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**Evaluation**

**Report of the Independent Evaluation Office on its support to  
evaluation capacity development**

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## I. Introduction

1. The UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, in addition to its main function – conducting independent thematic and programmatic evaluations – contributes to capacity development for evaluation within UNDP and beyond, with national partners and the global evaluation community, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While this constitutes a small part of the overall output of the Office, it is a highly relevant complement to its evaluation work.

2. Within UNDP, the Office provides support to strengthen capacities for decentralized evaluations through the provision of guidelines, animation of training workshops, quality assessments, and other services. Beyond UNDP, the Office contributes to strengthening national evaluation capacities through its flagship national evaluation capacities conferences, as well as support to other communities of practice, and the development of new tools to facilitate diagnostics of evaluation systems and knowledge-sharing. The Office promotes global knowledge-sharing and partnership building, with a sharp focus on the Sustainable Development Goals, independent oversight, and related challenges, through engagements with global thought leaders in the fields of development assistance and evaluation research.

3. The present report provides the Executive Board with an update on the approach and contributions to evaluation capacity development of the Office as of the fourth quarter 2018. Chapter II describes the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNDP and elements of the Independent Evaluation Office theory of change. Chapter III provides a brief overview of Office support to strengthening evaluation capacities within UNDP. Chapter IV discusses Office support to national evaluation capacities, particularly the biennial national evaluation capacities conferences. The year 2017 marked a milestone for the conference series: one conference was held in each of the five UNDP regions, the first in Morocco, in 2009, and the most recent in Turkey, in 2017. Particular attention is therefore paid to this topic. Chapter V introduces Office contributions to the global evaluation community, while chapter VI considers possible next steps in strengthening capacities for evaluation.

## II. The Sustainable Development Goals, UNDP, and Independent Evaluation Office contributions to evaluation capacity development

4. The work of UNDP is anchored in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The vision articulated in the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2021, is “to help countries achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, accelerating structural transformations for sustainable development and building resilience to crises and shocks”.<sup>1</sup>

5. Evaluation has a key role to play in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and in UNDP support to them. With respect to the goals themselves, the 2030 Agenda notes that “a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework will make a vital contribution to implementation and will help countries to maximize and track progress in implementing this Agenda in order to ensure that no one is left behind”.<sup>2</sup> Follow-up and review processes are to be “informed by country-led evaluations”<sup>3</sup> and will require “enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes”.<sup>4</sup> The UNDP evaluation policy adds that “when appropriately tailored to national circumstances and priorities, the evaluation function is an effective country-led vehicle for greater citizen accountability that can accelerate progress towards national Sustainable Development Goals priorities, drawing on contributions from indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> DP/2017/38, paragraph 24

<sup>2</sup> A/RES/70/1, paragraph 72

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., paragraph 74 (g)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., paragraph 74 (h)

peoples, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders, including national parliamentarians”.<sup>5</sup>

6. To effectively support the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social, and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner, the Strategic Plan calls for new approaches as well as new capacities, platforms and solutions. More than ever, UNDP needs to ensure that its programmes are relevant, effective and efficient, responding to the needs of countries in a complex and rapidly changing world. Evaluation can make a vital contribution in this regard. As the evaluation policy expresses it, “evaluation supports better decision-making and promotes learning among stakeholders. Evaluations are important tools for helping UNDP, UNCDF and the United Nations Volunteers programme to learn from experience and better understand what types of development support work well, and not so well, and in what contexts”.<sup>6</sup> In addition to supporting learning, evaluations help stakeholders to hold UNDP accountable for contributing to development results at different levels.

7. In this context, the Independent Evaluation Office seeks to contribute, albeit modestly, to three immediate outcomes through a series of interrelated capacity development activities and interventions: improved quality and relevance of UNDP-led evaluations; strengthened national evaluation capacities and systems; and a more robust global evaluation culture. These, in turn, should contribute to an intermediate outcome: evaluations inform programmes and policies designed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. This will contribute to the intended longer-term outcome: national government and UNDP programmes that are more relevant, effective and efficient, and that produce sustainable results – thus leading to the final intended result, achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

8. The three areas of Office intervention are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, as its experiences and those of UNDP feed into discussions at the national evaluation capacities conferences and on other global platforms, while the knowledge gained from the conferences and other international gatherings strengthen evaluations within UNDP.

### III. Improving the quality and relevance of UNDP-led evaluations

9. High-quality evaluations – both independent and decentralized – are essential to ensuring that UNDP programmes and projects are relevant and effective, and to supporting the realization of sustainable, people-centred, planet-sensitive results. Furthermore, high-quality decentralized evaluations are a valuable input to independent evaluations: they can provide a substantive basis for independent country programme evaluations and relevant information for independent thematic evaluations. The first strand of the capacity development work of the Office therefore focuses on strengthening internal capacities to manage, generate and use credible decentralized evaluations. This includes developing evaluation standards, procedures, criteria and methodological guidance for decentralized evaluation; assessing the quality of decentralized evaluations; maintaining a searchable, publicly accessible repository of all UNDP evaluations (the [Evaluation Resource Centre](#)); and developing and delivering training workshops. As much of the past work has been already been reported to the Executive Board, the following paragraphs present a short summary of Independent Evaluation Office initiatives.

10. *Decentralized evaluation guidelines.* In 2009, UNDP published a handbook on planning, monitoring and evaluating development results, supplemented with a 2011 addendum and a companion guide on outcome-level evaluation. While the “Yellow Handbook” remains conceptually sound and relevant, UNDP has evolved considerably since 2009. Thus, in 2017, the Independent Evaluation Office, in collaboration with the Development Impact Group of the Bureau for Programme and Policy Support and with financial support from the Government of Switzerland, carried out training and feedback workshops with regional bureaus and country offices to obtain inputs from monitoring and evaluation focal points on the needs of country offices

<sup>5</sup> DP/2016/23, paragraph 6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., paragraph 4

so as to strengthen decentralized evaluations.<sup>7</sup> This was used to revise and update the evaluation chapters of the “Yellow Handbook” and produce separate evaluation guidance, which will be launched in the near future. The new guidelines give renewed emphasis to the importance of planning for evaluations and ensuring appropriate evaluative coverage of UNDP country programmes, provide greater detail on expected roles and responsibilities for evaluation, and include links to examples of good quality evaluations, with a view to strengthening the quality and utility of future decentralized evaluations. The Independent Evaluation Office and the Bureau for Programme and Policy Support are developing a strategy to further strengthen the culture of and accountability for evaluation in UNDP.

11. *Training.* Following the launch of the new guidelines, the Office will organize a new series of training workshops and webinars, and will develop an updated online course on evaluation for UNDP staff. The Office is collaborating with the United Nations Evaluation Group, which is mapping existing evaluation training initiatives with a view to developing a global information hub for evaluation capacity development and professionalization opportunities. The Independent Evaluation Office, which has contributed in the past to the International Programme for Development Evaluation Training, is exploring possibilities with the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group to develop a set of training modules for future courses, as well as for use within and beyond UNDP. As described in greater detail below, the Office strongly encouraged UNDP staff to attend the last two national evaluation capacities conferences and training programmes – and will continue to do so in the future.

#### *Quality assessments of decentralized evaluation*

12. The Independent Evaluation Office began conducting quality assessments of decentralized evaluations in 2011 and has continually improved its assessment system. In 2012, an online tool was created to facilitate the assessments, which were made available in the Evaluation Resource Centre from mid-2013. In 2014 and 2015, quality assessments were limited to Global Environment Facility-funded projects, pending revision of the evaluation policy. In 2016, the quality assessment tool was improved, and all UNDP decentralized evaluations have been quality-assessed since that year (see, for example, the special report on the quality assessment of 2016 decentralized evaluations, shared with the Executive Board in 2017, and the annual report on evaluation, 2017 – DP/2018/12). A further update to the quality assessment tool is planned for 2019.

13. The quality assessment process provides feedback to commissioning offices on how to strengthen future evaluations, and in recent years the Office has enhanced the Evaluation Resource Centre to make the information more readily available to UNDP staff working on evaluation. The quality assessments also serve to point to areas of weakness, which have been addressed in the revised guidelines and will inform training workshops.

14. *Evaluation Resource Centre.* The Independent Evaluation Office maintains the Evaluation Resource Centre, a public, searchable repository of all UNDP evaluations. Over the past year, the Office has been enhancing the Centre to facilitate tracking of evaluation management responses and key actions to more easily monitor changes to evaluation plans, build in links between the database of evaluators and the evaluations and their quality assessments, and develop oversight dashboards for UNDP staff responsible for tracking evaluation plans and their implementation.

## **IV. Strengthening national evaluation capacities and systems**

15. The second area of Independent Evaluation Office support to capacity development focuses on national evaluation capacities and systems. The UNDP evaluation policy affirms that improved national evaluation capacity enhances progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and support to national evaluation capacities is embraced as a programmatic priority in its own right. Both UNDP programme units and the Office seek to strengthen national evaluation capacities and systems, as part of a broader effort to contribute to the realization of the Sustainable Development

<sup>7</sup> See the Independent Evaluation Office workplan, 2018-2021 (DP/2018/4) and the annual report on evaluation, 2017 (DP/2018/12).

Goals. According to the policy, the Independent Evaluation Office contributes to the “development of communities of practice and partners with professional evaluation networks to improve evaluation utility and credibility”. A key component of this support has been the organization of biennial national evaluation capacity conferences.

16. The year 2017 represented a milestone in the history of the National Evaluation Capacities Conference series: with the conclusion of the fifth conference in October 2017, each UNDP region had hosted one of the conferences. The first was in Morocco (Arab States region) in 2009, the second in South Africa, in 2011, the third in Brazil in 2013, the fourth in Thailand in 2015, and the fifth in Turkey (Europe and the CIS region), in 2017. In 2018, the Independent Evaluation Office reflected on this near-decade-long experience, giving careful thought to the future, as exemplified in the present report.

17. This chapter of the report reviews the history and expansion of the conferences, which grew from the initial gathering of 55 participants in 2009 to more than 500 in the most recent event, in 2017. There follows a summary of the findings from conference assessments and reviews, and of the implications for the future of the conference series. Subsequent chapters introduce two new tools that the Office has been developing, an online national evaluation capacity diagnostics tool and a national evaluation capacities information centre.

#### *History of the National Evaluation Capacities conference series*

18. UNDP organized its first National Evaluation Capacities Conference in response to a request from the UNDP Executive Board to support national evaluation capacity development in programme countries. Organized in cooperation with the Moroccan National Observatory for Human Development in Casablanca, in 2009, the premise of the conference was that while there was consensus that evaluating the performance of public policy was an important instrument for good governance, in many countries there was a gap between this general agreement and the actual implementation, use and sustainability of monitoring and evaluation systems, processes and tools. The conference was designed to provide a forum for discussing issues faced by UNDP programme country partners, deepening their understanding of evaluation as a powerful tool for public accountability, sharing solutions adopted by other countries and, if possible, identifying common strategies for establishing relevant evaluation systems with sound political and institutional bases.

19. That first conference was structured around five areas of inquiry – vision, purpose, structures and capacity, methodology and accountability – which were then broken down into the four major themes of national-level evaluation practices of public policies: evaluation quality, use of evaluation, and enabling environments for evaluation. Participants shared and compared good public policy practices, showcasing examples of both embryonic and more advanced national monitoring and evaluation systems, and highlighted the importance of evaluation as an accountability and decision-making tool.

20. Two years later, building on the messages of the conference in Morocco, the second conference was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on “use of evaluation in decision-making for public policies and programmes.” Co-hosted by the UNDP Evaluation Office and the Public Service Commission of South Africa, the conference sought to continue the sharing of experiences between countries that have different levels of development of national monitoring and evaluation systems; identify lessons and constraints in implementing such systems; and identify potential supply of and demand for technical assistance to strengthen institutional capacities for national monitoring and evaluation systems, under the umbrella of South-South and triangular cooperation.

21. The discussions in South Africa in 2011 evolved from the showcasing of national monitoring and evaluation systems to a focus on the management, conduct and use of evaluation. Practical examples were provided to show how evaluation has been used for policy- and decision-making. Discussions and reflections on the use of evaluations at various levels of government and development organizations illustrated the strong linkages between evaluation quality and use and between an evaluation’s ‘user friendliness’ and its ‘effective use’.

22. Topics that emerged in Morocco and South Africa relating to the independence, quality and use of evaluations led to the third conference, in São Paulo, Brazil, to “seek solutions to challenges related to independence, credibility and use of evaluation”. That conference was co-hosted, in 2013, by the UNDP Evaluation Office, the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger.

23. While recognizing, as had the previous conference, that monitoring and evaluation are closely related, the Brazil conference focused more specifically on evaluation. Within the context of establishing national monitoring and evaluation systems, the conference emphasized three interconnected challenges with respect to evaluations: how to ensure their independence, their credibility, and their use. The conference examined challenges faced by governments in establishing monitoring and evaluation systems that are considered independent, including the question of where to place – and how to structure – the evaluation mandate and function within the Government. With respect to credibility, participants concluded that credibility depends on the expertise and independence of the evaluators, the degree of transparency of the evaluation process, and the quality of evaluation outputs. On the utility of evaluations, challenges noted included broadening the use of evaluation beyond a limited number of stakeholders, which requires user-friendly dissemination, translation into local languages, and presentation of insights into different public policy options and issues.

24. The Brazil conference was distinguished by the participatory elaboration of 18 commitments to further national evaluation capacities, broadly clustered into four strategies, including: promoting evaluation use through in-country and global advocacy; defining and strengthening evaluation process and methods; engaging existing and new stakeholders in exchanges and collaboration; and exploring options for different institutional structures for managing evaluation.

25. Following the conference in Brazil, the United Nations General Assembly acknowledged 2015 as the International Year of Evaluation in its first, stand-alone resolution (69/237) on building capacity for the evaluation of development activities at the country level. In September 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. One month later, the fourth national evaluation capacities conference was held in Bangkok, Thailand.

26. The theme of the conference was “blending evaluation principles with development practices to change people’s lives”. Designed before the Sustainable Development Goals were formally adopted, the conference anticipated evaluation capacities as an imperative for the implementation of the new sustainable development agenda. The conference focused on how governments can develop the necessary national evaluation capacities to meet the new challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals. Key priorities for national evaluation capacities that emerged from the conference include the need to: promote country-owned and country-led evaluations with an emphasis on their use in influencing policies; develop methods for assessing progress towards the goals, including evaluating environmental, social and economic sustainability, social inclusion and equity, social cohesion and governance; promote more diverse partnerships to increase the awareness and use of evaluation; and integrate evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals into institutional structures – a significant challenge.

27. The Sustainable Development Goals continued to be at the heart of the next conference, in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2017. The fifth conference was co-hosted by the Independent Evaluation Office and the Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS and the Government of Turkey. The European Evaluation Society was a key partner in substantive design and implementation of the conference. The global event brought together government representatives, evaluation practitioners and development professionals from 119 countries to examine national evaluation capacities with respect to “people, planet and progress in the Sustainable Development Goals era”. The event sought to continue and deepen the discussions initiated in Thailand on the role of evaluation in the follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals, for example exploring in greater depth how to ensure that “no one is left behind”, including the environment, in evaluation. The conference engaged participants on themes that have been present since the first event in 2009, such as challenges in institutional arrangements and questions of independence, credibility and use.

*Participants in the conference series*

28. Reflecting the expansion of an evaluation culture across the globe, the number of participants in the National Evaluation Capacities Conference series has increased significantly over the years, and profiles have become more diverse. The conferences have attracted a wide range of national government officials and participants from multilateral and bilateral development organizations and evaluation associations. A recent trend, from 2015 onward, has been the increasing number of government representatives from the global North, as well as private sector actors, academics and researchers.

29. The participation of the primary target group – government officials – has increased steadily over the years. Civil society participation peaked in 2015, when the conference was co-organized with the International Development Evaluation Association ('IDEAS'). UNDP staff from its regional centres and country offices were encouraged to attend the two most recent conferences, in part to accompany government officials to strengthen follow-up activities to the conference in country, and in part to develop staff awareness of and capacities for evaluation as a complement to the Office's efforts to strengthen decentralized evaluation. The participation of women has increased considerably over the years, from only 23 per cent of the participants in 2009 to near parity (47 per cent) in 2017. Table 1 summarizes the profile of participants in the National Evaluation Capacities conferences series over the years.

*Table 1: NEC Conference Participation 2009-2017*

NEC conference years	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017
Total number of participants	55	87	156	450	508
Number of countries	30	24	58	100	119
Type of participants	%	%	%	%	%
Government	44% (24)	76% (66)	64% (99)	32% (145)	33% (167)
Civil society (voluntary organizations of professional evaluators, academia, private sector)	18% (10)	7% (6)	16% (24)	48% (220)	15% (75)
United Nations	16% (9)	8% (7)	8% (13)	7% (33)	15% (76)
UNDP	22% (12)	9% (8)	12% (18)	13% (57)	35% (178)

30. The high level of participation at the 2017 conference was due in part to contributions from the governments of Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Netherland, enabling 71 participants from Official Development Assistance-eligible countries to attend. Nearly three-quarters of those participants were government officials, the remainder coming from civil society, evaluation associations and academia.

31. The 2015 conference introduced a new component: the three days of conference sessions were preceded by two days of pre-conference training workshops. These were well received, and the 2017 conference expanded the pre-training workshop offerings to 13 one-day seminars. More than 150 individuals benefited from these focused opportunities for individual capacity development in 2017.

32. Since 2009, 1,151 individuals have attended national evaluation capacities conferences, 79 of whom attended two or more conferences.

*Conference assessments*

33. The Independent Evaluation Office takes the views of conference participants seriously. Each of the conferences concluded with an assessment survey, as well as internal discussions, the recording of lessons learned, and suggestions for future conferences. Members of the international Evaluation Advisory Panel who attended the conferences have also provided feedback and guidance.

34. Assessment formats have varied across the conferences, limiting their comparability; however, all of them have recorded positive feedback. The surveys for the last three conferences asked similar closed-ended questions about participant satisfaction, and more than 85 per cent of participants at the last three conferences expressed overall satisfaction. Over 88 per cent of respondents to the surveys that followed the 2015 and the 2017 conferences found the overall engagements useful, and more than two thirds found the structure and delivery of the three most recent conferences to have been useful in contributing to the objective of enhancing national evaluation capacity.

35. To complement the survey data, during the 2017 conference two members of the international Evaluation Advisory Panel of the Independent Evaluation Office conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, representing government agencies, United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and evaluation associations. The information gathered during the interviews was analysed by the two advisers in conjunction with their observations as participants in the conference, together with responses to an open question in the 2017 conference assessment survey about how the conference could be improved, and feedback received on the pre-conference training workshops, compiled by the Office. The following paragraphs summarize some of the key messages emerging from their analysis.

36. The Evaluation Advisory Panel assessment team concluded that the national evaluation capacities conferences have addressed multiple issues – and tensions – on the agendas of evaluation, international development and public policy, and have become a singular community of practice. They have engaged participants from a growing number of countries and stakeholder groups – government, civil society and the academic evaluation community, as well as staff from UNDP, other United Nations organizations and development partner institutions – to discuss political, institutional and operational challenges linked to evaluation.

37. Interviews and opinions expressed during thematic sessions show that the national evaluation capacities conferences differ from other evaluation forums in the type of participants they bring together. Officials from planning and other central ministries, representatives of UNDP country offices, United Nations partners, bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, non-governmental organizations and civil society congregate to learn from one another, share and discuss the experiences of their countries in planning, monitoring and, especially, evaluating development policies, programmes and projects. For some of the people interviewed, the conferences fill a gap that exists at the international level to deal with the issues of evaluation, development and public policy with a broad, strategic audience comprising government technical staff, evaluation communities, civil society and United Nations personnel. In the words of one of the European Evaluation Society Board members at the Istanbul National Evaluation Capacities Conference, “We have a quite particular audience. Usually evaluation conferences are about academics, evaluators, evaluation consultants talking about evaluation amongst themselves, basically, the supply side. At this conference, we really have a conversation going between the supply side and the demand side, the practitioners and the policymakers. It makes for a very different conversation”.

38. The biennial conferences are recognized as a critical arena for discussion of the political and institutional challenges in building evaluation frameworks for development programmes and public policy. The opportunity to share and explore the political and institutional aspects of evaluation frameworks is, according to many, the particular strength of the conferences, differentiating them from seminars organized by evaluation academics or professional organizations. “Sharing experiences and knowledge” was the most useful aspect of the 2017 conference, according to one third of the respondents to the 2017 survey, followed by “learning new knowledge”, mentioned by 21 per cent of survey respondents.

39. Another message emerging clearly from the feedback received is that there is a high demand for technical training. The 13 one-day technical courses that preceded the Istanbul conference addressed different kinds of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The overall average rating – measured by a Likert-type scale from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction) – was 4.1. The unexpectedly high subscription and the assessments of the training workshops reveal a clear demand for longer, more in-depth technical training courses in the future.

40. Findings from the interviews and assessments suggest that different stakeholder groups – for example, public officials (especially those responsible for public programmes and development projects) – may have different views as to the primary role of evaluation than do participants coming from epistemic communities or bilateral or multilateral organizations. For the former, evaluation is a tool for learning and improving the effectiveness of development programmes and public policies. For the latter, the emphasis may be more on accountability and the meritocratic assessment of public expenditure and international assistance. Practically speaking, the multiplicity of evaluation uses and users has implications for programmatic offerings, calling for a balance in the keynote sessions in view of these different constituencies. These multiple perspectives point to differentiated needs for pre-conference workshops and panel session themes: public officials and development programme managers are as interested in evaluation from the perspective of design and implementation challenges as from that of results and impact assessments.

#### ***The future of the National Evaluation Capacities Conference series***

41. The reflections of the Independent Evaluation Office on the conference series, augmented by information from surveys, interviews, and feedback from the international Evaluation Advisory Panel, are summarized below.

42. The National Evaluation Capacities Conference series has been and remains valuable as it caters to diverse needs while maintaining a special niche, centred around a core audience of government officials engaged in evaluation, within the broader international context of evaluation professionals.

43. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a sound organizing – and normative – framework for evaluation conversations and future conferences, as illustrated by the last two events. This is a tangible area for potential collaboration between the evaluation community, governments and the United Nations—and its full potential has yet to be explored. The implications of the 2030 Agenda point to a need to re-examine and refine the principles that guide evaluations.

44. The emphasis on practical aspects is essential. The UNDP national evaluation capacities conferences can contribute to the 2030 Agenda by continuing to develop as a multisectoral forum on Sustainable Development Goals monitoring and, particularly, evaluation, bringing together experiences from around the world on strategies, tools and practices for the evaluation of public policy and programmes, filling the gaps between other thematic forums on individual Sustainable Development Goals organized by specialized agencies.

45. The 2017 conference devoted several sessions to complexity, which is increasingly recognized as a central element in development and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. It is now acknowledged that implementation problems and failures to attain intended results may be a consequence of conventional project design methods and logical framework approaches that imply linear progress, and that policy and programme objectives should be very specific so as to guarantee coherence in the intervention and efficiency in the linkages between activities, outputs and outcomes. Yet that narrow focus has often resulted in policy fragmentation. Sectoral policies and programmes may well be effective, but as ‘synergies’ is not a traditional design criterion, the overall success of government or societal efforts may be compromised. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes concurrent goals of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection, implying a need for new perspectives in intervention planning and evaluation. The conferences provide opportunities to debate complexity and its implications for planning, implementation and evaluation.

46. The overarching conclusion of the review of the five national evaluation capacities conferences is that the series has created a special niche and should continue. From the start, the goal has been

to create space for conversation with evaluators, civil society and national governments that aspire to strengthen their national evaluation functions. The concept evolved as more national governments joined, national evaluation capacities matured through learning from mistakes and best practices, and the development context and priorities changed. The first two conferences emphasized the need to build better institutional capacities to manage development programmes through evaluations. The 2015 conference responded to the new context of the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasized the importance of institutionalizing monitoring and, especially, evaluation system practices in the national context, and paved the way towards country-led evaluation practices and realities. The discussions and papers in 2017 highlighted the need to shift the discussion more fully from development evaluation to public policy evaluation, as relevant to national governments working on the complex task of Sustainable Development Goals localization, review and follow-up. As illustrated during the conference, many countries have adapted or established institutional arrangements to integrate the goals in national and subnational development strategies and budgeting processes and have assessed the availability of data in view of the goals indicators. Countries are also adjusting their monitoring and evaluation systems, but to date scant attention has been paid to evaluation systems and capacities with respect to the new challenges of the goals.

47. The trajectory of the conference themes has evolved from an enabling environment for evaluation and the utility of evaluation for decision-making, to evaluation principles with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals; institutionalization of evaluation; and, finally, to a more targeted discussion of what reviewing and following up on the goals implies for national governments. Yet many of the challenges that inspired the first conference were still discussed at the fifth event in the series. While evaluation conferences are only one element in a broader, multi-stakeholder strategy to strengthen national evaluation capacities, they provide a unique forum for the exchange of knowledge and practical lessons learned in institutionalizing evaluation and national evaluation systems, across countries and continents.

48. The Independent Evaluation Office is planning a new conference, to be held in 2019. Having come full circle, with one conference held in each UNDP region, the Office is collaborating with the Regional Bureau for Arab States to jointly organize the next event. The tentative theme is 'Evaluation for Sustainable and Inclusive Development', with a renewed focus on both the Sustainable Development Goals and public policy evaluation. The format will probably echo that of the past two conferences, with two days of pre-conference training workshops offered in multiple languages, followed by three days dedicated to the conference itself.

#### ***Other national evaluation capacity development initiatives***

49. Building on its experiences with the conference series, the Office has expanded its support to national evaluation capacity development with the creation of diagnostic guidance for the evaluation of national development plans and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Supported by the Norwegian Agency for International Development, the Office has developed an online self-assessment tool for evaluation diagnostics and strategizing. The main objectives of the tool are to facilitate the development or strengthening of a national evaluation framework for the goals; address gaps in national evaluation thinking and practice; and inform country-led evaluation processes and systems. The self-assessment tool aims to provide a flexible, practical framework that enables governments and other development actors to develop a systematic approach to determining key areas, pathways, and parameters for evaluating national development strategies and the Sustainable Development Goals. It situates evaluation practices within the context of other public-sector feedback mechanisms and recognizes that an evaluation practice is not a set of outputs but is built over time.

50. The online tool consists of a series of questions that enable countries to identify requirements for building national evaluation capacity. It helps users to understand the enabling environment for national evaluation systems and institutional capacities in different countries. It is designed for use by government entities regardless of their evaluation systems, processes and capacities. The diagnostic process consists of four phases: planning and building ownership of the diagnostic process; preparing necessary information for the diagnostic process; carrying out diagnosis,

analysis, reporting and building ownership; and, finally, undertaking the identified follow-up actions.

51. The self-assessment tool, introduced at the national evaluation capacities conference in Istanbul, in 2017, is now available for use. In June 2018, the UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa and the Independent Evaluation Office jointly organized a two-day workshop in Kigali, Rwanda, providing an opportunity to discuss regional lessons learned in national evaluation capacity development among representatives from 14 countries, to share the online tool, and to identify countries and partners for piloting and rollout. Two countries, Senegal and Uganda, expressed interest in piloting the online tool, and at the time of drafting the present report, Senegal was using the tool in conducting an assessment. In the Asia-Pacific region, at the time of writing, Nepal was initiating a pilot diagnostic.

52. Building on experiences with the conferences, requests from participants, and the importance of knowledge-sharing for the development of evaluation capacities in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Independent Evaluation Office is developing a user-friendly online information centre that will provide useful, organized documentation on national evaluation capacities, by country. The centre will serve as a consolidated information source for national evaluation stakeholders, notably governments, as well as for UNDP and the wider international evaluation community. UNDP will be able to organize and access information to better identify national capacity needs, understand different country contexts and existing enabling environments for evaluation, and design future conferences and other interventions. The centre will have the potential to facilitate advocacy efforts, providing incentives for countries with less developed evaluation capacities. The online centre becomes operational in late 2018.

53. The Independent Evaluation Office has engaged with UNDP and other partners in additional national evaluation capacity development initiatives. Following the national evaluation capacities conference in Thailand, in 2015, the Office contributed to an Asia-Pacific regional training workshop on developing national evaluation capacities to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, followed by a joint initiative between UNDP and the United Nations Children's Fund to conduct country case studies to identify emerging practices in the region on key enablers for national development strategies and for the review, follow-up and evaluation processes of the 2030 Agenda. That initiative continues and was the subject of a session at the 2017 conference. The Office, with the Regional Bureau for Africa, is participating in a consortium led by the Réseau francophone de l'évaluation, focused on the institutionalization of evaluation in francophone countries. Diagnostic studies are being carried out in four countries to assess readiness to develop a project to institutionalise evaluation. The Office facilitates the participation of national government officials engaged in evaluation and related disciplines in international conferences such as the African Evaluation Association conferences, Asian Evaluation Week, and European Evaluation Society conferences. For example, the Office supported two officials from Botswana to attend the Asian Evaluation Week 2018 and share the experiences of the Office of the Auditor General and the National Strategy Office (lead agency for evaluation) in auditing and evaluating in light of the 2030 Agenda.

## **V. Strengthening global evaluation culture**

54. The third area of Independent Evaluation Office support to capacity development is at the global level. Dramatic shifts in the approach to development over the past few decades, and most notably the advent of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have given rise to new challenges to evaluation as an independent, critically reflective professional practice. In the international development arena, evaluation has often meant 'development evaluation', or the evaluation of development programmes such as those implemented by UNDP. However, as indicated above, the 2017 National Evaluation Capacities Conference pointed to a need to shift the discussion from development evaluation to public policy evaluation, as relevant to national governments working on the complex task of Sustainable Development Goals localization, review and follow-up. In this new context, ever-increasing numbers of actors are involved in examining the ambitious, multi-level, interconnected issues that constitute the 2030 Agenda. As a result,

evaluators must respond to an ever-widening range of actors engaged in following progress towards the Goals.

55. Despite the recognition of evaluation in the 2030 Agenda, analyses of voluntary national review reports submitted to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development show that country-level follow-up and review processes are focusing primarily on indicator frameworks and monitoring progress towards quantitative targets. The role of evaluation – which includes generating knowledge on what works for whom under what conditions – still needs to be strengthened. There is a need to further energize and engage with, learn from, and influence the global evaluation community. In that regard, the Office brings together global thought leaders in the field of development assistance and evaluation research in various forums to contribute its experience to global debates, continue to build its own capacity, ensure that the guidance it provides to UNDP for decentralized evaluation is in line with international good practices, and reinforce its cutting-edge national evaluation capacity conferences.

56. The Office is an active member of the United Nations Evaluation Group; the Director leads the Sustainable Development Goals Working Group, and other staff members are engaged, for example, in the Professionalization Working Group and the Decentralized Evaluation Interest Group, which have clear links to the Office strategy to strengthen evaluation capacities within and beyond UNDP.

57. In 2018 the Office partnered with Wilton Park – an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom that focuses on international security, prosperity and justice – to convene a multi-disciplinary high-level event. The objectives of the event were to analyse the extent to which the 2030 Agenda and the evolving development context have given rise to a new set of challenges to evaluation; contribute to the global debate on the purpose and use of evaluation for accountability and learning; and explore ways in which evaluation can better achieve its purpose and contribute to improving the design of programmes and policy decisions without jeopardizing its rigor and credibility. Some of the key points emerging from the discussion of relevance to future UNDP evaluation capacity development efforts included that the increased emphasis on national ownership of evaluation and stronger citizen involvement in debating and defining sustainable development plans and projects means that evaluators have a greater obligation to invest in creating audiences capable of interpreting and critically appraising facts and evidence. Given the complexity and cross-sectoral nature of the Sustainable Development Goals, evaluation needs to spend more time investigating systemic effects and how social change works. In view of the wide scope of the goals, development work has become increasingly diverse, and the ‘objects’ of evaluation differ widely. In this context, choosing what to evaluate and why becomes an ever-more critical concern. Another conclusion was that training for evaluators needs to emphasize that the practice of evaluation is about making judgments to provoke conversations that will help bring about social change. These and many other elements will feed into future UNDP-led evaluation training workshops and national evaluation capacities conferences.

58. On a smaller, local scale, the Office initiated in 2015 a “brown-bag lunch series”, bringing in speakers to share expert knowledge and experience on evaluation and other development-related topics. The sessions animate debates and strengthen internal capacities as well as those of invited partners such as UNDP programme colleagues and other United Nations evaluation unit colleagues. Speakers in 2018 included a Joint Inspective Unit inspector and former Chief of Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness in the Office of the Director of Foreign Assistance Resources at the United States Department of State, the Oxfam Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Team, and an international development expert from the Directorate General of the European Union.

## **VI. The way forward**

59. In 2019, the Office will continue to strengthen its capacity development strategy, seeking greater synergies between its various capacity development initiatives, as well as between these and its evaluative work.

60. With respect to strengthening UNDP capacities for decentralized evaluation, the Office will continue to collaborate with the Development Impact Group of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support to further strengthen the culture of evaluation in UNDP and to reinforce capacities and accountability for decentralized evaluation, including through the launch and dissemination of the decentralized evaluation guidelines, additional training events and workshops, and the forthcoming online course.

61. In partnership with the Regional Bureau for Arab States, the Office will host the sixth National Evaluation Capacities Conference in 2019, building on lessons learned from past conferences, strengthening the technical training component, giving greater space on key platforms to national experiences, and continuing to advocate not only for principles of independence, credibility and use, but also for the relevance of sustainable development values to be upheld in designing and evaluating development policies and programmes. The Office will seek greater engagement with the regional bureaus in conference design, delivery and follow-up, including continuing to encourage UNDP staff to attend together with their national counterparts. The aim is both to build staff understanding of evaluation and to facilitate initiation or reinforcement of country office support to strengthening national evaluation systems. The soon-to-be-launched National Evaluation Capacities Information Centre will have links to UNDP country-level evaluations as well as the opportunity to highlight UNDP projects that are working to strengthen national evaluation systems.

62. In collaboration with the regional bureaus, the Office will, to the extent possible, support regional initiatives to strengthen national evaluation systems, including the expansion and replication of the UNDP-UNICEF Asia Pacific initiative to identify and share good practices in developing national evaluation systems that are responsive to the 2030 Agenda, participation in the Réseau francophone de l'évaluation institutionalization project, and dissemination of the online diagnostic tool and experiences in its implementation.

63. The Office will pursue collaboration with other development partners to strengthen synergies and complementarities in conference and training course offerings, including with the World Bank in future editions of the International Programme for Development Evaluation Training, and partnering with the United Nations Evaluation Group and its members to conduct common trainings for United Nations staff and partners at the regional and country levels.

64. The main role of the Independent Evaluation Office remains the conduct of independent evaluations designed to help UNDP respond to a changing development landscape and the evolving needs of its partners. Contributing to strengthened capacities within UNDP to conceptualize, commission and use high-quality decentralized evaluations will have positive implications for both the evaluations conducted by the Office and for the wider organization. Contributing – albeit modestly – to the strengthening of national evaluation capacities, particularly through the national evaluation capacities conferences, the Office provides a platform where UNDP and others can come together with national partners to pursue strengthened national evaluation systems as a tool for good governance and as an element in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals. Contributing to global debates on the evaluation agenda and the profession, the Independent Evaluation Office contributes to the visibility of UNDP as a leading development organization and brings back lessons for future learning and growth.

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