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Policy pointers

National evaluation systems need to be grounded in a philosophy and practice of evaluation that is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals' interconnected nature.

Taking a 'complex systems' perspective on development is particularly useful for attending to this interrelated nature.

Lessons from the Millennium Development Goal era show that taking this perspective early on will enhance national evaluation systems as well as development results.

Five considerations can help resource-constrained countries to set national evaluation agendas and maximise the value of evaluation: thinking beyond single policies, programmes and projects; examining macro forces influencing success or failure; having a nuanced understanding of 'success'; recognising the importance of culture; and adopting evaluative thinking and adaptive management.

Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informed by the SDGs

Each country sets its own national agenda and strategy within the broad contours of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet the Agenda gives little explicit guidance on how to do this. However, there is a perspective on development that offers direction. This perspective views development through a 'complex systems' lens. It is consistent with the 2030 Agenda because it considers development as a holistic, integrated, multifaceted and context-sensitive process that has diverse means and ends, and is intimately tied to sustainability. This briefing summarises five aspects of this perspective that emerged as important lessons for evaluation during the Millennium Development Goals era, and discusses their implications for national evaluation agendas that support countries' achievement of the SDGs. It is the third in a collection of briefings discussing the role of evaluation in achieving the SDGs.

National evaluation systems and the Sustainable Development Goals

National governments seeking to evaluate ongoing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) find little guidance in the 2030 Agenda. It encourages governments to create national follow-up and review processes, but has little to say about the priorities and issues that should shape evaluation agendas. Complementary reports[1,2] advocate voluntary national and regional reviews, yet do not venture beyond general references to annual thematic reviews and the need to assess implementation, to base budgeting on evidence, to ensure equity and gender-responsiveness in line with the 'no one left behind' commitment, and to identify gaps, deficits and successes.

However, guidance for national evaluation agendas and systems can be found in a particular concept of development that is aligned with thinking about complex systems[3] and that recognises the 17 SDGs' interconnected nature. This concept has implications for decisions about what is to be evaluated and how that is done, how success and failure are judged, and how evaluation knowledge is to be used. Some of the main aspects of this 'complex systems' concept of development are outlined in Box 1.

National evaluation agendas should reflect the issues that each country deems the most important in its development priorities and strategies. Nevertheless, we know from experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that failing to view development from a complex systems perspective leads to weaknesses in national development planning and evaluation systems.[4] Therefore, to avoid re-introducing these weaknesses, this briefing urges early attention to the following five

guiding considerations when setting national evaluation agendas.

Guiding considerations for national evaluation agendas

National evaluation agendas should reflect the issues that each country deems the most important

The five considerations discussed here bring together the conceptualisation of development from a complex systems perspective with selected MDG-era lessons for evaluation that highlight some of the problems arising when this perspective is not taken.[4] The lessons also focus on weaknesses that might not be immediately apparent and hence might continue to be overlooked. Attention to these five considerations can strengthen national evaluation agendas and help maximise the value of evaluation in resource-constrained countries.

1. Think beyond individual policies, programmes and projects. Evaluations at national policy level tend to target specific interventions: usually a single policy or the programmes and projects through which a policy or strategy comes to life in a particular sector. It is essential to evaluate the design, implementation and impact of important interventions. Yet the integrated, interconnected nature of development means that the value of evaluating single interventions may be limited. When evaluation agendas are grounded in a complex systems understanding of development, they attend to more than just one intervention in and of itself. Instead, they examine issues that cut across policies, strategies and sectors.

Such issues frequently relate to policy or strategy coherence and alignment. For example, different goals, such as those enabling energy-efficient human settlements or improving the wellbeing of smallholder farmers, may be interconnected. Here, tracking inter-policy outcomes and impacts may add value and help guide development efforts.

It is also important to assess whether the achievement and timing of progress towards interrelated goals and targets are 'in line' for achieving the desired overall development. For example, there is little use in increasing rural production if sufficient and sustainable markets are not yet available, or if the infrastructure needed to get products to market cannot cope with the new supply. Similarly, where a national focus on technological innovation, increased productivity and efficiency leads to fewer workers being required, sufficient numbers and types of alternative jobs have to be created and supported by training programmes. This is further discussed in a recent publication that sets out a useful framework for understanding the interactions between the SDGs.[5]

Other cross-cutting aspects important for evaluation may relate to the design of development interventions. For example, evaluations can determine the extent to which strategies or programmes were designed to allow potential synergies to emerge during the implementation phase. Or, evaluations may determine whether a set of policies or strategies work together sufficiently to address the root causes of a particular social problem.

Evaluations can examine processes and mechanisms critical for successful policy implementation — for example, the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy coordinating mechanisms between government departments, or the impact of power asymmetries between organisations or national institutions. Evaluations may also look at themes such as governance, gender or equity for interrelated factors that may influence and determine success across sectors.

2. Examine macro forces influencing success and failure. If done well, evaluation can show 'what' has been achieved, 'how', 'when', 'among/by/for whom', 'at what cost' (tangible and intangible) and 'under what circumstances' (see also other briefings in this collection[6,7]). In order to answer such questions, evaluation agendas must carefully consider political, economic, ideological, environmental, socio-cultural and technological circumstances that affect the success or failure of a policy, strategy, programme, institution, project and so on.

Lessons from the MDG era show how important it is to actively search for often-overlooked

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Box 1. Thinking about development as a 'complex system'

Thinking about development as a complex system means recognising and ensuring the following features (among others):

- Development policies and strategies are holistic and integrated, and development goals, challenges, solutions and so on are therefore interconnected

- The impacts of development strategies and interventions are often felt across national borders and are, in turn, influenced by trans-boundary dynamics

- Differences between countries (eg in terms of development's context, trajectories and responsibilities) mean development planners as well as evaluators must recognise a diversity of development models, approaches and measures of success

- Development is highly context-sensitive. Patterns in a society's behaviour are influenced by interactions between its culture, the environment and its socio-economic trajectory

- Strategies and interventions unfold in non-linear, emergent, largely unpredictable ways that cannot be controlled through rigid plans nor fitted into fixed results frameworks.

influences on development in the macro environment. Examples of influences that have had a detrimental effect on development over the past decade are summarised in Box 2. A large number of these forces are influenced by power relationships and asymmetries between and within countries, sectors or institutions. This confirms that the role and influence of power in development interventions presents an important focus for evaluation.

3. Take into account multiple definitions and measures of 'success'. Claims of development success (or failure) can be misleading. Even if an intervention or strategy achieves prescribed goals or targets, these could have been set unrealistically low (or high), or might have been developed without sufficient consideration of stakeholders' perspectives on what 'success' looks like.

It is therefore important to use evaluation not only to determine outcomes and impacts, but also to establish how well such 'success' has been conceived, defined and measured in the first place. To do this, national evaluation agendas must consider the following:

- *Look for multiple perspectives on what constitutes 'success'.* If development planners and funders demand rigid goal and target setting, they risk encouraging the establishment of over- or under-ambitious plans, or even unethical practices to satisfy unrealistic expectations. Plans need flexibility to account for learning or changes in circumstances. Stakeholders often also have varying perspectives on the merit and value of development outcomes and impacts. Blindly working with the expected outcomes and impacts of an intervention can easily mean that unintended consequences, in particular negative outcomes and impacts, are missed.[8] These may undermine what is regarded as success. For example, if an imported mono-culture crop with high nutritional and commercial value replaces hardy indigenous staples in a drought-prone region, increased production and farmer incomes might be short-lived. Empowering women without addressing local values and customs might have the unintended consequence of perpetuating violence against the same women. Definitions of an intervention's success therefore need to be informed by experiences and perspectives on the ground, as well as by a national vision of development.

- *Sustainability also means designing, implementing and evaluating for long-term impact.* Evaluations should investigate systematically whether the design and implementation of an intervention has given

enough attention to ensuring its ideas, models or benefits will be sustained in some or other form. A programme with benefits that do not persist after it has ended can hardly be regarded as a success, unless such benefits contribute to other emergent positive outcomes. So it is crucial to recognise that evaluating impact has to involve assessing the longevity of effects. It is also important to assess and learn more about whether, why and how positive impacts have been sustained, or have transformed and contributed to emerging outcomes. This approach requires evaluations at suitable intervals both during interventions and after they have ended.

- *Ensure monitoring systems have credible measures of success.* Monitoring systems must themselves be evaluated to ensure that success is appropriately measured. Baselines must be established as credible, indicator quality must be confirmed, and data collection and analysis must be sufficiently nuanced to ensure 'no one is left behind'. For example, the challenges and cost involved in getting interventions to very isolated communities can severely influence the quality of both services and monitoring data. Evaluations of monitoring systems should draw attention to such challenges. Evaluation should particularly guard against preoccupation with 'easy to reach' and 'easy to measure' targets that might lead to distortions. For example, when aiming to provide equitable quality education, the free and equitable access part is much easier to measure than the quality of education or the relevance and effectiveness of learning outcomes. But

evidence on both aspects is required for good evaluation. Furthermore, despite Agenda 2030's emphasis on context-sensitive, country-led targets and plans, the competition triggered by global indexes might tempt some countries to set their performance bar quite low. Measures that are consistent from national to global level are needed to calculate the minimum level and type of achievement expected per country. National planning authorities have to ensure and advocate for realistic yardsticks. Evaluation can assist in this process.

4. Recognise the importance of culture. The 2030 Agenda frequently refers to the importance of context in development. It says nations have to determine their own development path with the knowledge of their own particular circumstances. However, it fails to give the same recognition to culture.

A society's culture is composed of its ways of perception, underlying assumptions, and beliefs and values as embedded and reflected in people's behaviour, in their symbols, memes and rituals, and in their social and political institutions. Cultural beliefs, values and behaviours evolve over time as the context of the society changes. This has a deep effect on the patterns of societal behaviour, including on the disposition of a society towards change and therefore on how development unfolds. In turn, a development intervention can shape culture, especially when the intervention challenges some of the most enduring, deeply rooted dimensions of that culture.

National evaluation agendas should therefore promote a focus on culture, and consider its influence when designing, implementing and evaluating development policies and plans. The field of evaluation is increasingly aware of the need for culturally competent evaluators, and the importance of incorporating cultural awareness and cultural responsiveness in evaluation design and methods.[9,10]

The challenge of engaging effectively with culture is especially great in multicultural societies or where an intervention interacts with practices in distinctly different cultures. In such cases,

in-depth work with each cultural group is seldom possible. A national effort may be required to identify those core dimensions of a society that remain constant even when contexts change. Local citizens and experts are best placed to do this. It is essential to prepare frameworks and toolkits that explain concepts, options and methods. Evaluators' competencies in assessing cultural influences must also be strengthened.

5. Shift towards evaluative thinking and adaptive management. Viewing development from a complex systems perspective requires a shift away from relying on 'predict-and-act' decision making and exclusively results-based management. Instead, robust adaptive governance and management approaches that emphasise flexibility must be embraced.[11] This approach to governance and management requires a focus on evaluative thinking and on developing capacities that can accommodate continuous cycles of experimentation, enable evidence-informed learning, and adjust strategies and actions. Its power lies in shifting stakeholders' attention to 'learning by doing', dealing with challenges as they arise and making improvements or changing direction before too many resources have been wasted.

All five of the guiding considerations discussed above can strengthen national evaluation agendas, but this last consideration is perhaps the most powerful. The next briefing in this collection will therefore focus on how evaluative thinking and adaptive management can shape national evaluation systems.

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Notes

[1] United Nations Development Group (2016) Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Reference Guide to UN Country Teams. https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/UNDG-Mainstreaming-the-2030-Agenda-Reference-Guide-Final-1-February-2016.pdf / [2] Report of the UN Secretary-General (2016) Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level (A/70/684). 15 January 2016. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/8917SAMOA(2).pdf / [3] Ramalingam, B (2013) Aid on the Edge of Chaos. Oxford University Press. / [4] Ofir, Z (2016) Throwing down the gauntlet: lessons that challenge evaluation in the SDG era. In: *Blending Evaluation Principles with Development Practices to Change People's Lives. Conference Proceedings.* Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities, 26–30 October 2015, Bangkok, Thailand. http://web.undp.org/evaluation/nec/nec2015_proceedings.shtml / [5] Nilsson, M *et al.* (2016) A draft framework for understanding SDG interactions. International Council for Science (ICSU), June 2016. www.icsu.org/publications/reports-and-reviews/working-paper-framework-for-understanding-sdg-interactions-2016/SDG-interactions-working-paper.pdf / [6] Schwandt, T *et al.* (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17357IIED / [7] Lucks, D *et al.* (2016) Counting critically: SDG 'follow-up and review' needs interlinked indicators, monitoring and evaluation. IIED, London. pubs.iied.org/17363IIED / [8] Bamberger, M *et al.* (2016) Why so many "rigorous" evaluations fail to identify unintended consequences of development programs: How mixed methods can contribute. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 55, 155–162. / [9] Hood, S *et al.* (2015) Continuing the journey to reposition culture and cultural context in evaluation theory and practice. Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC, USA. / [10] CJPE (2016) *Special Edition of the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 30(3) doi:10.3138/cjpe.30.3.02. / [11] Mitchell, S (2009) Unsimple Truths: Science, Complexity, and Policy. University of Chicago Press. / [12] Schwab K (2016) The Fourth Industrial Revolution. World Economic Forum.