Briefing

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Policy pointers

Designers of evaluations can draw on the 2030 Agenda's goals and principles to assess national policies, plans and programmes through a sustainable development lens.

Evaluators can use the 2030 Agenda framework to engage stakeholders in the evaluation process, generating learning for planning and decision making.

Using the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda as evaluation criteria will help evaluators identify unexpected or overlooked aspects of progress towards sustainable development

Concepts from the SDGs can help evaluators to develop and negotiate with stakeholders evaluation questions aimed at assessing sustainable development progress and outcomes.

Evaluating sustainable development: how the 2030 Agenda can help

As countries increasingly commit to sustainable development pathways, they need approaches that assess the sustainability dimension of national policies and interventions, including their contribution to multiple sustainable development aims. Previous briefings have discussed the importance of evaluation in 2030 Agenda national follow-up and review processes. This briefing looks at how the 2030 Agenda and its goals can provide a sustainable development framing for a broader range of national evaluation efforts. Key issues examined are: assessing how well national policies, programmes and projects fit with one another and across the SDGs; the value of the goals in stimulating policy-oriented learning from evaluation; and how aspects of the Agenda can be integrated into evaluation criteria and questions.

Support for the concept of sustainable development has grown steadily over the past several decades. With the United Nations' ratification of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, virtually every country has accepted sustainable development as the prevailing global development paradigm.

Sustainable development differs from other development paradigms largely in recognising that social, environmental and economic dimensions of development are interconnected, and that any human action has intergenerational impacts, whether positive or negative. Sustainable development evaluation thus differs from other types of evaluation because it requires evaluators to assess how interventions in one domain or sector affect others ('policy coherence'), and to assess the factors that contribute to a policy or intervention's expected or unexpected impacts.

Development practitioners have recognised the need for a 'sustainability-ready' approach to evaluation[1] for more than 20 years,[2] but integrating sustainable development concepts and principles into evaluation has remained the exception rather than the norm.

Recently though, the pace has sped up. In ratifying the 2030 Agenda, countries have pledged to report to one another on national progress towards the goals through periodic Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented at annual UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which are meant to be rigorous, evidence-based and "informed by country-led evaluations".[3] The evaluation community has responded with a range of guidance materials, including the previous ten briefings in this series (available from the IIED and EVALSDGs websites).[4,5] The UN system also offers capacity support to countries wishing to undertake SDG evaluations.

In March 2019, evaluators, evaluation users and practitioners from around the world met in Helsinki, under the auspices of EVALSDGs, UNICEF, the Government of Finland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IIED, to share early learning on SDG evaluation. Those present at the retreat concluded that SDG evaluation must serve needs beyond VNRs, including:

The 2030 Agenda provides a universally accepted vocabulary for describing sustainable development

• Helping align national policy with the overarching aims and principles of the 2030 Agenda

• Supporting countries to generate national SDG roadmaps, tailored to their specific contexts and priority goals

• Generating learning on what works, and what does not, that can feed into sustainable development policy and planning processes

• Providing a space for informed policy discussion around an SDG evaluation's findings and recommendations.

Those present at the retreat also identified some features of the 2030 Agenda that could make evaluation generally more attuned to sustainable development. This briefing examines some of those features and their practical application in the context of national evaluation systems and efforts.

Giving national M&E plans a sustainable development orientation

Given its comprehensive and visionary nature, and the broad global consensus around it, the 2030 Agenda provides a universally accepted vocabulary for describing sustainable development. As such, it provides an opportunity to strengthen systems, enhance synergy between sectors and improve multi-stakeholder decision making.

One of the greatest challenges for countries in adopting a sustainable development approach is entrenched 'sectoral silos' within government structures.[6] Evaluation employing a sustainable development perspective can help reveal unforeseen outcomes (both negative and positive) affecting policy domains beyond the intended focus. For example, an agricultural programme promoting a new crop could unintentionally undermine governmental policies aimed at protecting biodiversity.

The VNRs show that many countries have mapped the SDGs and their targets against national policy frameworks to assess their fit with one another. These exercises look at coherence of policies, implementation systems, plans and programmes with the 2030 Agenda's goals and principles. Ideally, they should also examine internal coherence between the different national policy structure levels, in order to avoid 'disconnects' that can bring unintended consequences.

This type of policy mapping can provide a foundation for developing a national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan informed by the SDGs. Such a plan would: identify priority areas for evaluation based on SDG alignment; allocate the resources needed; and establish mechanisms to feed back the evaluation findings at relevant levels of the policy structure.

Figure 1 illustrates how national policy can be linked to, and informed by, an evaluation plan aligned to the 2030 Agenda. The left side shows different levels of national policy and reform agendas. The right side shows the analogous components of a 2030 Agenda national evaluation plan.

These SDG-informed M&E plans and systems are not only fit for national SDG evaluations but also for evaluating individual policies and programmes through a sustainable development lens.

Enhancing evaluation's learning function

Evaluations aimed at informing policy and practice must, by definition, have a learning function. Learning is particularly crucial when key stakeholders include decision makers and other senior government actors who will be both involved in developing the findings and recommendations, and responsible for following them up (for an example, see Box 1).

These key government actors are essential to national progress on the SDGs, but they may

Figure 1. Integrating the SDGs into national evaluation plans
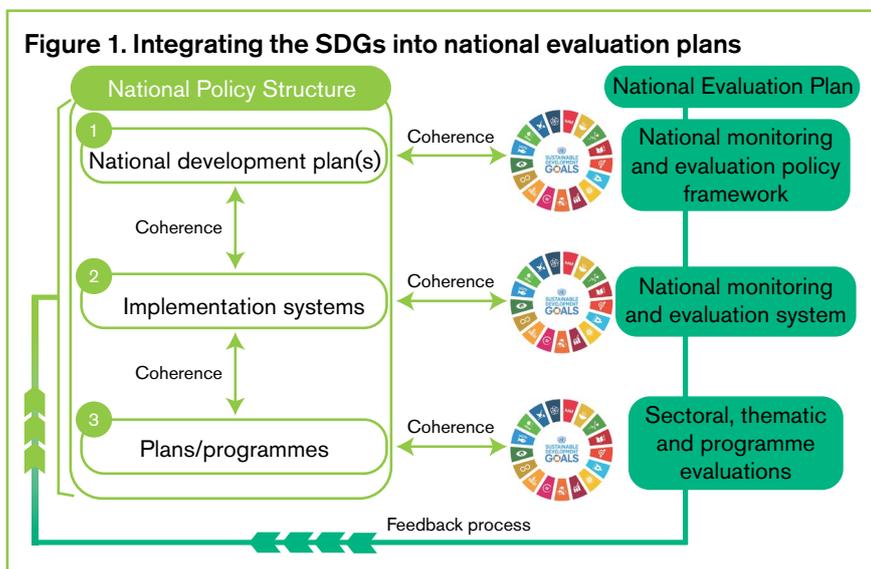
have a limited knowledge of the key concepts of sustainable development.

Furthermore, the right and responsibility of stakeholders to be meaningfully involved in processes and decisions that affect them is a central precept of sustainable development, and is strongly reflected in the 2030 Agenda. Ongoing stakeholder involvement in evaluation processes respects that precept, creating a space for shared learning on sustainable development's multiple dimensions and on the diverse ways that different stakeholders may be affected. It also helps evaluators uncover the range of perspectives and understandings among policy makers, policy implementers and other stakeholders, about a sustainable development policy's (or programme's) purpose and objectives.

Thus in the context of the SDGs, participatory evaluation is "an educational process through which social groups produce action-oriented knowledge about their reality, clarify and articulate their norms and values, and reach a consensus about further action".[7]

The SDGs' comprehensiveness provides a valuable analytic and pedagogic tool for evaluators at different phases of an evaluation, from defining the scope, to sharing findings and developing recommendations. It is particularly useful in helping decision makers understand inter-connections — for example how a programme aimed at rural poverty might inadvertently accelerate environmental degradation, with serious local and national implications.

Using an SDG perspective also reinforces the importance of engaging with issues and actors that fall beyond an intervention's immediate boundaries — for example, the usefulness of consulting and involving environmental managers when evaluating a rural poverty programme.

A number of resources are available to help evaluators better understand the linkages between goals and communicate these to stakeholders. The International Council for Science's *A Guide to SDG Interactions: From Science to Implementation*[8] is particularly useful and comprehensive.

Integrating Agenda 2030 principles into evaluation

Evaluation design is a negotiated process involving commissioners, evaluators and other interested parties. The criteria that are agreed need to be aligned to the evaluation's purpose.[9] There is increasing recognition that standard criteria used for government policy and programme evaluation, such as effectiveness and impact, may not adequately capture crucial aspects of sustainable development. For example, the OECD Development Assistance Committee is now reviewing the five criteria that donors and their partners employ for evaluating development assistance: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Among the recommendations for reform are "greater attunement with the SDG

Box 1. Engaging stakeholders in Finland's SDG evaluation

In 2018 the government of Finland commissioned an independent evaluation, believed to be the first by any country, of the 2030 Agenda's national implementation. The multi-disciplinary team, including experts from outside Finland, carried out the evaluation over six months, with oversight from a government steering committee. Generating recommendations on future policy directions[13] was a major aim. The timeframe allowed for significant engagement with government decision makers and other stakeholders, so they could co-create recommendations. Meetings and workshops that developed and negotiated the recommendations created a valuable space for learning. Stakeholders' understanding of sustainable development concepts and principles grew significantly over the period, enriching the quality of the recommendations and increasing their 'buy in'. Evaluators found that an analytic framework known as 'the Doughnut'[14] was particularly useful in helping stakeholders understand the relationships between the different goals.

Box 2. Agenda 2030 principles that could serve as evaluation criteria

Integration/coherence: development's social, economic and environmental dimensions are inextricably interlinked. Any action in one dimension will have reverberations in the others; and none of the SDGs can be achieved without the achievement of all.

No one left behind: no goal is met unless it is met for everyone. Meeting the needs of those farthest behind should come first.

Equity: rights, opportunities and access to benefits and services are provided under equal terms to all (intra-generational equity). Meeting the current generation's needs and those of future generations get equal consideration (inter-generational equity).

Resilience: individuals, social groups, human systems, and/or ecosystems should have the capacity to withstand social, economic or environmental stress, to recover quickly from shocks and to thrive under adverse or changing conditions.

Environmental sustainability: governments and resources users take measures to sustain, and where possible enhance, a continuous flow of environmental goods and services that are essential for human development and for healthy ecosystem function.

Universality: the SDGs are framed around global problems requiring global solutions. It is not enough for a country to make progress on the goals within its own borders. Countries must also support, and not undermine, the efforts of others.

Mutual accountability: there is mutual respect and trust among all those working to achieve a sustainable development objective. Roles and responsibilities are commonly agreed and equitably allocated; and everyone is equally accountable to one another for their actions and results.

narrative" on rights and equity, and more attention to complexity and inter-connectedness.[10]

In the first briefing[11] in this series,[4,5] we raised the idea of supplementing standard evaluation criteria with some basic sustainable development principles, such as resilience or social justice, that could be used as the basis for assessing sustainability.

Those, as well as several other principles that could be used as evaluation criteria, are embedded in the 2030 Agenda (see Box 2). For example, evaluators can use the repeatedly stated principle that 'no one will be left behind' to explore whether a policy is actually reaching all those who it could usefully benefit, or whether some members of society are falling behind as a result of broader policies and budgetary decisions. Such individuals might not be visible in an evaluation that looks simply at numbers of beneficiaries.

The 2030 Agenda also emphasises principles relevant to how evaluations are conducted. The guidance on national follow-up and review calls for a wide range of stakeholder groups and political representatives to actively participate.

Using SDGs to frame evaluation questions

Evaluations directly focused on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda will naturally include questions that reference the Agenda and goals. But the Agenda can also be useful in designing questions for many other national policy and programme evaluations, whether they deal with an economic sector, social services or some aspect of environmental management. Questions informed by 2030 Agenda principles and by inter-linkages between the SDGs can help reveal gaps, deficiencies, trade-offs and unintended consequences that would otherwise undermine long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

At the policy level, questions could relate to alignment with relevant 2030 Agenda principles. For example, Finland's recent evaluation (see Box 1) asked: "How are the human rights-based approach and leave no one behind thinking of the 2030 Agenda realised in Finland's sustainable development policy"? That question would be equally relevant to evaluations of education, agricultural development or many other policy sectors.

Evaluations at operational level could include questions derived from the SDGs' systemic and inter-connected nature, and explore whether and how a programme has affected progress on other national sustainable development priorities. Research on SDG interactions[12] can point to relevant questions. For example, an evaluation of a programme aiming to expand science and technology could ask who has reaped benefits in terms of jobs, and whether those beneficiaries have included unskilled or economically marginalised groups. Questions can also explore whether a programme is generating downstream co-benefits; for example, improving women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare may also help reduce rates of sexually transmitted diseases.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

UNICEF's Evaluation Office mission is to help drive results for children by fostering evidence-based decision making in the organization and at the national and international levels.

The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' experience of development evaluation contributes to evaluating progress in SDGs at national level and identifying local solutions to global challenges.

EVALSDGs is a network of interested and skilled policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for the critical roles played by evaluation at the national, regional, and global levels in examining progress toward achievement of the SDGs.

Notes

[1] Rowe, A (2019) Ecological thinking as a route to sustainability-ready evaluation. Chapter 2 in Hopson, R and Cram, F. *Tackling Wicked Problems in Complex Ecologies: The Role of Evaluation*. Stanford University Press. www.researchgate.net/publication/331328096_Rowe_-_Ecological_Thinking_as_a_Route_to_Sustainability-Ready_Evaluation_Ch_2_Hopson_Cramm_Evaluation_in_Complex_Ecologies / [2] For example, see Hardi, P and Zdan, T J (1997) Assessing Sustainable Development: Principles in Practice. International Institute for Sustainable Development. www.iisd.org/pdf/bellagio.pdf / [3] The 2030 Agenda para 74, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld / [4] www.iied.org/effective-evaluation-for-sustainable-development-goals / [5] https://evalsdgs.org/portfolio/briefing-papers / [6] Geoghegan, T and Bass, S (2016) Reconceiving the SDGs as a political force for change. IIED, London. https://pubs.iied.org/17391IIED / [7] Brunner, I and Guzman, A (1989) Participatory evaluation: a tool to assess projects and empower people. In: Conner, RF and Hendricks, M (Eds) *International Innovations in Evaluation Methodology: New Directions for Evaluation Methodology*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, USA. / [8] Griggs, D, Nilsson, M, Stevance, A-S and McCollum, D (2016) A Guide to SDG Interactions: from Science to Implementation. The International Council for Science. https://council.science/publications/a-guide-to-sdg-interactions-from-science-to-implementation / [9] Stufflebeam, DA (2004) Evaluation design checklist. University of Michigan Evaluation Design Workshop. https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u350/2014/evaldesign.pdf / [10] DAC Network on Development Evaluation (2018) OECD DAC evaluation criteria: summary of consultation responses. https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/DAC-Criteria/ConsultationReport_EvaluationCriteria.pdf / [11] Schwandt, T, Ofir, Z, Lucks, D, El-Saddick, K and D'Errico, S (2016) Evaluation: A crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. https://pubs.iied.org/17357IIED / [12] See note 10 above, and Nilsson, M (2017) Important interactions among the Sustainable Development Goals under review at the High-Level Political Forum. 2017. Stockholm Research Institute. https://mediamanager.sei.org/documents/Publications/SEI-WP-2017-06-Nilsson-SDG-interact-HLPF2017.pdf / [13] Berg, A, Lähteenoja, S, Ylönen, M, Korhonen-Kurki, K, Linko, T, Lonkila, K-M, Lyytimäki, J, Salmivaara, A, Salo, H, Schönach, P and Suutarinen, I (2019) Path 2030 – An evaluation of Finland's sustainable development policy. Prime Minister's Office. http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161601/VN_TEAS_23_Path%202030.pdf / [14] Raworth, K (2012) A safe and just space for humanity: can we live within the doughnut? Oxfam GB. www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en.pdf

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