3 GENDER-EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE: A BLIND SPOT IN SDG REPORTING? [26, 27]

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INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has put forward an ambitious agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within the frameworks of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda reaffirms that development will only be sustainable if its benefits are equally shared by both women and men and full attainment of women's equal rights will only be achieved if there are broader efforts to protect the environment and ensure that no one is left behind.[29]

Tracking progress on the 17 SDGs is crucial, and gender-responsive monitoring is the responsibility of all countries in order to strengthen accountability for actions. However, monitoring gender data is not enough. Review and follow-up mechanisms put in place for the 2030 Agenda should be informed by country-led evaluations, among other things, to ensure they are rigorous and based on evidence. Evaluation offers evidence-based learning on how policies and programmes delivered results and what needs to be done differently. Gender-responsive evaluation can analyse the data and present strong gender-evaluative evidence to meet the gender accountability targets for the SDGs.

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26 This paper is based on the policy brief "Equity-focused, gender-responsive evidence: a blind spot in VNR reporting" authored by Silke Hofer-Olusanmokun, Tarisirai Zengeni, Florencia Tateossian, Svetlana Negroustoueva, Claudia Olavarría Manriquez and Kassem El-Saddik, and published by the International Institute for Environment and Development, EvalGender+, EvalSDGs and UN Women Independent Evaluation and Audit Services.

27 The authors would like to thank the members of the EvalGender+ group who have contributed to the evidence base for analysing 2019 voluntary national reviews: Claudia Olavarria, Hur Hussain, Umi Hanik, Abeer Hakouz, Margaret Kakande, Benjamin Kachero, Rashmi Agrawal, Sana Ben Salem, Aicha Ben Yahia, Alexis Salvatore, Anis Ben Younes, Sonal Zaveri, Dolgion Aldar.

28 UN Women is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

29 UN Women, Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; A/RES/70/1 – Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 74 (g).

The follow-up and review mechanisms also call for inclusiveness, participation and ownership. The 2030 Agenda puts forward that processes should be "people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights"[30] and be "open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people".[31] In this line, gender-responsive evaluation becomes a crucial avenue that can support accountability for gender equality commitments in the implementation of the SDGs. At the global level and national levels, capacities are therefore needed for increasing the demand and conducting gender-responsive evaluations in order to meet the accountability commitments for gender equality in the implementation of the SDGs.

Gender-responsive evaluation allows countries to identify the structural causes of inequalities through deeper analysis of power relationships, social norms and cultural beliefs. Gender-responsive evaluation assesses the degree to which gender and power relationships – including structural and other causes that give rise to inequities, discrimination and unfair power relations – change as a result of an intervention using a process that is inclusive, participatory and respectful of all stakeholders (rights holders and duty bearers). Gender-responsive evaluation also provides information on the ways in which development programmes are affecting women and men differently and contributing towards achievement of these commitments. Finally, it helps to promote social change by using the knowledge produced from an evaluation for better development programming that promotes gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights in a sustainable manner.

At the global level, gender-responsive evaluation is driving the way in which evaluation is being conducted in order to meet the accountability commitments for gender equality in the implementation of the SDGs.

Capacity-building for countries should include strengthening national evaluation systems, particularly in least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and middle-income countries.[32] This means that evaluation and national evaluation capacity development should play a crucial role to support effective and efficient implementation of the SDGs. In line with strengthening national evaluation systems, various initiatives across regions are working to build capacities in gender-responsive evaluation. For instance, in the Americas and the Caribbean region, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and the City of Buenos Aires have engaged in programmes to strengthen their national/local evaluation systems, integrating gender equality and human rights perspectives in the evaluation of public policies. Similarly, Zimbabwe is developing a national monitoring and evaluation framework for gender equality. These uniquely integrated initiatives and activities are expected to

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30   Ibid, para 74 (e).

31   Ibid, para 74 (d).

32   Ibid, para 74 (h).

augment efforts by government and non-State actors towards strengthening existing and establishing new gender-responsive national monitoring and evaluation systems.

The global evaluation community has also engaged in reinforcing nationally-owned and -driven evaluation systems with a gender-responsive lens. EvalGender+, a global partnership composed of 37 organizations that aims to strengthen gender-responsive evaluations, has established itself as a unique movement to advocate for equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluation for the SDGs. As such, EvalGender+ works to advocate for gender-evaluative evidence and support accountability for gender equality commitments in the implementation of the SDGs. Among its initiatives, in 2018, EvalGender+, together with the International Institute for Environment and Development and EvalSDGs, jointly published a policy brief that looked at the degree of integration of gender-responsive evaluation in voluntary national reviews (VNRs). In 2019, EvalGender+ extended the study to analyse a group of 2019 VNRs and compare the progress and challenges in meeting the SDGs.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYSIS

The research studies for VNRs for both 2018 and 2019 aimed to answer the following questions:

- Whether and how gender equality is covered by the VNRs.
- Whether and how VNRs incorporate gender-responsive evaluative evidence. If not, what are the possible barriers?
- Whether perspectives from marginalized individuals (Leave no one behind) are included in the VNRs.
- Whether and how evaluation communities have been engaged in VNR processes at national level.
- How evaluative evidence on gender can be strengthened.

Based on these questions, an analytical framework was designed in order to assess the VNRs according to the following categories:

- Use of "Evaluation"- and "Gender"- related keywords
- Reference to a governance system for measuring progress towards the SDGs
- Description of a methodological framework for the VNR
- Integration of evaluation into SDG follow-up and review systems
- Mention of national frameworks, strategies, policies related to gender equality
- Evidence of inclusion of marginalized voices (Leave no one behind) in VNRs
- Evidence of plan(s) for a regular review of SDG progress at the national level, including the role of civil society in those processes

The EvalGender+ reviews included 43 countries that published their VNRs in 2018 and 24 countries that published theirs in 2019.[33] A short summary of the analysis under each category is presented below.

KEYWORD REVIEW

The analysis showed that there are varying uses of the equity-focused and gender-responsive terminology. Mostly, VNRs do not address these terms specifically but use nuances to address issues related to social inclusion, violence against women and evaluation. They usually use the term "review" instead of "evaluation" and use "social participation" with the aim to address inclusion. The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex are almost never used.

GOVERNANCE SYSTEM TO MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDGS

Most VNRs in 2019 do not mention monitoring and evaluation systems when describing governance mechanisms for SDG reviews. Only two VNRs (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Guyana) specifically mention the role of national monitoring and evaluation systems as responsible for the SDG reviews. In general, countries within the group analysed in 2019 have relied on national statistical offices and/or ministries of planning, development, finance and in some cases foreign affairs as the main bodies in charge of monitoring and reviewing progress towards the SDGs. It is also important to note that while these bodies are mentioned, there is no observed linkage with national evaluation systems.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SDG REVIEWS

Of 43 VNRs analysed in 2018, 27 mentioned a method, but there is limited clarity on a specific methodological framework or use of a specific analytical tool. Only three countries mentioned the use of the Rapid Integrated Assessment[34] proposed by UNDP. Mexico stands out for mentioning the importance of having an "engendered national plan for monitoring and evaluation". In 2019, 16 of 23 VNRs analysed did mention specific tools and used an analytical framework for analysis. Among these tools, the SDG Indicator Collection and Assessment Tool developed by Guyana, the UNDP Rapid Integration Assessment tool and the Living Standards Framework with indicators focused on well-being (New Zealand) stand out.

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33 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/

34 https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/sustainable-development-goals/rapid-integrated-assessment---mainstreaming-sdgs-into-national-a.html

INTEGRATION OF EVALUATION IN VNR REVIEWS

There was limited to no mention of evaluation or of gender-responsive evaluation in the 43 VNRs reviewed for 2018. The VNRs analysed in 2019 did reference evaluation within the monitoring and evaluation context, although with limited examples of use of evaluative evidence and almost no examples of gender-responsive evaluation. The need for evaluations is sometimes highlighted as in the cases of the VNRs for Chile, Guyana and Tunisia. In some cases, past evaluations were used as evidence to reference progress towards the SDGs, for example in the case of the Tunisia VNR, and commitment to invest in evaluation capacity in the future is seen as a crucial element.

GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORKS

Major international gender equality frameworks and treaties were increasingly mentioned in the 2019 VNR reviews. Among them, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the international treaty adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, and the Beijing Platform for Action were the most cited. National frameworks and laws were also often cited in the VNRs. Data disaggregated by sex were mainly included in the health, education and employment sections of the reviews.

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

In the VNRs, a wide range of context-specific marginalized groups were specifically referred to as those who should not be left behind, most commonly children and women and much less so youth, the elderly, persons with a disability and indigenous peoples. When referring to "leave no one behind", VNRs usually also mentioned different type of stakeholders that were part of the VNR discussions and involved in the process of reviewing progress towards the SDGs. These were mainly civil society organizations. Academia and women's organizations or groups were almost never mentioned.

LOOKING AHEAD

The VNRs included a section on how future reviews will be conducted and which governance systems will be part of them. In some cases, national monitoring and evaluation systems were mentioned, as well as information systems through statistical offices. There was some acknowledgement of evaluation but there was no systematic plan to include evaluation systems in future VNRs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO TAKE ACTION

Findings from global and regional analyses point to gaps in using equity-focused and gender-responsive evidence from evaluations to inform VNRs. The analysis showed that although monitoring is strong, evaluation receives almost no attention, nor does evaluative evidence, particularly gender-evaluative evidence. Lack of disaggregated data remains a core problem for tracking progress, especially for selected sectors.

Among the general conclusions, the comparative analysis helped us to observe that:

- Inclusion of gender-responsive evaluative evidence and evidence from national evaluations on gender equality plans and strategies is still extremely limited; however, mention of gender equality frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action has increased.

- Evaluative evidence is present in selected cases, although use of evaluations to inform progress on the SDGs appears limited. This can denote a slight positive change from 2018 to 2019.

- Access to data disaggregated by sex continues to be a challenge to monitoring progress in most of the countries analysed, with health and education targets more often disaggregated by sex than other sectors.

- Inclusion of civil society in SDG reviews is still weak, but there has been some positive progress in terms of considering the voices of civil society organizations regarding progress towards the SDGs. Women's groups are still not specifically referenced in most cases and neither are voluntary organizations for professional evaluation.

Based on this analysis and conclusions, a series of recommendations are put forward for action by the global development and evaluation community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To engage with frameworks such as the Rapid Integrated Assessment framework for SDG readiness

- To promote resources and expertise from the evaluation community, including voluntary organizations for professional evaluation, related to gender-responsive evaluative evidence

- To engage with gender machineries, to sensitize them to demand gender-responsive evidence and provide them with evidence for advocacy

- To ensure that evaluation processes elevate gender-responsive evaluation from an approach to a stand-alone evaluation criterion, to make them catalysts for transformative change, including in the 2030 Agenda

- To strengthen evaluation of national gender policies, plans and strategies that can feed into VNR processes
- To build and/or enhance partnerships between statistical commissions, national SDG governance platforms and evaluation communities to enable strong links between data, analysis and evaluation