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Policy pointers

Every nation needs a national sustainable development M&E policy giving evaluation a clear role and focusing on cause and effect, vulnerable populations and environments, and stakeholders' responsibilities.

The United Nations Evaluation Group could help develop a standard requirement for all countries' Voluntary National Reviews to explain what role their M&E system plays in reviewing progress towards the SDGs.

The evaluation community must convince senior politicians that evaluation is useful and needed, so that responsible authorities integrate quantitative and qualitative evaluation into their national reporting systems.

Evaluation adds meaning and depth to conclusions about SDG achievements. Up-to-date evaluation findings and an assessment of progress on National Evaluation Policies and Systems should be included in each Voluntary National Review.

Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs' first set of Voluntary National Reviews

At the 2016 UN High Level Political Forum, 22 countries presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) — status reports on their efforts to implement national-level follow-up and review frameworks for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VNRs are meant to cover the status of the 17 SDGs in each reporting country and to provide an overview of processes planned to assess national progress towards them. This briefing reports on a review of the 22 VNRs, which focused on how each addressed the role of evaluation. It found that most VNRs show little awareness about just what evaluation is and how it could be used to support the 2030 Agenda. Many more countries will soon be presenting their VNRs. The recommendations presented here can strengthen and improve future reporting on VNRs.

Signatories to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have committed to developing Voluntary National Review frameworks (VNRs). These are intended to track implementation of the Agenda up to 2030, promote accountability to citizens, foster exchanges of best practices across countries and support mutual learning. They are to be robust, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated.

The 2030 Agenda spells out key principles for constructing national reviews: "They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by *country-led evaluations* [our emphasis] 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…".[1]

The inclusion of *country-led evaluations* clearly implies that countries need to develop appropriate national monitoring and evaluation systems as part of their follow-up and review frameworks.

In 2016, the first countries delivered reports on their VNRs.[2] According to UN guidelines,[3] these reports were to provide "information on the process for preparation of the national review… including, for example, how different levels and sectors of government contributed to the review, whether parliaments were engaged, whether national evaluation/oversight institutions contributed, how stakeholders from civil society, academia and the business sector were involved, which consultations took place, and possibly whether another Member State or institutions contributed to the review, etc."

This briefing examines how evaluation was discussed within this first round of VNRs reporting and recommends ways for the next batch of VNRs to 'put more E into M&E'.

Voluntary National Reviews and their role

The VNRs are part of a series of documents designed to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Other key documents that the UN requests of countries are the National Sustainability Strategy, updated and adapted to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a National Action Plan for implementing the SDGs. VNRs are supposed to give an up-to-date overview of the implementation process, and provide some baseline facts and information about the status of the SDGs in each reporting country.

Most of the reports lack detail about how evaluation could be used to inform the reporting processes

In July 2016, 22 pioneer countries — six African, five Asian, eight European and three Latin American states — presented reports on their respective VNRs at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the United Nations' central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. In 2017, a second group of 44 states promised to follow (see Figure 1). And in 2018 and 2019, more than 50 countries will be presenting their VNRs (however, some important states, including Australia, Canada, Russia, South Africa, the UK and the US, have not yet announced any plans for reporting on their VNRs). Given these timetables, an early examination of the first VNRs is an opportunity to help other countries get the most from the process.

Assessing the VNRs

We have examined how the 22 reports discussed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) using the following five criteria, which were chosen for their comparability between the different VNRs, their suitability to be assessed by a large team and their capacity to identify the main features of M&E systems:

- Explicit reference to M&E keywords: assessment, evaluation, effectiveness, relevance, efficiency, accountability, efficacy, indicators, monitoring, follow-up, impact, logical framework and performance. The number of hits were tracked in the documents. This helped to assess the use of keywords associated to monitoring as compared with keywords associated with evaluation.

- Evidence of an established reporting system for progress towards the SDGs (a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the action plan, including scheduling, tools, organisation of responsibilities and deliverables). This is a crucial part of implementing M&E.

- Evidence of a methodological framework for M&E that does not rely solely on a list of indicators for the 17 SDGs (ie monitoring), but also incorporates *evaluation* methods and procedures (for a discussion of this distinction, see the briefing *Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success*).[4]

- Evidence that evaluation is integrated into the follow-up and review system. In looking for this, we also examined how the system is managed/governed and its stated purpose (accountability, improvement of development policies, etc). These two aspects show whether evaluation has been given a clear role.

- Evidence of a governance framework for M&E (through ministries, agencies, committees and involving civil society). We chose this criterion because a governance framework is a key issue for accountability and legitimacy of M&E.
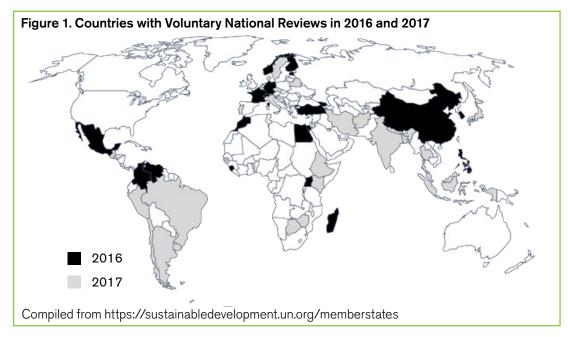
A limitation of our review is that the 2016 VNRs were the first ever released, so may not yet reflect mature plans for tracking how countries implement the 2030 Agenda. A more complete description of follow-up and review frameworks for SDGs may exist in other documents that were not reviewed. Nevertheless, these first VNRs forge concepts about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and thus the role devoted to M&E. They also represent the main reporting instrument to the HLPF.

Building on what's already there

Our research found most countries will rely on their existing M&E systems for reviewing progress. These systems are often linked to sustainable development systems derived during the 'Rio process' (following on from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio in 1992, and including adoption of 'Agenda 21' and creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development, among landmark actions) and associated with a National Sustainability Strategy (developed for the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002). Alternatively, they may be linked to 'Millennium Development Systems', derived during the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) process since 2000. Moreover, many countries already have a high level 'National Plan' and have linked their SDG reporting to the system driving this national development strategy.

Very few of the reporting countries are considering developing a specific M&E system for SDGs. An interesting case is Norway, which intends to link SDGs to its budgeting process. However, the reporting system is not detailed in Norway's VNR.

In fact, the variability in countries' M&E governance systems largely reflects what was already put in

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Figure 1. Countries with Voluntary National Reviews in 2016 and 2017

2016
2017

Compiled from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates

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place for the MDGs (for those countries that implemented the MDGs) and whether or not the country had an established high level development strategy. Nonetheless, some countries have been proactive in assessing gaps. For example in Montenegro, various stakeholders, including civil society representatives, have been reviewing the existing reporting system that tracks the National Strategy for Sustainable Development. Similarly, Finland has conducted a gap analysis to identify how ready and relevant its policies are to achieving the global SDG targets at the local level.

One advantage of linking SDG reporting to existing M&E systems is that it should simplify the process and make it function more rapidly. On the other hand, the potential disadvantage is that SDGs that are not closely related to established strategies or plans may receive limited M&E.

Governance

Of the 22 countries, 16 have already established a governance system for M&E at the president/ prime minister level or at a ministry level. In eight countries, inter-ministerial agencies coordinate exchanges between ministries. Many countries have implemented Special National Sustainable Development Committees to consult, guide or oversee the 2030 Agenda process. These institutions often include civil society organisations and people from the private sector.

At this stage, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about how the governance system's place in a country's political hierarchy will affect its performance and/or the balance between M&E. But it seems reasonable to assume that involvement of higher levels of government implies strong commitment to delivering relevant information about the implementation of the 2030

Agenda. However, in almost all national reports, it was not entirely clear how the proposed M&E system would support implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches

The reports mostly discuss quantitative methods and indicators. Our keywords analysis revealed that terms associated with monitoring and indicators are mentioned about three times more often than terms associated with evaluation. Many countries noted that they lacked data and need to improve their statistical reporting system if they are to use monitoring to help implement the 2030 Agenda. Others highlight how, in many cases, progress simply cannot be measured with quantitative indicators. Only two reports (Finland and Morocco) refer to qualitative data. Most of the reports lack detail about how evaluation could be used to inform the reporting processes.

Evaluation is underplayed

In most VNRs, the term 'evaluation' is not clearly defined and its use is ambiguous. We found little discussion of evaluation's purpose. Four countries' reports (those for Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Samoa and Uganda) refer to evaluation (as distinct from monitoring), are more specific about the reasons why evaluation should be carried out and intend to use evaluation for assessing regular progress. However, even these are not linking it into monitoring. In other reports, the two terms appear to carry the same meaning. In the Finnish report, evaluation has a clear mandate to assess the performance of Finland in terms of partnership and development cooperation. However, there was no mention of using evaluation to assess Finland's national performance against the goals.

There appears to be very little awareness about just what evaluation is and how it could be used to support the 2030 Agenda — for example how it can help decision makers understand complex contexts, how it can support management that adapts to changing circumstances, and how it can strengthen the policy coherence between sectors and/or between actions undertaken by different types of stakeholders (local authorities, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), businesses, etc). Even those countries with an existing evaluation culture (France, Germany and Switzerland) have not yet seized the opportunity to widen their evaluation practice to build stronger national M&E systems for the SDGs.

Recommendations

However, there is still time to 'put more E into M&E'. From our analysis, we make the following recommendations to enhance future VNRs and perhaps even help revise the 22 'forerunners'. These recommendations draw on evaluation's potential to add meaning and depth to assessments of SDG achievements:

1. The evaluation community should further develop activities to convince senior politicians that evaluation is useful and needed, and thus that national evaluation policies for the 2030 Agenda should be designed.

2. VNRs should make clear that macro indicators have limits when it comes to assessing the specific contributions of policies designed to help reach the SDGs. VNRs should also be clear on evaluation's role as an essential complement to indicators when judging the effects of policies and attributing these to implemented measures.

3. VNRs should complement the focus on quantitative indicators with more qualitative methodologies. This is an opportunity to include different data sources and tools for analysing and reporting progress.

4. Countries should organise evaluation processes from now to 2030 through VNRs and their 2030 Agenda National Action Plans, using a four-year pattern that fits the HLPF's thematic cycle and focusing on three main aspects:

   a. Assessing causes and effects in complex and interdependent systems by looking at what has changed, for whom, how and why

   b. Paying attention to vulnerable populations and environments

   c. Assessing the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders through a 'co-responsibility lens', ie taking an approach that expects sustainable development strategies to be co-designed and co-implemented by all stakeholders (public, private, NGOs and citizens).

5. There should be a standard requirement for all countries to explain in their VNR what role their M&E system plays in reviewing progress towards the SDGs. The United Nations Evaluation Group could help develop this, just as the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators did for the indicators.

6. As the SDGS are strongly interlinked, it is crucial to both avoid counterproductive interactions between different objectives and targets (ie ensure internal coherence), and to reinforce synergies between stakeholders (external coherence). VNRs should strongly focus on building an interlinked picture at national and local levels. For example, VNRs should link reporting procedures used by the different stakeholders, such as corporate and social responsibility reports made by private companies, ISO 26000 reports published mainly by local authorities, and sustainable development strategy analysis carried out by ministries and local communities. Extra tools to observe this coherence (or the lack of it) should be devised in the VNRs.

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Notes

[1] United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1). New York, USA. / [2] Voluntary National Reviews released in 2016: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf / [3] United Nations General Assembly (2016) A/70/684. Proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF as presented in the annex of the Secretary-General's report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf / [4] Schwandt, T et al. (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17357IIED

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