially by making the results of evaluations easily available to stakeholders.⁹⁶ Consequently, the EVALSDGs network brings together evaluation practitioners, CSO networks with national governments and development partners with a focus on sharing, learning and innovation. In this way, EVALSDGs aims to add value to both the evaluation sector and to the SDGs implementation and review processes and ultimately contribute to greater achievement in relation to the SDGs and 'changing people's lives' through development practices.

94 Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). 2014. 'Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for Sustainable Development Goals Launching a Data Revolution for the SDGs'.

95 United Nations Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG). 2014. 'A World That Counts: Mobilizing the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development'.

96 UNEG. 2015. 'Evidence Changes Lives: Realizing Evaluation's Potential to Inform the Global Sustainable Development Goals'.

Changing people's lives through increased engagement in evaluation of SDGs

Good evaluation practice is based on effective stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders need to be more engaged in monitoring and evaluation and their engagement is needed to assist in providing a useful framework and practices for governments and international agencies to generate valid quantitative and qualitative data as evidence for performance monitoring and learning. Building national evaluation capacities to enable evaluators to effectively engage with governments, donor agencies, and other stakeholders is an important priority to support the SDGs. At the same time, commissioners and procurement processes for evaluation need to improve, including allocation of sufficient resources to cover all stages of the evaluation requirements including learning and stakeholder engagement. Evaluation processes must have sufficient scope to include and raise the voice of previously excluded minorities or disempowered stakeholders, who are often most affected by national decision-making. Most importantly, individuals with influence to change people's lives such as national and sectoral leaders and other key civic leaders require assistance to increase awareness of evaluation findings and what decisions can be made to bring about accelerated and equitable progress in relation to the SDGs outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The priorities for countries in terms of developing national evaluation capacities to support the SDGs are to promote improved decision-making through evaluation, learning and innovation, specific to country contexts. Enhanced focus on national data systems and blending quantitative and qualitative analysis through evaluation will strengthen analysis and collaborative action between national governments and CSOs, particularly through VOPEs. Meaningful evaluation should include accountability and transparency mechanisms as well as concerns of social equity and gender equality by giving voice to previously marginalized stakeholders.

A platform for collaboration around evaluation and the SDGs has the potential to facilitate knowledge sharing and networking towards the advancement of national evaluation capacities. EVALSDGs provides a platform for collaboration around the development of national evaluation capacities in development as they relate to the SDGs. In this way, both national governments and the evaluation sector can ultimately contribute to greater achievement in relation to the SDGs and to 'changing people's lives' through development practices.

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