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System-wide Evaluation in Support of UN Reform: Towards Collective Accountability & Learning

White Paper # 1

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Synopsis: *This paper reflects on the possible role and contribution of UNEG to inform/guide UN reform, with a particular focus on Agenda 2030. It offers some ideas on how to strengthen the synergies between agency specific and system-wide evaluation at global level and how to maximize the value-added of system-wide evaluation as a key driver for a stronger, more accountable and effective UN system.*

1. Background

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) aims at advancing the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the UN system’s work by promoting and strengthening evaluation. UNEG is an agile network of some 50 evaluation offices and 200+ evaluators that adhere to the professional and internationally recognized norms and standards for evaluations developed and approved in 2005 and updated in 2016. The Norms and Standards focus on independence, credibility, relevance and utility/utilization of the evaluation function and provide concrete guidance on what is expected for each of these criteria. They are applicable to the agency-specific context as well as to the system-wide context.

Subsequent to the adoption of the first Norms and Standards the UN System’s evaluation capacity, and with it, its credibility and utilization has been greatly enhanced and synergized. This was also confirmed by a 2014 Joint Inspection Unit review that rated and benchmarked the maturity of evaluation functions across the UN System². The Review found that central evaluation functions have grown through the years, striving for quality and efficiency, and that a number of organizations had robust evaluation functions. The JIU Review however concluded that the level of commitment to evaluation across the United Nations system is not commensurate with the growing demand for and importance of the function and that there is in general a need for more overarching vision and strategy for evaluation that is anchored in the organization’s mandate, corporate goals and reform agendas.

While a number of UN entities have improved capacities at corporate level, there has been less attention to the capacity and quality of evaluations at country level. Assessments of decentralized evaluations reflect mixed quality, credibility and use – and UNEG members are increasingly recognizing the need for stronger capacity at the country level to ensure adequate evaluation efforts at all levels within the mandate of their respective organizations. Strengthening decentralized functions should go hand-in hand with strengthening national evaluation capacities as outlined in [the 2014 GA resolution A/RES/69/237 "Capacity building for the evaluation of development activities at the country level."](#)

¹ This White Paper was prepared in consultation with the UNEG Executive Group and UNEG membership. It does not purport to project a negotiated, consensus piece of UNEG and reflects an array of most if not all views offered by members in preparation of this paper. The sole responsibility for its contents therefore rests with the UNEG chair.

² *Analysis of the Evaluation Function in the United Nations system*; S. Prom-Jackson and G. Bartsiotas, 2014.

2. Why is evaluation important for UN reform?

Evaluation is a key agent of change:

Evaluation's overall purpose is to ensure organizational accountability and learning. Evaluation therefore informs both policy/agenda-setting as well as operational implementation and daily decision-making (e.g. alignment of budget allocations to organizational needs). At organizational level, a number of UNEG evaluation entities have contributed to change management by providing influential evaluations and by serving as a tool to assess reform efforts and related policies. At system-wide level, evaluation has shown potential to be an effective change agent (see Annex II) although the lack of a standing capacity has been a limiting factor.

Independent, objective and credible system-wide evaluation provides and explains evidence and thus can be the backbone of system-wide reporting efforts:

Current UN reform focuses not only on a single UN entity but seeks to reform the entire system and is the most ambitious system-wide reform effort to date. Indeed, successful attainment of Agenda 2030 will require the concerted and coherent effort of UN entities and its global and country-level partners. The UN reform *inter alia* focuses on strengthening the UN's work at the country level and the collective support demanded by Agenda 2030. Key expectations include strengthening collective accountability and reporting and focus on the delivery of results. This is to be underpinned by improved quality of system-wide results reporting at country, regional and global levels on "funding, performance and programme results of the UN operational activities for development, aligned with the SDGs" (2016 QCPR). Providing evaluative evidence in results reporting is already standard practice in some of the multilateral banks and in some UN agencies. This needs to be replicated at system-wide level.

Evidence-based system-wide evaluation identifies local and global lessons, informs joint learning and drives change and improvements:

Building on existing platforms and processes, evaluation can help determine how well multiple actors perform and interplay in pursuit of converging Agenda 2030 goals. To be maximally useful to policymakers and citizens, review processes must incorporate rigorous, inclusive, transparent country-led evaluations that examine policy and program implementation and effectiveness, and build well-reasoned and supported cases for claims of progress. With competition for resources and separation of mandates, the exercise of independence in determining past success and priorities among challenges and opportunities will increasingly be a necessity of system-wide coherence in strategy and operations, be it at the global or at the country level.

3. UNEG member experience

Accompanying UN or agency-specific reform has been high on UNEG members' agenda. UNEG's diverse membership and strategic engagement in this regard has focused on increased joint work and joint impact.

UNEG has had experiences in the recent past in advocacy in the framework of high-level events and fora, for example the [GA resolution A/RES/69/237 "Capacity building for the evaluation of development activities at the country level"](#), integrating evaluation into the 2030 Agenda, and demonstrating the importance of evaluation during the [High-level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#) on Sustainable Development.

UNEG has developed guidance for joint evaluation and supports joint evaluation work under its strategic objectives. UNEG has also contributed to the development of evaluation guidelines for UNDAFs and its member have been advising UNDAF and DaO evaluation efforts.

UNEG members have also implemented a number of joint evaluations of major humanitarian crisis response³ as well as for key developmental issues⁴ (also see Annex II). Three of these stand out, for the larger scope and level of effort: the Indian Ocean Tsunami Response (2005/2006), [the role and contribution of the United Nations system in the Republic of South Africa](#), 2008/9 and the Lessons Learned Review of Delivering as One, 2012/13. These three exercises in addition to the two ISWE pilot evaluations have confirmed the value-added of system-wide evaluation but also the complexity and significant multi-stakeholder engagement required to manage and follow-up on these efforts. The lessons learned from these exercises should inform any future system-wide evaluation engagements.

4. Towards system-wide evaluation capacity

In response to GA resolution 64/289 of July 2010, the UN Secretary-General commissioned a study to assess the demand for system-wide evaluation in 2012⁵. The study confirmed the demand and this led to the establishment of an Interim Coordination Mechanism (ICM) - which included UNEG as well as JIU, OCHA, OIOS - to develop a policy for system-wide evaluation. This policy, in line with the GA resolution, builds on existing mechanisms (UNEG and JIU), and articulated three types of system-wide evaluations: evaluation synthesis (reviewing evaluation of evaluations), crosscutting (e.g. thematic) or comprehensive (common or coordinated evaluations at various levels and by different entities). Only the first two were tested during the pilot phase. The 2017 external review⁶ of the pilot confirmed the need and demand for system-wide evaluation but also criticized the heavy and cumbersome mechanism and the time it took to produce the two pilot evaluations and found that the placement in the JIU was not optimal. The review issued four key recommendations – two of which are of direct relevance here: (i) establishment of an independent system-wide evaluation office; (iv) the evaluation offices of the UN-system should fully collaborate and support the task force for the development of a viable and realistic policy and institutional arrangements for system-wide evaluation.

Many UNEG members support many if not all the Mid-term Review's findings and a number of its members are poised to provide their support and experience into reflecting on an appropriate way forward.

5. What would be the value-added of capacity for system-wide evaluation?

Such capacity would build on the work already done by UNEG members and their partners and allow system-wide analysis, reflection and action. It would respond to key fundamental questions based on the information needs by high-level decision makers and key stakeholders and inform decision-making. Some of the potential key objectives would be as follows:

- Identify and analyze merit of individual UN entities' contribution to system-wide objectives;
- **Increase UN-system coherence, lesson learning and accountability** towards a relevant, efficient and effective UN that contributes as expected to development results at country level;

³ *Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami*, ALNAP 2006; **Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation reports**: Philippines –Typhoon Haiyan Response (2014), Response to Conflict in South Sudan (2015), *Response to Central African Republic Crisis 2015*, **Synthesis** of key findings from Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations of the international responses to crises... (2016); Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lesson Learning (2013- 2016).

⁴ **Joint evaluations: gender, SRH and maternal health**: Joint Evaluation of Joint Gender Programmes in the UN System (2013), Joint Evaluation of UNFPA and UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation Phase 1 (2013), Evaluation of the H4 + Joint Programme (2017).

⁵ *Independent System-Wide Evaluation Mechanism*; Angela Bester and Charles Lusthaus, March 2012.

⁶ *External review of the Independent System-wide Evaluation Initiative*; Beth Daponte and John Markie, April 2017.

- **Improve global and regional development work** which involves several UN entities, particularly around contributions to the SDGs;
- **Evaluate progress on priority and reform issues** identified in the QCPR and by the Secretary-General and UN System senior management (e.g. CEB);
- **Promote overall system-wide accountability** by ensuring evaluation findings are used to inform key global policy-making and to ensure collective accountability;
- **Promote and facilitate a focus on providing evaluative information** through the evaluations of UN entities by building on and using evaluation capacity throughout the UN system.

6. What UNEG can offer:

Informing reform:

- Provide inputs, insights and experiences from evaluations over the past years to inform, as appropriate, key policy, strategy and reform discussions
- Provide advice on the establishment of independent system-wide evaluation capacity as part of a potential SG task force with core membership composed of select and representative UNEG evaluation heads. This task force would review the ISWE pilot evaluation report and propose revision to the system-wide evaluation; policy and shepherd through the creation of a possible new office;
- Develop an approach note including a theory of change (ToC) to ISWE with clear articulation of how evaluation contributes to collective accountability and improved results.

Engaging the evaluation system:

- Contribute to a common platform and coordinate system-wide evaluation activities, including with UN Regional Commissions;
- Focus the work of its membership on ensuring appropriate coverage of SDG activities at agency level;
- Provide a forum for discussing lessons learned from SDG-relevant evaluations and for refining evaluative methods and criteria (e.g. no-one left behind, culturally-responsive);
- Strengthen engagement and build relevant partnerships with national partners and international partners (e.g. multi-lateral banks, donors) and the non-UN evaluation community (e.g. EVALSDGs, EvalGender, EvalYouth, EVALINDIGENOUS etc.);
- Develop principles, guidance and capacity for evaluation of system wide issues and activities in the SDG context

Building system-wide capacity for SDG-relevant evaluations

- Support the Follow-up and Review Process of the SDGs within the HLPF and the Voluntary National Review;
- Follow-up closely the presentation of annual VNRs at the HLPF (High-Level Political Forum), bringing relevant evaluation evidence forward;
- Provide methodological and related support to Member States that require it for their country-led reviews;
- Liaise with specialized academic institutions and considering developing or contributing to the development and delivery of training to UN country teams on joint SDG evaluation processes.

Supporting national capacity building for evaluation (NCE):

- Support national evaluation policy and capacity-building efforts at global, regional and country levels;
- Engage/support in select joint countrywide evaluations with a focus on national capacity building.

Evaluation asks

*Why – and to what extent – intended and unintended results were achieved and what their implications are.
To get better development results, we need to know what works, as well as what does not work and how to fix it.
Evaluation is a bridge that spans the gap between monitoring and accountability.*

Who we are

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) is a voluntary professional network that brings together the offices responsible for evaluation in the United Nations system, including the specialized agencies, funds, programmes and affiliated organizations. UNEG currently has 46 such members and 7 observers.

What we do

UNEG's mission is to

- promote the independence, credibility and usefulness of the evaluation function and evaluation across the UN system
- advocate for the importance of evaluation for learning, decision-making and accountability
- support the evaluation community in the UN system and beyond

Our priorities

- All evaluation functions and products of United Nations entities meet the UNEG Norms and Standards for evaluation;
- United Nations entities and partners use evaluation in support of accountability and programme learning;
- Evaluation informs United Nations system-wide initiatives and emerging demands;
- UNEG benefits from and contributes to an enhanced global evaluation profession.

Publication highlights

- [*Norms and Standards for Evaluation*](#) (in six UN official languages)
- [*Evaluation Competency Framework*](#)
- [*Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation*](#)
- [*Guidance on Preparing Management Responses to UNDAF Evaluation*](#)
- *National Evaluation Capacity Development. [*Practical Tips on How to Strengthen National Evaluation Systems*](#)*
- [*Handbook for Conducting Evaluations of Normative Work in the UN System*](#) (English, French, Spanish)
- [*Resource Pack on Joint Evaluations*](#)

UNEG Executive Group members (2017)

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UNEG's Work

The UNEG Strategy 2014-2019 was published in November 2013. Building on the previous work, the new strategy set out four (4) overarching strategic objectives, each of which contained a sub-set of initiatives and activities meant to enhance a particular area of work, and UNEG as a whole. Some of the recent and upcoming activities under the four strategic objectives are listed as follows:

Strategic objective 1: Evaluation functions and products of UN entities meet the UNEG Norms and Standards for evaluation:

- Updated *Norms and Standards for Evaluation*
- Updated *Evaluation Competency Framework*
- Completed six peer reviews (WFP, UN Women, GEF, UNRWA, ITC and UNODC) in 2014-2017; conducting/preparing two peer reviews (UNICEF and UNFPA) in 2017 (<http://www.unevaluation.org/document/peer-review-reports>)
- Support the efforts of members in the area of decentralized evaluation; conducted an exploratory study of the decentralized evaluation functions across UNEG agencies.
- Work to update *Ethics and Code of Conduct for Evaluation Guidance*

Strategic objective 2: UN entities and partners use evaluation in support of accountability and programme learning:

- Reach out and advocate for use of evaluation.
- [Conducted study and published papers on *Evaluation Use in the UN System; Principles for stakeholder engagement; Checklist on quality of evaluation recommendations; Implications of the governance structures of UNEG members in promoting the use of evaluative evidence for informed decision-making \(exploratory study\)*.](#)

Strategic objective 3: Evaluation informs UN system-wide initiatives and emerging demands

- Advocate the importance of evaluation and enhance SDG related discussions; previous efforts led to the adoption of the first stand-alone UN General Assembly Resolution on evaluation ([A/RES/69/237](#)) and the integration of evaluation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- Develop an evaluation road map for SDGs;
- Support the biennial National Evaluation Capacity (NEC) Conferences organized by UNDP
- Support UNEG members to enhance integration of gender equality and human rights in evaluation in accordance with the [Norms and Standards for Evaluation, UNEG Guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation](#), and the CEB-endorsed Evaluation Performance Indicator (EPI) of

the [United Nations System Wide Action Plan for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women \(UN-SWAP\)](#).

- Support UNEG members in humanitarian evaluations, including publishing [Reflecting Humanitarian Principles in Evaluation](#) and conducting a mapping and synthesis study on evaluative evidence around the Humanitarian-Development Nexus
- Support the efforts of members in culturally responsive evaluations in the UN System
- Continue to work on the Independent System Wide Evaluation issues and participate in the Interim Coordination Mechanism

Strategic objective 4: UNEG benefits from and contributes to an enhanced global evaluation profession

- Nurture and strengthen partnerships with OECD DAC Evalnet, development banks' Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG), the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) and evaluation associations and community worldwide.
- With IOCE, co-chair EvalPartners, an interactive web platform to share knowledge on country-led monitoring & evaluation systems worldwide; jointly planned Global Evaluation Forum (the most recent one took place in Kyrgyzstan in April 2017)
- Joined forces with partners in the initiatives of EvalSDGs, EvalGender+ and EvalYouth.
- Develop a partnership strategy

ANNEX II

UNEG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION EXPERIENCE TO DATE – SOME HIGHLIGHTS

1. Humanitarian:

The most active engagement in system-wide evaluation activities lies mostly with the humanitarian agencies who over the years have implemented a number of joint and system-wide evaluations of major humanitarian crisis responses under the leadership of OCHA and the IASC. Notable in this regard is the joint effort of UN agencies, NGOs and key donors to evaluate the 2005 Indian Ocean Tsunami that led to significant changes in humanitarian coordination response. Lessons learned from this evaluation led to the development of the joint real-time evaluation concept in recognition that evaluation teams arrive too late to inform humanitarian response. The 2006 Darfur real-time led to a further set of changes in humanitarian assistance provision. The humanitarian response review commissioned by the Emergency Relief Coordinator was undertaken in parallel and led to the development and application of the cluster system. Subsequently, the effectiveness of the cluster approach and the new policies and funding instruments have been subject to a number of joint system-wide evaluations over the past 10 years which have led to important improvements.

The most recently established Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation Mechanism (IAHE) has shown promise as a vehicle to evaluate and learn from UN performance at country level (CAR, 2015, 2016, South Sudan, 2016, Typhoon Haiyan, 2015, and the Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lesson Learning (2013- 2016). These evaluations are typically commissioned by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, or the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE), which assess the collective results of the joint response to an emergency. The strategic direction to IAHEs is provided by the IAHE Steering Group, which comprises the Evaluation Directors of IASC member organizations. IAHEs are the only UN-led activity

assessing the combined humanitarian response to emergencies. Therefore, they have an important role in ensuring the system's accountability to donors and affected people.

2. Development-related:

The Joint Evaluation: [the Role and Contribution of the UN System in the Republic of South Africa](#) was conducted between August 2008 and March 2009 by an independent, external team of South African and international evaluation specialists. The report was the outcome of a new approach to evaluation in the United Nations based on partnership between a national government and the UN Evaluation Group. The evaluation assessed the relevance and effectiveness of cooperation between South Africa and the UN system within the three-tier strategic policy priorities of the country: a better South Africa, a better Africa, and a better world.

The evaluation was unique for a number of reasons:

- The Government of South Africa expressed the will to develop a policy dialogue to strengthen its partnership with the UN based on evaluative evidence.
- For the UN system, this was the first time that the UN system as a whole has been jointly evaluated at the country level, rather than on an agency-by-agency basis.
- Building trust and sharing the will to improve based on lessons from past experience were essential aspects of the exercise. All important decisions were made by consensus.
- The evaluation demonstrated the need for champions, and there was clear leadership on both sides of the partnership.
- Key to the success of the joint evaluation was the fact that it was conducted by a highly competent and independent evaluation team who had no conflict of interest with the UN system or the South African Government. The Joint Evaluation Management Group, comprising evaluation specialists from South Africa and the UN Evaluation Group, was also independent from line management functions on either side.

Another larger evaluation exercise was the independent evaluation of lessons learned from “Delivering as one” was conducted in 2011-2012 in accordance with the request of the General Assembly, contained in paragraph 139 of its resolution 62/208 and paragraph 21 of its resolution 64/289. The evaluation was overseen by a regionally balanced group of evaluation experts appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General, the Evaluation Management Group and was supported by a Secretariat located in DESA. This exercise reviewed the lessons learned by a series of country-led evaluations of the DAO experience in six countries (Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uruguay and Viet Nam).

A significant body of joint evaluations was also produced thanks to the Spanish-funded MDG-F, which produced 256 mid-term and final evaluations of 128 joint programmes engaging 21 agencies in 50 programmes. More recent joint evaluations have focused on gender, SRH and maternal health issues such as the Joint Evaluation of Joint Gender Programmes in the UN System (2013), the Joint Evaluation of UNFPA and UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation Phase 1 (2013), a Joint Evaluation of **Renewed Effort Against Child Hunger and Under-nutrition (REACH): A Strategic Evaluation** (WFP/FAO/UNICEF/WHO/DFATD (2015) Canada) and a joint evaluation of the H4 + Joint Programme (UNFPA/UNICEF/Canada) (2017).

Two independent system-wide evaluations were undertaken at the request of ECOSOC and in line with the provision of the Secretary-General's policy on ISWE: a Metaevaluation of the UNDAF, primarily based on existing evaluations, and a more complex evaluation of national capacity-building in statistics⁷.

3. National Capacity Building for Evaluation (NEC) efforts:

Together with global evaluation community colleagues from more than 100 countries, UNEG members convened at the 4th global conference on national evaluation capacities in Bangkok immediately after the SDG Summit and adopted the '[Bangkok Declaration of Principles on National Evaluation Capacity](#)'. The Conference concluded that in moving forward in support of national evaluation capacity, the following types of efforts and initiatives warrant consideration:

- Conduct of country - level 'SDG evaluation needs' reviews and diagnostic studies
- Evaluability assessments pertaining to individual country or sector SDG goals and targets
- Fostering of evaluation as component of national governance and public sector management reform
- Establishing national evaluation legal frameworks - legislation and policies
- Developing clear national and local sub-national level mechanism for independent evaluation of progress against the SDGs
- Assigning resources (a percentage of the initiatives' costs) for the conduct of evaluations when realigning national plans with the SDGs and when designing/approving projects/programmes/policies
- Strengthening national and local data systems to monitor SDG progress
- Establishment of frameworks of formal competencies and professional evaluation standards
- Establishing evaluation training programmes within academic and public sector professional training institutions
- Creating opportunities for local, young and emerging evaluators
- Developing systems to promote transparent follow up of evaluations recommendation
- Support to national, regional and global evaluation professional organizations
- Support for international forums of exchange between users and producers of evaluation, via the right of access to information, including regional workshops and web-based platforms for knowledge management

A new and yet to be tested initiative is the [Executive Leadership Programme in Evaluation and the Sustainable Development Goals \(ELPE\)](#) that has been developed by UNITAR together with the Claremont Graduate University and the Claremont Evaluation Centre in New York. Its overarching objective is to build evaluation leadership capacity to support the voluntary national review and follow-up process of the SDGs, as well as to contribute to the implementation of resolution 69/237 on building national evaluation capacities. Consisting of some 100 learning hours, the Programme focuses on leadership and its blended approach, which combines a series of online learning modules on the 2030 Agenda with face-to-face skills development workshops and a month of individualized follow-up coaching and mentoring by the Programme's diverse and highly regarded faculty.

⁷ *Evaluation of the contribution of the United Nations development system to strengthening national capacities for statistical analysis and data collection to support the achievement of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and other internationally-agreed development goals; JIU/2016/5. Meta-evaluation and synthesis of United Nations development assistance framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication, JIU/2016/6.*