

3 EMBEDDING EVALUATION IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS



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INTRODUCTION

The workshop on embedding evaluation in voluntary national reviews (VNRs) was conducted at the 2019 National Evaluation Capacities Conference on 21 October. It was led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and EvalSDGs, and featured presentations from Ada Ocampo, Senior Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF; Dr. Dorothy Lucks, Co-Chair of EvalSDGs and Executive Director of SDF Global; Robert Stryk, UNICEF Regional Evaluation Adviser; and Asela Kalugampitiya, EvalPartners Executive Coordinator. The session attracted 30 participants from several different countries and with varying levels of experience with VNRs, ranging from no experience to considerable experience.

The learning objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Increase the capacity of countries to embed evidence from evaluations in VNRs;
2. Understand the relevance of scaling up evidence from evaluations to inform national policies and VNRs as a means to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and
3. Be better able to use evidence from evaluations and other sources in future VNRs.

The workshop included practical examples from around the world and gave participants an opportunity for some hands-on experience collaborating with people from a variety of countries.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and discuss the key messages of the workshop. It will begin by outlining the background and purposes of VNRs in national evaluations, followed by a discussion of national evaluations and the importance of country ownership in leading such evaluations. The need for identifying existing data and utilizing quality evidence in evaluation decision-making is outlined along with the importance of embedding evidence in VNRs. Examples of good practice evaluation in VNRs are presented.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSES OF VNRs

VNRs are designed to be “regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven”.⁷⁰ This workshop highlighted that VNRs “make possible the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda [and] strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships”.⁷¹

The important characteristics of VNRs are outlined in the 2030 Agenda (paragraphs 74 (g) and 74(h)). It stated that follow-up and review processes “will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts”. Furthermore, follow-up and review processes “will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes...”.

While monitoring for the 2030 Agenda is necessary, it is not sufficient, as monitoring is focused on assessing the extent to which plans are being executed. Evaluations go further to assess whether those plans are resulting in their intended outcomes and impacts. Evaluations are essential for accountability and good governance purposes. Evaluations involve deep analysis of issues such as causality, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Evaluations promote learning and use of the findings for continuous improvement, not as a punitive exercise. Evaluations can be policy-, programme- or project-based but can also focus on learning issues or themes, especially for those “left behind”.

Evaluation for those left behind can help to achieve greater equality for all via various evaluation means, such as equity- and gender-focused evaluation, indigenous evaluation or participant-led evaluation. For example, the 2019 VNR for Tonga reported the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework relating to the SDGs. This framework includes specific sections for each group of people at risk of being left behind. Each section includes the identification of actions to reduce this risk for each population and potential barriers to action.⁷²

70 United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015, pg. 38 paragraph 79.

71 [Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](#), 2018.

72 Kingdom of Tonga, *Voluntary National Review 2019*.

EVALUATION SYSTEMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNTRY OWNERSHIP

Evaluation systems require country ownership and leadership “champions”. This involves: (1) country leaders understanding and supporting evaluation; (2) all key stakeholders gathered together, including government, parliamentarians, civil society, the private sector and development support agencies; (3) assessing capacities; (4) identifying gaps; and (5) developing action plans, including agreement on responsibilities and resources.

A national evaluation system is a system “in which evaluation is a regular part of the life cycle of public policies and programmes, it is conducted in a methodologically rigorous and systematic manner in which its results are used by political decision makers and managers, and those results are also made available to the public.”⁷³

National evaluation systems are characterized by the following:⁷⁴

- The presence of evaluation in political, administrative and social discourse
- A need for consensus on what evaluation is, what type of knowledge is produced and how evaluations should be conducted
- An evaluation agenda/plan with organizational responsibility
- Integrating the SDGs into national evaluation plans

IMPORTANCE OF EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Identifying existing data and utilizing quality evidence was a key message reinforced during the workshop. Evaluation is important in order to achieve better decision-making and stronger accountability, improve/transform performance and generate knowledge. Evidence is required to inform local, national, cross-boundary and global decision-making to achieve better solutions in pursuing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Evidence matters in evaluation as it helps us identify the C-A-U-S-E of initiatives that are working or not working well. The process of gathering evidence is an important part of a national evaluation system. The following mnemonic helps us to remember the important steps required in building and using evidence:

73 Lazaro, Blanca, Comparative study on the institutionalisation of evaluation in Europe and Latin America, EUROsocial Programme, Madrid, 2015, pg. 16.

74 Clear/UNICEF presentation ‘Orientation to Countries on Evidence-Based VNRs’, Addis Ababa, 11-12 December 2018.

- **C:** Collect data
- **A:** Analyse data
- **U:** Use findings
- **S:** System-based thinking
- **E:** Evaluation of what is working well or not to generate recommendations

Evidence is data that is independent, objective, verifiable and valid. It holds both internal validity (has scientific credibility) and external validity (has contextual relevance of data), and can be quantitative and qualitative. Strong evidence is to be drawn from multiple sources and cross-analysed, and will thus speak for itself.

An important distinction was made between evidence and opinion. Evidence is NOT opinion and therefore is not subjective (“I think...”), partial (“In my situation...”) or difficult to verify.⁷⁵

Evidence is readily available through various sources. Data may be found in quantitative, qualitative or combined sources, and can either be primary (e.g., surveys, financial data, expert knowledge, focus groups etc.) or secondary (e.g., published research, statistical data, peer-reviewed articles, published policy papers, etc.).⁷⁶ What is important is focusing on analysis and finding the missing pieces.

Both quantitative and qualitative evidence have strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, assessing the quality of various evidence data sets is required for evaluations. The following questions should be considered when assessing evidence quality:

- Accuracy – to what extent is the data that are present accurate? What biases may be present?
- Completeness – how complete is the data set? How much missing data is there?
- Timeliness – when was the data collected? Is this sufficiently recent to still be relevant?
- Coverage – which population/area is missing?
- Accessibility – who has access to the data? Who controls this access?
- Confidentiality – can individuals be identified from the data?
- Ethics – personal data may only be used for the purposes for which it was collected.

75 Clear/UNICEF presentation ‘Orientation to Countries on Evidence-Based VNRs’, Addis Ababa. 11-12 December 2018.

76 Ibid.

IMPORTANCE OF EMBEDDING EVIDENCE IN VNRs

The workshop emphasized the importance of considering evaluation as an integral part of the VNR process. A checklist of activities to consider is:

- Entry points for incorporating evidence in the VNRs
- Diagnosing
- Planning
- Informing implementation
- Assessing outcomes and impact
- Learning
- Timing

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE EVALUATION IN VNRs

Some countries have already begun incorporating VNRs in their evaluation practice and lead as examples of good practice evaluation.

AZERBAIJAN

The Baku Forum on Sustainable Development was held in Baku, Azerbaijan in October 2018. The main objectives of the Forum were to share lessons learned and best practices gained by countries in and around the region, which can contribute to tracking, evaluation and monitoring of implementation plans and strategies developed with a view to achieving the SDGs. The discussions and studies conducted have shown a need for Azerbaijan to expand the coverage and depth of the national information systems relating to the SDGs, improve their coordination by enhancing logistical and human capacities and software support, and develop evaluation capacity.

BELIZE

The Belize VNR utilizes earlier evaluation findings to assess the current situation for cash transfer programmes, gender equality and fisheries/marine management.

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia emphasizes the value of learning through monitoring and evaluation and has conducted a national review of performance against the Millennium Development Goals. This has fed into the preparation of Ethiopia's national agenda for the SDGs.

GHANA

In Ghana, the SDG Implementation Coordination Committee has been established with the intention to strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships in implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The Technical Committee is responsible for ensuring integration of the SDGs into development plans, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the SDGs in the various sectors. Studies will be conducted to assess the impact of SDG-related interventions and inform future strategic actions and interventions, with a midterm evaluation to be conducted in 2024.

GUYANA

The SDG Indicator Collection and Assessment Tool developed by the Government required that the Ministry of Finance, as the hub for the National Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy, validate each indicator submitted. This strategy is undergoing an end-term evaluation and preparation of the next sector plan will be framed within the principles of the Green State Development Strategy: Vision 2040.

KENYA

The Kenyan Government has studied the period of 2000–2015 to assess progress against the Millennium Development Goals and to document the experiences, challenges and lessons learned. This study has informed the new medium-term plan and the road map for implementing the SDGs.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan has instituted monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes that are critical for supporting SDG implementation and strengthened collaboration with development partners, civil society organizations, think tanks, academia and the private sector. Its SDG Framework sets baselines and targets for the SDG M&E Framework including localization to provinces.

TONGA

Tonga has an M&E framework for the SDGs, and a tracking database linked to planning and budgeting. These have separate sections for each category of “people left behind”, with special actions identified.

However, evaluation is still not sufficiently used as a powerful process to understand the critical aspects facing each country in relation to the SDGs. Participants that have prepared more than one VNR noted that they are already putting additional effort into gathering evidence and making VNRs more analytical. This is seen as improving

the value of the VNR process and is stimulating further action to improve progress. It is hoped that future VNRs will place more emphasis on the potential of evaluation for understanding the causes of national challenges and as a means to improve and accelerate progress.

SUCCESSFUL EVALUATION

Successful evaluations not only support better performance, but also contribute towards “transforming our world” through better decisions and systems.

A successful evaluation should be stakeholder-owned, inclusive, systems-oriented, credible (including independent, unbiased, referenced and valid sources), useful (including relevant, realistic recommendations, timely, right format for use) and transparent (clear methods, good communication, published results).

The success of an evaluation depends on certain success factors. These are:

1. Users and stakeholders should be involved and consulted throughout the evaluation process.
2. The support of senior decision makers is key, as is their commitment to the implementation of the recommendations.
3. Evaluators need to ensure that recommendations are feasible and relevant.
4. Independent evaluations must attempt to capture organizational realities.
5. Management responses and follow-up processes must take place and be adequately supported.
6. The sharing of findings enables cross-organizational learning and use.⁷⁷

EVALUATION TYPES

There are many types of evaluations and it is important to consider the best options/combination for the specific evaluation questions. Some notable types include:

- Diagnostic review: What is the underlying situation and root causes of the problem?
- Design evaluation/evaluability assessment: Is the theory of change/programme logic strong?

77 United Nations Evaluation Group Working Paper: Evaluation Use in the UN System: Conclusions from the Data, 2016.

- Project/programme evaluation outcomes, policy evaluation: What is happening and why?
- (Social) return on investment analysis/impact investing: What are the cost benefits?
- Impact evaluation: Has the intervention had impact at outcome and impact levels, and why?
- Development/process evaluation: What approach is most effective?

CONCLUSION

It is important to strengthen national evaluation systems to ensure continuous sharing of challenges, successes and lessons learned, enhanced capacity-building, strengthened policies and institutions and increased progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Evaluation systems should be country-led and country-owned to make certain that evaluation practices respond to country needs and become a continued aspect of public policies and programmes. Identifying existing data and utilizing quality evidence are vital when making decisions relating to national evaluation systems, and such evaluations should be integral to the VNR process. Several countries such as Belize, Kenya, Pakistan and Tonga already incorporate good practice evaluation in VNRs and demonstrate how other nations can do the same. Successful evaluations depend on a multitude of success factors, such as focusing on a priority national issue, ensuring quality evidence gathering, engaging multiple stakeholders and communicating evaluation results widely. There are various evaluation types that allow for customized evaluation approaches to respond to specific evaluation questions that can contribute to improved progress towards the SDGs.

Following these key messages, workshop participants were encouraged to consider what the required next steps are for strengthening high-quality evidence generation in their own countries and how they personally can advocate for and influence the enhancement of evidence gathering and evaluation in their VNR processes.