

Policy pointers

Meaningful evaluation of progress towards achieving sustainable development extends beyond supporting voluntary national reviews.

For the full potential of evaluation to be realised, evaluation processes must be embedded in national policies and strategies. Embedding evaluation at the national and local level can be an important tool for fostering country-level transformative development.

For evaluation to support transformative development, it must assess whether the political processes used to achieve innovations in policies, institutions and social relations reflect the values and principles of sustainability, inclusiveness, transparency and social accountability.

Evaluation supporting transformative development must also examine the success of activities other than policies and programs — such as coordination, integration, co-construction, strategies, innovation and empowerment.

Embedding evaluation in national plans and policies to foster transformative development

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are an important tool, rolled out globally, for demonstrating how far countries are progressing toward realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); but VNRs represent just one approach to evaluation in the 2030 Agenda. Countries can look beyond evaluation in the context of global reporting through VNRs, to embedding evaluation at the national and local level. In this way, evaluation can be a strong entry point for countries to achieve truly transformative development, reflecting the Agenda's ambition. This briefing examines the idea of 'transformation' as promoted in the 2030 Agenda and looks at how it can be applied to evaluation. We argue that when embedded in national planning, evaluation assumes additional roles and functions that go far beyond technical target measurement and can even assess political processes and activities.

VNRs present a valuable global reporting tool...

One approach to evaluation in the 2030 Agenda focuses on the importance of building (or refining) national monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets. This assumes that evaluation results feed into national development plans and enable assessment of how far policies and programs are addressing the inter-related set of SDGs and their targets, given specific country priorities and needs across sectors.

Under this approach, national responsibility for evaluating sustainable development is primarily tied to national follow-up and review processes. Presenting their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) meetings¹ is one of a number of activities countries can undertake as part of these review processes. As such, VNRs should be in line with the principles

to which the review processes should adhere, as spelled out in the 2030 Agenda.²

The importance of VNRs as an approach to evaluation is twofold: 1) VNRs are a means of reporting on the technocratic challenges associated with monitoring, measuring and setting indicators, and 2) importantly, they are the vehicle for reporting on national progress toward realising the SDGs and their targets. At the HLPF, countries are encouraged to report on the challenges they face in implementing the SDGs, how they are addressing those challenges and how they are tracking progress toward the targets. The VNRs enable countries to share their implementation experiences — including successes, challenges and lessons learned — with a view to accelerating and improving implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda.

In addition to stressing the importance of evaluating progress towards SDG targets, the

Transformative development directs the attention of key groups towards positive action

latest guidance for preparing VNRs revisits several of their important objectives.³ These include:

- Reporting on how the SDGs are being incorporated into all relevant aspects of national frameworks (such as vision documents, development plans, laws and regulations, legislation)
 - How multi-stakeholder groups contributed both to the development of VNRs and the implementation of the SDGs
 - How links, conflicts and trade-offs between SDGs are being addressed in a national context
- How institutional mechanisms and arrangements are effectively supporting progress toward realising the SDGs.

... but embedding evaluation into national plans and policies can drive transformative development at country level

There is another approach to evaluation in the 2030 Agenda, going beyond the global reporting process of the VNRs. Reporting VNRs is a valuable exercise for demonstrating how sustainable development is being realised across social, environmental and economic sectors. However, countries can take a more strategic and systematic approach by simultaneously embedding evaluation of SDGs into national policies and development plans. In this way, countries can work towards assessing whether their national plans and policies will deliver transformative change. This approach encourages a shift in perspective of the 2030 Agenda, moving from an adopted framework to a political force for change,⁴ grounded in the concept of transformative development.⁵

Defining ‘transformative development’

While ‘transformation’ is a central theme of the 2030 Agenda — the 17 SDGs are referred to as ‘universal’ and ‘transformative’ — the notion is not specifically defined. Before exploring how evaluation can be a useful entry point for achieving transformative development, here we offer one definition of the term and discuss how this framing can spur positive action — involving different actors — that supports transformative development.

We define transformative change here as strategic changes through the institutionalisation of policies, programmes and projects that lead to large scale, sustained impacts in systems that accelerate or shift the development trajectory of a country. It should be noted that not all policy changes that lead

to positive, sustained change are transformational. This definition embodies the concept of sustained results (those consistently achieved over time) in institutional and other systems, in order to exclude short-term, transitory impacts.⁶ In addition, transformative development should enable change in systems at greater scope and scale by conveying ‘the desire that something about what we do and achieve — politically, economically, socially, technologically and environmentally — and why and how, should be fundamentally different in the future from the way it is now.’⁷ Several countries, including India, Kuwait and Malaysia, are already signaling that their national planning is aiming for transformative change.

Transformative development directs the attention of key groups — planners, parliamentarians, evaluators, non-governmental organisations, businesses and citizens — towards positive action including:

- Innovation in conceptualising and defining problems and potential solutions (for example, systems thinking)
- Designing policy and institutional reforms that are focused on integration across social, economic and environmental sectors
- Changing social structures and norms that shape behaviors of people and organisations that promote and sustain patterns of stratification related to class, gender, ethnicity, religion or location.⁸

Transformative change also means moving past exclusively relying on national government efforts to effect sustainable development, and towards mobilising new agents of change such as businesses, cities, localities and civil society.

How evaluation can support transformative development

If the 2030 Agenda is to be viewed as a political force for change by promoting the concept of transformative development, approaching evaluation in the context of VNRs is too narrow a focus. Evaluation can and must play a more important role in sustainable development by serving three main functions:

- a) Enabling the identification and prioritisation of problems hampering transformation.
- b) Assessing the worth, value and merit of national and sub-national policies and plans aiming to address those problems.
- c) Providing ongoing recommendations about effective approaches to achieve transformation and systemic change.

If a philosophy of transformative development guides the role that evaluation plays in

contributing to policy formulation, budget allocation and policy implementation in national planning, new ways of thinking about follow-up and review processes of the SDGs emerge.

For example, it will be key to expand the focus of evaluation. This implies moving beyond focusing on outcomes, to examining the inclusiveness, transparency and accountability of political processes employed to achieve innovations in policies, institutions and social relations.⁸ Other critical new ways of thinking include:

Conducting evaluation as a strategic exercise to assess the value of policies and plans for transformative development. Producing valuable new evidence and data can play a major role in fostering transformative development. However, activities producing unused data can be costly; they can take away resources from other critical initiatives and put the capacities of national and sub-national governments under stress. Every process that demands new data should consider these trade-offs; so too should follow-up and review processes for the SDGs.

Experiences from developing countries suggest that the proliferation of unused monitoring and evaluation data threatens the sustainability of national and sub-national M&E systems.⁹ Conversely, countries with sustainable national M&E systems (such as Colombia and South Africa)^{10,11} use evaluation to inform local formulation and implementation of policies and plans.

It is concerning that several countries have reported difficulties about integrating all 230 SDG indicators into their national statistical systems.¹² At the same time, it is generally unclear how the new set of data will be used at the national and sub-national levels.¹³ Countries could benefit from a more pragmatic approach to follow-up and review of the SDGs by using evaluation as a strategic exercise to assess policies and plans in terms of their value for transformative development.

Using evaluation to set national priorities for sustainable development. To assess policies and plans in terms of their potential for transformative development, evaluation could help decision makers at different stages of the policy cycle, including agenda setting and prioritisation. Evaluative processes can help to understand countries' needs by engaging both decision makers (commonly in power) and agents who are out of power (and potentially more aware of the problems) in identifying critical problems hindering sustainable development. Evaluative processes can help answer two key questions: what are the critical problems of each country hindering sustainable development? Why do they matter?¹⁴ Systemic approaches to evaluation can provide

useful evidence to understand where the bottlenecks are, while participatory processes use different value frameworks to identify which problems to address most urgently.

Involving multiple stakeholders in evaluation to identify and prioritise critical problems, and assess the value of policies and plans.

Transformative development is a process that requires the contribution of citizens, government officials, businesses and non-governmental actors. Evaluation that simply renders judgements of program and policy performance and outcomes to government, business planners and decision makers can be expanded to involve citizens, civil society organisations and traditionally marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society. A more participatory process can help countries identify which are the most pressing social, environmental and economic problems, and how they provide direction on where to focus their energies.

Participatory approaches in evaluation also help to take into account multiple views and value frameworks in the assessment of benefits and challenges created by different national and sub-national policies and plans.

Focusing on new objects of evaluation. It is commonplace to assume that the objects of evaluation — that is, what is to be evaluated — are social, economic and environmental interventions in the form of individual policies, programs and projects. The focus is often solely on whether intended objectives of the interventions were achieved. As it is impossible to evaluate all such interventions associated with the 17 SDGs and 169 targets, evaluation strategies embedded in national development plans single out a select number for evaluation. The 2016–17 to 2018–19 South African National Policy Evaluation Framework¹⁵ selects interventions to evaluate based on a set of criteria that include whether the intervention is strategic, innovative and presents an opportunity to learn; whether there is a lot of public interest in the intervention; whether the intervention is at a critical stage for decision making about continuance; and whether there is existing monitoring and performance data on the intervention.

However, embedding evaluation in national evaluation plans aimed at transformative development highlights the importance of evaluating other aspects that should be considered when assessing change that has been achieved, and which can be overlooked, such as:

- Coordination, coherence and interlinking of policy objectives across sectors
- Risks associated with trade-offs among development objectives

- Involvement of multiple stakeholding parties in planning and implementation, and the relevance of planned projects and policies in relation to these primary stakeholders and intended beneficiaries
- Efforts to link citizens, government officials, businesses and other civil society organisations to address development challenges
- National strategies for facilitating innovation in economic, social and environmental sectors
- Economic, social and/or political empowerment of traditionally disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society
- Harmonisation of economic opportunities with environmental sustainability
- Co-construction of policy design and implementation
- Policies' potential to create changes in one area and leverage those effects to others.

Integrating evaluation with the work of other professionals and citizens. Evaluators cannot work in isolation — they must coordinate their work and objectives with that of development planners, policy analysts, social researchers, specialists on culture, organisational development specialists, and urban and rural planners, among others. Likewise, national evaluation strategies should adopt integrated approaches to evaluation — that is, combining foresight or scenario modelling, monitoring, implementation analysis, economic evaluation and goal-achievement or outcome-oriented evaluation. Sound evaluation requires the talents of professionals and lay citizens with varied expertise in the analysis of social conditions and root causes, the design of innovations, the promotion of civic participation and dialogue, the measurement of outcomes, and the determination of the merit, worth, importance and significance of human actions to address social problems.

Notes

¹ Two previous briefings examined the extent to which evaluation policies and mechanisms were discussed in the Voluntary National Reviews prepared for the 2016 and 2017 High-Level Political Forum that meets under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council; see notes 12 and 13. / ² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf / ³ Division of Sustainable Development and Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews. United Nations, New York, USA. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17354VNR_handbook_2018.pdf / ⁴ Geoghegan, T and Bass, S (2016) Reconciling the SDGs as a political force for change. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17391IIED> / ⁵ Eyben, R and Guijt, I (2015) Introduction (pp. 1–18) in: Eyben, R, Guijt, I, Roche, C and Shutt, C (eds) *The politics of evidence and results in international development*. Practical Action Publishing, UK. / ⁶ UNDP (2011) Supporting Transformational Change, Case Studies of Sustained and Successful Development Cooperation. / ⁷ Madvig, A and Roche, C (2016) Working towards transformational development and the sustainable development goals. LaTrobe University Institute for Human Security and Social Change, Australia. www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/tdsdg_report_-_bw_a4_-_final_cover.pdf / ⁸ United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (2016) Policy innovations for transformational change. / ⁹ Porter S and Goldman I (2013) A growing demand for monitoring and evaluation in Africa. *African Evaluation Journal* Vol 1 N 1, AFREA. / ¹⁰ Cassidy C and Tsui J (2017) Global Evidence Policy Units. Sistema Nacional De Evaluación De Gestión Y Resultados, SINERGIA, Colombia ODI. / ¹¹ Goldman, I (2017), South Africa National Evaluation Plan, 2018 – 19 to 2020 – 21. Department Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), South Africa. / ¹² Meyer, W, Naidoo, I, D'Errico, S, Hofer, S, Bajwa, M, Pérez, LAT, El-Saddik, K, Lucks, D, Simon, B and Piergallini, I (2018) VNR reporting needs evaluation: a call for global guidance and national action. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17446IIED> / ¹³ Benoit, S, Meyer, W, D'Errico, S, Schwandt, T, Lucks, D, Zhaoying, C, El-Saddik, K, Schneider, E, Taube, L, Anderson, S and Ofir, Z (2017) Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs' first set of Voluntary National Reviews. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17423IIED> / ¹⁴ Andrews, M, Pritchett, L, Woolcock, M (2015) Doing Problem Driven Work. Centre for International Development, Harvard University. / ¹⁵ Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation, Republic of South Africa (2016) National Evaluation Plan 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. / ¹⁶ Ofir, Z, Schwandt, T, D'Errico, S, El-Saddik, K and Lucks, D (2016) Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informed by the SDGs. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17374IIED>

Moving forward: making more of evaluation

If we are to begin to fully appreciate the role evaluation can play in working towards a successful transformative development agenda in relation to the SDGs, the first step is to recognise that VNRs — while offering a useful global reporting tool for tracking progress on implementing the SDGs — are only one approach.

Evaluation has a much deeper and richer role to play than demonstrating what countries have accomplished and whether targets have been met and goals achieved (what is often referred to as 'technical accountability'). Determining accountability also includes explaining that what was done was the right thing to do in the first place — what we might refer to as social accountability — and evaluation has something to offer here too.⁷

In a previous briefing,¹⁶ we argued that national evaluation plans for development should take into account the fact that development is a holistic, integrated, multifaceted and context-sensitive process. The process has diverse means and ends, and is grounded in culturally specific understandings, norms and perspectives.¹⁶ We now add that if countries take a more strategic and systemic approach to evaluation by embedding it into national policies and development plans, evaluation can be an effective tool for spurring country-level transformative development.

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