



## EVALSDGs INSIGHT 1: EVALUATING THE COMPLEXITY OF THE 17 SDGs

**PURPOSE:** The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require participation from actors at all levels: governments, civil society and the private sector. The SDGs are integrated and this creates complexity for evaluators who seek to evaluate them collectively, and commonly on a national scale, rather than individually. The purpose of this INSIGHT is to guide evaluators in how to navigate this complexity.

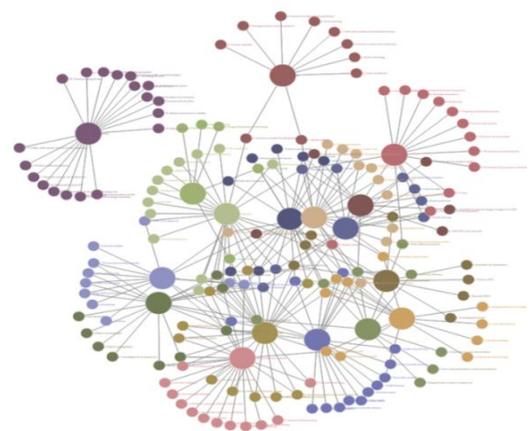
**THE ISSUE:** Actors at all levels of government, civil society, and the private sector, are involved in addressing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. The ultimate purpose is to tackle global issues through an integrated approach, following the principle '*No One Left Behind*'. This is based on lessons learnt from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which failed to recognise the interlinkages between targets and topics. The SDGs are comprehensive and integrated and speak for the 5 Ps: People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace, and Partnership. But *evaluating all of them together, and not singularly*, remains a challenge. Also, we often work on short timeframes to evaluate projects and programs rather than considering the longer timeframes and system changes that are required for the SDGs. Further, evaluation of the SDGs needs to go beyond tracking simple performance indicators and consider complexity in behavioral, social, and political changes. Therefore, in implementing the SDGs and measuring their achievements, there is an imperative to *address complexity in a rapidly changing context by (a) being clear about the expected outcomes, (b) using a mix of evaluation tools, and (c) taking an adaptable approach*. To achieve this, evaluators must:

- **Set adaptable evaluation frameworks:** prepare frameworks which outline objectives, expected outcomes but allow space for initiatives to evolve and emerge. Invest time in identifying assumptions as well as the possible weaknesses and strengths of the whole monitoring process. Think beyond the indicators to capture data that explains emerging processes.
- **Demonstrate complexity in reality and in practice:** tell a story through appropriate analysis that blends quantitative (numbers) data and qualitative (words) data. Some goals, for example Goal 16, '*Promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies*', presents information which is intangible, such as: what peace means to different people, communities, and countries. It is important to ensure participation of all stakeholders. Analysis has to contextualize findings depending on different locations, stakeholders involved and other important factors that help to show what works, for whom, why and where.
- **Take an integrated approach:** including linked concepts which can describe the reality of the circumstance. Choosing the most appropriate words and their nuances is fundamental to give data gathering personality. For example, for Goal 16, '*sensitivity*' and the '*do no harm*' approach are meaningful concepts that are realistic about the choices that need to be made to understand that there may be influences or trade-offs between different courses of action. These integrated aspects need to be given attention in evaluation.
- **Consider risk assessment:** reflect on the identification, management, and potential mitigation of risk factors (using a risk matrix with ratings: high, medium, and low) to identify risks that have (or may) occur. This can help to understand the different influencing factors in complexity. For example, for Goal 16, special attention should be given the culture, history of equity policies and human rights violations, politics, and economy of a

### Do you know where we are? In the middle of complexity

**BIG CIRCLES:** 17 SDGs  
**SMALL CIRCLES:** targets and interconnections among the 17 SDGs

Source: [SDGs interactive model](#)



country. These may have positive or negative influences. The risks may be that the potential of positive influence is not given enough support; or that negative influences are not sufficiently guarded against. Identifying the risk factors helps to deepen understanding of the complexity of the situation and context.

**SOLUTION:** If the reality of the SDGs is complex, then evaluating interventions is even more complex. It is important to use mixed methods, multiple disciplines, outcome and intermediate indicators, and actors to tell the story of what you are evaluating. A complex story will have many chapters, implications, and participants. **A complex story will be a mix of everything - but it will have boundaries.** An evaluation needs to be clear about its scope - the beginning and the end; what is included and what is not to help with understanding. The following table may help in defining the scope of an evaluation for the SDGs. The points are not comprehensive - just a few starting points. There are many excellent books and other resources for evaluators to consult.

Criteria to consider	Integration	Method	Result	Accountability level	Remarks	Risk Factor
Individual (context important)	Holistic; thematic or sectoral – integration	Theory of change Participatory Qualitative	May require proxy indicators	Self-assessment Perceptions of impact	Test facts and assumptions.	High, medium and/or low context; Careful risk assessment required
Institutional (important to identify links and stakeholders at start)	Governments (sectoral/thematic)	Institutional Performance Assessment	Effectiveness & efficiency of mandate	Rigorous audit and strategic review	quantitative evidence on mandate, KPIs & finance	Low if single mandate More complex if multiple mandate; High if political
	Civil Society/ Not for profit (issue-focused)	Outcome focused evaluation	Linked to CSO objectives	Programs; Functional Board; ethics and quality	Quantitative Qualitative data and program based approach important	Medium: different stakeholder perspectives High - advocacy or frontier work
	Private Sector (sectoral)	Quantitative; triple bottom line	Viability; contribution to outcomes	Depends on company & ethics	Complex data difficult to access. Time constraints	Medium – depends on type and objective of engagement
System level/society	Multisector; multi-stakeholder	Systems-based, developmental	Findings – specific & emerging	Specific for agents; decision-making	Often requires multi-sectoral team, good planning and communication	High – multiple interpretations possible. Define boundaries in scope.

**KEY LESSONS:**

- It is challenging to evaluate the SDGs holistically, rather than singularly - however this is critical to improve evaluative practice on the SDGs.
- Evaluators should be clear about expected outcomes; use mixed evaluation tools, methods, disciplines, indicators and actors; and take an adaptable approach in order to address this complexity in a rapidly changing environment.

**About EVALSDGs INSIGHTS**

EVALSDGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to the SDGs. EVALSDGs Guidance Group is a sub-group of EVALSDGs made up of evaluators ready to walk with you to support the evaluation of the 17 SDGs. EVALSDGs INSIGHTS are short, light and easy to digest notes on topics related to evaluation and the SDGs. They present ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.

**Contact us to provide your feedback or for more information:**

Dorothy Lucks, EVALSDGs Co-Chair: [sdfglobal@sustain.net.au](mailto:sdfglobal@sustain.net.au); Florence Etta; Isha Wedasinghe Miranda, [ishamiranda2011@gmail.com](mailto:ishamiranda2011@gmail.com)

**Produced in partnership with UNITAR.**