Informal Dialogue

Independent system-wide evaluation mechanism:
UN operational activities for development

INFORMAL SUMMARY

The following note provides a summary of the key substantive issues covered by the informal dialogue on the independent system-wide evaluation (ISWE) function of operational activities for development of the UN system, held on 5 November, 2012. The dialogue was organized to inform and contribute to the 2012 QCPR negotiations.

The session heard a presentation of the findings and recommendations of the "independent review of the existing institutional framework for independent system-wide evaluation of UN operational activities for development"[1], which was commissioned by the Secretary-General and presented to the 66th session of the General Assembly in fulfillment of GA resolution 64/289 on system-wide coherence. The independent review contains 36 findings and 7 main recommendations, all of which respond to five key questions covered by evaluators:

1. What is the demand for ISWE and how such evaluation should be used?
2. What constitutes a good ISWE and what kind of mandates and capacities would be required to do one?
3. What capacity exists within the UN system to manage, conduct and contribute to an ISWE?
4. How can the UN system address capacity gaps in system-wide evaluation
5. What is the present institutional framework for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development?

The key substantive issues raised by Member States and evaluation professionals of various UN development entities revolved around the following five key elements which are elaborated in more detail further below:

1. ISWE must build on existing structures and capacity and not place additional burdens or create new organizational layers;
2. Better use must be made of current annual production of evaluation reports, which already unduly tax the absorptive capacity of the UN development system and its governing bodies to follow up on their findings and recommendations;
3. The QCPR should clarify the coordination/leadership for ISWE function within the UN development system; although the review felt this rule should be performed by the JIU as the only entity with a specific ISWE mandate;
4. ISWE mandate, standards and policies should give priority focus to supporting and building national evaluation capacity;
5. There was no consensus on what should be the way forward but Member States signalled openness to deliberate options and use the QCPR to clarify ISWE definition, role, function and mandate.

[1] Full-text of the independent review and related documents of the QCPR analytical preparations and SG reports on the QCPR can be downloaded from the UN/DESA QCPR website: www.un.org/esa/coordination/2012qcpr.htm

Key issues in relation to ISWE mandate:

- Member States broadly accept ISWE as an essential tool and a prerequisite function to demonstrate the effectiveness and results of UN operational activities for development.
- The reluctance by the GA to adequately address and move forward with ISWE mandate stems to a degree from the complexity and technical nature of the many elements that underlie an effective ISWE function. For example, as evaluations increase in scope, with project-specific evaluation at one end of the spectrum and system-wide evaluations at the other end, a trade-off begins to take place between the breadth and depth that can be covered at different intervals of the spectrum. As other elements get layered, such as coordination mechanisms, financial resources, standards, and professional competencies, the complexity begins to grow significantly.
- There was a strong call to use the QCPR resolution as an opportunity to provide clear mandate and guidance on the role, coordination and function to be played by ISWE in the UN. Achieving clarity was seen as critical to avoid the politicization of ISWE at a time when there is wide interest and support to strengthen this mechanism to better report the performance and results of UN development assistance.
- Clarity of ISWE's role and function also depends on clarity of expectations by Member States about what can be achieved and what use can be made of independent system-wide evaluations.
- Any resulting ISWE mandate must be accompanied by a level of financial and human resources that is commensurate to the expected results and objectives. It is easy to call for and desire an independent system-wide evaluation function, but there must be a recognition that ISWE processes are expensive activities; but some Member States cautioned against expectation that resources for ISWE would be increased, arguing that better quality evaluation could be achieved through prioritization within existing resources.
- Overall, clarity on ISWE expectations and resources is fundamental to the dual objective of making effective use of and establishing a credible independent system-wide evaluation mechanism with better division of labour.
- Views expressed that ISWE activities within the UN system have focused predominantly on operational aspects and not so much on the more critical dimension of evaluating development results and impact.
- Opposing views were also expressed on the need for the President of General Assembly (PGA) to establish a working group to determine the role and function of ISWE within the UN system. Some Member States felt that previous experiences with such working group mechanisms have proven ineffective. Other Member States agreed that a high-level dialogue was needed to answer basic questions but that the mandate should be narrowed to operational activities for development and that the PGA must consult with Member States before forming such a working group. As an alternative, it was proposed that the SG may wish to appoint a panel of eminent evaluation experts to formulate options that could then be considered by the GA.

Key issues in relation to the coordination of ISWE

- There is no unified definition of what constitutes ISWE among the entities of the UN development system. All have different perspectives and understandings of this function. The JIU, DESA, OCHA, OIOS and UN-Women all perform this function to some extent with variance on what this function means operationally across the UN system.
- Furthermore, there is not as yet any systematic analysis of the demand or priorities by which to plan and carry out "horizontal" evaluations, whether of programmatic or operational activities by the UN system as a whole.
- "Independence" of system-wide evaluation function is a concept that varies widely depending on the understanding that is attached to the various factors that are associated with the concept. For these reasons, the independent review report opted for the terms "credible" and "useful" as of equal importance to independence. Together, these two alternative principles capture better the purpose and objectives that underlie a system-wide evaluation function, particularly to support the different roles played out by management, oversight and governance bodies. As was noted, ISWE depends on both principles operating in tandem—i.e., credible and useful - given that one can have credible but not useful evaluations, or alternatively, useful but not credible evaluations.
- Concern was expressed about the absorptive capacity of both Member States and UN entities to deal with the existing volume of evaluations produced on an annual basis, although there was an agreement about the importance of supporting the evaluation function of the UN system and about the fact that, resources and efforts are wasted if reports are not effectively used or followed through. As proposed, the central issue of ISWE or of evaluations in general should be on quality and use, and not the quantity of reports; thus the importance raised on the need to clarify ISWE mandate and achieve a common definition of ISWE function.

Key issues in relation to national evaluation capacity:

- Point was made that the independent review of ISWE function presents the ideal state and not a description of what is already *in situ*. Such context, in combination with findings from the Delivering-as-One evaluation and the surveys of the QCPR analytical preparations, paints a global situation of very low national evaluation capacity.
- A key and practical intermediary step that can be taken to ensure that ISWE function continues to strengthen and improve over time is to redouble efforts and give priority focus to initiatives designed to build national evaluation capacities.
- Serious efforts about building national evaluation capacities must integrate this function into development cooperation projects and programmes. Failure to "programmatize" and "projectize" this objective, would leave it without the required resources and mandate to achieve real progress in strengthening national evaluation capacities.
- UNDP, in convening of national evaluation institutions for global conferences and contribution to knowledge sharing, strengthening professional networks and building national evaluation capacities was noted.
- UNEG's work on strengthening national evaluation capacity and its current undertaking to develop a framework to support this objective was welcomed. The framework seeks to clarify the role and value added to UN development

cooperation, particularly through knowledge facilitation, technical assistance, and south-south and triangular cooperation. The working group network was also pilot testing in Asia the system-wide evaluation approach as a means to support national evaluative capacity development.

Key issues in relation to the role of JIU:

- The QCPR should give impetus to the JIU for future ISWE role and function, taking note that it is the only entity in UN system with a specific ISWE mandate. There were opposing views on supporting the JIU to lead a steering group that would coordinate the UN system's operational work on ISWE. Some Member States saw the JIU as the only institution to be tasked with an ISWE mandate while others welcomed a JIU-led coordination mechanism on an interim basis until more definitive decisions are taken by the GA. The pilot approach was seen as a compromise in light of the fact that the ISWE review focused on ISWE generally and did not provide definitive conclusions on the specific area of UN operational activities for development.
- A select number of Member States expressed their position that JIU should be able to fulfil the call for improved ISWE quality and capacity within existing resources. The JIU expressed its readiness to meet the expectations about ISWE function but insisted that it could not do so without additional resources. The growing demand for "doing more with less" in the current environment of funding constraints is not a trite slogan. It was important to reflect on the real implications of resource-constraints and the ability to meet the expectations of ISWE; otherwise the responsible parties were being set up for failure.
- Questions were raised on whether the JIU was thinking of or has decided to undertake an external assessment of its role and function on ISWE, which was deemed as a desirable and important input for Member States' deliberations and decision making. Another desirable input identified was a benchmarking exercise of how other multilateral organizations (e.g., Bretton Woods Institutions) are structuring and managing ISWE function.

In conclusion, there was a general agreement for an urgent need to:

- better define the scope of system-wide evaluation in the UN system;
- make a clear distinction from the evaluation functions of the entities of the UN system;
- clarify aspects related to the evaluation of the operational activities for development of the UN system;
- emphasize the importance of building national capacities in evaluation; and
- clarify on the division of labour between the JIU, the UNEG and the responsibility for the evaluation of operational activities for development of the UN system on the one hand, and the responsibility for coordinating ISWE on the other.