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POLICY BRIEF

LIMITED USE OF EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE IN PUBLIC POLICY, PLANNING AND VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW (VNR) DEVELOPMENT

Recommendations for governments, evaluation communities and ECD stakeholders

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Executive Summary

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a development tool, with a detailed follow-up and review mechanism, guided by a global indicator framework and prominently positioned in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Within this context, however, program evaluation only plays a minor role. This policy brief analyses the position of program evaluation in public policy, development planning and VNR development processes of eight countries in Africa and Latin America. The brief is based on a discussion paper produced jointly by the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results-Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results-Latin America and the Caribbean (CLEAR-LAC) in 2022. This paper found that program evaluation is marginalized in VNR development, a key international tool for assessing UN member nations' progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through document analysis and key informant interviews in the sampled countries, the paper finds that the marginal position of program evaluation vis-à-vis VNR development is linked to a combination of structural and operational issues. These include lack of internalization and entrenchment of the SDGs in public policy and planning cycles and/or processes of governments; lack of focus on the VNR process by evaluation stakeholders; the VNR development guidelines' quantitative bias; and emerging evaluation practice in certain countries. This brief concludes by recommending five remedial policies for addressing the marginalized position of evaluation in VNRs.

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About this brief

This Policy Brief is a succinct summary of findings from a recently completed research study on the role of evaluations in the development of country voluntary national review reports (DEval, CLEAR-AA and CLEAR-LAC. 2022. "VNRs and SDG evaluations in Anglophone Africa and Latin America: A mapping of common challenges and emerging good practices". German Institute for Development Evaluation, Bonn. The policy brief proffers recommendations on how to create an enabling environment for a greater role of evaluation reports and evidence in VNR development.

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1. Introduction

This policy brief is based on a more extensive discussion paper[3] that assessed the use of evaluative evidence in public policy, planning and VNR development in eight countries, four from Anglophone Africa, and four from the Latin American region: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Costa Rica. A VNR is a country-owned report that provides an overview of the approaches and actions taken by a UN member nation in pursuit of the 17 SDGs, as well as identifying achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors. VNR reports are submitted to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development hosted by the UN Economic and Social Council (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021:6).[4] The UN uses VNRs to assess common challenges and best practices for peer-learning purposes among UN member states and to highlight key developmental areas to work on for development partners and governments. Worthen (1990: 42)[5] defines evaluation as the process of determining the worth of a public policy or program based on the stated objectives thereof. Thus, an evaluation assesses the change or improvement effected by a development intervention (public policy, program, project or plan). Program evaluations can serve both a formative purpose (i.e. helping improve the design or implementation of a public policy or program) or a summative purpose (assessing change effected by the policy or program, and deciding whether it should be continued or terminated).

Given the implementation and outcomes measurement value of evaluation, it is important that evaluation practitioners, evaluation capacity development (ECD) stakeholders and governments collectively advocate for the greater commissioning and use of evaluations in the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The discussion paper on which this policy brief is based highlights a limited utilization of evaluation by governments when developing their VNRs. This challenge is a symptom of systemic issues whereby program evaluation has a limited role in public policy, planning and VNR processes in the eight sampled countries on which the discussion paper research was based. This policy brief provides a synopsis of this systemic issue(s) and proffers key pathways and policy solutions thereto.

3 DEval, CLEAR-AA and CLEAR-LAC. 2022. "VNRs and SDG evaluations in Anglophone Africa and Latin America: A mapping of common challenges and emerging good practices". German Institute for Development Evaluation, Bonn.

4 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2021. 2021 *Voluntary National Reviews* Synthesis Report. UN DESA, New York.

5 Worthen, B.R. 1990. "Programme Evaluation" in Walberg, H. and Haertel, G. (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Educational Evaluation*. Pergammon Press, Toronto.

2. Research overview

As stated before, this policy brief seeks to proffer policy solutions to key challenges identified in the discussion paper that focused on the role of SDG evaluations in VNR development processes of the eight sampled countries. The following subsections outline the research questions and methodology informing the said study, as well as the key findings of that research exercise.

2.1 Research methodology and sampling technique

The discussion paper on SDG evaluations and VNRs had three main objectives:

1. To assess the extent of use of evaluative evidence by governments when compiling their respective Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), the latter an implementation tool used to track countries' progress and achievements vis-à-vis the SDGs.
2. To understand other sources of evidence that feed into the development of country VNRs.
3. Highlight key findings regarding evidence sources into VNRs, particularly highlighting best practices and challenges from the eight sampled countries in Africa and Latin America.

The discussion paper purposively sampled four African countries in which CLEAR-AA undertakes ECD activities (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi and Uganda), and four Latin American countries where CLEAR-LAC and DEval (through its Focelac+ project) undertake or support country ECD initiatives: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Mexico. The discussion paper employed a research methodology consisting of an extensive desktop review of each country's VNR, planning and public policy processes, and the state of evaluation capacities in the eight countries. The desktop review was triangulated by key informant interviews of stakeholders involved in the VNR, planning and public policy processes and national evaluation system of each country.

2.2 Research results and analysis

The findings of the discussion paper are presented in two sections, with the first section identifying unique findings per country while the second section analyses the use of evaluation and other forms of evidence in VNR development.

2.2.1 Findings per country regarding adoption of SDGs in public policy and planning, and use of evaluations and other forms of evidence in VNR development

The discussion paper found that the four sampled Anglophone African countries have *generically* and *superficially* adopted the SDGs in their national planning and public policymaking processes. This means that the four African countries' public policy and planning institutions have not quite integrated SDGs and their indicators when developing their national and sectoral development plans and public policies. The exception is Uganda, which adopted SDGs and SDG indicators as part of its National Development Plan III 2020/21-2024/25 (DEval, CLEAR-AA and CLEAR-LAC, 2022: 14). In contrast, the four sampled Latin American countries have integrated SDGs and their indicators as part of their development plans and results frameworks. However, only Columbia has deeply entrenched the integration of SDGs and their indicators into sector-level development planning. This sectoral internalization of the SDGs in Colombia was enabled by its 2030 implementation strategy. This strategy has ensured that SDGs are a key focus in agenda-setting, public policymaking and budgeting across the Government of Colombia (DEval, CLEAR-AA and CLEAR-LAC, 2022: 18).

Despite some good practices, it is clear from the research that countries have generally not sufficiently adopted the SDGs and the SDG indicators as the basis of their planning and public policy systems. The examples of Uganda and Colombia, who have each managed to integrate and internalize SDG indicators in national planning systems, are important best practices other countries can adopt.

2.2.2 The state of national evaluation systems in the sampled countries

Assessing the state of national evaluation systems (NESs) and evaluation capacities of the sampled countries was important so as to understand the role of evaluations in each countries' VNR reports. The four Latin American countries have advanced NESs and evaluation capacities owing to at least three decades of ECD investments and the existence of evaluation policies, plans, legislation and frameworks. For instance, the constitution of Ecuador mandates public sector institutions to undertake program and policy evaluations; while in Mexico there is a law that requires all government interventions (programs) to be evaluated, led by its public sector evaluation institution, the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL). The effectiveness of these NESs in Latin America is challenged by the lack of clear evaluation responsibilities and mandates for the oversight ministries vis-à-vis sector ministries. In contrast, the NESs and evaluation capacities of the four sampled African countries are still emerging, with national evaluation policies being recently enacted (2013 in Uganda, 2017 in Botswana). Lesotho and Malawi only have draft form evaluation policies. As a result, evaluation practice is still relatively new in these Anglophone Africa countries. However, governments of Malawi, Uganda, Lesotho and Botswana are partnering with higher education institutions and ECD stakeholders to build individual and institutional evaluation capacities.

2.2.3 Key evidence sources in VNR development

The discussion paper finds that statistics and performance monitoring reports tend to be the predominant evidence source in the VNRs of the eight sampled countries. This reality is a consequence of countries' investment in monitoring systems and national statistical capacities, aided by development partners such as UN agencies. This is a global trend not only limited to the eight countries under study. Relative to the evidence predominance of statistics and monitoring reports, evaluations and evaluation players have a limited to non-existent role in informing VNR reports of the eight sampled countries. Possible explanations for the limited role of evaluations and evaluation stakeholders is due to further contributary factors:

1. The VNR development guidelines and indicator framework favour quantitative data that privileges national statistical offices over evaluation institutions and stakeholders;
2. Lack of integration between evaluations, public policymaking and the VNR processes;
3. Lack of integration of SDGs into some countries' development planning; policymaking processes; and NESs
4. Evaluation stakeholders tend to focus on social sectors, and this selective focus limits their participation since VNRs are meant to report on all SDGs;
5. Lack of focus on VNRs by ECD stakeholders;
6. Lack of learning agenda in the VNR guidelines; and
7. The value of SDG evaluations in the 2030 Agenda has not yet been realized by governments and development partners alike.

3. Conclusion and policy recommendations

From the research conducted on the eight countries, it is clear that evidence from evaluations does not inform country VNR reports. While these eight sampled countries are not a saturated representation of all Anglophone Africa and Latin American nations, the research study on which this policy brief is based certainly indicates that further research is required on the nexus between SDG evaluations and VNRs in more countries. Evaluative evidence is important for governments to understand what has worked and what has not worked in the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development agenda. For the four sampled African countries, it is important that they continue building institutional and individual evaluation capacities and ensure the building of evaluative cultures. For the four Latin American countries, it is important to ensure that the relatively advanced NESs build evaluative cultures and that evaluation stakeholders start advocating for the use of evaluative findings in VNR development.

The following policy recommendations are proposed by this brief as a means of improving the use of evaluative evidence in VNR development in all studied countries:

- **Integrate the SDGs and their indicators into public policymaking and planning systems**: The goal is to ensure the effective integration of SDGs and their indicators into national and sector development plans and policies.
- **Enact legislation or regulations that promote the mandatory evaluation of public policies and development plans**: in particular, governments should ensure that each public policy or development program pursuing the SDGs should be evaluated.
- **Evaluation stakeholders should advocate for greater participation in VNR development processes**: Once they are included in VNR development processes, evaluation stakeholders (public institutions with evaluation functions, evaluation associations, development partners and practitioners) should supply relevant evaluation reports on SDGs (or alternatively, advocate for greater openness to evaluation studies) to inform VNR development.
- **The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs should update the VNR development guidelines:** Updated guidelines should highlight scope for qualitative inquiry into SDG achievements and challenges, inclusive of evaluation and applied research studies.
- **ECD institutions and development partners should augment their capacity building activities:** ECD institutes should strive to advocate for greater use of evaluative evidence in VNR development processes of their partner governments as part of broader ECD offerings.

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