



Wilton Park



Tracking development progress and evaluating development partnerships in the post-2015 era

Monday 12 – Wednesday 14 December 2016 | WP1504

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Report

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Introduction

Wilton Park convened this meeting to shine light on the post-2015 journey towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the role that evaluation should play in tracking progress towards them. This event brought together decision makers, scholars and evaluators from around the world. It discussed policy and evaluation challenges posed by the aspirational nature of the SDGs formally endorsed by 193 heads of states in September 2015. While much depends on monitoring progress of the 17 goals and 169 targets through no less than 230 indicators, evaluation potentially needs to provide understanding of what works, how, for whom, under which circumstances, to achieve progress.

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There is a recognition that partnership is an overarching cross-cutting theme for a post-2015 agenda, linking the SDG goals that are focused on 4 ‘Ps’: People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace. The 5th P for Partnerships embodies the imperative need for strengthened interaction across sectors and borders. Without broad-based partnerships, the financial and human resources needed to implement the SDGs would not materialise. The estimated funding gap of the SDGs is in the range of US\$1.9 trillion and US\$3.1 trillion, and it is hoped that a range of market-orientated initiatives and blended finance can fill this gap. Whether embedded in north-south or south-south cooperation the new development compact would need to emphasise social, economic and environmental sustainability so as to ‘leave no one behind’.

The new development policy agenda blazes new frontiers and aims for extraordinarily ambitious targets in a period of severe geopolitical stress, major international economic uncertainties and unprecedented fiscal constraints. The resulting complexity must be factored into the design of country- and people-led programmes and multi-country development initiatives. There is a recognition that monitoring the SDG indicators will not be enough. High quality evaluations of the SDGs, and of the partnerships that will work to achieve them, are also needed both for public accountability and to draw lessons for the future.

This Wilton Park meeting sought to address some of the key challenges affecting partnerships and evaluation of the SDGs, including policy priorities, the need for new approaches, tools and methods, support for country-level evaluations and follow-up.

Key summary points

Partnerships and networks

1. There is a recognition that the SDGs depend on new partnerships being formed, and old partnerships expanded. This includes not only civil society and governments, but a wider range of actors including citizens, the private sector, academics and a range of stakeholders not currently part of the development process. While the call for more partnership is not new, the SDGs provide a framework for partnerships to focus on and be evaluated for their contribution. Partnerships should have legitimacy, establish authority and act on the ground. These processes will require constant interaction,

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learning from best practice building evaluation capacity development. Or, as one participant said: “partnership is a muscle that needs to be exercised”.

Political will

2. The political will to achieve the SDGs needs to be nurtured and communicated during a time of major political, social and economic upheaval and major environmental concerns. Countries need to prioritise the SDGs within their national sustainable development priorities. Within countries the public needs a voice in these processes. The routes that countries and peoples will decide on will differ substantially, as countries face different challenges and have diverging backgrounds and histories. Notable concerns over what role evidence and monitoring will have in a ‘post-truth’ era should not be underplayed. Evaluation tools and methods will need to incorporate a diversity of ambitions, means, action and communication.

Policy coherence

3. The SDGs have not been developed into a coherent framework; they reflect what the global community could agree on. This means that they are not all mutually achievable and trade-offs are inevitable, which poses an additional challenge for evaluation. While the holistic and aspirational nature of the SDGs is recognised, the potential trade-offs between efforts to make progress on various SDGs are not. Discussions about the trade-offs between different SDGs should be promoted, and the potential role of evaluation explored. Evaluations could highlight where trade-offs endanger progress and where lack of policy coherence undermines the achievements towards the SDGs.

Making evaluation ready for the SDGs

4. Evaluation needs to step out of its comfort zone to play a role. While evaluations of partnerships have taken place, these were seldom implemented jointly with partners. While policy coherence has a tradition in evaluation, there is no agreement or mandate on how far evaluations could explore coherence issues. Evidence is increasingly contested and evaluation as a profession should prepare for a role in the minefield of “post-truth” societies. Evaluation is also facing a challenge to bring new tools and methods to the complex issues it will face when supporting progress towards the SDGs. To be able to meet these multiple challenges evaluators will need to “go back to school” and develop, learn and implement new approaches. More focus on mathematical skills is also called for, for example including more mathematicians on evaluation teams.

Continued dialogue

5. Resource constraints in funding the SDGs and ensuring action towards them means a call for partnerships, but also a call to put resources where they will produce the most impact. Evaluation’s role should be supportive, to bring evidence and promote learning, but in order to do so, the dialogue between policy makers and major actors and partners should continue to enable exploration of the many complex issues that countries and the global community face. This is relevant both to achieve the goals and to monitor and evaluate them. A platform should be established to enable, promote and draw conclusions from such a dialogue.

Broader challenges of meeting the SDGs and learning from the MDGs

6. More investment in evaluation of the SDGs will be needed, compared to the evaluation of the MDGs given the greater number of goals, targets and indicators. Key for the next few years will be how to ensure the SDGs are on track? What’s working? How to make feedback loops quicker so that corrections can be made in projects and national plans?
7. Evaluation played no role in the MDGs. However, given the holistic and aspirational nature of the SDGs, evaluators can play an important role in tracking progress of the ‘whole’. However, with the high number of targets and indicators, the evaluation challenge is considerably more complex than it would have been for the MDGs. While recognizing the complexity and aspirational nature of the SDGs, it should be

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recognised that their appeal is mainly in setting an agenda, calling for action and raising the bar for mankind’s hopes.

8. Political buy-in around evaluation and investment for evaluation will both be necessary. However, whether the global political buy-in around the SDGs remains after the political upheavals in 2016 is questionable. What are the implications for evaluation where there may be changing attitudes towards evidence? There are also limitations of ‘speaking truth to power’ in a range of evaluation cultures. Different institutional arrangements of actors involved in the SDGs (at country level and internationally) with different foci and incentives can also lead to a greater coordination challenge. This adds complexity to the evaluation process.
9. Recognition of national SDG plans that are rooted in the context of the countries and peoples also provides challenges for evaluation in cross-country analysis. The non-homogenous and context specific nature of the SDGs has benefits, where landlocked countries such as Switzerland and Uganda will not have to report on SDGs which they are not directly involved (for example, SDG 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources). It is also, however, often necessary to take transboundary issues into account, such as ensuring environmental sustainability where ecosystems do not match political borders.
10. Despite the broadness and universality of the SDGs, there is an imperative that the goals do not remain aspirational, but are matched with real change. This means upholding the principles of “No One Left Behind”. Evaluation can help build an accountability culture and support the removal of constraints to ‘development for all’. Evaluation should include recognition of the trade-offs and decisions that countries will face as they work towards achieving the SDGs. Interventions aiming to achieve one SDG goal, may have some negative impact on progress on other SDGs. For instance, tackling undernutrition (SDG 2) may lead to the promotion of farming focused on protein rich food, (with implications for sustainable production – SDG 12), which may lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions with climate change consequences (SDG13). There has not yet been a serious look at coherence and how the various SDGs should interact and work together, by policy makers, evaluators or other stakeholders.
11. The complexity of the SDGs means that partnerships will have to be formed at international, national and local levels, which are inter-disciplinary, people-driven and multicultural. Partnerships will be important to overcome silo thinking. The extent to which partnerships work, or not, and whether they can mobilise resources, should be a stronger focus for evaluation efforts than is currently the norm in development evaluation.

Recommendations

12. Policy makers and evaluators involved in evaluation of the SDGs, need to work from the premise that business as usual is insufficient. Given the lessons of the MDGs and the non-binding commitment behind the SDGs, evaluation could be driven by a human rights perspective, in particular the processes that build and guarantee rights, which is legally binding. If evaluations have a rights-based perspective they will hold more credence.
13. A concerted effort should be made by evaluators to reduce their use of jargon. Evaluators will also need to encourage higher political buy-in from policy makers and to democratise evaluation for wider populations, providing a voice for varied stakeholders. This would allow greater understanding and nuance to be brought into national and community level efforts.
14. Evaluation has to be nationally rooted, yet at the same time stretch beyond national boundaries and be driven by universal values. It must play a role in uncovering the barriers to progress, noting the political environment places additional emphasis on evaluator’s role for delivering evidence for understanding and action.

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Partnerships and policy - challenges in context

15. Partnerships are not easy and need to be worked at to succeed. To work effectively partnerships need a vision and clear governance outlined at the outset. They may require longer timeframes in order to facilitate trust and promote knowledge sharing. This means that partnerships may not be the most efficient vehicles to achieve short term goals, but in the longer run they can produce the most sustainable solutions if interests and commonalities align. Similarly, with regards to policy, there needs to be political buy-in and an enabling environment for partnerships to function.
16. The private sector is likely to be increasingly involved in efforts to achieve the SDGs. The multi-faceted private sector includes new and emerging actors seeking economic return as well as social and environmental investment impact. The private sector is also interested in setting up monitoring arrangements of its input, in some cases complementing these with evaluation, often using less-traditional methods. Evaluators need to understand how private sector partners generate, use and talk about data, evidence and findings and discuss the impact of their work on progress towards the SDGs.
17. The emerging partnerships that will be needed to mobilise resources and action for the SDGs, and the risks entailed with those partnerships, have far reaching consequences. This is particularly so with how multilateral and bilateral donors engage. Evaluation can provide an understanding of the capacity of partners to deal with issues of an intervention and to reconcile those relationships going forward in a context. There are calls for a greater transfer of power from the donors to nations and citizens, both for aid delivery, through capacity development, and for evaluation.

Recommendations

18. Evaluation mandates in organisations are often restricted to the input of that organisation in a partnership, rather than to support partnerships in evaluation, usually due to resource constraints. Mandates will need to be enlarged and opened up to more democratic evaluation processes with partners. It was suggested that experiences in building successful evaluation partnerships and mandates could be shared between countries and that the UN could facilitate this, perhaps in line with quarterly policy reviews. This could lead to a global platform for exchanging experiences, establishing best practice, a safe space to learn and to discuss how development can be evaluated in partnership and relevant to the process of achieving the SDGs.
19. Evaluation capacity development is considered crucial to this. It was suggested that there is an urgent need to introduce more adaptive and dynamic scientific and mathematical methodologies into evaluation to better understand and evaluate chaotic and non-linear processes of change. In this regard evaluators would need to go “back to school” to add a wide variety of non-deterministic systems approaches to their toolbox.
20. Evaluation needs to engage better with actors in the private sector focusing on social and environmental impact in addition to economic rates of return. Evaluators and academics should look at what lessons have occurred through private sector engagement around the MDGs in helping orientate private business for the SDGs. Similarly, evaluators need to better understand the competitive instinct of the market, and use evaluation to provide a voice for the people.
21. Finally, more needs to be done on translating evaluative evidence into policy changes, ensuring evaluation findings can be communicated and using partnerships to help align incentive structures to provide that change.

Raising standards in evaluation

Models and methods

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22. There are several challenges from the shift from the MDGs to SDGs which should inform evaluators' methodological choices. Firstly, the interconnectedness and complexity of the SDGs raises interesting questions about how to deal with this; and how to understand the inter-relationships between multiple variables. Secondly, the SDGs require all countries to develop, and also include a multitude of new actors to do so. Finally, spatial and temporal dimensions (particularly issues around climate change and long-term sustained impacts) require methods and models that allow consideration of more than the conventional 3-5 year time perspective of an intervention, while including micro-meso-macro linkages where necessary, as well as system-level changes and transformations.

Recommendation

23. Greater attention needs to be placed on causality, and nested theories of change where there is a great richness in the literature to build on. The process of choosing evaluation questions, who is involved, whose values are represented and challenged in setting them, is key to ensure a greater relevance of evaluation for understanding progress of the SDGs. Systems-thinking in evaluation needs to be encouraged; there is a large repository of evidence, but lots of unanswered questions which may provide more depth. Finally, more emphasis must be placed on the models and methods of synthesising existing evaluative evidence.

Governance of evaluation

24. The governance of evaluation of the SDGs must be considered, to avoid power relations being mirrored by the evaluations, and to give voice to the marginalised and the organisations which represent them, where they exist. Evaluation of progress towards SDGs needs to start from a better perspective on common knowledge, taking into account where this continues the status quo rather than works for transformation. Inclusive approaches, such as people-centred data and participatory evaluations are recommended.

Recommendation

25. Ensure people-centred governance of evaluation. The promise of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005, to shift towards country-driven evaluations, has not been delivered yet, but has increased urgency in light of the SDGs. Recognising that the SDGs are universal, and for all countries, means there is a need for a common evaluation standard to be used in country-led evaluations. This would set a quality bar to be achieved.

Ethics of evaluation

26. Issues of ethics and integrity, including transparency and accountability, underpin all evaluations and are critical to how the SDGs should be evaluated. Throughout the evaluation process questions of values need to be faced by the evaluator. There is a need for more development of protocols, methods, and approaches to do an ethical evaluation, including how to get buy-in to get those who commission evaluations to agree on ethical perspectives in evaluations. This is a process that would clearly vary between countries and institutions, as ethical implications are also culture specific. Specific challenges of integrity will be corruption and bribery, and how to deal with ethical issues related to digitalisation such as privacy, consent, ownership, and opaqueness.

Recommendation

27. It is proposed that a body be created that can deal with ethical complaints raised on evaluations. The UN could create an 'ethics ombudsman. In addition, professional evaluation associations could promote ethical values in evaluations and provide training for those becoming involved in the process, and help with the challenges of values in evaluation.

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“Digitalisation will not be the silver bullet for evaluation”

Digitalisation

28. Digitalisation is deemed to be a potentially significant tool for both monitoring and evaluating the SDGs, as more rapid, automated flows of information become available. With large funding gaps in achieving the SDGs, digitalisation could be a valuable tool, in a cost-mitigating manner, with lower running costs. However there are still strong ethical concerns with regards to privacy and security of data, as well as equity and participation. With regards to methods and tools there is still progress to be made, as oftentimes tools such as online surveys can have sizable biases. Overall, digitalisation is an area where private sector actors are generally ahead of their public sector counterparts in their use of digital information for evaluation.

Recommendation

29. Understanding the limitations of digital data for evaluations will be key. For some SDG targets there will be lots of data, and for others little. Digitalisation will not be the silver bullet for evaluation; critical thinking and data collection methods will still be important. However, data scientists will need to be partners to understand the possibilities for a role for digital data.

“giving a voice and decision-making role to the people that are meant to benefit from these new initiatives”

Diversification

30. The involvement of new actors from the private sector, civil society and local communities is crucial to achieve progress towards the SDGs. In particular social and environmental impact- investing initiatives and shifts in the corporate sector to sustainable approaches should be better understood. Evaluating these initiatives raises challenges with regards to comparability, the scope of impact information available for investees, and a lack of understanding of the potential role of evaluation. A major challenge lies in giving a voice and decision-making role to the people that are meant to benefit from these new initiatives.

“Bridging the gap between evaluators and private sector representatives would be a key starting point”

Recommendation

31. While there are positive developments, the role of evaluation in social and environmental impact-investing and the new approach to sustainability in the corporate sector is still new and needs further attention. The SDGs provide framing and a space for a wide range of partnerships, including with civil society and private institutions, to provide social impact, but there is not yet agreement about how to evaluate these. Bridging the gap between evaluators and private sector representatives would be a key starting point. Civil society organisations, working in the nexus between the private and public domains may help to bridge this gap. The creation of a learning platform could also help these efforts.

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