



Current evaluation methods and the limits of their application in evaluating the SDGs.

Assessing development is increasing in complexity given the interdependencies and new requirements of development initiatives. Is the evaluator community equipped to meet the paradigm shift? The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 has provided an opportunity to review evaluation approaches and criteria. This article examines the different approaches as well as the challenges for an adequate assessment of SDGs, and suggests possible ways forward for truly sustainable development.

Jean Yves Adou, Head of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)

Historical context and definitions

THE concept of development evolved in line with the increasing awareness of the phenomenon of underdevelopment, needed in order to “eradicate the evil of underdevelopment.” (Freyssinet J., 1966).

- Development is the combination of the mental and social changes of a population that make it capable of cumulatively and sustainably increasing its overall output. *François Perroux*
- Development consists of broadening the possibilities of success to those who wish to escape the balance of mass poverty and its cultures. *J. K. Galbraith*
- Development is the act of growing, progressing, expanding, becoming more complex over time. *Maurice Byé*

The persistence of poverty and especially of extreme poverty in some developing countries, despite the growth of their economies, has led to the emergence of a new “basic human needs” development concept, first expressed in speeches by Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank Group 1968–1981.

In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a view to addressing this problem by 2015. The assessment of these eight targets in 2015



Robert McNamara, White House Press Office (WHPO)
© Photo credit: Yoichi R. Okamoto, November 1967.

highlighted many shortcomings. Consequently, the concept of sustainable development has gained ground.

- Sustainable development is “the transition from a relatively low per capita productivity structure to a relatively higher per capita productivity structure” *Gérard de Bernis, 1994*.
- Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs *Bruntland, WCED, 1987*.

Will the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with a view to closing the gaps in the assessment of the MDGs, spur a change in evaluation methods and criteria? Are the current criteria used for evaluations sufficient to ►



► assess the achievement of sustainable development objectives? How can evaluations have a real impact on achieving the SDGs? What are the challenges to be addressed in the assessment of the SDGs?

This article first gives an overview of methodological approaches and criteria used in evaluation before moving on to identify their shortcomings in the context of the SDGs and the challenges to overcome to achieve a holistic and coordinated approach to their evaluation.

Some methodological approaches and their application in the evaluation of SDGs are:

Formative evaluation or "monitoring evaluation"

The aim of this approach is to provide the management team and other stakeholders with regular information on the implementation of an intervention to increase performance in working towards the objectives. Formative evaluation establishes a very close link between monitoring and evaluation. The evaluation team is involved in the implementation of the intervention. Formative evaluation is very often used for project steering and seems appropriate in the steering of specific SDG projects and programs.

Summative evaluation or "Impact evaluation"

Summative evaluation is very often used for accountability exercises. It focuses on the expected results chain, from immediate results to long-term impacts. It is a retrospective assessment that takes place at the end of an intervention. Unlike formative evaluation, and in order to guarantee the independence and objectivity of the evaluation, summative evaluation is carried out by evaluators who are not involved in the intervention. This approach is appropriate in

assessing the impacts of policies, programs and projects in the context of the SDGs and could be very useful for accountability to financial partners, implementation stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Evaluation of policy and strategy

Policy or strategy evaluation focuses on how policies or strategies have been developed, implemented and to what extent they have achieved their development goals. This approach is often used retrospectively. It ensures the overall coherence of the interventions, their effectiveness, their relevance, and their efficiency. It can be applied in the evaluation of national or regional policies developed to achieve the SDGs.

Developmental evaluation

Developmental evaluation is an approach that is adapted to complex situations, in dynamic environments, on innovative, interdependent subjects and which have decentralized decision-making and control centers (Michael Patton, 2006). This approach appears to the assessment of SDGs which involve a high number of stakeholders, multiple results and decentralized management and monitoring of these results.

The limits of current approaches and criteria

Evaluating the SDGs implies the integration of the three interdependent dimensions of sustainable development, namely economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as a number of principles and criteria necessary to achieve these objectives. These principles and criteria form the basis for the development of methodological approaches specific to each intervention. Each project, program, policy or strategy aimed ►

► at achieving the SDGs is unique and hence each evaluation should be based on a specific methodological approach. Taken individually, none of the afore-mentioned approaches meets the requirements of an SDG evaluation.

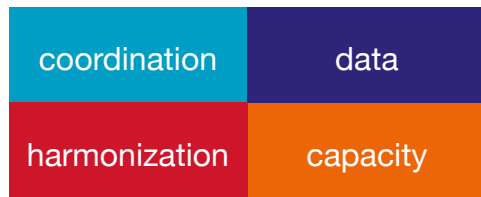
Given the global and interdependent vision of sustainable development against a backdrop of major economic, social and environmental challenges, no single methodological approach to evaluation is applicable to interventions aimed at achieving SDGs.

Formative evaluations are limited by their scope, do not take into account interactions with other sectors and do not measure the effects or impacts of interventions. Summative evaluations do not take sufficient account of the process of implementation of an intervention and the context in which it was designed. The current approach for policy and strategy evaluation, based on the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability from the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), does not take into account the key principles and criteria for sustainable development of inclusion or participation of all, equity, gender equality, preservation of natural capital, and principles and criteria of good governance. Developmental evaluation cannot be applied literally in the context of the assessment of the seventeen SDGs which have pre-defined expected results.

Evaluation of the SDGs requires a flexible, multidimensional approach which takes into account the multitude of approaches and which deploys both qualitative and quantitative assessment techniques. The five-step approach to evaluating complex programs, proposed by Michael Bamberger, Marco Segone and Florencia Tateossian in their paper entitled "Evaluating the Sustainable Development of Goals with Equal Focus and Gender-Responsive Evaluation", could be one way forward in achieving a consensual and harmonized approach to the assessment of SDGs.

This approach is based on an overall analysis to understand the different systems in which an intervention is implemented, followed by its subdivision into components. Appropriate methodologies are selected for each component for analysis, draws conclusions from specific evaluations of each component, and provides a synthesis of aggregated results for a coherent overview. Given its flexibility and adaptability, this approach could easily be applied in the context of the SDG assessment, providing the criteria is expanded to accommodate the evaluation criteria reflecting the fundamental principles of sustainable development and good governance which form the SDGs.

The community of evaluators faces four major challenges to effectively address the complexity of the SDGs. (i) the challenge of coordination; (ii) the challenge of harmonizing methods and criteria; (iii) the challenge of the availability of reliable data; and (iv) the challenge of capacity development. ►



► The coordination challenge

Given the high number of SDG initiatives and decision-making centers, effective coordination is paramount to make full use of the results of evaluations. Such coordination should take place at the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels. At each level, functional institutions on which to build an effective institutional coordination framework already exist. While there is no need to set up new institutions to achieve coordination, the participation of all stakeholders is required, namely civil society, the private sector, research institutions and evaluation organisations etc.

The harmonization challenge

Despite the existence of various approaches and methods according to evaluation types, a comprehensive, harmonized and integrated methodology would facilitate a cross-evaluation of different SDG interventions, as well as aggregations and summaries of evaluation results at each level. OECD Development Assistance Committee criteria should be broadened to include good governance, without which it will be difficult to respect the SDG time schedule. The principles, standards and criteria of good governance could be used as a basis for the determination of common criteria complementary to those of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD in the context of the SDGs.

The availability of quality data challenge

In many countries, the capacity of statistical institutions to produce regular and reliable statistics remains very limited. In the context of the SDGs, this data is needed to establish targets and to monitor indicators. The quality of evaluations, good accountability and adequate decision-making by policy makers at all levels are at stake.

The capacity development challenge

Capacity building is needed and should not be limited to statistical offices and evaluation agencies or institutions, but also extend to all other stakeholders such as the institutions who call for the evaluations to be carried out, the institutions financing the evaluations, and users of evaluation results.

Conclusion

Given the shortcomings of evaluations of the MDGs, the adoption of SDGs is a real opportunity for the evaluator community to review its evaluation methods and criteria. Independently, none of the approaches currently used for evaluations can meet the requirements of an evaluation of the SDGs. Similarly, the five evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD do not sufficiently cover the fundamental principles and criteria for sustainable development and good governance. Evaluating the SDGs requires an integrated, multidimensional methodological approach with a set of criteria extended to include good governance. ►►



► Also, we need to overcome the four main challenges mentioned: the coordination challenge, the harmonization of methods and criteria challenge, the availability of reliable data challenge, and the

capacity development of actors involved at all levels. If and when these conditions are met, evaluations within the framework of the SDGs can substantially contribute to real sustainable development.

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Author's profile

Jean Yves Adou, Head of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Knowledge Management, Monitoring / Evaluation and Review Process Support Division in Johannesburg, has over 20 years' experience in development cooperation, 13 of them in international organizations, including the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), the National Higher School of Statistics and Applied economics (CEMAC) and the African Union. He holds a statistics engineer's certificate obtained from ENSEA in Abidjan and a masters' degree in International Economics and Globalization, from Pierre Mendès France University, Grenoble.

