



UNRWA – Use of Evaluation for Evidence-Based Policymaking: Case of UNRWA

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This paper provides an example of how evaluations can be used for evidence-based decision-making in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using the example of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), it first explains the situation of the agency and develops how this situation is similar to the situation of national governments delivering on the promises of the MDGs and SDGs. In the second part, it explains how UNRWA has aligned itself with the MDGs and SDGs and integrated evaluation in that process. It concludes with some thoughts on how use of evaluations can be improved in the case of UNRWA.

UNRWA

UNRWA was established under General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949, becoming operational on 1 May 1950. Its mandate is to respond to the needs of Palestine refugees, until a durable and just solution is found to the refugee issue. It is now serving over 5.3 million Palestine refugees.

The mission of UNRWA is to “help Palestine refugees achieve their full potential in human development under the difficult circumstances in which they live”. UNRWA fulfils this mission by providing a variety of essential services within the framework of international standards, to Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the West Bank. UNRWA’s mandate extends at present to providing education, health, relief and social services, microfinance and emergency assistance to refugees, infrastructure and camp improvement within refugee camps, and refugee protection.

UNRWA is well-regarded as a pioneer in public service delivery in both stable and fragile contexts. About 500,000 children are enrolled in UNRWA schools, UNRWA provides access to primary health care services to families comprising 3.5 million individuals, which translates into well over 9 million consultations annually, provides social safety net assistance to close

to 300,000 persons, and has made a positive impact on the lives of 730,000 people through inclusive and participatory infrastructure and camp improvement interventions.

In 2015, UNRWA provided direct services through a workforce of 30,000 persons, primarily Palestine refugees themselves. This workforce includes 23,000 education staff, 3,300 health staff, 1,100 sanitation labourers, and 300 social workers working in over 900 facilities (including schools, health centres, technical and vocational training centres) across its five fields of operations.

Among United Nations agencies, it is unique in delivering services directly to refugees, and as such is similar in character to a public service organization facing challenges very similar to those of governments in middle income countries.

MDG, SDG ALIGNMENT

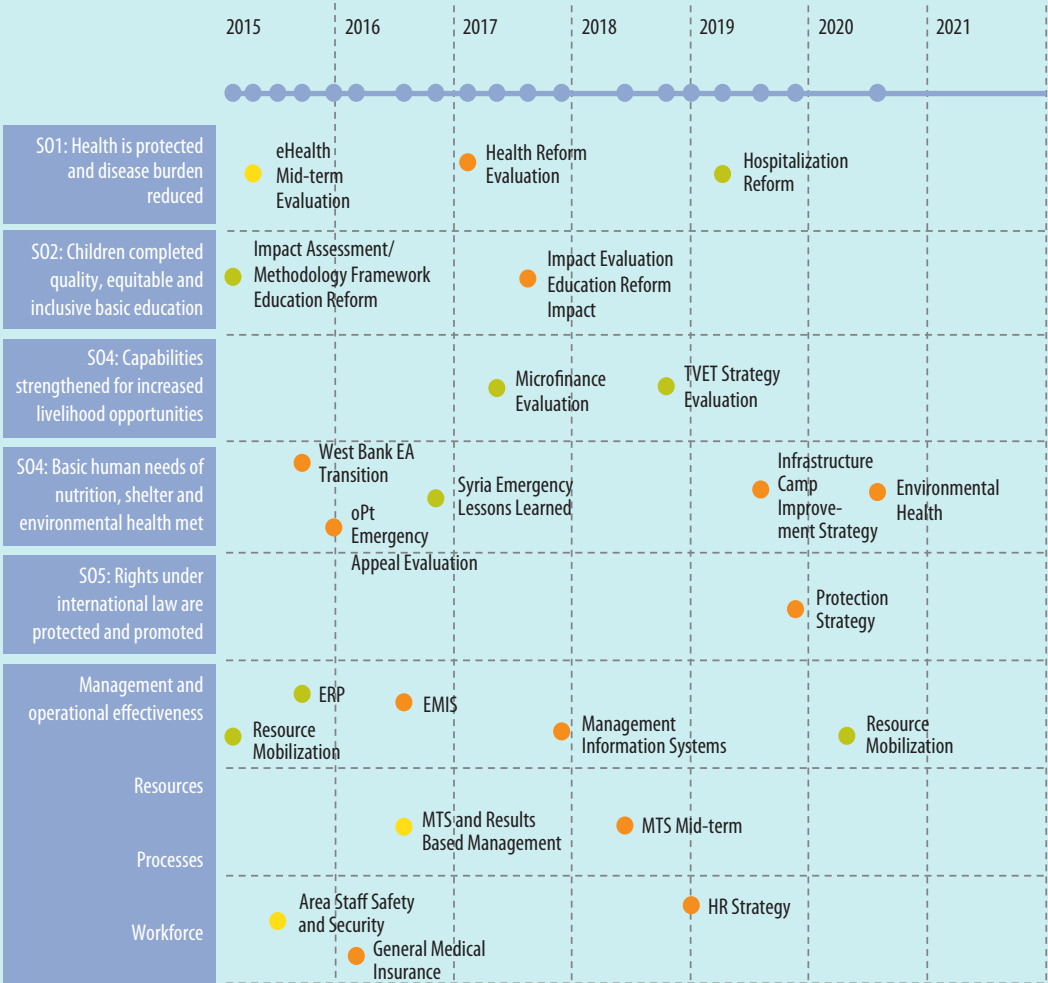
Alignment with internationally agreed agendas provides the framework for evaluations providing the evidence for decision-making.

UNRWA is not a government and therefore not part of the negotiations around the MDGs or SDGs. However, as part of the UN family it is committed to align itself with these global goals as much as possible. During the development of its first Medium Term Strategy 2010-2015 it therefore decided to align its own development goals as much as possible with the MDGs. For the second Medium Term Strategy 2016-2021 it aimed to align with the emerging SDGs.

- UNRWA Strategic Objective 1: Refugees' rights under international law are protected and promoted (SDG 5)
- UNRWA Strategic Objective 2: Refugees' health is protected and the disease burden is reduced (SDG 3)
- UNRWA Strategic Objective 3: School-aged children complete quality, equitable and inclusive basic education (SDG 4)
- UNRWA Strategic Objective 4: Refugee capabilities strengthened for increased livelihoods opportunities (SDG 1)
- UNRWA Strategic Objective 5: Refugees are able to meet their basic human needs of food, shelter and environmental health (SDG 2, 6, 9)

The Medium Term Strategies have been endorsed by the Advisory Commission of UNRWA, a body composed of hosts and donors advising the Commissioner General on the strategic direction of UNRWA. The Medium Term Strategy 2016-2021 includes as an annex the agency plan for strategic evaluations over the period 2015-2021. This plan was developed in close consultation with internal and external stakeholders and coordinated with the Department of Planning. It aims to evaluate all strategic issues that were identifiable in 2014 when the plan was developed. It takes into account the programming cycle in the different sectors to provide evidence in a timely manner and is supported by the evaluation policy that stipulates that all strategies of UNRWA need to be evaluated.

FIGURE 1. MEDIUM TERM EVALUATION PLAN OF UNRWA



SPECIFIC APPROACHES

Below is a discussion of some specific approaches that improve the use of evaluations for evidence-based policymaking.

Evaluation of Strategies

Evaluating strategies that are designed to support the achievements of the MDGs/SDGs is essential to assure that programming progressively improves and that the MDGs/SDGs are achieved. In UNRWA the evaluation policy stipulates that all strategies are evaluated within the agency. For these evaluations to be most useful they will need to be timed so that the results can be used for policymaking. Given the importance of strategies for policymaking in the context of the SDGs, it is essential that evaluation results and especially recommendations are available to policymakers on time and that policymakers refer to the evidence and recommendations from the strategic evaluations.

Strategies that have so far been evaluated are:

- the Medium Term Strategy 2010-2015
- the Security Risk Management Strategy
- two elements of health reform
 - the Family Health Team Approach
 - the e-health introduction
- the Resource Mobilization Strategy 2013-2015

The Medium Term Strategy Evaluation and the Resource Mobilization Strategy Evaluation were conducted in time for the follow-up strategies to be designed. For the Medium Term Strategy Evaluation all the recommendations have been taken into account for the upcoming Medium Term Strategy 2016-2021.

For 2015 all strategy evaluations are also part of the priority activities of the Executive Office and enjoy a very high level of support and visibility. The evaluations of the two parts of the health reform were done as mid-term evaluations to allow the use of a better methodology (with intervention and without can be easier compared) and are used to steer the implementation and finalization of these major reform efforts.

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder involvement and ultimately stakeholder ownership improves the use of evaluations. During research of UNEG two very clear mechanisms were identified that improve the use of evaluation through stakeholder involvement and through creating ownership of the evaluation by senior management. See Figures 2 and 3.

In UNRWA several mechanisms have been created to allow stakeholders to participate and to increase the ownership of senior management of the evaluations of strategies.

- Inclusion in planning and monitoring systems. The Agency Medium Term Strategy 2016-2021 is owned by senior management as well as host governments and donor

FIGURE 2. STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT (UNEG RESEARCH)

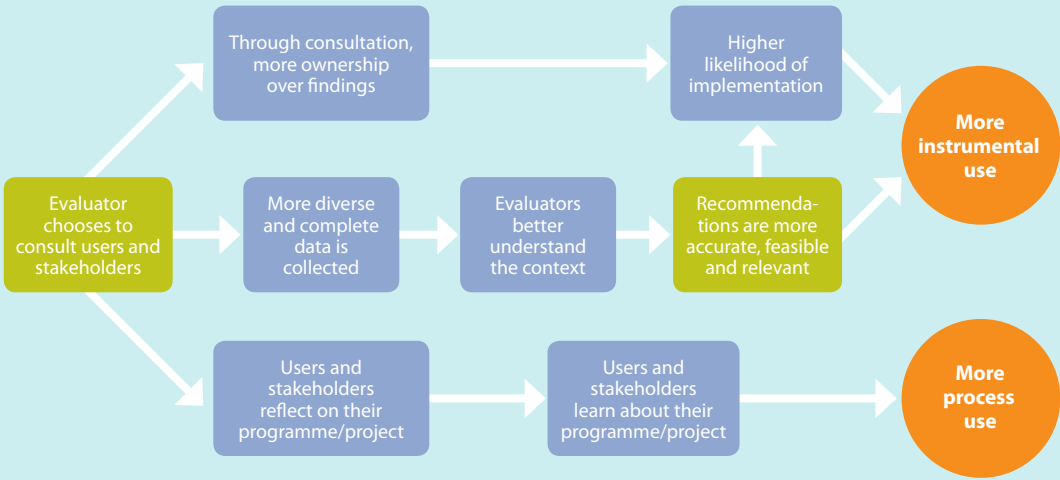
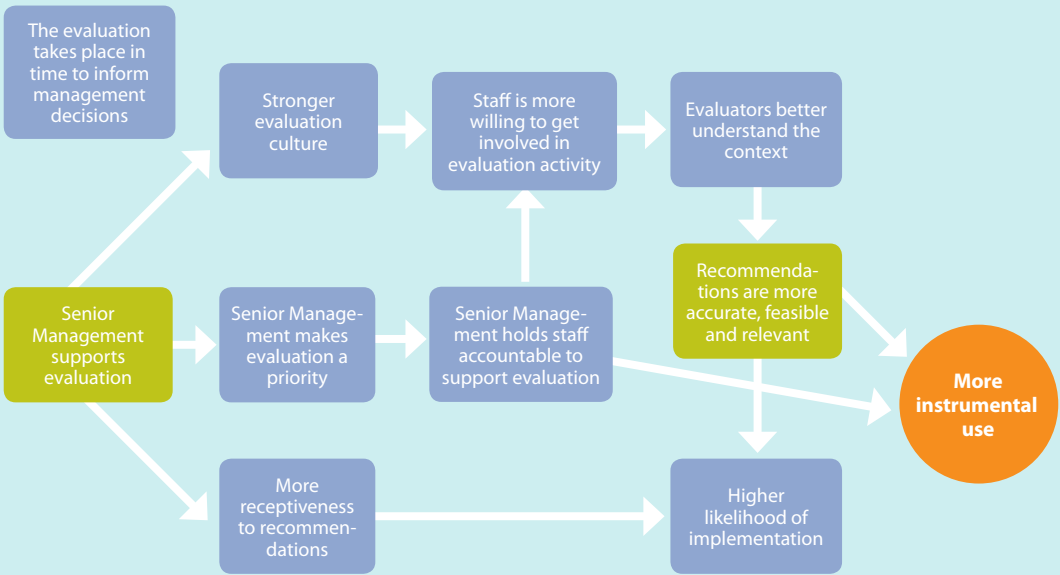


FIGURE 3. OWNERSHIP OF THE EVALUATION BY SENIOR MANAGEMENT (UNEG RESEARCH)



governments, having the evaluation plan included improves ownership. The priority activities for the Executive Office are monitored by the Department of Planning and include all strategic evaluations. The recommendation follow-up system is included in the UNRWA RBM system and quarterly reports are generated from this.

- Involvement in the planning phase. UNRWA prepares an extensive background paper for each evaluation. These include the theory of change, the objectives of the evaluation, the scope and evaluation questions. The client for the evaluation is very closely involved in the process. In several cases, this included the Evaluation Division facilitating a workshop to establish an agreed theory of change that is owned by the client in the process.
- For all strategic evaluations a steering committee is established that works based on an agreed terms of reference. The steering committee consists of representatives of host governments, donors, the Executive Office or Department of Planning, the client and at least one field representative. The committee discusses and endorses the background paper and inception report. It meets to advise on the background paper, the inception report, the presentation of preliminary findings, the draft evaluation report, and in case unforeseen items need to be discussed.
- The recommendation follow-up includes a personal component where the Department of Internal Oversight will meet with the client to discuss the implementation of the recommendations every six months.

Independence

Institutional as well as behavioural independence is seen as the most important factor for the quality and credibility of evaluations. However, when it comes to the use of evaluation there seem to be also other factors that influence the usefulness of evaluations and especially recommendations. Recent research from UNEG identified some mechanisms how independence of the evaluators can improve instrumental use or discourage instrumental use of evaluations (see Figure 4).

UNRWA has experimented with the composition of teams for strategic evaluations. Based on these few examples, it seems that the use of independent consultants has not always helped use. In some cases, the external consultants were more concerned about the sentiments of the client of the evaluation than the internal stakeholders.

The quality of recommendations requires both a very good understanding of the context as well as the knowledge of good practices. At least in the case of UNRWA, it seems that the understanding of the context is a significant challenge to external consultants and not easily achieved within a reasonable time-frame. The composition of teams therefore should be balanced to ensure the use of evaluation for policymaking.

Quality Recommendations

The quality of evaluation recommendations immediately influences the use of evaluations for policy decision-making. Building on the previous point, good recommendations come

FIGURE 4. INDEPENDENCE INFLUENCING INSTRUMENTAL USE (UNEG RESEARCH)

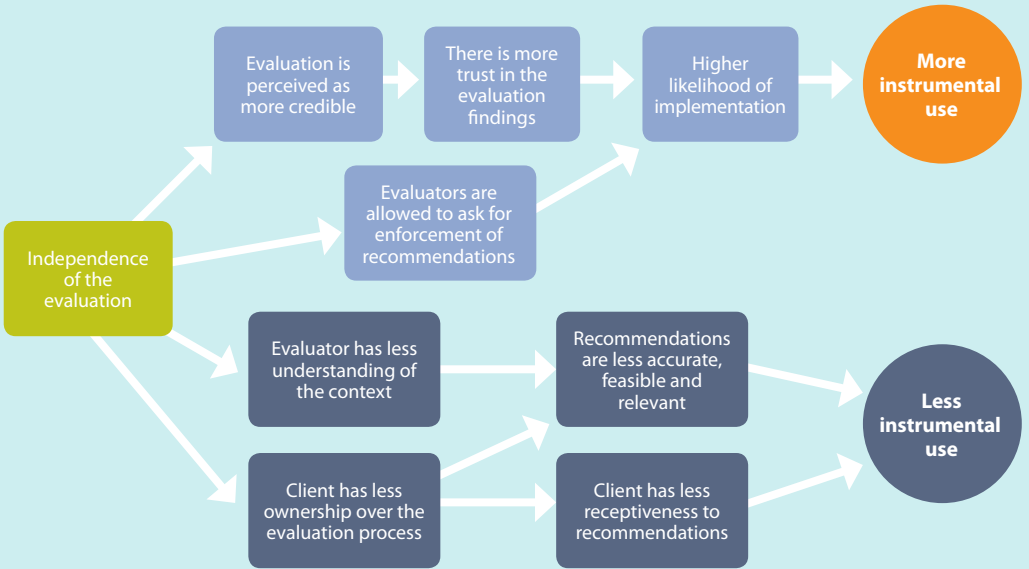
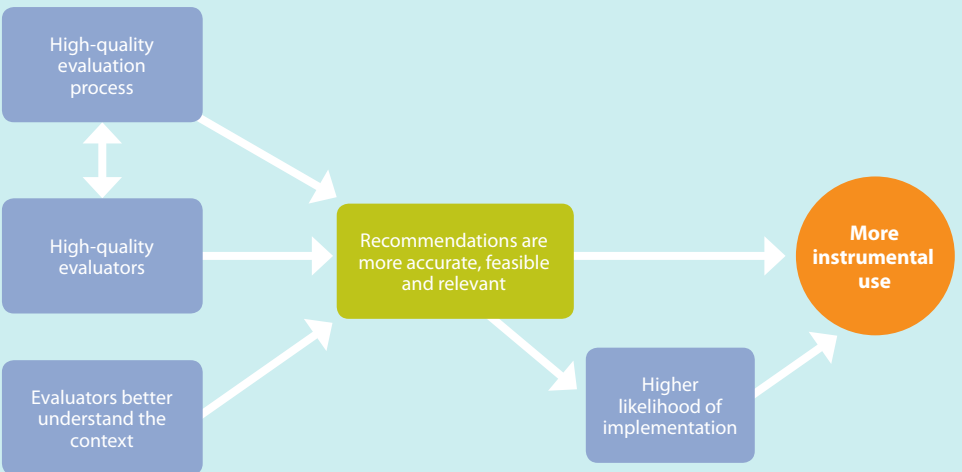


FIGURE 5. REALISTIC RECOMMENDATIONS (UNEG RESEARCH)



from good evaluators, good evaluation planning and evaluation management. The mechanisms from recent research in UNEG are shown in Figure 5.

Quite specifically in the case of UNRWA, it is very important for the recommendations to be realistic especially in terms of the limited funding available. To assure use of evaluation it is very important to avoid language such as 'strengthen,' 'improve' without clearly identifying the source of funding.

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