Briefing

Governance, Policy and planning

Keywords:
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

iied

Issue date
April 2016

Policy pointers

Measurement is not enough: monitoring must be accompanied by evaluation that addresses the complexity of the SDGs and how they are achieved.

National policy evaluation is essential in the review and follow-up process.

Evaluation builds evidence for claims about the value of policies, programmes and strategies.

Evaluative thinking is a critical element in building the capacity of policymakers and parliamentarians to make informed decisions about success in achieving the SDGs.

Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for follow-up and review processes that examine progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such processes are needed at international and regional levels, but especially at the national level. To be maximally useful to policymakers and citizens, review processes must incorporate rigorous, country-led evaluations that examine policy and programme implementation and effectiveness, and build well-reasoned and supported cases for claims of progress. At present, there is considerable focus on how to measure progress using indicators, but evaluation must go beyond measurement, to consider whether progress is equitable, relevant and sustainable. Such evidence will help demonstrate public sector accountability and accelerate change by focusing attention on enhancing learning and innovation.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed to internationally in 2015 offer a turning point for transforming our planet into a more prosperous and sustainable world. The 2030 Agenda, the SDGs' charter, calls for all countries and stakeholders to collaborate to achieve ambitious development targets. It also gives a central role to reviewing and following up processes at the country, regional and international levels. These processes should take a long-term view and focus on identifying achievements (what is working, for whom and under what circumstances), as well as identifying challenges, gaps and factors crucial for continued improvement.

Above all, the review process must be informed by rigorous, evidence-based, country-level evaluations. Of course, regional and international evaluation of policy and strategy coherence, resource flows, and the effectiveness of regional and global systems will also be important — especially where these serve as enabling environments for addressing shared issues such as food security and clean water.

This briefing provides an overview of six key considerations for effective evaluation. It is the first in a planned series of briefings by EVALSDGs (see Box 1) and IIED.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation combines evidence with sound ways of thinking about value-based criteria, or sometimes principles. Essentially, it is critical thinking. It aims for reasoned judgments of the merit, worth or significance of policies, programmes, strategies and systems. Good evaluation informs policymaking, facilitates adaptive management, enhances government and organisational learning, demonstrates accountability, and informs and empowers citizens. It can help improve people's lives and the planet's well-being.

Good evaluation can help improve people's lives and the planet's well-being

In addition to using *effectiveness as a criterion*, an evaluation might employ *economic* criteria (efficiency in terms of costs and benefits), *equity* and *equality* criteria (who benefits, who doesn't), as well as criteria related to *sustainability*, cultural and contextual *relevance* and appropriateness, and sometimes other criteria negotiated with stakeholders.

In some situations, an evaluation adopts a principle-based approach. For example, analysing different perspectives on the meaning of sustainable development might yield principles such as resilience and social justice (as found in the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*) that could be used as a basis for assessing sustainability. Alternatively, an evaluation of an initiative to support healthy families and communities within an indigenous people might be based on culture-specific principles, such as the principle that community-based organisations must aim for a deep understanding of the communities they serve, or that participants' worldviews must be incorporated into programme design.

Evaluation is related, but not identical, to research in the social and natural sciences. Research examines the origins, causes and extent of, as well as potential remedies to, social and environmental problems. Research knowledge can be helpful in designing an evaluation and building decision makers' capacity for evaluative reasoning. Good evaluation practice takes into account existing knowledge and multiple points of view on the nature, contexts, and solutions to social and environmental problems.

Evaluation is also related, but not identical, to monitoring. Monitoring is a management tool concerned with tracking ongoing progress in programme implementation, in outputs (were target numbers for participants reached?) and in outcomes (what has changed as a result of the policy or programme?).

Evaluation can make use of such monitoring data but is primarily concerned with *how well implementation, outputs and development outcomes were achieved,* as well as with determining long-term development impact. For example, monitoring might ask "How many people in the targeted communities did the programme reach?". The corresponding evaluative question is "How *adequate* was the programme's coverage?".

The review and follow-up processes for the SDGs emphasise monitoring progress towards targets. Evaluations can help answer 'why' targets are achieved or not achieved, and can help identify what can be done to improve the success of future initiatives.

Evaluation and the SDGs

The SDGs are aspirational and are accompanied by broad targets. In determining whether targets are being met, particular attention should be paid to at least the following six key aspects of evaluation. The first two relate to building knowledge; the next two to using that knowledge to improve decision making; and the final two to building capacity that will help achieve the SDGs.

1. Measurement is not enough. There is an extensive focus within the international development community on measuring progress towards the SDGs. The 17 goals are accompanied by 230 targets, each tied, in turn, to multiple indicators. The entire 'measurement apparatus', so to speak, is very important in the worldwide effort to track whether SDGs are being achieved. That apparatus includes, among other important aspects, specifying targets so as to ensure measurability; developing measures of policy implementation as well as policy outcomes; determining whether to use existing indicators or to develop new ones; ensuring the availability and integrity of data for indicators; providing capacity to collect, analyse and interpret data; and ensuring database compatibility, and so on.

All this is certainly necessary. But it is far from sufficient. It is also crucial to *evaluate* the policies, strategies and programmes that are intimately tied to accomplishing the 17 SDGs and their targets, whether such initiatives relate directly to one or many SDGs. We must take care that national M&E systems do truly include both 'monitoring' and 'evaluation'.

Box 1. About EVALSDGs

EVALSDGs (Evaluation — adding Value And Learning to the SDGs) is a network of interested and skilled policymakers, institutions and practitioners who advocate for evaluation of the SDGs and support integration of evaluation initiatives into national, regional and global SDG feedback and review systems.

The network operates as part of EvalPartners — a global partnership that aims to influence policymakers, public opinion and other stakeholders so evaluative evidence and reasoning and values of equity and effectiveness are incorporated in policy and planning.

EVALSDGs members work to support the evaluation community to be prepared for evaluating initiatives towards better outcomes for the SDGs and ultimately, the 'World We Want'.

2. Evaluation addresses the complexity of the SDGs and their achievement. SDGs are deeply interrelated in complex ways — ie in unpredictable and largely uncontrollable ways. For example, one cannot neatly separate the aim of reducing income inequality (SDG 10) from the aim of ensuring healthy lives and well-being (SDG 3). Similarly, Goal 2 (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture) couples natural processes with social and economic processes. It moves in the same direction as Goals 1, 3 and 4, but also involves tradeoffs with Goals 6, 7 and 13. This complexity means the link between any given policy or programme and the achievement of an SDG cannot be neatly captured in a linear, straightforward cause-effect relationship. Whether, and how well, SDGs can be achieved is a highly contextual matter subject to various internal and external factors that practitioners and stakeholders cannot always control or influence. However, evaluation practices are increasingly drawing on methodologies from systems thinking and complexity science to examine whether and how outcomes and impacts are achieved in these highly complex and contextually-dependent circumstances (see Box 2). Moreover, evaluators use these approaches to go beyond basic monitoring of progress to generate data and insights that help decision makers to manage change and improve situations while in pursuit of the SDGs' targets.

3. Evaluative thinking is indispensable for informed choices. To remain relevant, the follow-up and review processes associated with Agenda 2030 require evaluative reasoning. Policymakers, parliamentarians and knowledgeable citizens will be asking the classic evaluative questions, "Are we doing things right?" and "Are these the right things to do?". Answering these questions requires evaluation that analyses arguments, interrogates evidence and assesses claims. This 'critical thinking' is indispensable for making informed and reasoned decisions. Such capacities are essential not simply for good government but also for society's continued well-being.

4. National policy evaluation is essential. Achieving the SDGs will inevitably involve national governments developing sectoral, thematic and holistic policies that reflect their commitment to Agenda 2030. These policies will need to be evaluated to determine whether they are being implemented well and to document the achievement of both outcomes and longer-term impacts. Evaluation examines whether a problem was correctly identified in the first instance, whether intended effects were achieved and whether unintended effects (both positive and negative) occurred. Policy evaluation builds policymakers' knowledge of problems and potential remedies; demonstrates a government's accountability to its citizens; and informs decision making. Good policy evaluation requires knowledge of the political policymaking process and the place of rigorous evidence in that process.

5. Evaluation builds solid evidence for claims. Policymakers and parliamentarians, as well as everyday citizens, make claims about programmes and policies. In the context of the SDGs, claims such as: "We have successfully reduced gender inequality in employment opportunities"; "This rural vaccination programme has drastically reduced infection rates"; or "Far more of our citizens living in Y now have access to clean water" may be heard. Evaluation builds the case for such claims. It often involves combining evidence from descriptive questions (how many? how much? how often?) with evidence from explanatory questions (eg are observed outcomes attributable to this policy?) and normative questions (is the policy or programme

Box 2. Evaluating 'wicked' problems

Most of the problems we face in society, whether in education, health or the environment, are what are commonly referred to as 'wicked problems'. Problems are considered wicked for several reasons.

First, they resist a single solution because they are formulated differently in different places — poverty in southern Chile is similar to but different from poverty in a Midwestern US city, for example.

Second, the fact that contexts change means that any solutions are themselves usually only temporary, which makes an adaptive management approach important to allow solutions to evolve in line with changing conditions.

Third, initiatives designed to address such problems are often themselves complex. They may involve long causal chains with many intermediate outcomes, or outcomes that can only be understood using a 'causal package approach' that examines contributions from multiple interventions, contexts or agencies (sometimes further complicated by those agencies having conflicting agendas). Similarly, policies designed to address wicked problems often affect other policies, or show dynamic and emergent effects that were not easily predictable.

Evaluation practices are increasingly drawing on 'systems thinking' in order to attend carefully to complex circumstances and to judge the value of interventions. New tools are allowing evaluators to better describe and analyse the boundaries, interrelationships and perspectives involved in complex situations. Such tools include causal loop diagrams, system dynamics and outcome mapping. Similarly, techniques such as soft systems methodology and critical system heuristics are providing ways to bring together perspectives and reach a way of framing value judgments.

implemented according to agreed-upon technical, legal and ethical standards?).

6. Building capacity for evaluation is crucial. Strengthening societies' capacity for evaluation can be understood in several different yet related ways:

- Developing the knowledge, skill, personnel, institutions and resources to design and operate effective and efficient M&E systems for policies, projects and programmes
- Developing the skills of evaluative thinking and evidence-based decision making within both government and civil society
- Capturing the knowledge generated from evaluation processes and sharing it across sectors and goals
- Capitalising on these processes so learning feeds into more effective policies, projects and programmes as well as more useful evaluations.

In conclusion, achieving the SDGs depends on country-led evaluations that produce evidence of whether outcomes and impacts of policies, programs and projects are equitable, relevant and sustainable. Such evidence is useful not only in demonstrating public sector accountability but also in focusing the attention of civil society and governments on enhancing learning and innovation. Put simply, evaluation doesn't just identify 'what works and what doesn't' or answer the question 'did we or did we not achieve our objectives?'. Its real value is that it is coupled to learning, strategic planning and knowledge development, not just to accountability. Evaluation is a dynamic and ongoing process that continues to evolve and support improving activities, even when the context changes.

Thomas Schwandt, Zenda Ofir, Dorothy Lucks, Kassem El-Saddick and Stefano D'Errico

Thomas Schwandt is Professor at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA. Zenda Ofir is an Independent Evaluation Specialist, former President of the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) and Honorary Professor at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Dorothy Lucks is Co-Chair EVALSDGs, IOCE Board Secretary, EvalPartners Executive Committee member and Executive Director of SDF Global. Kassem El-Saddick is vice-chair of EVALSDGs and member of the Evaluators Middle East and North Africa network (EvalMENA). Stefano D'Errico is the monitoring evaluation and learning lead at IIED and Council Member of the United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES).

Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

EVALSDGs is a network of interested and skilled policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for the critical roles played by evaluation at the national, regional, and global levels in examining progress toward achievement of the SDGs.

Contact
Dorothy Lucks
sdfglobal@sustain.net.au

Stefano D'Errico
stefano.derrico@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback via: @IIED and www.facebook.com/theiied

This briefing was developed in partnership between IIED and EVALSDGs, with support from the Government of Finland. Production of the Brief was supported by SIDA, DANIDA, Irish Aid and DFID, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of funders.

FORMIN.FINLAND.FI
MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF FINLAND