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Case Studies of Best Practice Evaluations by UN Agencies in Asia and the Pacific

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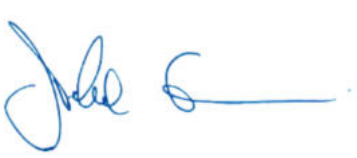
FOREWORD

One of the biggest challenges in the world of development is to demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of our interventions in bringing change for people and the planet. Evaluations remain a critical tool for the assessment of our interventions, generating objective evidence, demonstrating relevant change, documenting lessons learned and making recommendations for the future.

With the impact of, and recovery from the pandemic, development is even more important and so is evaluating its impact. The staff and teams of the United Nations in Asia and the Pacific adapted and innovated to be able to provide information for decision makers to overcome the setbacks created by COVID19. The country offices in our region continued to undertake robust evaluations as we adjusted to a new reality where COVID19 has impacted the lives of all citizens, and more heavily women and children everywhere.

This report has been established with funding from UNDP and UNICEF – and is the result of a collaboration with UN agencies in Asia and the Pacific. We have endeavoured to bring to the reader's attention our experience over the last two years and reflect on successful examples that can be replicated globally. The report highlights case studies with key lessons learned that can be of use to development practitioners and all citizens to identify best practices in the post pandemic world. We hope this report provides inspiration for strong, locally adapted evaluations that can in turn be used by decision makers for effective programmes for people, prosperity, planet, and partnerships.



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INTRODUCTION

This report is a collaborative effort highlighting the best practices of evaluations undertaken by UN agencies in the Asia and the Pacific region during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to better understand how UN systems adapted to the changing environment during the 2020–2021 period—a period which saw unprecedented impacts on the conduct of evaluations—and to facilitate the growth and professionalism of evaluation practice in the region by examining selected UN agency evaluations from the region, showcasing good practices and demonstrating emerging techniques, tools and technologies.

Supported by the United Nations Evaluation Development Group for Asia and the Pacific (UNEDAP), a regional interagency network that brings together regional UN evaluation, the report demonstrates multidisciplinary and inter-agency learning across agencies and countries. UNEDAP currently has 10 member agencies with regional offices in Bangkok and 8 of these agencies submitted evaluations for analysis in this report: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and World Food Programme (WFP).

The methodology entailed a desk-based review and analysis of pre-selected evaluations, followed by semi-structured interviews with managers of the evaluations, including UNEDAP members and Country Office colleagues, using the information gleaned to develop case studies of best practice and outline the key lessons learned. The target audience is evaluation officers and practitioners, as well as members of the development community.

By informing management and stakeholders of the emerging practices and conduct of evaluations, and by focusing in particular on the adjustments and innovation made necessary by widespread COVID-19 restrictions, it is hoped that this report will help institute, through the application of lessons learned, improvements in the design and approach to conducting evaluations during the pandemic and beyond.

CASE STUDIES

Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB) Project

Photo © UNDP Bangladesh

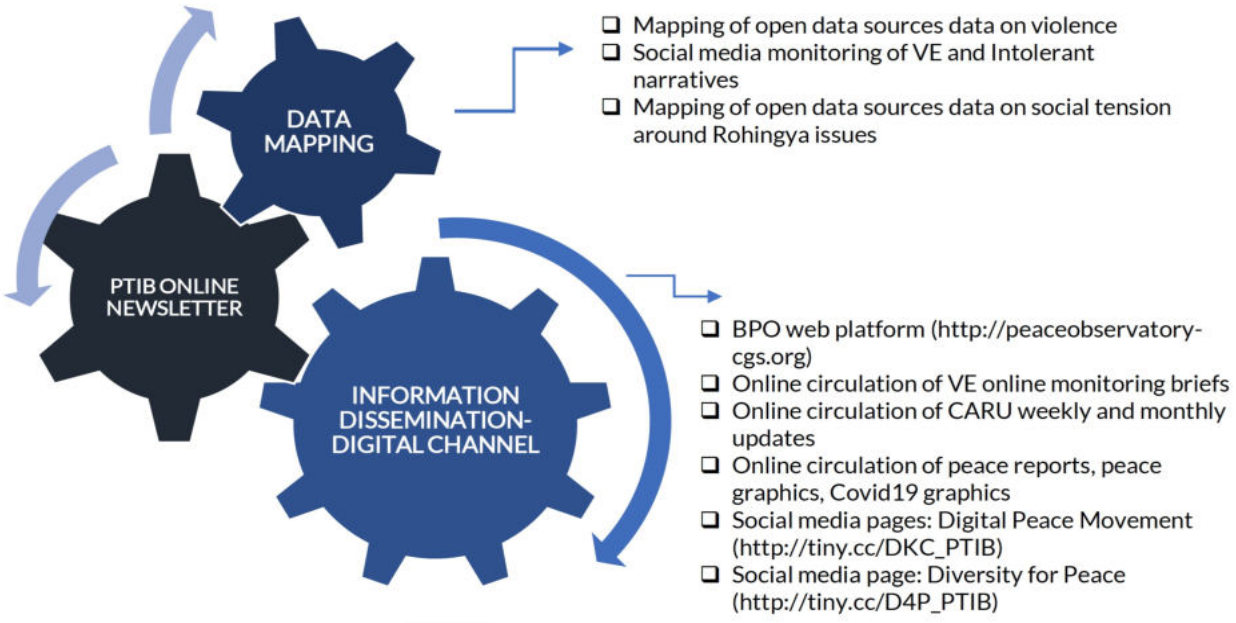
This evaluation which received an Excellence Award from UNDP's Independent Evaluation Office, covers the project, *Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB)*, and was commended for its preparatory work, as well as for turning COVID-19 restrictions into an advantage. The project was launched in 2017, in the wake of the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack in Dhaka. A programme such as this, taking place at a time when little was known about the nature of violent extremism in Bangladesh, had not previously been run in Bangladesh. It was considered to be very much a learning and research project to try to understand and respond to the drivers of extremism through youth engagement and working with the government. The first phase ended in 2021 and the second phase, lasting a further five years, is expected to run until 2027.

In August 2020, UNDP's Bangladesh office conducted the final evaluation to assess the achievements to date, document the lessons learned and provide recommendations to UNDP and its partners for the development of the second phase. The evaluation team was also tasked with collecting feedback and other information that could be applied in future programming.

The Bangladesh office is well regarded for the innovative and creative approach it takes to its work and this particular evaluation won the UNDP Evaluation Excellence Award for Innovative Evaluations in 2020, partly in recognition of the way that elements of inclusion in general, and Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) and gender equality in particular, were strongly embedded in the Terms of Reference (ToR) and applied in all aspects of the evaluation. Care was taken to ensure women's voices were represented in the selection of interviewees, and there was a good balance in the selection of different voices to be captured.

Perhaps the real innovation here, though, was the way the programme's strong design and good data monitoring systems were utilized before the evaluation began. This is a learning project with experimentation and adaptation at its core. The evaluators were able to take a similar approach by investing in research and learning before starting. A consultant was hired to delve deeper into the data that had been gathered during the programme. His analysis provided the evaluators with a valuable head start in preparation and uncovering a trove of useful insights into where violent extremism sits on Bangladesh's social media landscape.In an age when there is increasing discussion about the role of social media in the spread of disinformation and the proliferation of hate speech and incitement in society, the pioneering social media monitoring and data collection were timely and innovative, and demonstrated how learning and social media monitoring can be part of normal programme and project design.

PTIB DIGITAL ECO-SYSTEM



Preparation

To prepare for the evaluation, all necessary information and data were collected into one document, which saved a lot of time for the consultants when they began their work. The more information that is gathered and prepared in advance, and the more explicit the stated requirements, the easier it will be for the evaluators to provide a good quality evaluation. Since this project focuses on social media and social media campaigning, a consultant was commissioned prior to the evaluation to analyse the project's social media data, looking at outreach and reactions to campaigns, in addition to aggregated data on newsletter subscribers and website traffic. The result was that the data sets were fully prepared before the evaluators started so it saved them time and allowed them to focus on the evaluation rather than the preparation.

Risk analysis

The evaluators assessed how the project managed risks by reviewing the PTIB risk matrix with the project team and analysing it against the project's actual risks. This allowed them to determine whether the risks had materialized; what was their impact on the PTIB; what changes or mitigation measures, if any, were taken; and if any anticipated risks arose during the life of the project.

Remote data collection

Because the evaluation had to be done remotely, it was possible to conduct many more interviews than would have been the case with face-to-face interviews. When one interview finished, the next could begin almost immediately. The net result was many more interviews, a bigger sample size and the various stakeholders in the project, including beneficiaries, having a greater voice. COVID-19 showed it possible to gather data online or with a hybrid model, and to be flexible in approach.

Research

Evaluations can benefit from either a research component, or a pre-evaluation research or analysis of project results and findings. This enables ready-to-use data and findings for the evaluation team.

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THE EVALUATION HERE

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

At the time of the evaluation, Bangladesh was under varying degrees of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, as with many evaluations conducted at the time, the primary impact was that all stakeholder meetings for primary data collection had to be organized virtually and interviews were conducted remotely to allow the evaluation team to triangulate, cross-check, and verify information gathered during the initial document review. This was the first time an evaluation had been conducted totally remotely.

Normally with an evaluation like this, the evaluators would visit the project activities to see the work for themselves, which was not possible in this case. The evaluation team decided to divide interviews between the national and international consultants to better manage workload and schedules.

Overall, the office felt that the changes imposed by COVID-19 restrictions gave rise to more advantages than disadvantages, particularly when it came to the number of informants it was possible to interview. There were also considerable cost savings arising from the inability to travel, and a reduced carbon footprint.

Resilient Reconstruction through Building Back Better focused on the most vulnerable communities in districts most severely affected by the 2015 Nepal Earthquake

Photo © UNDP Nepal

The evaluation of UNDP Nepal's project, *Resilient Reconstruction through Building Back Better* focused on the most vulnerable communities in districts most severely affected by the 2015 Nepal Earthquake, demonstrated the ability to adapt to COVID-19 restrictions, and leveraged strong data monitoring to report on impacts on vulnerable communities. This was appropriate as the project focused on the most vulnerable communities in the districts most severely affected by the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. About 10 districts were identified as being the worst hit and badly affected. The project, implemented between January 2018 and May 2020, addressed the reconstruction challenges faced by the poorest and most vulnerable earthquake-affected households most at risk of being left behind in the reconstruction and recovery process.

Just over 11,000 households affected by the earthquake were beneficiaries of the project. These included elderly people; single women–headed households; orphaned children; Dalits and others discriminated against by the caste system; and people with disabilities who, despite receiving government reconstruction grants, found themselves unable to rebuild their houses on their own.

UNDP hired an independent evaluator to conduct the evaluation, which was done between 18 June 2020 and 30 August 2020, during a peak in the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation—non-experimental, quantitative and qualitative—was designed and conducted according to UNDP and United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) guidelines.

The evaluation benefited from the strong programme data monitoring system that was already in place. Quantitative data were collected through the Project Management Information System Database while qualitative data and information were collected through focus group discussions, interviews and observations.

As per policy, all evaluations must have an Evaluation Manager and a Quality Assessment process for the entire duration of the evaluation. The implementation of this policy strengthened both the process and the evaluation report.

The evaluation was led by a national evaluator who managed the work very well in very challenging circumstances. The fact that this evaluation won an excellence award illustrates the potential for using national evaluation capacities in the future.

Reconstruction Information Management System (RIMS)

Photo © UNDP Nepal

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The impact of COVID-19 inevitably led to delays in the timeline. The evaluation was originally planned to be completed by May 2020 but was finalized in October.

A complete nationwide lockdown made it practically impossible to conduct field visits and face-to-face discussions with stakeholders. The number of site visits was reduced and data collection methods were adapted so that both face-to-face and virtual methods could be used to collect information from the respondents. The original plan in the inception report was for at least four focus group discussions but in the end, this was reduced to two. To make up for this, the number of key informant interviews was increased.

With face-to-face interaction not possible, telephone was generally preferred to videoconferencing as a means of collecting data, particularly at the beginning of the evaluation. As time went on though, Zoom and Google Meet were increasingly used as people became accustomed to the format. Consultations with implementing NGOs were conducted online through videoconferencing.

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Data collection

Data disaggregated by gender, age and disability were rigorously collected and monitored throughout the project's life, allowing for the identification and inclusion of the most vulnerable beneficiaries in the project activities. Data from the project monitoring system remained well managed and easy to analyse. The evaluation team was able to triangulate the data and demonstrated the ability to adapt well to new collection techniques and challenges. The data collection techniques, including in-person interviews, telephone interviews and Zoom videoconferencing, were innovative and flexible, though complicated by COVID-19 restrictions.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) guidelines are woven into the fabric of the project design and therefore also into the design of the evaluation. The evaluation had pre-existing disaggregated data to analyse but the methodology was also designed to ensure voices of women and people with disabilities, as well as the Dalit community, were captured. The evaluation received a Gender Responsive Excellence award.

Rights, Education and Protection (REAP) II programme for children with disabilities

Photo © UNICEF/UNI310419/Sinis VII/Vietnam/2020

The *Rights, Education and Protection (REAP)* programme is a two-phase partnership between UNICEF and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) that was launched in 2011 to promote inclusive development approaches which fulfil the rights of children with disabilities. The second phase, which ran from 2015 to 2019, was the REAP II Programme. The project focused on facilitating the inclusion of children with disabilities by removing barriers at a policy and legislative level. It invested in service coordination and improvement; policy development; and evidence and data collection in collaboration with government and civil society partners.

The evaluation aimed to identify the lessons from the implementation of REAP II at the regional and country level that could be used to shape future programming and to inform the objectives and geographical focus of future disability-inclusive programming.

In terms of scope, the evaluation focused on Papua New Guinea, Viet Nam and Pacific Island Countries and Territories (with a focus on Vanuatu) and referred to activities and outputs completed between July 2015 and December 2019.

The methodology incorporated the reconstruction of a Theory of Change (ToC) for the programme, used a simplified outcome-harvesting methodology for the formative part of the evaluation, and a mixed-method approach to respond to the evaluation questions.

The evaluation methodology had to be adapted on more than one occasion due to the travel restrictions and social distancing measures resulting from COVID-19. This resulted not only in doing data collection remotely, but also in smaller sample sizes. The remote methodology included workshops on Theory of Change and outcome harvesting, interviews and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the programme.

The Global Evaluation Report Oversight System (GEROS), which assesses evaluations according to a certain set of UNICEF evaluation report criteria, deemed this evaluation to be of exceptional quality, noting the combination of flexibility and adaptability within the evaluation and management teams, combined with the ability to find high-quality local researchers to facilitate workshops and data gathering on the ground. The outcome harvesting workshops were a good example of this, especially given the constraints of conducting outcome harvesting remotely for the first time in an evaluation.

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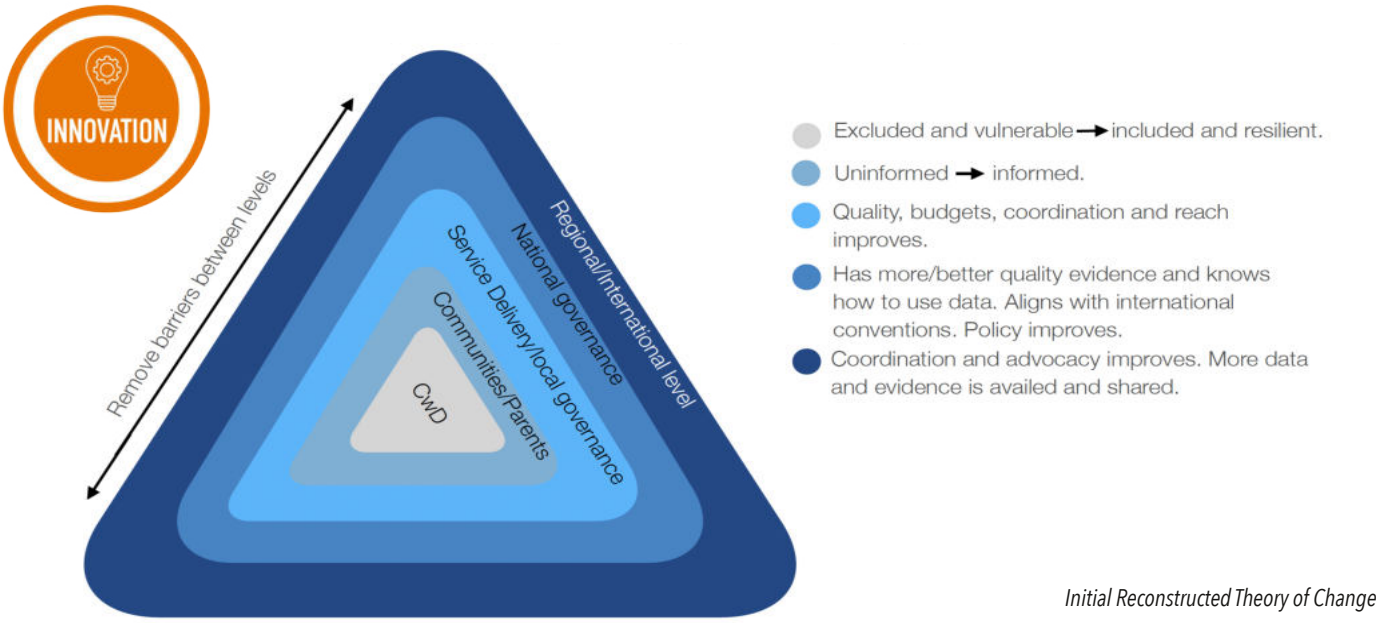
EXPLAINER VIDEO



Initial Reconstructed Theory of Change

Flexibility and team work

A good evaluation and project team needs to be flexible and adaptable enough to be able to change the course envisioned in the ToR and inception report in a manner appropriate to the country context. For example, in some cases the team needed to bring in a translator. The timeliness of the process depended on how quickly appropriate local translators could be identified and brought onto Zoom calls or webinars. COVID-19 showed that the team needs to work together, to be adaptable and flexible. A clear division of roles and responsibilities, and a balance between partners to find solutions, while ensuring the report was impartial, was critical to produce the report in a timely manner. While the team understands the benefit of remote data collection, they believe that the need for face-to-face interactions is not over. This is especially important in certain cultures where such interactions allow for a deeper and more meaningful collection of data and feedback.

Innovative approaches to evaluations

Outcome harvesting, though not a new approach to evaluations, was brought into the region through UNICEF's work as an approach to evaluations which focuses on the change rather than the process through which the change has occurred. It allows for feedback to ensure, once change has been determined, how and if it can be attributed to the project. This is one of the many ways through which evaluation approaches need to be updated and relevant methodologies selected for different streams of work.

Communicating evaluation findings

The process of evaluations is to learn and improve accountability. This can be achieved not just through reports but also by making the findings of the reports open and accessible to all. UNICEF's four-minute explainer video (see the link on the previous page) made sure that a large evaluation document was condensed and made available to all, with recommendations from the evaluation clearly communicated.

Importance of data

When managing data, it is important to have a team that can manage, understand, analyse and interpret data within an analytical framework. This allows for remote triangulation while making the data accessible to the whole team.

Research in evaluations

UNICEF's approach to data collection included hiring of researchers, in addition to the key evaluators, for data collection and analysis. This enabled a stronger, robust data set which the evaluators were able to triangulate. One of the main factors REAP II evaluation was categorized as an exceptional evaluation was the combination of flexibility and adaptability within the evaluation team and the management team, combined with the ability to find very good local researchers who could facilitate workshops and ensure the work was done in a participatory manner, which helped the data gathering.

Remote data collection

Remote data collection can actually take longer to do than visiting the country to collect the data. People often find it easier to cancel online appointments than they do for face-to-face appointments. Internet outages and weak connections can also contribute and add to delays. Hence, triangulation takes longer to complete if the evaluation is carried out remotely.

COVID-19 Behavioural Drivers and Patterns: A longitudinal assessment from the South Asia Region

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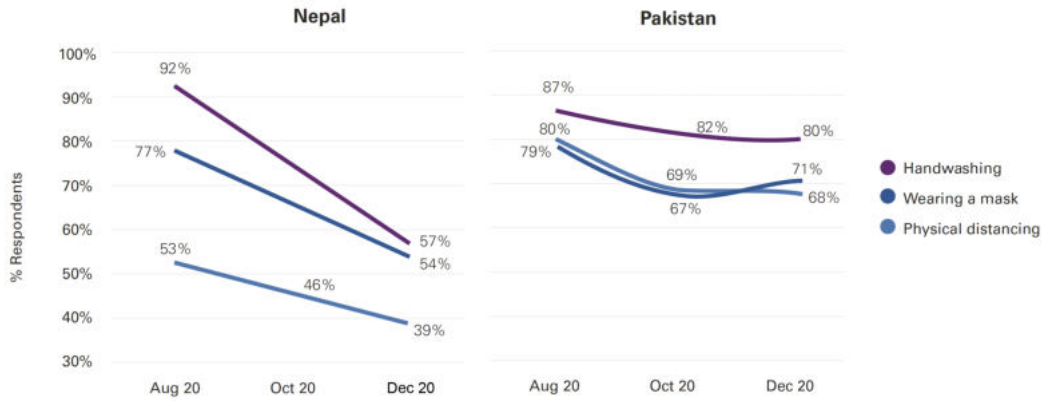
The evaluation, *COVID-19 Behavioural Drivers and Patterns: A longitudinal assessment from the South Asia Region – Findings from Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Pakistan*, looks at behavioural drivers of COVID-19 in South Asia. The impetus came from the need for social and behavioural data to inform risk communication and community engagement during COVID-19 and led to the implementation of Community Rapid Assessments (CRA) by UNICEF in Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

Using a time-series approach that collected similar data over time to observe changes, the CRAs were designed to provide quick and consistent data on people's perceptions and behaviours concerning COVID-19 and covered a range of topics including access to and trust in information; vaccine acceptance; mask-wearing and social distancing; coping strategies; perspectives on government action; and people's evolving needs during the pandemic.

Initially, data from Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan were used during the period from August to December 2020 and presented in an interim report with early findings. This was expanded to include India up to April 2021. A series of research questions was formulated to guide the analysis. These questions were drawn from well-established questionnaires but were given further context by UNICEF Country Offices. Of particular note was UNICEF's flexibility in its choice of partners to collect data across the region, eschewing a "one size fits all" approach in favour of engaging a variety of diverse partners to collect data for each country.

COVID-19 had an impact in various ways, not least because the assessment itself was about attitudes and behaviours related to COVID-19. COVID-19 mandated the need for timely and quick data collection because the situation and the responses to it were evolving all the time. The need for getting data quickly dictated the modality for data collection. A face-to-face method, even if possible given restrictions, would have taken too long and would not have worked. Hence, COVID-19 dictated the modality, COVID-19 dictated the questions and COVID-19 also dictated that the findings be disseminated almost entirely virtually. The assessment was tailored to the COVID-19 environment in terms of the format, questions, methodology and timing.

Trends in practice of protective behaviours against COVID-19 (Nepal and Pakistan)



A harmonized results framework across countries

The evaluation showed best practice in demonstrating the importance of harmonized and consistent indicators and methodologies used to provide information relevant to both country and regional programming decision makers. The assessment gathered similar information through a range of data collection tools and partners in a way that enabled comparison and learning for both country and cross-country comparisons.

Innovation in data collection

UNICEF experimented with new ways of remote data-collection technologies, mainly involving the use of phones, interactive voice response (IVR) and online surveys. IVR data collection technology, for example, used a recorded voice to ask survey questions by telephone, and respondents answered by pressing the buttons on their telephones.

Diversity of partnerships

The capacity to collect this kind of data in the region exists and it is possible to move beyond traditional partners for data collection. Viamo in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a social enterprise, IPSOS in India is a market research organization, and the Sharecast Initiative in Nepal is a not-for-profit media and research organization. The flexibility and creativity by UNICEF to expand its partnership base to collect data, often at a reasonable cost, allowed for high-quality and consistent data collection.

Comprehensive sampling frame

For telephone surveys, it is important to make the sampling frame as comprehensive as possible. Engaging a data collection company with the right database of people is crucial to building a good sampling frame. Incorporating sampling techniques like random digit dialling can help eliminate bias.

Survey length and order of questions

Surveys need to be short and to the point. If a survey is too long, there will be a higher rate of omissions. The order of the questions is also important so priority questions should be asked first. Similarly, forward and back translations help reduce misunderstandings due to dialects.

Inclusivity

Some countries, including India and Pakistan, have a higher rate of phone use. In Afghanistan, and particularly in the tribal regions, phone usage is lower and therefore, there was a risk of not getting a good representation in some areas. UNEG guidelines were followed throughout as much as possible but the methodology, as noted, had limitations in that those who don't have phones or access to the internet are excluded.

While the sampling design achieved wide national coverage across regions and provinces, it was not representative of the national population on key characteristics such as gender and education. This was because the sample represented users of mobile phones, which likely excluded some of the most vulnerable people. In Nepal, this was mitigated by purposefully recruiting underrepresented groups into the survey, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan by applying weight models ex post facto to ensure representativeness on key characteristics.

Hybrid approach to data collection

Previously, it was thought that face-to-face methods provide the best information. Now, it is clear that other modalities can produce relatively good data. In Pakistan, because of a need to do local surveys, face-to-face data collection has started. Where this is possible, it supplements the data and provides depth. But where data are needed quickly and regularly, e.g. in this case every three months, this is not feasible. So, a hybrid format that combines remote and face-to-face data collection is proposed to work well in a post-pandemic scenario, and phone-led surveys have been found beneficial in terms of timeliness and costs.

Debriefing

Debriefing with the data collection agency should be done as soon as possible after the data are collected; otherwise, issues may arise that are too late to correct. At first, there was a delay between data collection and debriefing which resulted in a failure to spot gaps in the data, such as populations being missed and problems with the questions.

People don't always answer the phone

Just because people have telephones doesn't mean they will answer them. A much higher number of rounds of calls than anticipated was needed to get a sufficient sample.

Ready-Made Garment Project Phase II (RMGP II) and Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) and affiliated projects

International Labour Organization

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Photo © ILO / Marcel Crozet

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest clothing exporter, employing over 4 million workers in more than 4,600 garment factories throughout the country. Following the Tazreen factory fire in 2012 and the collapse of Rana Plaza in April 2013, which together killed over 1,200 workers, international and national stakeholders came together through various initiatives to improve workers' safety in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector.

ILO has since focused on improving working conditions in the sector, particularly social protection for workers who have been injured on the job, the use of training inspectors, generally improving the level of inspections and pushing for regulation.

There are two main complementary ILO programmes aimed at improving working conditions and enhancing the competitiveness of the RMG sector in *Bangladesh: Improving Working Conditions in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment Sector Phase II (RMGP II)* and *Better Work Bangladesh (BWB)* and its affiliated projects.

These programmes work with diverse stakeholders including government, global brands, national industry associations, factory owners, unions and workers to improve working conditions in factories; to support a policy and business environment that protects workers' rights and improves competitiveness; and to empower women, reduce sexual harassment and close the gender pay gap.

For the mid-term evaluation, the goal was to review progress made towards achieving the intended results and outcomes, identify lessons learned, and recommend possible adaptations to be made during the programmes' final implementation period. It draws on RMGP II performance data as well as qualitative and quantitative data collected from programme stakeholders and documents. The evaluation team—composed of an international evaluator, a national consultant and a logistics assistant—conducted the evaluation between April and September 2020.

The evaluation methodology had to be adapted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions on travel and social interaction. The evaluators used both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods including document review, key informant and group interviews, and online surveys. While every effort was made to remain agile and flexible, the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 situation, made even more difficult by the personal difficulties encountered by both the consultants and the beneficiaries, impacted how the evaluation was rolled out.

Cluster approach

The mid-term evaluation used a cluster approach, a proactive effort by the ILO driven by its new evaluation policy, which aims to facilitate high-level analysis and recommendations, as well as potentially save resources. ILO defines clustered evaluation as: "An envelope of evaluations of projects combined into a single evaluation based on results or strategic, thematic or geographical area or scope." This approach, which was agreed upon by programme donors, was taken because the programmes have shared objectives, stakeholders and, in some cases, management structures and intervention strategies. Clustering evaluations is also a way to reduce evaluation fatigue among the stakeholders.

Remote data collection

This evaluation has shown that remote data collection is possible if it is carefully planned. The use of remote data collection will likely grow in the future because of the opportunities it provides and time and cost savings from travelling. Remote data collection, however, requires a lot of planning and flexibility. A backup plan is often necessary because stakeholders are more likely to cancel or postpone online appointments than face-to-face ones. Considerable time, therefore, needs to be allocated for remote data collection. And while there are obvious downsides and challenges to remote data collection, it does open up opportunities for strengthening the use and capacity of national consultants in evaluation.

Teamwork and flexibility

Good collaboration with the country team is essential. When working remotely, good and timely advice regarding the situation on the ground in the country where the evaluation is happening is necessary. This is only possible through working closely with the country team. COVID-19 has impacted on everyone and it impacts people in different ways. It is important to be sensitive to the changing circumstances and needs of the people involved. The evaluation team needs to be flexible in terms of data collection and time because the situation may suddenly change, for example, because of lockdowns, stakeholders becoming sick or the loss of their friends and relatives.

Beneficiary and stakeholder contact database

The database containing the contact details of all stakeholders and beneficiaries needs to be up to date and easy to access. Since not everyone had access to the internet for email, telephone numbers were needed as well, so that interviews could be conducted over the telephone.

Database of national consultants

It is important to have a database of good national consultants who have expertise in evaluations and the subject matter of the evaluations. This has become more important, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. National consultants have an important role in data collection and in supporting international evaluators that are working remotely.

Flexibility around evaluation timelines

This was really the first time that everyone has faced a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic and adjustments were made along the way. In the beginning, it was easy to underestimate the scale and longevity of the disruption. After nearly two years of varying degrees of disruption, it is evident that there is little point in pushing too hard to complete evaluations within a limited time-frame. There will be delays due to unforeseen circumstances, including people losing their businesses or physically relocating. Sometimes pushing too hard to complete the evaluation has the potential to do more harm than good.

Photo © ILO / Marcel Crozet

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This large, clustered evaluation was in the final stages of preparation when COVID-19 hit. The impact was immediate and widespread. The international consultant could not travel and the national consultant withdrew. The decision to proceed with the evaluation was done in consultation with the programme team and the ILO Evaluation Office. A planned two-phase solution did not work, as the situation had deteriorated by the time the second phase was due to begin. The plan to have face-to-face focus discussion groups had to be abandoned. There was also a situation developing with business people in Bangladesh, who were suddenly faced with a reduction in orders, resulting in businesses closing down and workers losing their jobs.

This necessitated a certain degree of sensitivity when requesting interviews. When people lose their businesses, they are not really inclined to talk to the ILO. With so many stakeholders, the pressure to complete the evaluation within the timeline was considerable, though this increasingly became impractical and deadlines had to be pushed back.

Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Marginalized Agricultural Communities Living in the Mahaweli River Basin of Sri Lanka (2013–2020)

Photo © WFP

The project, *Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Marginalized Agricultural Communities Living in the Mahaweli River Basin of Sri Lanka (2013–2020)*, was financed by the Adaptation Fund and implemented by the World Food Programme in partnership with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Environment & Wildlife Resources (MEWR) and UNDP. The project, also known as the *Climate Change Adaptation Project (CCAP)*, targeted rain-dependent farming families in two hazard-prone areas in the Mahaweli River Basin in Sri Lanka and was designed to address specific vulnerabilities faced by rain-dependent farmers there.

The main objective of the project was to protect the livelihoods and the food security of people living in the area against climate-related shocks and rainfall variability, particularly droughts. It focused primarily on smallholders dependent on rain-fed agriculture or minor irrigation schemes. Another objective was to build capacity on climate change adaption at the local and subnational levels.

The evaluation was commissioned by the WFP Sri Lanka country office and covers the full CCAP implementation period from 2013 to September 2020. One of the main objectives was learning; the evaluation provided an opportunity to take stock of the successes and challenges of the project, and to identify lessons learned for future interventions.

The project had not been evaluated in five years and lacked comprehensive monitoring data collection and management systems. There was also significant staff turnover in the various relevant agencies and government departments over the period, all of which led to a growing concern over the validity of the evaluation and, consequently, an absence of ownership in the evaluation process.

The evaluation team used a mixed-method approach including secondary data analysis, interviews with key informants and project site visits. Project documentation was reviewed by the team during and after the field mission phase. Gender equality and empowerment of women (GEEW) was built into the evaluation matrix, for example, specific interviews with women and women's groups were conducted, and questions related to gender were asked as part of interviews with men and women.

Data were collected using various methods, particularly key informant interviews and/or paired interviews; focus group discussions with project beneficiaries; in-person observation of project achievements; and household interviews with male and female beneficiaries.

The data collection phase took place during the last weeks of September 2020. Field visits were done by the national team instead of the full team due to restrictions on the full team's movement. Some key informant interviews were conducted remotely by the two international team members.

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Consultative validation of findings

Evaluation reports can be technical, sprawling documents containing a lot of information and tables. So, communicating an evaluation's key findings to stakeholders and beneficiaries in a concise, comprehensible and meaningful way can be quite challenging. Graphic facilitation can work well to help people understand concepts, stimulate conversation and improve stakeholder engagement, even when done online.

The findings of the evaluation report were shared with stakeholders during the validation workshop in order to get their input and feedback. In this case, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the validation workshop had to be done online and the evaluation team decided to use graphic facilitation to increase engagement. This enabled building consensus, and included doing deep dives into certain issues around project management. It also allowed for a shared responsibility and accountability towards the project's management response. Graphic facilitation of validation workshops can work well offline too, especially at a community level where WFP has sought to seek feedback from stakeholders such as farmers. With graphic facilitation, project beneficiaries can understand the contents of a report and give their feedback.

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IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The first phase of the data collection was not impacted by COVID-19. As the pandemic worsened in Sri Lanka, it was decided to do the validation workshops online. Invitations were sent to government and implementation partners to join the event remotely and the response was good.

The online validation workshop took an innovative approach to engaging participants, using graphic facilitation to explain complex concepts and provoke discussion. This had the effect of increasing the enthusiasm for the evaluation, removing any scepticism from the process and created overall buy-in. The validation workshop allowed all stakeholders to fully engage in drafting the management response together with the evaluation team. In a sense, the COVID-19 restrictions boosted the effectiveness of the validation workshop because, by forcing it online, the number of participants increased.

Methodology

Project monitoring systems are the first source of data for evaluators. In the absence of strong systems, the evaluation methodology, however robust, called for a more formative and less summative evaluation.

LESSONS LEARNED

Inclusivity

The evaluation tried to be as inclusive as possible, despite COVID-19 restrictions. Gender equality and empowerment of women (GEEW) is integrated throughout the evaluation. Specific attention was paid to include women and marginalized groups in the field. Women made up 51 percent of focus group discussion (FGD) participants, 81 percent of the FGDs included women, and 30 percent of FGDs were women only. The primary field data collection phase was conducted by the national team instead of the full team.

Climate change

Climate change is becoming an important issue in Sri Lanka. As this is an environmental project, environmental assessment will play a bigger role in the next evaluation.

11th Thailand Country Programme (2017–2021)

Photo © United Nations Population Fund

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) started its programme of support to Thailand in 1971 and since then has worked to advance the goals of the International Conference of Population Development (ICPD) in Thailand. The *UNFPA Thailand 11th Country Programme (CP11)* was formulated through a consultative process, involving the Government of Thailand, civil society, the private sector and other development partners. As an overarching approach to addressing inequality, the programme targets disadvantaged and vulnerable populations and focuses on adolescents and youth, while integrating strategies to address gender inequalities across the programme. Policy engagement and advocacy are key programme strategies, along with the development of a robust resource mobilization strategy targeting the corporate sector and the general public.

The evaluation of CP11, combining UNEG guidelines with UNFPA's own guidelines, was standard. It was undertaken by an external, independent team of evaluators, and covered three programmatic areas: Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Population and Development, and South–South Cooperation, with gender equality integrated in all programmatic areas. All programmatic interventions planned and implemented during the period from January 2017 to July 2020 were included, plus cross-cutting areas and strategies such as partnerships, resource mobilization and country programme communication and advocacy interventions. CP11 was implemented at the national level, with initiatives at the regional and subnational levels.

The evaluation used a purposive sampling method, applying a mixed-method approach for collecting data from both secondary and primary sources. This included a desk review of publications, individual and group face-to-face interviews, remote interviews, informal and focused group discussions, and field observations.

A total of 58 key informants (15 male, 43 female) were selected from UNFPA country office staff, national- and subnational-level development partners, the United Nations Country Team, and other implementing partners and key stakeholders who contributed their input to this evaluation.

The evaluation team involved four people, including an interpreter. In normal circumstances, the international evaluator would have visited Thailand, but due to COVID-19 restrictions this was not possible. Therefore, the two national evaluators led the interviews together with a trained interpreter for the benefit of the international evaluation team leader, who was connected remotely.

The teamwork between colleagues in different time zones was critical in maintaining the robustness and integrity of this evaluation. The national consultants were able to build upon their knowledge and experience and learn useful skills from the team leader. The team leader, for her part, was quite satisfied that the information was impartial and robust and in line with UNEG guidelines.

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Role of national and international evaluators

This evaluation demonstrated that, where necessary, evaluations can be successfully completed without the need for the international evaluator to travel to the country. The potential to cut travel-related costs was noted. If an international evaluator cannot provide on-site guidance, this has the knock-on effect of increasing the workload and responsibilities of the national evaluators. This, in turn, requires extra coaching to properly prepare national evaluators for field-based data collection, which helps build national capacity. Thus, the role of international evaluators may shift in the future to include a stronger coaching role.

Time zones

It can be challenging when team members are based in quite different time zones, though there are also difficulties in finding international evaluators based in the same or a close time zone to where the programme is located. This evaluation showed that people can adapt to working together from different time zones. Being flexible in this area is key and that should be reflected as an important criterion in the recruitment process. For this evaluation, UNFPA Thailand was lucky because the international evaluator, based in the United States, had just completed an evaluation in the same time zone (with Thailand) during the COVID-19 pandemic, so she already knew how to deal with some of the challenges that arose and the importance of being flexible and sometimes working past midnight.

Time management

The evaluation had adequate time at the design stage for the evaluation team to come together and work closely to address any questions or challenges the evaluation team had or may have in the future. This helped them to be well-prepared for the data collection stage.

Gender-responsive evaluation

The evaluation was independently assessed as being of very good quality for the way in which it managed to integrate human rights, gender equality and disability inclusivity, a common challenge for evaluations, especially when conducted during COVID-19. In total, 74 percent of all stakeholders interviewed were women, including both government and non-governmental stakeholders.

Hybrid data collection

The evaluation used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, FGDs or unstructured interviews and direct observation through field site visits. Secondary data were collected through existing literature, including evaluations, research, other assessments and administrative data. Online surveys, although planned, were not necessary as there were few pandemic-related restrictions in place in Thailand at the time. Videoconferences and teleconferences were organized as necessary.

Photo © United Nations Population Fund

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 had a big impact on the evaluation and delayed it significantly. Evaluation planning began in 2019 and was delayed to allow the international evaluator to enter the country. As this was not possible, the data collection did not start until October 2020 and the evaluation wasn't completed until March 2021. This amounted to about a six-month delay in starting the evaluation but once up and running, it went relatively quickly.

Economic Empowerment of Women Home Based Workers and Excluded Groups in Pakistan (2017–2020)

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In Pakistan, people from marginalized social groups, particularly women with disabilities, transgender women[1] informal female workers living below the poverty line, and women affected by conflicts, are among the most persecuted groups; their political, social and economic exclusion exposes them to systemic violence, abuse, neglect and discrimination.

Although women account for 65 per cent of the money that Home Based Workers (HBW) contribute to Pakistan's economy, most receive low wages and are denied legal protection and social security. The project, *Economic Empowerment of Women Home Based Workers and Excluded Groups in Pakistan*, aimed to support the economic empowerment of women HBWs and other excluded groups in Pakistan, including women with disabilities and transgender women. It was implemented from August 2017 to August 2020 in several districts and was intended to reach 10,000 women, 500 people with disabilities and 200 transgender women, building their capacity by providing them with training, registering them with relevant institutions, and connecting them and clustering them into viable groups where they can better interact with the market.

The evaluation team consisted of two members, one male and one female. The research approach and methodology adhered to UNEG's norms and standards and UNEG's guidelines on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation. The evaluation is also aligned with the UN System-Wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.[2]

The planned evaluation methodology was proposed by UN Women and further fine-tuned by the evaluation team. UN Women shared the criteria it uses to assess evaluation reports, provided documentation for review and gave helpful guidance on how to collect, triangulate and store data. Given time and budget constraints, a sample of about 50 of the 10,000 beneficiaries was shortlisted with the help of UN Women and the implementing partners.

UN Women leads the promotion of evaluation approaches responsive to human rights and gender equality and similar to most agencies has its own quality assurance system. Evaluation reports are submitted to an external consultant that reviews them against the Global Evaluation Reports Assessment and Analysis System (GERAAS) to assess adherence to the standards and rate the quality of the evaluation.

The stand-out feature of this evaluation was its dedication to inclusivity right from start. The methodology recognized the need to include people with disabilities and transgender people and analyse structural barriers and social norms that impede the realization of gender equality. A case study approach was employed as a means of focusing on a project that targeted people with disabilities which was both complementary and similar in nature. The case study provided a deep dive into this project and the findings were subsequently embedded throughout the evaluation.

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[1] It is to be noted that in Pakistan, it is not yet accurate to refer to the entire lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) community. Transgender people in Pakistan were recognized as a third gender on 4 November 2009 by a landmark ruling in the Supreme Court. This recognition of transgender persons is the foundation to realize the equal human rights and dignity for transgender people in Pakistan. Pakistan's 1973 Constitution guarantees the fundamental human rights of its citizens without discrimination of gender, sex, religion, caste and creed; however, the transgender community have a long history of facing deep-rooted stigma and social exclusion.

[2] See ***here.***

Ethical consideration

The evaluation used a methodological framework that was guided by the philosophy of participation and empowerment of the rights holder, conflict-sensitivity and 'do no harm' (DNH) and used diversity lenses, for example, age, disability and minority status, to examine exclusion. The evaluation team developed an ethical protocol to be followed during the implementation of the evaluation to ensure the safety of the individuals being interviewed. This involved making sure the respondents were in a safe space, that there was nobody else around, that no questions specific to violence would be asked, and that the questions were all related to how their work was related to economic empowerment. Furthermore, if something did come up related to the respondents' experience of violence, information was to be provided about where they could seek support.

The evaluation was conducted according to established ethical standards and guidelines for social research. Special care was given to ensure the confidentiality of the data received from all sources; this was explained explicitly to all respondents, including the primary beneficiaries of the project, at the start of each interview. The identities of respondents interviewed for this evaluation are protected to ensure no harm comes to them for the opinions and views they have expressed and shared about the project.

Inclusivity and intersectionality

The way the evaluation integrated the principles of gender equality and ensured the voice and inclusion of different types of marginalized groups stood out as a best practice and demonstrated the benefits of having a deep analysis around more vulnerable groups. This evaluation was able to bring out ways of engaging with marginalized groups. UN Women implemented a pilot project focused on creating a paradigm shift from a charity-based to a rights-based approach for women with disabilities (WWDs), which was covered under the case study component of the evaluation. The findings and recommendations from the case study were integrated into relevant sections of the evaluation to mainstream the needs and priorities of people with disabilities.

Innovation

Despite restrictions on in-person travel imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation team was able to select and interview a cross-section of new and old beneficiaries, from districts with very different characteristics in terms of providing an enabling environment to Women Home Based Workers (WHBWs). The team was able to speak with provincial authorities who are at different stages in the process of policy and legislative reforms for WHBWs and make extensive use of the triangulation technique for verification of data gathered from primary and secondary sources. Interviews were conducted using a variety of online platforms such as Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp and mobile phones. One positive feature of the research was, despite concerns and fears that interviews by mobile phone would inhibit WHBWs from sharing their views and opinion openly, the evaluation team was able to spend quality time with each WHBW interviewed by mobile phone. On average, each interview with a WHBW lasted an hour and a few interviews went on for 90 minutes, providing a rich source of data.

Methodology

The evaluation methodology was expanded to include a case study approach. Data collection methods included key informant interviews (KIIs), the recall method, a case study approach and the triangulation technique to verify the veracity and integrity of information drawn from different sources through a core set of common research questions.

National evaluators

Most evaluations in the UN system include an international consultant on the team, but in this case, the whole team was from and based in Pakistan. This helped enormously in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the cultural context and how to engage with people from marginalized groups. The evaluation benefited from a good team that worked well together and used their knowledge and overall understanding of the situation to good effect.

Engaging with women with disabilities and transgender persons

Through a dedicated and in-depth look into excluded groups, the evaluation was able to identify key challenges that the project encountered to work effectively with excluded groups such as women with disabilities and transgender persons. The evaluation notes that a good analysis, particularly a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) of persons with disabilities and transgender people, specialized institutional knowledge and previous experience, and positive networks and contacts in these groups is necessary for effective project implementation. An analysis of the risks involved in working with excluded groups and a shared understanding of challenges involved is necessary to ensure sensitive approaches that will stimulate meaningful change rather than further disempower excluded groups.

Time management

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, more time to conduct the evaluation was required. An adequate time-frame to properly conduct the evaluation is necessary in such circumstances. This is to avoid the situation where there is much haste to wrap up the evaluation towards the end of it and the resulting pressure is pushed onto the evaluation team. Similarly, sufficient time has to be allocated for the transcribing and analysis of the telephone or online interviews.

Corporate Responsibility in Eliminating Slavery and Trafficking in Asia (CREST) Project

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The IOM project, *Corporate Responsibility in Eliminating Slavery and Trafficking (CREST)*, is a regional partnership initiative that works with private and public sector actors to uphold the human and labour rights of migrants working in business operations and supply chains. About a quarter of the estimated 40 million victims of modern slavery are international migrant workers who are often exposed to unethical recruitment practices, such as excessive recruitment fees, document retention, social and cultural isolation, restrictions to freedom of movement, and absence of legal protection.

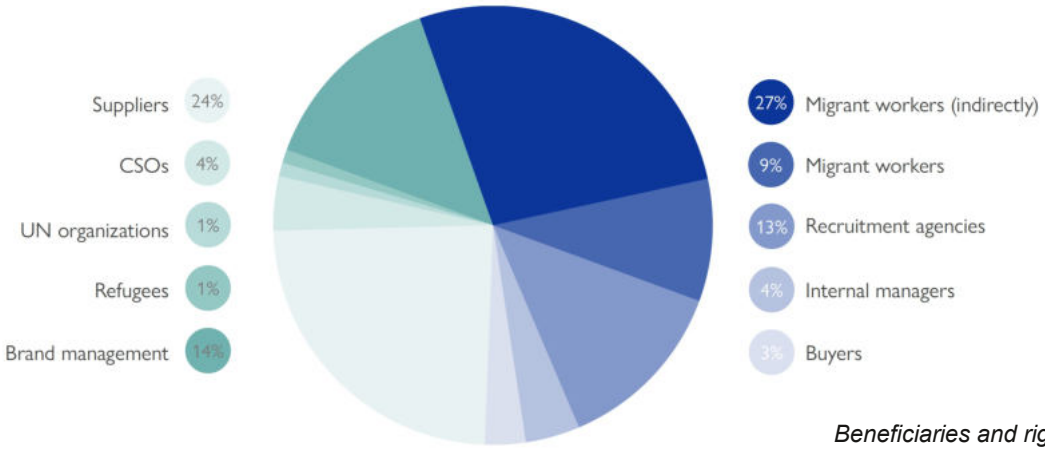
Together with cross-sectoral partners, CREST aims to build a stronger commitment from businesses to maximize the impact of collective action in eliminating modern slavery, particularly in relation to migrant workers, and to make their supply chains exploitation-free. CREST is a regional partnership project with activities initially in six countries—Bangladesh, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam—though Bangladesh is no longer part of the programme.

This is a utilization-focused evaluation with mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, theory of change analysis, contribution analysis, cross-country comparison analysis, and quantitative data analysis with coding and triangulation. Data were collected through a desk review of documentation, key informant interviews and a portfolio review of CREST partnerships and initiatives. The approach was grounded in the ethical principles contained in the UNEG Ethical Guidelines. Key informant interviews were used in place of focus group discussions in order to respect such principles and to better protect the privacy of all stakeholders. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, all data were collected remotely.

This mid-term evaluation covered the six countries where CREST was implemented in the period between October 2017 and May 2020, assessing the project results to date and the progress made towards objectives, identifying lessons learned and making strategic recommendations to inform the remainder of the project. It also provided an opportunity for organizational learning to improve future programming and to introduce corrective measures to strengthen its ability to deliver high-level results.

Somewhat uniquely, this evaluation provides a thematic analysis of a project that works at the intersection of business, human rights and labour migration in a truly regional sense. CREST is a programme in its own right, but there is also a whole portfolio of direct partnership projects under it; this made it important to understand the overarching umbrella programme in the region and how it links to and facilitates the building of these direct partnership projects.

This evaluation demonstrated that the evaluators and evaluation team need to allow the time and flexibility to understand the complexity that comes with portfolio and cluster evaluations, especially those that run across countries or projects, and that these types of evaluations benefit from a harmonized set of questions that can be used to compare data across time, projects and locations.



Beneficiaries and rights holders targetted by CREST

Cross-cutting areas

The evaluation included three cross-cutting criteria: gender, human rights and environment. A gender equality and equity approach was used by applying a gender- and equity-sensitive analytical lens throughout the evaluation process to ensure that the evaluation process itself did not reinforce structures of inequality between different gender groups and subgroups of vulnerable migrant workers. In total, 58 percent of all key informant interviewees (with the exception of recruiters) were women.

Ethical considerations

Efforts were taken throughout the project to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the project stakeholders. These concerns were not just limited to protecting migrant workers but also some of the private sector companies that have partnered with CREST.

Evaluation as a management tool

The IOM evaluation made a number of solid internal and external recommendations on how IOM can strengthen its internal management system to optimize processes and be more efficient in its work with the private sector. The evaluation provided IOM with a good internal overview of what works and what doesn't and gave insights into whether to pursue this modality moving forward and expand it beyond the region.

The evaluation provided external recommendations on how IOM can expand and strengthen its work towards more sustainable results for migrant workers. Overall, evaluations provide an opportunity for learning not just within the project under study but also assessing management and strategic direction for the organization as a whole.

Working with the private sector

Many private sector companies are unfamiliar with the practice and conduct of the evaluation process. The purpose of evaluation was clearly communicated, particularly with regard to accountability and learning. The evaluation used a Reference Group for the collective management of the process. The fact that the companies contribute financially and with in-kind contributions to the project ensures a greater sense of ownership and raises their level of engagement, all of which benefits the evaluation.

The original approach the project took in relation to the private sector generated interest internally within IOM across various departments.

Global guidelines

COVID-19 has changed the way IOM does evaluations. At a global level, guidelines were established to monitor evaluations and to decide whether to go ahead with planned evaluations or not, providing the country and regional offices with clear guidance.

Portfolio approach

Projects and initiatives were compared across countries and partnerships through the portfolio review to further investigate project implementation modalities, results and sustainability. The portfolio review also facilitated identifying strengths and areas for improvements across the initiative, as well as any elements that might be missing from its programming.

Monitoring and evaluation expertise

The evaluation was a very resource-heavy exercise and there were budgeting and staff capacity issues. In the future, it would be good to have closer involvement of HQ and the regional offices and to have a specialist in monitoring and evaluation on the team who could drive the evaluation forward, with the project manager providing overall oversight.

Reference group engagement

The evaluation drew on participatory methods to engage members of the Evaluation Reference Group and key stakeholders throughout the evaluation process. The participation of and ownership by the reference group are critical to the success of any evaluation process. However, multiple reiterations of reports can cause fatigue for partners. It may be more feasible to use the reference group to share key updates on the process, upcoming findings and recommendations.

Asia and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APCICT)

UNITED NATIONS ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

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Photo © ESCAP

The Asia and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APCICT) was established by ESCAP in May 2005 and is one of five regional institutions under the auspices of ESCAP within the Asia-Pacific region. It is located in Incheon in the Republic of Korea. APCICT's stated objective is to build the capacity of its members and associate members through training programmes in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for the purposes of socio-economic development. ESCAP is an intergovernmental body with 62 members that meets every year. Member States make a specific request to review each regional institution, including APCICT, once every five years in terms of, among other things, continued relevance and financial viability. Thus, there is a very specific demand for the evaluation and a clear intention to closely examine its findings and act upon its recommendations.

The methodology used for the evaluation of APCICT was mainly non-experimental due to APCICT being a capacity-building institution. This was not an evaluation of a project as such, but rather an evaluation of the work of one of ESCAP's regional offices. The evaluation began in April 2020 and was completed in July 2020 and mainly covered the period from March 2017 to March 2020. A desk review examined the documentation and data provided by APCICT and other ESCAP offices. APCICT staff and ESCAP management were interviewed in small groups or individually. Key informant interviews were undertaken individually with stakeholders at the national, regional and global levels and an online survey was done. A case study approach was taken to assess impacts and obtain in-depth information on APCICT's main activities in selected countries. The main stakeholders and informants were government officials at the highest level.

The documentation was limited to a certain extent by the fact that some countries don't have very active focal points, making it difficult to obtain certain data—although there was sufficient information to demonstrate the impact of APCICT in the countries. Human rights, inclusivity and 'Leaving No One Behind' are not big considerations in this evaluation, although there was a focus on gender. Even in the programming, these concepts were not particularly well integrated; they were accepted and adopted but there was little human rights terminology in the project formulations.

Demand

For an evaluation to have an impact, there needs to be a clear demand for it and a clear intention to act on its recommendations. This evaluation was a demand-driven evaluation which resulted in a much stronger level of interest and engagement from partners, especially when compared to mandatory evaluations. The demand and interest from stakeholders also increased the ownership of the evaluators to develop a strong final document.

Case study approach

APCICT has been operating in the selected countries for many years, so the case studies were focused on a deeper look at what is going on at the country level, what has changed, what is the contribution to policy and the progress of ICT development programmes. Case studies were mostly created through interviews as well as from reports available from the countries highlighting the work of APCICT. The case study approach successfully highlighted the impact of the programme at the country level.

Roster of evaluators

ESCAP has developed its own roster of quality consultants to choose from. In addition to this, there is an evaluation office in New York that supports the evaluation work of the secretariat entities and they provide access to a global roster of professional evaluators. That database is searchable allowing evaluators to apply filters such as years of experience, subject matter, region and country. For this evaluation, the evaluator was familiar with the subject matter and had relevant past experience. The evaluator, who was based in Ireland, also brought on board a junior research assistant based in Bangladesh.

Corporate policies

ESCAP's monitoring and evaluation policy and guidelines are based on UNEG guidelines. ESCAP is a member of UNEG. Its processes and institutional arrangements are very much in line with UNEG's. An evaluation reference group was established to provide support for the evaluation and to ensure quality and impartiality. It included members from the management and as well as members from the office being evaluated.

Good working relationships

The report benefited from the dynamic between the evaluator and his junior research assistant. The researcher assistant supported data analysis and documentation, allowing the evaluator to apply his experience, vision and strategic thinking to the outcome of that analysis.

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Importance of qualitative data

Projects need to establish certain norms and practices for producing quantitative and qualitative documentation and for producing data for use by evaluation. The case study approach relies heavily on qualitative data, and thus had some trouble in getting suitable data, but this was mitigated by some of the documentation produced by national resource persons.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 situation made it impossible to carry out field visits, as had originally been hoped. Thus, all interviews were carried out remotely. COVID-19 was seen as more of an inconvenience than a disruption in terms of the planning, methodology and implementation of the evaluation. This was because the main stakeholders of this evaluation were high-level government officials, ministers, deputy ministers and directors, with full access to modern communications technology, even when working from home. In many cases, it was found that, government officials were actually more willing to speak online than before as videoconferencing over Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other modes became more normalized during the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

CORPORATE GUIDELINES

Most agencies have pre-existing policies and quality guidelines, which were found to be useful in the conduct of evaluations. Agency-specific or UNEG quality checklists and the importance of reference groups were mentioned repeatedly in interviews. The report also found that some agencies (ILO, UNDP) rolled out global guidelines on evaluating within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that provided countries with much-needed guidance and advice in a time of great uncertainty.

INVESTING IN NATIONAL EVALUATORS

COVID-19 restrictions led to serious travel restrictions around the world and this meant that, in most cases, international consultants could not travel to visit countries and project sites. Furthermore, international consultants being based in different time zones tended to create scheduling issues. As a result, the national evaluation consultants took on a larger role in the primary data collection team, engaging with counterparts and, in some cases, leading the evaluations themselves. Some UN agencies (UNDP) have since updated their rosters of national evaluators to increase the number available for easier recruitment. International consultants when engaged remotely can also strengthen capacities of national evaluators.

INCLUSIVITY AND CROSS-CUTTING AREAS

Consultants should be properly briefed as to inclusivity requirements and expectations, with reference to UNEG, GESI and GEEW and agency-specific guidelines, where appropriate, to ensure the integration of gender equality and the representation of various marginalized groups. Examples from UNDP (Nepal), UNFPA and UN Women demonstrate how agencies can take small but critical steps to ensure that evaluations remain inclusive. If approaches of the methodology are modified (for example, due to COVID-19), this cannot and must not be at the cost of seeking feedback from the beneficiaries.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical guidelines should be updated to respond to the unique challenges of collecting data during a pandemic. Where the safety and/or anonymity of the individuals interviewed need to be ensured, ethical protocols should be established before the implementation of the evaluation. One example of an ethical protocol is UN Women's approach to providing data collectors with a script in case violence against women and girls is raised during an interview. For IOM, the need to respect non-disclosure agreements with private sector companies presented its own set of challenges. It is also important to be sensitive to people's changing circumstances and needs. For example, as the ILO evaluators found out, people who lost their jobs and livelihoods during the pandemic may not be willing to engage in interviews.

REMOTE DATA COLLECTION

The pandemic and the consequent restrictions in movements demonstrated that normal methods for collecting data for evaluations would have to change and that, in most cases, data would have to be collected remotely using methods including telephone calls, video calls and online surveys. Zoom calls, social media surveys and telephone surveys became the modes for data collection in the absence of in-depth field visits.

In terms of data collection that is not in person, the total number of questions is generally reduced, especially when surveys are conducted by telephone. It was noted that online video portals such as Zoom, while not being the perfect medium for focus group discussions, did seem to work much better for key informant interviews.

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Collecting data by telephone survey is very useful when there is a tight deadline to finish the evaluation. Phone-led surveys were shown to be effective in terms of timeliness and costs. For these surveys, it is important that the sampling frame is as comprehensive as possible. Care needs to be taken to ensure data collection agencies have a proper and appropriate database of project beneficiaries and partners, which is inclusive and gender-balanced. This allows for any data generation to also be inclusive and balanced. In many developing countries, the capacity to collect this kind of data by telephone survey already exists and can be done relatively cheaply. UNICEF engaged with multiple partners across countries to gather consistent and comparable data for evaluations through telephone surveys.

The limitations imposed by COVID-19 sometimes made it easier to narrow down the scope of the bigger evaluations, allowing teams to focus more on strategic partnerships and key personnel. It was also evident that, while the onset of sudden COVID-19 restrictions threw some evaluation plans into disarray, similar restrictions had little or no impact on the conduct of other evaluations, particularly where access to stakeholders was unaffected. For example, in some cases it was found that government officials were more willing to speak online than before the pandemic, due to the normalization of video calls and easy access to modern communications technology and infrastructure in some countries. In these instances, the alternative data collection tools allowed disruptions to be reduced in terms of the planning, methodology and implementation of the evaluation.

As noted, when the situation demands it, many evaluations can be done almost entirely without in-person contact. As communications technology and infrastructure evolves and improves in the developing world, hybrid methods of data collection that combine both new media platforms with tried and tested face-to-face interactions will probably provide the best results.

COMMUNICATING EVALUATION FINDINGS

To maximize an evaluation's impact, it is important that findings are communicated to the right people in the best way. This can take the form of communication targeted to project stakeholders (internal) or to a broader audience (external). WFP's use of the graphic facilitation tool, EvalUvision, is an example of a way to engage with project beneficiaries to explain concepts, provoke discussions and increase engagement, especially where the target audience may be unfamiliar with and reluctant to read lengthy, complex reports. EvalUvision has been shown to be a useful validation tool for the evaluation process itself, a tool that can also be used to generate data in an anonymous fashion. For external-facing communications, UNICEF's explainer video outlining the findings of the REAP II evaluation is an example of how to bring findings to a wider audience.

It is important to create and develop a strong evaluation culture within UN agencies that recognizes quality evaluation and encourages evaluators to be innovative in their methodologies and to disseminate their findings. UNDP's Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) established the Evaluation Excellence Awards, intended to do this and this report features two evaluations that won such awards in 2020.

INNOVATION IN EVALUATION APPROACHES

Many of the evaluations considered in this report demonstrate a willingness to move beyond a "business as usual" approach to evaluating projects and to embrace new methodologies. Projects that have obvious overlapping in terms of shared objectives, stakeholders and intervention strategies can be clustered together into a portfolio approach that can save costs and reduce evaluation fatigue, as seen in the ILO and IOM evaluations. A case study approach can successfully highlight the impact of a programme at the country level (ESCAP). Outcome harvesting has proven to be useful in complex evaluations and is particularly suited to projects where the outcomes are not predetermined at the time of planning (UNICEF REAP II). Using harmonized questions for cross-country analysis, demonstrated by UNICEF in their assessment of behavioural drivers in South Asia, is another good example of innovation in evaluation approaches.

RESEARCH IN EVALUATIONS

Evaluations can benefit from pre-existing research components, including a pre-evaluation analysis of project results and findings as UNDP used in evaluating PTIB in Bangladesh. UNICEF's REAP II evaluation team hired researchers, in addition to the key evaluators, for data collection and analysis, which provided a stronger, more robust data set for the evaluators to triangulate. ESCAP employed a junior research assistant to complement the more strategic vision of the senior consultant.

IMPORTANCE OF PRE-EXISTING DATA MONITORING SYSTEMS

Some evaluations (UNDP Nepal) benefited from a strong programme data monitoring system already in place, the data from which were well managed and easy to analyse. The data were managed through a dashboard for easy visualization and storage of important information. More significantly, the project design and consequently the monitoring system were adjusted to include several marginalized groups. Other agencies (UNICEF REAP) underlined the importance of being able to transfer data into an analytical framework as soon as possible after collection in order to triangulate them and ensure valuable data and insights are not lost.

unicef
for every child

WFP
World Food Programme

ILO

IOM
UN MIGRATION

UNDP

UNFPA

UN WOMEN

UNITED NATIONS
ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific