Briefing

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Policy pointers

The evaluation community needs to promote, resource and build capacity for using equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluation in all countries.

National governments, women's machineries and evaluation communities, including voluntary organisations for professional evaluation and other partners, should work together to ensure VNR reporting is based on equity-focused and gender-responsive evidence.

Elevating 'equity-focus and gender-responsiveness' to a standalone criterion within national M&E processes can make evaluation a catalyst for transformative change in the era of SDGs and beyond.

International and national statistical commissions and evaluation communities can advance gender equality and equity by linking data, analysis and evaluation in VNR processes.

Equity-focused, gender-responsive evidence: a blind spot in VNR reporting

In 2018, 46 countries expressed their commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by voluntarily presenting national reviews of their progress on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the 2018 High-level Political Forum (HLPF). Analysis of these voluntary national reviews (VNRs) found that, although monitoring is strong, evaluation receives almost no attention. VNR reporting is not incorporating evaluative evidence, particularly equity-focused and gender-responsive evidence. Access to disaggregated data is a core challenge to tracking progress. Nevertheless, countries are actively looking for solutions, recognising that gender equality is an enabler and accelerator in achieving all the SDGs. Equity-focused, gender-responsive implementation, assessment and evaluation of the 2030 Agenda offers an opportunity for transformative change to achieve gender equality and equity in the SDGs era and beyond.

The core principles of the 2030 Agenda — human rights, gender equality and a commitment to leave no one behind — should underpin efforts to prevent conflict, overcome divisions and address the root causes of inequity, discrimination and unfair power relations. To deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda, countries must integrate a gender equality and equity perspective into implementing, following up and reviewing all the SDGs.

In the three years since adopting the 2030 Agenda, 102 countries have presented their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). This briefing examines the extent to which the 46 VNRs presented in 2018 incorporate equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluative evidence and whether they report on how countries are integrating gender equality and

equity into national policies and systems. This assessment builds on previous briefings on the 2016 and 2017 VNRs.[1,2]

The study analysed VNRs' use of evaluation- and gender-related keywords, mention of reporting systems for measuring progress on SDGs and descriptions of methodological frameworks for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). It also looked for evidence of countries integrating gender-responsive and equity-focused evaluative evidence into follow-up, review and general governance systems and incorporating gender equity and equality, and marginalised voices in their national policies and systems.

What countries reported

Gender equality. All the 2018 VNRs used gender-specific language, even when reporting

on only the six priority SDGs (Box 1). Most reflected gender equality as a priority, often highlighting it in forewords, opening statements and/or report summaries.

Policymakers need equity-focused, gender-responsive evaluative evidence to facilitate transformative change

Most countries reported on their planning and progress for delivering the 2030 Agenda. Many had mapped the SDGs within national priorities, often having analysed women's overall situations across sectors, and/or highlighted gaps in policy and data. For example, Bhutan's gender equality diagnostic study of selected areas aims to facilitate gender mainstreaming by generating baseline information on the status of women and men, including through gender analysis. In Jamaica, the women's health survey collects data on violence against women.

Most countries demonstrated progress in implementing their national development plans. Several have established institutional structures — including national women's machineries (institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women) — to lead on:

- Integrating gender equity and equality into national plans and policies

- Developing national strategies targeting women and girls, as well as systems to monitor them, and

- Amending and/or introducing legislation on domestic or gender-based violence, women's working conditions, maternity-related laws and other issues.

Although women's machineries and rights organisations are involved in implementing the 2030 Agenda, countries did not indicate whether they are helping to assess progress, plan or develop the VNRs.

Progress towards gender equity and equality. Despite most countries noting significant challenges in integrating the 2030 Agenda into national priorities and structures, many reported on the status of women and what they are doing to meet targets for SDG5: achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. 36 VNRs dedicated a section to this goal, while others highlighted its cross-cutting nature.

However, few VNRs addressed SDG5's full set of targets and indicators. While most reflected on baseline situations and reported on implementation, few reported on progress in achieving targets. Those that did often focused on introducing or amending equality and discrimination legislation and women's participation in parliamentary, local government or managerial positions, mainly in the public sector.

Most VNRs highlighted violence against women and girls as a major gender equality issue in their respective countries but only a few — including Greece, Ireland, Namibia, Switzerland and Vietnam — reported on progress towards addressing it. Greece, Ireland and Singapore also reported on measures for safeguarding women against trafficking.

Several countries have established systems to track and make public budget allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment. Albania, for example, is mainstreaming gender in its medium-term budget programme and reported that 28 programmes complied with gender-responsive budgeting, compared to 9 in previous years. Mexico has earmarked a budget to strengthen follow-up systems for gender equality and women's entrepreneurship programmes.

Recognising the cross-cutting nature of gender inequality, some countries highlighted discrepancies between women and men, girls and boys when reporting on progress towards other goals. They often outlined challenges in addressing these disparities.

Many VNRs showcased a lack or sporadic use of sex-disaggregated data in implementing and assessing progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Those that did use it rarely aligned it to the SDG indicators, suggesting their data were not appropriate for tracking progress against specific targets.

VNRs that focused their reporting on the six priority SDGs for HLPF 2018 (Box 1) were less likely to report on gender discrepancies in their progress. Variation within reports indicated that gender-responsive reporting is easier for some goals or targets than others. The most reported differences in gender were in educational proficiency and attainment (SDG4: quality education) and pay,

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Box 1. HLPF 2018 'Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies' priority SDGs

Although most countries reported on all 17 SDGs, the 2018 HLPF prioritised and focused on:

SDG6: Clean water and sanitation

SDG7: Affordable and clean energy

SDG11: Sustainable cities and communities

SDG12: Responsible consumption and production patterns

SDG15: Life on land

SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals.

workforce participation and working conditions (SDG8: decent work and economic growth).

Gender mainstreaming. In line with the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), VNR reporting reflected a continued and increasing commitment to — and adoption of — gender mainstreaming. Several VNRs included evidence of promoting and achieving gender equity and equality in planned policy action and preventing legislation and programmes from creating or reinforcing inequalities. For example, Lebanon has abolished a penal code article allowing the prosecution to drop charges against a rapist who marries his victim and is developing a law to criminalise sexual harassment in public spaces and workplaces. Namibia has adopted a national gender mainstreaming programme and gender-responsive budget guidelines. Bhutan has developed a cross-sectoral handbook on indicators for improved gender mainstreaming and Mexico's national development plan has incorporated a holistic gender approach.

Some reports indicated challenges in achieving full gender equality on all levels, reporting that gaps persist in political life, leadership roles and pay and that women still experience high levels of gender-based violence.

Marginalised women and girls. The principle that no goal is considered met until it is met for everyone is well established within the SDG framework. Countries need to go beyond governance as usual to match the transformative ambition of the 2030 Agenda.

Some VNRs reflected a commitment to 'leave no woman or girl behind' in implementation, but not in results. Although some featured marginalised groups, such as refugees and displaced, older, disabled and LGBTQI people, few referred to disparities in achieving individual SDG targets between women in different groups.

Some countries reported policies and measures to improve the lives of women from marginalised groups. For example, Egypt is targeting women in rural areas, Hungary and Albania are strengthening employment opportunities for women from ethnic cultural minorities and Bahrain is providing housing for divorced, abandoned and widowed women.

While some countries reported involving nongovernmental organisations and the private sector in the VNR process, they did not specify whether these represented marginalised, vulnerable or any other women.

Data challenges

1. Limited reporting on the use of evaluation evidence. The SDG follow-up and review process emphasises monitoring progress but not the importance of evaluation. Therefore, although countries have made efforts to assess data availability, sources and methodologies and identify evidence gaps, VNRs barely reported on evaluation. This is consistent with the 2016 and 2017 assessments.[3]

No VNR explicitly demonstrated how countries are incorporating equity-focused or gender-responsive evaluative evidence. Of the 19 reports that mentioned sex-disaggregated data, none clarified if, and how, they are collecting or using this data or whether they are further disaggregating it to track equity between women from different groups.

2. Limited access to, and use of, disaggregated and gender-sensitive data. The 2030 Agenda stipulates that follow-up and review processes "will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts."[4]

Stakeholders need access to detailed data across multiple dimensions to make sure they leave no one behind. An equity-focused, gender-responsive approach to evaluation considers what the evaluation examines and how it is undertaken to assess the degree to which an intervention changes gender and power relationships. This includes structural and other causes that lead to inequity, discrimination and unfair power relations. M&E processes should be inclusive, participatory and respectful of all stakeholders, including rightsholders and duty bearers.[5]

Policymakers need equity-focused, gender-responsive evaluative evidence to facilitate transformative change. The lack of reliable, disaggregated gender-sensitive data is the core challenge to progress on SDG5 and the cross-cutting nature of gender equality, across the rest of the goals.

Recommendations

Although the VNRs demonstrate that countries consider gender equality and equity to be essential for achieving the SDGs, integrating equity-focused, gender-responsive evidence seems to be a blind spot in reporting. The 2030 Agenda needs a strong equity-focused and gender-responsive M&E framework to provide better evidence for learning, decision making and accountability to ensure that no one is left behind.

The 2030 Agenda's call for a robust follow-up and review framework informed by country-led evaluations brings opportunities for the evaluation community to work with other

networks and professions, such as statisticians and women's rights advocates. However, the methodological, political, social and financial implications of evaluating progress towards the SDGs through an equity-focused and gender-responsive lens are challenging.

Despite some progress towards gender equity and equality, the 2018 VNRs reveal a critical lack of evaluative evidence. In particular, they lack equity-focused, gender-responsive evidence, which can illuminate problems that a social policy may not foresee.

With 51 countries already committed to reporting at HLPF 2019, policymakers and stakeholders must now work together to assess progress towards the 2030 Agenda. To ensure countries move beyond monitoring to incorporate gender-responsive and equity-focused evaluation in their follow-up and review of the SDGs, we recommend that:

1. The international evaluation community provides the necessary resources and expertise to promote equity-focused, gender-responsive evaluation and build national evaluation capacity in all countries.

2. Women's machineries and rights organisations, along with national evaluation communities including voluntary organisations for professional evaluation, are a central part of assessing progress so they can hold governments accountable to their equity and gender-equality commitments.[6] National governments should work with women's machineries and rights organisations to ensure

their policies, decisions and reporting are equity-focused and gender-responsive.

3. Evaluation processes elevate equity-focus and gender-responsiveness from an approach to a standalone evaluation criterion, which make them catalysts for transformative change, including in the 2030 Agenda.

4. National and international statistical commissions and evaluation communities work together to enable strong links between data, analysis and evaluation for advancing gender equality and equity.

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Partners

EvalGender+ is the global partnership to promote the demand, supply and use of equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluations as an avenue to support accountability for gender equality commitments in the implementation of the SDGs.

UN Women Independent Evaluation Service is co-located with the Internal Audit Service under the Independent Evaluation and Audit Service. Its main purpose is to enhance accountability, inform decision making and contribute to learning about the best ways to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment through the organisation's mandate. The analysis and recommendations in this briefing do not necessarily reflect the views of UN Women, its Executive Board, or the UN Member States. The designations in this publication do not imply an opinion on the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or the delimitation of frontiers. The text has not been edited to official UN Women publication standards, and UN Women accepts no responsibility for error.

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

EvalPartners is a global partnership that aims to influence policymakers, public opinion and other stakeholders so evaluative evidence is valued and used.

Notes

[1] Simon, B, Meyer, W, D'Errico, S, Schwandt, T, Lucks, D, Zhaoying, C, El-Saddick, K, Schneider, E, Taube, L, Anderson, S and Ofir, Z (2017) Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs' first set of Voluntary National Reviews. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17423IIED / [2] Meyer, W, Naidoo, I, D'Errico, S, Hofer, S, Bajwa, M, Tekko Perez, L A, Ed-Saddick, K, Lucks, D, Simon, B and Piergallini, I (2018) VNR reporting needs evaluation: a call for global guidance and national action. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17446IIED / [3] Our briefings on the VNRs presented at HLPF 2016 and 2017 had similar findings (see notes 1 and 2). / [4] United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1), p32, 74g. / [5] UN Women (2015) How to manage gender-responsive evaluation. Evaluation handbook. / [6] UN Women (2018) Turning promises into action: gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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