

The NEC Conferences: Reflections on the Past and Ideas for the Future

INDRAN NAIDOO

Director
UNDP Independent Evaluation Office

HEATHER BRYANT

Evaluation Advisor
UNDP Independent Evaluation Office

GENTA KONCI

Evaluation Consultant
UNDP Independent Evaluation Office



INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) conferences, which began in 2009 and have since evolved over the series of five events to expand in scope and participation. Beginning with the inaugural conference in Morocco, each of the events has addressed new topics in evaluation and development and benefited from greater diversity in participant groups, both in terms of geography and institutional affiliation, leading to the current NEC “brand” as one associated with global evaluation thought leadership. This paper reviews the different events over the past decade and their evolving emphasis— informed by contemporary evaluation and development debates—and brings us to the present moment where we reflect on the future of the conference series. It is not meant to be a definitive assessment; indeed, the sheer size and diversity of the NEC events, involving so many global travelers and observers, makes this impossible as each conference has provided value in some form or other as a response to a particular need. The NEC conferences have sought to address diverse audiences, but more importantly, to place themselves within contemporary debates—the key now being the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the use of evaluation for their attainment, but also the consideration of evaluation as a public good, with its attendant values of transparency, accountability, democracy and, critically, bringing about equity.

The first NEC conference was organized nearly a decade ago, in 2009, when the world was grappling with the economic crisis that threatened progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had a target date of 2015. Discussions at the conference covered a wide range of topics, from institutional set-ups for evaluation, independence, the different capacities required for managing, conducting and using evaluations to the importance of political will and commitment for evaluation of public policies, and the need to

consider both technical and political dimensions of evaluation. The fifth NEC conference was held in 2017, two years after the adoption of the SDGs, an agenda more complex and more ambitious than that the MDGs. Yet, many of the same questions that arose in 2009 found an echo at the discussions in 2017, with new elements and challenges enriching the exchanges, and new queries opened, for which answers are still sought.

This paper reviews the history of the conferences, from the first gathering's look at monitoring and evaluation systems to the third conference's examination of the philosophies of independence, credibility and use, through the new turn taken by the two most recent conferences in response to the adoption of the SDGs. This is followed by an analysis of feedback received from conference participants through surveys and interviews, and a discussion of possible ways forward for the next NEC conferences. The paper concludes that the NEC conferences still fill an important niche and can continue to play a key role in developing capacities for evaluation.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE NEC CONFERENCES

From Monitoring and Evaluation Systems to the Philosophy of Independence, Credibility and Use

The first NEC conference was organized in response to a request from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Executive Board to support national evaluation capacity development in programme countries. The UNDP Evaluation Office,²⁷³ in cooperation with the Moroccan National Observatory for Human Development, organized a conference on national evaluation capacities in Casablanca in 2009. The premise of the conference was that while there was consensus that evaluating the performance of public policy is an important instrument for good governance, there was a gap between this general agreement and the actual implementation, use and sustainability of monitoring and evaluation systems, processes and tools in many countries. The conference was designed to provide a forum to discuss issues faced by UNDP programme country partners, to deepen their understanding of evaluation as a powerful tool for public accountability, to learn from solutions adopted by other countries and, if possible, to identify common strategies for establishing relevant evaluation systems with sound political and institutional bases.²⁷⁴

The conference in Morocco was structured around five areas of inquiry—vision, purpose, structures and capacity, methodology and accountability—which were then broken down into the four major themes of national-level evaluation practices of public policies, evaluation quality, use of evaluation and enabling environments for evaluation. Participants shared and compared good public policy practices, showcasing examples of both embryonic and more advanced national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, and highlighted the importance of evaluation as an accountability and decision-making tool.

273 Renamed the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) on 27 February 2014.

274 UNDP, Independent Evaluation Office, *Proceedings from International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities*, 15-17 December 2009, Casablanca, Kingdom of Morocco, New York, May 2011.

Two years later, building on the messages from the conference in Morocco, the second NEC Conference was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on *Use of evaluation in decision-making for public policies and programme*. Co-hosted by the UNDP Evaluation Office and the Public Service Commission of South Africa, the conference sought to continue the sharing of experiences between countries that have different levels of development of national monitoring and evaluation systems; to identify lessons and constraints in implementing national monitoring and evaluation systems; and to identify potential supply of and demand for technical assistance to strengthen institutional capacities for national monitoring and evaluation systems, under the umbrella of South-South and triangular cooperation.

The discussions in South Africa evolved from the showcasing of national monitoring and evaluation systems to the management, conduct and use of evaluation. Practical examples were provided to show how evaluation has been used for policy- and decision-making. Discussions and reflections on the use of evaluations at various levels of government and development organizations illustrated the strong linkages between evaluation quality and use and between an evaluation's "user friendliness" and its effective use. The conference participants also highlighted that evaluation users are ultimately people and individuals and they are "champions" for use of evaluation for policy and organizational change. Also emphasized were the promotion and communication of evaluation and the role of different actors in the country and how can they work together to champion evaluation capacity and use for more effective policy in governments and countries.²⁷⁵

Topics that emerged in Morocco and South Africa relating to independence, quality and use of evaluations led the third NEC conference in São Paulo, Brazil, to seek *Solutions to Challenges Related to Independence, Credibility and Use of Evaluation*. This conference was co-hosted by the UNDP IEO and the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger.

While recognizing, as had the previous conference, that monitoring and evaluation are closely related, the Brazil conference focused more specifically on evaluation. Within the context of establishing national monitoring and evolution systems, the conference emphasized three interconnected challenges with respect to evaluations: how to ensure their independence, their credibility and their use. The conference examined challenges faced by governments in establishing monitoring and evaluation systems that are considered independent, including the question of where to place—and how to structure—the evaluation mandate and function within the government. With respect to credibility, participants concluded that credibility depends on the expertise and independence of the evaluators, the degree of transparency of the evaluation process and the quality of evaluation outputs. On the utility of evaluations, challenges noted include broadening the use of evaluation beyond a limited number of stakeholders, which requires user-friendly dissemination, translation into local languages and presentation of insights into different public policy options and issues.

275 UNDP, Independent Evaluation Office, *Use of evaluation in decision making for public policies and programmes*, Proceedings from International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities, 12-14 September 2011. New York, 2012.

The Brazil conference was distinguished by the participatory elaboration of 18 commitments to further national evaluation capacities, broadly clustered into four strategies including:

1. Promoting evaluation use through in-country and global advocacy;
2. Defining and strengthening evaluation process and methods;
3. Engaging existing and new stakeholders in exchanges and collaboration; and
4. Exploring options for different institutional structures for managing evaluation.²⁷⁶

NEC Brazil was also characterized by an effort to promote continued engagement with past participants and institutions to deepen dialogues, partnerships, and cooperation. The conference also announced that 2015 would be the International Year of Evaluation, a designation intended to further advocate for and promote evaluation and evidence-based policy-making at international, regional, national and local levels.

THE ADVENT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Following the conference in Brazil, the United Nations General Assembly acknowledged 2015 as the International Year of Evaluation in its first, stand-alone resolution (69/237) on building capacity for the evaluation of development activities at country level. In September 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. One month later, the fourth NEC conference was held in Bangkok, Thailand.

The conference theme was *Blending evaluation principles with development practices to change people's lives*. Designed before the SDGs were formally adopted, the conference anticipated evaluation capacities as an imperative for the implementation of the new sustainable development agenda. The conference focused on how governments can develop the necessary national evaluation capacities to meet the new challenges of the SDGs. Key priorities for national evaluation capacities in light of the SDGs that emerged from the conference include the need to: promote country-owned and country-led evaluations with an emphasis on their use in influencing policies; develop methods for assessing progress towards the SDGs, including evaluating environmental, social and economic sustainability, social inclusion and equity, social cohesion and governance; promote more diverse partnerships to increase awareness and use of evaluation; and integrate evaluation of the SDGs into institutional structures, a significant challenge.²⁷⁷

The SDGs continued to be at the heart of the next NEC conference in 2017, in Istanbul, Turkey. This conference was dedicated to examining national evaluation capacities with

276 UNDP, Independent Evaluation Office, *Solutions related to challenges of independence, credibility and use of evaluation*. Proceedings from International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities, UNDP, New York, June 2014.

277 Rosellini, Nicholas, 'The Global Evaluation Agenda to Support the SDGs: The Road Ahead', in UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, *Proceedings from the Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities*, UNDP, New York, June 2016.

respect to *People, Planet and Progress in the SDG era*. The 2017 event sought to continue and deepen the discussions initiated in Thailand on the role of evaluation in the follow-up and review of the SDGs, for example exploring in greater depth how to ensure “no one is left behind”, including the environment, in evaluation. The conference also engaged participants on themes that have been present since the first event in 2009, such as challenges in institutional arrangements and questions of independence, credibility and use.

SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER AND DIVERSITY OF PARTICIPANTS

Reflective of the expansion of an evaluation culture across the globe, the number of participants in NEC conferences has increased significantly over the years and their profiles have become more diverse. The conferences have attracted a wide range of national government officials as well as participants from multilateral and bilateral development organizations and evaluation associations. A recent trend, from 2015 onward, has been the increasing number of representatives from governments from the global North as well as private sector actors, academics and researchers.

The participation of the primary target group—government officials—has increased steadily in absolute terms over the years. Civil society participation peaked in 2015, as the conference was co-organized with the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS). UNDP staff from its regional centres and country offices were actively encouraged to attend the last two conferences, in part to accompany government officials to strengthen follow-up activities in country, and in part to develop staff awareness of and capacities for evaluation. The participation of women has shown significant improvement over the years, from only 23 percent of the participants in 2009 to near parity (47 percent) in 2017. Table 1 summarizes the profile of NEC conference participants over the years.

TABLE 1. NEC CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION, 2009-2017

NEC CONFERENCE YEARS	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017
Total no. of participants	55	87	156	450	508
Number of countries	30	24	58	100	119
TYPE OF PARTICIPANTS	%	%	%	%	%
Government	44% (24)	76% (66)	64% (99)	32% (145)	33% (167)
Civil society (voluntary organizations of professional evaluators, academia, private sector)	18% (10)	7% (6)	16% (24)	48% (220)	15% (75)
United Nations	16% (9)	8% (7)	8% (13)	7% (33)	15% (76)
UNDP	22% (12)	9% (8)	12% (18)	13% (57)	35% (178)

TABLE 2. GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF NEC CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS, 2009-2017

NEC CONFERENCE YEARS	2009	2011	2013	2015 ²⁷⁸	2017
Total	55	87	156	450	508
Women	23% (13)	24% (21)	31% (49)	45% (202)	47% (238)
Men	77% (42)	76% (66)	69% (107)	53% (238)	53% (270)

Stakeholder views of the NEC conferences

The UNDP IEO takes the views of conference participants seriously, and each of the NEC conferences has concluded with a conference assessment survey, as well as internal discussions and recording of lessons learned and suggestions for subsequent conferences. Members of the IEO International Evaluation Advisory Panel who have attended the conferences have also provided feedback and guidance over the years.

Surveys to gauge satisfaction levels

Each of the NEC conferences has closed with a conference assessment survey. The assessment formats have varied across the conferences, limiting their comparability; however, all of them have recorded positive feedback. The surveys for the last three conferences asked similar, closed-ended questions about overall satisfaction with the conference, the usefulness of the overall engagements and the structure and delivery of the conference. The results are summarized below.

Overall satisfaction

In 2011 in South Africa, 72 percent of the responding conference participants expressed that they were “very satisfied” with the conference overall.²⁷⁹ From 2013 onwards, between 85 percent (2017) and 92 percent (2013) of the participants indicated that they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the conferences (see Figure 1).

Perceptions of the usefulness of the NEC engagements

Surveys asked participants if they found the overall NEC engagements useful. In 2013, the responses were limited to “yes” or “no” and 97 percent of the respondents answered positively. In 2015 and 2017, more options were provided (see Figure 2), with 94 percent and 88 percent, respectively, of the participants finding the events to be either “completely” or “largely” useful.

278 Data are not available for 2 percent of the participants.

279 UNDP Evaluation Office, *Proceedings from the Second International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities*, UNDP, New York, 2012, pp. 180-181.

FIGURE 1. HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE CONFERENCE?²⁸⁰

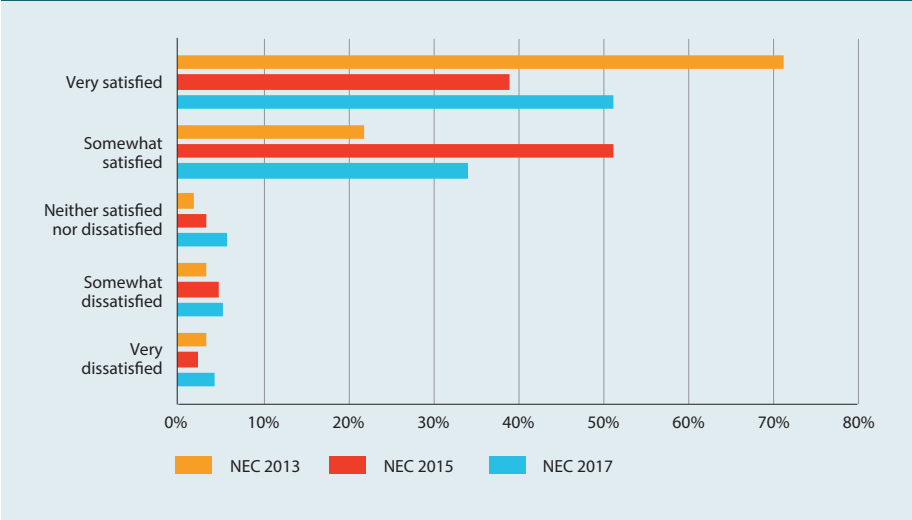
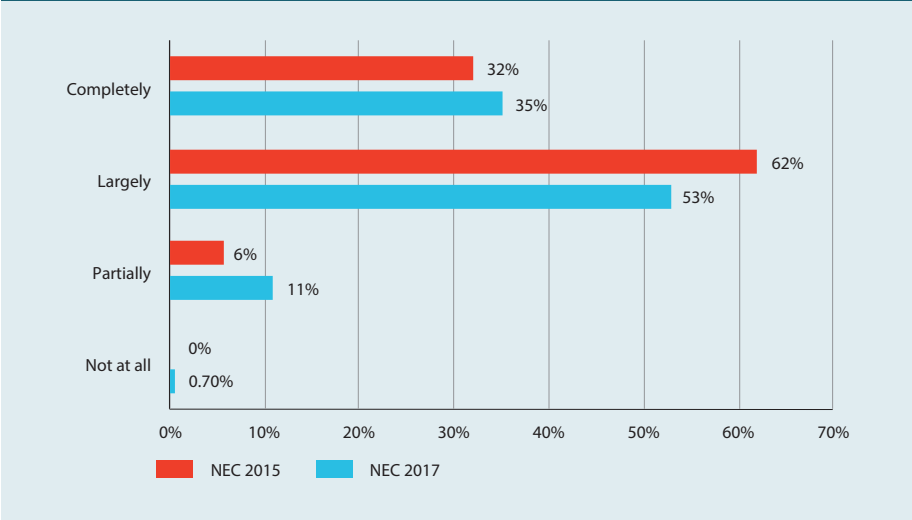


FIGURE 2 . DID YOU FIND THE OVERALL NEC ENGAGEMENTS USEFUL?

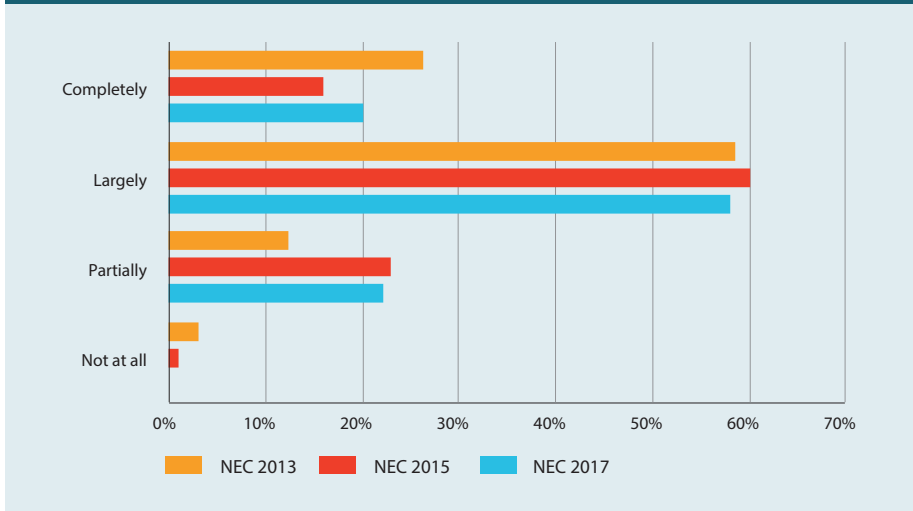


280 The question in 2013 was, “Do you think the conference could be improved in terms of organization, design and implementation? Please rate your overall satisfaction with the conference.” In 2015 and 2017, the question was more straightforward, asking simply, “How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the conference?”

Views on the format of the conference: structure and delivery

The surveys also asked participants to indicate to what extent the structure and delivery of the conferences were useful in contributing to the objectives of enhancing national evaluation capacities. Seventy-eight percent of the 2017 participants responded that this was completely or largely the case.

FIGURE 3. WAS THE WAY THE CONFERENCE WAS STRUCTURED AND DELIVERED USEFUL IN CONTRIBUTING TO THE OBJECTIVES OF ENHANCING NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY?



Additional qualitative feedback solicited from participants

To complement the survey data collected following the conferences, in 2017, during the conference, two members of the IEO International Evaluation Advisory Panel²⁸¹ conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, representing government agencies, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and evaluation associations. The information gathered in the interviews was analysed by the two advisors in conjunction with their own participant observation during the conference,²⁸² with responses to an open question in the 2017 conference assessment survey about how the conference could be improved, and feedback received on the pre-conference training workshops, compiled by the IEO. The following paragraphs summarize some of the key messages emerging from the interviews and the surveys.

281 Paulo Jannuzzi, Professor, National School of Statistics, Brazil, and Olga Schetinina, Head, Ukrainian Evaluation Association.

282 Supplementary observations on the conference series were also provided by Rachid BenMokhtar, President, Moroccan National Observatory of Human Development, and El Hassan El Mansouri, General Secretary, Moroccan National Observatory of Human Development.

The NEC has become a singular community of practice

Over the years, the NEC conferences have been addressing multiple issues—and tensions—on the agendas of evaluation, international development and public policy. The conferences have engaged a growing number of participants, from a growing number of countries and stakeholder groups—government, civil society, the academic evaluation community, as well as staff from UNDP, other United Nations agencies and other development partner institutions—to discuss political, institutional and operational challenges linked to evaluation.

This diversity of participants, brought together around this common set of interrelated issues, is what makes the NEC conference constituency a singular community, a community of practice and a place to present, exchange and discuss concrete country experiences and discuss methodological improvements in such fields. Analysis of the interviews suggests that the NEC conference series should be seen as an institutional forum to stimulate the systematization of technical knowledge on evaluation of intervention experiences and development policies and programs run by government and development partners including the United Nations and NGOs.

Interviews and opinions expressed during thematic sessions show that NEC conferences differentiate themselves from other evaluation forums by the type of participants gathered together. Officials from planning and other central ministries, representatives of UNDP country offices, United Nations agencies, bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, NGOs and civil society congregate to learn from each other, share and discuss countries' experiences with planning, monitoring and especially evaluation of development policies, programmes and projects. For some of the people interviewed, the NEC conferences fill a gap that exists at the international level to deal with these issues—evaluation, development and public policy—with a broad and strategic audience comprising government technical staff, evaluation communities, civil society and United Nations personnel.

The NEC conferences have provided a critical arena for discussion about political, institutional and practical challenges related to evaluation

As expected—given the original objectives of the biennial events—NEC conferences are recognized as an arena for discussion about the political and institutional challenges in building evaluation frameworks for development programmes and public policy. Given this, and despite the positive ratings in the conference assessment survey, interviewed participants said that country experiences should have a greater place in the programme. Participants at the Istanbul conference felt that general panels and plenary sessions could have focused less on technical issues—like experimental designs, for instance—and brought more national experiences on policy evaluations and their uses and challenges to improve the development agenda. In fact, “sharing experiences and knowledge” was the most useful aspect of the NEC conference according to one third of the respondents to the 2017 conference survey, followed by “learning new knowledge”, mentioned by 21 percent of the survey respondents. In the open survey questions dedicated to suggestions for improving future

conferences, several respondents mentioned that keynotes and panel speaker sessions should be reduced to accommodate more country presentations, practical experiences and more time to discuss them. The most appreciated topics pointed to in the survey were, in fact, the more practical sessions.

Consistent with their preference for practical/country experiences, interviewed participants do not see the NEC conference as an academic or professional evaluation seminar; neither do they consider that it should be a showcase of UNDP practices in development programmes and public policies. Rather, conference sessions should be conceptualized as communities of practice focused on problems and challenges. The opportunity to share and discuss political and institutional aspects of evaluation frameworks is, according to many, the specific strength of NEC conferences, that which differentiates them from seminars organized by evaluation academics or professional organizations. NEC conference participants are evaluation contractors, users or general advisors, who may be more interested in how to produce relevant inputs to the development agenda than in the scientific rigour of knowledge produced in evaluations.

Future vistas: broaden participation

Some NEC conference stakeholders call for broadened participation at the conferences. It may be strategic for evaluation capacity development over the world—and to the efforts of evaluation of the SDGs—to bring to the conferences public officials from sectoral ministries and statistical agencies, in addition to those from central planning and finance ministries. Encouraging the participation of high-level policymakers and parliamentarians would also encourage the fostering of evaluation practice in their countries. Many countries have economic and social development councils, whose members may be able to offer insights on integrating not only the economic and the social but also the environmental into development planning, and by extension, evaluation. Inclusion of journalists and specific training offerings for this stakeholder group could further raise awareness of the importance of evaluation of government policies and strategies.

Evaluations need to draw on high-quality disaggregated data: national statistical systems capacities are linked to evaluation capacities in any country, as discussed in the guidance on “Country-led Evaluation in the Era of the Sustainable Development Goals” launched at the Istanbul conference.²⁸³ The NEC conferences can make a valuable contribution to data production by further diversifying the conference community with the addition of representatives from national statistical agencies. Producing better and broader statistics, registers and administrative data to monitor and evaluate the SDGs depends on systematic dialogues between data producers and information users. The better the data, the more consistent can be the evaluations.

283 UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, National Evaluation in the SDG era: Country-led Evaluation in the era of SDGs: an online self-assessment tool for evaluation diagnostics and strategizing, 2018, <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/documents/diagnostic-tool/National%20Evaluation%20Diagnostic%20Guidance.pdf>

Technical training must continue

A clear message emerging from the feedback received is that there is a high demand for technical training. The 13 mini-courses, organized before the main Istanbul event, addressed different kinds of quantitative and qualitative techniques and were very well rated. The overall average rating—measured by Likert-type scale from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high)—was 4.1. The unexpectedly high subscription for and the assessments of the training workshops show a clear demand for longer, more in-depth technical training courses in the future.

Recognize multiple roles for evaluation

Finally, findings from the interviews and assessments suggest that different stakeholder groups, for example, public officials (especially those responsible for public programmes and development projects) may have different views as to the primary role of evaluation than participants coming from epistemic communities or bilateral or multilateral organizations. For the former, evaluation is a tool for learning and improving the effectiveness of development programmes and public policies. For the latter, the emphasis may be more on accountability and meritocratic assessment of public expenditure and international assistance. Practically speaking, the multiplicity of evaluation uses and users has implications for programmatic offerings, calling for balance in the keynote sessions in view of these different constituencies. These multiple perspectives point to differential needs for pre-conference workshops and panel session themes: public officials and development programme managers are as interested in evaluation from the perspective of design and implementation challenges, as from that of results and impact assessments.

THE WAY FORWARD

The reflections of the UNDP IEO on the conference series, augmented with information from surveys and interviews, point to the following.

The NEC conference has a distinct niche

The NEC conference series has been and remains valuable as it caters to diverse needs, while maintaining a special niche, centered around a core audience of government officials engaged in evaluation, within a broader international context of evaluation professionals.

The SDGs provide an organizing—and normative—framework for future conferences

The SDGs provide a sound organizing framework for evaluation conversations, as illustrated by the last two events. This is a tangible area for potential collaboration between the evaluation community, governments and the United Nations—and its full potential has yet to be explored. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda sets out a broad consensus for civilization—maybe the greatest since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948—and it therefore points to a need to reexamine and refine the principles that guide evaluations.

The SDGs bring special challenges to policy and intervention design and thus to evaluation, as they address the indivisibility of economic, social and environment commitments

in any development project. The 2030 Agenda calls for more integrated and multi-objective policies and projects; “good” practices are those that simultaneously contribute to the five areas of critical importance—the five “Ps”—the promotion of people’s dignity, sustainability of the planet, prosperity and well-being, a more peaceful society and greater partnership engagement. The NEC conferences, driven by the UNDP IEO, can continue to bring these normative questions to the table and continue conversations between governments, the United Nations system and the wider development and evaluation communities. Through their mandate and format, the NEC conferences constitute a multi-institutional platform to advocate not only for principles of independence, credibility and use, but also for the relevance of sustainable development values, as an additional ethical principle, in designing and evaluating development policies and programmes.

The emphasis on the practical is key

The UNDP NEC conferences can contribute to the 2030 Agenda by continuing to develop as a multisectoral forum on SDG monitoring and, more particularly, evaluation, bringing together experiences from around the world on strategies, tools and practices for evaluation of public policy and programmes, filling the gaps between other thematic forums on specific SDGs organized by specialized agencies. With the multi-institutional and strategic profile of their participants, NEC conferences are an ideal space to discuss SDG implementation issues, including political, institutional and operational bottlenecks on the design and evaluation of truly sustainable development policies and interventions. Thematic forums on SDGs indicators and programmes organized by United Nations agencies or universities are extremely important, but the NEC conferences can bring together the strategic sponsors and users of SDG data for evaluation and decision-making processes.

Promote pluralist perspectives and explore the multiplicity of evaluation uses

The NEC conferences can continue to legitimate pluralist perspectives in evaluation, in line with the ethical principles of the SDGs. As early as the 1980s, enlarged perspectives in evaluation—with an emphasis on qualitative, less structured and more participatory methods—have been taught, disseminated and used, despite the resistance from some epistemic evaluation communities (such as academic economist “*randomistas*”) or even practitioner communities (such efficiency-driven donors). If evaluation inputs are to be used in the policy cycle, methods must be customized for the problems faced and the demands of their users, not the contrary (as some Cartesian communities would seem to suppose). If SDG ethical principles should be considered in the evaluation, as well as in the design phase, of development programmes, it may be necessary to consider other methodological perspectives to capture less tangible effects of the interventions. Assessments by external advisors and teams may be complemented by internal or participatory evaluations which can delve more deeply in these areas. The NEC conferences can reinforce multiple perspectives and methods, as they have been doing, in the accompanying technical training courses.

At the same time, while advocating for broader and more pluralistic perspectives in the field of evaluation, NEC conferences can continue to be a strategic platform to promote an

already well-known objective of evaluation: programme improvement. Evaluation remains a resource to guarantee accountability and worthy use of public money. But if effectiveness—as advocated in the 2030 Agenda—is the main goal of development programmes, then evaluation strategies, whether quantitative or qualitative, participatory or external, using prospective, formative or summative designs, should be understood as tools to improve public policy and international cooperation on development programmes.

Future NEC conferences should thus deepen the exploration of the multiplicity of evaluation uses. They should also continue to address diverse evaluation needs—a diversity reflective of the differentiated progress in evaluation across the globe. Different levels of progress are in turn reflective of the nature of enabling environments, including elements such as policy, resources and democratic space. Taken as a tool for accountability, citizens using evaluation for empowerment require the space to engage with critique for eventual change and to reduce the discrepancy between plans and actions.

Embrace complexity

The 2017 NEC conference devoted several sessions to complexity, which is increasingly recognized as a key feature in development and progress towards the SDGs. It is now recognized that implementation problems and failures to attain intended impacts may be a consequence of conventional project design methods and logical framework approaches which imply that policy and programme objectives should be very specific, in order to guarantee coherence in the intervention and efficiency in the linkages between activities, outputs and outcomes. Yet, such a narrow focus has often resulted in policy fragmentation. Sectoral policies and programmes may well be effective but as synergies is not a traditional design criterion, the overall impact of government or societal efforts may be compromised. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes concurrent goals of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection, which implies a need for new perspectives in intervention planning and in evaluation. The NEC conferences can continue to provide opportunities to debate complexity and its implications for planning, implementation and evaluation.

Strengthen the training component

The NEC conferences moved towards a more robust training offering from 2015, with an emphasis on curricula that are informed by practice and emphasize interaction, exchange and co-creation of knowledge. Future events should build on these experiences, extending the offerings and continuing the shift in the training agenda from one dominated by the North to one more in synch with Southern perspectives.

CONCLUSION—THE NEC CONFERENCES MUST CONTINUE

From the first NEC conference, the idea has been to create space for conversation with evaluators, civil society and national governments that aspire to strengthen their national evaluation functions. However, over the years, the concept has evolved as more national government

joined, national evaluation capacities have matured through learning from mistakes and best practices, and as the development context and priorities have changed.

Overall, the conferences in Morocco and South Africa emphasized the need to build better institutional capacities to manage development programmes through evaluations. The focus was on improving organizational systems and processes and on developing incentives for better performance and results. National systems that facilitate independent and credible evaluations play an important role in achieving these priorities by generating evidence and objective information on how improvements can be made. NEC 2015 responded to the new context of the SDGs, emphasized the importance of institutionalizing monitoring and especially evaluation system practices in the national context and paved the way towards country-led evaluation practices and realities.

The discussions and papers in 2017 highlight the need to shift the discussion more fully from development evaluation to public policy evaluation, as relevant to national governments working on the complex task of SDG localization, review and follow-up. As illustrated during the conference, many countries have been adapting or establishing institutional arrangements to integrate the SDGs in national (and subnational) development strategies and budgeting processes and have assessed the availability of data in view of the SDG indicators. Countries are also adjusting their M&E systems, but to date, not much attention has been given to evaluation systems and capacities with respect to the new challenges of the SDGs.

The trajectory of the conferences' themes has been developing from enabling environment for evaluation and the utility of evaluation for decision-making, to evaluation principles with respect to the SDGs, institutionalization of evaluation and finally to a more targeted discussion on what reviewing and following up on the SDGs implies for national governments. Yet, many of the challenges that inspired the first NEC conference were still discussed at the fifth event in the series.

The NEC conferences thus still have an important niche, providing a platform for a unique mix of stakeholders focused on the triptych of evaluation, development and public policy: government officials tasked with commissioning, managing, conducting and/or using evaluations, evaluation experts, academics, civil society and international development partners.

The SDGs bring a heightened awareness of the complexity of development, with the need for synergies, recognition of trade-offs, strengthened partnerships and evaluations that integrate the principles of "no one left behind" and the indivisibility of the economic, social and environmental goals. Countries to date have been focused primarily on the integration of the SDGs into their national development agendas and aligning national statistics systems with the new demands of the SDG indicator framework, and the role of evaluation in the review and follow-up of the SDGs still needs to be better understood and the capacities required for this new level of country-led evaluations still need to be strengthened. The NEC conferences and training workshops can continue to play a key role in developing capacities and providing a space to learn from peers and experts from around the world.

In summary, over the past decade, the NEC conferences have become truly global, both geographically and substantively, and these unique gatherings of evaluators from multiple communities merge complementary strengths to advance evaluation as a discipline, a practice and an agenda—the 2030 Agenda—and its explicit call for measuring results to ensure that no one is left behind. The NEC conferences must continue.