



Throwing Down the Gauntlet: Lessons that Challenge Evaluation in the SDG Era

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The launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 by all 193 Member States of the United Nations heralded a new era of global development action – an area that will undoubtedly engage and challenge the evaluation profession. The emphasis on a “robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework” (UNGA 2015) places evaluative action²¹ at the centre of strategies to achieve development success.

This paper documents seven strategic lessons and calls influential actors to action to ensure that evaluation lives up to the promise that it holds for helping to shape development. The lessons represent the essence distilled during analysis of a set of key documents.²² They neither focus on the achievements of evaluation, nor regurgitate the obvious. Instead, they identify some of the most crucial, often neglected issues for attention by the global evaluation community, and in particular by influential funders, commissioners and designers of evaluation strategies and approaches.

While this paper focuses only on the lessons, their implications for the evaluation profession are discussed in depth in a series of posts on the author’s blog at www.zendaofir.com.

21 Included are all evaluative activities that support planning and adaptive management from global to local levels – assessments, appraisals, rapid reviews, ongoing reflection and self-evaluation, as well as evaluations at any stage of the design, implementation and follow-up of development oriented initiatives (policies, strategies, programmes or projects).

22 The 30 resources from which the lessons were derived are listed in the relevant reference list at the end of this article. They include books, literature reviews, evaluations, commentaries and analyses by key stakeholder groups. Selection criteria included their prominence, credibility, focus and utility. References not linked to a specific lesson are cited in the text.

FROM THE MDGS TO THE SDGS

In September 2000, the Millennium Declaration gave birth to a first in world history: a universally applicable goal framework, established to improve human development in the 21st century. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with their 21 targets and 60 indicators were launched at a time of world-wide optimism and global ambition.

Today they are considered part success, part failure. They created focus and momentum for development, informed local perspectives and priorities, and galvanized political leaders and civil society organizations to tackle multiple dimensions of poverty at the same time (UNGA, 2012; UNTT, 2012; Vandemoortele, 2012). They provided a tool for advocacy and agenda setting, focused attention on results, incentivized progress monitoring and strengthened statistical capacities (Rippin, 2013; Miller-Dawkins, 2014; UNDP, 2015). They reinforced the notion that the public in donor countries is more willing to support aid if progress is measured in a clear, convincing way in areas that are widely regarded as desirable (Manning, 2010).

Yet the MDGs also had well-studied weaknesses. They were overly donor-centric and technocratic, focused on quantity over quality and had a simplistic development narrative founded on sector-based silo approaches and mostly 'easy-to-measure' goals and targets (UNTT, 2012). Important nuances in the definition of concepts and measurement of results were missed, unfairly disadvantaging poorer countries and ignoring disparities and inequalities (Hailu and Tsukuda, 2011; UNGA, 2012). They also emphasized the promotion of welfare and aid dependence over growth and self-reliance, tending to skew funding towards social rather than productive sectors (Manning, 2010).

Fifteen years later, the unveiling of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development signalled a different approach to development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals with their 169 associated targets address many of the most obvious MDG weaknesses. They are obviously aspirational. Their complexity stems in large part from extensive consultation processes with thousands of civil society and other actors and organizations across the world; in contrast, the MDGs were set up by a group of academics and technocrats (Vandemoortele, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, critics lined up immediately after their publication, pointing out both their 'unrealistic ambition' and the 'insufficient ambition' of particular goals, as well as reliance on models of development based on 'endless material growth' that will undermine the SDGs' own ecological targets, and that are likely to fail during an era of massive income inequalities (Open Letter, 2015). Yet the SDGs show significant strengths, informed by lessons learned during the previous 15 years. They highlight the dire need for a more holistic, systems approach to development. They admit the importance of major resource flows other than aid, and confirm that growth has to be inclusive and the responsibility of all nations, directed by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. They emphasize the role of multiple change agents, de-emphasize the UN role and call for citizen-driven demand for public accountability. They are explicit about the need to consider different country contexts, and to allow for differentiated targets and disaggregated data that reflect national realities and country commitments in support of efforts towards "no one left behind". Development is not

any more something to be exported from one set of countries to another; all have to address common priorities and global challenges.

The 2030 Agenda is not a panacea, but will undoubtedly have a significant influence on how development is conceptualized and done over the next two decades. Importantly, it also has a much stronger focus than the MDGs on extensive 'follow-up and review' processes. In these, evaluation has to prove its value amid an obsession with indicator monitoring and reporting.

SEVEN LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

During the MDG era, good evaluation could have done much to bring timely improvements to development interventions. It should now prevent similar problems, weaknesses and failures from emerging on the road to 2030.

Lesson 1. The value proposition of evaluation is not clear to influential actors.

The value of evaluation cannot be assumed or taken for granted. It must be demonstrated consistently and continuously, cognizant of the needs and demands of influential policy- and decision-makers.

Critics have pointed out that MDG-related policies and strategies would have benefited from a much stronger focus on evaluation. The envisaged SDG follow-up and review architecture and processes now have the potential to ignite much greater interest in useful evaluation. Yet it is abundantly clear that although evaluation is frequently included in policy and strategy documentation, the value proposition of evaluation has yet to be fully understood and accepted by influential actors in development **and** in evaluation. This is in large part the result of how evaluation has historically been conceptualized and conducted, especially in the Global South, where it continues to be driven largely by efforts to comply with externally imposed logframes and often meaningless indicators, and by short-term project-based funding modalities.

It is important to recognize that research, monitoring and evaluation constitute a 'triple helix' of evidence. They are different practices, yet draw from one another. Complemented by experience and intuition, each has its value and place in guiding and measuring development progress. Monitoring is most frequently used to track implementation fidelity and output achievement. It is seldom used to show and understand progress towards stated outcomes and impacts. Research and special studies (as part of a monitoring and evaluation system) test hypotheses and study phenomena and problems defined by research questions. It is done with the explicit aim of generating new knowledge and insights that may or may not be useful or used in practice. Evaluation is the only practice that deals in a forward-looking manner with assessments and judgments of merit, worth or importance, informed by past and current realities. Evaluators use research and evaluation-specific methodologies (Davidson, 2014) and include monitoring, research and special study data and findings. Evaluation has to be integrative, and invariably demands understanding of the interconnectedness of things as well as a high level of expertise informed by experience.

Good evaluation offers a strong value proposition for development which has yet to be fully realized in practice.

- Evaluation data are collected and analysed with the primary intent to trigger action and intervention. Its action orientation means that it can inform plans and decisions at short notice.
- It seeks to answer priority questions for immediate use by (often multiple) groups of stakeholders. It can do so within timelines and approaches that social research seldom accommodates, and with information that monitoring or research insights alone cannot provide.
- It can provide credible strategic or operational insights that, depending on circumstance and purpose, can be perceptual or factual, quantitative and/or qualitative. Most importantly, they can be generated as independent, external or internal insights, often considered and used in dialogue with one another.
- It enables judgment to be informed by rich, useful insights. Good evaluation searches for those interconnections that enable a solid understanding of situations, mechanisms and processes, integrates them, and considers their combined influence on development trajectories.
- It considers stakeholder as well as theoretical perspectives on models, progress, success and failure. This demands explicit interrogation of the underlying values, power relations and assumptions that influence development initiatives from design to closure, as well as the durability of the ideas and impacts they generate. This brings nuance, and limits judgments made on superficial grounds.
- It empowers – allowing for a deep understanding of real-world situations and challenges; knowledge synthesis; and learning for multiple purposes.²³
- As difficult it may be at times to “speak truth to power”, evaluation has the charge to do just that, wherever feasible, for the benefit of the citizens, ecosystems and planet that evaluation is intended to serve.

The rest of this paper is devoted to six of the most important lessons learned about issues for attention if evaluation is to deliver on its promise.

Lesson 2. Macro influences that emphasize the complex (adaptive) systems nature of development have been ignored.

Failure to understand and take into account the true nature of development – including, and especially, macro level influences on the development trajectories of countries and regions – leads to ill-formed and inadequate strategies, decisions and evaluations.

23 Such as planning, strategic and operational decision-making, adaptive management, accountability, knowledge generation for development and for evaluation, advocacy, and more.

It is tempting to refer to the well-known acronym “IoT” as the “Interconnectedness of Things” instead of the “Internet of Things”. The world is moving away from the old mechanistic Cartesian paradigm to a systems understanding of life, and of development. Yet evaluative analyses often fail to make the connections necessary for sound judgment. This is particularly true when dealing with global phenomena and trends, and with the often complex dynamics among countries and regions. The analysis of lessons done for this article points to the following aspects that have been severely neglected by evaluators and commissioners of evaluation during the MDG era:

Changing or interrupted resource flows. Societal disparities and crises in donor countries are increasing, resulting in shifts in aid budget allocations. Several major donor countries now explicitly align their aid with national, often commercial goals (Bortello, 2010; DFID, 2015; *Globe and Mail*, 2014). In the past withheld, inadequate or fragmented flows of finance between countries have thwarted effective transition from global to national goals and resulted in disillusionment among, or mistrust between partners, while excessive emphasis on sector-based interventions caused often detrimental displacement or skewing of national budgets.

New types of investment. Public-private partnerships, impact investing, private sector investments in health and other services, and new financing modalities by the BRICS²⁴ and emerging economies through flourishing South-South cooperation are leading to a wider variety of development models and agendas. Most of these efforts demand expertise different from the prevailing ‘expert planner’ approach.

Geopolitical dynamics. Tensions between countries or regions can paralyse or encourage manipulation of international forums, affect resource flows, and challenge conventional development models and internationally agreed norms and rights. International conventions around trade, financial systems, intellectual property rights and migration, as well as conflicts, the instigation of conflict, financial and economic crises, climate change and other man-made and natural disasters all have knock-on effects on development.

Policy and strategy alignment and coherence. Integrated development was already fashionable several decades ago. Policy coherence or alignment is by now almost a truism. Yet evaluation seldom considers these issues with sufficient nuance. Coherence can have positive or negative impacts on development trajectories; what is good for one country or region is not necessarily good for others. Alignment between the SDGs and national development priorities and approaches is not a given, nor alignment in values and strategies between countries, or regions – in spite of negotiated ‘universal norms.’²⁵

Diversity and context-responsiveness. Thankfully, the era of ‘best practices’, ‘replication’ and blueprint ideas of development forced upon countries and regions is slowly coming to an end. Tolerance and respect for diversity and context-responsiveness are growing. The

24 BRICS countries are Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

25 For example, policies and interventions that advance the youth while marginalizing elders and their traditions might be acceptable in North America, yet have significant undesirable social consequences in Africa which are often not visible to an outsider.

Global South is interested in creating or adapting development models for different values, cultures and circumstances, while the 2030 Agenda is explicit about the need to respect the context-dependent nature of development, and reinforces the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities among countries.

Technological advancements. Major trends in technological advancements, such as the increasing number of emerging disruptive technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2016), have yet to be interrogated for implications for development models and their evaluation.

Lesson 3. Balance and synergy, critical aspects of 'integrated, sustainable' development success, have been neglected.

For successful development at national, regional and global levels, interconnected goals and targets across sectors have to move forward in a certain order and in synergy and balance with one another. Monitoring and evaluation have failed to track and assess the extent to which this takes place.

A very significant result of the interconnectedness of things is that national strategies have to balance different interacting goals and targets in their design, and ensure that they unfold and evolve with a certain balance, in a certain order, and in synergy as execution proceeds.

This is implicit in the design of the SDGs. As a simple example, SDG Goal 3 (Ensuring healthy lives) cannot be achieved unless Goal 2 (Ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition) is successfully addressed; achieving Goal 1 (Ending poverty) is dependent on success in both, as well as on nearly all other global goals, in particular Goals 8-10 (Decent work, economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequality). Yet appropriate infrastructure, education, capacities and food production systems (and more) are preconditions (and targets) for success in reaching Goal 2, while sufficient resources are a precondition for all of these.

It is clear that the need for balance and order cuts across global goals and across sectors. Integrated development planning is not enough; implementation has to be timed and managed to ensure progress in concert, and evaluations should be alert to, and target this important aspect of the complex systems nature of development.

Lesson 4. Hidden influences can be debilitating for development.

There are many important, yet often hidden influences on, or within, processes and relationships. They can drive, slow down or block development, yet evaluations are seldom alert to their impact.

The value and utility of judgements about performance or impact are very limited unless the reasons for good or poor progress, or for success or failure are known. The following lists some of the most important influences that evaluations frequently fail to highlight.

Power relations and asymmetries are very significant influences on development agendas and initiatives. Their impact can be particularly acute in cases where it really matters, for example in partnerships between rich and poor organizations, countries or regions;

in interventions that are dependent on weak governments or governments of contested legitimacy; or policies affected by the actions of predatory states or organizations. It is likely that societal values and culture play a crucial role in development success, yet even the 2030 Agenda has very limited references to this matter, even though the report on the proposed follow-up and review architecture and processes includes the enabling role of traditions and culture as possible focus for a thematic review.

Leadership commitment to, and accountability for the observance of the internationally agreed upon principles underlying the SDGs is crucial, albeit within limitations such as resource constraints. Such commitment at global or regional level has to be reflected in adherence to international agreements, laws and norms, and at national level to principles of “no one left behind” or ‘equitable growth’ in the design and implementation of development initiatives. Finally, although efforts were made by some to identify unintended negative consequences or outcomes, they remain neglected during strategic evaluations. For example, health budgets skewed through donor-driven attention to priorities other than building sustainable and effective health services led to severe challenges later. In other cases, educational outcomes declined as a result of a strong focus on universal primary education without sufficient attention to quality education.

Lesson 5. Monitoring and evaluation approaches have yet to help facilitate shifts towards adaptive management as a result of a complex systems perspective on development.

Interventions informed by ‘learning by doing’, iterative experimentation, adaptive management or contextualized solutions remain largely in the realm of rhetoric.

Lip service continues to be paid in development and in evaluation to ‘adaptive management’, ‘learning’ and considerations of ‘context’. In many aid-dependent countries, institutional cultures and funding opportunities stifle progress in this direction. Instead, they continue to be infatuated with logframe-informed linear notions of progress within static contexts, and with results-based management frequently used only for reporting and accountability purposes. Institutional cultures are notoriously difficult to change, and only powerful funders of development and commissioners of evaluation have the power to give momentum to efforts to ensure that management and evaluation is done with a complex adaptive systems lens on development initiatives.

Developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010) and problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) (Andrews et al., 2012) are two of a slowly growing number of evaluative approaches aimed at breaking conventional ways of doing. Yet the most ground-breaking example has yet to be acknowledged and explored for adaptation to other contexts. Since 1978, China has had a GDP growth of around 10 percent per year and lifted more than 500 million out of poverty. This large country of (by now) 1.4 billion people is one of the only countries in the world that has achieved, or is in the process of achieving, all the MDGs.²⁶ What is less well known is that in this extraordinary effort, evaluative processes based on ‘learning by

26 Although most of their efforts to meet such targets started long before the MDGs were designed.

doing' were crucial for success (Jordan, 2015), in spite of acknowledged systemic weaknesses (Wong, 2013).

Lesson 6. Definitions, data and interpretations used in development interventions and evaluations lack nuance, leading to unjustified claims of 'success'.

Key concepts have been ill defined, while development data often lack sufficient depth and nuance during analysis and synthesis for monitoring and evaluation. Simplistic, un-nuanced approaches are not benign; they can distort and do harm, in particular when considering what constitutes 'success'.

'Nuance' has been absent from the definition of key concepts as well as from MDG informed monitoring and evaluation strategies. Goals and targets were treated as largely sector-based and isolated from one another. Assessments of progress were informed primarily by simple indicator-driven monitoring data that leaned towards the 'easier to measure' goals and targets, and emphasized quantity at the behest of quality. Data were not sufficiently disaggregated to show trends in, for example inequality. And importantly, in spite of the fact that countries were expected to set their own targets, notions of 'success' were simplistic and seldom defined and interrogated by a variety of stakeholders. Performance trajectories and expectations were treated as linear, and budgets calculated accordingly. The 'last mile' problem was insufficiently considered,²⁷ leading to overspent budgets, inadequate coverage and lower quality services. The implications of vastly different starting points, and of linear models for progress where countries' performance was already off track early on, were also not considered. This distorted definitions of 'success' by placing an untenable burden of expectation on the poorest countries that had the most to achieve.²⁸

In spite of significant progress over the last decade in understanding and evaluating the short-term impacts of development interventions, difficulties persist in attributing impact²⁹ to the influence of the MDGs. This is the result of time lags, the large variety of initiatives and actors involved and, in the eyes of some, the absence of well-designed conventional counterfactuals. Limited efforts to identify positive **and** negative influences on success meant that structural and other causes of failure to develop have not been sufficiently used in evaluative judgment. There has also been little synthesis of evaluation results across initiatives and organizations in order to learn from the MDG experience. Valuable lessons have been lost, and many of the contributions the MDGs are said to have made to national level development do not have solid evidence backing the claims. It may also be that the value of the

27 The 'last mile' problem refers to the fact that development initiatives, especially in their pilot phase, tend to cover easy-to-reach individuals or communities first. Expansion in coverage then leads to rising marginal costs.

28 While the vast majority of countries' progress did not accelerate after implementation of the MDGs, a total of 16 of 24 indicators showed accelerated improvement after MDG implementation in at least half of sub-Saharan African countries. This compares very favourably to five out of 24 in the case of all developing countries. It is therefore unfair to refer to Africa as a 'failure' in terms of the MDGs (Rippen, 2013).

29 This includes the attribution of contributions to the MDGs.

MDGs as an instrument for change has been underestimated in the absence of systematic evaluation of outcomes and impacts that are more difficult to measure.

Crucially, evaluation funders and commissioners have generally failed to focus on evaluating whether the differences made by development interventions have had a chance to endure (Chekan, 2016) or were transformed into further emergent outcomes or impacts.

Only very rarely should success be claimed if these very important aspects are not appropriately considered and assessed.

Lesson 7. The nature and quality of evaluative evidence present a serious challenge to the credibility and utility of such evidence.

The nature and quality, and hence the credibility and utility of evaluative evidence depend on many factors, such as the contexts in which the evidence is generated and used. The current state of the art around 'evidence' in development and evaluation presents a serious challenge for the evaluation profession.

There are many well-known challenges involved in gathering high-quality evidence for the monitoring and evaluation of development. Experiences during the MDG era highlighted many troublesome weaknesses, both conceptual and technical. Conceptual weaknesses included targets and indicators that were set up to encourage 'quick wins' instead of longer term systemic support and achievements such as the strengthening of health or education services, while as noted earlier, the vastly different starting points among countries and the non-linearity of development trajectories were not sufficiently considered. This new phase of context-responsive development might tempt countries to set their own performance bar quite low, which will significantly complicate inter-country comparisons unless well-nuanced calculations clearly spell out the minimum level of expected achievement for each country.

Other weaknesses relate to technical challenges. Baselines were unclear, population trends and dynamics ignored and there was a preoccupation with "easier to reach and measure" targets. 'Fuzzier' goals were neglected, while indicator quality could cause distortion in systems. The interrelationship and balance between targets that had to be achieved in concert were also not well understood or tracked, while target setting and data granularity failed to highlight vulnerabilities and inequalities. Planners and implementers also underestimated the challenges ahead for MDG monitoring. It was a struggle to find and ensure reliable data from the field. Statistics capacities were lacking and national statistics services strained. It was essential to mobilize agencies across sectors to assist with data collection and analysis, complicating data quality assurance systems. In the absence of adaptive management, the estimated time lag of three to five years means that final assessment of MDG as global initiative can only be done between 2017 and 2020.

Finally, dominant narratives and readily available data sets that are the basis for evaluative arguments and findings are usually not targets for assessment. For example, it is true that disparities between countries are decreasing while disparities within countries are increasing. Yet contrary to narratives put forward by pundits and the media, a study of international indexes (so-called 'league tables') indicates that the North-South or East-West divide remains

very significant. At the same time, such international data comparing country performance themselves have to be examined and assessed for conceptual strength and technical credibility, as evident from the recent contestation of some of the AidData information and interpretation (Brautigam, 2015).

IN CONCLUSION: THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs have come into operation during a period of increasing strain within and across societies and ecosystems, and in an environment of competition for power and finite resources. The stakes are thus high; humankind will have to use all tools at its disposal to enable or maintain positive sustainable development trajectories at national, regional and global levels.

To what extent will the evaluation profession be committed and able to live up to the challenges posed by the era of the SDGs? Will it mirror the ambition in the 2030 Agenda? Will it be prepared to change long-held ideas of evaluation criteria and 'best practices'? Will its response and resources be sufficient to enable the full value proposition of evaluation to be reflected in theories and in practice – including in support of the SDGs? How will it prioritize evaluative activity in the absence of sufficient resources? And what does all of this mean for the notion of evaluation as a profession with deep social and ethical responsibilities, especially when working with those most impoverished or vulnerable?

The 2030 Agenda and subsequent Report on Follow-up and Review outline significant expectations. But it will be up to the evaluation profession to show the value that evaluation can add in challenging times to ensuring that development works for those at whom it is aimed – and especially for those who might be given only one chance to live a dignified life.

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