

8

LIBERIA: STRENGTHENING NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS



JAMES AFIF JABER

DIRECTOR, PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND COORDINATION, MINISTRY OF FINANCE AND DEVELOPMENT PLANNING, GOVERNMENT OF LIBERIA

INTRODUCTION

Countries around the world are conducting awareness on the global development goals. They have begun to develop and mainstream global, continental and regional goals, targets and aspirations into their national development plans. Significant progress has been made by a number of countries in, for example, developing results frameworks; linking their national development plan targets and goals to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); linking national indicators to the SDGs; creating coordination bodies and multi-stakeholder mechanisms; and undertaking SDG data gap assessments.

Using Liberia as a case study, this paper intends to discuss the progress made and shortcomings encountered. It also seeks to provide the necessary and relevant information needed to strengthen the national evaluation system to promote effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the SDGs. It states the problems responsible for the low impact that this initiative sought to address, particularly in ensuring the sustainability of planning processes and achieving intervention targets for transformative development. Furthermore, it identifies causes for inadequate implementation affecting development outcomes including lack of political will; the enabling environment; institutional weaknesses of public systems; lack of systemic evaluation procedures; low capacity to supply, demand and report credible information; limited participatory processes in the design, implementation and monitoring of evaluation tools; and limited budgetary support for projects and programmes including higher-level investment projects. It also provides information on challenges. The paper concludes by highlighting what the national evaluation system intends to achieve and how it can be strengthened, institutionalized and sustained.

This paper also provides information on the importance of the national evaluation system in contributing towards achieving the SDGs and the social, economic and development of Liberia that can be emulated by other countries.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION

Evaluation plays a very significant role in measuring progress and the effect of change towards achieving the goals of the national development plan and the SDGs. The national

evaluation system is an important tool used for management and quality improvement.⁹⁶ Strengthening the national evaluation system will enhance a Government's capability to maintain its effectiveness, promote sustainability and meet its objectives. It provides policymakers with relevant and credible information to aid in planning, policy and programme design and budgeting. It supports decision makers in determining the extent to which government programmes and policies have achieved their desired objectives, thus providing the evidence needed to ensure strong accountability to stakeholders and determining the level to improve performance. Strengthening of the national evaluation system is crucial for effective and sustainable development and in achieving national development goals and the SDGs.

In strengthening a national evaluation system, evaluation capacity-building support is one of the essential mechanisms for enhancing the system and maintaining its effectiveness and sustainability: national ownership is required to provide an incentive for ensuring good governance, the fight against corruption, transparency and accountability, unbiased analysis and reporting and achievement of a country's national development goals and the SDGs. The measurement of a system's performance can only be done through monitoring and evaluation, which are key components of an effective and sustainable national system. This can only happen if the national evaluation system is nationally owned and supported with political will, commitment for change and the creation of an enabling environment for the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system to develop and function.

PROGRESS IN LIBERIA

Liberia, as a case study, has been conducting awareness on the global development goals. It has mainstreamed global, continental and regional goals, targets and aspirations (SDGs, African Union Agenda 2063 and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Vision 2020) into its national development plan. Significant progress has been made in developing its results framework, linking the plan's targets and goals to the SDGs; linking national indicators to the SDGs; prioritizing, coordinating and collaborating with interministerial bodies and multi-stakeholder partners; and undertaking SDG data gap assessments. It has carried out development finance assessments; strengthened its domestic resource mobilization strategy through international support to finance development initiatives; taken steps to design integrated national financing frameworks to improve budget coverage, fiscal policy management, financial control and oversight of government finances; and aligned national budgeting with

96 United Nations Evaluation Group, National Evaluation Capacity Development: Practical tips on how to strengthen National Evaluation Systems, p.9. Available at <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/national-evaluation-capacity-development-practical-tips-how-strengthen-national>

the national development plan, the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD). Significant progress has been made on public financial management and procurement to enhance implementation.

From 2008 to 2011, the country developed its short-term national development plan, the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) (“Lift Liberia”) and conducted an evaluation of its planning processes and implementation to determine its strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the PRS, the country conducted a results-focused assessment,⁹⁷ a form of evaluation supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to determine the extent to which its objectives had been met. It was determined that its achievements were at the output level and about two thirds of what had been planned was accomplished. Much of what was needed and what was done were preparatory measures: developing detailed plans, building capacity, passing laws, building or rebuilding parts of institutional and physical systems and rehabilitating or repairing infrastructure. Although the outputs did not achieve all the desired outcomes described, there were positive developments: peace was sustained; economic growth continued, especially in the urban areas; poverty declined; some physical infrastructure improved; coverage of health and education services expanded by most measures; and some aspects of governance improved.

From 2012 to 2017, the country developed its medium-term Agenda for Transformation. A midterm review conducted in October 2016, again supported by UNDP, took stock of the Agenda’s framework, construct, implementation arrangements and contribution to the national development agenda, looking at results and outcomes produced. The review⁹⁸ showed that progress was measured against three groups of outcome indicators: (1) per capita income and consumption; (2) the Millennium Development Goals; and (3) indicators of unmet basic needs derived from the national census. It was determined that its achievements were at the outcome level. Although not all the desired outcomes had been achieved, there were positive developments: progress towards the goal of creating an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence and of conflict resolution; improvements in peace, security, rule of law and the criminal justice system; improved gross enrolment ratios at the primary and secondary school levels; 85 percent of the population in urban areas was not less than five kilometres from a health delivery point; a significant decrease in the number of malaria-related incidences; the stated goal for access to safe drinking water was met well before the target year of 2017; and progress for cross-cutting issues of child protection, disability, youth empowerment, environment, HIV/AIDS, human rights, labour and employment.

97 Government of Liberia (2012), *Lift Liberia Poverty Reduction Strategy, Results-Focused Assessment Report (2008-2011)* available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr1245.pdf>

98 Government of Liberia (2016), *Agenda for Transformation, Report of the Midterm Progress Review*.

Additionally, Liberia has adopted an innovative national measurement tool, the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index⁹⁹ methodology. This M&E tool diagnoses and predicts issues, challenges and progress on peace and reconciliation, which is linked to Pillar 3 of the PAPD. Reporting arising from the tool shows that peace is on course but more efforts are needed in reconciliation and expanding access to justice.

The country has a national M&E Unit in the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning that is being used as a framework for coordinating monitoring and evaluation. It works closely with other government ministries, agencies and commissions but does not have enforcement authority or high-level political support. The national M&E Unit collaborates with the Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services, which serves as the repository for statistical information to report on progress under the national development plan and the SDGs.

Currently, the Government of Liberia is preparing to conduct its voluntary national review of progress towards the SDGs. It is preparing to establish a National Evaluation Committee that will include the Government, development partners, civil society, the private sector, etc. It will be responsible for facilitating support and promoting evaluations of key projects and programmes.

SHORTCOMINGS ENCOUNTERED

From 2008 to 2011, Liberia developed its short-term PRS, Lift Liberia, and from 2012 to 2017 developed its medium-term Agenda for Transformation. Since the implementation of these plans, the Government has not conducted an impact evaluation, even on public sector investment projects/programmes, except for a results-focused assessment and midterm review by independent consultants hired by the Government.

The current Government has developed its medium-term national development plan, the PAPD, 2018-2023¹⁰⁰ and has yet to strengthen the effectiveness of its M&E system, which is the weakest public sector management tool. It does not have an M&E policy, well-developed M&E system or relevant skills and capacities to conduct impact evaluations and measure performance. It has no centralized data-collection and reporting system for the SDGs and the national development plan despite having the Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services as its statistical data house. Most of the data initially collected under previous development plans were inadequate for decision-making due to limited capacity, skills, experience and financial support. The country has not been very successful in reporting its enormous contribution towards achieving the SDGs and the extent of the positive impact made on the lives of its citizens through its national development plans.

99 Liberia Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index, available at <https://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia>

100 Government of Liberia (2018), Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development.

CAUSES/PROBLEMS OF LOW IMPACT

Liberia has been confronted with inadequate implementation of development projects/programmes to positively impact the lives of its citizens. Some of these causes have been identified as follows:

- Lack of ownership supported by high-level political will and commitment for change, which relates to the absence of political buy-in and the obligation to ensure transformative change for the citizens and the country
- An enabling environment for the development and functioning of an M&E system, which relates to the lack of commitment to support values and ethics, provide resources and sustain the system
- Institutional weaknesses of public systems, which relates to weaknesses in the system of public institutions
- Lack of systemic evaluation procedures, which refers to the absence or non-existence of systemic evaluation procedures in state institutions
- Lack of capacity to supply, demand and report credible information, which refers to limited technical M&E capacity with the relevant skills and experience to collect, use and measure performance and provide credible and relevant information in a timely way
- Limited participatory processes in the design, implementation and monitoring of evaluation tools, which refers to inadequate involvement of stakeholders (including government, international community, international agencies, private sector and civil society) in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development processes
- Unclear strategies and techniques, which refers to uncertain plans, tactics, approaches, methods and skills usage or design to accomplish a desired objective
- Limited funding, which relates to inadequate budgetary and donor support to fund projects and programmes, including higher-level investment projects

CHALLENGES

Liberia has been faced with challenges that have served as impediments to achieving the goals of national development plans and the global development agenda. Some of these impediments are as follows:

- Inadequate planning, which relates to insufficient information to support national development plans, redirection of development funds from sectoral plans/programmes to other budgetary items and political interest

- Inadequate implementation, which relates to the low level of interest in and support to sectoral ministries, agencies and commissions for sectoral plans/programmes
- A weak M&E system, which refers to the lack of a well-organized, robust and coordinated M&E system to disaggregate data and measure progress both by sector and at regional levels to inform decision-making for effectiveness and sustainability
- Lack of an M&E policy to guide monitoring and evaluation for development effectiveness
- Limited staff capacity, with limited technical staff to adequately perform tasks
- Limited capacity-building, which refers to limited support to building staff capacity and improving higher-level skills and experience
- Inadequate sensitization and awareness, which relates to insufficient information being provided on development.

CONCLUSION

Realizing that the attainment of the SDGs depends significantly on monitoring and evaluation, it is important to strengthen the national evaluation system for management and quality improvement that will enhance the Government's capability to meet its objectives and ensure effectiveness and sustainability. A reinforced system will promote effectiveness and efficiency in achieving national development goals and the SDGs. It will provide policymakers with the relevant and credible information to aid in planning, policy and programme design and budgeting. It will also support decision makers in determining the extent to which government programmes and policies have achieved their desired objectives, thus providing the evidence needed to ensure strong accountability to stakeholders and determining the level to improve performance.

Analysis has shown that not much has been seen in terms of positive impact on the lives of citizens in Liberia due to the absence of impact evaluation of development plans over the years. For example, projects such as the Cotton Tree to Buchanan Highway, the Red Light-Parker Point to Ganta Highway and the Restoration of Electricity from the Mount Coffee Hydro to Monrovia have not been subject to an impact assessment. If impact evaluations are conducted, they can provide a picture of the extent to which the Government has contributed to significant change and at the same time identify its shortfalls and recommend corrective measures to improve on its development shortcomings. Policymakers have had limited information to make informed development decisions, resulting in a lack of significant impact in terms of the realizing national development plans and achieving global development goals. Thus, there is a need to support capacity development of a country-owned national evaluation system to promote effectiveness and sustainability. This will lead to the following:

- Ensuring good governance
- Improving public policy, programmes and service delivery
- Fight against corruption
- Transparency and accountability
- Unbiased analysis and reporting
- Sound policy decision-making

The above-mentioned factors, together with improved institutional abilities to use evaluation, the development of employees' skills including the use of indicators and statistics, and the development of approaches/processes to improve results, will have the following positive effects:

- Greater institutional success and sustainability
- More informed decision-making for achieving results
- Measurement of productivity and efficiency
- Creation of an enabling policy environment

Support to a country's national development goals will contribute towards achieving national development plan targets and the SDGs. This entails providing funding and capacity support to government development projects and programmes, thereby creating an enabling environment for support to monitoring and evaluation. Critical evaluative thinking, analysis and assessment are crucial at national and subnational levels to provide solutions to difficult decisions in complex environments to enhance impact and performance. Developing partnerships to strengthen engagement and approaches including the private sector and civil society will enhance development effectiveness.

In so doing, the strengthening of national evaluation systems should achieve the following:

1. Evidence-/evaluation-based decisions on planning and budgeting
2. Improved policy and programmes through consensus
3. Improved service delivery in the public sector
4. Enhanced operations and improved quality
5. Improved skills of employees
6. Higher-level results, intermediate and longer-term outcomes and impacts of public sector interventions
7. Efficiency and effectiveness of performance from institutional actions

Institutionalizing an integrated national system would require development, passage into law and full implementation of an M&E policy and framework, and ensuring national ownership through political buy-in and government commitment to believe in the utility of the national evaluation system and understand its benefits.

Conclusively, a national evaluation system is critical to the development of Liberia because it provides an opportunity for an improved and quality system that reviews the extent to which government programmes and policies have achieved their objectives; provides evidence needed to ensure strong accountability to stakeholders (Legislature/Parliament, civil society, donors, citizens and various government bodies); provides policymakers with credible information for decision-making; determines the level to improve performance; and contributes to achieving the global development goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis and the experience of Liberia, in order to measure results and achieve the goals of the national development plan and the SDGs, it is recommended to:

1. Strengthen the national evaluation system to enhance government capabilities to maintain an improved quality system that is effective, sustainable and meets its objectives
2. Strengthen the M&E policy to guide monitoring and evaluation for development effectiveness
3. Strengthen the capacities of technical staff to adequately perform requisite tasks
4. Support evaluation capacity-building for employees and other stakeholders to improve their skills
5. Reinforce planning and implementation to support national development
6. Ensure that evaluation is nationally owned to support buy-in
7. Foster political will and commitment for change
8. Create an enabling environment for the development and functioning of an M&E system
9. Involve stakeholders in development processes in the design, implementation and monitoring of evaluation tools
10. Ensure adequate funding for programmes and projects, including higher-level investment projects.