



Insights on National Evaluation Capacities in 43 Countries

ANA ROSA SOARES

Evaluation Adviser at the Independent Evaluation Office at UNDP

CLAUDIA MARCONDES

Evaluation Consultant

At the UNDP-sponsored Third National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) Conference (São Paulo, 2013), national government representatives from 60 countries – including 43 UNDP programme countries¹⁶ – discussed solutions to challenges related to evaluation independence, credibility and use. The participants developed and signed 18 commitments (the 2013 NEC Commitments) to enhance national evaluation capacities and to encourage accountability by calling on countries and NEC participants to commit to actions and collaboration.¹⁷

As a follow-up on these commitments and also as a preparation for the Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities (Bangkok, 2015), the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a study which documents the current state of national evaluation capacities and existing institutional set-ups in the 43 UNDP programme country signatories of the commitments. Documenting existing capacities will enable the assessment of progress made towards fulfilling these evaluation needs in the future.

‘Capacities’ refer to a national government’s technical capacities and current institutional settings, including the legal frameworks in place, the organizational structures in which evaluation is (or is not) inserted and the existing individual technical capacities that make up the enabling environment. The term ‘capacity’ refers to creating an ‘enabling’ environment in which evaluations can be determined or required and the way in which they are used as a credible and independent function to inform national-level decision- and policymaking.

16 Countries in which UNDP has programmes.

17 These unofficial commitments were not signed by official government representatives. Rather, they represent key areas of intervention for government representatives, policymakers and practitioners as expressed during the Third NEC Conference.

This study is a descriptive, factual document (as opposed to an evaluative assessment) and focused on compiling and assembling a collection of resources by country to serve as a foundation upon which to build a more comprehensive baseline study. Assessment data was collected through a desk review of primary and secondary source documents and information downloaded from the Internet, complemented and validated through a consultation process involving an online survey of UNDP country offices and representatives of government and voluntary organizations for professional evaluation from each country.

The study revealed a variety of institutional settings and legal frameworks among the countries analysed. Many combinations are in place, reflecting a variety of government interests, political contexts and national developmental stages.

NATIONAL EVALUATION POLICIES

There are many variations of legal framework (or 'national evaluation policy') implementation. Some countries (e.g. Benin, South Africa, Uganda, and Uruguay) have a national evaluation policy; others lack a specific evaluation policy but do have national evaluation legislation. Many countries (e.g. Colombia, Malaysia, Mexico) formalize (or semi-formalize) the legal frameworks upon which evaluation functions are built or structured. Some countries (e.g. Costa Rica, South Africa) have a specific national evaluation system in place. There are also a number of countries, which do not yet have a national evaluation policy, but have proposals or draft policies waiting for legislation (e.g. Bhutan, Kenya, and Niger).

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

National governments exhibit diverse institutional settings. In almost all countries, international donor pressure and requirements for evaluation have facilitated the creation of a minimum structure (e.g. Afghanistan, Ethiopia). In many cases, even if donors conduct the evaluations themselves, national governments have a unit or division tasked with monitoring this work.

Some national governments have developed sophisticated structures and policies, incorporating mechanisms to ensure that evaluation processes are both credible and independent. Such structures also aim to ensure that evaluation results are useful and used for decision-making and that they actually assess the performance, impact and effectiveness of their programmes (e.g. Colombia, Mexico).

Many countries' ministries of planning have evaluation units tasked with monitoring; many of these units evaluate national plan implementation (e.g. Brazil, India, Malaysia, and Nepal). In many cases, decentralized evaluation units exist across line ministries to facilitate this work, such as in the ministries of social development, education and health.

A central evaluation unit is not the only possible institutional arrangement; such arrangements are usually a function of the size and nature of government structures and country contexts. Given the complexities in formulating institutional settings, centralized units seem to work well in some cases, while in others a decentralized evaluation unit enables a variety of perspectives on evaluation work and research.

EVALUATION USE

In general, evaluations are used widely. Many countries that do not have a national evaluation policy nonetheless use evaluations on an ongoing basis; the lack of a national policy is not an indication that evaluations are not used.

The survey results reveal that 13 of the 43 countries do not conduct national-level evaluations (Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Lebanon, Niger, Pakistan, Panama, Russia, Suriname, Tanzania), although survey respondents in some countries (e.g. Cameroon, Guatemala, and the Kyrgyz Republic) referred to evaluations conducted by donor agencies on national government programmes as national-level evaluations. Certain countries, including some of the 13, conduct sectoral evaluations of national programmes, evaluations of national development plan projects and produce reports on progress towards achieving plan goals and targets. There is often a general perception that these are also national-level evaluations.

Almost all countries are making efforts to promote the use of evaluations either by parliamentarians, voluntary organizations for professional evaluation, universities, international donors or other stakeholders. Numerous countries have a national evaluation society (and some have more than one). In some countries, administrative reform is pushing for modern management techniques that incorporate evaluation (e.g. Lebanon). In contrast, some governments (e.g. Albania, Burundi, Egypt, and Russia) do not show much work in evaluation use.

Several issues that limit the use of evaluation have been identified. For example, some national governments have used evaluation as a political mechanism or as a marketing tool to assess the performance of programmes that are political priorities.

Technical evaluation capacities are important for all governments. Many have invested in developing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacities, guides and methodologies to implement a variety of evaluation processes. Some evaluation units have managed to gain full respect for the quality of their work due to the level of staff expertise. In contrast, some governments lack the requisite evaluation capacity even if there are calls for M&E of national development plans.

Stakeholder Involvement – Many governments require the involvement of representatives of the programmes being evaluated. Some governments have structures in place to enable programme beneficiaries to participate in evaluation processes. Many countries post their evaluation reports on the Internet. In contrast, some restrict public access to evaluation information.

Budgets – National budgets often limit evaluation processes. There are situations in which budgets are in place but are insufficient to conduct the full range of evaluation work. There are also situations in which although evaluation units ostensibly have their own evaluation budgets, the resources are not in fact available. Ultimately, budgets are highly influenced by government politics.

Gender, Ethnic and Cultural Issues – Although some evaluations consider gender issues fairly well, many evaluations limit their treatment to merely including sex-disaggregated

data. With a few exceptions, evaluation work seldom considers ethnic and cultural issues (the exceptions include instances where it is the main focus of the evaluation).

Donors – In some countries, donors had an impact on the success of government M&E systems. In addition to establishing new or stand-alone M&E units, international donors have been pushing for broader public-sector and administrative reforms in support of improved transparency, accountability and good management.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that the fabrics out of which countries and national governments are made of are not uniform. Several shades exist and there is need to think about granularity. These granular aspects of 'national' evaluation capacities are complex and intrinsically linked to each country's development agenda, and therefore need to be taken into consideration and incorporated into the development of future evaluation agendas. This study found relationships between the stage of democratic governance in the countries surveyed and their governments' capacities to conduct evaluations and to ensure the independence, credibility and use of the evaluation results.