

4. The Use of Evaluation in Follow-up and Review Frameworks for the Sustainable Development Goals

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Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 65 countries have submitted their voluntary national reviews to the high-level political forum on sustainable development to report about their progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While important, voluntary national reporting is only one piece of the puzzle which risks remaining an artificial and bureaucratic exercise if it is not substantiated by ongoing evaluations, reviews and assessments conducted at the national and subnational levels.

As stressed in the 2030 Agenda, voluntary national reviews should build on evidence gathered by national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that feed into policy planning and implementation. Reviews, assessments and evaluation can play a key role for achieving the SDGs only if they are used in country to accelerate achievements against all three sustainable development pillars: the economic, social and environmental.

The 2030 Agenda is a massive step forward from the Millennium Development Goals because it recognizes the interrelationships between human and economic development and the environment. However, in its complexity, the Agenda can become a burden for national governments. There exists a great need to digest the Agenda by developing simple narratives around its key principles: country ownership; universality; sustainability; partnerships; and no one left behind. In this effort, evaluators can play a fundamental role by facilitating the co-generation of value judgements about what works, for whom and under what conditions. These judgements must be based on rigorous evidence.

For evaluators, this means dealing with hard-to-predict, intricate and often volatile interactions between different interested parties. Ultimately it means brokering the values, views and needs of different stakeholders while new knowledge is generated. In doing this, evaluators have a responsibility to challenge monopolies of any kind—of problem definition, of issue formulation, of data control, of information use. For example, the interaction of the SDGs often leads to trade-offs and clashes between conservation policies and economic growth. Evaluators need to mediate different interests in the process of value definition.

Therefore, national and subnational evaluation is crucial for achieving the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. To date much of the global community's attention has focused on monitoring of SDG indicators, national statistical capacity and global reporting mechanisms. While these are all key aspects for measuring progress towards the SDGs, simply monitoring by means of indicators is insufficient. Evaluation is needed to analyse and probe the results achieved, both positive and negative.

Two reviews²¹ of the 65 voluntary national reviews submitted to the high-level political forum in 2016 and 2017, conducted in partnership by the International Institute for Environment and Development, EvalSDGs and the United Nations Development Programme, found that there are numerous efforts to strengthen national monitoring architectures, but evaluation systems and processes often remain missing or misunderstood. Most voluntary national reviews do not entirely capture how evaluation can help report and guide SDG implementation and only three countries assign a clear role to evaluation. Lack of awareness and understanding about the role and use of evaluation can eventually result in partial evidence and poor value judgements about what has been achieved, how and why, by different policies and initiatives addressing the SDGs.

The two reviews therefore call for global guidance and national action to improve understanding and use of evaluation in follow-up processes of the SDGs and make the following recommendations:

1. The current voluntary national review guidelines should be revised by the United Nations Secretariat and General Assembly to clearly outline evaluation measures and review processes. These gaps should be filled in consultation with the United Nations Evaluation Group and the broader evaluation community.
2. National governments should engage with evaluation networks and professionals early in the voluntary national review process. They should also consider developing and harmonizing national evaluation policies.
3. National evaluation organizations should initiate dialogues with their governments on the role of evaluation and engage with institutions in charge of defining evaluation processes.
4. There is a need to strengthen evaluation capacity and use in all countries; this requires courageous political will, adequate resources and evaluation expertise.

21 See <http://pubs.iied.org/17423IIED/> and <http://pubs.iied.org/17446IIED/>.