

4

BENIN: EMERGING ISSUES IN NATIONAL MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS FOR VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS



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INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the 22 voluntary national reviews (VNRs) submitted to the 2016 United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development,⁷⁸ which focused on how each addressed the role of evaluation, revealed that most VNRs show little awareness about just what evaluation is and how it could be used to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, more widely, the Agenda 2063 of the African Union. Along with Benin, many more countries will soon be presenting their VNRs in 2020. In most African countries, monitoring is strong, but evaluation systems and processes often remain missing or misunderstood in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

When decision makers want to use evidence from monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to assist them in making choices, there is a demand for M&E. When there is great capacity to supply M&E information, but low capacity to demand quality evidence, for example to prepare VNRs, because the institutional frame involves many actors working in silos, there is a mismatch between supply and demand.

BENIN'S NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS FOR SDG TRACKING AND EVALUATION

In Benin, an institutional framework has been established which defines the mechanisms for conducting evaluations, including guidance on selecting evaluations and structures, engagement of stakeholders, dissemination of results and the monitoring of implementation of recommendations.

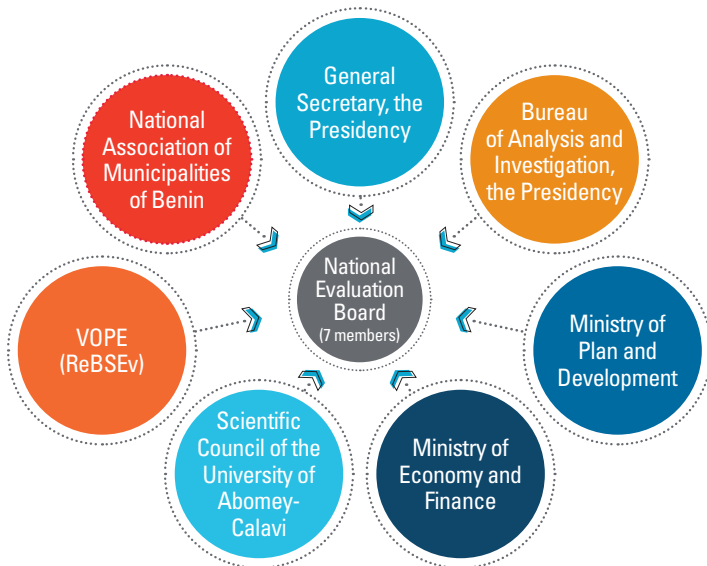
78 Benoit Simon, Wolfgang Meyer, Stefano D'Errico, Thomas Schwandt, Dorothy Lucks, Chen Zhaoying, Kassem El-Saddik, Elisabeth Schneider, Lena Taube, Simon Anderson and Zenda Ofir, Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs' first set of Voluntary National Reviews, 2017. <https://evalsdgs.org/2017/05/01/briefing-paper-6-evaluation-a-missed-opportunity-in-the-sdgs-first-set-of-voluntary-national-reviews/>. This analysis was expanded in Wolfgang Meyer, Indran Naidoo, Stefano D'Errico, Silke Hofer, Madeeha Bajwa, Luisa Alejandra Tello Pérez, Kassem El-Saddik, Dorothy Lucks, Benoit Simon and Ilenia Piergallini, VNR reporting needs evaluation: a call for global guidance and national action, 2018. <https://evalsdgs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/eight-briefing-paper.pdf>.

For example, with respect to conducting evaluations, to ensure impartiality, independent service providers such as universities undertake the evaluations. Approximately 17 evaluations have been started and 14 have been completed since 2010, one of which is an impact evaluation and the others implementation and/or process evaluations. These include evaluations of sectoral projects, multisectoral programmes and public policies in decentralization, power, agriculture, health, water and energy and specific studies in the areas of domestic electric security policy and global development strategy. This demonstrates the strength of the Benin National Evaluation System and how evaluation is generating evidence for use in policymaking and preparation of VNRs.

In terms of use of evaluations, a study was undertaken by the Bureau of Public Policy Evaluation, Office of the Presidency, Republic of Benin, on the quality and use of evaluations commissioned from 2010 to 2014, focusing on nine evaluations. One of the key findings was good ownership of the recommendations by implementing agencies. Approximately 80 percent of the recommendations (from all nine evaluations) have led to the development of implementation plans. Approximately 82 percent of the recommendations led to specific changes (49 percent policy review, 10 percent institutional change, 10 percent new projects and 15 other short-term measures). However, it is an ongoing challenge to ensure the use of evaluation findings for policy improvement and better implementation, tracking and elaborating VNRs.



Figure 1. Benin’s National Evaluation System for the SDGs



VOPE = voluntary organizations for professional evaluation
Source: Bureau of Public Policy Evaluation, Presidency, Republic of Benin, 2019

ANALYSIS OF PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDGs IN BENIN

Countries are beginning to document their progress towards the SDGs through regular VNRs submitted to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets clear expectations for VNRs to be “rigorous and based on evidence”, and the United Nations recommends that the first VNR in particular should describe the review process and how the “national follow-up and reporting” system will be implemented. Evaluation enhances monitoring’s meaning and depth by addressing complexity in how the SDGs are best achieved, so each VNR should include up-to-date evaluation findings and an assessment of progress on national evaluation policies and systems.

In Benin, at the national level we see increasing collaboration between government, civil society and academia on evaluation. However, often there are different streams of support and different levels of engagement, at times duplicative. There are many opportunities to collaborate more closely to strengthen capacities and evaluation culture at the national level.

The current VNR processes represent a unique entry point for national-level thinking on evidence-creation and dissemination for transformative changes. Benin should seek to embed evaluation into national plans and policies to foster transformative development. This is presently missing. Currently, monitoring data seems to prevail within the scope of the VNR processes. Evaluation is often dismissed whereas it should be the best analytical entry point to report on the SDGs and promote learning.

For transformative change to take place in the country, the generation and use of evidence are critical. However, such evidence ought to be as diverse as possible. In other words, assessing progress towards the SDGs is not only about quantitative data (administrative data collection to track SDGs as the country is proceeding for its VNRs) but also qualitative. At country level, the measures that could greatly benefit the effectiveness of VNR processes include the following: the conduct of meta-analyses and joint evaluations; the launch of evaluations of cross-cutting strategies; and the support of voluntary organizations of professional evaluators, civil society organizations and parliaments to commit. The Bureau of Public Policy Evaluation located in the Office of Presidency is mandated to support this.

There is evidence of increasing demand through government-led evaluation systems in Benin. Results concepts are not yet consistently applied throughout the M&E systems in Benin. In addition, the results-based notions that are applied appear to be generating perverse incentives that reinforce upward compliance and control to the detriment of more developmental uses of M&E evidence. This implies that the SDG review and follow-up process will be data-rich, but weaker on integrated analysis as evaluation could help to do.

There is an added value in working closely with all the actors in the country. In Benin, the Bureau of Public Policy Evaluation is coordinating the national evaluation system for learning and accountability. The main actors of the system are all committed to working closely with the Bureau, as illustrated in Figure 1 above, to strengthen national capacities in monitoring and evaluation and produce evidence for policymaking.

When it comes to the SDGs, no Government can go it alone. Partnerships across a wide range of national and international players are essential to make an effort to set up a platform where all the interested parties could collectively advance the discourse on the VNR, both at national and subnational levels. This requires:

- Strengthening evaluation and integrating an evaluation perspective in planning, monitoring and reporting (especially country-level reporting, as well as for the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063).
- Importance for Governments, in collaboration with their partners, to plan for evaluation and set aside funding for M&E from the outset. This requires a change in culture and practices, as well as political will.
- Strengthening robust data to monitor developmental processes and including all stakeholders in this process (beyond default household surveys conducted by national statistical offices).



Figure 2. Activity map to work with main national actors within the system



VOPE = voluntary organizations for professional evaluation
Source: Bureau of Public Policy Evaluation, Presidency, Republic of Benin, 2019

- A strong national evaluation system within a national evaluation policy.
- Domesticating the SDGs within the national development plan and developing indicators for monitoring purposes and evaluation processes.
- Developing an algorithm to retrieve SDG indicators from census and survey data based with national statistical agencies.
- Developing a disaggregated platform at country level that provides information on SDG indicators including at the local level.
- A country-level web-based application to check if ministries' annual workplans are aligned with SDG targets and to monitor their costing.
- Continuing and strengthening monitoring the SDGs to facilitate their evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The institutional design of government M&E systems is important, including the systems for capturing, processing, storing and communicating M&E information. Monitoring helps managers and policymakers to understand what the money invested is producing and whether plans are being followed. Evaluation helps to establish what difference is being made, why the level of performance is being achieved, what is being learned from activities, and whether and how to strengthen implementation of a programme or policy. Linked to the SDGs and VNRs, the programme will strengthen the overall national capacity and provide coherence, breaking the actors' work in silos for better evidence production.

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