

# Peer review of UNDP’s Evaluation Office on methodology and knowledge sharing

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## I. Executive Summary

1. This Professional Peer Review on Methodology and Knowledge Sharing in UNDP's Evaluation Office took place in the months of September to November 2012. The Panel found that the Evaluation Office (EO) is professional and strong and has a high degree of independence. There are many good skills in the team and there is an excellent engagement with management and the board. From this strong position the Office has opportunities to further strengthen its strategic role in UNDP.

2. The Panel appreciated the many and often frank discussions with EO staff and stakeholders and took note of on-going initiatives to strengthen methodology and knowledge sharing throughout the work of the Office. The peer exchange of EO staff and Panel provided further insights and underscored our key findings and recommendations to UNDP, which can be summed up as follows:

- a. The move towards greater ownership of evaluations by the Office is worthwhile and should be continued.
- b. There is scope to increase the strategic relevance of the evaluations and the Office should interact with UNDP Board and Management to identify opportunities in addition to the closer alignment to the Strategic Plan, which is already being pursued.
- c. The Office should explore efficiency and impact issues as possibilities to enhance the strategic use of evaluations.
- d. Methods and tools are well developed and of a high professional standard but lacking in some areas; the Office should explore more cutting edge methodologies, including for impact evaluations.
- e. There is a need to achieve greater uniformity throughout evaluations, so that evaluation findings can be synthesized and provide streams of evaluative evidence that can be presented in UNDP annual reports and used for strategic decision-making.
- f. The linkage to decentralized evaluations should be improved; decentralized evaluations could contribute more to evaluations of the Office if their quality was enhanced. The panel recommends that Management and the Evaluation Office work together to achieve this. The office should work closely with operational teams to help strengthen the decentralised evaluations and improve evaluation-related skills.
- g. The Office should more heavily invest in knowledge. It should be integral to the evaluation function, rather than an add-on at the end of evaluations. Done well, this could transform the Office's role as a knowledge player, both within UNDP and more widely.
- h. The Office is staffed by highly competent officials but not all skills and resources may be fully mobilized. The Office should increasingly tap on specialized knowledge, for instance in impact evaluation and knowledge sharing, and reinforce efforts to provide coaching and opportunities for professional development, as is for example increasingly happening through the participation in international conferences.

## II. Background

3. This Professional Peer Review was conducted in line with the *UNEG Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of Evaluation Function of UN Organisations*. It was requested by UNDP's Evaluation Office. The Peer Review report will be presented to the Director of the Office and shared with UNDP's Administrator and Board. This document presents the key observations and recommendations of the Peer Review Panel.

4. In 2005 UNDP was the first UN organization to benefit from a peer review of its evaluation function. At the time no agreed framework for these peer reviews existed. This pilot peer review together with a subsequent peer review of UNESCO's evaluation function led to a first framework for peer reviews as agreed by the joint Task Force on Peer Reviews of the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) and the DAC Evaluation Network. Several peer reviews have been undertaken on the basis of this first framework. Through a continuous process of learning from these reviews the framework was improved and updated, finally leading to a UNEG framework for professional peer reviews, adopted at the UN Evaluation Group's Annual General Meeting in April 2011. This peer review is based on the UNEG framework.

5. After the 2005 peer review, UNDP established an evaluation policy, which was evaluated in 2009 by an independent team. The evaluation report was issued in January 2010. Amongst many other issues, the report raised concerns about maintaining the quality of evaluations of UNDP's Evaluation Office, given the emphasis on increasing the number of these evaluations. This peer review looks deeper into this issue. Furthermore, knowledge management issues were not addressed in the January 2010 report but are taken up by this review.

6. The UNEG peer review framework is based on the three main principles of the UNEG Norms and Standards: independence, credibility and usefulness. The two issues that form the subject of this peer review are mainly related to credibility and usefulness.

7. In the period of April to August 2012 the Panel interacted with the UNEG/DAC Joint Task Force on External Peer Reviews, the UNEG Task Force on Peer Reviews and UNDP's Evaluation Office. One panel member had to withdraw; the final composition of the panel was:

- Margareta de Goys, Director, Evaluation Group, UNIDO, Vienna, Austria (former vice-chair of UN Evaluation Group)
- Fabrizio Felloni, Senior Evaluation Officer of IFAD's Independent Office of Evaluation, Rome, Italy
- Nick York, Head of Evaluation Unit, DFID, UK (former chair of DAC Evaluation Network)

- Geoff Barnard, Independent Knowledge Management consultant, UK (Advisor to the panel)
- Rob D. van den Berg, Director of Evaluation of the Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC, United States (Chair of the Panel)

8. The terms of reference for the peer review were finalized in September 2012. They included a framework for a self-assessment that was undertaken by UNDP's Evaluation Office in early October 2012. The panel has reviewed the self-assessment as well as evaluation-related documents (the policy, evaluation reports, methodological papers, knowledge sharing and communication documents) and visited UNDP in the week of October 22. This visit provided opportunities for a series of interviews with Board members, management and staff of UNDP, as well as interviews with management and staff of UNDP's Evaluation Office. In conducting its work, the panel put special emphasis on a peer exchange session with the Director and staff of UNDP's Evaluation Office, which took place on Thursday, October 25, to enrich its independent assessment and to promote two-way learning through discussions on ways to meet common challenges related to good evaluation practice and discuss and build consensus on identified issues and ways forward.

#### ***Core Assessment Criteria***

9. In line with the *Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of Evaluation Functions in Multilateral Organisations*, the Peer Review of the Evaluation function of UNDP on methodology and knowledge sharing has applied two core criteria, identified as primary building blocks for the sound application of methodology and adequate knowledge management of findings:

- A. **Credibility** of evaluations. The credibility of evaluations depends on the expertise and independence of the evaluators and the degree of transparency of the evaluation process. Credibility requires that evaluations should report successes, as well as failures. Recipient countries should, as a rule, fully participate in the evaluation process in order to ensure credibility and commitment. Whether and how the organization's approach to evaluation fosters partnership and helps build ownership merits attention as a major theme. Within these issues, the focus of the peer review was on whether these aspects of credibility support or weaken a sound application of best-practice methodology throughout the evaluations of the Office.
- B. **Utility** of evaluations. To have an impact on decision and policy making, evaluation findings must be perceived as relevant and useful and be presented in a clear and concise way. They should fully reflect the different interests and needs of the many parties involved in development cooperation. Importantly, the review bore in mind that optimizing the utility of evaluations is only partly under the control of evaluators. It is also, critically, a function of UNDP managers and stakeholders in member countries through their participation on governing bodies and in commissioning, receiving, and using evaluations. Within this framework the

panel focused first and foremost on the knowledge management products and processes and their dissemination.

10. These core criteria are further developed in the Normative Framework elaborated and provided in Annex A.

***Subject, Scope of, and Limitations to the Professional Peer Review***

11. The Panel has reviewed the Evaluation Office of UNDP in light of the objectives and structure of UNDP, the UNDP Evaluation Policy and the current practices in the Office. Structural aspects of how the evaluation function operates were taken into account through available documentation (such as the review of UNDP's Evaluation Policy) and through interviews, to better understand the context of the Office.

12. Similarly, the current arrangements (Evaluation Policy, budget, relationship with decentralized evaluations) have been reviewed to better understand how the Evaluation Office can undertake its evaluations in a professional and efficient manner and contribute to learning in UNDP. The internal organization of UNDP's Evaluation Office, including budget and human resources for methodology development, quality assurance and for knowledge management has been explored through interviews with the Director and other staff.

13. The panel has looked at quality and consistency of the evaluations undertaken under the auspices of the Evaluation Office. This included, as far as possible in the limited time available for the review: the planning and decision-making process; the conduct of the evaluations; the quality of the evaluation reports; including the appropriateness and adequacy of the methodology used; the independence of evaluation teams and team leaders; and the ways in which the Office enables the latter to produce credible reports, including the ways stakeholders are invited to comment on draft reports, as well as arrangements for quality assurance.

14. The quality and use of evaluation results and follow-up were explored, with a focus on how and for what purpose knowledge products generated from evaluations are disseminated both within UNDP and externally (such as to member countries, beneficiaries, donors, and other stakeholders). Furthermore, other actions undertaken by UNDP's Evaluation Office were reviewed, such as preparation of analytical or synthesis reports, interaction with the Board, networking, organizing or attending meetings and conferences, and website management.

15. The review was supported by an excellent self-assessment by the Evaluation Office on these issues, presenting them from the perspective of credibility and usefulness. Furthermore, a full range of documents, including evaluation reports, was made available to the panel for further study. Based on a review of the self-assessment and the documents made available, the panel interviewed the Director and other staff of the Office as well as representatives of UNDP management and staff and the Board.

16. An active peer exchange between the panel and the Evaluation Office took place on Thursday October 25. This exchange offered an opportunity for formulation of preliminary findings and validation of identified avenues for the future.

17. It should be noted that the Evaluation Office is only one part of the evaluation function of UNDP, which also consists of decentralized entities within UNDP Country Offices and Regional Service Centres and under the authority of regional bureaux. Although an assessment of decentralized evaluations was beyond the scope of the Peer Review, the extent to which decentralized evaluations can provide inputs to evaluations conducted by the EO has methodological and other implications and was examined by the Panel. This is in line with the ToR of the Peer Review (page 3), specifying that it would examine and comment on whether current arrangements (Evaluation Policy, budget, relationship with decentralized evaluations) are effective and adequate in ensuring that the evaluation Office can undertake its evaluations in a professional manner and contribute to learning in UNDP.

18. By necessity, this assessment of the evaluation function on methodological approaches and knowledge sharing is limited in scope. A professional peer review is not a full-fledged evaluation that can comprehensively and systematically evaluate practices, processes, and outcomes but the panel is confident that the assessments of methodological approaches and knowledge sharing are robust.

### **III. Assessment of the Current Situation**

19. The methodological approaches, tools and methods that the Office has adopted for its evaluations can be characterized as well developed, sound and professional, but there are some significant gaps and limitations in key areas such as impact and some issues in how they are applied and quality assured. The Office is well positioned to develop and use new approaches and has taken the opportunity of the appointment of a new Director to further explore avenues to improve. On knowledge sharing and communication the Office has adopted a product-oriented approach, focusing on publishing and disseminating evaluation reports.

20. While the evaluations in general tend to be well received and regarded and praised for their quality, credibility and usefulness, and for the well-edited published reports, the peer panel was quickly drawn into more strategic discussions both with the Evaluation Office itself and with stakeholders in UNDP and its Board. Often the question was raised whether the evaluations and the knowledge sharing concerning these evaluations were addressing strategic issues in UNDP. It was conveyed that the application of tools, methods and approaches, as well as the sharing of knowledge should be guided by a strategic perspective and a vision of what evaluation should ultimately contribute to UNDP. Although the Peer Panel has interviewed a limited number of stakeholders, their observations on the potential for a more strategic role of evaluations was a recurrent theme, and in line with findings of the Panel.

21. In the self-assessment, efficiency was mentioned as a particularly difficult evaluation criterion for UNDP as its activities and outputs are challenging to benchmark and to compare to other organizations. Several stakeholders mentioned that they would wish evaluations to more directly tackle efficiency issues in the organization. On the other end of the results chain, expectations regarding feed-back on the impact of UNDP's support are often not always met. While the Office has actively engaged with the international evaluation community in debates about how impact can be assessed and evaluated (most notably in relation to the NONIE guidelines), it has so far not taken this on board in its own methodological approaches. Stakeholders expressed an interest in evaluations shedding more light on impact and overall development effectiveness and the inclusion of an impact evaluation in the 2012-2013 EO programme of work is a positive step in this direction.

22. Lastly, in most interviews the relationship between decentralized evaluations and the work of UNDP's Evaluation Office was raised. The variability of the quality of decentralized evaluations is recognized as a problem, and many see a negative effect of this on the work of the Office, as decentralized evaluations do not provide reliable building blocks for the evaluations of the Office, which consequently face extra work to assemble evaluative data and evidence. It also limits the validity of meta-evaluations of decentralized evaluations as part of higher level evaluations. The Office is assessing and reporting on the quality of decentralized evaluations and related reports show the need to improve the quality of these evaluations and ensure that they can provide solid evaluative evidence. The Panel fully supports the intention that the Evaluation Policy review, planned for 2013, will focus, amongst others, on the quality of decentralized evaluations.

23. Similarly, within the evaluations of the Office the potential for the Assessment of Development Results (ADR) evaluations, at the country level, to provide building blocks for global and regional program evaluations and for thematic evaluations was also seen as a way forward to rationalize the work and increase the level of evaluative evidence on strategic issues within UNDP.

24. The guidance for the Assessment of Development Results evaluations is extensive and reflects a thorough knowledge of evaluation concepts, approaches, methods and tools, including relatively recent developments. It contains guidelines on what ADR reports should discuss and in which order this needs to be done. Furthermore, the process of the evaluation is fully described. On the exact methods and tools to be used the guidance is relatively flexible, thus leading one of our interviewees to describe the guidance of the ADR as "rigorous on process and flexible on methodology". This voices the assessment of the Panel as well. The rigour on process has served the ADRs well in that they follow a recognizable standard reporting pattern, address similar issues in each evaluation and provide consistency throughout the series of evaluations. However, the flexibility in methodology reduces the usefulness of the ADRs as building blocks for higher level evaluations

and for a synthesis of their findings, as the “blocks” tend to be of different nature. Furthermore, ADRs do not include themes and questions of thematic evaluations and thus do not easily provide additional evaluative evidence to these. While innovative approaches like Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) may yet derive more solid evidence from the ADRs, as will be validated in the near future, a more rigorous identification of tools and methods that would need to be used in all ADRs could make aggregation of findings easier, even more or less automatic.

25. The flexibility in application of methods is related to the well-established practice of the Office to contract out evaluations to teams of experts that have to make methodological decisions while conducting the evaluations. While this model allows for a high number of evaluations, it also has several drawbacks. One is that it tends to increase variability in application of methodology and presentation of findings, which tends to reduce comparability. A second problem is that evaluation teams composed of technical experts tend to defend their area of expertise and thus may come up with recommendations that would strengthen UNDP’s role in this specific area, rather than being more strategic for UNDP as a whole (which in some cases may mean less rather than more investment in that area). A third problem may be unevenness in the presentation of findings and recommendations, with each team coming up with its own interpretation of what would be most useful for UNDP. These problems may diminish in the near future, as the Office has recently initiated a change towards more internal ownership of evaluations, as envisaged in the note “Initiatives to enhance the evaluation function of the UNDP”, dated October 2012. The Panel encourages the Office to continue implementing the measures proposed in this note.

26. The Panel fully recognises the methodological challenges to evaluating impact in UNDP. In many areas of work UNDP projects and programmes face highly complex pathways to impact, to which UNDP’s interventions often provide relatively minor but perhaps crucial and catalytic injections. This is generally recognized as a distinct problem in evaluation and various approaches are still being tested, such as contribution analysis, on how to solve it. UNDP’s Evaluation Office has in-house expertise on impact methodology and has actively been involved in NONIE. However, UNDP does not have formulations of its goals and strategies that could easily be evaluated with existing impact methods, and as a result until 2012 the Office did rarely undertake impact evaluations, or include impact-related assessments in its evaluations, with some exceptions in the early years of the first decade of this century. It is noted that an impact evaluation is planned in the programme of work of the Office for 2012-2013.

27. A special problem related to impact assessment in the ADRs is that they are focused on UNDP’s support at country level. The Evaluation Office has been reluctant to enter into impact discussions as this could be construed as assessing the country rather than UNDP’s support. Furthermore, the Office would ideally prefer to explore impact issues together with professional evaluators in the countries concerned; and while there is a definite increase in capacity and there is a growing

possibility to evaluate together with national evaluators in an evaluation culture that recognizes the importance of impartial and transparent evaluation, this is not yet the case across the board, leading to a big variation in involvement of local evaluators. The panel feels that both arguments can and should be overcome, as many other evaluation offices have struggled with these issues and have found a way forward that was satisfactory to partner countries.

28. In relation to the highly complex pathways to impact, the specific role and function of UNDP is not always clearly spelled out, leading to extra difficulties to identify how UNDP operates and how it could operate more efficiently. This may explain why, in general, UNDP's evaluations tend to be excellent on output and outcome, but contain less evaluative evidence on efficiency and impact.

29. On a more mundane level, some methodological choices in the past may have been guided by considerations of internal organization of the Office and by the job profiles of staff of the Office.

30. Knowledge sharing and communication have received increased attention of late in UNDP's Evaluation Office. Its publications are professionally edited and produced and have for the most part been well received, not only within UNDP but also in the wider evaluation community and communities of practice working on the issues evaluated. However, the panel observes that the emphasis of the Office has been on reports and how to disseminate these. Many possibilities for diversified products and more interactive knowledge sharing have opened up and could be explored in the wider context of UNDP's knowledge management strategies.

31. Given these interrelated causes and challenges, there is an opportunity for the Evaluation Office to engage with stakeholders in UNDP, first and foremost its Board and senior management, to identify how it could further strengthen and focus its evaluation methodology and approaches, as well as its efforts in knowledge sharing.

32. The Panel is of the opinion that choices in methodological approaches, tools and methods and in knowledge sharing need to be rooted in and based on a **strategic vision of the role of evaluation in UNDP**, in line with the UNDP Strategic Plan and its development results framework. Depending on how this is taking shape, decisions on **methodological approaches** can be made. **Knowledge sharing** can play a greater role to ensure that methods and tools lead to a greater usefulness in UNDP. Finally, **team skills and roles** in the Evaluation Office are essential for making this happen. Further analysis and recommendations are grouped under these headings.

#### **IV. Strategy and Vision**

33. The Evaluation Office has over the past seven to eight years gone through a process of professionalization and increased interaction with Board and

Management of UNDP. The emphasis of the Board has been on increasing coverage of UNDP's support throughout the world through evaluations. The Office has succeeded in increasing its productivity and in ensuring a steady flow of evaluations to the Board. The review of the Evaluation Policy in 2010 has raised the question whether the emphasis on productivity would at a certain moment be detrimental to maintaining the quality of the evaluations. Furthermore, some issues that have consistently been identified as problematic, such as the quality of decentralized evaluations, have not seen sufficient improvement. Further increases in productivity are not likely to lead to transformational changes in UNDP's programmes and support. The panel recommends that the discussions in the Board and with Management shifts from general coverage and productivity to a more strategic role of evaluations, tackling issues that so far have been less evaluated.

34. In general we note three areas that would need to be explored further with the Board and senior management, in which the strategic and potentially transformative role of evaluation in UNDP could be enhanced. For this, a higher level of methodological rigour is required as well as evaluations reviewing effects and impact. The usefulness of evaluations in the Board and for management will potentially be increased if and when the credibility of evaluations is increased, coupled with evaluations focusing on strategic issues or areas with high learning needs. The three areas are:

- 1) Moving evaluations into reviewing pathways to impact, to achieve a better understanding of what the unique role of UNDP in these pathways is or could be, and to enable a more formative interaction with partners in UNDP, such as country offices, on how the goals of UNDP could be realized in specific circumstances;
- 2) Moving evaluations more into efficiency and performance issues, to ensure that UNDP becomes accountable for its business model and management practices and make necessary revisions if necessary. This could be done by cutting up efficiency issues into pieces that can be evaluated and acted upon without solving the riddle of overall efficiency. Efficiency problems as noted for example in MOPAN reviews could provide a good starting point – rather than to depend on perceptions of others of its efficiency and service delivery. This would enable UNDP develop its own objectives and build transparent data and analysis of how efficiently it operates.
- 3) The link between decentralized evaluations and the central evaluation function could be significantly strengthened. A formative approach could be adopted to better understand why in several areas of UNDP's work decentralized evaluation and monitoring remains below par. Strengthening decentralized evaluations will mean strengthening the evidence base of UNDP's work, which should empower country offices and headquarters to improve and strengthen country, regional and global strategies.

## V. Methodological Approaches

35. Since the 2005 peer review exercise, the UNDP Evaluation Office (EO) has made important efforts to improve its methodological approaches. It has produced a manual for its country-level evaluations (Assessment of Development Results or ADRs) as well as guidelines for thematic evaluations. The latter have not been finalised but have been the subject of intensive discussion within EO, as well as with external prominent evaluation scholars, and have been exposed to the review of an internationally reputed evaluation expert. These guidelines are still used as reference for the preparation of thematic evaluations.

36. The EO has collaborated with institution-wide initiatives at UNPD to support and strengthen “decentralised” evaluations, i.e., those evaluations that are managed by country offices or headquarter bureaux. EO provided crucial contributions to the production of two guidance documents: the *Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results* and the *Outcome Level Evaluation Guide*. It was instrumental in establishing a roster of consultants with evaluation experience that can be accessed by country offices and central bureaux for the purpose of recruiting specialists.

37. Regarding the conduct of its own evaluations, EO has made the process more participatory. Terms of reference of all forthcoming evaluations are now regularly discussed with headquarter bureaux at the beginning of the exercise. In the case of ADRs, the country office is engaged at an early stage and a “national reference group” including representatives of the government, international organisations, civil society and other stakeholders is identified early on and invited to provide comments on the evaluation design. Country offices and the reference groups are also involved during the main mission and requested to comment on the draft report. As a standard practice EO organises an in-country stakeholder workshop at the end of the ADR to discuss the main findings and recommendations of the exercise and enhance ownership and learning by the country office and national counterparts.

38. These are important developments and UNDP managers acknowledge the stronger participatory nature of the evaluation processes. Some of them believe that there is scope for fine tuning these processes and facilitating the adoption of their recommendations by:

- better synchronizing evaluations with institutional milestones and Board meetings;
- formulating fewer evaluation recommendations and paying further attention to prioritizing them so as to facilitate tracking and follow-up by the management; and
- working with Management to further align evaluation findings and recommendations with the development results framework of UNDP, including – to the extent possible – its outcome structure.

39. From the perspective of this peer review, there are improvements of methodological nature that are both possible and desirable. They are presented below.

### ***Working on Evaluation Building Blocks***

40. Since 2011 UNDP EO has conducted a systematic assessment of the quality of decentralised evaluations, following very detailed guidelines. Beginning with 2012, the main findings have been presented in a summary table in the Annual Report on Evaluation. Based on a six-point scale rating,<sup>1</sup> the results show that 36% of the assessed decentralised evaluation reports were classified as “moderately unsatisfactory” or lower.

41. **There is a need to further support decentralised evaluation as building blocks for independent evaluations.** This is important not only to enhance the effectiveness of UNDP programmes but also as a starting point for independent evaluations conducted by EO. Without solid evidence from decentralised evaluation it is more challenging to assess the performance and effectiveness of UNDP initiatives and the scope for aggregating findings from decentralized evaluations through meta-evaluations/analyses are limited. At present, time and resources need to be spent by EO to make up for the absence of quality secondary data and to collect basic information on UNDP country regional and global programmes. This reduces the time available to refine methodological approaches and carry out substantive analysis.

42. Further support to strengthening the quality of decentralized evaluations does not mean that the responsibility for supporting decentralized evaluations should be transferred to the EO but there are obvious benefits to the EO (and UNDP at large) of contributing to this process, considering the programmatic thrust and decentralized structure of UNDP. The management of UNDP has decided to include EO ratings on the quality of decentralised evaluations in the balanced scorecard of all country offices and headquarter bureaux. These are important steps forward. At the same time there is scope for further support from EO to this process by:

- sharing more detailed findings from its decentralised evaluation assessment with UNDP counterpart units;
- identifying cases of good performance that can be considered as “models” for decentralised evaluation; at the same time, highlighting those factors that explain under-performance;
- engaging in training activities and dissemination of good practices and evaluation resources.

43. **Use ADRs as building blocks for higher-plane evaluations.** EO conducts a number of higher-plane evaluations such as thematic, regional programme and

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<sup>1</sup> The ratings are as follows: (i) highly satisfactory; (ii) satisfactory; (iii) moderately satisfactory; (iv) moderately unsatisfactory; (v) unsatisfactory; (vi) highly unsatisfactory.

global programme evaluations. Due to time and resource constraints, only a limited number of countries can be visited in the course of these evaluations, thus constraining the evidence base. In fact this argument is sometimes evoked by UNDP managers to question the validity of generalisation from small numbers of observations.

44. While the above argument is not necessarily always correct, it is true that in the past ADRs have not been used systematically to build evidence for forthcoming higher-plane evaluations. Since 2010 EO has increasingly included meta-analyses of past ADRs in Thematic, Regional Programme and Global Evaluations<sup>2</sup>. As noted by the peer review panel differences in the application of methodology between ADRs can pose constraints to inter-evaluation comparability and meta-analysis (this topic is further discussed in the next section). In addition, selected questions or issues that are relevant for higher-plane evaluations could be mainstreamed within ADRs once thematic evaluations have been decided upon. This would offer opportunities for more in-depth analysis for a number of ADRs and complement the more general treatment of many of the thematic issues that are touched upon in the ADRs.

### ***Enhancing Consistency between Evaluations***

45. **Applying methodological guidelines in a more consistent manner.** While EO has elaborated methodological guidance documents, the review of recently completed evaluation shows that the degree to which the methodology is applied varies substantially and the quality of reports is uneven. For instance, some evaluations treat evaluation criteria as the centrepiece of the analysis, others apply them in a rather tangential manner while in some cases criteria are not applied at all and findings are presented in a purely descriptive manner. The degree to which statements in the reports are supported by evidence and the nature and quality of evidence also varies considerably between evaluations.

46. This is the case for all types of evaluation and notably for ADRs that are in principle more amenable to standardisation than other categories of evaluations. The wide inter-evaluation variability suggests the need for revising the current methodological guidelines in a more prescriptive fashion as well as to enhance the rigour of internal quality control processes within the EO. The current internal organization of the office, quality assurance arrangements and working practice rightly emphasise flexibility to adapt to specific cases but tend to underplay the importance of applying the methodology in a rigorous manner. The situation could be improved by:

- revisiting the existing guidelines and turning them into more prescriptive tools;

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<sup>2</sup> This is the case, for example, of the Evaluation of UNDP Contribution to Strengthening Local Governance, the Evaluation of UNDP Contribution to Strengthening National Capacities, Evaluation of UNDP Contribution to Disaster Prevention and Recovery, and other recent higher level evaluations.

- vesting the responsibility for quality assurance in a clearer manner within EO and making the adherence to evaluation guidelines a mandatory requirement for EO staff as well as for consultants;
- strengthening the quality assurance process within EO, from the beginning to the end of each evaluation.

47. **Coaching of staff on methodological issues for complex evaluations.** It is a common practice in EO to bestow a large degree of autonomy upon its staff members in the conduct of evaluations. While it is important to recognise the professionalism and experience of staff, it is also equally important to seize opportunities to share knowledge and experience and to capitalise on previous work experience. There are cases in which these opportunities do not appear to be fully exploited. In the case of the preparation of higher-plane and complex evaluations such as thematic, regional and global programme evaluations, cases were identified where task managers have been offered limited guidance from EO's senior management in the definition of key questions and the design of the methodology and evaluations were not able to fully capitalise from previous experiences in carrying out similar exercises.

48. For high-complexity evaluations a way forward could be to:
- designate senior staff with relevant experience for coaching evaluations of higher complexity, in close collaboration with the EO Director;
  - discuss more widely the typical methodological issues posed by an evaluation and prepare toolkits for those evaluations that are likely to be repeated cyclically (e.g. regional and global programme evaluations). These toolkits could also be peer-reviewed by recognised external specialists.

### ***Widening the Frontier of Methodological Approaches***

49. **More systematic assessment of Impact, efficiency and performance.** At present, the EO methodological guidelines draw from recent evaluation literature and from internationally recognised good practices. The guidelines are generally of high quality but the Panel found that they do not sufficiently emphasise three domains which generally receive limited attention or no coverage by the evaluations: (i) impact, (ii) efficiency, (iii) the assessment of corporate organization and administrative processes. The peer review notes that, while UNDP programmes pose challenges to these types of assessments, other organisations as well as evaluation practitioners have already experienced similar methodological issues and have developed *ad hoc* approaches to come up with defensible findings, increasingly accepted and disseminated in the evaluation community.

50. Regarding impact, there is a perception among some EO staff members that this criterion can only be applied to micro-level results (such as household or community welfare measures) and thus only assessed by project (i.e. decentralised) evaluations, rather than independent (EO conducted) evaluations. The peer review suggests that the impact criterion could also be applied at programme and

institutional levels, and thus assessed through ADRs, thematic and other evaluations. To overcome difficulties and methodological pitfalls that relate to the particular nature of UNDP interventions, EO could draw from the family of “theory-based” approaches that can be applied to interventions lacking clear frameworks of results or generating long-term results that cannot be entirely observed at the time of the evaluation.<sup>3</sup> Developing a “theory of change” for why programmes or support is supposed to lead to higher level and longer term impact may identify assumptions that can be reviewed, thus leading to insight in how UNDP contributes to processes leading to impact at higher levels.

51. Other changes, beyond the control of the EO would also be needed to facilitate the conduct of impact evaluations, for instance the collection of outcome level monitoring and baseline data. This is presently only the practice for GEF projects.

52. Concerning efficiency, the peer review acknowledges the challenge of properly identifying and quantifying benefits and costs of UNDP interventions but notes that a set of “proxy indicators” of determinants of efficiency (e.g. operational cost ratios, implementation delays, cost overruns) can be adopted to pinpoint potential areas of inefficiencies, in line with practices accepted by evaluation offices of multilateral banks. It is also noted that information on the above type of indicators is available through the UNDP balanced scorecard systems, a low-cost and easily accessible source of data that is not sufficiently exploited by independent evaluations.

53. In the same vein, EO evaluations do not systematically cover managerial and business processes (e.g. funding and resource mobilisation, human resources, internal organisation and oversight systems) for example at country office level, regional level or headquarter bureaux whereas these aspects could help explain the performance of UNDP (including efficiency issues), and the results of its interventions. An example is the role of country offices in ensuring additional support to countries through trust funds and other sources of funding, like the GEF, which is not evaluated in the ADRs. Sources of funding are identified in the ADRs, but the role of country offices in mobilizing them is not assessed.

54. Important improvements could be achieved by focusing on the following courses of action:

- updating EO methodological requirements by including evaluation questions on impact, efficiency and managerial and business processes;

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of relevant approaches include the “Review of Outcomes to Impacts”(RotI) adopted by the GEF Evaluation Office, the “causal contribution analysis” proposed by J.Mayne (1999) and the “outcome mapping” approach developed by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). References: GEF Evaluation Office and Conservation Development Centre (2009), *RotI Practitioner’s Handbook*, Washington DC; Mayne, J. (2009): “Addressing Attribution through Contribution Analysis: Using Performance Measures Sensibly”, *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, vol. 6 n.1, p.1-24 ; Earl, S., Carden, F. and Smutylo, T. (2001) *Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs*, Ottawa: IDRC.

- upgrading EO methodological tools to include approaches that can be used when the result framework is not fully developed or clear: EO could further draw from the literature on theory of change, systems theory and mixed methods. EO has an opportunity to become a leader in adapting and adopting these approaches and paradigms;
- advocating with UNDP management that programmes be made “more evaluable” by presenting a better-structured and more complete logical framework, and conducting baseline analysis;
- encouraging EO staff to attend training sessions on evaluation methodology as well as professional associations’ events, in order to stay abreast of the latest approaches and share their own experiences at the same time;
- making more systematic use of the experiences of EO staff, including members that have recently joined the office and have considerable experience managing UNDP programmes or operations in country offices and could provide useful insights on managerial and business processes.

**55. Synthesise evaluation findings, track performance and results trends.**

During recent years, EO has conducted on average 10-14 ADRs and 3-5 higher-plane evaluations per year. A selection of issues stemming from these evaluations is succinctly (and casually) presented in the Annual Report on Evaluation but there is no approach to consolidate and aggregate evaluation findings in a systematic and compelling manner. In particular there is no instrument to establish and report on historical series of performance and results, by evaluation criterion, development issue, thematic area of intervention, or by geographical area.

56. This poses a challenge as such a series of data and information would help EO pinpoint areas of better and weaker performance as well as establish a basis of information for further meta-analysis. It is to be noted that such reporting instruments exist with evaluation offices of international financial institutions (for example the ARDE report at the World Bank) and other UN organisations (the ARRI report at IFAD for example) as well as with the GEF (various annual reports, of which the Annual Performance Report includes ratings at project level). They are based on ratings in individual evaluations and have helped establish historical trends that the management of the organisation has used to address issues at the corporate level. Furthermore, other organizations like UNEP and UNIDO present synthesis documents of findings and lessons learned. The governing bodies in these organizations tend to appreciate these aggregate and higher level documents that provide them with insights in the institutional and development effectiveness of the organization.

57. EO may address the above issues by:

- deciding to establish a high-level evaluation synthesis report, drawing from the experience of other organizations. This report, that could be published annually or bi-annually, could become the flagship product of EO;

- introducing a rating system in its report (particularly in ADRs) that would generate historical series for a number of evaluation criteria and facilitate the preparation of the synthesis report. If this is implemented, methodological guidance documents would need to be upgraded by adding rating requirements.

## VI. Knowledge Sharing

58. EO is doing a good work in producing professional evaluation reports and making these available in a consistent and transparent way, and is performing the accountability side of its knowledge management role well. Like many evaluation functions, however, it seems to be missing opportunities in terms of its wider learning and influencing role. Rather than ‘knowledge management’, this broader vision of what EO might set out to achieve is better described as “knowledge sharing”, which implies a more open-ended and two-way communication process.

59. Conditions are in place for EO to “raise its game” substantially as a knowledge player, both within UNDP and among the wider evaluation and development communities. There is an encouraging appetite for change within EO and a clear demand from senior management and the Executive Board for EO to become more proactive on the learning side. Having established credibility as a respected and independent evaluation office, EO can capitalise on this to become a much more influential knowledge player.

60. There are a number of areas to work on to bring about this transformation:

- 1) **Planning:** communication thinking needs to be factored in from the start of every evaluation. This means considering who are the key target audiences, how they can be engaged, and where are the windows of opportunity and pathways of influence that will ensure that the evaluation hits home? This applies to ADRs and thematic and global evaluations – all of which bring up distinctive communication opportunities and challenges.
- 2) **Products:** Knowledge products need to be improved, so that the detailed evaluation report is the foundation product, but not the only communication tool. Reports need to be sharpened but also augmented by a range of lighter, snappier and more compelling communication products. Professional writers who ‘get’ the substance of the work are needed, not just good editors.
- 3) **Platforms:** The various knowledge platforms that EO uses (website, the Evaluation Resource Centre (ERC), intranet, Staffnet, Teamworks) are solid and, while not perfect, represent an important asset. These need to be further enhanced to make them more user-friendly, linked together intelligently, and – above all – used. The initial scepticism over Teamworks needs to be set aside, and some opportunities found to test it out properly, so

EO can learn where it can help them and where other channels would work better. There is experience elsewhere in UNDP to draw on, so EO does not have to reinvent the wheel. Reviving the Evalnet section of Teamworks would be a good place to start, but this will need active moderation.

- 4) **The Archive:** EO needs to find more efficient ways of mining and exploiting its substantial archive of previous evaluations. This will require investment in ‘tagging’ content more effectively, and making it more easily searchable. There are useful new synthesis products that could emerge from this, and potentially a responsive help desk function that connects external colleagues to the most relevant findings from within the evaluation archive. A helpdesk of this kind, once established, might usefully be extended to cover evaluation findings from UNEG partners and other agencies, since UNDP does not have a monopoly on useful evaluation lessons.
- 5) **Communication approaches:** these need to be diversified and made more creative and engaging. EO needs to master the art of presenting interesting presentations, running effective webinars and face-to-face events, and using social media intelligently. Outside expertise is available to help with this.
- 6) **Engaging:** Staff are already being encouraged to ‘get out more’ and selectively engage in other networks and at other venues where there are opportunities both to learn themselves, and to share EO’s learning. This is welcomed by staff and is the right direction to move in. Longer term, it means moving beyond the relative comfort zone of evaluation peer networks to engage in thematic networks and other fora. This “raises the bar” somewhat, as EO will need to bring incisive new knowledge to the table if it is to be convincing.
- 7) **Connecting:** EO needs to connect up and join in with other networks and knowledge sharing channels, both inside UNDP and within the wider community. A “Being There” strategy of taking EO messages to where target audiences are already meeting and engaging will often be more effective than always expecting people to come to EO’s events and knowledge platforms.
- 8) **Prioritising:** Incentive systems need to be aligned and time and resources carved out so knowledge sharing, communication, and learning become part of EO’s core business, rather than being an add-on. This will require a significant reorientation of how staff time is deployed, so the ratio of time spent on the evaluation to time spent on communication and learning shifts substantially. Comparable experience in the research sector shows that at least 10% of overall resources are needed to do a good job at research uptake, with many of the most influential programmes devoting more than this.

61. Stepping up in this way will be a significant challenge. EO will need to strengthen its staff team to ensure this happens. The suggestion is to bring in an experienced knowledge manager and communicator at a senior level to work with existing staff and inspire and lead this transformation. Skills across the whole of EO need to be enhanced, and staff supported as they build their confidence. Additional skills can be brought in from outside to augment this, and there are many lessons to be drawn from successful think tanks and research institutes who have geared up their communication and outreach capacities. But there is no substitute for having a good base of core skills and capacities within the unit.

62. As it works to raise its own game, EO has a probably even more important job to do in raising standards and expectations across the whole of UNDP's decentralised M&E network and systems. This can be assisted through developing good policies, guidelines and tool kits, but the most effective way of demonstrating it is by doing it, working with colleagues in the regions, and modelling effective knowledge sharing practice.

63. The long term goal is to change the perceptions of the role of the evaluator from an accountability 'policeman' to a forward-looking change agent. Rigorous, independent analysis is obviously a key foundation for this. But to fulfil their real potential, evaluators need to develop their skills as communicators, knowledge brokers, and facilitators so they can become champions in encouraging more reflective, evaluative good practice within UNDP and among its country partners.

64. This transition will take time to achieve and involve a considerable amount of 'learning by doing'. Many of the new communication and knowledge sharing approaches will be experimental, so it would be smart to bring EOs' analytic strengths to bear in outlining a theory of change for how they are expected to make a difference, and finding intelligent measures to assess what's working and why. EO would be pioneering good practice in this area and could play a valuable leadership role within the evaluation community.

## **VII. Team Skills & Roles**

65. The EO can be regarded as a competent, professional and well-resourced office, both in terms of human and financial resources. This coupled with a high level of independence has ensured the credibility of EO evaluations. It seems however that not all skills are known and that some are not used, which raises the question whether the office is realizing its full potential. In fact, some needed skills might not be available and others might no longer be totally relevant.

66. Skills and functions need to be in line with the EO strategy and vision and include methodological and knowledge sharing ones. It is important that the office capability goes beyond evaluation management and conduct and covers the entire evaluations process thus including communication and knowledge sharing. The EO will thus need to build capacities to assume certain new functions/tasks. The EO is

going through a change process and this is a good time to review the skills-base and initiate changes.

67. EO staff are for the most part evaluation generalists and there is an increasing need for specialization (both in terms of technical expertise, methodology, outreach, knowledge sharing, coaching and in leading versus supporting evaluations). The present move towards leading and conducting evaluation and engaging in professional networks is positive and expected to further enhance the professionalism of the office but greater ownership of evaluations will also bring about a need for more specialization. This will need to be reinforced by skills identification and needs assessments, mapping and gap analyses in relation to existing and wanted skills and to be followed up with coaching, team work, training of staff in order to impart new skills, and using external specialist advisors to complement EO capacity. In some critical areas, new skills/staff might need to be added or expanded; knowledge sharing and impact evaluation probably belong to these. The Office might want to develop an action plan for skills enhancement.

68. Moreover, new roles (lead and conduct of evaluations) entail more work and a need to rationalize the way of doing evaluations or, alternatively, reducing the number of evaluations. As mentioned earlier, decentralized evaluations and ADRs cannot always be used as building blocks and this means that potential synergies remain un-tapped and this may reduce overall efficiency. There should, however, be room for more teamwork between the evaluation office and the decentralised monitoring and evaluation units.

69. The peer review panel equally identified a need for more synergies between different types of evaluation, also arguing for the development of team skills and teamwork. Decentralized (project) evaluations, as mentioned earlier, need to be strengthened in order to become solid evidence bases. Issues of thematic evaluations should be mainstreamed in ADRs and project evaluations for increased efficiency. In addition, and considering the enhanced workload of evaluation managers, an increasing use of research assistants to back up team leaders could be one way forward. Some new skills and roles might require targeted training but it is likely that others can be acquired through learning by doing, training and conferencing.

70. Attention needs to be given to not only the skills set of the EO but to have the right skills in the entire evaluation function. The competence and independence of decentralized functions are being contested. This has limited the scope to do outcome and impact evaluations which in turn affects accountability of executing partners and learning by partner governments, the credibility of evaluations and commitment of key stakeholders. The use of national evaluators and national reference groups was, on the other hand, identified as a good practice but new ways to substantially involve national partners in the evaluation process need to be identified for increased national ownership.

71. Operational managers, particularly the Directors of Regional Bureaux need to take full responsible for improving the quality of evaluation practices in the operational units ('decentralised evaluations'). The analysis already presented to the board highlights that this is not being addressed quickly enough. As this is fundamental to whether or not EO can do its job and whether the evaluation function in its entirety lives up to the UNEG norms and standards this needs to be prioritized. We suggest that the upcoming review of the Evaluation Policy (2013) explores this in more depth and look at questions such as the underlying incentives and awareness of evaluation in operational teams and whether there is enough leadership and a clear focal point for taking this forward on the operational side.

## **Annex A – Normative Framework of the Peer Review of UNDP’s Evaluation Function on Methodology and Knowledge Sharing**

In its self-assessment UNDP’s Evaluation Office will deliver a note on how evaluations are implemented with a focus on methodological issues, as well as a note on how evaluative findings are disseminated. Both notes will contain a description of procedures, practices, tools and products and will discuss strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The panel will review the issues raised with particular reference to international best practices and with reference to the following UNEG norms.

The self-assessment will start with a general overview of issues that impact on credibility and usefulness of evaluations and their findings, ranging from independence issues to availability of resources to the linkages between evaluations of UNDP’s Evaluation Office to the decentralized evaluations. Furthermore, the involvement of the Office in results based management, indicators, evaluability assessments of programs and projects in UNDP will be discussed in the self-assessment to provide a background to the peer review on application of methodology and dissemination of evaluative findings.

### **Application of Methodology**

The Panel will assess the application of methodology by reviewing the processes through which evaluations are transparently planned, managed, and conducted and by assessing the quality of evaluation reports and the ways they are disclosed. Reference points for the assessment are the following UNEG Norms for Evaluation in the UN System:

***UNEG Norm 4.2:** The evaluation plan can be the result of a cyclical or purposive selection of evaluation topics. The purpose, nature and scope of evaluation must be clear to evaluators and stakeholders. The plan for conducting each evaluation must ensure due process to ascertain the timely completion of the mandate, and consideration of the most cost-effective way to obtain and analyze the necessary information*

***UNEG Norm 8.1:** Each evaluation should employ design, planning and implementation processes that are inherently quality oriented, covering appropriate methodologies for data-collection, analysis and interpretation.*

***UNEG Norm 8.2:** Evaluation reports must present in a complete and balanced way the evidence, findings, conclusions and recommendations. They must be brief and to the point and easy to understand. They must explain the methodology followed, highlight the methodological limitations of the evaluation, key concerns and evidenced-based findings, dissident views and consequent conclusions, recommendations and lessons. They must have an executive summary that encapsulates the essence of the information contained in the report, and facilitate dissemination and distillation of lessons.*

**UNEG Norm 9.3:** *Evaluators must have the basic skill set for conducting evaluation studies and managing externally hired evaluators.*

**UNEG Norm 10.1:** *Transparency and consultation with the major stakeholders are essential features in all stages of the evaluation process. This improves the credibility and quality of the evaluation. It can facilitate consensus building and ownership of the findings, conclusions and recommendations.*

**UNEG Norm 10.2:** *Evaluation Terms of Reference and reports should be available to major stakeholders and be public documents. Documentation on evaluations in easily consultable and readable forms should also contribute to both transparency and legitimacy.*

The Office is asked to include appropriate and relevant UNEG standards in the self-assessment, such as standards 1.5, 1.6, 3.7 and 4.9.

### **Knowledge Management**

The Panel will assess the dissemination and use of evaluative findings by reviewing the products, tools, policies and processes through which evaluations are published and disclosed. This will include the availability of synthesis reports and evaluation briefs. Reference points for the assessment are the following UNEG Norms for Evaluation in the UN System:

**UNEG Norm 2.7:** *The Governing Bodies and/or Heads of organisations and of the evaluation functions are responsible for ensuring that there is a repository of evaluations and a mechanism for distilling and disseminating lessons to improve organisational learning and systemic improvement. They should also make evaluation findings available to stakeholders and other organisations of the UN system as well as to the public.*

**UNEG Norm 10.2:** *Evaluation Terms of Reference and reports should be available to major stakeholders and be public documents. Documentation on evaluations in easily consultable and readable form should also contribute to both transparency and legitimacy.*

**UNEG Norm 13.1:** *Evaluation contributes to knowledge building and organisational improvement. Evaluations should be conducted and evaluation findings and recommendations presented in a manner that is easily understood by target audiences.*

**UNEG Norm 13.2:** *Evaluation findings and lessons drawn from evaluations should be accessible to target audiences in a user-friendly way. A repository of evaluation could be used to distil lessons that contribute to peer learning and the development of structured briefing material for the training of staff. This should be done in a way that facilitates the sharing of learning among stakeholders, including the organisations of the UN system, through a clear dissemination policy and contribution to knowledge networks*

## Annex B – List of Interviewees (Oct 22-Oct 26 2012)

Name	Position	Organization
Rebeca Grynspan	Associate Administrator	UNDP
Judith Karl	Director Operations Support Group, Executive Office	UNDP
Babacar Cisse	Deputy Director Regional Bureau for Africa	UNDP
Nils Boesen	Director of Knowledge, Innovation and Capacity, Bureau for Development Policy	UNDP
Linda Maguire	Policy Adviser Democratic Governance Group, Bureau for Development Policy	UNDP
Martine Therer	Programme Adviser, Operation Support Group, Executive Office	UNDP
Indran Naidoo	Director, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Juha Uitto	Deputy Director, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Sukai Prom-Jackson	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Oscar Garcia	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Michael Reynolds	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Alan Fox	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Masahiro Igarashi	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Fumika Ouchi	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Olivier Cossee	Evaluation Adviser, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu	Evaluation Specialist, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Ana Rosa Soares	Evaluation Specialist, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Roberto La Rovere	Evaluation Specialist, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Heather Bryant	Evaluation Specialist, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Ximena Rios	Operations Manager, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Sasha Jahic	Communications Analyst, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Anish Pradhan	Information Technology Specialist, Evaluation Office	UNDP
Tina Nebe	UNEG Secretariat	UNDP
Jin Zhang	UNEG Secretariat	UNDP
Tiffany Moore	Programme Associate	UNDP
Michelle Sy	Programme Associate	UNDP
Concepcion Cole	Programme Associate	UNDP
Sonam Choetsho	Programme Associate	UNDP
Antana Locs	Programme Associate	UNDP
Charita Bondanza	Programme Associate	UNDP
Thomas Glentis	Second Secretary, Permanent Mission to the UN	Antigua & Barbuda
Yasuaki Momito	First Secretary, Permanent Mission to the UN	Japan
Macharia Kamau	Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN	Kenya
Esther Pan Sloane Aisha Sabar	Economic and Social Council Permanent Mission to the UN	USA