

PEER ASSESSMENT OF EVALUATION IN MULTILATERAL ORGANISATIONS

PEER REVIEW OF UNDP EVALUATION OFFICE

KEY ISSUES AND LESSONS IDENTIFIED

SUMMARY

The December 2005 Peer Review of the Evaluation Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)¹ represents a first application of a new approach, designed under the auspices of the OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation. It aims at assessing and enhancing *multilateral agencies' own evaluation capacity and performance*, with an ultimate view to improving their development performance and reduce the need for external evaluations. This 'New Approach' and methodology were developed, and partially tested with UNDP between June and October 2004. The assessment of UNDP was guided by the steps laid out in the "Approach and Methodology" produced in June 2005². One variation was that the work was able to take advantage of a good deal of the preliminary familiarization with UNDP, data-collection, and analysis carried out during the exploratory period in 2004.

Because it was a first test, the Review Panel involved agreed, together with UNDP, to pay special attention to documenting and reporting on the experience and lessons learned for similar exercises in future. This brief report sums up the reflections of the Panel and the UNDP Evaluation Office on these points. It is primarily designed for use by Members of the DAC Network and the UN Evaluation Group, and particularly for those who may be planning further assessments in future. While the team stops short here of recommending any major changes in the working approach and methodology for these assessments on the basis of this single experience, it points to a number of lessons that would suggest some significant changes be considered. A reading of the Review Report, or at least its Executive Summary, is strongly recommended to provide a direct sense of the substance and impact of the work.

The experience outlined here should have relevance for applying this approach to any multilateral organisation, and particularly to U.N. organisations - since it worked with the new 2005 Norms and Standards for Evaluation in the UN System and the results of an evaluation self-assessment carried out by all UN organisations. The results of the UNDP Review will be followed shortly after by a review of UNICEF – a different type of UN agency – and the combined reading of the two experiences should prove especially instructive.³

¹ "UNDP Evaluation Office: Peer Review." Peer Assessment of Evaluation in Multilateral Organisations. December, 2005. The report can be downloaded at www.evaluation.dk or www.undp.org/eo/

² "A New Approach to Assessing Multilateral Organisations' Evaluation Performance: Approach and Methodology" Under the auspices of the DAC Evaluation Network, June 2005.

³ The lead Member for the UNICEF Peer Review team was able to join the UNDP assessment team for some of its key meetings and all its materials were shared with her and the consultants for that team.

LESSONS

General

- While organisations can be expected to vary significantly, the initial investment during 2004 was specific to the piloting nature of this first Review, and thus should not be necessary in future review exercises. Beyond the pilot phase, the effort expended in the review proper was reasonably efficient for this type of task. Comparison with the experience of the UNICEF review should shed further light on this point.
- With the type of approach and methodology used here, it is possible for such a peer review to provide a reasonably confident and documented response to the central assessment question. The results need to be shared widely with all decision-makers concerned to see to what extent they will share this conclusion, and work more closely with multilateral organizations' own evaluation capacities. This will determine the extent to which such efforts may complement or substitute for wider institutional reviews in future.
- Each multilateral organization considering participation in such an exercise should make its own assessment as to the likely utility of the process and findings to the agency, in the light of this and other experiences.
- The value of this type of exercise for all concerned will be greatly enhanced if it can be planned and scheduled to mesh with important decisions, reviews and/or relevant events within and beyond the agency being assessed.

Demand and Use

- Based on the principal that the use of any assessment is contingent on establishing a clear demand and use up-front, considerable effort is necessary to clarify and engender participation within the donor community, and with the UNDP Executive Board. To help strengthen the engagement and knowledge of members of multilateral governing bodies in strengthening and using evaluation, ways should be sought to formally engage the governing body of the entity being reviewed at an early stage, even if this may take more time. The suggestion in the June 2005 Approach paper, of seeking a Board Member to sit on the Peer Panel was found politically impractical. To build greater governing body engagement in future reviews there may also be a special need to demonstrate that these exercises are undertaken in the shared interest of all Member Countries and their citizens and not just a group of donors who took the first initiative.
- Beyond the Review's value to the UNDP EO and management, its use will only be evident in the counterfactual, namely by preventing the conduct of a multi-donor evaluation of UNDP, and through evidence of the use of specific evaluations by bilateral departments. To determine this, it may be helpful to conduct a study of actual use at some later stage.
- In view of the 'New Approach's' primary objective of replacement for an institutional evaluation, future Reviews should also assess the coverage of evaluations conducted by the central evaluation unit. While UNDP's EO has evaluated a number of key organizational dimensions over the past three years, and thus has sufficient coverage, this was not an explicit criterion in the Review.

Panel Composition and Roles

- These reviews should expect to encounter challenges in identifying appropriate panel members from among other multilateral donor agencies, beneficiary countries, and independent evaluation experts. They may have to handle potential real or perceived conflicts of interest between certain agencies, or between consultants and the host agency as a client, and reconcile the experts' availability for this work with their normal workloads. One question that the lead agency should consider in advance is what constitution of peers those within their agencies that are commissioning multi-donor evaluations of multilateral agencies will deem credible.
- There are important arguments for seeking early and structured participation in future reviews from a wider group of countries, and the interest of UNEG in related work could be an asset in this. The more active role and engagement of UNEG in this work has been positive development. Perhaps there is an analogy to the broader dynamics around the international development strategy, with much greater joint activity in all aspects of development work, from needs identification all the way to evaluation. There could be considerable benefits to all concerned if ways could be found for future reviews to include more peer panelists and advisors from developing countries, with the active support of developing country members of the governing body of the Organisation concerned.
- The Panel found that the diverse backgrounds and experiences of its members and advisers was a strong combination that brought out varied perspectives and insights. The innovations of incorporating an experienced "user" of evaluation and an evaluator from beyond the development cooperation field probably had the effect of broadening the analysis from what otherwise might have been a narrower, "in-group" exercise and attuned the treatment better to the non-specialised audiences for whom it was mainly intended. All agreed that the gender balance should have been better. UNDP EO, moreover, believes that the Panel should have had stronger representation from a multilateral agency with country presence. These different views suggest that all concerned be clear on their primary audiences.
- The kind of streamlining of roles done in this review make sense, while still respecting the basic requirements of the approach. Energetic, experienced and diplomatic consultant support is likely to be essential. The Panel should be substantially engaged from an early stage, to provide overall directions, key issues, questions and possible hypotheses. Consultants can then pursue the issues and gather evidence in greater depth, then make a clear "handover" of evidence and findings to the Panel, allowing the time and access to sources to test their accuracy and proceed to forming judgments, conclusions and possible suggestions.

Working Relationships with UNDP

- It was suggested by the Evaluation Office that future panels should invest even more heavily in preparatory work in order to best clarify their information needs and especially interview requests.
- The Panel concluded that at least one earlier and more intensive peer panel meeting would have been helpful, although it would be very difficult to replicate more rapidly the strong base of information and understanding of the Organisation accumulated during the exploratory work a year earlier when the peer approach had not yet been selected.

The Normative Framework and Methodology for Assessment

- The justification for establishing a framework beyond taking the UNEG Norms and Standards as drafted was based on the need to establish a common basis which both the Peer Panel and the multilateral agency agree. This principal of a ‘negotiated agreement’ will be important for future Peer Reviews where the UNEG Norms and Standards may not be the foundation (such as the MDBs, where good practice standards are used).
- The normative framework adopted covered the ground well. The compilation of evidence and findings in a single working document (structured around that framework) permitted the systematic and transparent organisation of findings, and provided a basis for effective consideration of conclusions, suggestions, and a clearly drafted report.
- Drawing on the clarification of the “New Approach” methodology from the pilot experiences, the process of future reviews should begin with a discussion and clear agreement by all parties on a brief outline of the framework and methodology. This should serve to clarify expectations and provide a sound basis for agreement on a more detailed review plan and work-programme.

Key Boundary Issues

- Reviews of the evaluation function will need to anticipate and manage important “boundary issues” relating to the lines between assessing evaluation processes and products; centralized and de-centralized evaluation systems; and between evaluation and other systems for performance information and management, such as RBM. The approach of maintaining a central focus, but explicitly taking account of the essential linkages proved reasonably successful in this case, making quite clear the extent and limits of the validity of its findings beyond the main boundaries. In the case of the UNDP review, the agreed decision not to cover evaluation in the Funds and Programmes was in retrospect a shortcoming, although to do so would have considerably increased the work and complexity involved.

17 March 2006