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Summary findings of the independent evaluation of the evaluation function

Purpose of the document

In the present document, the Governing Body is provided with a summary of the findings and recommendations from the independent evaluation of the evaluation function (IEE) conducted in accordance with the process agreed upon by the Governing Body during its 325th Session.

The IEE provides an assessment of the overall performance of ILO's evaluation function during 2011–16 along with explanations for this performance, lessons learned and good practices.

The final section of the summary contains a set of recommendations requiring follow-up and an Office response. The Governing Body might wish to request the Director-General to take into account the recommendations and follow-up as appropriate (see the draft decision in paragraph 43.).

Relevant strategic objective: Relevant to all strategic objectives.

Main relevant outcome/cross-cutting policy driver: Enabling outcome B: Effective and efficient governance of the Organization.

Policy implications: The final section of the evaluation summary contains a set of recommendations, the implementation of which will have policy implications.

Legal implications: None.

Financial implications: Changes in resource allocations within approved budget level of the ILO may be required.

Follow-up action required: Follow-up to the recommendations will require reporting to the Governing Body during its November 2017 and March 2018 sessions.

Author unit: Evaluation Office (EVAL).

Related documents: GB.322/PFA/6, GB.325/PFA/5(Rev.).

Introduction

1. As agreed with the Governing Body during its 325th Session, the IEE was conducted in a fully independent manner by external evaluators overseen by an independent technical committee constituted by the Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC).
2. The evaluation focused on achieving two main interconnected objectives:
 - assessing the relevance of the ILO Evaluation Strategy, relating to the quality of the strategy and its actual capacity of informing sound decision-making in the ILO; and
 - assessing the effectiveness of the operational arrangements and structures, relating to the appropriateness of the organizational set-up and processes.
3. The overall scope of the IEE is the central evaluation function and the systems, structures and evaluations it oversees; and the decentralized evaluation function under the control of departments and field units with technical oversight provided by the Evaluation Office (EVAL).
4. Four evaluation criteria were applied based on United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG)'s guidance: independence, credibility, utility and enabling environment.

Background

5. In 2005, the ILO adopted an evaluation policy framework that aimed to improve and strengthen independent evaluation in the ILO. Following the first IEE in 2010 a new evaluation strategy was introduced (2011–15).¹ Since then through a combination of measures the evaluation function has been significantly transformed and strengthened.
6. During 2011–16, an average of 103 evaluations per year were conducted and over 15 strategic high-level evaluations. Independent project evaluations account for 44 per cent of the total number of evaluations followed by the internal evaluations reports and joint project evaluations. The highest number of evaluations during this period have been carried out in Africa (178) and Asia (153).

Methodology

7. The IEE applied a mixed-methods evaluation approach which used multiple lines and levels of evidence (qualitative and quantitative) in parallel as a means to triangulate and interrogate findings. The main sources of evidence are: a desk review of more than 150 documents; field visits to headquarters and Regional Offices (Geneva, Abidjan and Bangkok) and in-depth interviews with staff of two more Regional Offices (Lima and Beirut); interviews with 138 key participants; two surveys (architecture and users) in three languages; and a portfolio review of a selection of 20 evaluations.

¹ Extended with an additional biennium until the end of 2017 at the 322nd Session of the Governing Body.

Overall findings

8. The first IEE in 2010 strongly emphasized the importance of structural independence for the central evaluation function. As a result of the changes made following that evaluation, and the subsequent work of EVAL, the ILO is now recognized as having one of the three most mature evaluation functions in the United Nations (UN) system. This is a significant achievement.
9. As a small centralized office within the ILO, EVAL has achieved progress through establishing mandatory requirements and structured systems to deliver the evaluation function. These include tools, such as guidance and manuals, and some innovations, such as the Evaluation Manager Certification Programme and linking the i-Track database to other corporate information technology systems.
10. The now systematized evaluation function is strongly independent and consistently delivers its technical requirements to UNEG standards. There is however need for a more integrated evaluation planning system, since nearly all current evaluations are mandatory and have been triggered through an ‘automatic’ process. Looking forward, a more flexible, integrated and utilization-focused approach will be increasingly demanded of EVAL. Meeting this challenge with the same small team (presently comprised of four professionals including the Director) and without sacrificing current coverage and quality will be the central challenge for the next evaluation strategy.
11. Based on the biennial budget for ILO 2014–15, evaluation represents 0.8 per cent of total budgeted expenditure (excluding extra-budgetary resources such as technical cooperation). Based on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) in 2014, this evaluation would expect to see expenditure in the range of 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent of the total organizational budget being allocated to evaluation. The ILO is currently spending less than half of the recommended amount, which might explain the general perception among interviewees that there are inadequate resources and staff capacity to manage evaluations and follow-up on their outcomes.

Independence

12. While the independence of the evaluation function has increased considerably, several limitations remain. In light of recommendations made by the JIU, a small number of interviewees expressed concern about the reporting lines of the head of evaluation to the Governing Body and the Director-General, or to the conditions attached to the position of the head of evaluation. Having considered these perspectives, and triangulated them with other data, the IEE is of the view that the main priorities regarding independence are, however, not these issues.
13. The highest priority regarding independence is to transition the regional evaluation officers to being full staff members of EVAL, albeit located in the regions. Substantial demands are being placed on the regional evaluation officers to support evaluability and monitoring of programmes. The implication of this arrangement is insufficient time to support either monitoring or evaluation functions adequately, and a critical missing link in the “independence-chain”.
14. A second priority regarding independence is to continue exploring means to support and incentivize the voluntary evaluation managers. The evaluation concludes that the current evaluation manager system is primarily a response to the shortage of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialists.

Credibility

15. One key question this evaluation sought to examine was the persistent similar level of quality ratings for evaluation reports despite the wide range of systems strengthening activities being undertaken by EVAL. The dominant evaluation approaches in ILO are focused on examining the achievement of results frameworks. There is also the case that quality standards only measure certain aspects of quality. Examination of a broader range of evidence leads this evaluation to conclude that the two main facets of quality that are challenging the ILO are:
 - the need for expanding use of participatory methods that both model social dialogue and engage social partners in examining the impact of normative changes; and
 - the required flexibility to ensure credibility by commissioning the right evaluation with the right purpose at the right time.
16. The existence of these challenges is driven by the real and perceived demand for project-based levels of accountability which – in the absence of a mandate from donors to commission more strategic clustered evaluations and/or sufficient staff with the expertise to make informed professional judgements on commissioning evaluations - has been achieved through large numbers of evaluations. The implication of continuing this model, however, is that opportunities are being missed to more comprehensively address the questions of constituents, build the ownership of interventions through participation, and transfer evaluation capacity to social partners at the national level.
17. The combination of technical areas, normative work and tripartism means that the ILO occupies a niche space in the international evaluation space. Evaluators that combine experience of these dimensions with necessary experience are relatively rare explaining the challenge in finding suitable candidates at comparatively low rates.
18. While it would be useful for EVAL to provide guidance on the minimum viable costs of evaluation in projects, the evaluation finds reasons to be cautious in replacing the 2 per cent allocation in projects with fixed budgets, as any action reducing overall resourcing would have significant negative implications.

Utility

19. The focus of the Evaluation Strategy (under outcome 1) has been on the use of evaluations for governance at the central level. The EAC plays two important roles: firstly, it helps to distribute learning among senior managers, and secondly, it demonstrates that accountability through evaluation is a whole-of-Organization (and not solely EVAL) responsibility. The system for following-up on management responses at the decentralized level is far inferior to the EAC arrangement and needs to be more strongly represented in the indicators for a future evaluation strategy.
20. An underlying assumption of outcome 2 is that increasing evaluation quality will also lead to an increase in use in the field. While the evaluation agrees that this may be partially true, it finds that the primary drive of utility is not quality. The evaluation found that timing, communications and knowledge management are key ingredients in enhancing its use.
21. The importance of communication is recognized by EVAL and, inter alia, reflected in the efforts made to produce meta/synthesis studies and other knowledge products and the development of the i-Track database. The development of a communications strategy and

the appointment of a knowledge manager have laid important groundwork for doing more of this.

Enabling environment

22. Many of the requests and suggestions encountered during interviews for this evaluation were essentially to address gaps in the wider results-based management system (especially regarding evaluable indicators or incorporation of evaluation recommendations). While these are relevant and necessary programming needs, they are not typically the mandate of a central evaluation function.
23. The boundaries of what is possible to expect from the evaluation function are strongly influenced by the environment. The need for more M&E capacity within projects and programmes limits the results data available to evaluations while weak organizational incentives for programme and project staff to engage in evaluation processes limits the capacity of the function. Despite the independence of EVAL, the evaluation function in the ILO does not exist in isolation: it is embedded within a culture framework and set of institutional drivers that will also need to adjust if the performance of the function is to improve.
24. This evaluation sees three main challenges facing the design of the next evaluation strategy:
 - determining a means to strengthen the focus of the evaluation function in regard to utility and national capacity in a way that complements and does not jeopardize the gains already made in systematizing an independent evaluation function within the ILO;
 - expanding the use of strategic, joint, thematic and Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) evaluations in a way that maintains sufficient evaluative coverage of technical cooperation projects; and
 - progressively integrating the large body of internal and self-evaluations into the ILO's quality assurance and system strengthening process, and dealing with implications of this on both human resources and the probable near-term drop in average report quality that result from this integration.
25. Missing from the current evaluation strategy is a clear theory of change for the evaluation function and indicators of the outcome of the evaluation itself. The policy should also include a clear mission for the evaluation function, and guided flexibility to maximize the value of each evaluation.
26. The evidence from this evaluation indicates that one of the main contributing factors to this situation was the top-down development of the current strategy, based primarily on the recommendations (and framework) of the IEE (2010). This evaluation concludes that – to be owned and understood – it is necessary for the next strategy (and policy) to be developed through a participatory process facilitated by EVAL.

Conclusions

27. Overall conclusion: In the course of the Evaluation Strategy 2011–17, the evaluation function in the ILO has been transformed in terms of its structural independence, institutionalization of evaluation practice and development of material. It is highly regarded for having achieved this with limited resources, including becoming a more consistent and

visible champion for gender mainstreaming and introducing good practices that are in some ways ahead of UN evaluation peers.

- (1) Priorities for enhancing the independence of the evaluation function are the integration of regional evaluation officers as full staff members of EVAL, strengthening the capacity of evaluation managers and expanding quality assurance systems to internal evaluations.
- (2) While independent evaluation reports largely meet UNEG standards, there is much to gain from increasing the diversity of evaluations, mainstreaming social dialogue and deepening participation of constituents.
- (3) Enhancing evaluation budgets, rosters, networks and procurement processes is required to consistently secure evaluators with the combination of evaluation skills and technical knowledge that the ILO requires.
- (4) There is significant value to be realized from strengthening communications and knowledge management to enhance the utility and use of evaluation in the field.
- (5) At the decentralized level there is a need to replicate the same success that the EAC has had in ensuring effective management response to recommendations from high-level evaluations.
- (6) Despite high-level support for evaluation in the ILO, the emergence of an evaluation culture is inhibited by underinvestment in M&E specialists and too few institutional incentives for programme and technical staff to engage with evaluation.
- (7) The Evaluation Policy (2005) and the Evaluation Strategy (2011) have served their purpose well, but are both now in need of being updated to meet the challenges of a changing context.

Lessons learned

28. The evaluation identifies several lessons learned in the areas of: evaluation as an integrated function, human and financial resources for evaluation, evaluations that are fit for purpose, involving partners in evaluations, evaluation management response follow-up and effective communication.

Recommendations

Overall recommendation

29. Recognizing the ILO's comparative leadership in evaluation in the UN system, the necessity for evaluative thinking to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), and the need to consolidate an emerging evaluation culture; the Governing Body and senior management of the ILO is recommended to strongly reassert organizational commitment to the evaluation function. Given the current trajectory and the recommended level of budgetary and political support, it would be possible to set an ambitious target of the ILO beginning the transition to the highest level of the JIU maturity matrix.

Concerning independence

30. *Recommendation 1: Transition regional evaluation officers into full staff members of EVAL.*

Convert regional evaluation officers into evaluation officer positions at a common grade level. These positions should be directly subordinated to the Director of EVAL and funded through regular budgetary sources reallocated to EVAL for this purpose.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
Director-General, Strategic Programming and Management Department (PROGRAM)	High	Medium-term	Low (if funds reallocated)

31. *Recommendation 2: Incentivize and strengthen the Evaluation Manager and focal person system.*

Build an incentive structure whereby the evaluation manager function is recognized in job descriptions and the annual performance appraisal process and facilitate the internal network of evaluation focal points and regional evaluation officers into a community of practice.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
Deputy Directors-General, Human Resources Development Department (HRD), EVAL	High	Medium-term	Medium

32. *Recommendation 3: Establish an integrated evaluation planning system.*

Develop a consolidated, formal evaluation planning mechanism to ensure better sequencing and coordination of high-level and decentralized evaluations; and directly link budgetary control of technical cooperation project evaluation allocations to the central evaluation function to allow for more clustered and strategic evaluations.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
EVAL, PROGRAM, Partnerships and Field Support Department (PARDEV)	Medium	Medium-term	Low

Concerning credibility

33. *Recommendation 4: Further develop collaboration with other UN system entities to advocate for and support a diverse community of evaluators and national constituents with expertise in evaluating decent work and promoting social dialogue.*

The pool of prospective consultants can be expanded by advertising opportunities more widely, and increasing the maximum daily rates to drive demand. In line with EVAL's published position on the SDGs/2030 Agenda, engage national constituents more systematically and closely in the development of M&E systems, continuous monitoring and evaluation processes.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
EVAL, technical departments and Regional Offices, International Training Centre of the ILO, Turin (ITC-ILO), Multilateral Cooperation Department (MULTILATERALS), PROGRAM	Medium	Medium-term	Medium

34. Recommendation 5: Enhance evaluation value added and relevance by promoting participatory, gender-responsive and mixed-methods evaluation.

Develop a model evaluation framework for evaluating decent work (including normative interventions and taking account of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP)) through social dialogue. Encourage evaluation consultants and evaluation managers to combine this with theory-of-change-based approaches and allow flexibility and time for them to develop and administer their own corresponding evaluation methods and data collection tools. Prioritize strengthening of evaluability and monitoring systems including the inclusion of M&E specialists in decent work teams and projects

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
EVAL, PARDEV, PROGRAM, technical departments, Regional Offices	Medium	Short-term	Medium

35. Recommendation 6: Expand the quality assurance system to include internal evaluations, and switch to an annual or real-time independent quality assurance system.

The current quality assurance system is comprehensive but does not cover the full range of evaluations undertaken in the ILO. Expand the quality assurance system to give feedback to commissioning offices on the quality of internal evaluation reports under a long-term agreement for services that would also allow EVAL to report evaluation quality to the Governing Body and UN-SWAP on an annual basis.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
EVAL	Medium	Medium-term	Medium

Concerning utility

36. Recommendation 7: Diversify and elevate the overall portfolio of evaluations to include more DWCP evaluations and thematic evaluations.

Introduce the flexibility and mandate within the evaluation policy and strategy for EVAL to adjust the overall focus of the evaluation function from project evaluations to evaluations of DWCPs, thematic agendas and flagship programmes.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
PARDEV (obtain donor agreement), EVAL, PROGRAM	High	Medium-term	Low

37. Recommendation 8: Strengthen the decentralized evaluation management response mechanism.

Continue to advocate and support a mechanism by which evaluation recommendations are shared and properly discussed with intended users by managers, and that joint agreement is reached on follow-up actions.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
Regional Offices, technical departments	High	Medium-term	Low

38. Recommendation 9: Prioritize EVAL's communication capacity and coaching function.

Revisit EVAL's communication strategy and explore interfaces with the Communication and Public Information Department (DCOMM) with a view to develop targeted communication products. If senior evaluation officers are relieved from their quality assurance function (see recommendation 1), more time could be freed up for meta-analysis, synthesis reviews and to support the knowledge management/learning function through dialogue.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
EVAL, DCOMM	Medium	Medium-term	Medium

Concerning enabling environment**39. Recommendation 10: Strengthen results-based management (RBM) and M&E systems to promote DWCP, programme and project evaluability.**

EVAL, PARDEV and PROGRAM should cooperate to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated for technical cooperation projects, Regular Budget Supplementary Account (RBSA) (and in DWCPs) to build M&E systems capable of capturing contributions to the programme and budget, SDGs and policy changes.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
PARDEV, PROGRAM, MULTILATERALS, technical departments and Regional Offices	Medium	Medium-term	High

40. Recommendation 11: Update and align the Evaluation Policy to IEE recommendations and current organizational structure and processes.

The ILO Evaluation Policy should be updated to reflect changes in the ILO organizational structure, strategy and programming that have taken place since 2005, the evolution of international standards (with a focus on the 2016 UNEG Norms and Standards), and external developments of relevance for the evaluation agenda, specifically the SDGs and 2030 Agenda.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
Governing Body, Director-General, EVAL	Medium	Short-term	Low

41. Recommendation 12: Develop the new evaluation strategy in a participatory manner to promote ownership and visibility.

A new evaluation strategy should be developed based on the findings and recommendations of the IEE. The process should be participatory to ensure ownership and commitment to its implementation.

Responsible units	Priority	Timing	Resource implication
Director-General, Governing Body, EVAL, technical units	High	Short-term	Low

Management response

42. The management response below addresses the recommendations, the implementation of which depends on a number of pre-conditions to be met linked to institutional approaches and enabling environment as identified in the full report. Further refinement of the recommendations will be reflected in the new policy and strategy.

Recommendations	Office response	EVAL observations
Overall recommendation	The Office welcomes the finding that substantial progress has been made in terms of structural independence, evaluation practices, capacity building and guidance material within a limited budget. It takes note of the need to consolidate an emerging evaluation culture and reasserts its organizational commitment to evaluation and the specific challenges linked to the 2030 Agenda.	
Recommendations 1–3 (independence)	The Office recognizes that constant improvement is required to enhance the high level of independence the function has already achieved. The Office will review reporting lines, incentive structures, and integration of existing work planning tools at the global and regional level as well as funding arrangement combining both regular and extra-budgetary resources with the aim to optimize evaluations, from more strategic coverage to enhanced use.	Zero-growth budget limitations and domestic accountability requirements of donors may have an impact on the ability of the Office to implement these recommendations.
Recommendations 4–6 (credibility)	The Office welcomes a focus on credibility from the perspective of evaluation methods that both model social dialogue and engage social partners. The Office will work on capturing these issues in appropriate evaluation frameworks while recognizing that it will be an Office-wide effort to bring in institutional strategies and investment in capacity building, data collection and reporting to improve overall evaluability. The existing quality assurance mechanism for project evaluations will be expanded and the frequency increased to include internal evaluations as part of ongoing efforts to enhance organization learning.	In terms of priorities EVAL questions whether limited evaluation resources should be invested in more oversight on internal evaluations. Rather, the focus should be on strengthening a culture of (self) learning among managers as part of RBM.
Recommendations 7–9 (utility)	The need for a more clustered and strategic evaluation portfolio concurs with earlier evaluation recommendations and is already an important consideration in the flagship programmes but will be subject to agreements and approaches in development cooperation funding that are conducive to pooling of resources. The decentralized evaluation management response will be strengthened, building on the existing <i>i-eval discovery database</i> complemented with a dynamic <i>recommendation follow-up system</i> and a <i>regional advisory body</i> modelled on the EAC. The Office will also request EVAL to step-up collaboration with technical departments to conduct more meta and synthesis studies as part of knowledge management and learning but without compromising its independence. The existing evaluation communication strategy will be revised in collaboration with, and building on the capacity of the communication department.	A strong Office-wide coordination system will be needed, including the regions to strengthen integrated and more strategic evaluation planning with decentralized follow-up systems.
Recommendations 10–12 (enabling environment)	The Office is continuously strengthening RBM and M&E systems and will continue efforts to ensure that established guidelines and approaches on RBM and M&E are adhered to and expanded. A revised evaluation policy will be presented to the Governing Body in November 2017 reflecting the findings and recommendations of the IEE. The new	Support from senior management will be needed to foster Office-wide involvement and ownership in the new policy and strategy.

Recommendations	Office response	EVAL observations
	evaluation strategy 2018–21 to implement the revised policy will be submitted in March 2018 to allow for a participatory and consultative approach in its formulation.	

Draft decision

- 43. The Governing Body requests the Director-General to take into consideration the recommendations of the independent evaluation presented in this document and to ensure their appropriate implementation.***