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ARCHITECTURE FOR EVALUATION EFFECTIVENESS

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INTRODUCTION

The evaluation profession has rapidly grown globally, with most Governments and development partners drawing on evaluative knowledge and expertise to improve performance and demonstrate accountability. In any oversight and accountability type of evaluation, key principles are important and need to permeate the evaluation architecture. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) references its evaluation function and offices to the 2016 United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation.⁴¹ These are foundational principles that explain what constitutes a sound evaluation function. An important issue to note is that for evaluation reports to be taken seriously and acted upon, they need to emanate from credible evaluation units, the key to which is the principle of independence. Evaluations make a judgment about the quality and worth of a strategy, programme or project, offering a basis for discussion on what needs to be changed and how. Evaluation thus cannot be compromised by bias, and therefore structural, financial, content and behavioural independence are critical.

This paper discusses the independent evaluation function of UNDP, providing lessons from the largest independent evaluation office in the United Nations system. It describes key issues that have been addressed in policy and practice to make the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of UNDP a model office. The paper focuses on four areas critical for strengthening any evaluation function, i.e., evaluation policy, evaluation quality, evaluation coverage and communication.

STRENGTHENING THE EVALUATION FUNCTION

As UNDP implements its new Strategic Plan, 2018-2021, the vision of which is “to help countries achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, accelerating structural transformations for sustainable development and

41 <http://unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>

building resilience to crises and shocks”, to be delivered through country support platforms for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global development and advisory and implementation support platforms, with an increased focus on innovative solutions to support development,⁴² it is increasingly relevant for the organization to have a strong, credible and independent evaluation function. Such an evaluation function will ensure the accountability and transparency of its operations and contribute to promoting learning across the organization and strengthening evidence-based policymaking.⁴³ The independence of the UNDP evaluation function remains essential to insulate the IEO from undue influence and uphold its credibility in judging the programmatic effectiveness of UNDP.⁴⁴ It is important to emphasize the two dimensions of the independence of the evaluation function which include behavioural and organizational independence. The former entails the ability to conduct evaluations without undue influence of a third party while the latter refers to the structural independence from management functions.⁴⁵ These dimensions are reinforced at the IEO.

The IEO abides by the Evaluation Policy of UNDP.⁴⁶ UNDP has had an evaluation function since shortly after its establishment in 1967, but did not have an evaluation policy until 2005. According to Trochim,⁴⁷ *“an Evaluation Policy is any rule or principle that a group or organization uses to guide its decisions and actions when doing evaluation”*. The UNDP Evaluation Policy has evolved considerably over time, having been revised in 2011, 2016 and again in 2019. Developing a national evaluation policy may also take time, or may evolve over time, with subsequent iterations. The purpose of the policy is to establish a common institutional basis for the UNDP evaluation function. The policy seeks to increase transparency, coherence and efficiency in generating and using evaluative knowledge for organizational learning and effective management for results, and to support accountability. The elements of the 2016 and 2019 UNDP Evaluation Policies remain critical for any evaluation office, for example, foundational principles such as reporting lines, behavioural independence (term limitations of heads to prevent conflict of interest), and operational and budgetary independence.

42 UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2021: <https://undocs.org/DP/2017/38>

43 Naidoo, Indran, 2018b, Evaluation, a driver for democracy and development towards Sustainable Development Goals success in Africa, Evaluation Matters First Quarter 2018; and UNDP IEO, 2018, Annual Report on Evaluation, New York: UNDP IEO, <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/annual-report/are-2018.shtml>

44 Naidoo, Indran, 2019, Audit and Evaluation: Working Collaboratively to Support Accountability, EES Conference paper. <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/papers/papers-articles.shtml>

45 UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, 2016.

46 <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/policy.shtml>

47 Trochim, W.M.K. (2009). Evaluation policy and evaluation practice. In W.M.K. Trochim, M. M. Mark, & L. J. Cooksy (Eds.), Evaluation policy and evaluation practice. New Directions for Evaluation, 123, 13–32.

The IEO has successfully established its own structure, budget and professional and managerial independence. It has put in place measures to protect the evaluation function of UNDP from erosion and undue influence to ensure the continued credibility of its work and the transparency and accountability of the organization as a whole. As outlined in the UNDP Evaluation Policy, clear budgeting benchmarks were established to ensure that the work of IEO cannot be restricted through financial constraints. UNDP management continues to affirm the importance of independence in the work of the IEO and its value in strengthening the development contribution of the organization. This recognition has resulted in a fourfold increase in independent evaluations by the office, with US\$7.2 billion in programming being evaluated in 2018 and 2019. A critical mass has been reached in advancing a reflective evaluation culture.

Another question that arises with respect to independent evaluation functions is, who oversees the evaluation office? In UNDP there are three levels of oversight. The Executive Board of UNDP is the custodian of the Evaluation Policy. The IEO reports to the Executive Board, which also approves its budget and multi-year programme of work. In addition, IEO engages with the UNDP Audit and Evaluation Advisory Committee and the IEO Evaluation Advisory Panel. The Panel advises on the office's work and provides periodic quality assurance of evaluations which contributes to monitoring both structural and substantive independence within the organization.⁴⁸

However, the independence of the evaluation function is not inconsistent with the practices of consulting stakeholders during the evaluation process.⁴⁹ It rather strengthens transparency and ensures an inclusive evaluation approach, which are key elements of credibility according to the UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation.⁵⁰

"In the Philippines we have had an evaluation policy framework in place for three years. We receive funding on an annual basis. The system is still in its infancy; we are pilot testing some evaluations. We have an annual [monitoring and evaluation] forum where we share the lessons from the initial evaluations with all government stakeholders and other partners, including academia, development partners and civil society. We now have two pending bills in the Senate and the lower house to pass an evaluation act."

– **VIOLETA CORPUS**, DIRECTOR IV, NATIONAL ECONOMIC AND DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, GOVERNMENT OF THE PHILIPPINES

48 Wilton Park and UNDP IEO, 2018, Revisiting independence, objectivity and the critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG era, Report.

49 Ibid.

50 UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, 2016.

“In Morocco, in 2006, the National Observatory for Human Development (Observatoire National du Développement Humain (ONDH) was created. This Observatory was established following an in-depth study of development programmes and human development, which found, among others, that while there were many strategies and programmes designed to promote human development, and that Morocco had made quite a bit of progress, there were no evaluations to determine which programmes had been successful or not.

The ONDH is led by a Council of 24 people identified and appointed by the King, and includes representatives from the scientific community, the professional world, [non-governmental organizations] and the administration. The Council is supplemented by a technical, operational team. The ONDH is independent from the executive, from the Government, although it is attached to the Head of Government for its budget allocations. The programme of work and the evaluations are carried out by the Council members and the technical teams of the ONDH.”

– **EL HASSAN EL MANSOURI**, GENERAL SECRETARY AT THE
NATIONAL OBSERVATION OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, MOROCCO

It is important to note that although independent, the office continues to engage fully with UNDP management and programme teams in undertaking evaluations to ensure that findings, conclusions and recommendations are thoroughly considered, and as a result, are taken into account in adjusting or developing new policies, programmes and development approaches across the organization.

EVALUATION COVERAGE

Evaluation coverage of the organization’s programme is critical in ensuring accountability and learning. The coverage affects three dimensions of the evaluation which include the subject (what is supposed to be done by the evaluation agency), the focus of the evaluation and the type of evaluation methods and techniques to be used.⁵¹

The IEO of UNDP conducts evaluations of UNDP country programmes prior to the submission of a new four- or five-year country programme document to the UNDP Executive Board.

Our move towards 100 percent independent evaluation coverage of all country programmes that are scheduled for a new strategy is a key milestone for IEO. This coverage relates to visibility and impact, and issues of scale and scope are pertinent.

51 Boyle, R., and Lemaire, D. (Eds.), 1999, Building effective evaluation capacity: Lessons from practice (Vol. 8). Transaction Publishers.

Implementing an evaluation strategy that facilitates 100 percent coverage of countries allows for a more in-depth examination of key issues within clusters or typology of countries. The IEO recognizes that expanding country programme evaluation coverage requires both product innovation (i.e., in the content and scope of evaluations) and process innovation (i.e., in the ways country programme evaluations are conducted).

The IEO also carries out corporate thematic evaluations designed to inform the organization's global policies and programmes. These evaluations are tabled for formal consideration and decision by the UNDP Executive Board, generate considerable discussion within the organization and among other key stakeholders, and also inform UNDP global policies and strategies.

“The title of this session, Architecture for Evaluation Effectiveness, is very relevant, as it points to the fact that we are actually building something. **In Montenegro**, over the last decade, public administration reform and institution building has been largely determined by the [European Union] accession process. This has resulted in a ‘hyper production’ of strategic documents. However, when we mapped our strategic framework, we realized that only a third of the more than 120 strategies in our system envisaged evaluation. From 2017 we have been working on the legal framework for strategic planning, which includes reference to the need for all strategies to be evaluated. Evaluation is now an inherent part of the policy cycle.”

– **ZORKA KORDIC**, SECRETARIAT-GENERAL OF THE GOVERNMENT OF MONTENEGRO, DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE GOVERNMENT, HEAD OF DEPARTMENT FOR GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES, MONTENEGRO

EVALUATION QUALITY

Evaluation quality has been subject of significant contributions in the literature. Many authors have emphasized a wide range of criteria to ensure quality. Cooksy and Mark⁵² highlighted two necessary criteria, which include the use of the right methods based on the evaluation objectives and the sufficiency of data collected with appropriate rigour. The application of the right methods needs to respond to the context without compromising evaluation quality, which in turn can undermine the legitimacy of the

52 Cooksy, L. J., and Mark, M. M., 2012, Influences on evaluation quality, *American Journal of Evaluation*, 33(1), 79-84.

evaluation institution.⁵³ Evaluation quality is also impacted by several factors including limited resources, insufficient understanding of the evaluation function, poor data, non-alignment of timing and scope of the evaluation with the budget cycles.⁵⁴ In UNDP, the allocation of resources to the evaluation function is a critical issue addressed by the UNDP Evaluation Policy. This is consistent with the literature which identifies the evaluation policy as an important contextual variable that affects evaluation quality by the way it defines allocation of resources and conditions under which evaluations are carried out.⁵⁵

Quality is therefore a key issue for evaluation. Independence does not mean ignoring quality. Credibility is based on quality. Since 2012, when I joined the office, the IEO has made considerable progress in building internal mechanisms, platforms and processes for optimizing its independent evaluation, oversight, quality assurance and outreach functions. To ensure evaluation quality at a lower cost, the office has strengthened its team of professional evaluators as well as its research team, enabling more research and data collection prior to country visits when initial desk-related findings are verified.

Establishment of an Evaluation Advisory Panel is one of the key measures taken by the IEO for outside scrutiny and advice to strengthen the quality of independent evaluations. The members of the Panel are eminent and internationally recognized leaders in evaluation who support the quality assurance function of the IEO Director. The Evaluation Advisory Panel has reviewed and made recommendations on various IEO products; provided the IEO with strategic advice; conducted several training sessions on various topics relating to development, evaluation theory and practice; provided guidance on methodology, communications, outreach, a knowledge management strategy and staff professionalization and capacity; and participated with the IEO in a number of external outreach events and conferences, including the National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) conferences. The NEC conference is part of the IEO strategy to support the development of national evaluation capacities across the globe.⁵⁶

Evaluations conducted by programme units are important building blocks for independent evaluations, hence their quality assumes importance. One of the tasks of the IEO is the assessment of the quality of the evaluations conducted by programme units, which has resulted in a steady improvement of evaluations. The process aids UNDP in

53 Naidoo, Indran, 2012, "Management Challenges in M&E: Thoughts from South Africa." *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 25, no. 3, pp103-114; and Naidoo, Indran, 2013, *Growth and Integration in the Evaluation Profession: Some Perspectives for Consideration*, American Journal of Evaluation.

54 Naidoo, 2018b.

55 Trochim, 2009; Cooksy and Mark, 2012.

56 Naidoo, Indran and Soares, Ana Rosa, "Incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals in National Evaluation Capacity Development"; Rob D. van den Berg, Indran Naidoo and Susan D. Tamondong, eds. 2017, *Evaluation for Agenda 2030: Providing Evidence on Progress and Sustainability*, Exeter, UK: IDEAS, pp 51-63.

identifying weaknesses across the implementation of evaluations that may need further strengthening, support or capacity-building, both geographically and by evaluation type. Quality assessment data, comments and recommendations are readily available to improve implementation and use of resources. IEO developed comprehensive UNDP evaluation guidelines which reflect the commitment of UNDP to evaluation and its desire to improve evaluation quality, credibility and usability.

EVALUATION COMMUNICATION

Evaluation communication is crucial in the evaluation process as poor communication, in the sense of wrong messaging or not recognizing language nuance, affects timely delivery of evaluations to the right audiences.⁵⁷ According to Torres, Preskill, and Piontek,⁵⁸ the use of evaluation, which is the most fundamental aspect of evaluation, is related to how we communicate about evaluation activities and report findings. The issues related to communication are of concern not only at the time of the final report dissemination but also throughout the whole evaluation process. The authors conducted a survey with 246 respondents from the United States membership pool of the American Evaluation Association and found that good practices of evaluation communication include involving stakeholders in the evaluation design, using clear language and timely reporting of results to a variety of audiences.

In IEO, communication has been deliberately strengthened to involve stakeholders and communicate key evaluation messages to them throughout the evaluation processes. The IEO website, the face of the office, was redesigned and revamped to become more user-friendly with innovative features. Several communication strategies and processes have been introduced and transformed the one product into multiple digestible products with the goal to increase the visibility of IEO and strengthen an evaluation culture within UNDP. As a result, the IEO, in addition to its full reports, now creates illustrated summaries, briefs, infographics, expanded annual reports, newsletters, summaries, animated videos and regular posts to social media networks.⁵⁹ These strategies have led to increased access to evaluations on both the Internet and outreach platforms.

A key principle of independence is the ability to share findings and recommendations in a timely manner. All UNDP independent evaluations are undertaken in close collaboration

57 Naidoo, Indran, 2018a, Graduation Dinner Speech, International Program for Development Evaluation Training, 2018.

58 Torres, R. T., Preskill, H. S., and Piontek, M. E. (1997). Communicating and reporting: Practices and concerns of internal and external evaluators. *Evaluation Practice*, 18(2), 105-125.

59 Multimedia and media resources that IEO engaged with: Video of Srinii Pillay, M.D., CEO and Founder of NeuroBusiness Group; Assistant Professor (Part-time), Harvard Medical School, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qIvGAQb23JFXUlsdtjGjJEoqpG3pl2Dr/view?ts=5dad633e>

with programme units within UNDP as well as partners and stakeholders. Continued strong communication and cooperation with UNDP have ensured highly informative and detailed evaluator findings and robust and detailed management responses to recommendations. It is critical that messages, irrespective of how challenging they are, be shared in the public domain. UNDP decentralized evaluations, as well as independent evaluation, are shared on a public repository (<https://erc.undp.org/>).

Country programme evaluations are shared with the respective Governments and other key partners of UNDP. Corporate thematic evaluations are shared with the UNDP Executive Board at informal and formal sessions, where the IEO presents detailed evaluation findings, giving opportunities for robust discussion. In addition, the office is increasingly developing new information pieces to keep the Board and partners informed of its work.

We have even explored brain science to understand how evaluands react to evaluative results. We have invested in our team, providing training on how to communicate results without making the evaluand feel defensive, but without compromising the message.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the ultimate goal of the evaluation function in UNDP is to make UNDP stronger, just as a national evaluation function seeks to help a country achieve its development goals. The independence of the evaluation function lends it credibility. Pursuing quality also strengthens credibility, and in turn, the potential for evaluation use for positive change. Quality evaluations also require effective communication to ensure evidence feeds into decision-making.

Strengthening an evaluation function, whether in an organization like UNDP or in a national context, is a journey, one that is not always easy nor straightforward.