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**Assessment of Development Results: Perspectives on Country-level Evaluation from UNDP**

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Introduction

Increasing attention is given to assessing the work of the UN and other development organizations. This trend has coincided with the recognition that much of aid has been ineffective. In many cases, development projects have done what they were set out to do, but with little or no impact on the bigger picture. Partly, this case may be a result of the fact that projects as isolated interventions have not been significant enough. Importantly, another reason may be that they have not been sufficiently tied to a country's strategies and policies. In all cases, sustainability of results has been lacking.

These unfortunate realizations have put the onus on the development partners to demonstrate that such cooperation does indeed make a difference. Consequently, there has been a marked shift from monitoring inputs and outputs of individual interventions, to assessing the results and impacts of broader programmes and their contributions to larger outcomes.

Evaluation was originally largely driven by donor interests. One of the pioneers was OECD/DAC, which focused on the effectiveness of development aid. Now we see significantly increased interest from partner countries. Concern that development cooperation should show results has reached an all time high in both partner governments and the international agencies. Both now face new demands for accountability to citizens on how aid is used, what results are achieved, and how appropriate these results are in bringing about desired development impacts.

Both must also establish knowledge and learning systems to better understand what works and why and the implications for future programming or management. Both must also address efficiency, comparative value, coherence, partnerships and measures that enhance sustainability. In this context, national ownership and capacity development are crucial.

All organizations and agencies engage in evaluation but it is organized in different ways. Lately, there's been significant emphasis in professionalizing evaluation in the UN system and making it independent, impartial, credible and useful.

Definitions

Evaluation is defined as judgment made of the relevance, appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of development efforts, based on agreed criteria and

benchmarks among key partners and stakeholders. It involves a rigorous, systematic and objective process in the design, analysis and interpretation of information to answer specific questions. It provides assessments of what works and why, highlights intended and unintended results, and provides strategic lessons to guide decision-makers and inform stakeholders. (UNDP Evaluation Handbook)

The main objective of evaluation in UNDP is to determine not only that the interventions are effective at the project output level but that they also have value and make a contribution to development results – they are relevant to national development goals, are appropriate given contextual factors, are sustainable and that they are also carried out efficiently.

### Evaluation and UNDP's Role in Development at the Country Level

UNDP is the development network of the United Nations, working on the ground in 166 countries to assist them to find their own solutions to national and global development challenges. Consequently, country-level focus in evaluation is very important for UNDP and its partners to know how the organization is contributing to national development results. Rigorous evaluation of the programmes is important for ensuring that the partner countries receive the best possible support for their development efforts from UNDP. It is also important to ascertain that the funds provided from public sources are utilized wisely and efficiently.

Development must be based on the aspirations of the people concerned. Externally funded interventions are intended to support the overall development goals of the country where they take place. At the same time, these must be placed into the context of internationally agreed principles, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While focusing on poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery, and environment and sustainable development, UNDP advocates a people-centred approach to development that enhances the capabilities, choices and rights for all men and women. Ultimately, the success of UNDP's programmes must be evaluated against these principles, i.e., whether UNDP has been successful in supporting the partner country's development goals and whether it has been able to incorporate its own guiding principles into its programming.

### Assessment of Development Results

An evaluation tool to address these issues is the Assessment of Development Results (ADR) carried out by UNDP's Evaluation Office (EO). The EO is independent from the organization's programme units and therefore its evaluations are able to take a frank and objective look at the success or lack thereof of UNDP's interventions.

ADR's are country-level evaluations that are intended to assess the organization's contributions to the country's development results. Their scope includes UNDP's responsiveness and alignment to country challenges and priorities, its strategic positioning, use of comparative advantage, and engagement with partners.

These evaluations focus on the outcomes of UNDP's programmatic and other work in the country, and critically examine its achievements and constraints in the thematic areas of focus, draw lessons from the past activities, and provide recommendations for the future. ADRs also provide a strategic analysis for enhancing the performance of and positioning UNDP support within national development priorities and UNDP corporate policy directions.

The evaluations focus on UNDP's strategic positioning, on one hand: its relevance to country priorities, human development focus, use of comparative advantage, missed opportunities, innovation, range and quality of partnerships, links to MDGs and the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), etc. – Are we doing the right things?

On the other hand, the evaluations focus on the development results: the key results at the country level, intended and unintended outcomes, factors affecting achievement of results, UNDP's contribution to the overall results, national ownership, sustainability – Are we doing things right?

ADRs thus provide both a strategic view of what value added UNDP brings to the country, as well as lessons learned and good practices. They produce objective findings and propose recommendations that are tied to future programming of UNDP's work in that country and more broadly.

The strengths of the evaluations include that they are external to the UNDP country office, which ensures the independence of the evaluation process and findings. They focus on the results and take a comprehensive approach to performance assessment, assessing outcomes in relation to nationally defined priorities. Overall, this allows for critical assessment of UNDP's contributions and comparative advantages in supporting the country in its development aspirations.

The evaluations also help to create partnerships at the national level and to build an results-based/evaluation culture, fostering accountability and national ownership.

### Evaluation Challenges

ADRs look at UNDP's contributions to nationally owned development results. The main challenge initially is to position the evaluation at the correct level. We are not evaluating what is happening in the country overall, but how UNDP is fairing in its efforts to support the country's development efforts. This requires that the evaluations analyze UNDP's work in the context of the country situation.

There are also methodological challenges. Evaluation in the UN draws from established approaches to assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies (basically, evaluation is applied social science research). But many of the experimental or quasi-experimental approaches are not appropriate in the situations and areas in which we work. Similarly, baselines and counterfactuals are often missing and evaluative evidence is scarce.

Another challenge is that UN(DP) is but one actor amongst many contributing to the development results. It is therefore often difficult to isolate the impact of its actions to the broader changes in the development situation or to attribute particular results to the work of UNDP.

Furthermore, some things (e.g., “soft assistance” that may consist of policy dialogue and advice, capacity development) just don’t lend themselves easily for measurement.

This doesn’t mean, however, that our evaluations are goal-free or carried out without rigour. We are constantly developing approaches and methodologies that will allow us to better understand the logic of our programmatic interventions, the causal linkages how they are intended to influence development, and how we will be able to gauge their results and impacts.

We need to broaden the definition of “impact” beyond the direct effects to include the full range of impacts at all levels of the results chain. For instance, NONIE (Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation) follows the DAC definition of “impact”, which is defined as “positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.” Quality evaluations ask the relevant questions, use appropriate methods (not just experimental or quasi-experimental designs, but also qualitative methods), apply these methods rigorously, and deliver policy- and programme-relevant conclusions.

This last point brings me to another major challenge: How to make evaluations useful?

At the organization’s own level, UNDP ties ADRs to the country programme cycle. The evaluations are conducted in sync with the development of the country programme, so that the evaluation findings can be fed into the new programme.

All evaluations also need to have management responses. The evaluations have findings based on a thorough and objective analysis of data and information, and they make recommendations to decision-makers. They do not implement change, which is the responsibility of those who are developing and managing the programmes. The latter may not always agree with the evaluation findings and conclusions; or even if they do, they may find the recommendations inappropriate. The management response is the place for the management to react to the evaluation and tell what they plan to do about the findings. The implementation of agreed actions will then be monitored.

Most importantly, it is essential to keep the momentum going on in the countries, so that the evaluations have a sustained impact on enhancing development effectiveness.

### Concluding Remarks

In recent years, the emphasis has moved from donor-driven to inclusive evaluation, which must be participatory and collaborative, based on national ownership of both the

evaluation process and the findings and conclusions of the evaluation to the development programmes and broader issues the evaluation is focusing on.

In order to enhance this ownership, there is a need for evaluation capacity development to support the function in the partner countries. The goal is to move more towards country-driven and country-led evaluations.

We need partnerships with countries and other development actors within and without the UN system. Evaluations must also be inclusive vis-à-vis key stakeholder groups in the countries, including the civil society and all those affected by the development interventions.

Evaluation in the UN system must move beyond aid effectiveness to evaluating development results and effectiveness. This requires clarity that the end results belong to countries – hence, the importance of national ownership and focus on partnership with governments and other stakeholders, and on evaluation capacity development. We must focus on managing for results and the use of evaluation for management and decision-making.