UNICEF, UNECA and UNITAR side event on
Embedding Evaluation in Voluntary National Reviews during 2020 HLPF

On 14 July 2020, UNICEF, UNECA and UNITAR organized an online side event "Strengthening National Capacities for the World We Want – Embedding Evaluation in Voluntary National Reviews" during the virtual 2020 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The event aimed to explore and promote the use of evaluative thinking and evidence within Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Representatives from UNICEF, UNECA and UNITAR were joined by panelists from several African countries to share their experiences and the challenges and opportunities they have faced in their VNR and evaluation processes.

Opening remarks by Mr. Inam Ullah and Mr. George Laryea-Adjei both stressed the importance of evaluation for reviews to go beyond simply tracking progress by adding detail and nuance to answer crucial questions of *how, why, and who*. Mr. Ullah specified the value of evaluation in allowing us to see not only that progress is being made but that it is "equitable, efficient, relevant and sustainable". Similarly, Mr. Laryea-Adjei drew on the concept of Leave No One Behind, highlighting that this can only be demonstrated with evidence. He asked the panelists to reflect on four key ideas for systematizing the inclusion of evaluative thinking into national reviews, stressing that national reviews are a "shared accountability… there is a role for the UN and other partners to make them happen in a more systematic way and across all countries", and emphasizing the need to advocate for multiple sources of evidence "to understand the why's, how's, and what else could be done". Ms. Ada Ocampo then welcomed the panelists and stressed the desire to hear the different experiences of their countries in embedding evaluations into VNR processes.

The importance of using evaluative evidence to give depth and substance to national reviews was picked up on by all the panelists in their statements, in particular the value it provides for understanding how and why particular approaches have worked. As Ms. Laila Omar Gad noted, the ability to go beyond trends, to be able to see *why* things work, is essential for policy makers to improve programs and ensure the most vulnerable populations are reached.

Disaggregated data was also mentioned by many panelists such as Mr. Zephirin Maniratanga as an important component in building more comprehensive and useful pictures of countries' progress on the SDGs, to ensure that progress is inclusive and no one is left behind. The role of multiple sources of data to give a complete picture of not only where a country is, but how, why and who benefitted, was highlighted by Mr. Zakari Lawal, who cited the example of Nigeria investing in 46 evaluations for its VNR.

While the panelists agreed on the value and importance of evaluative evidence, there nonetheless remain a number of challenges to integrating it into the VNR process. Some common challenges mentioned were a lack of baselines, a lack of technical capacity, difficulty in involving all sectors of society in the process, and a lack of domestication of SDG indicators. Ms. Cristina Matusse highlighted the challenge of conducting the VNR process that required indicators, when Mozambique did not yet have its own national framework of indicators. However, this challenge ultimately led to Mozambique strengthening its efforts to define a national framework, illustrating how despite, or perhaps because of, these challenges the VNR process can be an impetus for positive development.

In addition to providing a catalyst for developing national frameworks, it was also recognized that the process of VNRs lend the opportunity for building national capacity around evaluation, and also provides evidence to support national policymaking and inform prioritization of development goals. Ms. Laila Omar Gad contributed with the example of Liberia's over-ambitious national development plan, where the VNR process then helped to highlight what the key priorities should be by identifying the SDGs that affected the most vulnerable populations. Ms. Matusse further noted the value Mozambique had derived from the VNR process providing baselines to help the planning of public programs.

A number of areas where many countries are still struggling involve the need for improved data governance, coordination and partnerships to ensure a more effective monitoring of the SDGs and support the evaluation of public policies. "Overall, data users/producers dialogue is essential in making sure that collected data meet policy needs. NSOs have an important role in coordinating data production and providing methodological guidance to other parts of National Statistical Systems. But user engagement is equally important, noted Ms. Elena Proden drawing on UNITAR's recent experience of supporting a number of least developed countries and small island developing states, in this area. Other important needs identified by UNITAR's partner countries included the strengthening of data analysis capacities to provide robust quantitative inputs in the context of policymaking and impact evaluations, and the overall statistical literacy of various stakeholders and public at large.

Taking stock of some of these challenges, Mr. Ian Goldman noted the role of partners such as UNITAR, UNICEF and CLEAR in promoting the use of evaluative evidence through capacity development initiative geared towards the demand side, in addition to strengthening statistical literacy. He also gave an example of the potential to use existing evaluations, recalling the case of Uganda where a survey found 500 pre-existing evaluations they could use.

In closing, the panelists reflected on the motivations of the countries they represented to be a part of the VNRs, focusing on the opportunities they bring for enhanced understanding of progress on development. Ms. Ada Ocampo asked the panelists for one key message they would like to convey to the audience, in response to which Mr. Lawal noted that above all, VNRs are an investment rather than a cost, as they "engender collective ownership of SDG implementation". The event served as an inspiring reminder of the value of VNRs beyond their application for measuring the SDGs, especially when evaluative evidence is integrated into the VNRs and is then used to develop and refine national programs and policies. Looking forward, Mr. Laryea-Adjei reminded participants that many of the points they had raised such as the lack of technical capacity could quickly be, and in many cases are already being, addressed.

The recording of the event can be found [here](#).

Moderator
- **Ada Ocampo**, Senior Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF

Speakers
- **George Laryea-Adjei**, Director Evaluation, UNICEF
- **Inam Ullah**, Evaluation Officer, Strategic Planning Oversight & Results Division, UNECA
- **Elena Proden**, Senior Specialist, Strategic Implementation of the 2030 Agenda Unit, UNITAR
- **Ian Goldman**, Advisor on Evaluation and Evidence Systems, CLEAR-AA
- **Zakari Lawal**, Director National M&E Department, Ministry of Budget & National Planning, Nigeria
- **Cristina Matusse**, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Budgeting, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Mozambique
- **Laila Omar Gad**, Representative, UNICEF Liberia
- **Zephirin Maniratanga**, Ambassador Head of State Protocol, Burundi