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CEPA strategy guidance note on

Monitoring and evaluation systems

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The [United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration \(CEPA\)](#) has developed a set of principles of effective governance for sustainable development. The essential purpose of these voluntary principles is to provide interested countries with practical, expert guidance on a broad range of governance challenges associated with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. CEPA has identified 62 commonly used strategies to assist with the operationalization of these principles. This guidance note addresses monitoring and evaluation systems, which are associated with the principle of sound policymaking and can contribute to strengthening the effectiveness of institutions. It is part of a series of such notes prepared by renowned experts under the overall direction of the CEPA Secretariat in the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

In reading this guidance note, individuals in government ministries and agencies who are less familiar with the topic will be able to understand the fundamentals. Those who have perhaps taken initial steps in this area with limited follow-through or impact will be able to identify how to adjust elements of their practice to achieve better results and to better embed and institutionalize the strategy in their organizations. Those who are more advanced in monitoring and evaluation systems will be able to recognize the practices which contribute to their success.

Understanding the strategy

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development national governments and ministries must understand their respective contributions and measure progress towards targets. The 2030 Agenda states that review of the SDGs will be “rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations.” It also calls for “strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs.”¹ Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems can have a [transformational role](#) in the SDG era when carried out in a way that is inclusive and connected from the practical level to the strategic/policy level and from the local level to the national, regional and global levels (see Figure 1).²

Figure 1. M&E system for improved SDG impact and inclusion



Source: UNITAR-UNDG (2015) Preparing for Action National Briefing Package: The 2030 Agenda and SDGs adapted to illustrate the impact and acceleration of positive change.

Although varying greatly according to country context, national M&E systems generally include different mechanisms for data collection, analysis and learning for decision-making. Monitoring data indicates whether or not targets are being met and evaluation can provide evidence as to how and why results are – or are not – being achieved. Evaluation helps understand what works, where and for whom, which is essential to design policies and implement programmes that reach the most vulnerable and sustain progress towards the

¹ United Nations, 2015, *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

² Van den Barg, R., C. Magro and S. Salinas Mulder, 2019, *Evaluation for Transformational Change. Opportunities and Challenges for the Sustainable Development Goals*, International Development Evaluators Association (IDEAS), Exeter UK. <https://ideas-global.org/transformational-evaluation/>

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SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on principles such as “no-one left behind,” “transformation” and “innovation”.¹

This note provides practical guidance on strengthening national M&E systems toward the principle of sound policymaking. Such guidance is focused on assessing current M&E systems and measuring progress in applying M&E practice in national policymaking processes as well as policy and strategy interventions (such as programmes, projects, schemes, campaigns, regulations and legislation).

Text box 1: Important terminology

This paper uses the term M&E. Increasingly, the abbreviation **MEL** – monitoring, evaluation and learning – is used to acknowledge the contribution of M&E to intelligence gathering for decision-making.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines **monitoring** as a continuing function that uses the **systematic collection** of progress data on **specified indicators**.³ **Evaluability assessments** make sure that the correct data will be gathered to enable good reporting on **outputs and outcomes**. **Results-based management (RBM)** is a systematic way to gather data in relation to expected results for management and budgeting to inform management where changes are required.⁴

An **evaluation** is a specific initiative designed to generate evidence that will **help decision-makers improve** policy and practice. An evaluation will gather evidence on **key evaluation questions**. Data can be **quantitative** (statistical or non-statistical) or **qualitative**. M&E usually requires collecting data across multiple data sources and “**triangulating**” data to generate evidence that is robust so that there will be a high level of confidence in the conclusions.

Globally accepted evaluation criteria help to determine the relevance, coherence, level of achievement, efficiency/value for money, broader impact, and sustainability of the results of policy implementation.⁵ These criteria need to be applied with consideration to unique **contexts, cultures and complexities**. For sustainable development, complexity-aware evaluation also considers **synergies and trade-offs** as important factors for multi-dimensional decision-making.

Other important terms relating to good M&E practice, such as **participatory or multi-stakeholder** M&E, underline the need for the active engagement of multiple organizations and individuals in M&E. Important stakeholders include M&E officers, data analysts, professional evaluators, Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) and commissioners of evaluations as well as those individuals that are affected by the initiatives being evaluated.

Benefits of strong M&E systems throughout the policy cycle

M&E systems serve a dual purpose by providing evidence required for mutual accountability and enabling valuable knowledge to be fed back into policy adjustments and quality

³ OECD, 2002, *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management*.
<https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/2754804.pdf>

⁴ World Bank, 2004, *Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System*,
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/14926/296720PAPER0100steps.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁵ OECD, 2019, *Evaluation, Criteria*,
<https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>

improvements. National M&E systems are designed and implemented as an integral part of different governance structures, taking into account capacities, levels of development and national policies and priorities. M&E systems contribute to building better policies, at different stages of the policy cycle, in line with national priorities.⁶

The early stages of the policy cycle – analysing and developing government policies, budgets, priorities and strategies – all benefit from sound evidence. During policy implementation, M&E helps policymakers learn quickly what is and is not working and why, where, for whom and under which circumstances.⁷ Monitoring generates data on agreed indicators. Evaluative methods add rich evidence to be used to identify required adjustments (either small course corrections in specific initiatives, or major changes in policy or strategic directions) that can be made in a timely and appropriate manner to achieve better results. At the final policy stage, M&E reveals the extent to which the objectives of the government policy and related interventions have been achieved and have contributed to the desired impact. When results targets have not been met, or where policy gaps are evident, M&E provides valuable insight for review and analysis to fill the gaps and improve future policy design and performance.

In a context of limited resources, M&E systems help policymakers to improve the relevance and effectiveness of public programmes. The M&E data and reports can demonstrate whether policies and initiatives are achieving the desired impact on national objectives and the SDGs. Active M&E systems, combined with a commitment to learning from both positive and negative results, increase the potential for sound policymaking and better value for money. M&E systems assist in accelerating good performance and highlighting specific vulnerabilities where special attention is required to ensure that no one is left behind.

Public sector situation and trends

National governments are increasing their commitment to building M&E systems that can assess the performance of national development plans and national progress towards the SDGs. In our increasingly complex world, policymakers are faced with the need to focus on systems change.⁸ Developing skills in complexity and evaluative thinking enables policymakers

⁶ World Bank, 2012, *Building Better Policies: The Nuts and Bolts of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems*, World Bank, Washington, DC. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/6015>

⁷ OECD, *Policy Monitoring and Evaluation*, available from; [http://www.oecd.org/gov/policy-monitoring-evaluation.htm#:~:text=Policy%20monitoring%20and%20evaluation%20\(M%26E,achieve%20key%20long%2Dterm%20objectives](http://www.oecd.org/gov/policy-monitoring-evaluation.htm#:~:text=Policy%20monitoring%20and%20evaluation%20(M%26E,achieve%20key%20long%2Dterm%20objectives).

⁸ Future Earth, 2019, *A Systems Approach: Imperative To Achieve The Sustainable Development Goals*, https://futureearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SDG-systems_issue-brief.pdf

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to focus on causal links and rapid solutions.^{9, 10} The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation reported that in 2018, 64 per cent of countries had high-quality national development strategies in place and 91 per cent of national strategies approved after 2015 reference the 2030 Agenda. Yet, only 35 per cent of governments had data and systems to track the implementation of those national strategies.¹¹

Nevertheless, the Evaluation Office of the Rockefeller Foundation identified steady growth in the number of developing countries that are implementing national M&E policies.¹² The Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation has gathered data that indicates that the trend is continuing and strengthening.¹³ In some countries, prominence is given to M&E through legislative changes, national frameworks and active M&E strategies. There is enhanced investment in M&E capacity development by academia, VOPEs, professional development associations and international organizations.

Depending on the country, M&E systems are most effective when they are institutionalised through formal policy or legal instruments. A National Evaluation Policy¹⁴ or Act and associated regulations,⁷ are embedded in political institutions and authorities.¹⁵ Countries may include RBM systems across government, linking interventions to evidence-based budgeting.¹⁶ Important considerations for the effectiveness of M&E systems include: (i)

[Finland](#) requires the evaluation of progress toward the 2030 Agenda every four years. An evaluation was completed in 2019. Based on key recommendations, a new policy objective has been approved to reach carbon neutrality by 2035 in a socially equitable manner.

[Nepal](#)'s revised Constitution in 2015 includes aspirations closely aligned with SDG targets, including the importance of evaluation. Nepal has actively engaged civil society, parliamentarians, government and the evaluation sector to improve evidence-based decision-making.¹

⁹ Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus (CECAN), 2020, *Complexity and what it means for policy design, implementation and evaluation*, <https://www.cecan.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/EPPN-No-16-Complexity-and-what-it-means-for-policy-design-implementation-and-evaluation-pdf>

¹⁰ Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2018, *Thinking Big: How to Use Theory of Change for Systems Change*, <https://oecd-opsi.org/toolkits/thinking-big-how-to-use-theory-of-change-for-systems-change/>

¹¹ Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-Operation, 2019, *Making development co-operation more effective: Headlines of Parts I and II of the Global Partnership 2019 Progress Report*, https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2020-01/GPEDC_2019-Report_Glossy_EN.pdf

¹² The Rockefeller Foundation, 2014, *Emerging Opportunities: Monitoring and Evaluation in a Tech-Enabled World*, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Monitoring-and-Evaluation-in-a-Tech-Enabled-World.pdf>

¹³ Global Parliamentarians Forum, 2015, *Status of National Evaluation Policies: Global Mapping Report*, <https://globalparliamentarianforum.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/the-status-of-evaluation-policies.pdf>

¹⁴ EvalPartners and GPFfE, 2015, *Ten Reasons Why National Evaluation Policy is Important*, <http://www.pfde.net/images/pdf/102.pdf>

¹⁵ Goldman, I. and M. Pabari, 2020, *Using Evidence in Policy and Practice: Lessons from Africa*, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/using-evidence-policy-practice-ian-goldman-mine-pabari/e/10.4324/9781003007043>

¹⁶ Indasi, E., 2013, *Learner's Submission: Results Based Monitoring and Evaluation System*, <https://unpanellearning.wordpress.com/tag/evaluation/>

consistency of data across different locations/sources to allow for data analysis; (ii) collection of data across relevant sectors, programme types, for completeness of findings; (iii) whether M&E is conducted internally (self-assessment) or evaluated externally; and (iv) effective communication of evaluation findings and recommendations.¹⁷

There are three additional considerations of importance for effective M&E systems.

- **M&E as integral and critical to the policy cycle.** The role of evaluation in the policy cycle has shifted from a classic backward looking approach towards a systemic approach integrated throughout policy cycle interventions.¹⁸ The establishment of M&E processes, including the assessment of evaluability prior to implementation, are now usually considered integral steps in a policy or intervention design process. This improves the relevance and quality of data generated and the extent to which the performance tracking of policy results is ascribed to the specific policy inputs.
- **M&E evidence forms part of an overall strategy for knowledge management and adaptability.** Monitoring used to be synonymous with compliance appraisal and progress reporting that was largely backward-looking. Now, combined in a systematic way with evaluation, it contributes to a powerful management process to track and understand change, generating knowledge that can be used to improve future outcomes. With the growing diversification of evaluation approaches, M&E systems have the capacity to generate critical, timely, foresight-oriented knowledge in uncertain contexts.
- **Increased attention to contextualized data and findings.** The 2030 Agenda places emphasis on those “left behind” – reaching the furthest behind first, including countries in special situations, vulnerable countries and communities – and the need to understand the national, regional and local context in planning and development. Well-designed M&E systems provide disaggregated data related to people or contexts that are often overlooked, such as the youth; elderly; all gender groups; people with disabilities; remote, minority and culturally distinct populations; and sensitive and vulnerable environmental assets. Moreover, well-functioning M&E systems can be designed to reveal differing levels of policy impact so that relevant and appropriate actions can be taken to improve benefits across different contexts and cultures.

¹⁷ Meyer, W., R. Stockmann and L. Taube, 2020, *The Institutionalization of Evaluation Theoretical Background, Analytical Concept and Methods*, The Institutionalisation of Evaluation in Europe, pp. 3-34.
https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-030-32284-7_1

¹⁸ Akre, B., 2017, Towards a systematic Monitoring & Evaluation framework: Evaluating individual interventions in an entwined policy intervention area, *Discussion paper*.
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Towards-a-systematic-Monitoring-%26-Evaluation-in-an-Akre/c288b0a2de4add759cf62657f3a28867f1b2633c>

Methods of implementation

The following seven building blocks should be combined to help ensure that M&E systems function effectively and generate relevant evidence:

1. **Invest in participatory co-design processes including M&E.** Engaging key stakeholders in policy/programme/project design helps to build an understanding of and commitment to the intent of the intervention. Developing a systems-based, conceptual framework⁸ at this stage helps to identify the key challenges to be addressed and to understand causal linkages, contextual influences and assumptions to provide a robust foundation for the M&E system. Obtaining agreement to develop an M&E system encourages stakeholders to contribute quality data, have a stake in the M&E findings, and increases the likelihood that M&E recommendations will be accepted and actioned.
2. **Set realistic, measurable outcome indicators and targets.** The quality of indicators and targets is important to the overall strength and usefulness of M&E processes. Key performance indicators and associated baselines and targets are developed to monitor progress with respect to inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. One approach is to adopt SDG indicators and targets.¹⁹ This ensures that policy actions are causally linked to the 2030 Agenda and other global frameworks. Indicators and associated targets should also be specific and measurable within a given context. Realistic and achievable targets that acknowledge expected funding and resource levels, and institutional and individual capacities and constraints are important.
3. **Evaluability assessment.** An evaluability assessment helps to identify what can be evaluated in a reliable and credible fashion to assess the merit and worth of the interventions, and what mechanisms to gather data are required to ensure that the flow of monitoring data will be credible and useful to track performance and generate learning. Key considerations are the availability of relevant and viable data sources and the utility and practicality of an evaluation.²⁰
4. **Gathering of relevant data and information.** Statistical capacity to collect data is an essential component of building effective M&E systems. Systematically gathering baseline data is generally important for credible evaluations, providing a basis for trend analysis and measuring progress towards outcomes and overall impact. Gathering real-time data and emergent forms of evaluation are also possible, contributing to improved adaptive management for optimum impact.
5. **Regular collection of data: data for monitoring and for specific evaluative requirements.** Collection of data against specified indicators and the baseline is

¹⁹ UNStats, *SDG Indicators*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/>

²⁰ Davies, R., 2013, *Planning Evaluability Assessments: A Synthesis of the Literature with Recommendations*, DFID Working Paper 40. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a0d40f0b652dd000534/61141-DFIDWorkingPaper40-finalOct13.pdf>

important for the tracking of results and for management decision-making processes, for example through dashboards and processes for adaptive management. A sound understanding of progress against intended results helps to adjust interventions to context or unforeseen circumstances and undertake corrective action where required. Ongoing monitoring and rapid evaluation can capture lessons in real time for potential replication, acceleration and upscaling of approaches.

6. **High quality evaluation for robust findings and realistic recommendations.** Collating and analysing evidence from a variety of sources helps to ensure the validity of findings through the triangulation of data. Analysing evidence from different sources helps to (i) increase the validity of the M&E findings and (ii) assist with identifying and understanding enabling and hindering factors affecting performance and the steps required to address these. Evaluation standards and guidelines are available and evolving.²¹ Commonly used [evaluation criteria](#) are relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. In terms of broad evaluation questions this means: i) is the intervention doing the right things? ii) How well does the intervention fit with others? iii) Is the intervention achieving its objectives? iv) How well are resources being used? v) what difference does the intervention make (positive and negative, intended and unintended)?²² vi) Will the benefits of the intervention last? While these criteria form a strong basis for evaluation design it is important to ensure that the evaluation questions are adapted to the evaluation purpose, planned utilization, and available resources to ensure findings and recommendations are context-specific and utilization-focused. Furthermore, an effective M&E system should include a system for follow-up of recommendations to understand whether or not they have been successfully implemented and to improve the efficacy of future recommendations.
7. **Communication of findings and results.** Evaluation findings can contribute to discussions among government officials and other stakeholders about the causes of certain conditions and how to respond appropriately. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of evaluations should be presented in a way that can assist policymakers to make informed decisions.¹⁵ It is important that evaluation be shared with all relevant stakeholders as they are imperative to the CEPA principle of sound policymaking for effective institutions. The 2030 Agenda requires more than sharing the results of individual evaluations by synthesizing evaluation results on priority topics through meta-analysis and systematic reviews thereby leading to improved results more broadly through learning uptake in other contexts and the replication and scaling up of successful interventions.

²¹ Better Evaluation, 2020, *Evaluation Standards*, https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/evaluation_standards

²² Bamberger, M., M. Tarsilla and S. Hesse-Biber, 2016, *Why so many “rigorous” evaluations fail to identify unintended consequences of development programs: How mixed methods can contribute*, *Evaluation and Program Planning*, Vol. 55. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/epplan/v55y2016icp155-162.html>

International standards, methods, and common approaches

Effective M&E at the national level requires the adoption of evaluation approaches which acknowledge the complexity of national policy level interventions and contexts such as systems thinking and complexity-aware approaches.^{23,24} There are no internationally recognised standards or protocols for M&E systems but there is a growing body of recognised global good practice. This generally requires multi-sectoral approaches, mixed methods evaluation design which includes the collection of primary and secondary data in both quantitative and qualitative forms, and the use of a range of methods and tools. There are an increasing number of evaluation methods and tools that can be applied. As with any topic, for policymakers embarking on M&E system strengthening, it is important to engage qualified and experienced evaluators to identify the most appropriate tools and methods.

Systems thinking and complexity-aware approaches align with the 2030 Agenda, which states that “The interlinkages and integrated nature of the SDGs are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized.” This approach is relevant in increasingly complex systems such as public health, environmental management, climate change, and humanitarian crises as well as for interventions that span across systems (e.g., that affect both human and natural systems). A complexity-aware approach is useful where the links between activities and outcomes are not linear or predictable and external factors influence the contribution of activities to outcomes.²⁵ These approaches maximize the transformational potential of monitoring and evaluation for the SDGs.

Participatory M&E (PM&E) is a process through which stakeholders (who may be different from those included in the design phase in the previous section) are involved at various levels in M&E activities; share control over the content, the process and the results; and engage in taking or identifying corrective actions.²⁶ A participatory approach is fundamental to needs mapping, planning and good M&E management. The approach contributes to demand-led planning and decision-making and improved accountability. PM&E is most successful when effective communication and feedback loops are in place.²⁷

²³ HM Treasury, 2020, Magenta Book 2020: Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879437/Magenta_Book_supplementary_guide_Handling_Complexity_in_policy_evaluation.pdf

²⁴ Centre for Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus, 2020, *Complexity Evaluation Framework*, <https://www.cecan.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A3-CEF-v6.pdf>

²⁵ Douthwaite, B. and E. Hoffecker, 2017, *Towards a complexity-aware theory of change for participatory research programs working within agricultural innovation systems*, *Agricultural Systems*, 155, pp. 88-102. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308521X17303190>

²⁶ Intrac, 2017, *Participatory M&E*, <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Participatory-ME.pdf>

²⁷ Chevalier, J. and D. Buckles, 2013, *Handbook for Participatory Action Research, Planning and Evaluation*, https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/toolkit/handbook_for_participatory_action_research_planning_and%20_evaluation

The logical framework (logframe) is a traditional, simple, linear tool for planning and M&E, most often used with clearly defined projects and programmes rather than policy work. The logframe outlines the objectives at different levels and tests the means of measurement and verification for achievement at each level.²⁸ However, the logical and rigid nature of the logframe makes it less applicable to the complex nature of national policy intervention.

A theory of change (ToC) is an increasingly common M&E tool that illustrates the causal pathways that may lead to the desired change.²⁹ It is similar to the logframe, but involves broader consideration of inter-related systems, causes and effects and the barriers and enablers that may influence progress towards the desired outcomes. A ToC is appropriate for use in a policy setting because it can be used in conjunction with mapping systems to identify multiple pathways to effect policy level change. A ToC identifies the causal linkages between the activities, outputs and outcomes required to achieve the targeted change.³⁰

Impact evaluations assess the changes, both intended and unintended that result from a project. Impact evaluations aim to go beyond an investigation of the delivery of outputs and instead seek to understand if the intended change actually happened and if so, to what extent certain inputs have contributed to change and what would have happened in the absence of the intervention.^{31,32} It is also important to understand what did not happen well and learn those lessons for improved performance in the future.

Adaptive learning or adaptive management. To increase the chances that promised results are achieved, adaptive learning and adaptive management are crucial.³³ This means collecting data through timely processes such as rapid evaluations, reflection workshops, or developmental evaluations so that implementation strategies can be adjusted as lessons are learned and situations and systems change.

Feedback systems are the systematic approach to collecting the views of key stakeholders about the quality and impact of the work that is undertaken and their perceptions of the success of an intervention throughout the project cycle. Feedback data can monitor the process and/or the results achieved to inform implementation changes where required and to

²⁸ Better Evaluation, 2015, *Logframe*, <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/logframe>

²⁹ Rogers, P., 2014, *Theory of Change*, https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guide/theory_of_change

³⁰ Alford, C., 2017, *Two Approaches for Combining Theories of Change and System Maps*, <https://blog.kumu.io/two-approaches-for-combining-theories-of-change-and-system-maps-5b556091c880>

³¹ Gertler, P., et al. 2011, *Impact Evaluation in Practice*, World Bank, Washington, DC. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2550>

³² Stern, E., et al. 2012, *Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations*, <https://www.oecd.org/derec/50399683.pdf>

³³ Centre for International Development Harvard University, 2018, *PDIA Toolkit: A DIY Approach to Solving Complex Problems*, <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/PDIAtoolkit>

hold decision makers accountable to citizens in the case of social accountability.³⁴ A feedback system can also be used in the context of a system that takes evaluation findings and translates them into changed approaches and refocusing of policies.

Capacity strengthening. The pace of change in M&E due to the rapid shifts in data systems, knowledge generation and M&E practices, means that there is a constant need to build the capacity of existing and new staff. There are necessary foundational skills as well as specialist areas of M&E practice that require capacity-building support. Cutting edge areas of M&E that need support include complexity-aware and context-sensitive evaluation expertise, particularly in sensitive environments and multi-stakeholder contexts. There is also a special need to support indigenous M&E practice to ensure that data gathering, use and analysis is culturally sensitive.

Limitations of current approaches and potential of emerging approaches

Some limitations for M&E systems include the dilemma of contribution versus attribution. In other words the [difficulties in attributing](#) results to policy interventions³¹ and an inclination towards static and siloed assessments which do not acknowledge [changing circumstances](#) or the complexity of national level interventions.³⁴ The focus on accountability in many monitoring and summative (end of initiative) evaluations minimizes the learning potential and often leaves evaluation underutilized. There is a need for new M&E approaches in the SDG era that more adequately address the cross-sectoral impacts of interventions. M&E is often fragmented because of the lack of a coherent national policy framework and supporting systems, and limited respect for the Paris Declaration principles of harmonization and use of national systems.

The increasingly tech-enabled world creates a unique set of new opportunities and challenges,¹² including: new approaches to M&E and potential for technology-driven M&E processes, when M&E plans and new ICT tools work together.³⁵ ICTs offer new methods for gathering, analysing and disseminating data and are changing M&E practice. Along with advances in mobile phone technology, remote sensing and other mapping tools, social media platforms and data visualization options offer emerging opportunities to combine data sets and support more informed decisions about policy and programme implementation. However, there is a risk of over-reliance on digital tools, data and numerical indicators, which will consequently weaken quality control due to an over-collection of data with little capacity for analysis, and the loss of contextual understanding obtained from project visits and face-

³⁴ Jacobs, A., C. Barnett and R. Posford, 2010, Three Approaches to Monitoring: Feedback Systems, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation and Logical Frameworks, *IDS Bulletin*, 41(6), pp. 36-44. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/7877/IDSB_41_6_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2010.00180.x.pdf?sequence=1

³⁵ Monitoring and Evaluation News, *Me&E Software: A List*, <https://mande.co.uk/2011/lists/software-lists/me-software-a-list/>

to-face interviews when these are replaced with rapid and often remote electronic data collection.¹²

Emerging approaches to evaluation. The evaluation sector is developing new methods for policy issues and complex situations that help decision makers to understand the dynamics in a given context and highlight the important economic, social, environmental, cultural and political changes that are occurring.⁸ 24 Evaluations can offer new and deeper insights on critical issues, cognizant of the various and often conflicting forces at play and a forecast of the likely impact for local, national and global sustainable development solutions. In view of this, the World Public Sector Report 2018 explains that national M&E systems need to be able to leverage M&E as a dynamic tool to encourage continuous cross-sectoral collaboration and go beyond the evaluation of single policies.³⁶

Case studies

The following case studies present innovative M&E systems and emerging practices for the SDGs.³⁷ The case studies demonstrate that there are a range of initiatives that can be used to strengthen M&E systems. These approaches can contribute improved evidence for M&E reporting, which can then be used to improve national and local decision-making and outcomes.

Africa

Senegal demonstrates links to the SDGs through its nationally identified strategic objectives and activities. A national evaluability assessment helped identify areas where additional data was required to show progress toward the SDGs. Senegal developed an inclusive approach to encourage stakeholders to contribute to data collection efforts through a multi-sectoral and interinstitutional database. In conducting a Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2018 Senegal assessed the alignment of the plan with individual SDG targets and indicators.³⁸ These data are now contributing to improved SDG monitoring and evaluation, including to an evaluation of the ‘Emerging Senegal Plan,’ the guiding national development strategy.³⁹ Senegal has also

³⁶ United Nations, 2018, *Working Together: Integration, institutions and the sustainable development goals*, World Public Sector Report, New York. <https://www.local2030.org/library/437/Working-Together-Integration-Institutions-and-the-Sustainable-Development-Goals-World-Public-Sector-Report-2018.pdf>

³⁷ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2018, *Tracking Progress Together: Emerging Practices in National SDG Review*, <http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Tracking-Progress-Together-P4R-Magazine-Nov.-2018.pdf>

³⁸ République du Sénégal, 2018, *Revue Nationale Volontaire Rapport Final*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19253Rapport_national_volontaire_Snegal_versi_onn_finale_juin_2018_FPHN2.pdf

³⁹ United Nations, 2018, *Voluntary National Review: Messages clés du Sénégal*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/senegal>

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done a [self-assessment](#) of its national monitoring and evaluation system (using a tool developed by UNDP),^{40,41} which led to drafting a national policy for public policy evaluation.⁴²

South Africa has a robust and innovative national M&E system that was established over ten years ago and has since been updated and improved.⁴³ South Africa developed an SDG Hub which encourages the engagement of different sectors, including civil society and the private sector.⁴⁴ The current national systems are strongly linked to the SDGs and have associated targets and indicators, especially related to social welfare. Furthermore, in preparing the 2019 VNR, South Africa engaged numerous stakeholder groups throughout the process to collect various forms of evidence.⁴⁵

Western Asia

Lebanon developed a national committee for SDGs and established a national database of SDG indicators to identify progress, gaps and targets, among other actions.⁴⁶ This committee was integral to engaging stakeholders and localizing the SDGs for action to prepare for the VNR.

Palestine conducted a Review of the Palestinian Government Preparedness for the SDGs in 2018. The review commented on the systems established to measure and control progress, including indicators, quality checks, and frameworks for national reporting against the SDGs.⁴⁷ The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics also developed a comprehensive account of

⁴⁰ UNDP, *National Evaluation Capacities: A Self-Assessment Online Tool for Evaluation Diagnostics and Strategizing*, <http://66.36.242.207/>

⁴¹ UNDP, *National Evaluation Diagnostic Guidance*, <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/guidance.shtml#dig>

⁴² UNDP, 2019, *Leaving No One Behind: Evaluation for 2030: Proceedings from the 2019 National Evaluation Capacities Conference*, http://web.undp.org/evaluation/documents/NEC/2019/NEC2019_proceedings.pdf

⁴³ Goldman, I., C. Nuga Deliwe, S. Taylor and Z. Ishmail, 2019, *Evaluation2 – Evaluating the national evaluation system in South Africa: What has been achieved in the first 5 years?*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335241786_Evaluation2_-_Evaluating_the_national_evaluation_system_in_South_Africa_What_has_been_achieved_in_the_first_5_years

⁴⁴ World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2020, *South Africa – NBI*, <https://sdghub.com/south-africa-national-business-initiative-nbi/>

⁴⁵ Government of South Africa, 2019, *South Africa's Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report 2019: Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23402RSA_Voluntary_National_Review_Report_9_July_2019.pdf

⁴⁶ Arab NGO Network for Development and Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2018, *On the Way to HLPF 2018*, <https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Lebanon-spotlight-report-2018.pdf>

⁴⁷ State of Palestine: State Audit and Administrative Control Bureau, 2018, *Review of the Palestinian Government Preparedness for the Sustainable Development Goals Final Report*, <http://www.saacb.ps/BruRpts/PalestinianSDGs.pdf>

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baseline data regarding the SDGs for the 2018 VNR, which was developed in consultation with a variety of stakeholder groups and participatory methods.^{48, 49}

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia established The Adaa National Center for Performance Measurement in 2017 as a response to the increasing demand to assess the performance of government agencies.⁵⁰ Adaa's mission is "to implement processes that measure public entity performance and offer the support to achieve the Kingdom's Vision 2030, associated development plans, and improve communication with beneficiaries."⁵¹

Southern Asia

Nepal's new constitution (2015)⁵² included several aspirations closely aligned with SDG targets including the importance of evaluation.^{42,53} Nepal has actively engaged civil society, parliamentarians, government and the evaluation sector to improve evidence-based decision-making. In 2017, Nepal developed a comprehensive report providing baseline information on SDG indicators, reviewing two years of SDG implementation and updating national SDG targets in line with previous experiences.⁵⁴ The current development plan (2019/20 to 2023/24) has fully aligned with the SDGs and Nepal has prepared its second VNR engaging all relevant stakeholders.⁵⁵

India has developed a national development strategy strongly linked to the SDGs and is supplemented by state level action plans and strategies also aligned with the SDGs.⁵⁶ The National Institute of Transforming India (NITI Aayog), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation and state governments are developing a National Indicator Framework that supports policymakers to benchmark their progress against the national targets and performance of their peers and devise better strategies to achieve the SDGs. India

⁴⁸ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, no date, *Baseline Data for SDGs Indicators*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/19403PalestineSDGs_Baseline_Data_VNR_2018_Final.pdf

⁴⁹ State of Palestine, 2018, *Palestinian National Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20024VNR2018PalestineNEWYORK.pdf>

⁵⁰ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018, *Towards Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow*, https://www.sa.undp.org/content/saudi_arabia/en/home/library/SDGs/VNR.html

⁵¹ The National Center for Performance Measurement Saudi Arabia, *Adout Adaa*, <https://www.adaa.gov.sa/en/About%20Adaa>

⁵² Ministry of Health and Population Nepal, 2015, *The Constitution of Nepal*, https://www.mohp.gov.np/downloads/Constitution%20of%20Nepal%202072_full_english.pdf

⁵³ National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal, 2017, *Nepal Sustainable Development Goals: Status and Roadmap: 2016-2030*, https://www.npc.gov.np/images/category/SDGs_Report_Final.pdf

⁵⁴ National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal, 2017, *Nepal's Sustainable Development Goals: Baseline Report*, [https://www.npc.gov.np/images/category/SDGs_Baseline_Report_final_29_June-1\(1\).pdf](https://www.npc.gov.np/images/category/SDGs_Baseline_Report_final_29_June-1(1).pdf)

⁵⁵ National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal, 2020, *Nepal: National Review of Sustainable Development Goals*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26541VNR_2020_Nepal_Report.pdf

⁵⁶ OECD, 2019, *Governance as an SDG Accelerator*, <https://www.oecd.org/fr/gov/pcsd/governance-as-an-sdg-accelerator-0666b085-en.htm>

has localized the indicators to the state level and is recording progress at state and national levels. This information is published and easily available.⁵⁷

Latin America

Colombia has a well-established and documented national M&E system that tracks government-wide performance including the SDGs. This system evaluates the implementation of key programmes across multiple sectors to oversee, develop and implement government-supported evaluations and monitor the National Development Plan. The inclusion of ministries as an integral part of the entire M&E process contributes to the effectiveness of this approach.⁵⁸

Costa Rica identified links between parts of the National Development Plan, national policy priorities and the SDGs to develop the National Evaluation Policy.⁵⁹ The country has used these links to leverage the SDGs to increase the profile and use of evaluation and develop a society-wide, national pact to monitor, evaluate and achieve the SDGs, including the implementation of an M&E strategy. The pact was developed, and progress is monitored, through inclusive and participatory processes as reported in the country's second voluntary national review.⁶⁰

Europe

Finland has completed a [national evaluation](#) on the implementation of Agenda 2030, which included an assessment of national indicators and policy objectives as well as SDG implementation activities. Stakeholder groups, including government sector representatives, researchers, academics, youth groups and varied experts, were engaged throughout the evaluation including in the design and data collection processes.^{61,62} The evaluation used a four-

⁵⁷ Government of India, 2020, *India VNR 2020: Decade of Action: Taking SDGs from Global to Local*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26281VNR_2020_India_Report.pdf

⁵⁸ Cassidy, C. and J. Tsui, 2017, Global evidence policy units: SINERGIA, Colombia, *ODI briefing paper*. https://www.odi.org/publications/10828-global-evidence-policy-units-sinergia-colombia?utm_source=eadi.org

⁵⁹ Government of Costa Rica, 2017, *A Shared Vision of Sustainability*, Report presented at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, New York.

http://ods.cr/sites/default/files/documentos/informepaisods_costa_rica-ingles.pdf

⁶⁰ SDG Technical Secretariat in Costa Rica, 2020, *Second Voluntary National Review. Sustainable Development Goals, Costa Rica 2020*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26894second_voluntary_national_review_sdg_costa_rica.pdf

⁶¹ D'Errico, S., T. Geoghegan and I. Piergallini, 2020, *Evaluation to Connect National Priorities with the SDGs*, <https://pubs.iied.org/17739IIED/>

⁶² Demos Helsinki, Finnish Environment Institute SYKE and Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science HELSUS, 2019, *PATH2030 – An Evaluation of Finland's Sustainable Development Policy*, <https://www.demoshelsinki.fi/julkaisut/path2030-an-evaluation-of-finlands-sustainable-development-policy/>

pillar framework of institutions, interests, ideas and information. The evaluation also used a ToC to assist in identifying enabling and hindering factors.

Switzerland has developed, MONET, a mechanism for tracking progress towards the national development strategy and the SDGs. MONET includes a series of indicators, criteria and processes, which include financial, societal and political measures that provide a well-rounded understanding of progress and change, integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interaction between them.⁶³

Peer-to-peer learning and research

The following list of resources is indicative and provides a pathway to other useful information sources.

BetterEvaluation is an international collaboration to improve evaluation practice and theory by sharing and generating information about evaluation methods and approaches. <https://www.betterevaluation.org/>

Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results is an initiative of the World Bank and has programmes that strengthen evaluation capacities at the local and regional levels, particularly with policymakers. <https://www.theclearinitiative.org/who-we-are>

The DAC Network on Development Evaluation is a partnership platform for evaluation learning and coordination that shares good practices, develops shared norms and standards and supports capacity development and joint evaluation work. <https://www.oecd.org/development/evaluation/>

The OECD Directorate for Public Governance offers international comparative analysis and benchmarking as related to M&E. <http://www.oecd.org/gov/>

EvalPartners is a global partnership that aims to strengthen national evaluation capacities and the enabling environment for civil society organizations to engage in national evaluation processes, to contribute to improved country-led evaluation systems and policies and for evaluations that are equity-focused and gender responsive. It started a global, multi-stakeholder consultative process to brainstorm about the priorities and key areas of a Global

⁶³ Government of Switzerland, 2016, *Switzerland's initial steps towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Report presented at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, New York. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10617Full%20Report%20HLPF%202016_Switzerland_EN%20fin.pdf

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Evaluation Agenda for 2016–2020 (“EvalAgenda2020”) that aligns with the SDGs. <https://evalpartners.org/>

EVALS is a network of policymakers, institutions and practitioners operating as part of EvalPartners. EVALS aims to form a strong evaluation platform to inform, support, measure and assess development efforts around the SDGs. EVALS members work to support the evaluation community to be prepared for evaluating initiatives towards better outcomes for the SDGs. <https://evalsdgs.org/>

Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI) is an inclusive partnership that brings together a large network of evaluation capacity development stakeholders, including governments, bilateral and multilateral organizations, evaluation capacity development service providers, civil society organizations, academic institutions, M&E associations, and M&E experts. GEI supports countries in building sustainable and effective M&E frameworks and capacities, by leveraging local, regional, and global knowledge and expertise. <https://www.globalevaluationinitiative.org/>

Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation (GPfE) is a collaboration of international parliamentarians advocating for evaluation use and evidence-based decision-making for improved policy outcomes and social accountability. <https://gpffe.org/>

The International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) represents and provides a link to national and regional Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation. It strengthens international evaluation through the exchange of evaluation methods, theories and practice. There are regional evaluation associations for Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Latin America, and South Asia and also a Francophone Network. <https://www.ioce.net/>

Twende Mbele is a programme and network in Africa that is working toward a partnership where countries collaborate on developing and implementing M&E systems that improve government performance and impact on citizens. Twende engages with a variety of national governments that are interested in using M&E to strengthen government performance and accountability to citizens. <http://www.twendembele.org/about-us/>

UNDP explores options for aligning the follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda with national M&E frameworks, prioritizing SDG indicators for national monitoring, strengthening national statistical capacities, and leveraging partnerships and innovations. UNDP supports national evaluation capacity development and is a partner of the new Global Evaluation Initiative <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluation-office.shtml>

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) is a network comprising the evaluation units of 45 United Nations agencies to foster professional evaluation knowledge in pursuit of United Nations goals. The mission of UNEG is to promote and support the independence,

credibility and usefulness of the evaluation units in the United Nations system.
<http://www.uneval.org/>

UN Global Pulse explores ways of effectively integrating big data into the M&E of development programmes. <https://www.unglobalpulse.org/>

International financial institutions have played a strong role in building evaluation capacity and practice. Many international and regional development banks have M&E systems in place.

- **The African Development Bank Group** conducts research on various evaluation issues in African countries. <https://idev.afdb.org>
- **The Inter-American Development Bank** has an Office of Evaluation and Oversight (OVE). <https://www.iadb.org/en/ove/home>
- **The World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG)** is an independent unit within the World Bank that aims to learn from experience through the dissemination of lessons learned, to provide an objective basis for assessing the results of the Bank's work, and to provide accountability in the achievement of its objectives. IEG, together with partners, launched a new collaboration in 2020 to address global gaps in M&E capacity through an evaluation capacity development partnership. <http://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/>
- **The Islamic Development Bank Group (IsDBG)** brings together 57 member countries across four continents. IsDBG's Operations Evaluation Department assesses IsDBG strategies such as the Member Country Partnership Strategy, which is a process to enhance dialogue with member countries and other development partners. The Operations Evaluation Department also assesses IsDBG sector and thematic strategies and suggests key lessons and recommendations towards improved development effectiveness of the Bank's strategies and financing operations. <https://www.isdb.org>

International development cooperation

The United Nations system strongly supports the strengthening of national capacity in M&E. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 60/237 of 14 December 2014 affirms that building national evaluation capacities at the country level is important for development activities.

UNEG has developed Norms and Standards for Evaluation.⁶⁴ UNDP has spearheaded a series of National Evaluation Capacities conferences to support the development of national evaluation capacities and systems as part of a broader strategy to contribute to the realization of the SDGs.⁶⁵ These conferences promote the understanding of international standards in evaluation and advocate for evaluation as a means to manage development results, thereby improving public accountability and learning. The conference provides opportunities to share country level lessons, innovations, experiences, challenges and solutions in strengthening national M&E systems.

The United Nations Institute for Training and Research supports capacity development within the United Nations system and at national level. Most United Nations Agencies and other international development partners have independent evaluation offices that support accountability and learning as well as decentralized M&E processes. They often provide external support for M&E in line with their specific mandate.

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⁶⁴ United Nations Evaluation Group, 2016, *Norms and Standards for Evaluation*, <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>

⁶⁵ UNDP, Independent Evaluation Office, National Evaluation Capacities Conferences – Accountability and Learning for Development, http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/documents/evaluation_brief/NEC_brief.pdf

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