

3. Evaluation in the SDG Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put evaluation of public policies in a new operating environment. This implies both opportunities and challenges. In Finland, the Parliamentary Committee with the responsibility and lead on the 2030 Agenda is the Committee for the Future. Recently, the Committee stated that the 2030 Agenda has the potential to be the most significant commitment of our era for the future of humankind. For the first time, we have agreed on ambitious global and universal commitments to achieve sustainable development. The challenge, of course, is that even if the potential is there, achievement will not be automatic. To succeed, there is a need to move from unique global commitments to unique global implementation, or the potential won't be realized.

There are three major issues that need to be addressed and operationalized with new determination for success: universality, comprehensiveness and interlinkages and finally coherence.

To achieve universality, we need to move from an established mindset which divides the world into the global North and the global South, an old mindset of “from North to South”. In too many cases, the SDGs are still only seen as a framework for development cooperation and relevant for aid relations. The sustainable development agenda is just as relevant in Europe. The 2030 Agenda is about our own national policies in addition to the external dimensions of our policies. The five “Ps” of the Agenda—people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships—are highly relevant on the European continent as well. Just a glance at news headlines of the last few years shows how relevant the five “Ps” framework is from a European perspective: migration, refugees, increasing inequalities, economic crises, terrorism, violence, Brexit, changes in trans-Atlantic relations. What is needed is implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda, everywhere. Success will require new and genuine partnerships between countries aiming to implement common commitments.

The SDGs can only be achieved if addressed comprehensively and respecting interlinkages, rather than a through narrow focus on fragmented elements. Success can be built only on coherent action. In Europe, implementation of the 2030 Agenda is typically seen as a matter of managing the internal and the national while balancing these elements with the

external and the global. In practice, this often means managing trade-offs and being prepared to compromise in the search for synergies. This has important implications for how processes are organized and implemented. What is needed is strong national leadership with the political power to coordinate. Success will be challenging in set-ups where the responsibility for sustainable development is given to a single sectoral ministry with inadequate power to coordinate others. In Finland, sustainable development issues were previously coordinated by the Ministry of Environment, emphasizing, given its mandate, environmental sustainability. After the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, in order to ensure adequate coordinating power, the role has been shifted to the Prime Minister's Office. This provides new opportunities to address coherence issues.

Multi-stakeholder cooperation is another prerequisite for sustainable development. In addition to public sector actors, civil society and private sector stakeholders need to come together in new ways to build consensus on the way forward. In the sustainable development game, we can only win together, we can only win if we all play on the same side. Many promising examples of this are already available, such as the voluntary national review mechanism which is an important source for learning lessons about innovations and successful new ways of doing things.

Turning to evaluation, we need to ask, what does this new operating environment imply for evaluation? What are the issues that cannot be tackled with traditional evaluation approaches?

Unique opportunities are before us. The 2030 Agenda definitions of review and follow-up include provisions for evaluation. After the frustration of the Millennium Declaration, which overlooked evaluation, the evaluation community has congratulated itself for paragraphs 74g and 74h in the General Assembly resolution—the two paragraphs where “evaluation” is mentioned. However, these words only become meaningful if we succeed in using them as a stepping stone to action. Action is needed now, not as an afterthought. The 2030 Agenda has already kept our statisticians, indicator experts and monitoring colleagues busy in meetings and work has been done at national, regional and global levels. Is there a similar buzz in the evaluation community? Is there adequate emphasis and action on the “E” of the “M&E” to ensure a sound foundation for evaluation evidence in the review and follow-up of the SDGs?

The 2030 Agenda implies unique challenges for evaluation. First, SDG evaluation is not business as usual. We need both new approaches and new capacities. We need evaluation approaches that don't fall into the trap of assuming linearity and logic where there is none. We need approaches that help to address complexity. A lot of innovation, testing and academic discourse has surrounded the question of complexity; the challenge now is to mainstream these approaches in evaluation, to apply and use the knowledge that we have. Systems approaches and a better understanding of different perspectives as a starting point for evaluations hold major promise, but these approaches have not yet been implemented comprehensively.

A new situation requires new capacities. Many more colleagues need to understand basic issues of evaluation and what added value independent evaluation can bring to decision-making. Quoting from work by EvalPartners, EvalSDGs and the International Institute

for Environment and Development which analyses the early voluntary national reviews, there appears to be very “little awareness of about just what evaluation is”⁹

Evaluators know, but for success, a much broader group of colleagues need basic capacity. Another type of capacity that is necessary is the capacity to break out of public policy silos. This means working with public sector colleagues in different ministries in a completely new way, and learning to work with new stakeholders, the private sector, academia and civil society.

Capacity challenges are not only technical, and the capacity needed for cooperation may prove to be a bigger challenge than that of adopting new methodologies. Fortunately, there have been encouraging and positive developments in recent years. For example, cooperation with parliamentarians who now promote evaluation has been a rapidly developing and successful area in breaking silos.

Leaving no one behind has become the mantra of the 2030 Agenda. In evaluation, many important approaches have been already adopted as safeguards: using disaggregated data; and employing participatory, empowering, human rights-based and feminist approaches in evaluation. The concept of leaving no one behind should also inspire further thinking on whom we as evaluators serve: who are the clients of evaluation evidence? Evidence-based decision-making has dominated this discussion in past years. It is important that evaluation serves political, policy and management decision makers. At the same time, it is necessary to think beyond a short-term focus on decision-making and think about evaluation as a public good. Evaluation can and should contribute to democratic and transparent governance, and support consumers of public and private services to hold decision makers accountable.

9 Benoit, Simon, et al. ‘Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs’ first set of Voluntary National Reviews’, IIED, London, 2017, <http://pubs.iied.org/17423IIED>.