

ESCWA evaluation policy and guidelines

8 February 2024



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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

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Introduction

The Secretary-General of the United Nations is committed to instilling a culture of learning and evaluation across the United Nations Secretariat. In his report on shifting the management paradigm in the United Nations (A/72/492), the Secretary-General outlined his intention to strengthen the evaluation capacity of the Secretariat to better inform programme planning, performance and reporting to Member States. As a result, a new Administrative Instruction on Evaluation in the United Nations Secretariat (ST/AI/2021/3, hereinafter the “*ST/AI on Evaluation*”) was promulgated in August 2021.

The *ST/AI on Evaluation*, along with accompanying guidelines, outlines the Secretariat’s evaluation architecture as well as the requirements for the management, conduct and use of evaluations. The *AI on Evaluation* builds upon Article VII of the Regulations and

Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation (PPBME) (ST/SGB/2018/3). Each Secretariat entity is required to either develop an evaluation policy, or align existing policies with the *ST/AI on Evaluation*.

This policy governs evaluation at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), institutionalizes the evaluation function and ensures that evaluations conform to internationally accepted principles. Furthermore, the policy defines evaluation, explains its purpose, outlines roles and responsibilities within ESCWA, sets out the types of evaluations it covers, provides guiding principles and norms for evaluation, and sets out expectations for the use of evaluation findings.

1. Concept

A. Definition

The United Nations Secretariat and ESCWA adhere to the definition of evaluation provided by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG):

*“an assessment, conducted as systematically and impartially as possible, of an activity, project, programme, strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area or institutional performance. An evaluation should provide credible, useful evidence-based information that enables the timely incorporation of its findings, recommendations and lessons into the decision-making processes of organizations and stakeholders”.*¹

B. Purpose and objectives

Evaluation at ESCWA is strategic², forward looking, methodologically rigorous³ and analytically ambitious⁴. Evaluations will strive to demonstrate the difference that is being made by the work of ESCWA, and its impact on

member States and their citizens. Evaluation at ESCWA has three main objectives:

- Provides a basis for evidence-informed decision-making, strategic planning, and risk management.
- Demonstrates accountability to the Secretary-General, the Commission and member States for performance in accordance with the mandate of ESCWA and the strategic objectives.
- Identifies evidence-based findings, lessons to be learned and recommendations for action that enhance the next generation of ESCWA work.

While it is a distinct process, evaluation complements monitoring, review, audit and inspection in the context of assessment of programme performance.

C. Categories

There are two types of evaluation:

- **External evaluations** are conducted and managed by the Office of Internal Oversight

1 This definition of evaluation is taken from the UNEG “Norms for Evaluation in the UN System”, Norm 1 - Definition, page 5. The definition draws on Regulation 7.1 of Article VIII of ST/SGB/2000/8 and from the widely accepted Principles for Evaluation of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/DAC).

2 E.g. the areas of greatest importance should be evaluated.

3 I.e. the strength of the evaluation design’s underlying logic and the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn including credibility (e.g. the evaluation will stand up to close scrutiny), confirmability (e.g. the data and findings are not due to participant or evaluator bias), transferability (i.e. the extent to which evaluations findings and recommendations can be applied beyond the bounds of a particular evaluation).

4 E.g. delves into depth, considers breadth and focuses on expected results.

Services (OIOS), the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), other United Nations entities such as Regional Commissions and donors.

- **Internal evaluations** are managed by the Strategy, Planning, Accountability, Results, Knowledge (SPARK) section and conducted by professional evaluators.

Both internal and external evaluations may take the following forms, depending on coverage:

- **Subprogramme** evaluations cover the work of a cluster, section, division or centre. These can be a whole-of-subprogramme evaluation, or an evaluation focused on one or more specific functions, activities, processes and/or projects in the subprogramme.⁵
- **Project** evaluations cover one or more projects funded through the Development Account or an extrabudgetary source.
- **Thematic** evaluations cover a specific function, modality or theme within ESCWA, for example conference services management, communication, e-learning and implementation of the ESCWA Data Strategy.

D. Norms

Evaluations at ESCWA align with the [UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation](#).⁶ These include:

- **Utility:** evaluations must aim to provide relevant and timely contributions to organizational learning, informed decision-making processes and accountability for

results. Analysis, findings and recommendations from evaluations must be used to inform programmatic decisions and actions.

- **Credibility:** evaluations must be credible. Credibility is grounded on independence, impartiality and a rigorous methodology. This requires transparent evaluation processes, inclusive approaches involving relevant stakeholders and robust quality assurance systems. Credibility requires that evaluations are ethically conducted and managed by evaluators that exhibit professional and cultural competencies.
- **Independence:** evaluators must have the full freedom to conduct their evaluative work impartially, access all relevant information and express their assessment. The evaluation function of ESCWA must be positioned independently from management functions, carry the responsibility of setting the evaluation agenda and be provided with adequate resources to conduct its work. The Head of Evaluation at ESCWA must have the independence to directly commission, produce, publish and disseminate evaluation reports in the public domain without undue influence by any party, including the head of entity.
- **Impartiality:** the key elements of impartiality are objectivity, professional integrity and absence of bias. Impartiality provides legitimacy to evaluation and reduces the potential for conflict of interest. The requirement for impartiality exists at all stages of the evaluation process. Evaluators need to be impartial,

5 Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance: the Business Transformation and Accountability Division (BTAD) and the OIOS Inspection and Evaluation Division (2021), *Guidelines – Administrative Instruction on Evaluation in the United Nations Secretariat*. New York: OIOS.

6 United Nations Evaluation Group (2016), *Norms and Standards for Evaluation*. New York: UNEG.

implying that evaluation team members must not have been (or expect to be in the near future) directly responsible for the policy setting, design or management of the evaluation subject.

- **Ethics:** evaluation must be conducted with the highest standards of integrity and respect for the beliefs, manners and customs of the social and cultural environment; for human rights and gender equality; and for the “do no harm” principle for humanitarian assistance. Evaluators must respect the rights of evaluands to provide information in confidence, protect sensitive data and validate statements made in the report with those who provided the relevant information. Evaluators should obtain informed consent. When evidence of wrongdoing is uncovered, it must be reported discreetly to a competent body (such as the relevant office of audit or investigation).
- **Transparency:** transparency is an essential element of evaluation that establishes trust and builds confidence, enhances stakeholder ownership and increases public accountability. Evaluation products must be publicly accessible unless there are specific and compelling reasons against full publication, e.g. protection of personal data; security of United Nations premises, data or people.
- **Human rights and gender equality:** The universally recognized values and principles of human rights and gender equality need to be integrated into all stages of an evaluation. It is the responsibility of evaluators and evaluation

managers to ensure that these values are respected, addressed and promoted, underpinning the commitment to the principle of “no-one left behind”.

In addition, evaluations undertaken at ESCWA address the key criteria defined by the [OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation](#) (EvalNet) of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability⁷:

- **Relevance:** the extent to which the intervention⁸ objectives and design respond to the needs of beneficiaries and partner/institutions and to global and country needs, as well as to their policies and priorities, and continue to do so if circumstances change.
- **Coherence:** the compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector or institution.
- **Effectiveness:** the extent to which the intervention has achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and results, including any differential results across groups.
- **Efficiency:** the extent to which the intervention has delivered, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.
- **Impact:** the extent to which the intervention has generated, or is expected to generate, significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.
- **Sustainability:** The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention have persisted, or are likely to persist.

7 First developed in 1991, these six criteria serve as the core reference for evaluating international development and humanitarian projects, programmes and policies.

8 Sub-programme, policy, strategy, project, activity, tool, etc.

In line with OIOS practice, guidance and assessment, all ESCWA evaluations shall address the integration of human rights, disability inclusion, gender equality and environmental issues – the scope and

depth of which is dependent on the subject of the evaluation.⁹ These elements are included either as a separate evaluation criterion or as an evaluation question under the main criteria.

9 The integration of disability inclusion and environmental issues were introduced in the OIOS 2020-2021 biennial review on “Strengthening the role of evaluation and the application of evaluation findings on programme design, delivery and policy directives”.

2. Institutional framework

A. Roles and responsibilities

This section outlines the roles and responsibilities of ESCWA staff regarding evaluation: Appendix A contains a flowchart.

1. Executive Secretary

The Executive Secretary:

- Reviews and approves the evaluation plan.
- Approves the management response to all evaluations.¹⁰
- Reports on the implementation of OIOS recommendations, as per the Executive Secretary's Senior Manager's Compact with the Secretary-General.
- Promotes the use of evaluation data, findings and follow-up.¹¹
- Ensures that recommendations, findings and lessons learned are considered in strategic planning, in the preparation of budgets for future cycles and are integrated into policies and programmes.¹²
- Ensures adequate capacity and financial resources through a dedicated budget line to manage and conduct evaluations and provide effective quality assurance.¹³
- Ensures the independence and objectivity of SPARK for impartial and transparent management of evaluations.¹⁴

2. The SPARK section

The SPARK section is the custodian of the evaluation function. SPARK is structurally located in the Executive Direction and Management function of ESCWA.

Accountable to the Executive Secretary, the Chief of the SPARK Section serves as head of evaluation at ESCWA and, together with or as delegated to the technical lead support staff for evaluation:

- Drafts an evaluation plan.
- Develops terms of reference for evaluators.
- Manages the processes for conduct of internal evaluations, including collaboration with relevant ESCWA staff.
- Develops management responses for all evaluations, in consultation with relevant stakeholders.
- Informs action owners of the recommendations they are responsible for addressing after the management response matrix has been approved.
- Tracks actions taken to address all evaluation recommendations, and report on their implementation to OIOS where relevant.

10 The Executive Secretary may delegate the approval of management responses as they see fit.

11 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para. 3.1.

12 Ibid.

13 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para. 6.1.

14 OIOS (2021), *Guidelines – Administrative Instruction on Evaluation in the United Nations Secretariat*. New York: OIOS, p. 7.

- Serves as focal point of ESCWA for OIOS, JIU and donors on the conduct of external evaluations.
- Serves as the focal point of ESCWA for reporting to OIOS and BTAD.
- Reports on the implementation of evaluation recommendations, including for the Statement of Internal Control, risk registers and the Proposed Programme Budget.
- Monitors quality for all internal evaluations; and
- Reviews and proposes any changes to the ESCWA evaluation policy.

3. Evaluands

Evaluands (i.e. the head of the unit, sub-programme, project, activity, etc., being evaluated):

- Engage with evaluators throughout the evaluation process.

- Propose, review or validate specific draft management responses/action to address evaluation recommendations that are relevant to them.

4. Action owners

Following engagement with evaluators and evaluands, action owners are identified in management response matrices – as decided by the Executive Secretary. Action owners may include the Deputy Executive secretaries, cluster leaders and any other relevant staff member.

Action owners:

- Are accountable to the Executive Secretary and their first reporting officer through their normal reporting line.
- Lead implementation of actions to address recommendations for which they are responsible.
- Inform SPARK of the status of implementation of recommendations.

3. Process

A. Planning and Budgeting

ESCWA has a multi-year evaluation plan that is reviewed annually. ESCWA ensures appropriate funding to deliver the evaluation plan.¹⁵

All ESCWA subprogrammes must be evaluated **at least once every six years**¹⁶ by way of internal¹⁷ evaluations. Subprogramme evaluations cover the work of a cluster, section, division or centre. These can be a whole-of-subprogramme evaluation, or an evaluation focused on one or more specific functions, activities, processes and/or projects in the subprogramme.

After approval, the evaluation plan will be circulated to the Executive Action Team and made available on the ESCWA public website.

B. Conduct

SPARK coordinates and oversees the development of the terms of reference for evaluations with inputs from the relevant units/offices. SPARK also provides overall management of the evaluation process, providing input and oversight at the design, data collection and analysis, and reporting phases of the evaluation.

In the case that external evaluation specialists are required to supplement the internal

evaluation capacity of ESCWA, the evaluator(s) are selected through a transparent and fair process from the Inspira roster, based on UNEG competencies (including educational background, evaluation experience and methodological expertise), in consideration of gender, geographical diversity and disability perspectives. The terms of Reference (ToR) developed for evaluations will contain the required competencies of evaluators.

C. Quality assurance

Both the *ST/AI on Evaluation* and the UNEG Standards and Norms for Evaluation require quality assurance for evaluation. To ensure the quality of evaluation reports, ESCWA:

- Ensures that the design of the evaluation, including its ToR, is consistent with the [UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Terms of Reference and Inception Reports](#).
- Assesses the evaluation reports prior to finalization to ensure that they align with the [UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports](#), particularly with reference to the quality of recommendations.

D. Use of evaluation results

ESCWA is committed to the effective use of evaluation findings and recommendations

15 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para. 2.1.

16 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para. 2.4.

17 In addition, OIOS is required to evaluate each sub-programme at least once every eight years.

through disseminating evaluation reports and management response matrices to all relevant stakeholders and to any potential users of the information and knowledge generated.¹⁸

ESCWA ensures that evaluation results, lessons learned and recommendations are considered in the preparation of planning and budget documents to inform strategic and transparent programme delivery.¹⁹ Further to this, ESCWA ensures that evaluation results are leveraged within all spheres of the organization in order to enhance the next generation of ESCWA work.

Evaluators and evaluands will engage in a post-evaluation discussion for the purpose of determining lessons that can be learned from the evaluation process and incorporated into future evaluation work.

For the purposes of wider learning, ESCWA publishes its evaluation reports (including sharing them on the OIOS Evaluation Knowledge Management Platform) – unless management deems the information contained in the report as confidential or sensitive (as defined by [ST/SGB/2007/6](#) “Information sensitivity, classification and handling”).²⁰

E. Entry into force and review

This policy was approved by the Executive Secretary on 8 February 2024 and entered into force on the same date. It replaces any other evaluation policy at ESCWA.

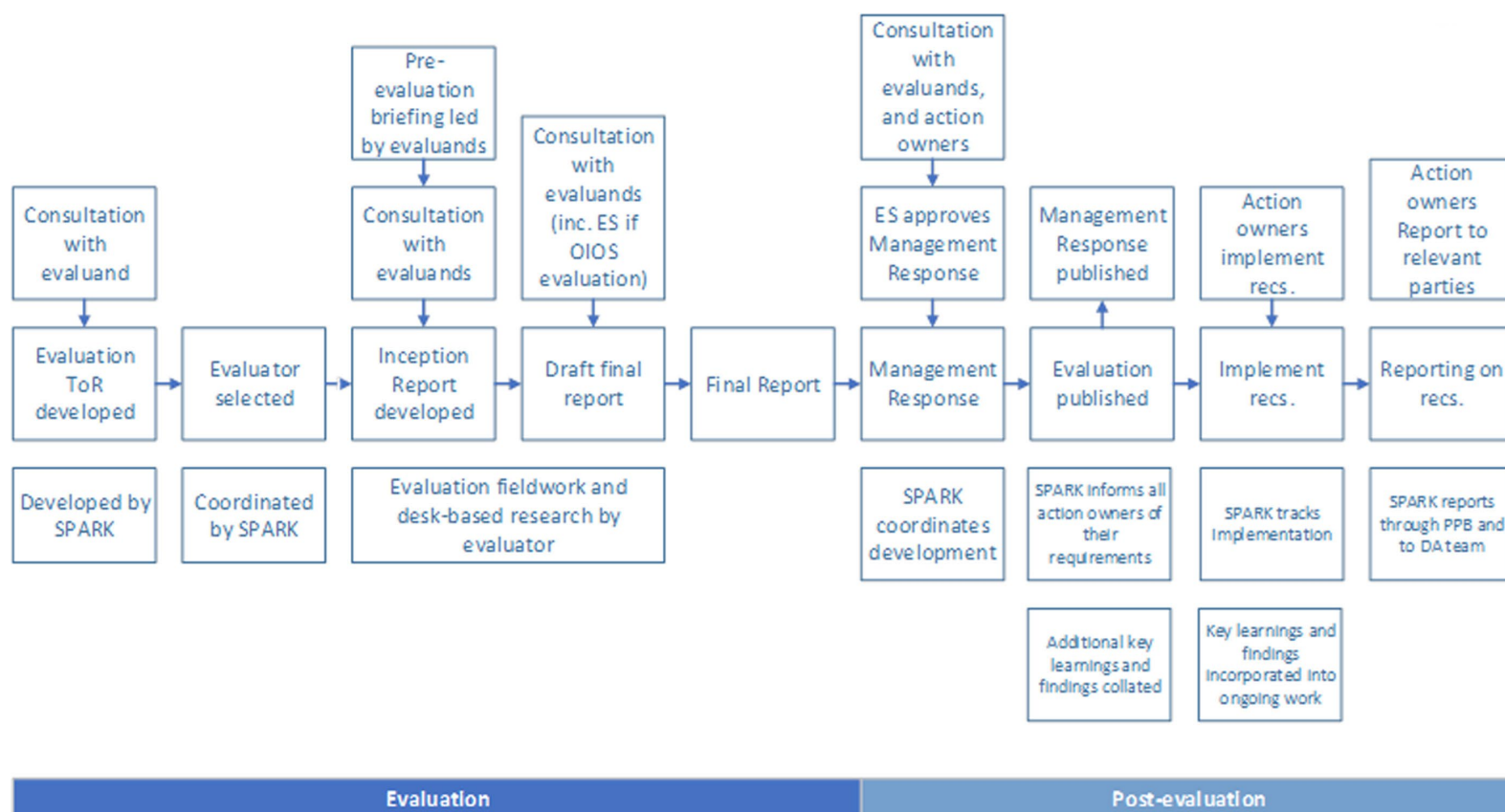
This evaluation policy will be reviewed at least every three years, or after the *ST/AI on Evaluation* has been revised, whichever comes earlier.

18 Appendix B contains guidelines for responding to evaluations. Appendix C contains a template for the management response.

19 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para. 2.1.

20 [ST/AI/2021/3](#), para 3.2. See also the Development Account Guidance Note on Terminal Evaluations, and Assessment Factor 23 of the UNEG Evaluation Maturity Matrix.

Appendix A. Flowchart



Appendix B. Guide to responding to evaluations at ESCWA

Evaluation at ESCWA informs and facilitates the process of organizational learning through the provision of evidence-based findings, learnings and recommendations.

This document guides evaluands in responding to the findings and recommendations of all external and internal evaluations. **It should be read in conjunction with the ESCWA Evaluation Policy.**

B.1. Finalization of the evaluation

B.1.1. Final report draft

The ToR for an evaluation requires the production of a final report draft by evaluators. The SPARK team will ensure that this draft is circulated to the evaluands for review before it is finalised.

When reviewing the final evaluation draft report, evaluands will **only address areas of factual inaccuracy**. If evaluands have concerns about the accuracy of a section of the report, they must **provide the necessary evidence** to ensure that these concerns can be addressed. Their comments and any additional evidence will be provided to evaluators for consideration for inclusion in the final report.

B.1.2. Final report and Management Response Matrix

Once the final evaluation report has been received from evaluators, a management response will be prepared. The SPARK section will engage with evaluands to develop responses to the findings and recommendations made by evaluators. Evaluands should indicate whether they would accept, partially accept or not accept each recommendation. If a recommendation is partially accepted or not accepted, **a clear justification should be provided**. The ultimate determination of whether to accept, partially accept or not accept a recommendation rests with the Executive Secretary.

For each recommendation that is accepted or partially accepted, evaluands outline the anticipated action to address the recommendation²¹, as well as the expected benefit of these actions, and a timeline for implementation. In addition, an action owner must be assigned to each action; the action owner is responsible for implementation.

The management response as a whole will be approved by the Executive Secretary.

21 Note that fully addressing some recommendations may require several actions.

B.2. Evaluation follow-up

Following the finalization of the evaluation and management response, SPARK records the actions, action owners and expected completion dates. At least every six months, or as prompted by other commitments (e.g. on reporting to member states or donors), action owners will be reminded to provide an update on progress.

The information on progress that is submitted through the evaluation tracker informs the reporting of ESCWA to member states, policy-making organs, and donors – including through the Proposed Programme Budget (PPB), which requires that ESCWA (i) reports on its evaluation activities for the previous year and how the evaluations informed the planned programme of work, and (ii) indicates how it is addressing recommendations made by OIOS.

