Enhancing the Evaluability of SDG 2

Position Paper (Theme 2, Question 3)
Partnerships and development actors — Dealing with the increasing complexity of development processes.

Dr. Dorothy Lucks[1]

1. Introduction

This position paper forms an input to the technical seminar on "Enhancing the Evaluability of Sustainable Development Goal 2: How can we evaluate progress towards achieving SDG 2 – End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" held in Rome from 17-18 November 2015. The focus of this paper is to respond to theme two of the seminar which relates to partnerships and development actors in an environment of increasing complexity. In particular, it aims to respond to the following question, focussing on accountability in complex processes and partnerships:

> *"How can the need for accountability for development be satisfied in a situation where development processes are becoming increasingly complex and more actors will be contributing to the achievement of SDG2? Has the conundrum between contribution and attribution been resolved and can contribution analysis offer to address the problem of individual accountability for support of complex processes and partnerships?"*

The need for accountability in development

One of the five key principles of aid effectiveness set out in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (the Declaration) was mutual accountability of donors and partners for development results. The Declaration states that "A major priority for partner countries and donors is to enhance mutual accountability and transparency in the use of development resources. This also helps strengthen public support for national policies and development assistance."[2] While individual accountability for contributions to partnerships remains important in development, mutual accountability for wider outcomes should not be neglected.

The recent evaluations of the Paris Declaration found that mutual accountability has advanced the least of the five principles and is the most important area need for future advancement to enhance aid effectiveness.[3] As the evaluations found, "domestic transparency and accountability of both donors and partner countries is the foundation of mutual accountability".

The importance of accountability to learn

Given the high level of complexity and variability among partnerships and processes and their dynamic nature in responding and adapting to contextual changes, it is increasingly important to capture lessons learned relating to the operation of processes and partnerships in order to maximise development results. In this sense, mutual accountability to achieve results is not sufficient as it does not include accountability for the learning process and lessons emerging that have the power to accelerate and amplify outcomes.

While there has been a growing focus on learning and knowledge sharing in development in recent decades in relation to food availability, access to food, food consumption and nutrition and stability of food supply, a priority for evaluation of SDG2 is to ensure that new and emerging learning on both targets and effectiveness of partnerships and processes is captured and harnessed in a timely manner.

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[1] Secretary International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation, EvalPartners Executive Committee member, Co-Chair of EvalSDGs, Executive Director SDF Global
[2] Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005. *The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*.
[3] Wood et al. 2011. *The Evaluation of the Paris Declaration, Final Report*.

2. Discussion

Maintaining the core to guide thinking through complexity

Both development processes and partnerships have always been and are becoming increasingly complex, meaning that they are often both novel and dynamic and as such their operation and outcomes cannot be reliably predicted and measured in simple ways. With the recent adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the basis of the post-2015 development agenda including 17 goals with associated targets and indicators, it seems likely that global development processes and partnerships will continue to increase in complexity in terms of global response to the global goals. Yet at the local level, complexity is an undeniable and continuing feature of real life across economic, social and environmental sectors and in relation to peace and partnerships. These are not new concepts. The innovation is in acknowledging and addressing the complexity.

The goals are important because in this environment of increasing complexity of action and review, the SDGs, provide a 'core' upon which development partnerships and processes can share a foundation. In relation to SDG 2, 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture', this overarching goal provides a basis for development interventions which will be highly varied depending on the context in which they are designed and implemented. However the core remains constant and is shared between donors and implementing partners and is recognisable by those who are impacted by development actors and activities; thus providing the end point goal for mutual accountability and towards improved results for local, national and regional development effectiveness and ultimately greater development outcomes .

Understanding the effectiveness of partnerships and processes

At this opportune time, soon after global endorsement of the SDGs, development initiatives increasingly need indicators to measure not only development outputs and outcomes, but also the health or success of complex partnerships or processes, as evidenced by the findings of the Paris Declaration evaluation processes. Without embedding such indicators in design, the capacity to respond to dynamic processes and partnerships in order to optimise effectiveness during interventions is limited. Summative evaluations of programs or projects are often unable to capture the complexity of partnerships and processes, especially once interventions have been completed and their operation cannot be observed during the conduct of the evaluation. Currently, our evaluation findings arrive too late to capture learning and embed the lessons in order enhance the effectiveness and ultimately contribute to greater achievement of desired outcomes for development. We need to use more process and real time evaluation tools in relation to both partnerships and processes to capture and build on strengths and innovations and overcome barriers to effectiveness.

Contribution analysis in evaluation is facilitated by indicators that measure the effectiveness of partnerships in particular. Without pre-agreed indicators, it is more difficult to attribute the results of both partnerships and processes to their respective contributors. This is a serious impediment in relation to mutual accountability for development results. The indicator associated with mutual accountability in the Paris Declaration is the "Number of partner countries that undertake mutual assessments of progress in implementing agreed commitments on aid effectiveness including those in this Declaration." At the operational level or SDG2, there are greater opportunities, and complexities, in establishing new partnerships, e.g. in investment in value chain development. The partnerships in such initiatives are often already nascent but have uneven power and knowledge relationships that require support for effective progress towards SDG targets.

Our focus for SDG2 should then pay attention to how mutual assessments of progress can be improved and how indicators and the method of data collection can be improved and results be made more transparent. Aspects of improved multi-stakeholder inclusion, building mutual understanding and collective strategic processes are therefore worth investing in - establishment, facilitation and in progress evaluation at early stages in the partnership. Active partners will then more readily agree on indicators for respective contribution, success and therefore attribution. This also involves ex-ante review of evaluative processes for both the partnership and the activities that the partnership is pursuing. This could result in better intermediate outcomes such as better understanding of shared objectives, clearer theory of change, strategy and associated decision-making, earlier identification of risks and barriers to achievement of targets and better identification

of innovation and emerging lessons. Further, making results of performance evaluation visible without judgement for low results and with better accountability for learning the hard lessons and sharing the results with a wider audience will accelerate progress.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Mutual accountability in an increasingly complex global development environment remains a considerable challenge for development actors; yet the issues are not new and much learning and new tools are already available. Progress toward achieving greater transparency and accountability for effective partnerships and learning has been lagging. Particular impediments are the lack of indicators relating to the effectiveness of partnerships and processes; and the lack of focus on the accountability of all actors to learn and adapt processes and partnerships based on knowledge and lessons as they emerge.

Addressing complexity must start during pre-design and include investment in and indicators for effective partnerships

It is important for the expected outcomes and contributions of different actors and mechanisms for operation of partnerships to be set out in detail at the design phase of interventions, including indicators for the effectiveness of processes and partnerships. The indicators and monitoring process should clearly link back to a "core objective" that is central to SDG2. This should include allowing contribution analyses to emerge from the strength of multi-stakeholder negotiation, establishing evaluation frameworks and processes at commencement and being realistic through risk analyses and thorough consideration of exogenous factors that may affect effectiveness. These investments in partnerships and evaluation processes early in design and implementation will allow for respective contributions to be more easily accepted, understood and identified so that accountability and attribution will be clearer. Explicit processes to improve transparency of results (e.g. through media, data visualizations, improved feedback mechanisms to wider stakeholders) also need to be considered and planned for in early stages of partnerships.

Systematising learning and learning frameworks

In order to maximise the effectiveness of partnerships and processes in an increasingly complex environment, development actors must be accountable for learning, and particularly for capturing and responding to lessons learned. To achieve this, learning needs to be more proactive and embedded in design, including the allocation of resources for continual capacity building to ensure responsiveness, collection of useful data and capturing and response to learning. A successful proactive focus on learning and documentation of learning would allow evaluations to better respond to complexity. Specific actions that could foster the environment required to capture and respond to learning would be to add a section on learning in all performance reports, to include outcomes that relate to learning and documentation of learning in results frameworks, and additionally to develop knowledge and learning management frameworks. In relation to evaluation, the shift from summative evaluations to process and real time evaluation has potential to support greater responsiveness to learning in complex processes and partnerships. This has potential both to increase the relevance and usefulness of evaluations and to increase the effectiveness of initiatives. Further, they can contribute to meta-evaluation in an accelerated way rather than needing to wait for project completion. Better learning frameworks and adaptive knowledge management pathways towards achievement of SDG2 will facilitate greater responsiveness to changes and fosters learning and innovation.

4. References

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