Beyond monitoring: Evaluation for a resilient recovery towards the SDGs

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Strengthening countries' performance on the SDGs increases their resilience to future shocks. This can be better achieved through the entrenchment of evaluation systems in organisational practice for the systematic conduct of SDG evaluations. Governments are ultimately responsible for progress towards achieving the SDGs over the next 9 years. Therefore, they need to be strategic in their recovery from COVID-19 and target their resources on the right needs. We argue that a full understanding of these needs requires the use of evidence-based and reliable information from evaluations.

COVID-19 challenges for countries

Governments have faced difficult trade-offs in managing the COVID-19 pandemic between health, economic and social concerns and between countries' short-term pressures and long-term goals. At the outset of the pandemic difficult decisions were made, often quickly, based on emerging and imperfect information that at the same time required Government's transparency and accountability regarding the actions taken. Then, as the pandemic unfolded, Governments have had to manage complex health, economic and social issues involving many interconnected variables and under uncertain conditions. This was exacerbated by pre-existing inequalities across several dimensions such as the socio-economic status, education, age, gender, ethnicity and geography of the populations affected.

Similar challenges but different responses

Countries are now understandably at different stages in responding to the pandemic and their regions and populations have been affected differently. For instance, the weak health infrastructure and limited financial and human resources in some countries, left their governments with limited capacity to provide a fast and effective response to this unexpected crisis. In addition, the decision-making mechanisms adopted by different leaders and the systems in place to support those decisions varied significantly across countries and regions. Structural weaknesses in some countries'

governing systems, including the national evaluation systems, have limited their ability to provide complete and quality information under short timelines to meet the urgent needs for evidence and ensuring simultaneously inclusiveness and equity in the decisions made.

Countries must prepare now for the difficult years ahead

Some parts of the world are now moving from the immediate crisis to a more stable phase of the pandemic. Therefore, leaders need to re-evaluate their policy tools, assess their policy options and adopt the right strategy for spending their resources.

Every decision that is made now will affect countries' recovery next year, and the development outcomes for the next few years to come.

Take for example the impact that the austerity measures implemented following the 2008 financial crisis had on the current health crisis. Many countries reduced their health budgets at that time to reduce government spending and were left without the resources needed to cope with a sudden and unexpected demand for health services.[2] Thus, political decisions made now should prioritise actions that are successful, at various levels, in facilitating a sustainable recovery and building resilience against future systemic shocks.

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[1] Special thanks to Kassem El-Saddik for facilitating and supervising this initiative.
[2] https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/a-systemic-resilience-approach-to-dealing-with-covid-19-and-future-shocks-36a5bdfb/

Policy decisions should be guided by considerations of social equity, gender equality, respect for environmental stability and must be supported by good governance to make sure that nobody is left behind. A full understanding of such considerations requires the use of evaluation techniques and tools for gathering and interpreting evidence. Thus, the right information is communicated to decision-makers.

What should countries do?

Use evaluation information for short and long-term policy decisions: Evaluations are critical for decision-making under crisis conditions and for strengthening countries' resilience building efforts for a sustainable future. In the short-term, the conduct and use of evaluations can support a rapid and effective multi-sectoral response and recovery at various levels. Evaluations can provide information about the people, activities and regions most affected and under which conditions they were more affected than others. It can also help decision-makers understand what is the impact that each measure taken to help the most affected, may have on other people, regions and activities and on the achievement of countries' long-term goals. In the long-term, information from evaluations is vital for building resilience against other crises given that they provide detailed information and an in-depth understanding of the main problems that countries need to address and make progress on the SDGs. This strengthens countries' ability to cope with future crises and their capacity to recover quickly.

Enhance public trust through the communication of evidence from evaluations: The use of evaluation as a decision-making mechanism when determining the allocation of funds also plays a key role in terms of being transparent and accountable. It helps governments explain their policy choices and their setting of priorities, and assures their citizens that they used the best available evidence to make decisions. This is particularly important in times of uncertainty and crisis. In crisis contexts, trust in governments is needed from their citizens to support the various government responses that can have a negative or positive impact on them and their activities. Thus, the effectiveness of government actions to respond and recover from a crisis depends on an open and transparent communication to the public about their policy choices through informed decision-making, grounded in evidence.

Build a strong and sustained evaluation culture for the post-COVID-19 world: Strong, effective and contextually relevant country-led evaluation systems are critical not only to track progress towards the achievement of the SDGs but also to support the effective planning needed to make the achievement of the SDGs possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored for everyone that having an evidence base for timely policy decisions cannot be developed due to an immediate need, but rather having monitoring and evaluation systems institutionalised across public sector institutions that allows for adaptive planning regardless of the immediate crisis at hand. (Somma and Kilroy, 2021; Baradei, Abdelhamid and Wally, 2014).

Whether an organisation's culture is supportive of evaluation or not can determine the ways in which an M&E system's components become entrenched in programme implementation across departments.

Building an evaluative culture in an organisation often requires interventions at multiple levels. Acknowledging that barriers may range from technical and administrative to differences in political ideology and values, a shift in culture requires not only building technical skills and capacity, but also shifting attitudes, and aligning policies to embed new practices within organisational culture over time (Tarsilla, 2014). Support from senior management, institutional practices such as policies, procedures and tools, and individual behaviour (Mayne, 2020) are the key organisational drivers that, over time, support and reinforce a particular institutional culture.

There are a range of factors that make the entrenchment of an evaluative culture challenging. These are factors that have both been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and have also been exacerbated by many pandemic related contextual changes. For example, the willingness by officials to strengthen the demand for evaluations can be limited by not only the financial resources to conduct rigorous evaluations, but also by the timeliness of the findings, and the need to make relatively rapid policy decisions (McNall, 2007).

Institutionalise evaluation in policy processes to strengthen countries' resilience against systemic shocks: When the pandemic spread, countries that were best able to make evidence-based policy decisions were those which had entrenched key components of M&E systems, such as integrated data systems and strong linkages between evidence generators and consumers of evidence.

Strengthening the resilience of complex development systems is often illustrated under the 7 principles below:

Each of these principles can be directly achieved in part through the entrenchment of evaluation systems in the truest sense for (i) enhancing the diversity of perspectives (ii) recognizing the connectivity between different social groups that can increase information sharing, trust and reciprocity (iii) responding to monitoring information by supporting the identification and understanding of the slow variables and

feedbacks that can affect the existing ecosystem services[3] (iv) engaging meaningfully with complexity by supporting an understanding of the interaction and dynamics of the social-ecological systems (v) supporting learning and experimentation (vi) promoting broad participation through active engagement of all relevant stakeholders, and (vii) assessing and supporting effective collaboration across institutions.

This allows the systems to overcome and recover more quickly after a disturbance and ensure that social-ecological systems remain able to provide the ecosystem services needed to sustain and support the well-being of people.

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Strengthen the IT Infrastructure, technical capacities and data governance for the systematic conduct of evaluations: At the 2020 UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), countries reported difficulties in conducting evaluations of their national development plans during the pandemic. The lack of access by their national statistical systems to timely, updated and disaggregated data reflecting the current reality from different groups, including those living in hard-to-reach areas was repeatedly reported.

This sudden shift to virtual arrangements, often without sufficient IT infrastructure and skills in place to sustain ongoing activities, has either resulted in incomplete and outdated data for understanding what was really happening on the ground, or the postponement of data collection and evaluations.

Conducting evaluations with scarce resources

Increase coordination within and among countries: Challenges in the implementation of the SDGs cannot be dealt with in isolation. Joint solutions through collaboration and

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[3] Slow variables are system variables that generate change much more slowly and are an emergent outcome of long-term processes. The dynamics of a socio-ecological system arise from interactions and feedbacks between fast variables that respond to

the conditions created by the slow variables.
https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2015-02-19-applying-resilience-thinking.html

partnerships for eliminating data gaps and conducting evaluations is critical. Thus, countries can build on these results together.

Look back at evidence from past evaluations:
Many countries have gone through similar crises in the past and have lessons learned from the efforts they made to address these events. Governments and international organizations should look back at this past knowledge, harness existing evaluative evidence and translate that information into meaningful insights. Thus, decision-makers can act based on this information to address the challenges of a crisis and plan their recovery strategies. For example, UNDP issued the "2020 Reflections – Lessons from Evaluations: Learning from Past Crisis for Recovering from COVID-19[4]" to provide a synthesis of evaluative evidence over the past decade. Also, UNHCR prepared an evaluation brief – "COVID-19 Response: Lessons from UNHCR's Evaluation Evidence[5]" drawing on evidence from over 15 evaluations carried out since 2018. This brief is structured around several key challenges and elevated risks identified and highlighted in global and regional COVID situation reports.

Make use of real-time evaluation approaches:
Evaluation cannot be separated from what is occurring around us, it needs to be dynamic and adaptive to changing contexts. This means that evaluation approaches need to be redesigned for evaluation to remain useful and relevant in contexts where answers are needed rapidly and/or where the resources are limited. Similarly, the ways in which evaluators had planned to engage with stakeholders may need to change and they need to find the right tools that are accessible to their beneficiaries and stakeholders at a given time.

The lack of resources to reach remote populations should not prevent us from using simple methods for gathering evidence and conducting evaluations.

Initiatives such as evaluation syntheses, real-time evaluations and engaging national evaluation consultants are critical to informing decision making in a timely manner.[6]

Countries must take measures towards the evaluation of the SDGs for a sustainable and resilient recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the global problems of poverty, hunger, health, and inequality. According to a DESA's policy brief[7] on the COVID-19 Impacts on VNR Preparation, 39 out of 46 VNR reports presented at the 2020 HLPF explicitly mentioned the impact of the pandemic on SDG implementation.

The implementation of the Agenda 2030 not only sets the stage for recovery, but is also a path forward for building resilience to future shocks as many of the SDGs relate to resilience.

Previous reviews of past VNRs by EvalSDGs identified evaluation as a missed opportunity in the SDGs[8]. Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and positioning countries in the right direction for the achievement of the SDGs requires prompt and effective solutions. Thus, the use and conduct of evaluation of the SDGs should be at the forefront of countries' priorities.

Without conducting an evaluation of the SDGs, countries will not have enough data to understand the various impacts of this crisis, and know which problems need to be addressed first for a successful sustainable and resilient recovery. In addition, the cost of inaction (or of delaying action) towards evaluating the SDGs will result in a loss of the development gains achieved, and increase countries' vulnerability to future shocks.

EVALSDGs is a network of policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for effective evaluation for the SDGs.

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[4] http://web.undp.org/evaluation/reflections/book/index.shtml
[5] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5fbd1ee24.pdf
[6] Resources for conducting evaluations without spending significant amounts of time and budget on the evaluative process: https://evalsdgs.org/2020/09/01/training-recovering-from-covid-19-embedding-evaluation-in-vnrs/

[7] https://sdg.iisd.org/news/desa-brief-reflects-on-covid-19-impacts-on-vnr-preparation/
[8] https://evalsdgs.org/2017/05/01/briefing-paper-6-evaluation-a-missed-opportunity-in-the-sdgs-first-set-of-voluntary-national-reviews/