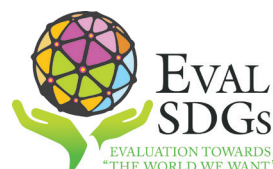


Evaluation to connect national priorities with the SDGs

A guide for evaluation
commissioners and managers



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland



This ‘real life’ introduction to evaluating progress on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is based on emerging country experience from North and South, as well as wider past learning on sustainable development evaluation. Rather than a one-size-fits-all manual, this guide seeks to support evaluation commissioners, managers and professional evaluators to create tailored plans and approaches to SDG evaluation. It argues that a successful evaluation must both be built around existing national context and underpinned by the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

To support customised local or national journeys towards sustainable development, this guide:

- Lays out the main steps involved in scoping, designing and conducting an SDG evaluation
- Discusses the ways in which SDG evaluation processes and results can be used to support national progress on sustainable development
- Identifies key SDG evaluation characteristics and approaches, and
- Looks at how SDG evaluation can be integrated into national monitoring and evaluation systems.

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

UNICEF's Evaluation Office mission is to help drive results for children by fostering evidence-based decision making in the organization and at the national and international levels.

The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' experience of development evaluation contributes to evaluating progress in SDGs at national level and identifying local solutions to global challenges.

EVALS DGs is a network of interested and skilled policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for the critical roles played by evaluation at the national, regional, and global levels in examining progress toward achievement of the SDGs.

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Acronyms

CBA	cost-benefit analysis
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEval	German Institute for Development Evaluation
ERGP	Economic Recovery and Growth Plan
HELSUS	Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science
HLPF	high-level political forum
IAEG-SDGs	Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSSAP-SDGs	Office for the Senior Special Assistant to the President on the SDGs
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SEI	Stockholm Environment Institute
SITRA	Finnish Innovation Fund
SYKE	Finnish Environment Institute
ToC	theory of change
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VNR	voluntary national review

Icon legend



Insights on sustainable development



Principles and concepts underpinning the 2030 Agenda



In summary



Evaluation resources, tools and tips



Lessons from practice

Preface

Bringing people together is powerful. This guide was inspired by a workshop attended by 33 government representatives and evaluation specialists from 22 countries, entitled *Evaluation to connect national priorities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. Hosted in Helsinki in March, the event was jointly organised by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, EVALSDGs, IIED and UNICEF. We four then came together again to create this guide. We replicated the workshop title because this resource captures and shares our learning from it, on how evaluation can accelerate national journeys to a more sustainable future.

The workshop fostered cross-country learning, allowing us to discover common challenges in using evaluation to support the alignment of national plans with the expectations of the SDGs. This was a vital exercise: a significant gap remains between government commitment to Agenda 2030 and implementation, due in part to competing demands. Listening to government officials, evaluation professionals and regional and multilateral organisations, a theme emerged: if evaluation is to assist in aligning national policy with Agenda 2030, it must be bespoke, built around existing political and assessment systems.

We decided to meet this need together, collaborating on a guide to country-led SDG evaluation. Each entity brought a relevant critical background: **Finland** is a strong advocate for effective national SDG evaluation as well as being the only country to complete one; **EVALSDGs** and **IIED** have been

co-publishing a successful series of policy briefing papers on the topic since 2016; and **UNICEF** — a co-chair of EVALSDGs — has long nurtured the debate in high-profile global spaces, as well as providing comprehensive country-level training. Our respective websites offer more information.

Even as we build on experience, we are continually learning from emerging practice. Finland has completed the first ever national-level SDG evaluation; Nigeria is making strong headway and will begin a national-level SDG evaluation shortly. It is thanks to these pioneers that we can weigh the effectiveness of different practices, reflect on challenges, and see the possibility of reconciling an assessment of priorities developed in national plans and policies with the 2030 Agenda. Their innovation and generosity have made this leading-edge guide possible. It will in turn support many others, not least Costa Rica, which is advancing its own SDG evaluation plans.

With SDG evaluation in its infancy, this resource is necessarily provisional. But time is of the essence. Local and national evaluators need support now if they are to use SDG evaluation as an opportunity to improve policies and programmes closer to home, applying tailored approaches. Here, we seek to provide this support and to motivate evaluation that embodies the principles of Agenda 2030: integration, equity, resilience, environmental sustainability, universality, mutual accountability and leaving no one behind.

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EvalSDGs, IIED, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and UNICEF are the four partners that have co-produced this guide; we are indebted to many colleagues for their contributions.

The input of participants at the Helsinki workshop of March 2018 was critical to the conceptualisation and design of the guidebook.

The real-world experiences of Finland, Nigeria, and Costa Rica have provided invaluable learning about using the 2030 Agenda to conduct country-led SDG evaluation and improve national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. We would like to thank:

- The Finnish Evaluation Team, and The Responsible for SDG Implementation of the Office of the Prime Minister of Finland
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- UNICEF Evaluation office and UNICEF Nigeria which have played a key role in supporting Nigeria to conceptualise and plan for their SDG national evaluation
- The DEval team supporting the development of the national M&E system in Costa Rica, and the Deputy Ministry of Planning and M&E team in the Ministry of Planning of Costa Rica.

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Introduction

Evaluation and national commitments on the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by UN member states in 2015, lays out an ambitious global agenda for change. This ambition is encapsulated in its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principles around which it is framed. The agenda is based on the concept of

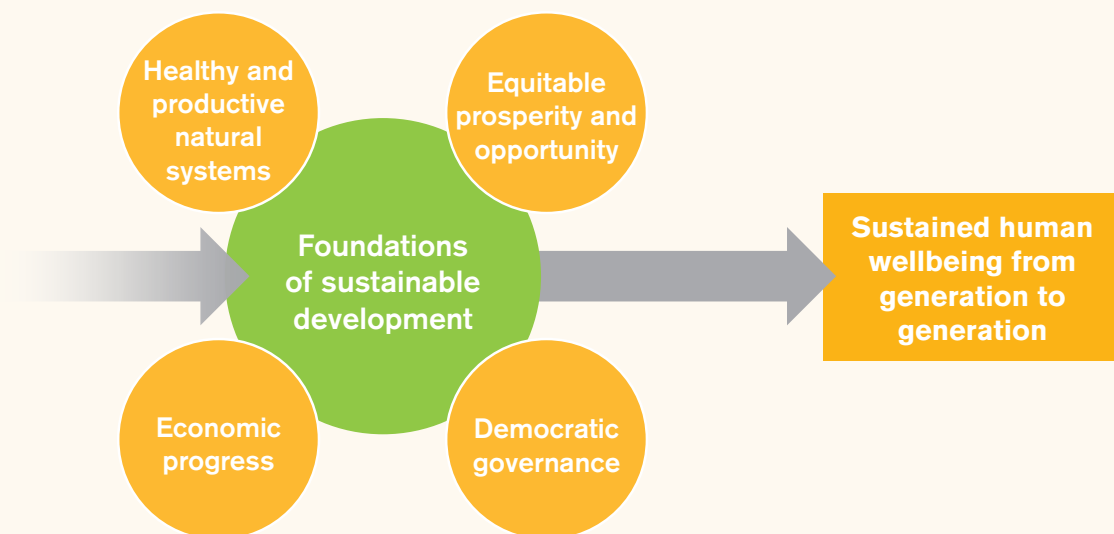
sustainable development (Box 1), which emphasises the interlinkages between the four dimensions of development: economic, social and human, environmental and inclusive governance. The latter includes the contributions of equity, social justice and participation to sustained human wellbeing.



Box 1. What is sustainable development and where did it come from?

Sustainable development recognises the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic and governance systems and the intergenerational impacts of human action on those systems. It assumes that sustained wellbeing depends on balanced attention to securing equitable prosperity and opportunity, a healthy planet, economic progress and democratic governance.

Figure 1. The foundations of sustainable development



Source: adapted from IRF (2013)

UN summits — particularly the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro — helped establish the concept on the international agenda. At the same time, the growing scientific understanding of the ecological limits of planetary growth added urgency to the need for a new approach to development.

The idea of creating a new global agreement based on sustainable development to replace the Millennium Development Goals was raised at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development and resulted three years later in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

To come close to achieving the 2030 Agenda within its 15-year timeframe, every country will need to contribute collectively and individually. Since 2015, countries have been developing national SDG strategies and action plans and thinking about how to assess progress on such a complex agenda. The SDGs have targets for each goal and the Inter Agency and Expert Group on SDG indicators (IAEG-SDGs)¹ has developed a set of global indicators related to the targets, which provide some tools for countries to adapt to their monitoring needs.

Although these tools are important for describing the state of progress, more can be done to understand how progress towards one goal might contribute to or undermine progress on others. Countries also need to look across the goal areas to assess national progress on the principles embedded in the 2030 Agenda, which reflect the core tenets of equitable and sustainable development (see Box 2). To achieve that type of assessment, they need the more flexible and comprehensive tools of evaluation.



Box 2. 2030 Agenda principles that are useful in evaluation processes

Integration/coherence: The social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of development are inextricably interlinked. Any action in one dimension will have reverberations in the others and none of the SDGs can be fully achieved without the achievement of all.

Leave no one behind: No goal is met unless it is met for everyone; meeting the needs of those farthest behind should come before meeting the needs of others.

Equity: Rights, opportunities and access to benefits and services are provided to all under terms that are just and fair, with the aim of increasing social and economic equality (intra-generational equity). Equal consideration is given to meeting the current generation's needs and the needs of future generations (intergenerational equity).

Resilience: Individuals, social groups, human systems and/or ecosystems have the capacity to withstand social, economic or environmental stress, recover quickly from shocks and thrive under adverse or changing conditions. In social systems, resilience is particularly important for poor, marginalised and otherwise vulnerable groups.

Environmental sustainability: A continuous flow of environmental goods and services essential for human development and healthy ecosystem function is maintained and to the extent possible enhanced over the long term.

Universality: The SDGs are framed around global problems requiring global solutions and are applicable to all countries. It is not enough for a country to make progress on the goals within its own borders; it must also support — and not undermine by its policies or actions — the efforts of others. The principle of universality is also informed by the international environmental policy principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. This recognises that, while all countries have a responsibility to address global problems, their responsibility should reflect their level of contribution to the problem and their capacity to contribute.

Mutual accountability: There is mutual respect and trust among all those working to achieve a sustainable development objective. Their roles and responsibilities are commonly agreed and equitably allocated and they are equally accountable to one another for their actions and results.

1. The UN Statistical Commission created the IAEG-SDGs, composed of member states and regional and international agencies as observers, to develop and implement the SDG global indicator framework and the 2030 Agenda targets.

Learning from experience

Evaluation can help countries understand how they are progressing on their SDG strategies and targets. But designing a national SDG evaluation is no easy task, given the enormous scope and complexity of the agenda. Although many countries have adapted SDG targets and indicators to their own contexts, only a handful have attempted to design and implement a comprehensive evaluation of how they are doing in these efforts. At the time of writing this guide, only Finland has completed an SDG evaluation. Nigeria has designed one and is in the early implementation stages, while a few other countries — including Costa Rica — are laying the foundations for similar country-led evaluations. Although these experiences are limited so far, other countries can learn a lot from them. The material in this guide has largely been derived from that learning.

Chapter 1 describes the SDG evaluation experience of Finland, Nigeria and Costa Rica. We use examples from those countries to illustrate approaches and concepts throughout the rest of the guide.

Chapters 2–5 look at the four main steps of evaluation development and design (Figure 2):

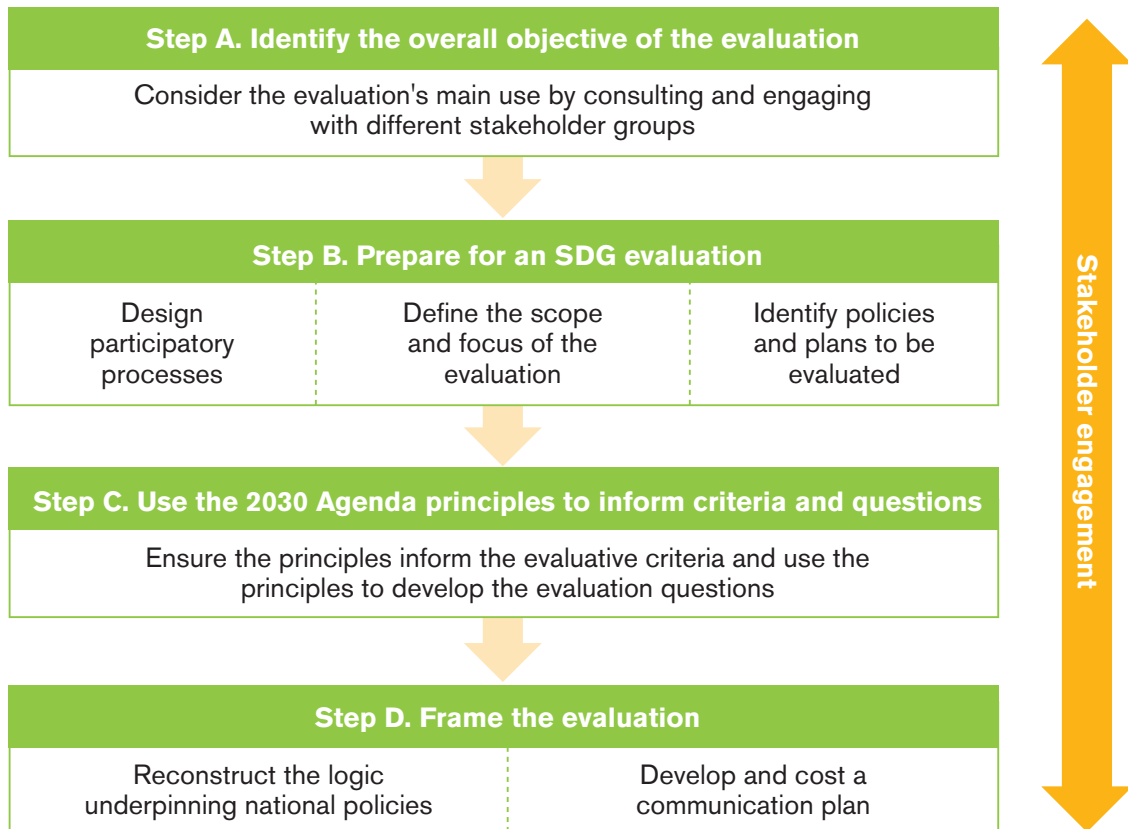
- **Chapter 2** explores the potential uses of SDG evaluation and how the intended uses inform its objectives.

- **Chapter 3** presents the choices that commissioners face in deciding the scope and focus of an SDG evaluation. It also proposes some pragmatic approaches to come up with participatory and informed decisions.
- **Chapter 4** provides guidance on how to use the principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda to inform evaluation criteria selection and develop evaluation questions.
- **Chapter 5** provides suggestions about how to frame the evaluation around the logic that underpins policies and programmes and how to develop a dynamic communication plan.

Chapter 6 offers suggestions on the evaluation process, including arrangements for oversight, agreeing expectations and ongoing stakeholder engagement. It covers methodological issues related to SDG evaluation design, particularly how to embed a sustainable development perspective and how to assess trade-offs and synergies between actions on different goals.

Chapter 7 looks at how to integrate SDG evaluation into existing or emerging national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems.

Figure 2. Four main steps of evaluation development and design



1. Early experiences of SDG evaluation

Offering case studies from three different regional contexts, this chapter describes early experiences of country-led SDG evaluations in Finland and Nigeria.

It also looks at Costa Rica, where the SDGs have taken a prominent role in shaping the national evaluation approach and development plans, inspiring neighbouring countries.

All countries need to consider how they will integrate the global indicators into their national plans and policies and track progress against the SDGs. We hope that the journey these countries have embarked on can give evaluation practitioners and commissioners some ideas to apply in their own countries.

Finland: towards a transformative sustainable development policy

Finland is the first country to complete an evaluation of its national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2018, the Finnish government commissioned an independent and comprehensive evaluation of sustainable development policies. It examined the state of sustainable development in light of national sustainability indicators, key sustainable development policy objectives and national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It also considered the status of sustainable development in its foreign policy sector.

The process resulted in a series of concrete recommendations on the future direction of Finland's sustainable development policy, many of which the newly formed coalition government has taken on board.

The government assigned the task of conducting the evaluation to an interdisciplinary team with members from three Finnish organisations: Demos Helsinki, the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS) and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE).² The core research team³ also benefited from external support from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

The evaluation, known as PATH2030 (Berg et al. 2019), was conducted over six months, with oversight from a steering group and a broader support group,

both appointed to provide advice and comment on its content and process. The former included representatives from the ministries of environment, finance, foreign affairs, agriculture and forestry; the latter had delegates from different ministries, universities, research centres, sustainable development committees, 2030 Agenda youth groups, SYKE and the Finnish Innovation Fund (SITRA)⁴. The Expert Panel on Sustainable Development,⁵ a pre-existing committee coordinated by SITRA and comprising mainly academic experts from different fields — economics, environment, social policy and so on — also played a crucial role, with its members offering valuable advice throughout the process. The evaluation team also connected with the international evaluation community through EvalPartners and EVALSDGs several times to share ways of working and advice.

The evaluation analysed a mix of information sources and gathered expert opinions through workshops, interviews and surveys. Focusing on policy documents available within government, the analysis aimed to shed light on the state of Finland's sustainable development policy. One of the main documents consulted was the 2017 'Government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (PMO Finland 2017) which gives an overview on how change towards the SDGs

2. Demos is an independent think tank working with the public and private sectors and civil society organisations to build fair and post-industrial sustainable societies. HELSUS is a cross-faculty research unit in sustainability science within the University of Helsinki and SYKE is a research institute and government agency under the Ministry of Environment focusing on changes in the environment.
3. Consisting of: Satu Lähteenoja (Demos), Annukka Berg (SYKE), Kaisa Korhonen-Kurki (HELSUS), Matti Ylönen (HELSUS), TyyraLinko (Demos), Kirsi-Marja Lonkila (Demos), Jari Lyytimäki (SYKE), Anna Salmivaara (HELSUS), Hanna Salo (SYKE), Paula Schönach (HELSUS) and Ira Suutarinen (HELSUS).
4. SITRA, the Finnish Innovation Fund, is an independent public foundation which operates directly under the supervision of the Finnish Parliament.
5. As of 2019, the Panel is hosted by HELSUS, the Natural Resources Institute Finland and SITRA.

is meant to happen in Finland. The team consulted the international SDG index (Sachs et al. 2019) and Finland's national sustainable development indicators. This helped highlight the country's strengths and weaknesses, which led to the reaffirmation of its national priorities.

In its analysis of key documents and other materials, the team was guided by the 4Is approach. This political economy framework developed by Brockhaus and Angelsen (2012) is based around four pillars: institutions, interests, ideas and information. The team analysed the underlying theory of change (ToC) and

implementation of Finland's sustainable development policy principles outlined in the government report, data from interviews with 78 experts and material from two national workshops to discover what hinders or enables change in a specific context (Table 1). Their analysis revealed that, although Finland has a well-developed sustainable development policy coordination model, this is poorly integrated in its day-to-day administration. It also revealed that policymakers rarely use sustainable development research findings and indicator data when formulating policies. Instead, more narrow perspectives and interests — often economic ones — prevail.

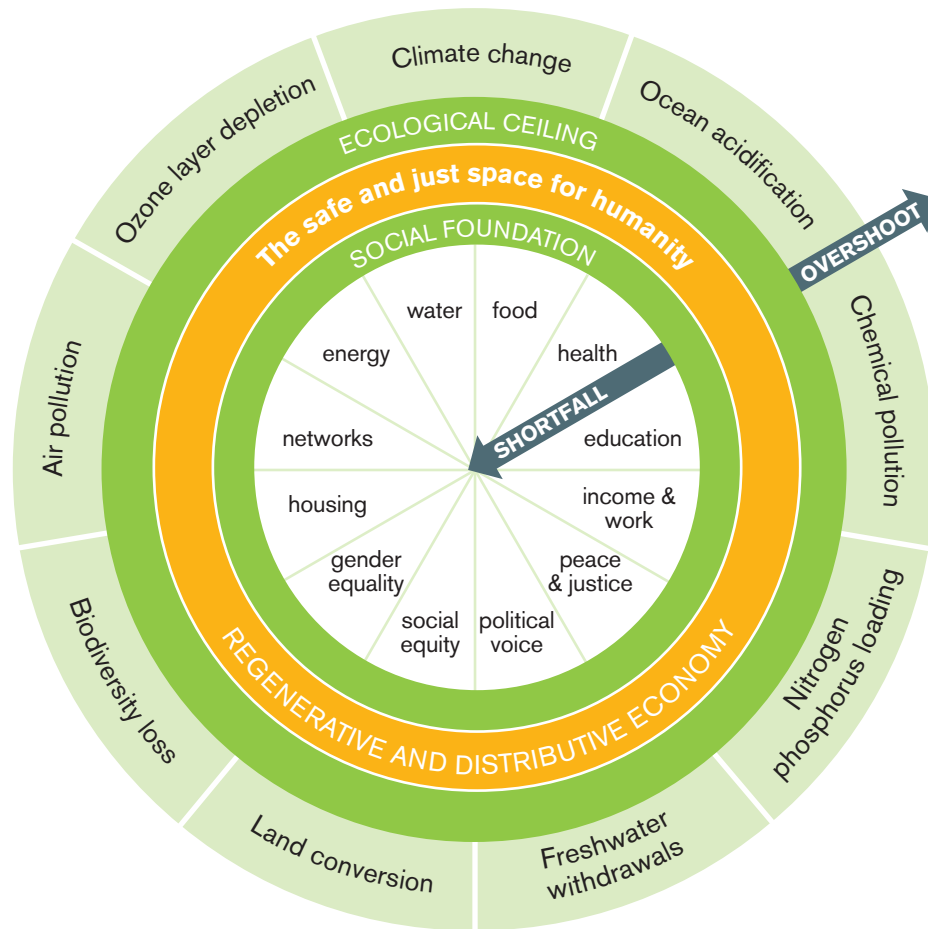


Table 1. Results from the Finland analysis, adapted from the 4Is framework

	Strengths	Challenges
Institutions	<p>There is a diverse participatory approach to sustainable development.</p> <p>The pursuit of sustainability is fairly visible — for example, in the strategies of different ministries.</p>	<p>Sustainable development has not been sufficiently integrated into all government sectors and management systems.</p> <p>Governmental work on sustainable development is poorly resourced when taking the required workload into consideration.</p> <p>Compartmentalisation remains a core problem.</p>
Interests	<p>Widely shared aims and processes (such as the 2030 Agenda government report) and reviews with a sustainable development angle (such as budgetary review) help to mediate conflicts of interest.</p>	<p>Short and long-term conflicts of interest — such as different dimensions of sustainable development — decrease the coherence and transformational power of politics.</p> <p>Tightly defined commercial interests tend to outweigh sustainable development policy based on human rights.</p>
Ideas	<p>Sustainable development is a widely shared and mainstreamed aim.</p>	<p>In practice, there are many disagreements over sustainable development solutions.</p>
Information	<p>There is a wealth of information on the state of sustainable development and different solutions.</p>	<p>The systematic use of indicators and research data in decision making and societal learning is not enough.</p> <p>Understanding of cross-sectorial sustainable development themes is underdeveloped and information on Finland's foreign policy aims is fragmented.</p>

The evaluators used the Doughnut economic model (Figure 3) as a tool for stakeholder engagement, to help them understand sustainable development beyond the four pillars of ecological, economic, social,

and governance sustainability. For example, it helped workshop participants discern the interrelationship between the ecological and social dimensions of sustainable development.

Figure 3. The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries

This material is adapted by the publisher from “**A safe and just space for humanity: Can we live within the doughnut?** – **Kate Raworth – Oxfam 2012** - https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en_5.pdf” with the permission of Oxfam, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford OX4 2JY UK www.oxfam.org.uk. Oxfam does not necessarily endorse any text or activities that accompany the materials, nor has it approved the adapted text.

They used mixed-methods data collection — a survey, document analysis, two national stakeholder workshops and one international evaluation workshop — to supplement their main analysis.⁶ The national workshops had high turnout from the private sector, municipalities and non-governmental organisations. The input of these participants — alongside ongoing contributions from the support group and Expert Panel — made the process highly participatory. The national workshops were crucial in reaching a consensus around final recommendations, while evaluators used the international workshop — held with partner organisations SEI and SDSN — to gather feedback on the evaluation process, given both institutions' wide expertise on the SDGs.

Providing many opportunities for sustainable development actors from inside and outside government to participate and be involved was crucial, as this increased their feeling of ownership and ensured the necessary political buy-in for the

uptake of the evaluation findings. The recommendations were largely co-created during the two national workshops and in various interviews with civil servants, the main actors who would need to apply the learnings from the process. The team found that key actors in the field had different perceptions of what sustainable development is or should be in Finland, so this was a useful exercise to build shared understandings among stakeholders.

The recommendations — centred around turning a good Finnish sustainable development policy into a transformative one — included:

- Taking a leadership role by creating a national roadmap that shows exactly how it is going to achieve the SDGs by 2030; this could then have a ripple effect, inspiring other countries to undertake the same efforts
- Using the 2030 Agenda as the basis of all future government programmes, including budgeting plans

6. Workshop participants included representatives from all ministries and all members of the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development. In total, 130 people attended the national workshops and 30 people from 21 countries attended the international workshop. The team interviewed 78 people and received 238 survey responses. See Berg et al. (2019) for more information on the process.

- A better definition of national sustainability targets
- More systematic tracking of sustainable development targets
- Adopting the Doughnut economic model — which speaks to the interconnected and complex nature of sustainable development — as a reference framework, and
- Strengthening support for the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development by granting them a more visible and influential role in decision making.
- How well a government committed to the principles of sustainable development would adhere to them in its decisions
- Whether the instruments being used have moved society in the right direction, and
- A public sustainable development evaluation conducted by an important and influential outside party such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Timing was a key element in the evaluation process. The government committed to the evaluation in its 2017 report, allowing the evaluation team to present and discuss results and recommendations with the main political parties ahead of the 2019 parliamentary elections.

The Finnish government is committed to commissioning a comprehensive evaluation on the state of the country's sustainable development every four years (in line with parliamentary elections). The evaluation report (Berg et al. 2019) suggests that the next evaluation could consider:

The report also offered recommendations on how to evaluate the 2030 Agenda in the future — for example, by establishing a systemic, cross-administrative evaluation system to support sustainable development policy and exploring sustainability impact evaluation tools to assess key legislative and reform projects. “Such a tool could increase knowledge of the interconnection of activities between different administrative sectors. Both monitoring information and impact assessment should be better linked to decision-making” (Berg et al. 2019).

Nigeria: progressing towards the SDGs through evidence-based reporting

Nigeria is the first African country to have initiated two national evaluations on its progress towards the SDGs. The president's commitment to the SDGs has facilitated the mainstreaming of the SDGs into national policies, plans and programmes and the government's ongoing commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Nigeria has put in place a multi-layer institutional framework — the Office for the Senior Special Assistant to the President on the SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) — to coordinate and mainstream the SDGs. Its main responsibility is ensuring coherence and integration of the SDGs into national and sub-national development plans, policies and strategies. Its mandate extends to developing a national SDG sensitisation and advocacy programme as well as M&E, documentation and reporting duties.

Nigeria has prepared itself for evaluating three SDGs aligned with national priorities — SDG1 (no poverty), SDG3 (good health and wellbeing) and SDG4 (quality education) — through a series of activities carried out over the last four years. This work started in 2015, when the country developed its transition strategy, 'From the MDGs to the SDGs'. Underpinned by the principle of 'Leaving no Nigerian behind', the strategy outlines three phases for achieving the 2030 Agenda:

- Phase 1** Consolidating lessons learnt from the MDGs legacy (2016–2020)
- Phase 2** Scaling up the SDGs (2021–2025); and
- Phase 3** Envisaging a practical roadmap for implementing the SDGs (2026–2030).

An important outcome of Phase 1 is creating national platforms or advisory groups in the private and civil society sectors and a donor partner forum. The common thread between the three phases is the emphasis on the importance of obtaining political buy-in during consultation and integrating the SDGs into existing national, sub-national and sectoral policy frameworks.

The transition strategy reveals a need for building a solid statistical base to evaluate progress against the national SDGs strategy. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published an SDG indicator baseline report in 2016 in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), providing the benchmark for monitoring and evaluating progress in Nigeria's SDG implementation. The result of extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, the report aimed to make sense of global indicators within the Nigerian context and examined the feasibility of developing them for informed decision making. As part of the process, a data mapping exercise across the 17 SDGs and related targets explored the extent to which existing national priorities were aligned to the SDGs. The report's main recommendation was that the government should build capacities to respond to gaps encountered during the data collection exercises. As a follow-up to the report, the OSSAP-SDGs is supporting the NBS to realign the National Statistical System with SDG requirements and indicators. Once completed, this will ensure timely tracking and reporting of SDGs in Nigeria.

In 2016, Nigeria's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) 2017–2020 marked further national alignment to the SDGs. The plan, envisaged to help the country recover from the 2016 economic recession, has three main objectives: a) restoring economic growth, b) investing in people and c) building a globally competent economy. Broadly, the ERGP has integrated the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of the SDGs.

To strengthen its voluntary national review (VNR) reporting and inform policy formulation, the Nigerian government has approved an independent evaluation of priority SDGs. At the end of 2018, OSSAP-SDGs, in

partnership with the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, UNICEF Nigeria and UNDP, established a technical working group on SDG evaluation for brainstorming, prioritising and addressing capacity gaps. In light of the ERGP findings, the working group prioritised five goals: SDG1 (no poverty), SDG3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality) and SDG8 (decent work and economic growth).

Nigeria is currently evaluating SDG1, SDG3 and SDG4 with support from UNICEF-Nigeria.⁷ It will use the findings from these evaluations to improve the quality of its next VNR, due in 2020.

Costa Rica: regional champion for achieving the SDGs

Costa Rica has played a leading role regionally in creating the necessary structures and procedures for achieving the SDGs. Other Central American countries have looked to it for good practice and demands for exchange and advice have also come from Ecuador and Colombia in South America.

In 2016, Costa Rica was the first country to sign a national agreement to meet SDG objectives (Government of Costa Rica 2016). This shows commitment from civil society and the private sector to comply with sustainable development principles and frame their plans, programmes and policies around the 2030 Agenda. In early 2017, a presidential decree established an SDG high-level council and a technical secretariat for planning, implementing and following up on the 17 SDGs (Government of Costa Rica 2017). The council identified three priority points of entry for Costa Rica to focus on: fighting poverty, sustainable production and consumption and sustainable infrastructure and communities. Directly linked to specific SDGs, these points of entry manifestly reflect the interconnected nature of the social, environmental, economic and political dimensions of sustainable development. The aim was to translate the SDGs into concrete actions guided by the 2030 Agenda. The government also committed to a four-year initiative under the auspices of the UN based on the 'Leave no one behind' principle to advance the national agreement to meet SDG objectives.

After presenting its first VNR at the High-Level Political Forum in 2017, the Costa Rican statistical commission undertook a diagnosis of the statistical capacities required to measure progress towards achieving the SDGs. The country has further developed the mapping of SDGs targets and indicators against national ones, establishing a

baseline to analyse the situation in-country and panel data to understand how the specific indicators for Costa Rica have evolved over time in the three priority areas. It is also developing new instruments to gather the information necessary to build its own indicators according to sectoral requirements and national goals and disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, disability and so on.⁸

In a major effort to foster a culture of evaluation, Costa Rica developed its National Development Plan (2019–2022) with explicit reference to evaluation, complementing it with a national evaluation policy. This widely participatory process, driven by the Ministry of National Planning and Political Economy, involved a national multi-stakeholder platform for evaluation that brought together key actors from civil society organisations, government departments (such as the Ministries of Planning and Finance), academia (such as evaluation professors), international cooperation agencies and professional evaluators. The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) provided expert advice.

The national evaluation platform has led to a regular exchange of experiences between actors, who have developed joint decisions. It is also responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan 2019–2023, adopted in late 2018, where different organisations committed to actions for development under four strategic components (MIDEPLAN 2018a).⁹ This exchange mechanism for communication has drawn interest from neighbouring Latin American countries. For example, after asking Costa Rica to present the idea of a national platform at the gLOCAL evaluation week in June 2019,¹⁰ Ecuador plans to establish a national platform following the same path.

7. At the time of writing, they had just concluded the terms of reference for the evaluation of SDG3 and SDG4 and were at the procurement stage.

8. See <http://inec.cr/objetivos-de-desarrollo-sostenible> for more information.

9. The four components are: 1) Evaluation in the management for development results cycle, 2) Institutionalisation of evaluation, 3) Capacities in evaluation and 4) Participation of actors in evaluation. For more information, see www.mideplan.go.cr/politica-nacional-de-evaluacion-pne

10. gLOCAL Evaluation Week is a new M&E knowledge sharing initiative convened by the CLEAR centres with support from local and global partners. It aims to support the exchange of M&E knowledge and experiences to promote evaluation capacity development, support evidence-based decision making and strengthen development outcomes at local and global levels. The first gLOCAL Evaluation Week was held in June 2019. See www.glocalevalweek.org/

With support from DEval, Costa Rica is building a comprehensive database on international donors' interventions on climate change and biodiversity as part of its ongoing evaluation of international cooperation projects. This includes quantitative indicators and qualitative data through fieldwork. It also seeks to assess the degree to which interventions contribute to the climate change and biodiversity-related SDGs. A publication comparing the findings from this effort and an analysis of publicly available OECD Creditor Reporting System¹¹ data is planned for 2020. This will be useful for informing other countries about the costs and benefits of setting up a specialised database.

The next planned step is using the climate change and biodiversity database to carry out Costa Rica's

first evaluation from an SDG perspective. This is being finalised and includes on-the-ground mapping of the OECD Creditor Reporting System data. The aim is to conduct a country-led thematic evaluation in the field of climate change and biodiversity focusing on the priority SDGs and other relevant goals. This could be one of the first evaluations where the host government evaluates the activities of all international donors in the country from a climate change and biodiversity perspective. As DEval's deputy director and head of its Competence Centre for Evaluation Methodology states, "If universality is a defining feature of Agenda 2030 and transparency key to its fulfilment, it is critical that partner countries are equipped to be able to evaluate the interventions of international donors in their countries."¹²

Summary of lessons learnt and next steps



Table 2. Summary of lessons learnt and next steps in Finland, Nigeria and Costa Rica

Country	Experience	Key lessons learnt	Next steps
Finland	Carried out national evaluation of sustainable development policies	<p>The timing of the evaluation was a crucial success factor for impact</p> <p>Developing a dissemination plan early on helped get the message out</p> <p>Designing a participatory evaluation ensured ownership among decision makers</p>	<p>Conduct a comprehensive independent and developmental evaluation on the state of sustainable development, policy implementation and impact in the next government term</p> <p>Undertake ongoing (annual) monitoring of key sustainability targets</p>
Nigeria	Commissioned evaluation of three priority SDGs	<p>Committing to evaluation and sustainable development in key political documents (such as the Country Transition Strategy) was the first important step</p> <p>Investing in national SDG evaluation capacity building for key officials (from ministries, departments, agencies and so on) secured adequate capabilities for engaging with the 2030 Agenda</p>	<p>Conduct three independent SDG evaluations (SDG1, SDG3 and SDG4) with final reports for SDG3 and SDG4 expected in February 2020</p> <p>Strengthen Nigeria's VNR for 2020 using key evidence from the evaluation's findings</p>
Costa Rica	Embedded the SDGs into national M&E systems	Aligning national development planning processes with the SDGs represented an opportunity to streamline and integrate reporting and data collection	Use the database on international donors' interventions on climate change and biodiversity to carry out the first evaluation from an SDG perspective

11. Database used to track overseas development aid flows from DAC member countries. It provides the international classifications donor nations and multilateral organisations use to report aid expenditure.

12. Interview with Dr Sven Harten (8 July 2019).

2. Step A: Identifying the overall evaluation objective

In this section, we explore the potential uses of SDG evaluation and how the intended uses inform its objectives.

In the context of the SDGs, evaluation relates to determining the merit, worth, significance and sustainability of strategies, policies and programmes that contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in different countries and globally. It investigates the complex interactions between the human, economic and natural systems. It looks at the effects of laws, regulations and procedures within and beyond the geographic boundaries in which they are adopted. This chapter explores why and with what objective a country might choose to conduct an SDG evaluation.

SDG evaluation produces data and analysis that different national stakeholder groups can use for accountability and learning (see Table 3). So, it is important to identify and engage with these groups early in the process to determine how the evaluation can best serve their needs. Involving stakeholders from the outset helps decide the main purposes of the exercise and identify possible use of M&E data and analysis.



Table 3. Uses of SDG evaluation, by stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Accountability	Learning
Decision makers, managers and planners	Share public reports of findings about government performance against the 2030 Agenda. Report evaluation findings in VNRs	Feed findings into the strategic and planning cycle, and inform policymakers about the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of different policies
Civil society organisations	Assess the government's performance against clear objectives and criteria	Use findings to identify and reflect on the needs of their constituencies and intended beneficiaries
Parliamentarians	Carry out oversight function and promote coordinated efforts across government to address the SDGs	Inform investigations carried out in parliamentary audit committees and parliamentary commissions

Three key distinct uses of SDG evaluation have emerged from the Finnish and Nigerian experiences: informing policymaking and feeding

into the strategic planning and programming cycle; influencing the national political debate; and informing the countries' VNRs.

Informing policymakers and feeding into the strategic and planning cycle

Evidence generated through SDG evaluation can inform better policies and provide decision makers, managers and planners with lessons about what is working to achieve the SDGs and why. It can help decision makers answer the following questions:

- Are we doing things right?
- Are these the right things to do?
- Are there better ways to do things?

It can also help answer more detailed questions, such as:

- How adequate was programme expenditure and public investment?
- Was the policy or programme's reach acceptable (did it serve enough people, in the right way, to the level expected)?

- How well was the programme or policy implemented?
- How substantial and valuable were the outcomes and impacts?
- How were benefits distributed?
- Is this approach to the problem better than others? (Schwandt et al. 2016a).

SDG evaluation should ask questions about fundamental aspects of sustainable development policies and programmes. These include their unintended positive and negative consequences, their environmental, economic, social and political sustainability and their relevance to the needs of intended beneficiaries.



Box 3. Integrating evaluation into the SDG policy cycle

The early national experiences with SDG evaluation show some emerging practice around how governments can use evaluative tools and approaches at each stage of the SDG policy cycle (see Figure 4). They can use these to provide evidence to inform policymaking, help decision makers reflect on the rationale behind their policy choices and identify ways to improve them (Schwandt et al. 2016b).

In **agenda-setting**, evaluation can help identify cause-and-effect relationships between previous policies and national or sub-national sustainable development challenges. Analysing data across different evaluation studies can play a similar function, helping decision makers identify the reach and effectiveness of policy and programme options. For example, the findings of a mapping and structured synthesis of evaluations conducted by 17 UN and bilateral evaluation bodies helped researchers assess the effectiveness of different initiatives to achieve progress towards SDG4 (Mundy and Proulx 2019).

At the **policy formulation stage**, evaluative evidence analysis can help question assumptions that underpin different policy choices. After identifying the issues, planners can use evaluative tools to identify processes or social mechanisms that affect positive or negative outcomes. Planners can use ToCs or system mapping to explore different pathways to change. In-depth assessment of positive or negative cases can shed light on contextual conditions that support or hinder sustainable development.

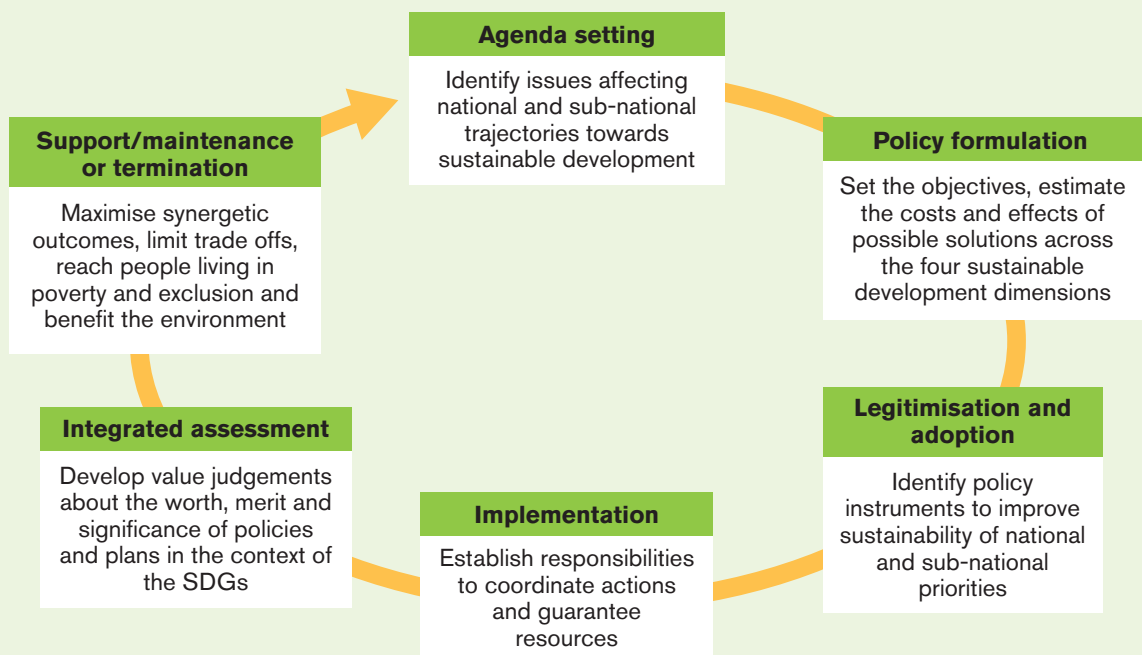
At the **legitimisation and adoption stage**, forecast-based evaluation that uses participatory approaches such as stakeholder mapping and engagement can help gather multiple perspectives to create consensus among stakeholders. It can also shed light on different stakeholders' interests by facilitating participatory assessment of possible benefits and trade-offs of different policy solutions.

At the **implementation stage**, formative and developmental evaluations can help planners develop interventions by assessing their relevance, efficiency and integration with other initiatives (Patton 1994). This can shed light on how to best use resources, help identify initial outcomes and provide recommendations to adjust plans.

At the **integrated assessment stage**, evaluation can help assess the validity of claims once a policy has been implemented. There are several tools available for this, including performance assessment and multi-methods impact evaluation design.

Finally, at the **support/maintenance or termination stage**, planners can use the findings of previous evaluative activities to decide how to support and refine a policy or take a new policy direction to maximise the synergies with other policies and accelerate the achievement of sustainable development outcomes.

Figure 4. The role of evaluation in the SDG policy cycle





Box 4. Learning from countries' experience: using evaluation as part of the policy cycle

As well as Finland, Nigeria and Costa Rica, other countries are using evaluation to inform their decision making on sustainable development. This box provides examples of several countries' successful experiences of integrating evaluation into policy cycles.

Agenda-setting: Nigeria examined data trends and used impact assessment to draw lessons from its experience with the MDGs to develop a transition strategy to the SDGs and identify which SDGs to prioritise first. Similarly, the Kenyan government studied the 2000–2015 period to assess progress against the MDGs and document the experiences, challenges and lessons learnt. This informed the country's new medium-term plan and its road map for implementing the SDGs. Ethiopia conducted a national review of its performance against the MDGs, which has fed into its national agenda for the SDGs (Meyer et al. 2018). Finland used evaluation to analyse the relevance, coverage and coherence of national policies by assessing how these addressed the findings of sustainable development research and analysis of indicator data (Berg et al. 2019).

Policy formulation stage: Finland's SDG evaluation used an analytical framework to understand what helped or hindered sustainable development progress in the past, as a first step in developing new policy directions. This assessment helped identify key sustainable development issues in Finland that require policy action (Berg et al. 2019).

Legitimisation and adoption stage: Finland, Nigeria and Costa Rica have all used a range of approaches — including workshops, surveys, advisory groups and interviews — to engage with stakeholders at various stages of their SDG evaluation processes.

Implementation stage: The Finnish SDG evaluation recommended conducting follow-up evaluations on different aspects of implementation every four years in line with their elections. It also recommended commissioning a public evaluation by a significant external institution such as the OECD.

Integrated assessment stage: Costa Rica incorporated an assessment of the impact of existing and past donor-funded environment and climate change programmes into the design of its upcoming SDG evaluation. In its VNR, Belize reported using earlier evaluation findings to assess the current situation for cash transfer programmes, gender equality and fisheries/marine management (Meyer et al. 2018).

Influencing the political debate

While local and national authorities can use learning from M&E data and analysis to improve programming, policymaking and service provision, parliamentarians and civil society can use M&E findings to make governments accountable and influence decision making. Box 5 shows how Botswana has used evaluation to feed evidence into decision making and facilitate national dialogue. Although this guide focuses in greater detail on the experiences of Finland, Nigeria and Costa Rica, we thought that it was worth reporting about Botswana's very successful monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system. Set up before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the system has successfully integrated the principles that underpin the agenda.

SDG evaluation commissioners may want to consider how to engage parliamentarians in the evaluation to maximise its use. Parliamentarians can play a unique role in promoting evaluation and use it to carry out their oversight function. Indeed, they “could strive for coordinated efforts across government that respond to the SDGs' complexity and interconnectedness and avoid piecemeal policymaking” (Schwandt et al. 2017). Finland, for example, has reported progress on sustainable development as part of its government annual report findings since 2016, well before this evaluation. It discusses the results in parliament, giving its members the opportunity to monitor measures for sustainable development.



Box 5. Botswana: using M&E data to assess, communicate and challenge government performance

In 2008–09, Botswana's Vision 2016 Council developed an M&E strategy to enable it to measure, monitor and report on progress against seven national-level socioeconomic goals/pillars that represented the country's long-term Vision 2016. This provided the basis for a framework for a national performance review that would report on the progress of each of the seven pillars. The Vision 2016 Council published 'Botswana's Performance' for 2009, 2012 and 2014 (Vision 2016 Council 2016) presenting them to the president, the High-Level Consultative Committee and the nation. This was a country-led initiative from which other countries can draw very useful lessons:

- a.** The exercise was led by a joint committee, unique to Botswana and called Vision 2016 Council, that represented the public sector, the private sector, and civil society.
- b.** The Vision Council, a formalised institutional structure with a Secretariat, has served as a useful vehicle to bring together on a regular basis representatives of all stakeholder groups to discuss, among other things, progress on the country's top priorities. The forum provided by the Council thus provides both continuity and opportunities for public profile of monitoring, evaluation and reporting on issues related to national priorities.
- c.** The Performance Report, written by the Council, represented the three constituencies; it was tabled with the country's High Level Committee and the President;
- d.** To help ensure its availability to the general public and to other institutions for independent scrutiny and review, the report was distributed to every library in the country.

The presence of a clear M&E framework enabled other independent organisations to evaluate the government's performance against the same objectives and pillars. At the end of the strategy period, Afrobarometer — an independent pan-African, non-partisan civil society organisation and research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions and related issues across more than 30 African countries — published an evaluation of the country's performance on its national vision, presenting data about public opinion on the seven development pillars.

In 2016, the new government's Vision Presidential Task Team developed 'Vision 2036: Achieving Prosperity for All', which synthesises the country's transformational agenda around four pillars that are aligned with the 2030 Agenda. These are inspired by the four dimensions of sustainable development: economic, human and social, environmental and governance, peace and security. Building on Vision 2016, a crucial component of the new agenda is the presence of a robust monitoring, evaluation and accountability system. It will track progress on targets that are specifically related to vision goals, report back on achievements and facilitate, conduct and commission M&E for government activities every five years. The key components of the new framework are:

- Conducting M&E activities that are provided for in policy documents
- Conducting appraisals of proposed development projects
- Conducting evaluation after a project is completed, and
- Assessing the government's evidence-based policymaking, review and reform.

Sources: Lekalake (2016), The Vision Presidential Task Team (2016), and Lahey (2013).



Box 6. SDG evaluation sparks political debate in Finland

Finland's experience teaches an important lesson about the feedback loop between policies and evidence. The timing of the evaluation was crucial, with the prime minister's office (PMO) purposefully tying it in with the next round of parliamentary elections. The findings were published during the electoral campaign, and additional time dedicated to communicating them to the main political parties. The evaluation team held meetings with the country's six main political parties and the National Commission on Sustainable Development held a workshop in May 2019 to discuss how to move on from the report's recommendations.

This attention to timing enabled the main political parties to engage with and respond to the evaluation findings. The leading party also reinforced its commitment to the SDGs by adopting the 2030 Agenda as the basis of its government programme. Benefits of this approach are clearly demonstrated in the new government's plans, which endorsed two of the evaluation's key recommendations: adopting the 2030 Agenda as a base for government policy and developing a national roadmap to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Informing countries' voluntary national reviews

SDG evaluation can also inform a country's VNR, providing valuable evidence and analysis about the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of different policies. "As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to 'conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven' ([UNGA 2015] paragraph 79). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the high-level political forum (HLPF), meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC [the UN Economic and Social Council]. As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews by the HLPF

are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders."¹³

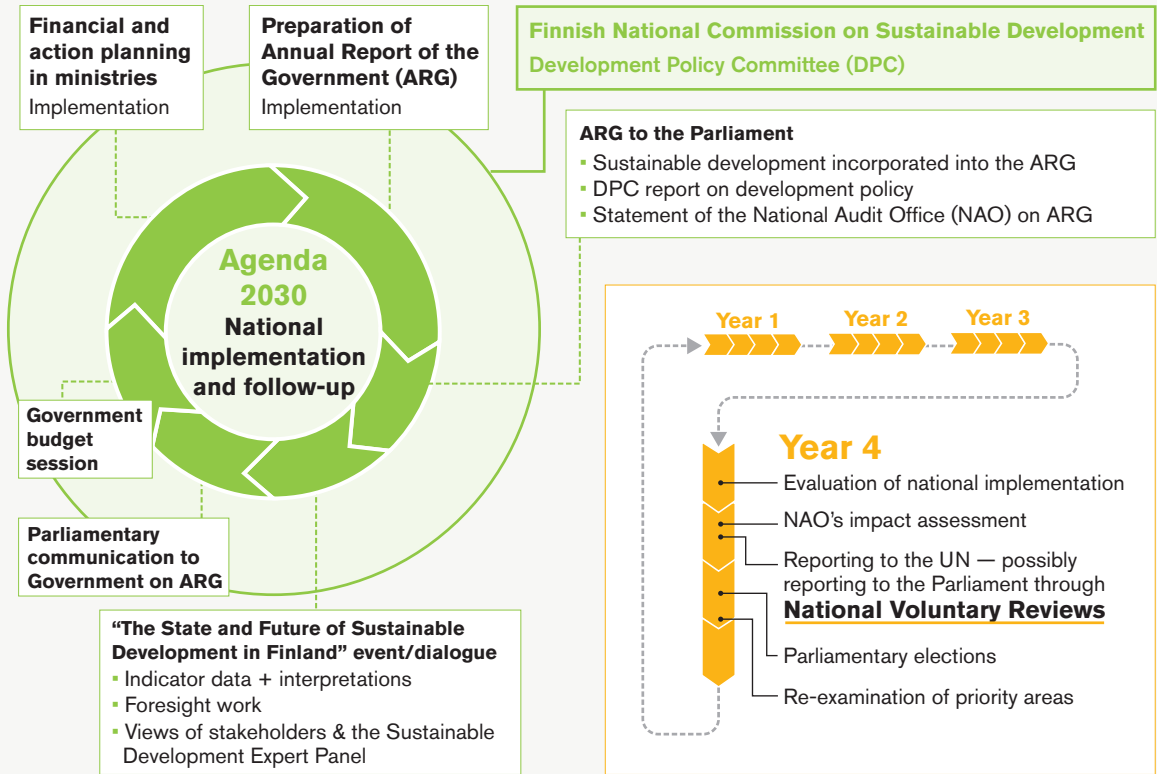
Despite this recommendation, very few countries have fed evaluation findings into their VNR preparations to date (Simon et al. 2017, Meyer et al. 2018). This evaluation gap highlights the risk that countries will passively report data gathered for the indicators rather than analyse it within the context of national planning, decision making and successful implementation. To make evaluations relevant to both internal policy cycles and global reporting, countries can adopt a phased approach, allowing time for the evaluation to feed into key political moments and inform the VNRs.



Box 7. Making the most of voluntary national reviews

Both Finland and Nigeria timed their national evaluations to feed into the VNR cycle. Finland linked its evaluation to the 2019 national elections and its next VNR reporting cycle in 2020 (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Finland’s national implementation plan’s annual and quadrennial follow-up and review cycles



Nigeria lined up two planned independent evaluations (SDG3 and SDG4) to link up with its 2020 VNR preparation. Key findings from the evaluation reports are expected to be ready in early 2020. The government envisages that this evidence will feed into the 2020 VNR, leading to strong engagement in strategic debates at the HLPF in July 2020.

13. UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

3. Step B: Preparing for an SDG evaluation

Having identified who will use the evaluation, how they will use it and why, commissioners can now consider the different ways they could use evaluation to learn about SDG implementation and relationships with existing strategies, policies and programmes.

In this chapter, we propose some pragmatic approaches to come up with participatory and informed decisions and present the choices facing commissioners in deciding the scope and focus of an SDG evaluation.

Designing participatory processes

The 2030 Agenda principles (see Box 2) are relevant to the way in which evaluations are conducted. They can also help different stakeholders decide their level of engagement and determine the design of evaluation management processes. For example, national follow-up and review guidance calls for the active **participation** of a wide range of stakeholder groups and political representatives and **accountability** to citizens by making evaluation findings public. The **leave no one behind** principle underlines the importance of meaningfully engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups, whose interests are often overlooked. The principles of **integration** and **coherence** support conducting the evaluation in collaboration with commissioning agencies from different sectors or with inputs and advice from cross-sectoral and cross-departmental advisory bodies.

When preparing an SDG evaluation, commissioners may wish to reflect on when different stakeholders can meaningfully participate in the exercise and how different groups can:

- Contribute to the choice of evaluation questions
- Input into the theoretical framing, and
- Participate in selecting the methodological approaches.

All engagement in data collection and analysis must be clear and transparent. It is important that commissioners facilitate the consultation to ensure stakeholders actively contribute to the process. Involving all stakeholder groups in drawing and analysing evaluation findings and developing recommendations can help avoid progress towards one goal benefiting one group while undermining the needs and rights of others.

Setting up cross-sectoral participatory bodies for management and advice

To facilitate participation, commissioners may consider setting up cross-sectoral management and advisory bodies in support of the evaluation. These bodies can enhance the quality of an evaluation and its value to stakeholders' groups. They can help to conduct a comprehensive analysis by providing a wider understanding of the effects of different policy options, including their potential for synergies.

For example, a steering group or advisory board with members from different ministries and government departments can improve evaluation design and

quality and facilitate the uptake of findings to improve policy coherence. But this type of body can become difficult to manage if members do not buy into methodological choices or accept its findings. So, it is important to think about processes to maintain the evaluation's independence. A support group of representatives from civil society and the private sector can also provide advice, feed into the evaluation design and data collection and analyse and debate the evaluation findings.



Box 8. Reinforcing ownership and inclusion

In **Finland**, involving different stakeholders at various stages of the evaluation reinforced their feelings of ownership and inclusion. But most importantly, it ensured political buy-in.

The evaluation management structure included a cross-administrative steering group and a support group. The former was chaired by the PMO (who also commissioned the evaluation) and comprised representatives from various ministries, including environment, finance, foreign affairs, agriculture and forestry. Its main role was providing quality assurance by reviewing the evaluation design, methodology and reporting. The support group was representative of key sectors in Finnish society and included delegates from different ministries as well as universities and research centres, sustainable development committees, 2030 Agenda youth groups, SYKE and SITRA. Their main function was to provide advice and comment on the content and process of the evaluation.

The evaluation itself was highly participatory, offering many opportunities for engagement through national and international workshops, interviews and surveys. The two national workshops, targeted at representatives of municipalities, civil society organisations and the private sector, were particularly useful in identifying key issues for Finland to achieve its sustainable development objectives. This contributed to the co-creation of the final recommendations. The material gathered from the 78 stakeholder interviews, which included members of the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development, ministries and other government actors, also helped shape the recommendations.

In **Nigeria**, SDG evaluation discussions took place in participatory spaces such as the SDG capacity building evaluation workshop — with participants from academia, evaluation associations, senior government and statisticians — and sector-specific communication platforms where private sector and civil society organisations could formulate and exchange ideas as part of Nigeria's transition strategy from the MDGs to the SDGs.

Nigeria's three SDG evaluations will be steered by the OSSAP-SDGs alongside the Ministry of Budget and National Planning and other relevant ministries, departments and agencies. UN agencies and development partners, including the UNICEF country representative, will provide technical and financial support.

OSSAP-SDGs plans to set up a national steering committee on SDG evaluation whose main roles will be to ensure political commitment, ownership and high-level technical guidance. The committee will also ensure adequate visioning, decision making, engagement and buy-in among governments and development partners and that the respective ministries, departments, government and UN agencies and development partners take up the independent evaluation findings to accelerate SDG progress in Nigeria.

Deciding the scope and focus

SDG evaluation comprises several exercises that differ in scope and focus. Commissioners face the challenge of deciding how broad or narrow the object of the evaluation should be. In terms of focus, that means deciding which policy area they

want to investigate. In terms of scope, national SDG evaluation can cover three interlinked levels of policy and programme design and implementation (see Box 9).



Box 9. The scope of national effort on the SDGs

National SDG efforts can occur at three interlinked levels: regional, national and sub-national plans and broad policy frameworks;¹⁴ implementation strategies; and discrete local to national-scale programmes and interventions.

1. At the **policy and plans level**, evaluation aims to identify relevant regional, national and sub-national priorities to assess the contribution of their related policies and plans to the SDGs by looking at their positive and negative consequences. Evaluating policies and plans can be a discrete exercise in reviewing their appropriateness against relevant evaluation recommendations and research findings. But it could be broader in scope, aiming to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation strategies set in motion by local and national authorities to operationalise said policies and plans.
2. To assess **implementation strategies**, evaluators can examine: the formal coordination mechanisms set up by national governments to integrate sustainable development approaches into the design and implementation of legislation, regulatory frameworks, policies and plans (Vaessen and D'Errico 2018); the systems and capacity for collecting, managing and analysing relevant information; and/or the less visible internal ways of working that contribute to an institutional culture that is supportive of inter-departmental cooperation and integrated policy processes. Evaluating implementation strategies can generate useful findings about the extent to which different policies reinforce or complement one another and shed light on policy coherence.
3. At the **programme and intervention** level, SDG evaluation investigates the effects of programmes, projects or activities on the four interrelated dimensions of sustainable development: economic, human and social, environmental and inclusive governance, peace and security. It should also look at how effectively national programmes have been adapted to local contexts, which can vary. At this level of analysis, SDG evaluation addresses questions related to the design and operationalisation of programmes and projects, and how they have helped or hindered the achievement of sustainable development outcomes.

The first step is deciding whether to conduct a comprehensive assessment of all sustainable development policies or focus on a few goals that are linked to priorities identified in national plans or the governments' agenda. The Finnish and Nigerian SDG evaluation experiences suggest that both options are valuable for informing a country's trajectory towards sustainable development. A feasibility assessment and consultation with key stakeholders will help commissioners decide which option to take. Issues to consider include:

- Is there an SDG implementation strategy?
- What costs and resources are needed to conduct the evaluation?
- What is the timespan of the exercise in relation to key policy moments?
- What data are available for use in the assessment?
- Are any additional data collection activities required?

The next step is deciding whether to focus the exercise on assessing the appropriateness of policies and plans, or also investigate their operationalisation by assessing their implementation strategies. If commissioners decide on the latter, the evaluation should also assess, if possible, the trade-offs and synergies between sector-specific policies, implementation systems and interventions and how they affect progress overall.

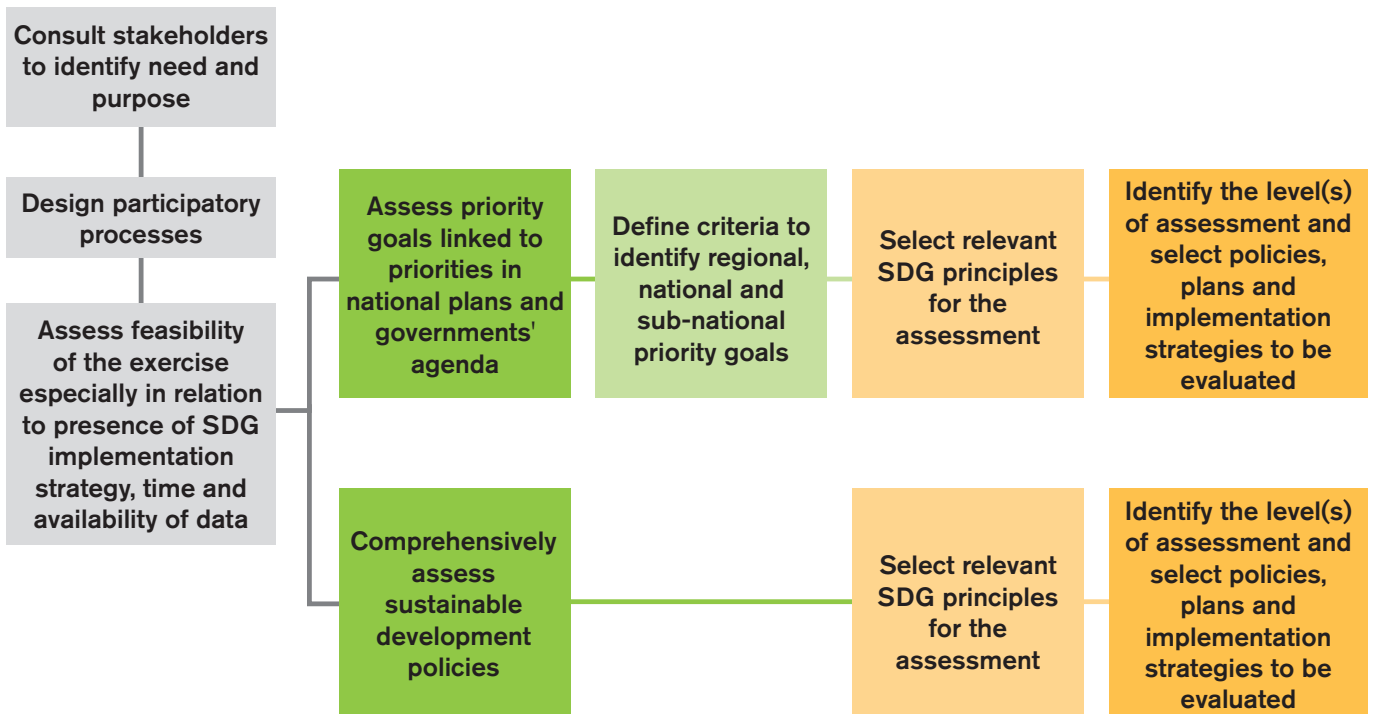
The principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda (see Box 2) can also help narrow down the scope and focus of SDG evaluation. For example, evaluation commissioners and stakeholders may decide that achieving the SDGs is especially contingent on improving policy coherence (integration) or increasing economic and social benefits for marginalised and vulnerable groups (equity). Looking at and discussing the purpose and scope of an evaluation in this way can bring to light critical issues and challenges that could be overlooked in

14. While this guidance focuses on the national level, it is possible to address some national sustainable development issues at state, province or municipal level through sub-national plans and programmes or at regional level through institutions such as the European Union or intergovernmental groupings such as the Small Island Developing States.

an evaluation focusing more specifically on priority goals or targets. In Finland, the evaluation team used the 'leave no one behind' principle to focus part of their investigation on foreign and private sector policies.

Each choice presents different benefits and challenges for commissioners to consider as well as key actions to undertake the exercise. Figure 6 presents a decision-making tree with some key decision points that commissioners will face in defining the scope and focus of an evaluation.

Figure 6. Decision-making tree for defining the scope and focus of an SDG evaluation





Box 10. Finland and Nigeria: two approaches to SDG evaluation

The 2017 'Government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (PMO Finland 2017) envisaged an evaluation of Finland's sustainable development policies and cross-administrative foreign policies as one of the main actions to take forward. As well as assessing the state of sustainable development in Finland, the evaluation would produce concrete recommendations for the next governmental mandate on the future direction of Finland's sustainable development policy.

The Finnish evaluation analysed all sustainable development policies. Nigeria, on the other hand, focused its forthcoming evaluations on three specific goals — SDG1, SDG3 and SDG4 — which largely correspond to the focus areas of the ERPG report. For example, under SDG4 (quality education), the evaluation object is to assess whether Nigeria's Education Strategic Plan 2016–2019 is contributing to achieving target SDG4.1: "Ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."

Nigeria's aims in evaluating the priority SDGs are: to assist its government at all levels with key evidence to understand the drivers of success and the challenges in achieving the three SDGs; to hold the government accountable for increased investment in those SDG-related sectors; and to strengthen evidence-based reporting for its next VNR in 2020.

Nigeria used a matrix score to select the priority SDGs. Key actors agreed the criteria — or main issues to look out for — when embarking in a national SDG evaluation (Table 4) during an SDG evaluation capacity building workshop in early 2019. Led by UNICEF-Nigeria, the workshop helped narrow down the priority SDGs to three from the five identified in the country's ERGP. The highest-ranked goal based on the available evidence was SDG3 (good health and wellbeing), followed by SDG4 (quality education) and SDG1 (no poverty).

The criteria developed during the workshop were the result of a joint effort between key actors from the OSSAP-SDGs, the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, relevant ministries and departments, government and UN agencies, development partners, academia and civil society organisations.

Table 4. Criteria mapping for selecting national priorities for SDG evaluation (Nigeria)

Criteria mapping
A. Sectoral plan(s) linked to relevant SDGs
B. Government flagship programme(s) (high contribution to the SDGs)
C. Leadership commitment of the relevant ministries, departments and agencies for SDG evaluation
D. Nationwide geographic coverage/spread
E. Large-scale public financing
F. Existing multi-level partnership
G. Availability of baseline survey/assessment
H. Availability of monitoring data
I. Availability of recent evidence from 2018–19 surveys or assessments
J. Availability of previous credible evaluation or study
K. Subjective view of respondents

4. Step C: Developing the evaluation criteria and questions

Having designed the participative elements and established both the focus and the scope of the evaluation, the next step is identifying the evaluation criteria and developing the questions it will ask.

In this section, we provide guidance on how to use the principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda (see Box 2) to inform evaluation criteria selection and develop evaluation questions.

Setting and tailoring the evaluation criteria

We can use the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda as evaluation criteria where their selection is part of the evaluation design and not pre-determined by the commissioning institution. For example, an evaluation can use the principle of **resilience** to assess the sustainability of natural or human systems (Schwandt et al. 2016a). Where

evaluations use set criteria, it may still be possible to supplement these with one or two additional principle-based criteria. For example, DEval suggests supplementing the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) standard criteria for evaluating development assistance with criteria based on 2030 Agenda principles (see Box 11).

Developing the evaluation questions

Once commissioners and evaluators have defined the criteria, they can use the 2030 Agenda principles to develop questions covering the governance, environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.

A major challenge in selecting evaluation questions in the context of the 2030 Agenda is how to capture the integrated, non-linear and intergenerational qualities of sustainable development. One of the 2030 Agenda principles that can help in examining these qualities is 'leave no one behind'. Evaluators can use this principle to explore whether a policy is reaching all those who could usefully benefit from it, or whether some members of society are falling behind as a result of broader policies and budgetary decisions. They can also explore what specific affirmative actions are being taken to support the most marginalised groups and individuals and how effective those actions are. This depth of understanding might not come to light in an evaluation that looks more generally at numbers

and beneficiary types, even those that use disaggregated data and look for unintended impacts.

Evaluations generally have a limited number of key questions linked to their evaluative criteria, and a range of lower-level questions to address specific dimensions of those criteria (Davidson 2014). Table 5 lists possible evaluation questions derived from the 2030 Agenda principles (see Box 2) that are relevant when evaluating national plans, policies, programmes or interventions. We offer them here as examples to help evaluators think about how the 2030 Agenda principles can help them develop both higher and lower-level questions.

Questions of this sort are appropriate for evaluations that use principle-based or standard, pre-determined policy and programme evaluation criteria. Evaluators may use some of the questions from Table 5 or craft new ones in consultation with all relevant stakeholder groups. Participation of different stakeholders is key to selecting relevant questions.



Box 11. Tailoring OECD DAC criteria to SDG evaluation

DEval has developed an internal discussion paper on how to adjust the standard OECD DAC evaluation criteria to better align them to Agenda 2030. The paper suggests supplementing the standard DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness and impact with criteria based on the SDG principles of universality, mutual accountability, integration and inclusiveness. A small sampling of the questions suggested for each criterion gives a sense of how robust questions related to national SDG progress can be employed using set evaluation criteria. This paper was developed before the publication of the revised OECD DAC Evaluation criteria definitions and principles for use. The revised OECD DAC criteria published in December 2019 now offer new opportunities to address the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda especially through the new coherence criteria and the revised sustainability criteria (OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation 2019).

Relevance

- To what extent is the conception of the intervention based on a holistic approach to sustainable development (social, ecological and economic)?
- To what extent does the intervention adapt to changing conditions (risks and potentials)?

Effectiveness

- To what extent have unintended positive/negative direct effects occurred as a result of the implementation of the intervention (social, economic, ecological)?

Impact

- To what extent can positive and/or negative interactions between social, economic and ecological impacts (outcomes) and overarching developmental impacts be identified or foreseen that could influence the durability of the intervention?

Universality and mutual accountability

- What contribution has the intervention made to fulfilling the principles of universal validity, shared responsibility and accountability?

Integration

- To what extent were there unintended (positive and/or negative) overarching developmental interdependencies between the social, economic and ecological dimensions of the intervention?
- What contribution did the intervention make to promoting intended or unintended positive or negative interactions between the social, economic and ecological impacts (outcomes) and overarching developmental impacts of the intervention?

Inclusiveness

- To what extent were there intended or unintended positive or negative overarching developmental impacts at the level of particularly disadvantaged groups (possible differentiation according to age, income, gender, ethnicity and so on)?

Source: DEval (unpublished)



Table 5. Suggested evaluation questions derived from 2030 Agenda principles

Integration/coherence
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do national policy frameworks consider the interconnected nature of sustainable development? 2. Are the implementation mechanisms adequate to ensure effective integration? 3. Do they require or encourage interdepartmental or public-private sector collaboration? 4. Has the policy/plan/programme resulted in unconsidered negative environmental or social externalities? 5. Has it produced any unexpected economic, environmental or social co-benefits? 6. What is the level of coordination between government departments and the different geographic levels of government? (Vaessen and D'Errico 2018).
Leave no one behind
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What public policies and plans have been adopted to leave no one behind? Who is benefiting from national priorities? Are they increasing inequality? 2. Do poor and vulnerable people and those living in economic, social and/or geographic exclusion benefit? 3. Were the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and excluded, as defined by themselves, considered during design and implementation? 4. Are data on impact collected and disaggregated to ascertain the effects on the poorest and most marginalised?
Equity
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What groups or individuals have benefited? What groups have experienced negative effects? 2. To what extent were the interests of affected stakeholders considered in the design? How were conflicting interests negotiated and accommodated? 3. Did the programme/policy design take account of longer-term social, environmental and economic effects? 4. Have adequate measures been taken to mitigate immediate or long-term impacts on specific stakeholder groups? 5. Have measures such as affirmative action been taken to bridge the gaps between groups?
Resilience
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the policy/plan/programme make individuals, communities, social groups and ecosystems vulnerable to social, economic and/or environmental disasters, shocks and other unexpected change? 2. Does it include actions that aim to increase human and/or environmental resilience to such changes and shocks? 3. To what extent does it contribute to improving resilience of poor, vulnerable and excluded communities, households and individuals?
Environmental sustainability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the policy/plan/programme contribute to the depletion or degradation of any natural resources or environmental services? 2. If so, what measures have been taken to mitigate those impacts? 3. Are the long-term effects on natural resources and ecosystems positive, negative or neutral?
Universality
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the policy/plan/programme support or undermine other countries' efforts to contribute to the SDGs and national progress towards sustainable development? 2. Does it facilitate collaboration with other countries on shared goals?
Mutual accountability
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are the roles and responsibilities of all partners clearly stated and agreed? 2. Are mechanisms in place to hold partners accountable for honouring their responsibilities? 3. Have partners negotiated institutional arrangements in a fair and equitable way?

**Box 12. Using 2030 Agenda principles to inform criteria and questions in Finland and Nigeria**

Some of the evaluation questions formulated as part of Finland's sustainable development policies evaluation draw on the 2030 Agenda principles.

Policy coherence was one of the leading principles of the Finnish government's report on the 2030 Agenda, alongside ownership, participation, long-term action and transformation. The 4Is framework (institutions pillar) used by the evaluation team highlighted one of the key challenges of policy coherence in Finland, namely that actors and ministerial departments often work in separate silos, making it difficult to ensure that knowledge, decisions and measures are compatible and their interconnections considered (Berg et al. 2019). In this sense, institutional mechanisms countries put in place have a prominent role in the successful implementation of the SDGs.

The evaluation call for proposals specifically required assessments to use the 'leave no one behind' principle. The main evaluation questions related to this principle examined how Finland's sustainable development policy addresses the 2030 Agenda's human rights-based approach (Berg et al. 2019). Due to limited resources, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all sustainable development policies from a 'leave no one behind' perspective. So, the evaluation team decided to focus this part of the investigation on foreign policies related to the private sector with an emphasis on impact on human rights.

One of the final recommendations references the need for Finland's sustainable development policy to reduce inequality in accordance with the 'leave no one behind' principle and expand future evaluation efforts to the human rights impact of all foreign policy.

Nigeria included the 2030 Agenda principles of universality, equity, leave no one behind and sustainability in the terms of reference of their planned SDGs evaluations and used them to develop the evaluation questions alongside the DAC criteria.


Table 6. Evaluation questions based on SDG principles (Finland and Nigeria)

Coherence/integration	Nigeria	Finland
Will the current sustainable development policy and measures help achieve societal changes that promote permanent socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development? Are the activities coherent and comprehensive from the sustainable development point of view?		✓
Do the central policy actions have an impact on the status of sustainable development?		✓
Does the achievement of central aims pose challenges? What are the challenges and existing strengths?		✓
How can policy be evaluated with regard to coherence, coverage and relevance?		✓
What are the policy measures that would significantly improve the coherence and effectiveness of external policies in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?		✓
How coherent is Finland's foreign policy in terms of achieving the SDGs?		✓
Leave no one behind		
How are the human rights-based approach and the 'Leave no one behind' thinking of Agenda 2030 realised in Nigeria for universal basic education?	✓	
To what extent was the human rights-based approach integrated into education sector programming within key flagship programme design and implementation?	✓	
To what extent did the programme target the poorest?	✓	
What was the role of the private sector in foreign policies related to sustainable development and what was its impact on human rights?		✓
Equity		
To what extent did it help to reduce inequalities between the wealthier groups and the poorest groups?	✓	
To what extent were the barriers (and their causes) to access basic services in education in the targeted local government areas identified and addressed as part of the overall programme strategy priorities?	✓	
To what extent are all children's rights for a fully integrated universal education package of services available and benefiting children and mothers?	✓	
Mutual accountability		
To what extent is the effective systematic participation of all stakeholders (individuals, communities, local institutions, states and federal stakeholders) in the design, implementation, financing and M&E of education sector's programmes functioning to sustain the gains made in achieving impact, outcomes and outputs?	✓	

Sources: Berg et al. (2019) and OSSAP-SDGs et al. (2019)

5. Step D: Framing the evaluation

Having set the evaluation criteria and questions, the last step for commissioners and managers is thinking about how they are going to frame the evaluation around the logic that underpins policies and programmes.

In this final section, we outline some of the tools and knowledge products they can use and make suggestions about how to develop a dynamic communication plan.

Reconstructing the logic underpinning national policies

To better understand the cause-and-effect relationships between a policy and observable changes, it is useful to reconstruct the logic that underpins policy choices. Commissioners can include such exercises in the terms of reference of national evaluations, through tools such as:

- **Theory-based evaluation**, which helps us develop complex theories by considering dynamics that are hard to predict, and
- **Systems thinking**, which aims to define the boundaries of the system(s) affected by different policy frameworks and map interactions between actors and changes within the systems.

Planners and evaluators can use these tools to develop non-linear, multi-faceted **theories of change** that explore different pathways and complex cause-and-effect relationships that consider challenges of integration. A ToC can be narrative or visual and outlines the causal chain between immediate, mid-term and long-term outcomes and presents the main assumptions underpinning the logic of the interventions.

ToC analysis is useful for clarifying the aims of existing policies, the logic that underpins them and the ways in which agents perceive them (Weiss 1997). It explores a hypothesis about how a policy or programme will bring about change by describing the chain of influences over intended results. Evaluators can reconstruct the causal linkages between a policy and its planned impact by consulting the relevant literature and engaging policy designers and programme implementers in facilitated participatory processes (Vogel 2012, Van Es et al. 2015, Mayne 2017 and 2019, Goodier et al. 2018, Powell 2019).



Box 13. Considering complexity when developing theories of change

Policy or programme ToCs can be informed by the complex aspects of interventions, including:

- **Multi-site and multi-governance issues:** Policies and programmes that address sustainable development are often implemented through multiple agencies operating in very different contexts.
- **Simultaneous or alternative causal strands:** Sustainable development outcomes are often brought about by the combination of different causes, which generates complicated pathways to change. In other cases, different pathways may lead to the same outcome, and the effectiveness of one pathway over another is due to context-specific conditions.
- **Recursive causality:** Once a programme or a policy is in operation, it is unlikely to progress linearly from implementation to initial and subsequent outcomes. Achieving results usually “depends on activating a virtuous circle where an initial success creates the conditions for further success”. This, in turn, reinforces previous achievements in a cyclical process of improvement with multiple feedback loops.
- **Tipping points and emergence:** Successful interventions do not always anticipate outcomes that emerge during policy or programme implementation. These unexpected changes are generated by new conditions created by interactions between stakeholders and the context in which a policy or programme operates. In these cases, the outcomes and the means to achieve them evolve during the implementation of the intervention.

Source: Rogers (2008)



Box 14. Reconstruct the logic of national policies in Finland

Finland used ToC analysis to understand “what a policy process entails, and how and when different steps are expected to be realised”. (Berg et al. 2019). The work in Finland was based on theory-based evaluation and aimed to understand the preconditions and mechanisms of implementing policies. The evaluation team tried to deconstruct the different steps of the policy processes and how and when those steps had been realised. The main material they analysed to trace back the ToC was the ‘Government report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (PMO Finland 2017) and the perspectives of ministries, representatives and sustainable development experts.

They used the ToC to answer two main evaluation questions:

1. What are the most important aims and methods of Finland's sustainable development policy?
2. How are these understood in practice by most central stakeholders?

The ToC shed light on the policy aims, which the evaluation team subsequently validated by interviewing key stakeholders about their perceptions and understanding of those aims.

The team found that there was no clear path linking the (broad and general) objectives of the ToC with the measures to achieve the SDGs. They also noted that the stakeholders involved in sustainable development policies often had different views and understandings of sustainable development. As a result, there was no shared theory of political change.

This lack of clarity in the ToC led the evaluation team to recommend creating a well-defined national roadmap to 2030 to “strengthen the goal-oriented and systematic nature of policy with regard to sustainable development” (Berg et al. 2019). The team also recommended that the government lead the process to create the roadmap, with support from the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development. The roadmap is meant to show how Finland can achieve all the 2030 Agenda goals by 2030 and support the European Union and rest of the world to do the same.

Developing and costing a communication plan

A common shortcoming of long reports full of technical jargon is that they are inaccessible to most of the stakeholder groups targeted by the evaluation. Commissioners can avoid this pitfall by considering which type of evaluation products would suit different audiences. Identifying different evaluation deliverables in advance can help them develop realistic budgets that consider communication needs over the course of an evaluation.

Different knowledge products and reporting processes are usually needed throughout the evaluation period and beyond. For example, short reports written in plain language can inform meetings with non-technical stakeholder groups. Administrators, civil servants or academics, on the other hand, may need detailed reports with substantial technical appendices to demonstrate the credibility of findings. Time-poor readers such as policymakers or parliamentarians, however, will probably prefer short briefings with recommendations or policy pointers at the top of the document.

Reporting can also make use of new technologies and creative solutions. Innovative ways of reporting include (Rogers 2018):

- Developing an interactive webpage on the evaluation client's website with evaluation results
- A public exhibition of the results for non-technical stakeholders
- Producing videos for non-technical audiences, and
- Doing joint conference presentations that involve the evaluator, the evaluation commissioner and ideally other stakeholders.

Commissioners can integrate all these deliverables and activities into an overarching communications strategy or plan that they develop at the beginning of the evaluation and update throughout. As we discussed in Step A, identifying the intended use and users of an evaluation's findings is often a precondition of their uptake. An effective communications strategy would therefore identify: who is or may be interested in the evaluation findings; the key processes and times when findings are needed; and how these feed into a series of analysis and reporting cycles.



Box 15. Audience-focused communication

Finland produced a wide range of communication products tailored for different audiences, including:

- An 80-page report with appendices in Finnish and English
- A shorter policy briefing in Finnish and English.
- Several blogs
- Twitter material, and
- PowerPoint presentations.

6. Methodological considerations

Because SDG evaluations can differ in scope and purpose, this guide does not aim to provide advice on specific methods. Rather, we reflect on some of the key issues to consider when selecting the methodology for an SDG evaluation and reflect on one of the greatest challenges of SDG evaluation: how to assess integration.

Effective SDG evaluation draws on evidence from various sources, not just monitoring systems and SDG indicators (Lucks et al. 2016). Using different methodologies and approaches will help evaluators draw overall conclusions from multiple findings by addressing the principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda. Processes to synthesise value judgments should confront, weigh and balance different perceptions and evidence sources, considering existing knowledge of — and multiple viewpoints on — the nature and contexts of and solutions to social and environmental problems.

How appropriate evaluative approaches and methodologies are depends on the questions, aims and use of the evaluation. Box 16 has a list of detailed publications that explore the benefits and limitations of different evaluation designs.



Box 16. Resources for selecting evaluation methods and approaches

The resources listed here can guide commissioners and evaluators when choosing a methodology or approach for a specific evaluation.

TEEB AgriFood Evaluation Framework (Obst 2018): Presented in Chapter 6 of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity's 'TEEB for Agriculture and Food: Scientific and Economic Foundations Report', this framework proposes using the four dimensions of sustainable development capital — natural capital, human capital, social capital and produced capital — to guide holistic assessment of policies and interventions. See <http://teebweb.org/agrifood/home/evaluation-framework/>

Impact evaluation, a guide for commissioners and managers (Stern 2015): Published by Bond, this guide proposes a practical approach to identify appropriate impact evaluation designs based on the evaluation questions that commissioners want to answer. See <https://tinyurl.com/yby7kcvy>

Choosing appropriate evaluation methods tool (Befani and O'Donnell 2016): Published by Bond, this hands-on tool will help commissioners and evaluators make informed choices about evaluation methodologies and gain greater understanding about their characteristics. See www.bond.org.uk/resources/evaluation-methods-tool

Manager's guide to evaluation (Better Evaluation): An interactive online guide that covers nine critical steps for designing and managing an evaluation. See www.betterevaluation.org/en/managers_guide

Participatory impact assessment: a design guide (Catley et al. 2014): Published by the Feinstein International Centre, this guide presents a flexible framework to design robust participatory impact assessment, based on a collection of good practice from the field. See <https://tinyurl.com/v8he3dw>

Participatory learning and action (IIED): Published from 1987 until 2013, this journal collects practices to conduct participatory research and evaluation. All 66 editions are available online in the PLA archive. See www.iied.org/participatory-learning-action-pla

How do we know if a program made a difference? A guide to statistical methods for program impact evaluation (Lance et al. 2014): Published by MEASURE Evaluation, this guide presents the main traditional statistical approaches to conducting impact evaluation. See www.measureevaluation.org/resources/publications/ms-14-87-en

Evaluation of humanitarian action guide (Cosgrave et al. 2016): Published by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance and developed primarily for the humanitarian sector, this guide contains useful general advice on and information about evaluation designs and management for commissioners of evaluation in other sectors. See www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluation-of-humanitarian-action-guide

Writing terms of reference for an evaluation: a how-to guide (Roberts et al. 2011): A practical resource to writing terms of reference published by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group. See www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/tor/how_to

Cost-benefit analysis for development: A practical guide (ADB 2013): Published by the Asian Development Bank, this guide provides an overview of recent methodological developments in cost-benefit analysis (CBA). It also illustrates the application of suggested methodologies through sector-specific case studies. See <https://tinyurl.com/to6zdsx>

Using a sustainable development lens

There has long been recognition of the need for approaches to evaluation that take account of complex system interactions and unintended long-term effects of interventions (Julnes 2019). SDG evaluation demands a varied set of tools to investigate complexity.

In 1997, an international group of sustainable development measurement practitioners came together to develop a basic set of principles for assessing sustainable development that remains valid and comprehensive today. The principles emphasise the need for a holistic perspective, attention to intra- and intergenerational equity and considering the underlying ecological conditions and non-market contributors to human and social wellbeing as well as economic ones. They note the importance of stakeholder participation in the assessment process, highlighting the importance of involving decision makers, “to secure a firm link to adopted policies and resulting action” (Hardi and Zdan 1997).

Since then, evaluators have grappled with developing concrete methods to address the complexities, uncertainties and contested understandings inherent in sustainable development programmes and interventions (Elkins and Dresner 2008; Reeger et al. 2009; Uitto 2014 and 2016; Rowe 2018; Julnes 2019). Although their methods vary widely, the growing body of research points consistently to several key attributes of sustainable development evaluation.

Attributes of sustainable development evaluation

1. Stakeholder engagement and co-generation of recommendations: A central precept of sustainable development is stakeholders’ right and responsibility to be meaningfully involved in processes and decisions that affect them. Ongoing stakeholder involvement in evaluation respects that precept, creating a valuable space for shared learning that can feed into decision making. Stakeholder involvement helps explore the multiple dimensions of sustainable development and the diverse ways that it can affect stakeholders. Their involvement can uncover a range of perspectives and understanding among policymakers, policy implementers and other stakeholders about the purpose or objectives of a sustainable development policy or programme. It also encourages constructive dialogue and debate between stakeholder groups and facilitates learning.

2. Mixed approaches to generating evidence: Examining a development process from multiple perspectives raises several issues regarding evidence collection. Quantitative data may not be enough for assessing the multiple dimensions of a sustainable development intervention or may not be

sufficiently disaggregated to get a clear picture. For example, while economic data is often robust, environmental data can be unreliable and data on beneficiary numbers can miss differences between genders or social groups. Evaluators may wish to use other information sources — including local experts and informed stakeholders providing empirical evidence — to fill gaps and build a comprehensive picture.

3. Integrated analysis: This broader approach to collecting evidence is essential to the SDG analysis. For sustainable development evaluation, it is important to examine the policy or programme under review from multiple — economic, social, environmental and political — perspectives. It is also important to examine the connections between those dimensions. Human and natural systems are actively and dynamically coupled (Rowe 2019). There are often multiple causes to any changes in human wellbeing, which throws up challenges around establishing causality and accounting for impacts (Rowe 2018). Assessing causality thus requires understanding all the causes of change and their interactions with one another. To do this, sustainable development evaluation designs and methodologies need to: consider changes in patterns; weigh the effects of different interventions; establish the likelihood of alternative explanations; and account for the rise of emergent causes and tipping points.

4. Alternative pathways and dilemmas: There is no single ‘right’ pathway toward sustainable development and all options throw up trade-offs around: distribution of benefits and responsibilities among stakeholders; present versus future impacts; allocation of social, economic, environmental and political costs and benefits; or attention to local versus national and global objectives. An effective evaluation at any scale should consider the possibility of such dilemmas and assess the choices made in view of accepted sustainable development principles, such as environmental sustainability, distributional equity, the precautionary principle and common but differentiated responsibilities (WCED 1987; Elkins and Dresner 2008). See Step C for a discussion on the use of sustainable development principles in evaluation.

5. Context specificity: A sustainable development evaluation cannot adequately assess an intervention or process in isolation from its spatial, temporal, socioeconomic and environmental context (Rowe 2018). Evaluations can consider the geographic scope and other contexts and cross-analyse results to identify the influence of different contexts on results found and process effects.

6. Upstream drivers and downstream effects:

Equally, to fully assess a policy, plan or programme's "merit, worth or significance" (Schwandt et al. 2016a), an evaluation must take account of both the upstream forces that led to and shaped it and any unintended or unacknowledged impacts on other sectors or domains across time and space. In economic terms, we refer to these as externalities. In some cases, impacts on natural systems only become visible years after project completion. They also often transcend project or jurisdictional boundaries. Sustainable development evaluation must therefore apply systems thinking and be alert to the possibility that the subject of an evaluation is influenced by or is itself generating multiple conflicting drivers, complex feedback loops, thresholds and tipping points, across ecological, social and jurisdictional boundaries. Policies and interventions in one place should never deplete natural resources or preclude progress elsewhere, nor should short-term

gain in one sustainable development objective compromise long-term benefits in others.

7. Impacts beyond national boundaries: Upstream drivers and downstream impacts can reach far beyond national boundaries. A plastic straw dropped on a beach in New York can kill a turtle in the South Pacific and civil war in Syria can create a humanitarian crisis in Europe. The principle of universality enshrined in the 2030 Agenda implies that development is only truly sustainable when it is being sustained everywhere and that all countries have an obligation to support the efforts of others (Halle 2016). So, examining a policy or programme's impact on other countries or regions is another dimension of sustainable development evaluation. European agricultural subsidies and some carbon offset programmes are examples of programmes that might benefit their countries of origin but damage other countries.

Assessing policy and programme integration

Perhaps the greatest challenge for sustainable development evaluation is assessing how policies and programmes deal with integration across the multiple dimensions of sustainable development, including examining the trade-offs and synergies between different sustainable development objectives.

The 2030 Agenda goals and targets have made that

challenge a little easier by providing a framework for assessment. For example, the International Science Council used this framework to measure how interventions in one dimension could affect progress in another, identifying seven possible types of positive and negative interaction between the social, economic and environmental, and political objectives reflected in the SDG targets (see Table 7).



Table 7. Seven types of positive and negative interaction between SDG objectives

Interaction label	Meaning
+3 Indivisible	Progress on one target automatically delivers progress on another
+2 Reinforcing	Progress on one target makes it easier to make progress on another
+1 Enabling	Progress on one target creates conditions that enable progress on another
+/-0 Consistent	There is no significant link between two targets' progress
-1 Constraining	Progress on one target constrains the options for how to deliver on another
-2 Counteracting	Progress on one target makes it more difficult to make progress on another
-3 Cancelling	Progress on one target automatically leads to a negative impact on another

Source: Griggs et al. (2016)

This type of technical assessment of synergies and trade-offs is a useful starting point for defining a good outcome in terms of integration. However, more methods are needed to assess the causal linkages between an integration outcome and the policy or programme being evaluated.

Evaluators need other methods to address ethical dilemmas and decide which objectives to prioritise when there are trade-offs to be made. Questions to explore could include:

- What stakeholders were involved or consulted in the decision making?
- Which constituencies benefited from the decision and which were hurt?
- Were conflicts of interest involved and how were they dealt with?
- Was decision making transparent?
- Did the decision respect the principles of leaving no one behind, equity and environmental sustainability?

Box 17 shows some of the tools evaluators can use to address these questions.



Box 17. Addressing integration in evaluative activities

This list of evaluative tools and approaches that evaluators can use to better understand the integration challenges is by no means exhaustive.

Expert judgements: The challenge of assessing integration underlines the value of engaging to the extent possible experts in all spheres of sustainable development, including sociologists, economists and natural scientists. Engaging experts with strong understanding of the context can be a practical and inexpensive approach to better understand integration challenges.

Participatory assessment of synergies and trade-offs, either before implementing a policy or programme or after completion. Evaluators can use participatory approaches to confront other types of evidence with the views of different stakeholder groups, including policy designers, programme implementers and intended beneficiaries from across the governance, environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.

Drawing systems: Combining tools from system thinking with participatory approaches can help evaluators better understand how a policy or programme works across the different sustainable development dimensions. For example, they can use tools from system thinking to map the components of the human system and its interactions with the natural world. (Meadows et al. 1972 and 2008, Ofir et al. 2019)

Mental modelling: Mental modelling can be useful for understanding complex interactions between socioecological systems. Evaluators can use participatory processes to reveal the mental models and values of stakeholder groups and shed light on how different people conceptualise and understand the issues affecting sustainable development (Moon et al. 2019).

In-depth assessment of extreme cases: To better understand the effects of policies and programmes on the interlinkages between social and environmental systems, evaluators can investigate extremely positive or negative outcomes that have affected different dimensions of sustainable development. Investigating extreme cases is a well-established research strategy for conducting causal assessment (Goertz 2017) that can also be used to assess integration. When using this approach, evaluators focus on cases where they have observed outcomes resulting from extremely positive synergies or extremely negative trade-offs. When using Griggs et al.'s interaction table (Table 7), their focus is on either the indivisible or the cancelling effects to better understand a policy or programme's complex causal linkages with different sustainable development dimensions. Evaluative methods based on in-depth, case-based investigations include contribution analysis, process tracing and contribution tracing.

Comparing cases with positive and negative outcomes: Another useful approach for identifying policies and programmes' effects on trade-offs and synergies is conducting several case studies for comparison through different methods. Qualitative comparative analysis is a rigorous approach for this type of assessment that helps identify the different combinations of conditions that can lead to indivisible or cancelling outcomes.

Network analysis: This type of analysis can help us understand the structure of physical, biological, social and economic networks, assess the extent to which they are interdependent and discover the effects of their interactions. As well as providing insights into how networks form, network analysis also helps us identify the core attributes of different types of network, including their strengths, weaknesses and how they function. Social network analysis, for example, can help us better understand the role different stakeholder groups' networks play in implementing programmes and projects across the four dimensions of sustainable development (Strogatz 2001).

Cost-benefit analysis of externalities: In economics, an externality is a cost or benefit not originally anticipated by an actor, policy or intervention. Externalities can be positive or negative and are usually conceptualised as effects of the economic activities or unanticipated results of transactions between economic agents. Thanks to the development of non-market valuation techniques, we can use CBA to estimate the effects of interventions targeting one SDG on another SDG and the positive or negative value of externalities of policies, programmes and projects across the four dimensions of sustainable development. To properly assess environmental externalities, an evaluation must consider sustainability constraints. So CBA is usually complemented by an environmental impact assessment, to ensure it identifies the necessary preventive expenditure, avoiding the worst form of degradation of environmental assets. This approach is usually effective in valuating the environmental costs of projects, but is usually more challenging for estimating the costs of programmes or policies (ADB 2013).



Box 18. Finland’s methodological choices: a versatile and participatory approach

In Finland, the evaluation team decided to use versatile and extensive data analysis and a participatory approach to address these methodological challenges. Table 8 summarises the key activities they undertook to analyse, validate and discuss data and evaluation findings.



Table 8. Key evaluation activities used by the Finnish team

Data sources	Summary
Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SDG Index and dashboard indicators (Sachs et al. 2019) ▪ National sustainable development indicators (10 indicator baskets) ▪ HELSUS policy dialogue material
Key policy documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Government sustainable development programmes and strategies ▪ Planning documents for development cooperation projects
Survey (n=238)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Closed survey of key sustainable development actors and practitioners ▪ Open survey of all interested stakeholders
Interviews (n=80)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Key professionals in sustainable development ▪ Representatives of all ministries ▪ Scientific advisory panel for sustainable development ▪ Key press stakeholders
Workshops (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two open stakeholder workshops (around 80 and 40 participants) ▪ One international workshop (30 participants from 21 countries)

7. Tailoring national M&E systems

Building the foundation: understanding national M&E systems and practice

Ideally, countries will be able to integrate SDG evaluation into their existing national systems for monitoring and evaluating development-related policies and programmes. But not every country has such systems. Case studies by the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group suggest that national approaches to M&E include:

- Loose networks of national, sectoral (or ministerial) and sub-national institutions
- Systems based on parliamentary oversight
- Highly centralised systems within or independent of government
- A mix of any of those.¹⁵

While the global trend appears to be towards greater institutionalisation, there is no sign of approaches

converging and no one approach has been shown to be inherently better than others (Jacob et al. 2015).

Regardless of the approach taken, institutionalising M&E serves several useful functions, including providing a structure for systematic data collection and analysis and facilitating learning and integration of evaluation findings and recommendations into the policy cycle (Jacob et al. 2015). But too much institutionalisation runs the risk of compromising the evaluation's function of providing critical assessment through independent thinking and questioning the assumptions that underpin policies and programmes (Leeuw and Furubo 2008).

Regardless of their form or extent, national M&E systems can provide a foundation for integrating the SDGs into national policymaking, monitoring and evaluation.

Integrating the SDGs into national M&E systems

The SDGs are not meant to create a new layer of policy on top of existing ones. Rather, countries should aim to address internationally agreed development goals by integrating sustainable development principles into their national policy frameworks. "Implementation and success [in achieving the SDGs] will rely on countries' own sustainable development policies, plans and programmes, and will be led by countries. The...SDGs will be a compass for aligning countries' plans with their global commitments."¹⁶

Although not all countries have comprehensive national plans accompanied by an integrated statistical system, they can all map their existing policy frameworks and instruments with the SDGs. Indeed, many countries have already done so. It is possible to do these exercises at national level, particularly in smaller countries with well-defined national development or government plans.

These kind of mapping exercises may point to aspects of policies or programmes where greater

alignment with 2030 Agenda principles or goals could improve their sustainable development contribution. Countries can then use that information to create SDG roadmaps tailored to their national, sector or sub-national context and indicators for their national priorities. Even countries that have not (yet) fully integrated the SDGs into their national policy frameworks can use these exercises to frame their evaluation of national progress on the SDGs at a range of levels.

Adapting national M&E systems to SDG evaluation involves reviewing — and where necessary, revising — standard evaluation processes, criteria and questions while also considering the nationally prioritised 2030 Agenda goals and principles. In doing that review, countries need to focus on what matters in terms of national and global sustainability and priorities without placing too much emphasis on global SDG targets, indicators and timeframes, which are not necessarily adaptable to national or local scales or purposes. Countries with piecemeal or non-existent national M&E systems may find it useful

15. See <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/topic/evaluation-capacity-development>

16. www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/

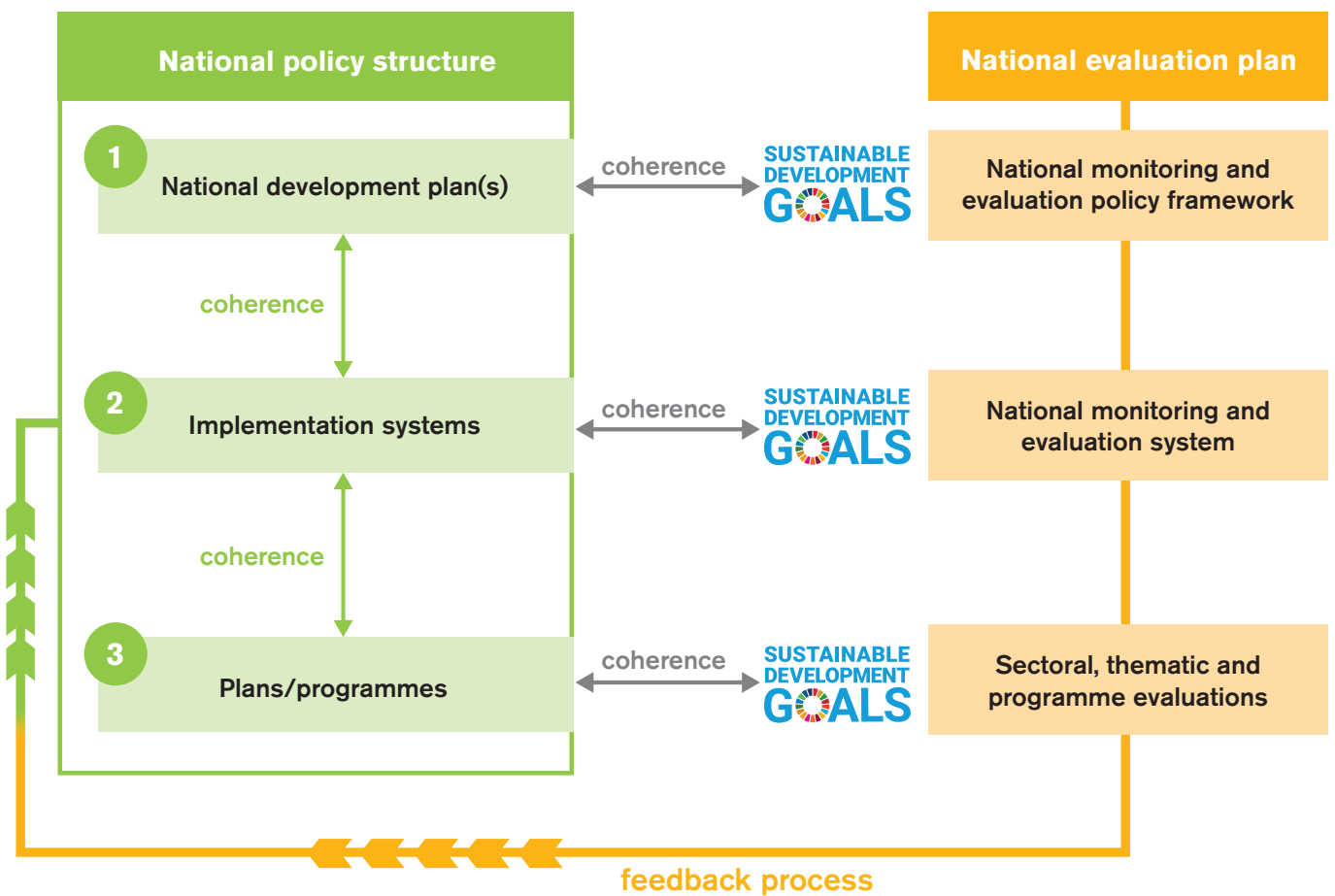
to look at evaluation processes, criteria and questions from an SDG perspective. This may help them develop or strengthen their systems.

To be useful for SDG evaluation, national M&E systems must generate relevant information, which may be different from the information generated by their existing systems. For example, countries may choose to incorporate data on selected national indicators of SDG progress into their national statistical systems.

Countries will find their own way to integrate the SDGs into their national development priorities, plans and linked evaluation systems based on their own trajectory towards sustainable development. Figure 7 lays out an idealised approach that countries can use for guidance. Issues to consider include establishing a national evaluation policy, developing M&E strategic plans and building national capacity in data management, evaluation and decision making.



Figure 7. An idealised approach for integrating SDG evaluation into national policy frameworks



Source: figure by García Acuña, M and Lucks, D adapted from from Geoghegan et al. (2019)

Developing relevant indicators: lessons from Nigeria and Costa Rica

For countries that are trying to align their national M&E system to the 2030 Agenda, developing indicators that are relevant to the SDGs is an area of major concern. Box 19 showcases the lessons

learnt from mapping exercises in Nigeria and Costa Rica, two countries that have integrated the SDGs into their statistical infrastructure.



Box 19. Step-by-step approaches to mapping indicators against the SDGs

In 2015, **Nigeria's** OSSAP-SDGs mapped SDG indicators with data production sources at national and sub-national level, in collaboration with the NBS and the UNDP in Nigeria. The objectives were to use the SDGs as a framework for results, build an indicator performance database by setting performance targets and foster a practice of open data principles.

As a result of the exercise, Nigeria assessed its data gaps, mapped its data needs and identified a set of indicators that are regularly monitored by national authorities. As well as strengthening data reliability in the country, these were critical steps towards monitoring progress in SDG implementation, defining indicator performance targets and creating a comprehensive list of data holders and a statistical information benchmark. The exercise also reinforced awareness of the SDGs in ministries, departments and agencies, identified critical funding and revealed that some indicators were incompatible with the Nigerian statistical context and scope.

In a similar exercise, **Costa Rica** mapped its national indicators against SDG indicators. Like Nigeria, Costa Rica put its National Institute of Statistics in charge of the task. The institute started by identifying the national statistical capacities needed to produce monitoring indicators for achieving the SDGs.

The results showed that Costa Rica only has enough data to cover 44% of the 243 indicators proposed by the UN Statistical Commission. Only 80 indicators were viable; 73 could be created with existing information; 33 could not be created with the information available in-country; and 57 were not applicable to Costa Rica.

The exercise helped identify the challenging areas for building indicators, which included climate change, life below water, water and sanitation, sustainable communities and sustainable production and consumption. One solution for tackling these challenges, envisaged in Costa Rica's VNR (MIDEPLAN 2017), is creating new instruments to collect the information needed to build its own national, inclusive indicators according to sectoral requirements and national goals.



Figure 8. Step-by-step indicator mapping exercises in Nigeria and Costa Rica

Nigeria

- 1 Creating an SDGs indicator dictionary through consultation with stakeholders. This meant they defined each indicator within the national context and explored methods for data collection
- 2 Developing data templates on each of the SDG indicators and rolling out training
- 3 Consulting key administrative data production sources
- 4 Data mining
- 5 Designing a baseline indicator survey to realign the National Statistical System with the SDGs
- 6 Publishing a baseline data report on some of the SDG indicators
- 7 Establishing an indicator performance database with performance monitoring indicators

Costa Rica

- 1 Developing tracker of SDG indicators based on a survey of national statistical capacities for producing SDG indicators developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
- 2 Mapping information/data sources
- 3 Evaluating SDG indicators with methodological records linked to the indicators proposed by the UN
- 4 Consulting with 48 institutions and looking at the availability of information to figure out indicators and possible sources
- 5 Revising and validating the responses received
- 6 Updating the list of indicators

8. Summing up

Robust evaluation is a critical component of any country's M&E system and the challenges posed by the SDGs offer a real opportunity to make effective use of evaluation. Where country-level evaluation is still in its infancy, there are many resources available internationally and lessons to be derived from the experience of other countries. To help countries develop their own approach to SDG evaluation, this guide has presented emerging practice and offered a pragmatic approach to SDG evaluation, based on four main lessons:

- Think about evaluation use and engage different stakeholders to define the SDG evaluation objectives
- Identify scope and focus of SDG evaluation through participatory processes
- Use the principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda to inform the evaluative criteria and evaluation questions
- Frame the evaluation around the logic that underpins complex policies and interventions and develop dynamic plans to communicate findings and engage evaluation users.

During this journey, which we have made together as partners, we have concluded that there is no single way to monitor and evaluate progress against the SDGs. There is huge disparity between countries in terms of their evaluation infrastructure and readiness. SDG evaluation can only make a difference if it is integrated into what countries are already doing. It must not be a separate and siloed activity they have to do to respond to an outside body.

Building SDG evaluation into existing policy and programme cycles can be a useful way for countries to achieve sustainable development. For this reason, identifying the intended users and uses of the evaluation early on is key. SDG evaluation comprises a range of different exercises inspired by the principles of integration/coherence, leave no one behind, equity, resilience, environmental sustainability, universality, and mutual accountability that underpin the 2030 Agenda. These can be used to inform the evaluative criteria, develop the evaluation questions and design the evaluation engagement process.

This guide should be considered provisional because it is based only on three real-case examples. We hope that other countries and local authorities will see SDG evaluation as an opportunity to learn and improve their policies and programmes. SDG evaluation is not mandatory and should not be done if it is perceived as a bureaucratic and burdensome requirement. It should be a reflective and strategic exercise. To maximise its benefits, every country and local authority should develop tailored approaches that work for their own journey towards sustainable development.

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Knowledge
Products

Toolkit

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Monitoring, evaluation and learning; Policy and planning

Keywords:

Paris Agreement, accountability, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This 'real life' introduction to evaluating progress on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is based on emerging country experience from North and South, as well as wider past learning on sustainable development evaluation. Rather than a one-size-fits-all manual, this guide seeks to support evaluation commissioners, managers and professional evaluators to create tailored plans and approaches to SDG evaluation. It argues that a successful evaluation must be both built around existing national context and underpinned by the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

To support customised local or national journeys towards sustainable development, this guide:

- Lays out the main steps involved in scoping, designing and conducting an SDG evaluation
- Discusses the ways in which SDG evaluation processes and results can be used to support national progress on sustainable development
- Identifies key SDG evaluation characteristics and approaches, and
- Looks at how SDG evaluation can be integrated into national monitoring and evaluation systems.



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