

EVALSDGs Insight # 20: Are We Getting There? A Synthesis of UN System Evaluations of SDG 5

PURPOSE:

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is essential to realize a more just, prosperous and sustainable future. However, [progress on SDG 5](#) has stalled and no target indicators have been achieved.

Within this context, the independent evaluation offices of [UN Women](#), [UNDP](#), [UNFPA](#), [UNICEF](#) and [WFP](#) conducted [an inter-agency synthesis of UN system evaluations on SDG 5](#).

The purpose of this Evaluation Insight is to explore key results from the SDG 5 synthesis, identify ways for stakeholders to advance SDG 5 and highlight lessons for conducting future evaluation synthesis exercises.

THE ISSUE:

The Synthesis

The initiative's purpose was to synthesize and use the wealth of evidence within UN evaluation offices to identify key enabling and hindering factors for SDG 5, explore what's working and not working, develop lessons and form forward looking implications for key stakeholder groups. The results were intended to serve as a catalyst for action by providing stakeholders with evidence needed to champion and advance their collective work to accelerate progress on SDG 5.

A [companion synthesis](#) was also produced, which examined inter-agency evaluations on SDG 5 in greater depth. The synthesis offered lessons and next steps for joint programming within the UN system.

Methodology

The initiative was a qualitative synthesis drawing on evaluation reports from the UN system related to SDG 5. The primary source of evaluations came from publicly available UN agency evaluation databases. The search and screening process identified 619 evaluation reports from 33 different UN agencies published between 2018 and 2022 that met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 295 were included in the sample for data extraction and analysis.

Key findings

The synthesis presented results across all nine SDG 5 targets, thematic and methodological evidence gaps and a set of overarching lessons. This section summarizes some of the key, high-level findings.

The UN contributed to **advancing gender-responsive legislation** by supporting legal reforms in areas such as public participation, employment, family law, and gender-based violence. Beyond advocacy, the UN provided technical assistance and capacity strengthening for policymakers to implement and enforce these laws effectively. However, continued efforts are needed to translate legislative progress into meaningful change in institutional practices and societal attitudes.

Integrated and holistic programming proved effective in addressing gender inequalities by linking multiple sectors. However, many programmes lacked sufficient scale and timeframes to produce longer term and widespread change.

The strategic use of **knowledge, data, and research** bolstered advocacy, technical support, and capacity building. UN agencies played a role as knowledge creators and brokers, providing context-specific research that informed policy decisions.

Partnerships with civil society organizations were essential for gender equality work, particularly in reaching marginalized groups and advocating for policy changes. However, some grassroots organizations faced barriers to engagement due to complex UN procedures.

Joint programmes enabled holistic approaches to address gender inequality, enhanced visibility of gender issues and helped create new partnerships. Despite higher transaction costs and coordination challenges, joint work enabled effective collaboration across sectors. There is a need for clearer roles, streamlined processes and longer timelines to achieve transformative results.

Operationalizing **Leave No One Behind (LNOB)** systematically remained difficult due to a lack of clear guidelines and gaps in identifying and engaging the most marginalized, ensuring their participation and addressing intersectionalities.

Achieving SDG 5 targets requires **more sustained and comprehensive prioritization in humanitarian settings**, including through stronger accountability, resourcing and expertise.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are often focused on outputs. More innovative and rigorous evaluation approaches, including theories of change, could better assess longer-term gender equality outcomes.

Harmful social norms and financing gaps remained major barriers. Deep-rooted attitudes continued to limit progress, while inadequate funding slowed implementation.

THE WAY FORWARD - ADVANCING SDG 5

To enhance the utility of the synthesis, a series of implications - potential courses of action or next steps - were developed for UN agencies, policymakers, programme implementers, and public and private donors.

UN agencies should continue supporting governments, civil society and other stakeholders in the development, adoption and implementation of gender-responsive legislation and policies. UN agencies can strengthen and promote integrated programming to address gender equality across sectors and undertake joint programming to leverage complementary expertise, facilitate knowledge exchange across agencies and enhance cross-sectoral programming. Knowledge products should be contextualized with clear communication plans. Programmes should utilize theories of change and include gender equality objectives at the outcome level where relevant. Outcome measurement can be strengthened using a broader range of mixed-methods evaluation approaches. UN entities can conduct costing exercises to assess investment needs for achieving SDG 5 targets. UN agencies could contribute to better understanding of areas where evidence gaps exist, such as the needs and concerns of intersectional groups, with clearer direction on applying the leave no one behind principle in evaluations.

Policymakers can integrate gender equality considerations into the design and development of legislation, policies, infrastructure projects, services and regulations; encourage cross-ministerial collaboration; prioritize LNOB principles during the policymaking process; and track commitments to gender equality through budget allocations, expenditure and gender audits. Policy makers can also integrate and institutionalize gender into capacity strengthening initiatives for government officials, civil servants, duty bearers and service providers.

Programme implementers can integrate gender equality into programme design and include gender-equality objectives at the outcome level. Theories of change can be adopted to guide programme

implementation and support monitoring and evaluation. Programme implementers should systematically conduct gender-responsive and gender transformative needs assessments as part of the planning and implementation process, including in humanitarian settings. Work to address root causes of gender equality, especially harmful social norms, by engaging men, religious leaders, cultural figures and other influential leaders. Programme implementers are well placed to continue amplifying community voices, particularly women from marginalized populations and those facing intersectional discrimination.

Donors can fund programmes that support the achievement and measurement of longer-term gender equality outcomes and provide flexibility to adjust programme strategies and incorporate real-time feedback. Donors can help increase the quality and volume of funding for gender equality, including within the humanitarian sphere, and can require programme implementers to incorporate gender equality into proposals, programme documents, reports and evaluations.

LESSONS FOR CONDUCTING AN EVALUATION SYNTHESIS

Lessons learned through the synthesis can guide similar endeavours aimed at synthesizing evaluative evidence.

Undertaking the synthesis jointly with other evaluation offices enhances the initiative. Active engagement of a multi-agency management group and synthesis team brings diverse expertise, thematic experience and technical knowledge to the synthesis and facilitates communication and use.

Clearly defined objectives and striking a balance between the scope and availability of evidence is crucial. A broader synthesis can have wider applicability but produce more general results while a narrower scope can yield more specific findings, as long as sufficient evidence is available. Transparency in the evaluation selection process is paramount.

Maintain a focus on synthesis communication and use. Development of a communication and dissemination plan that identifies key audiences; approaches and messaging; briefing documents; and communication and sharing events is critical. Engaging communications experts can help choose messaging and dissemination channels which target selected audiences.

Tailor recommendations or next steps to the audience. Given the breadth of results when synthesizing evidence at the SDG level, targeting next steps or recommendations to specific stakeholders can increase the relevance of the findings. Formal recommendations can encourage organizational buy-in, while less formal implications invite stakeholders to explore, understand and connect the results to their own work and unique contexts. In some cases, co-creating the

recommendations with the stakeholders involved ensures utilization, uptake, and innovation.

Explore the use of machine learning or Artificial Intelligence (AI) to support synthesis processes. Tools such as text mining and natural language processing may help facilitate the screening and coding processes and reduce the labour intensiveness of these phases.

Utilize existing resources and follow current synthesis initiatives. The [UNEG Evaluation Synthesis Working Group](#) offers several webinars and a comprehensive

guidance document to enhance the methodologies, quality and use of evaluation synthesis within UN agencies is forthcoming. [The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition](#) brings together over 40 UN agencies and other organizations to support and undertake evidence syntheses across all SDGs. The [Evidence Synthesis Infrastructure Collaborative](#) (ESIC) is a new initiative aiming to transform how we produce and use evidence synthesis to address societal challenges including accelerating progress towards the SDGs.

Did you know?

EVALS DGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to SDGs, made up of people with a shared interest in evaluation and sustainable development. EVALSDGs Guidance Group (GG) is an EVALSDGs sub-group focusing on strengthening capacity development for evaluation and the SDGs. The EVALSDGs 'Insights' are short, light and easy to digest notes presenting ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.

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