



Wilton Park



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Report

**Revisiting independence, objectivity and the  
critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG  
era**

Wednesday 25 – Friday 27 April 2018 | WP1600

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## Report

# Revisiting independence, objectivity and the critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG era

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A cornerstone of the evaluation function in development agencies has been its organisational and behavioural independence from management. Independence is commonly understood as freedom of interference from possible biasing influences embedded in organisational norms. These influences range from formal processes, such as control of media messages or budget and staffing decisions, to less formally expressed motivations, such as management's preference for evaluation delivering good news about organisational performance.

This Wilton Park event brought together a selected group of 25 thought leaders in the fields of development assistance and evaluation research along with specialists from other sectors, including audit, statistics, humanitarian assistance, banking, academia and the media. They came together to explore the extent to which the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, along with evolving understandings of the meaning of 'development,' give rise to a new set of challenges to evaluation as an independent, objective, critically reflective, professional practice. Discussion focused on the following key issues:

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes a transformative, rights-based development agenda in which stakeholders are engaged and empowered and where review and evaluation are seen as being country-owned. How can evaluation offices of large international donor organisations uphold a credible independent voice while contributing to this agenda?
- Decisions about development do not follow from evidence and technical merit alone. Whilst flows of information – ranging from national data to big data – are increasing, it is clear that both political and technical dimensions are central to developmental outcomes. How can evaluation functions be rigorous whilst influencing the political processes that surround Agenda 2030?
- Impartiality to individual agency interests is a crucial component of credibility when analysing the multiple causal factors and efforts of organisational actors that impinge upon development results. With increasing competition among development agencies for scarce resources, how can evaluators prepare to withstand pressures from organisational heads to use evaluation for their own purposes?
- Does evaluation need to move outside the confines of addressing matters related to results and resources frameworks of individual organisations and discrete projects?
- With few matters of development yielding to precise explanation by way of social science method, why do evaluators resist projecting their role as constituting professional judgement?

## The changing development context: implications for evaluation

1. Over the past few decades there have been dramatic shifts in the approach to development. The development agenda has moved from modalities of engagement built around the idea of transfer of knowledge, funds, as well as support for capacity development, to a more complex idea about co-ownership, partnerships and co-production. There has also been a shift from the notion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) as the leading force of development financing to aid as a catalyst and a lever.
2. The changing development context makes the evaluation enterprise potentially more complicated and complex as well as provides obvious opportunities and challenges. Among them is the need to reduce the focus on evaluating single interventions and their outcomes and increase examination of more systemic effects. Another challenge is how best to address issues of attribution and contribution in determining the effects of policies, programs, and projects. Still another challenge is to change the image of evaluators as technical experts with a specific toolkit to evaluators as partners in preparing decisions about how to achieve social change.
3. Given the cross-sectoral nature of the Sustainable Development Goals in the 2030 Agenda as well as their interrelationships, evaluation needs to spend more time investigating how social change works as opposed to how individual projects work. This may well require examining a collective set of interventions in order to learn something that will inform strategy and policy change.
4. Given the strong emphasis on national ownership of review and evaluation processes in the 2030 Agenda, the issue of who owns evaluation and its results comes more clearly to the fore. Is evaluation owned by evaluation commissioners and experts in donor agencies and countries or by governments, civil society organisations and citizens everywhere?
5. Increased emphasis on national ownership of evaluation as well as citizen involvement in locally debating, defining and owning sustainable development plans, strategies and projects enhances the obligation of the field of evaluation to invest in creating or educating discerning audiences—audiences that are capable of interpreting and critically appraising facts and evidence.
6. A greater number and more diverse set of actors are increasingly involved in examining the ambitious, multi-level, interconnected issues comprising the 2030 Agenda. As a result, evaluators must attend more carefully to the varied interests, objectives and agendas of governments, nongovernment agencies, civil society organisations, and private agencies.
7. The scope of the 2030 Agenda has also meant an increased presence of other professionals engaged in forms of evaluation such as policy analysis, performance measurement, change management, programme audit and inspection. This raises the issue of evaluation's comparative advantage or added value vis-à-vis these other practices.
8. In view of the breadth of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, their 169 targets, and interlinkages among goals, development work is exceptionally varied such that the 'objects' of evaluation differ widely. Thus, choosing what to evaluate and why becomes an even more critical concern.

9. The sources and balance of financing for development is shifting from traditional 'aid' resources to domestic, national resources as well as to private capital. This raises challenges for evaluation to serve the goal of accountability. Multiple types of accountability are now in play: governmental accountability to its citizens; international financial institutions accountable to their shareholders; NGOs are accountable to donors; and private foundations are, in principle, accountable to no one other than their trustees, and so on.
10. There continues to be significant tension between the uses of evaluation for accountability and learning, with the former closely allied with philosophies and practices of results-based management and value for money and the latter less well connected to theories of learning in society and in organisations.
11. Evaluation of a country's progress on achieving sustainable development goals must be accountable to the country's political leadership, both the executive and legislative branches, as well as those institutions representing significant minorities (i.e., political or religious). Evaluations conducted for national accountability need to be planned with the political leadership's input into the purpose of the evaluation, and the formation of the evaluation questions.
12. The Doing Development Differently and Thinking and Working Politically movements in the field of development add a number of important considerations to the standard concerns of the practice of evaluation. These considerations can be summarised as follows

To this standard concern with:

ADD this new concern with:

Technical accuracy

Political awareness

Exacting standards for rigorous evidence

Delivering real-time, feasible practical answers

Independent evaluation

Embedded evaluation

Accountability

Agility

Objective, expert judgment

Stakeholders' interpretations

### **Exercising independence**

13. It is easier to focus on the organisational independence of the evaluation function than on substantive independence. The former refers to the structural autonomy of an evaluation unit from operational management and decision-making responsibilities within an organisation. The latter speaks to the capacity of the individual evaluator to be demonstrably free from bias in the claims he or she makes in an evaluation.
14. Some argue that the complete absence of biasing influences is impossible to achieve; in short, there is no view from nowhere. The fact that an evaluation is conducted within a results-based management framework, or favors a participatory methodology, or supports the idea of transformative development are all instances of bias. Hence, the professional evaluator must attend carefully to making objective assessments warranted by good reasons and evidence and being transparent with respect to any particular standpoint that he or she adopts in the evaluation.
15. Substantive independence is not something established once and for all but is rather a dynamic and deliberative process of establishing and maintaining one's professional identity.

16. Independence of thought and decision-making is a fundamental professional value in evaluation practice, and it is manifest in the professional judgment that an evaluator exercises throughout all phases of an evaluation from design and implementation, to interpretation and reporting.
17. As is the case with many other professional practices, the professional autonomy, discretion and authority of the evaluator can be compromised by external forces. Consider for example how the autonomy and discretion of medical professionals is constrained by managed care organisations, or for example in the US how the discretion of judges in sentencing is constrained by legislated mandatory sentencing guidelines, or how the daily practical decisions of the classroom teacher in deciding how and what to teach are to conform to best practices.
18. Independence is a critical dimension in building the public's trust in evaluation and of the obligation of evaluators to "do right by citizens". This includes ideas such as candidness, accessibility, and 'digestability' in reporting the results of evaluations.
19. Independence is not inconsistent with the practices of consulting stakeholder groups when planning the evaluation, deciding on issues and programme concerns, assessing evaluability, setting priorities and sharing evaluation plans.
20. One way to monitor both structural and substantive independence is to create an external oversight panel of evaluators that review evaluation practices and functions within an organisation.

### **Learning from other sectors**

21. Evaluators, programme/performance auditors, statisticians and journalists share key professional practice principles including independence, objectivity, transparency and the exercise of professional judgement. They also face common threats to their independence as professionals. These practices can only flourish in an open society.
22. Evaluation shares with practices of monitoring, inspection, and auditing a broad mandate to describe and assess programmes and practices, although they often differ on the criteria used to make such descriptions and assessments.
23. Evaluation is unique among these other practices to the extent that it aims to create a critical space for reflection; a space for learning where visions, strategies, actions, and contexts are examined to facilitate continual adjustments.
24. Evaluation of progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda at the national level should ideally include a fruitful interaction between national audit organisations, national bureaus of statistics and evaluators to ensure that data, audits and evaluations build up to a coherent perspective that supports decision-making.
25. Scientific and evaluative evidence rarely, if ever, points unequivocally to a single clear solution to a complex problem. Thus, evaluators need skills in brokering their findings to different audiences, explaining how facts, evidence and findings need to be interpreted and the ramifications of their use.
26. From the field of professional journalism evaluation can benefit from learning how to clarify its central "message" of its added value to citizens and the public discourse.

### **Emerging opportunities and next steps**

27. Evaluators should consider partnering with developing countries' national audit institutions to conduct independent evaluations of their countries' progress on achieving sustainable development. Building national evaluation capacity could be considered a joint effort of professional evaluation and audit societies.
28. Evaluators should consider participating in, sponsoring and catalysing communities of practice around substantive issues for example immigration, climate change, food security. Energies would be better spent on those initiatives which add value not only to these substantive issues but also to the further development of the evaluation profession through organisations of evaluators.

29. Evaluation education and training needs to more clearly emphasize that the practice of evaluation is about making judgments to provoke conversations that will help bring about social, economic and environmental change. Accordingly, in addition to the traditional concern with evaluation methods, training should focus on:
- the topics of professional judgment (what it requires, what it means, how reason and evidence are central aspects of it, how it can be expressed);
  - evaluation conversations—what kind, with whom, about what; learning—what exactly do we expect to learn from an evaluation, how can that learning be taught or conveyed to others; and
  - change—how do we do adaptive management and how does it relate to the practice of evaluation, what does it mean to use evaluation in service of innovation, how does evaluation support transformative development, and so forth.
30. The strong emphasis on country-led processes of review and evaluation provides an additional incentive to evaluation agencies that engage primarily in corporate evaluations to focus new energies on helping to ensure the quality and independence of decentralised evaluations. Given the complexity of the 2030 Agenda the consistency and coherence of evaluative evidence emerging out of decentralised evaluations is a second imperative for ensuring a linkage between central and decentralised evaluations.

**UNDP/IEO Team**

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