

Briefing

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Policy pointers

Parliamentarians should strive for coordinated evaluation efforts across government that respond to the SDGs' complexity and interconnectedness, and avoid piecemeal policymaking.

Parliamentarians need, and should call for, understandable and actionable evaluation reports, and should allow time to assimilate and use these. They should also assess their own and others' motivations for decisions, and generate processes and incentives that steer away uncritical action based on sectarian interests, personal gain or populist ideas.

Parliamentarians need to define, and help develop, knowledge systems that support adaptive policymaking. Countries need ways of working that are effective for them, rather than simply copying institutions that work elsewhere.

Parliamentarians' roles needs ongoing support: from professional evaluators and their organisations, from government and from inter-governmental organisations.

The 2030 Agenda and evaluation: opportunities and challenges for parliamentarians

National parliaments are crucial in ensuring the 17 Goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are meaningfully translated into national policies and programmes that improve citizens' lives. Parliamentarians are responsible for making national government accountable and should therefore be strong advocates for using evaluation in policymaking. They can also help lead efforts to develop each country's wider capacity for evaluation. This briefing discusses parliamentarians' efforts to build national evaluation capacity and use evaluation effectively. Such tasks are not without challenges, but these, we argue, can be reframed as opportunities.

The ambitious 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), presents parliamentarians with important opportunities as well as many challenges.

On the one hand, the Agenda lets members of parliament (MPs) demonstrate strong commitment to improving people's lives and the planet's wellbeing by clearly linking the SDGs to national and local development agendas. SDG16, the 'governance goal', specifically speaks to this: "Peace, justice, and strong institutions: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." Two targets within this goal refer specifically to the role of parliaments: 16.6 "Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" and 16.7 "Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels."

On the other hand, the complexity and interconnectedness of the SDGs challenges MPs to work evaluation into their traditional responsibilities of lawmaking, budgeting, oversight and representation.

Evaluation: a tool

Parliamentarians fulfil three crucial roles in governance. They hold governments to account, establishing a transparent and trusting relationship between state and citizens, and enacting and scrutinising government expenditures. They provide responsiveness, giving citizens a collective national voice that helps identify and meet people's needs. And of course, they lead on formulating policy, and developing and implementing legislation.

Fundamental to all of these responsibilities is a commitment to, and knowledge of, evaluation: of policies, strategies, programmes and projects. Country-owned evaluations are an important part of follow-up and review processes in the 2030 Agenda, and policymakers have long recognised evaluation as a vital contributor to transparency and evidence-informed decision making.

Parliamentarians can use evaluation to respond to the needs and aspirations of all citizens, including the most vulnerable. Good evaluation helps parliamentarians foster accountability and responsiveness by brokering stakeholders' values,

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views and needs while new knowledge is being generated. It does so by challenging “monopolies... of problem definition, of issue formulation, of data control, of information utilization.”¹ By engaging differing groups in the processes of generating and interpreting evidence, evaluation lets parliamentarians consider the economic, social and environmental implications of policies, laws and budgetary allocations.

MPs can be political champions and advocates for evaluation in their country-led development plans. In addition, parliamentarians have governance responsibilities for:

- Monitoring and evaluating a country’s progress on the SDG agenda, and the effects of national policies on the global goals
- Facilitating a coherent cross-government approach to the 17 SDGs that recognises their interconnectedness
- Establishing periodic national reviews and evaluations of progress towards the SDGs that are linked to decision making and inform resource allocation
- Involving nongovernmental agencies and organisations (eg voluntary organisations of professional evaluators — Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), think tanks, research and policy institutes, private sector corporations and so on) in planning and evaluating the national sustainable development agenda.

Parliamentarians are promoting evaluation

Many MPs are making strong efforts to develop national evaluation capacity by building an ‘enabling environment’. They are supporting and demanding evaluation in their political systems, bolstering society’s belief in the legitimacy of evaluative information, drafting national evaluation policies, and developing integrated monitoring and evaluation systems.

For example, parliamentarians are heard at local and global conferences and events on evaluation and the SDGs, and a consultation with parliamentarians helped shape the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020. Parliamentarians have also been advocating for evaluation at high level United Nations events, and have been actively engaging in regional consultations on national evaluation policies and systems. Such activities are building bridges between those conducting evaluations and the national decision makers who

need evaluative information to shape policies. Together they are developing a stronger shared understanding of how to use evaluation findings and processes in parliamentary debates.

Some parliaments have taken specific actions. For example, Pakistan’s Parliament established an SDG Secretariat to help parliamentarians effectively oversee SDG progress, address the legislative gaps and ensure their constituents’ rights. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Parliament established a new Joint Select Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development. In Zambia, MPs informed a SDGs caucus. In Sri Lanka, the Parliament established a Select Committee on the SDGs. In Finland, MPs were consulted during the preparation of the first Voluntary National Review, they chair the Finnish Development Policy Committee that monitors and assesses implementation of Finland’s international commitments, and they are widely represented in the National Commission of Sustainable Development that governs implementation of the SDGs. In the UK, a Parliament Committee has conducted a critical inquiry that encouraged a shift in government approach to addressing the SDGs.²

A regional architecture for parliamentarians’ evaluation advocacy is also emerging. The Parliamentarians Forum for Development Evaluation in South Asia and the African Parliamentarians Network on Development Evaluation (initiated in 2014) are both reflecting MP’s growing attention to the role evaluation plays in evidence-informed decision making. There are parliamentarians’ groups in the Middle East and North Africa, East Asia, Latin America and Eurasia. National parliamentarians’ fora have been launched in Nepal, Uganda, Kenya and Sri Lanka. Parliamentarians have spearheaded major evaluation events in national and regional parliaments including in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Kyrgyz Republic and in the Latin American parliament, *Parlatino*. However, most such efforts so far are South-South collaborations, with little engagement from the North.

The Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation, sponsored by EvalPartners, has launched a video campaign inviting parliamentarians from countries across the globe to create video messages on the importance of national evaluation policies.³ Currently 38 videos are available in multiple languages.

Challenges: but also opportunities

MPs’ efforts to bring evaluation to bear on sustainable development certainly face challenges. But these can also be reframed as opportunities. The most difficult challenges, and thus the most important opportunities, include the following:

Coordinate across government to avoid piecemeal policymaking and evaluation. The SDGs reflect current concerns for parliamentarians and citizens alike. But, importantly, they also connect these issues synergistically, highlighting interconnections that may well include possible trade-offs. These interconnections help parliamentarians think beyond the mere alignment of policies to the SDGs and more carefully reflect about policy coherence across sectors and even policy integration. Thus, MPs have a unique opportunity to move away from a strictly sector-based approach, and instead synthesise evaluations across sectors and so develop much wider policy coherence on development needs. The distinctly inter-related and all-encompassing nature of the SDGs and their targets and indicators will involve many governmental 'oversight agencies', such as audit offices, human rights agencies, anti-corruption taskforces and national treasuries in tracking progress. To manage this challenge, parliaments can develop mechanisms or functions for coordinating the evaluative activities of these multiple agencies and synthesising their findings.

Structure work to allow time to interpret evaluative information and also to build capacity in evaluative reasoning. It is one thing to have a policy and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating development initiatives, it is quite another to actually make sense of the information these produce. Doing so requires an ongoing commitment to evaluative thinking, ie using critical reflection to appraise assumptions and claims, coupled with a commitment to continuous learning and a willingness and ability to modify views in the light of reasoned arguments and evidence.⁴ Parliamentarians use evaluative reasoning to make effective policy decisions by combining evaluative and scientific evidence, political preferences and widely accepted values. Efforts aimed at building national evaluation capacity should include a strong focus on enhancing people's evaluative reasoning.

Call for readily understandable and actionable evaluative and scientific information. Policymakers often complain the evaluative and scientific information they get is hard to use, because its format is too technical, too lengthy or not well connected to the particular policy discourse on the policymakers' agenda. This, of course, is primarily a challenge for evaluators to tackle. But parliamentarians, who rarely have the time to sift through detailed reports, have a role too in clearly calling for reports and findings that are fit for use and actionable.

Define, and then develop, knowledge management systems that support iterative, adaptive management and policymaking. This challenge/opportunity clearly links to the

need for understandable information and improved coordination. The aim here must be to ensure evaluative and scientific information actually gets used. Too often evaluative findings are overlooked. This is sometimes because they are just one aspect of information that has been generated and presented in different ways, and by different agencies, without necessarily being 'flagged' as evaluation.

Develop country-specific ways of working. As MPs get involved in developing national evaluation policies and mechanisms, they must always be mindful of the danger of uncritical mimicry. There is a natural temptation to build evaluation-focused institutions, agencies, policies and processes that seem commonplace or look like those found in 'successful' states (sometimes termed 'isomorphic mimicry'^{5,6}). But what works in one place doesn't necessarily suit another. There is no one best practice that fits all states. Rather, states must develop their own ways of working. Agenda 2030 encourages this approach by promoting 'country ownership' of the SDGs and their follow-up and review processes.

Understand political motivations and provide political incentives. Politicians' decisions are inevitably informed and shaped by power differentials, relations, vested interests and social divisions.⁷ So parliamentarians must critically consider how such motivations interact with scientific research and evaluation findings in their decision making. All governance actions aimed at implementing and reporting on the SDGs (including work by individuals, committees, working groups and so on) should be grounded in processes and incentives that steer decision makers away from acting uncritically on sectarian interests, populist ideas or for personal gain. In addition, parliamentarians from differing political groups should be engaging with evaluators while the political agenda is being developed, rather than expecting to see evidence just before policies are approved or resources allocated.

Wider support

Given that individual parliamentarians change with election cycles, countries need policies, procedures and agencies that will permanently serve all policymakers' needs.⁸

Efforts to broaden evaluation capacity in society, as well as in parliament, must continue. The international conference National Evaluation Capacities is a good space to assess progresses in evaluation capacity development and explore the way forward. UNDP hosts this conference every two years and in 2017 it will have a specific SDG focus. Additional resources for parliamentarians are listed in Box 1.

Box 1. Resources for parliamentarians

Several resources designed to help parliamentarians get to grips with evaluation are now available online:

- Agora, The Global Portal for Parliamentary Development. www.agora-parl.org/
- United Nations Environment Program (2014) The role of parliamentarians in advancing the Sustainable Development Agenda. Parliamentary handbook produced by European Parliamentarian Forum on Population and Development. www.agora-parl.org/resources/library/role-parliamentarians-advancing-sustainable-development-agenda
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals: a self-assessment toolkit. <https://beta.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2017-01/parliaments-and-sustainable-development-goals-self-assessment-toolkit>
- Karkara N, *et al.* (2014) Advocating for evaluation: a toolkit for developing advocacy strategies to strengthen an enabling environment for evaluation. New York: UN Women, EvalPartners, IOCE. www.evalpartners.org/sites/default/files/toolkit/UNICEF%20NY_Advocating%20for%20Evaluation_Web_1.pdf
- United Nations Development Programme (2017) Parliament's role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: a parliamentary handbook. www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary_development/parliament-s-role-in-implementing-the-sustainable-development-go.html
- Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation. <https://globalparliamentarianforum.wordpress.com/>

VOPEs must continue to work with both parliamentarians and civil society in building awareness and knowledge of evaluation in evidence-informed decision making. A good example comes from the Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation, which is organising regional consultations (in the Middle East and North African Region, Latin America and Eurasia, East Asia, and South Asia) that will gather parliamentarians to share learning about their national evaluation policies. The regional consultations will also feed in to a global event for parliamentarians, planned for 2018 in Sri Lanka.

Evaluators can also learn from the work of the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results (CLEAR) initiative, which has invested significantly in building parliamentarians' capacity to use evaluation evidence in decision making. Its annual report for 2015/16, for example, discusses such support in South Africa, China, India and Niger.⁹

National governments can strengthen parliaments' efforts to bring evaluation into decision making on the sustainable development agenda by establishing institutional mechanisms that leverage MPs' roles. For example, voluntary national review

committees can be established and given national oversight of SDG implementation.

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) — with its initiative to build national evaluation capacity — can promote capacity development by specifically attending to parliaments' role in the voluntary national reviews, which are to be reported at the High Level Political Forum.

Thomas Schwandt, Asela Kalugampitiya, Caroline Heider, Jos Vaessen, Zenda Ofir, Ada Ocampo, Dorothy Lucks, Kassem El-Saddik and Stefano D'Errico

Thomas Schwandt is an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA and editor emeritus of the American Journal of Evaluation. Asela Kalugampitiya is the EvalPartners Executive Coordinator and a member of the Secretariat to the Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation. Caroline Heider is Director General and Senior Vice President, Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank Group. Jos Vaessen is methods adviser at the Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank Group and member of the board of the European Evaluation Society. Zenda Ofir is a former president of the African Evaluation Association and an honorary professor at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Ada Ocampo is a senior evaluation specialist at UNICEF, member of the EvalPartners management group, vice co-chair of EVALSDGs and member of the secretariat of the GPFE. Dorothy Lucks is co-chair of EVALSDGs, IOCE board secretary, an EvalPartners executive committee member and the executive director of SDF Global. Kassem El-Saddik is vice-chair of EVALSDGs and a member of the Evaluators Middle East and North Africa network. Stefano D'Errico is the monitoring evaluation and learning lead at IIED and a council member of the United Kingdom Evaluation Society.

Notes

¹ MacDonald, B (1978) Democracy and evaluation. Public address at the University of Alberta Faculty of Education, 17 October 1978. / ² House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2017) Sustainable Development Goals in the UK – Ninth report of session 2016–17. Authority of the House of Commons, London. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmenvaud/596/596.pdf / ³ See <https://parliamentariansforevaluationcampaign.wordpress.com/> / ⁴ Schwandt, T *et al.* (2016) Realising the SDGs by reflecting on the way(s) we reason, plan and act: the importance of evaluative thinking. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17380IIED/> / ⁵ Pritchett, L, Woolcock, M and Andrews, M (2010) Capability traps? The mechanisms of persistent implementation failure. Center for Global Development, Working Paper 234. Washington, DC, USA www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/1424651_file_Pritchett_Capability_FINAL.pdf / ⁶ Krause, P (2013) Of institutions and butterflies: is isomorphism in developing countries necessarily a bad thing? Background Note, ODI, London. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8353.pdf / ⁷ Independent Evaluation Group – World Bank Group (2016) The role of political economy analysis in development policy operations. http://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/Data/reports/lp_poleconanalysis_0716.pdf / ⁸ United Nations Evaluation Group (2012) National evaluation capacity development: practical tips on how to strengthen national evaluation systems. www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1205/ / ⁹ CLEAR annual report July 2015–June 2016, box 3.2, page 13. www.theclearinitiative.org/sites/clearinitiative/files/2017-05/CLEAR_Annual_Report_2015-2016_0.pdf



Knowledge Products

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

EVALSDGs is a network of policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for the critical roles played by evaluation in examining progress toward achieving the SDGs.

EvalPartners is a global partnership that aims to influence policymakers, public opinion and other stakeholders so evaluative evidence and reasoning and values of equity are incorporated in policy and planning.

The Global Parliamentarian Forum for Evaluation promotes demand and use of evaluation by parliamentarians around the world.

The Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) evaluates the development effectiveness of the World Bank Group.

Contact

Stefano D'Errico
stefano.derrico@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 35 14 9055
www.iied.org

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