

Policy pointers

There is no single route to developing National Evaluation Capacity (NEC), countries have varying needs and contexts.

In developing NEC, four key challenges require serious consideration: developing a National Evaluation Policy, securing adequate evaluation capabilities, embedding evaluation within institutions and engaging with partners.

Political championing is crucial for building demand for, as well as supply of, quality evaluations. Equally, engaging stakeholders is indispensable to promote and supply credible, relevant and useful evaluations.

National evaluation processes should be aligned with other planning, budgeting and statistics processes to drive the 2030 Agenda.

Developing national evaluation capacities in the sustainable development era: four key challenges

Developing National Evaluation Capacity (NEC) in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) era brings four dynamic and interrelated challenges. These are: developing a National Evaluation Policy, setting up the institutional processes, securing adequate evaluation capabilities and engaging with partners. The challenges affect both the supply of sound evaluations for development plans and also the demand for their relevant and useful evidence, which in turn informs national policy development. This briefing highlights areas to consider when developing NEC, and is the fifth in a series on effective evaluation for the SDGs.

Governments have to deal with an unprecedented imperative: to align national development agendas with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while also ensuring “*rigorous, high-quality, accessible, timely, and reliable*” evaluations of the Agenda’s 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see Box 1).² To achieve that, National Evaluation Capacity (NEC) must be developed.

NEC generally refers to the ability of the national government, with contributions from many partners, to produce, manage and use evaluation effectively to better inform policy and programme decisions. It entails developing the guiding policies; building effective organisations, infrastructure and processes; and developing evaluation capabilities (within the evaluation community and among evaluators, evaluation commissioners and so on). Four essential dimensions were identified in the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020.³ These are:

strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing individual capabilities, nurturing an enabling environment and addressing the interlinkages between the other three (see Figure 1).

The four key challenges

To develop NEC in the SDG era, countries face four ongoing and interrelated challenges: developing a National Evaluation Policy (NEP); building enough individual evaluation capacity; ensuring institutions and processes are in place; and adequately engaging partners. These challenges are dynamic, and affect both the supply of and demand for relevant and useful evidence that can inform national plans and policies. As with the interlinkages between the SDGs (Box 1), the four challenges are interconnected. They sit at the central intersection of the NEC ‘dimensions’ identified in the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020 (Figure 1). For example, political championing, with adequate evaluation capability, is a key enabler to advance

and support the development of the evaluation policy and to reflect the leadership required to promote an evaluation culture within institutions.

Accordingly, developing and building NEC is not a linear path. There is neither a single prescription

nor a pre-determined best practice solution. Rather, there are opportunities to work in multiple, interlinked ways that need to be country-specific.

The most appropriate route depends on each

country's readiness level in terms of institutions and individuals, and their interactions within an enabling environment. Sometimes, it may be necessary to have a full-fledged NEP in place as an overarching guide. In other situations, having a champion within the policymaking arena might be essential to provide ownership and leadership for the process. Elsewhere, an authorising commissioner might generate interest, set the evaluation guidelines and manage the processes for developing evaluation capacities. Alternatively, a strong Voluntary Organisation for Professional Evaluation (VOPE)⁴ that advocates for NEC can also create the space to drive change in the key dimensions. Combining such opportunities where possible is likely to be the best approach to drive the development of NECs.

Developing a National Evaluation Policy

A national commitment to evaluating the SDGs requires a political decision and a thrust for evidence-based policymaking and improved national development outcomes. It is best reflected by developing a NEP and/or endorsing legislation that creates a system to implement SDG evaluations and safeguard their independence, credibility and utility. Once endorsed, a NEP provides the impetus to allocate

resources (including budget) and to push for interdepartmental cooperation.

Three imperatives can help develop such a policy: political championing; fostering a culture for learning; and engaging partners and stakeholders widely. All three also relate to the other challenges.

Politically powerful and capable champions, who appreciate the national development agenda and acknowledge evaluation's importance in interpreting development outcomes, are invaluable to drive the national evaluation efforts and policy.

Developing NEC should be a process of learning and ongoing adaptation. Given varying national priorities, the 17 SDGs and their targets can't simply be evaluated using a conventional 'accountability' approach. Rather, it is essential to nurture a culture of 'evaluative thinking'⁵ (see the fourth challenge). Experimentation, learning-by-doing and redesigning should become the features of the SDGs' evaluation policy and processes. A rigid over-engineered legislative apparatus — such as one established before development is implemented — might hinder adaptability.⁶

Public engagement must become integral to the SDGs' evaluation policy and processes. This will mutually reinforce a more evaluative culture. Promoting diverse partnerships and engaging many actors helps build stronger demand for better quality evaluation.

Getting the right evaluation capabilities in place

Evaluating the SDG plans and programmes inevitably involves national efforts to secure and nurture the right evaluation capabilities at all levels and across all stakeholders, ie across the full spectrum of supply and demand for evaluation.

On the demand side, having a competent *political champion* and *evaluation commissioner* is crucial.

Developing national evaluation capacity should be a process of learning and ongoing adaptation

Box 1. The complex interlinkages across the SDGs

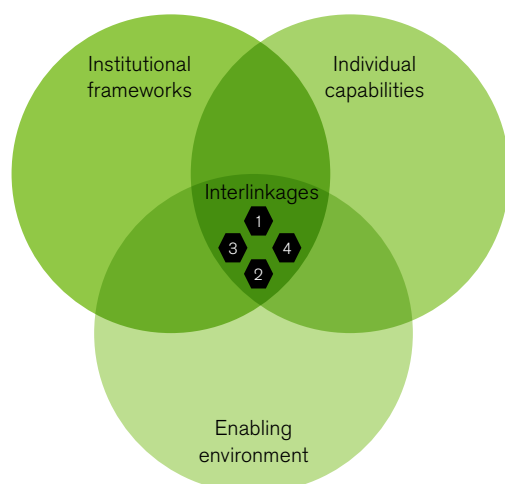
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is impressively ambitious and transformative. The Agenda's 17 SDGs, along with their 169 targets, have complex interlinkages: across sectors (environmental, social, economic, energy, health and so on); among numerous actors (governments, private sector, civil society and so on); and at different levels (local, national and global).

For example, not only is SDG17 (on partnerships for the goals) intrinsically connected to all the goals, but SDG15 (on terrestrial ecosystems) is also closely related to SDG2 (food security), SDG6 (water and sanitation) and SDG8 (economic growth and employment).

The Agenda specifically calls for national evaluation and review processes that “*promote accountability to [our] citizens ... foster exchanges of best practices and mutual learning ... and draw on contributions from indigenous people, civil society, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders.*”

These interlinkages and evaluation requirements call for innovative national capacities that can use 'complex systems thinking' and can align national plans with the SDGs.

Figure 1. The four key challenges to developing National Evaluation Capacity



- 1 National Evaluation Policy
- 2 Evaluation capabilities
- 3 Institutional process
- 4 Engaging wide-ranging partners

Four key interlinked challenges:

- **Developing a National Evaluation Policy (NEP)** that fits with the national development agenda
- **Ensuring adequate evaluation capabilities, ie getting the right people in place**, relies on filling key roles such as *Evaluation Champion*, *Commissioner* and *Advocate*. Building capacity more widely also needs well-crafted institutional processes (see next challenge)
- Strong **Institutional processes** are needed, and developing these draws on peoples' individual capacities, supported by policies, to align evaluation's role with other ongoing government and development programmes
- **Engaging wide-ranging partners** is crucial and is best supported by making an evaluation culture integral to development programmes and processes. Naturally, this draws on the other challenges. In fact, it is clear that all four are closely interlinked.

Depending on the country's political and development context, the *political champion* might be a parliamentarian or a senior government executive who demonstrates commitment and leadership that drives evaluative thinking within the government. They can promote the evaluation policy; lead efforts to make evaluation an integral activity 'across the board' (mainstreaming); secure the necessary funding (and its independence); ensure a multidisciplinary approach; and oversee evaluation quality. The Global Parliamentarian Forum for Evaluation (GPFE) already provides mobilisation and capacity building to help parliamentarians fill this role. Government executives need support to drive evaluation function and thinking within the government.

Evaluation commissioners procure and manage evaluations. In the SDGs era and given the requirement to '*leave no one behind*', it is imperative that evaluation commissioners' competence is enhanced and their knowledge of evaluation use is improved, both in planning and managing evaluations and also ensuring that they are used.⁷

On the supply side, the evaluation community, represented mainly by the national VOPE, is a natural ally in developing NEC. It is growing in size, capability and outreach, both nationally and globally. Most importantly, it fosters a supply of evaluators within countries, sharing learning to help them deliver the 'quality, credible, relevant and useful evaluation' called for by the 2030 Agenda.

The existing evaluation community within a country can advise the commissioner on developing context-specific national evaluation competencies and guidelines. Importantly, given members' proven policy competencies, national VOPEs play an invaluable role as *evaluation advocates*. An *advocate's* key task is to spot and

seize opportunities that can build alliances to persuade, convince and push forward the NEP for the SDGs. Being a leader of the VOPE, of another interest group or being a professional consultant on the 'supply side' of evaluation equips people for this role as they are likely to have in-depth experience and networks.

Institutional processes

This challenge relates to institutional rather than individual capacity, and involves establishing a SDG-related evaluation and follow-up function and an environment that acknowledges the use of evaluative evidence in informing national development decisions.

The 2030 Agenda clearly identifies the need for competent evaluation (follow-up and review) processes that establish impartial, credible, useful and context-specific evidence that can be used in decision making. Such evaluation functions can be either centralised or decentralised (at the sector, department or sub-national level), depending to a large extent on the country's political or development context. A centralised overarching institutional structure, supported by a powerful and capable *champion* and *commissioner*, is however highly desirable.

Within such an institutional framework, four processes require particular consideration:

- Ensuring a smooth alignment between the national SDG planning agenda and the SDGs' evaluation processes so that the planning agenda becomes responsive. Given the SDGs' integrated cross-sectoral nature, this involves evaluative thinking and adaptive management (as discussed in other briefings)⁸
- Resolving the 'disconnect' between evaluation and budget cycles — an oft-reported limitation of evaluation policy.⁹ This requires an

institutional culture that complements the conventional accountability approach with evaluative learning and that builds outcome-based and participatory budgeting processes

- Ensuring evaluation works with existing data collection and statistics mechanisms. A proper evaluation function incorporates monitoring data into evaluation findings. In other words, measurement alone is not enough.¹⁰ Rather than simply measuring progress toward specific outputs and outcomes, it is crucial to evaluate varying outcomes and understand their interactions and implications
- Guaranteeing independence for evaluations, either by establishing a government evaluation function that reports to the highest political authorities (as in South Africa, United Arab Emirates and the Emirate of Dubai) or by having an external evaluation organisation reporting to third parties (as happens with Deval in Germany and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact in the UK, both of which report to their respective parliaments).

Engaging partners

The fourth challenge for developing NEC is ensuring “*open and inclusive public engagement processes*” that engage partners locally and nationally, as well as at global levels.

The 2030 Agenda, which was developed through an extensive consultative process, calls for wide stakeholder engagement and strong partnerships that can enhance coordination for development projects; avoid duplication of reviews and evaluation; and can ensure stakeholders' interests are aligned wherever possible. This requires engaging the donor agencies, UN agencies, civil society, advocacy groups, private sector organisations and so on. Getting stakeholders to participate early, and throughout the process, is

indispensable in generating quality, relevant and timely evaluation.

Public engagement should become integral to the SDGs' evaluation policy and processes (Box 1), and is best reinforced by a national culture of evaluation. Promoting diverse partnerships among government, parliamentarians, evaluation professionals, civil society, the private sector and others builds stronger demand for, and better quality, evaluation. Academic institutions, for example, can nurture an evaluative culture and can support strong civic interest in democratic participation by teaching critical thinking, research skills, evaluating inquiries and so on. More widely, an evaluative culture can be nurtured by:

- Using innovative consultation platforms and means (including social media and informal channels)
- Building facilitation skills within the public sector so officials are better able to engage stakeholders at different levels
- Designing a strong communication and dissemination plan to ensure public access to SDG evaluations and their findings
- Engaging evaluation professionals, for example through national VOPEs.

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Knowledge Products

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EVALSDGs is a network of 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.

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

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Notes

¹ UN (2015) Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> / ² The International Council for Science's draft framework for understanding SDG interactions offers a conceptual reflection on these interlinkages. www.icsu.org/publications/reports-and-reviews/working-paper-framework-for-understanding-sdg-interactions-2016/SDG-interactions-working-paper.pdf / ³ EvalPartners (2015) The Global Evaluation Agenda 2020. www.evalpartners.org/global-evaluation-agenda / ⁴ UNICEF (2013) Evaluation and civil society: stakeholders' perspectives on National Evaluation Capacity development. www.evalpartners.org/sites/default/files/Evaluation%20and%20civil%20society_v9_final_web.pdf; VOPE groups can function at regional and national levels and bring together evaluators from government, academia and NGOs, influencing organisational and national evaluation policies for society's benefit. By 2015, the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) had registered over 166 VOPEs (up from 15 in 1999). / ⁵ 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> / ⁶ DPME (2015) Developing South Africa's National Evaluation Policy and System: First Lessons Learned (2014). www.aejonline.org/index.php/aej/article/view/107/139 / ⁷ IDRC (2016) Steps in planning and managing an evaluation. www.betterevaluation.org/en/commissioners_guide / ⁸ Ofir, Z *et al.* (2016) Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informed by the SDGs. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17374IIED> / ⁹ UN Women (2015) National evaluation policies for sustainable and equitable development. www.evalpartners.org/sites/default/files/library/selected/NationalEvaluationPolicies_web-single-color.pdf / ¹⁰ Schwandt, T *et al.* (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17357IIED>