Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services

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Evaluation

Independent review of the UNDP evaluation policy and Independent Evaluation Office response

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I. Context and background

1. The UNDP evaluation policy outlines the purpose and fundamental principles of evaluation and defines the institutional framework for the organization and its associated funds and programmes. The policy aims to ensure that evaluations are conducted with independence, rigor, transparency, and utility, thereby contributing to organizational learning, accountability, and improved decision-making. It encompasses all evaluations conducted by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of UNDP, as well as those commissioned by the UNDP programme and policy units (decentralized evaluations), the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme. Additionally, it addresses other activities of the IEO and UNDP that support national evaluation capacity.

2. As the custodian of the UNDP evaluation policy (DP/2019/29), the Executive Board mandated the IEO to facilitate an independent review of the revised evaluation policy that the Board endorsed in its decision 2019/19. An independent team of evaluators carried out the review from August to November 2024.

3. This is the fourth independent review of the UNDP evaluation policy to be presented to the Executive Board. The first review (DP/2010/20), conducted in 2010, focused particularly on the structure and role of the IEO, while the subsequent reviews, conducted in 2014 (DP/2015/5) and 2019 (DP/2019/13), considered the overall UNDP evaluation function, independent evaluations and decentralized evaluations. UNDP made considerable efforts to invest in becoming a results-oriented, evidence-based organization, including by revising the subsequent evaluation policies through a consultative process with the IEO and the Executive Board.

4. This evaluation policy review focuses on assessing the progress made since the last evaluation policy was implemented in 2019, identifying both enabling factors that support effective implementation and constraints that hinder it. The review assessed:

(a) Existing *evaluation procedures, governance structures, institutional framework, and overall architecture*, whether suitable and aligned with best practices in evaluation;

(b) *Evaluation procedures and quality assurance*, including the clarity and effectiveness of guidance for both decentralized and independent evaluation functions;

(c) *Results of evaluation policy implementation*, focusing on the effectiveness of translating evaluation findings into actionable outcomes. This includes an analysis of how decentralized evaluations are integrated into decision-making at various levels; the communication and utilization of evaluation results among stakeholders; and the mechanisms for public accessibility of findings.

(d) Support provided to *UNCDF and UNV evaluation processes*; and

(e) Provisions for *strengthening independent evaluation*, including the tenure provisions related to the IEO Director.

5. The IEO welcomes the report on the evaluation policy review and appreciates the opportunity it provides to engage internally and with the Executive Board on strategies to further strengthen the credibility and utility of the UNDP evaluation function, while advancing evidence-based policymaking.

II. Key findings

Evaluation architecture

6. The UNDP evaluation architecture is robust and independent, due particularly to the direct reporting line from the IEO to the Executive Board. That structure is widely recognized as a significant strength, ensuring that evaluations uphold their independence and integrity, a point highlighted by stakeholders during interviews. The IEO is viewed as a "trusted advisor" by both

internal and external stakeholders, particularly for its impartial assessments of development effectiveness through thematic and independent country programme evaluations. The IEO has established a strong reputation for innovating the use of evaluation findings through its bespoke Artificial Intelligence Application (known as 'AIDA') and evidence synthesis efforts, which contribute to enhanced learning and greater development effectiveness.

7. Stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the current evaluation policy, especially regarding the independence of the evaluation function and the processes for selecting and managing the performance of the Director. Interviewees, especially those in regional bureaus and country offices, appreciated the ongoing placement of IEO regional advisors in regional hubs, especially in light of diminishing resources for dedicated evaluation functions at the regional and country office levels. However, as those roles are still new, the full potential of regional advisors in improving the quality and use of evaluations at regional and country levels has yet to be fully realized. Stakeholders look forward to greater collaboration between the advisors and regional bureau focal points, which will help foster a culture of learning and enhance the quality of decentralized evaluations.

8. Linking IEO budgets to previous-year global programme delivery is a prudent approach that safeguards the independence of the evaluation function. Consequently, the IEO Director no longer has to negotiate budget allocations annually with UNDP senior management.

9. The decentralized evaluation framework, despite facing challenges, provides context-specific insights by focusing evaluations closer to the programme level. However, the review identified ongoing issues with the quality control of UNDP decentralized evaluations that limit their overall effectiveness.

10. Decentralized evaluations lacked alignment with broader UNDP strategic priorities, with donor-driven requirements overshadowing organizational goals. Stakeholders emphasized that evaluations should not overlook the country context but should explicitly link decentralized evaluations to corporate priorities. That alignment is likely to be more effectively achieved through higher-level or strategic evaluations, rather than through stand-alone project evaluations.

Innovative partnerships

11. Support for innovative partnership-based initiatives, such as the Global Sustainable Development Goals Synthesis Coalition, was noted, with stakeholders advocating for a balanced approach that would allow the IEO the flexibility to experiment and lead broader coalitions to enhance the use and effectiveness of evaluations. However, there is also a need for an 'off-ramp' option to ensure that the IEO is not burdened with long-term responsibilities for initiatives that prove successful.

Core services

12. Stakeholders expressed strong appreciation for the core service lines of the IEO as outlined in the evaluation policy, including strategic and thematic evaluations, independent country programme evaluations, and the promotion of organizational learning through insights generated through the Evaluation Resource Centre (known as 'ERC') and the Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics platforms. The implementation of the UNDP evaluation policy is bolstered by a robust management response system, which stakeholders recognized as a significant strength, particularly at the centralized level.

13. The Evaluation Resource Centre was consistently praised for its role in ensuring transparency by making evaluation reports and follow-up actions publicly accessible. Centralized evaluation findings play a critical role in shaping UNDP strategic decision-making processes, informing key decisions on programme direction and resource allocation.

14. UNDP evaluation policy and procedures align closely with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) standards, which stakeholders recognized as a key strength. Adherence to global best practices has contributed to the consistently high quality of centralized evaluations. Ongoing improvements to the Evaluation Resource Centre and the Artificial Intelligence for Development

Analytics platforms have further enhanced the quality, transparency, and data analytics of evaluations.

Quality and use of decentralized evaluations

15. Concerns were raised about the focus of the UNDP evaluation architecture on quantity over quality, particularly in relation to decentralized evaluations. Stakeholders indicated that the current evaluation guidelines create disincentives for the effective use of decentralized evaluations, as the volume driven by corporate expectations stretches resources and diminishes the strategic value of evaluations. Stakeholders suggested that both the evaluation policy and the guidelines should encourage fewer, but more strategically focused evaluations, especially as UNDP transitions to a portfolio approach to programme management.

16. Despite strong quality assurance processes for centralized evaluations, concerns persist regarding the quality of decentralized evaluations. Stakeholders highlighted that decentralized evaluations are more susceptible to management interference and lack the rigour found in centralized evaluations. The need for external peer reviews to enhance the quality of decentralized evaluations was emphasized, as current processes are seen to lack robust external oversight.

17. There are inconsistencies in the follow-up as to how decentralized evaluations are utilized for learning and adaptation. Despite the importance of decentralized evaluations, their findings are often under-utilized in decision-making processes. Stakeholders emphasized the need for stronger systems to facilitate and monitor the use of decentralized evaluation results for organizational learning and adaptation. Further, stakeholder engagement in decentralized evaluations remains limited, particularly regarding the involvement of national governments and local partners.

18. A critical issue identified is the under-resourcing of decentralized evaluations. The evaluation policy mandates that 1 per cent of programmatic resources be allocated for evaluations, a target that is unmet. A comparison of UNDP programme expenditures and self-reported investments in evaluation from 2018 to 2023 indicates a shortfall in meeting the 0.7 per cent target for decentralized evaluations. The 2022 roadmap for strengthening decentralized evaluations outlines strategies for the IEO and UNDP senior management to enhance this critical function. However, there is a sense that these activities remain under-funded, highlighting the need for a strategic shift in resource allocation to support these important initiatives.

19. There is a broader need for evaluations to address critical operational risks, particularly in complex contexts where UNDP operates. The review emphasizes the importance of focusing evaluations on areas with heightened operational, programmatic, or organizational risks, including evaluations of results from complex procurement operations.

National capacity-building initiatives

20. The role of UNDP in national capacity-building, particularly through initiatives such as the National Evaluation Capacities Conference, was recognized as a vital contribution to strengthening national evaluation systems. The bi-annual conference provides an essential platform for sharing best practices and advancing evaluation capacity development.

21. There is enthusiasm for maintaining the IEO focus on high-quality evaluation, which is central to its mission. Partnership-based initiatives, such as the Global Sustainable Development Goals Synthesis Coalition and the National Evaluation Capacity Conferences, offer valuable opportunities for collaboration and impact. However, ensuring that those initiatives complement – rather than distract from – core IEO functions will be key to sustaining its overall impact and effectiveness.

Increasing interest in impact evaluations

22. Interest in impact evaluations is growing across the organization, but resource constraints and the complexity of measuring long-term effects in diverse development contexts remain significant challenges. Stakeholders noted that its limited data infrastructure hampers the ability

of UNDP to conduct rigorous impact evaluations. Additionally, there is a lack of clear and unified understanding of the unique value of impact evaluation among evaluation stakeholders within UNDP. In light of those challenges, stakeholders suggested focusing on mixed-methods approaches to assess impact in resource- and data-constrained settings. There is also a need for further exploration of the strategic positioning of impact evaluation within the organization.

III. Conclusions

23.   The review of the UNDP evaluation policy presents an opportunity to shift from a compliance-driven approach to one that prioritizes learning, adaptation, and transformative change. The proposed changes aim to create an environment where evaluation serves as a tool for risk management and continuous improvement, rather than mere accountability. While accountability remains important, the primary emphasis should be on fostering a culture of learning and adaptation.

24.   To facilitate this shift, the review recommends integrating evaluation management more closely with UNDP programming structure and encouraging senior management to enhance corporate systems for results-based management. This includes adjusting quality assurance systems to prioritize learning and risk management over mere compliance. The evaluation policy should mandate that evaluation plans focus on the strategic use of evaluations for risk identification, learning, and adaptive decision-making.

25.   A comprehensive corporate framework is essential for aligning evaluation capacity-building with broader UNDP goals, integrating innovations such as artificial intelligence. Continuing to strengthen the global community of practice for monitoring and evaluation can further enhance collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the organization. There should be a balanced focus within the IEO on both building internal capacities and supporting national capacity-building. The review also underscores the significance of utilizing evaluation services in the Global South.

26.   While the 1 per cent funding formula has provided the IEO with a clear resource base for its work plans, it is important to establish a minimum budget threshold. Such a threshold would ensure that the office could maintain its core functions and meet its corporate obligations for delivering centralized evaluations, even in the event of a significant decline in UNDP programmatic resources.

27.   The evaluation policy does not adequately address the role and independence of evaluation functions in hosted entities such as the UNV programme and UNCDF. To enhance their impact and independence, it is recommended that a few strategic and thematic evaluations relevant to these entities be incorporated into IEO strategies and work plans. Exploring the integration of evaluation processes between UNDP and UNCDF could further improve efficiency and coherence across the Organization.

28.   A strategic approach to impact measurement is necessary, involving all stakeholders in building consensus on what impact means and how it should be measured in UNDP.

29.   Finally, the review proposes a modest extension of the tenure of the IEO Director to allow for effective reform implementation and to ensure that the IEO can fulfil its obligations despite fluctuations in UNDP resources.

IV.   Recommendations and Independent Evaluation Office response

30.   This chapter outlines the key recommendations provided in the review and the corresponding responses from the IEO, highlighting actions to be taken, planned, or under consideration to address the issues identified and enhance the effectiveness of the UNDP evaluation function.

Recommendation 1.				
1.1. Extend the tenure of the IEO Director from a single term of 5 years to a single term of *at least* 6 years.				
1.2. Establish a minimum threshold to ensure that the IEO can fulfil its core obligations even in the case of a major downturn in programming resources.				

IEO response: The IEO welcomes the recommendation, concurring partially with 1.1 and fully with 1.2. Regarding the Director's tenure, alternative options, such as two five-year terms, should be explored to align with the tenure of directors in other UNDP oversight offices and best practices among the United Nations organizations.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Prepare inputs for the revised evaluation policy	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 2. Incorporate a theory of change in the evaluation policy to clearly link evaluation activities with UNDP strategic goals to improve stakeholder understanding.

IEO response: The proposal to include a theory of change is welcomed.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Include a theory of change into the revised evaluation policy	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 3. Incorporate explicit provisions for environmental sustainability, carbon footprint, and inclusivity beyond gender in the evaluation policy. The revised policy should also include language related to the 'leave no one behind' principle.

IEO response: The IEO agrees with the recommendation to incorporate explicit provisions for environmental sustainability, carbon footprint, and inclusivity beyond gender. The IEO welcomes explicitly including the 'leave no one behind' agenda in the policy.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Include the explicit provisions and language into the revised evaluation policy	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 4.

4.1. Encourage greater attention to the identification of operational and programmatic risks during evaluation planning processes.

4.2. Conduct regular risk-based analyses of operations in high-risk areas such as procurement and crisis response, in collaboration with central and regional bureaux.

4.3. Establish funding arrangements and internal service delivery capacities for IEO to propose and respond to requests to directly manage evaluations in high-risk situations.

IEO response: The IEO welcomes this recommendation. Implementing it requires flexibility on the part of the IEO to respond to evaluation needs in high-risk situations, a process that is currently managed well. No changes to the policy are required to support this approach, as the IEO already has the necessary structures in place to address such situations.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
No changes are required for the revised evaluation policy	-	-		

Recommendation 5. The IEO should provide more detailed guidance and support for portfolio-level evaluations, including techniques for pooled funding and clustering individual projects under strategic themes for the purpose of co-financing and implementing evaluations that assess impact beyond the contributions of project-specific interventions. Financial thresholds for mandatory evaluations should be removed from the evaluation guidelines.

IEO response: The IEO welcomes this recommendation.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Include continued support for guidance	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 6. Extend the evaluation policy review cycle to 10 years, while reviewing the work programme and strategy more frequently.

IEO response: The IEO rejects this recommendation, as a ten-year period is lengthy given the need to incorporate emerging developments and evolving priorities in the evaluation field into the policy.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
No revisions are needed in the revised evaluation policy	--	--		

Recommendation 7. Shift the focus of quality assurance process for decentralized evaluation towards:

7.1. Prioritizing the strategic use of evaluations, such as those for high-risk areas, portfolios, outcomes, thematic, formative, and impact, rather than focusing on project-level evaluations.

7.2. Conducting project-level evaluations only when they are mandatory for donors.

IEO response: IEO partially accepts this recommendation, noting two key issues: the quality and the quantity of evaluations. While UNDP has flexibility in selecting which evaluations to conduct, further clarification of the guidance would be beneficial. Nonetheless, ensuring high-quality evaluations should remain a priority.			

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Prepare inputs for the revised evaluation policy for periodic revision of guidance	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 8. Strengthen mechanisms used to track and ensure implementation of decentralized evaluation recommendations to improve their relevance and utility. Encourage greater direct engagement by regional evaluation advisors to support all phases of the decentralized evaluation process.

IEO response: IEO welcomes this recommendation.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Prepare inputs for the revised evaluation policy to institutionalize and build mechanisms for tracking the use of decentralized evaluation recommendations	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		

Recommendation 9.

9.1. Continue to improve the user-friendliness of the Evaluation Resource Centre and the Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics platforms.

9.2. Continue to work collaboratively with the Executive Office, the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and regional bureaus to strengthen incentives within oversight and quality assurance systems and policies and procedures for learning, and integration of decentralized evaluation findings into organizational decision-making processes.

9.3. Continue to take a collaborative approach with the Executive Office and central and regional bureaus to co-invest in the strategic application of evaluative knowledge across the organization, including in the design and implementation of strategic communications and advocacy efforts.

9.4. Scale up, enhance and integrate the evaluation community of practice within UNDP. Enhance the dissemination and use of decentralized evaluation results to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to decision-making and organizational learning.

IEO response: The IEO welcomes the recommendation.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking	
			Status	**Comments**
Prepare inputs for the revised evaluation policy	June 2025	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the IEO		