

2. Review of National Evaluation Systems and Capacities for Evaluating Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Emerging Lessons Learned from the Asia-Pacific Region

RICCARDO POLASTRO

Regional Evaluation Advisor
UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office

MICHAELA PROKOP

Regional Programme Advisor
2030 Agenda, Bangkok Regional Hub, UNDP



CONTEXT

Many countries in the Asia and Pacific region have made significant progress in establishing the building blocks necessary to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Countries across the region have set up institutional arrangements to promote horizontal and vertical coordination to facilitate this implementation, have started to align their national (and sometimes subnational) development strategies and budgets with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets¹⁰ and have assessed the availability of data and the capacities of data systems to monitor and evaluate progress. In this process, countries are also reviewing and adjusting their national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. However, to date much of the attention has been on formulating targets and indicators as well as setting up systems for measuring progress against the SDGs and less on strengthening evaluation systems and capacities.

10 While the Millennium Development Goals focused mainly on monitoring, the 2030 Agenda has put evaluation at the centre, stating in paragraph 74 of General Assembly resolution 70/1 that: “Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles: [...] They 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. They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation frameworks. [...]” General Assembly resolution 69/237 on capacity-building for the evaluation of development activities at country level shows that Member States recognize that evaluation is a core component of development processes, and recognize evaluation as a country-level tool that can help strengthen and support development results.

The 2030 Agenda proposes a balanced approach, with a set of interconnected goals and targets, which requires an understanding of how different policies and interventions interact with each other and affect an entire system. This and the ambition of the agenda of “leaving no one behind” and “reaching the furthest behind first” poses significant challenges to development planners, policymakers and evaluators. It requires new approaches to planning and evaluating including mainstreaming equity-based evaluations and systems thinking-based approaches, and to learn what works best where, how, for whom, under which contexts and why to ensure value for money and enhanced efficiency and effectiveness.

Developing and strengthening systems and national capacities for evaluation and adopting new, more integrated approaches to institutional strengthening and capacity-building will be crucial to support this process. It will also need to be addressed as an integral part of the overall mainstreaming and implementation of the 2030 Agenda process. Figure 1 shows how evaluation and evaluative thinking inform a country’s planning and budgeting cycle and their importance in ensuring that progress towards a country’s development goals is equitable, that resources are allocated and spent efficiently and effectively and that it promotes a balanced approach to sustainable development.



Governments consider evaluation as an oversight function that captures results and lessons learned to improve national development policies and programmes which contribute to meeting performance standards such as relevance, effectiveness, sustainability and equity.

Evaluation can inform decision-making by putting the best available evidence at the centre of policy, planning and budgeting processes. However, this requires institutional arrangements and at times legal frameworks allowing for feedback loops, strong national evaluation capacity and a culture of evaluation. Exercising evaluation in an independent, credible and useful way contributes to good governance, public accountability and transparency in the use of resources and results.

REVIEW OF NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS AND CAPACITIES: A JOINT UNDP/UNICEF INITIATIVE¹¹

As mentioned above, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs provides new entry points and opportunities to create institutional mechanisms for better feedback loops linking planning, budgeting and monitoring and evaluation processes. There is increasing recognition globally and in the region of the importance of strengthening national evaluation systems and capacities to support this process.¹² Among stakeholders there is strong interest in learning from emerging experiences across the region and beyond on key enablers for national development strategies and for the review, follow-up and evaluation processes of the 2030 Agenda. In response to this interest, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched a joint initiative on reviewing national evaluation systems and capacities to evaluate progress towards the SDGs in the Asia and Pacific region.

The initiative aims to showcase successes, lessons and learnings from national evaluation systems, to foster peer learning among stakeholders and to inform global, regional and national evaluation capacity-development guidance through the production of readiness assessments at country level. Through an iterative process, outlined in Figure 2 below, country case studies are feeding into a regional synthesis report. A peer review group including members from the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, UNICEF and UN Women has been set up to provide overall guidance.

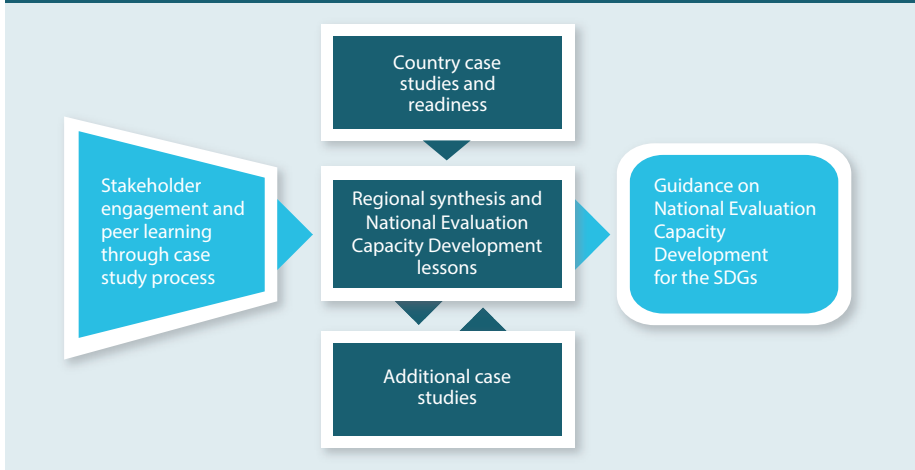
11 This section is based on the *Review of National Evaluation Systems and Capacities for Evaluating Progress towards the SDGs – Country Case Studies – Methodology for the Country Case Studies*, May 2017 (a report commissioned by UNDP and UNICEF).

12 At the regional level, several United Nations and government initiatives have contributed to this process including: *NEC Bangkok Declaration* from the Fourth International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities Conference 2015, organized by UNDP and the Government of Thailand in 2015; Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluations in Bangkok (2015), Kathmandu (2016) and Hanoi (2016) organized by EvalPartners in partnership with United Nations agencies; the first Asian Evaluation Week, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Finance of China, Asia-Pacific Finance and Development Institute and the Asian Development Bank Independent Evaluation Department; a regional training workshop on "Developing National Evaluation Capacities to Support the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda" organized by UNDP and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) with support from EVALSDGs and UNICEF; and the Asian Pacific Evaluation Association inaugural conference, "SDGs: making a difference through evaluation".

Specifically, country case studies aim to:

- Map national evaluation systems including institutions, actors, relationships and processes;
- Identify lessons learned, good practices, challenges, gaps and success factors for evaluation capacity in each country;
- Produce assessments of the readiness of national evaluation systems, including both state and non-state elements, to support progress towards the SDGs; and
- Provide recommendations for strengthening systems and building national evaluation capacities to support SDG implementation.

FIGURE 2. REVIEW OF NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS AND CAPACITIES: PROCESS AND KEY MILESTONES



Source: *Review of National Evaluation Systems and Capacities for Evaluating Progress towards the SDGs – Country Case Studies – Methodology for the Country Case Studies*, May 2017 (a report commissioned by UNDP and UNICEF)

The regional synthesis will identify patterns and lessons emerging from the country cases related to strengths and weaknesses of the national evaluation systems, readiness to support evaluation for the SDGs and related trends and priorities in national evaluation capacity development needs. The first phase of country case studies covers Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Additional country case studies are being initiated in Mongolia, Myanmar and the Philippines. Governments have stressed the importance of ensuring that the country case studies provide concrete recommendations and feed into road maps for filling capacity gaps.

The conceptual framework for the country case studies identifies key aspects of evaluation systems and capacity. It builds on the EvalAgenda2020 (see Figure 3) and other literature on national evaluation capacity-building.

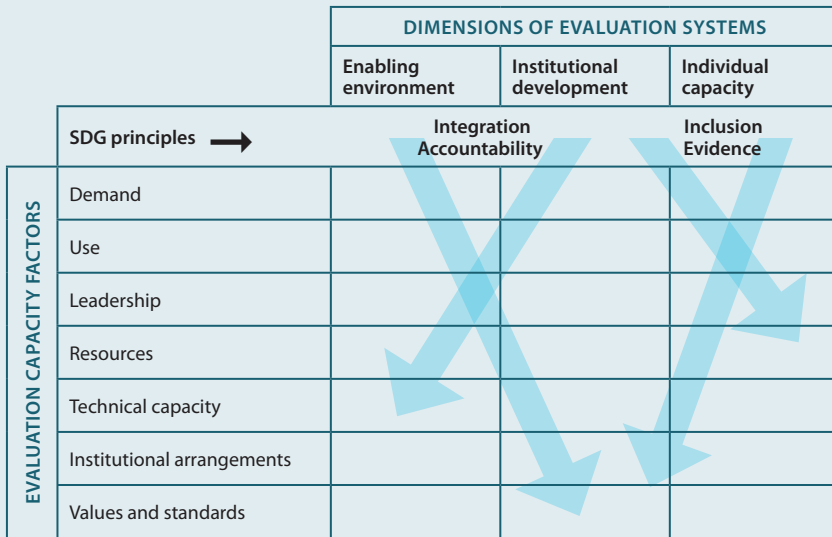


Source: Global Evaluation Agenda 2016-2020, (adapted from *Review of National Evaluation Systems and Capacities for Evaluating Progress towards the SDGs – Country Case Studies – Methodology for the Country Case Studies*, May 2017) p.7.

* Voluntary organizations of professional evaluators

The conceptual framework for the country case studies, shown in Figure 4 below, is structured around three core dimensions of evaluation systems—*enabling environment, institutional capacity and individual capacity*—and identifies seven key evaluation capacity factors: *demand; use; leadership; resources; technical capacity; institutional arrangements; and values and standards*. Cutting across these elements are four key principles of the 2030 Agenda: *integration, inclusion, accountability and evidence*.

FIGURE 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR COUNTRY CASE STUDIES



Source: *Review of National Evaluation Systems and Capacities for Evaluating Progress towards the SDGs – Country Case Studies – Methodology for the Country Case Studies*, May 2017 (a report commissioned by UNDP and UNICEF)

EMERGING LESSONS LEARNED FROM INITIAL COUNTRY CASE STUDIES¹³

From the first round of country case studies, a few initial lessons learned and regional priorities can be identified. While these are the subject of further refinement and discussion, a preliminary overview is provided below.

In most countries, there is limited awareness of the importance of evaluation for the process of mainstreaming and implementing the 2030 Agenda. As mentioned earlier, most efforts are focusing on indicators and data-gathering rather than on analysis and interpretation, particularly in relation to the key ambitions of the 2030 Agenda of “leaving no one behind” and “reaching the furthest behind first”. Similarly, integrated approaches that balance the three dimensions of sustainable development—economic, social and environmental—and a review of synergies and trade-offs across sectors, interventions and investments, remain a key challenge.

Evaluative thinking that feeds back into strategy and policy development remains a challenge in all countries in the region. Although most countries have set up institutional mechanisms for coordinating and implementing the 2030 Agenda, siloed approaches still predominate.

13 At the NEC 2017, only initial findings from Sri Lanka and Malaysia were presented.

Below is a list of emerging regional priorities using above-mentioned review framework.

| | SUMMARY OF REGIONAL PRIORITIES |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Enabling environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support policy or legal commitments and guidelines on roles and responsibilities in policy development and implementation. • Engage parliamentarians more extensively in evaluation planning and use. • Strengthen instruments and mechanisms to ensure policy commitments: (1) finalization of monitoring and evaluation framework for SDGs if not already in place; (2) establishing mechanisms to allocate specific resources for evaluation; particularly in relation to SDGs; and (3) strengthening integrated data platforms. |
| Institutional development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards, guidelines and good practices that countries can tailor to their needs and that contribute to high-quality evaluations to inform decision-making. • Horizontal and vertical linkages to support policy coherence and multi-stakeholder involvement. This should include building feedback loops into the development planning and budgeting process (at national, subnational and sectoral levels). |
| Individual capacity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of trainers. Some countries are moving towards country-based certification. Regional support to standardized training of trainers could widen the pool of trained evaluators. • Continuation of peer learning activities and opportunities for regional knowledge exchange. |

From three of the country case studies, the following are emerging as key priorities:¹⁴

Malaysia

- Establish evaluative policy feedback loops for the SDGs through the SDG Council.
- Improve data sharing through a new knowledge platform and portal for independent review and analysis of statistics and evaluation results for national learning for the SDGs.
- Build a more systematic approach to evaluation capacity development, drawing on existing institutional strengths.
- Strengthen and streamline the national evaluation system between government, private sector, academia and civil society organizations/non-governmental organizations.
- Reflect the voices of vulnerable groups in keeping with the principle of “no one left behind”.

Indonesia

- Central agencies need to take an oversight role and lead national evaluation capacity and national evaluation system efforts as a centre of excellence.
- Develop an overarching policy on evaluation.
- Develop a comprehensive capacity development plan.

¹⁴ For Malaysia and Thailand, findings are yet to be validated by key stakeholders, for Indonesia findings have been endorsed by the Government and for Sri Lanka recommendations are still being drafted.

- Strengthen data quality assurance of all data producers at national and subnational levels.
- Strengthen feedback loops through the utilization of tested and available social accountability tools.

Thailand

- Develop a stronger policy and strategic framework for values and standards for evaluation.
- Set up an independent body to oversee quality of evaluations and promote their use.
- Create opportunities for building awareness and capacity on the SDGs in general and evaluation in particular.
- Establish an independent evaluation unit staffed by well-trained evaluators, including in the areas of equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluation, to ensure that the voices of vulnerable groups are incorporated into evaluations in keeping with the principle of “no one left behind”.

Based on the emerging recommendations, the Governments of Indonesia and Thailand have indicated strong interest in developing national evaluation policies.

NEXT STEPS

In each case study country, a workshop will be held with multiple stakeholders to foster peer learning and to validate the recommendations. Governments have expressed keen interest in going beyond the country case studies to develop a road map with a set of prioritized and sequenced activities based on the findings. Following the validation workshop, consultations will be held with development partners to support capacity-building needs.

A synthesis report identifying national evaluation systems and capacity-building successes and lessons learned will be produced and shared with governments and other stakeholders in the region. The report aims to generate emerging good practices to guide national evaluation capacity development for the 2030 Agenda and will be shared with the United Nations Evaluation Group and other United Nations agencies. It aims to target policymakers and focal points for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs as well as members of the evaluation community to ensure that stronger linkages are being made.

Following bilateral consultations in 2018, additional country case studies including those for Mongolia, Myanmar and the Philippines will be conducted. There is also strong interest from other United Nations partners to join the initiative. In Malaysia, the initial assessment is being expanded to look at the subnational level. In Mongolia, the country case study could be linked to work on public finance and contribute to the follow-up to a recent Mainstreaming Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) mission.¹⁵

15 The mission included members from the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF.