Summary 2023
Evaluation Practice Exchange

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR STRENGTHENING THE DECENTRALIZED EVALUATION FUNCTION IN THE UN

Introduction
Urs Nagel

During this Evaluation Practice Exchange (EPE) session, we virtually gathered over 100 professionals, from different UN agencies and regions, all interested in learning and discussing the role of regional networks and the opportunities to strengthen the decentralized evaluation function within the UN. What unites us is the conviction that in working together we can help build stronger UN evaluation functions at the regional level and thereby also at the level of the UN country teams that will ultimately yield stronger evidence for better programming and policymaking.

Opening Remarks
Oscar Garcia

Decentralized evaluations are really at the core of many of our daily activities in the UN. All our organizations have headquarters and regional presence. Improving the quality of the first feedback loop provided by UNSDCF decentralized evaluations is of extreme importance for UNEG, and even more under the context of the United Nations reform. The UN regional evaluation networks have been playing a very important role in strengthening this aspect of our work.

UNEDAP in the Asia Pacific region pioneered the regional collaboration in supporting the development of evaluation capacity across different agencies and UN country teams in the region, as well as the Joint Quality review of UNDAF /UNSDCF evaluations, based on this experience, we have witnessed the extension of these networks with UNNESSA and now more recently, with UNNELAC.

We need to learn from each other, pose questions and rely on the collective expertise and professional capacity to try to respond to those questions and strengthen the practice of evaluation in the United Nations system according to our norms and standards, strengthening the credibility, the utility, and the independence of these exercises.

Thus, trying to improve the ability of our agencies and our collective efforts to deliver results for our Member States. It is in this capacity development effort that UNEG welcomes the initiatives provided by the UN regional networks in support of decentralized evaluations.

Panel Discussions

Capacity Development

Oyuntsetseg Chuluundorj
Natalia Acosta

All UN agencies based in the EAP region can participate in an annual training facilitated by all members of 11 agencies, both remotely and in Bangkok. Through this training, we were able to strengthen the capacities of 35 to 45 colleagues from the Asia Pacific Country offices of UN agencies including RCO. We targeted evaluation managers of our countries that were planning UNSDCF or country program evaluations in that particular year, to enhance the quality and effectiveness of evaluations in the region. Through this EPE session, we expect to enrich, strengthen, and replicate capacity development efforts.

Among the discussed issues were: What are the challenges of evaluation capacity development? And what is the added value of interagency training and evaluation? What can we do to build an evaluation culture with external partners, to answer the demand coming from governments? an important factor in demarcating and clustering the role of the evaluation network in how supports PSG and DCO otherwise lines can get blurred.

We suggest promoting national capacity development initiatives, during which UN agencies can jointly work with governmental institutions and other stakeholders. We also need to foster capacity at the national level, to inform policymaking, especially to get higher buy-in from the government. A possibility is to expand training to national counterparts, government officials, and other stakeholders to help them understand the value of evaluation. Participants also mentioned that we need to use the evaluation process to raise more awareness and think about how we can promote demand and use of evaluation results & findings. Among the identified struggles are poor information management and high staff turnover. Some of these issues can be addressed through training and enhancing the capacity of evaluation managers on quantitative and qualitative methods.

On the added value of interagency training and interagency work, it was mentioned how joint training can help us reach a common understanding. It also allows us to share different materials and approaches. A proposal was made to use UNEG's high-level discussion forum such as AGM to discuss, based on UNEG's vision and work plan, concrete collaboration areas and synergies between the work of Regional Interagency Networks and UNEG Working Groups.

DCO and Quality Assurance

Mayibongwe Manyoba
Angeline Wambanda

We oriented the discussion around the network's support to DCO and the Quality Assurance function. UNNESSA has supported the review of evaluation products, including in terms of reference inception reports as well as final reports. Our key learning has been using standard UNSDCF templates and providing collated feedback consistent with UNSDCF guidelines. Moving forward to clarify ways of working with DCO, RCO, and the country teams. We look forward to an opportunity to strengthen our planning and ensure sufficient lead time in terms of our quality assurance processes.

We discussed in which ways we have supported evaluation, quality, and usability. How? What approaches? We also looked at the different experiences and lessons learned in this area. Collaboration with DCO and RCO has allowed building trust and confidence in the capacity of regional evaluation networks to provide support throughout the evaluation process, from recruitment to quality assurance of all evaluative products. The organization through working groups has worked very well as a focal point for the distribution of UNSDCF evaluations.

One of the challenges identified is the timing for reviews, as well as mechanisms to ensure coherence and consistency of comments. Whose responsibility is it to ensure the comment's quality and management of stakeholders? Moreover, we have problems with buy-in and data quality, with certain findings, being rejected, or lack of credible sources of information. We also noticed that most evaluation managers are not capable to ensure that the feedback from experts has been taken on board.

We agreed on the need to enhance knowledge sharing as regional offices/networks build each other's capacity across regions and provide peer support. Another recommendation was to establish early clear responsibilities for the distribution of responsibilities between evaluation managers and experts on ensuring evaluation quality and adoption of feedback to evaluation deliverables. It's important to ensure we provide consistent feedback, rather than potentially contradictory feedback to enhance trust. The mandate of regional networks needs to be recognized at the highest level. Further, the capacity of RCO and government as core clients of evaluations needs to be strengthened to ensure ownership and accountability for feedback shared to improve the quality of evaluation products. Finally, open communication and trust among agencies are important elements to foster enhanced capacity and governmental engagement.

Challenges to establishing a Network

Michael Craft
Jean P. Nzabonimpa

Regarding the challenges and lessons learned in establishing and managing a network. UNNELAC had been a monitoring and evaluation network until last year. However, responding to the spirit of the UN reform and the principle of independence, it was reconfigured as a regional evaluation network. We aimed to learn from the experiences of other regions on strengthening the mandates of regional networks. As well as how to manage the work of these voluntary networks at a technical level, and how to respond to the system-wide evaluation mandate.

We discussed the challenges of establishing, recognizing, and managing UN regional networks. Some of the challenges mentioned were: (1) lack of individual commitment /personal relationships among members, (2) COVID and virtual fatigue, (3) UNEG recognition as a missing piece that could help in regions where it's been more challenging to formalizing efforts, (4) different organizational structures for the evaluation function (objectives, reporting, etc), (5) different levels of decentralization across agencies, operating at different regional scopes, (6) various evaluation approaches adopted differently across UN agencies, (7) Lack of human and financial resources required to make the networks functional and operational (only operating on a voluntary basis).

A key issue (and a great strategy going forward) is mobilizing resources in support of networks and the decentralized function. It is also important to find ways of incentivizing engagement and participation in voluntary networks. The UN reform can be used as a starting point to foster more interagency networking and evaluative activities. There is a need to establish a model for resourcing joint SWE evaluations at a regional level through (1) established regional programmes/projects of agencies (MPTF, etc.); (2) financing at regional/global level from DCO and others; and/or (3) demand from RCOs/RCPs.

Conclusion

Urs Nagel

The positive energy manifested in this workshop is a testament to the added value that UN interagency networks bring to the table. First, there is a validation that members obtain by working together on similar issues across organizations, in the spirit of one UN. Secondly, it is an opportunity that despite the many challenges, these platforms have found a way to take forward the global UNEG agenda and improve the decentralized evaluation function and enhance in-country capacity in support of the 2030 Agenda. This session has enhanced the understanding of our networks, and the added value of their work, despite its voluntary nature.

Formal recognition of these networks in the context of the global UN work is something that should be further discussed among network chairs and UNEG senior management. Finally, there's the decentralized evaluation interest group, which may be a forum through which we can also strengthen regional network visibility.

We look forward to the continued engagement with UNEG on regional collaboration with the view to really strengthening decentralized evaluation.