# Accelerating progress towards the SDGs through evidence-based VNRs

*ADA OCAMPO*

*IDEAS PRESIDENT*

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# Acknowledgments

This presentation was elaborated by Ada Ocampo, IDEAS President using her own experience and building on the following sources:

i)      UN Resolutions on VNRs and Evaluations

ii)     Guide: Embedding Evaluation in VNRs, by UNICEF and CLEAR Anglophone Africa.

iii)    Various resources by DEval, EVALSDGs and other

iv)    The work jointly being done by IDEAS, UNICEF, DEval and MFA-Finland on the second edition of the Guidebook: Evaluation to connect national priorities with the SDGs

**These resources have been listed and hyperlinked in the last slide of this presentation.**

# The agenda 2030 for sustainable Development

Formally adopted in 2015

Establishes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

# Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: Follow up and review processes

- Establishes principles for follow-up and review processes
  - Voluntary and country-led; open, inclusive, participatory and transparent; people-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind
  - *(g) **They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations** and data which is high-quality, […]*
  - *(h) They will require **enhanced capacity-building support** for developing countries, including the **strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes**, […].*

# Relevant Resolutions

- 69/237 – **Building capacity for the evaluation of development activities at the country level (2014)**
  - *2. Invites the entities of the **United Nations** development system, with the collaboration of national and international stakeholders, to **support**, upon request, efforts to further **strengthen the capacity of Member States for evaluation**, in accordance with their national policies and priorities;*

- 70/299 – **Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level (2016)**
  - Establishes the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF), its themes and SDGs to be reviewed each year, the voluntary national reviews

# 2023 Resolution on Strengthening VNRs through Country-led Evaluation

- [Resolution 77/283](#) adopted 26 April 2023 without a vote

- Sponsored by Nigeria and co-sponsored by 24 other countries, including Cambodia, China, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

  - *Para 1. Encourages all Member States to present regular **Voluntary National Reviews with a Country-led Evaluation component** as deemed relevant and useful at the country level in partnership with all relevant stakeholders, in line with the principles of the 2030 Agenda, taking into consideration that follow-up and review processes at all levels will be voluntary and country-led;*

  - *Para 3. Encourages all Member States to **use evidence from evaluations of the Sustainable Development Goals implementation for decision-making and reporting on their progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda** including in their Voluntary National Reviews, as appropriate;*

  - *Para 4. Requests the **United Nations agencies**, within existing mandates and resources, to **provide support** at the request of Member States on their efforts **to undertake evaluations of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals**, and facilitate exchange of experiences and knowledge products from those evaluations.*

# Evidence-based Voluntary National Reviews: relevance, methods, and use

- Key mechanism of the follow-up and review processes of Agenda 2030

- Presented at the annual High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York

- Countries' reports on their progress, experiences, challenges, and lessons learned in implementing the SDGs

- 188 countries submitted VNRs as of 2023
  - but only few incorporating SDG evaluations

# Evidence vs Opinion

**Science is defined by processes to reduce bias and maximize objectivity**

**Evidence**:

- Data that meet the standards of *internal validity* and *external validity (credibility)*
- Key qualities: independence, objective, verifiable

**Opinion**:

- Statements and claims that do not meet the  standards of evidence
- Key qualities: subjective, partial (selective), hard to verify
- Useful to further explain evidence or to complement existing data.
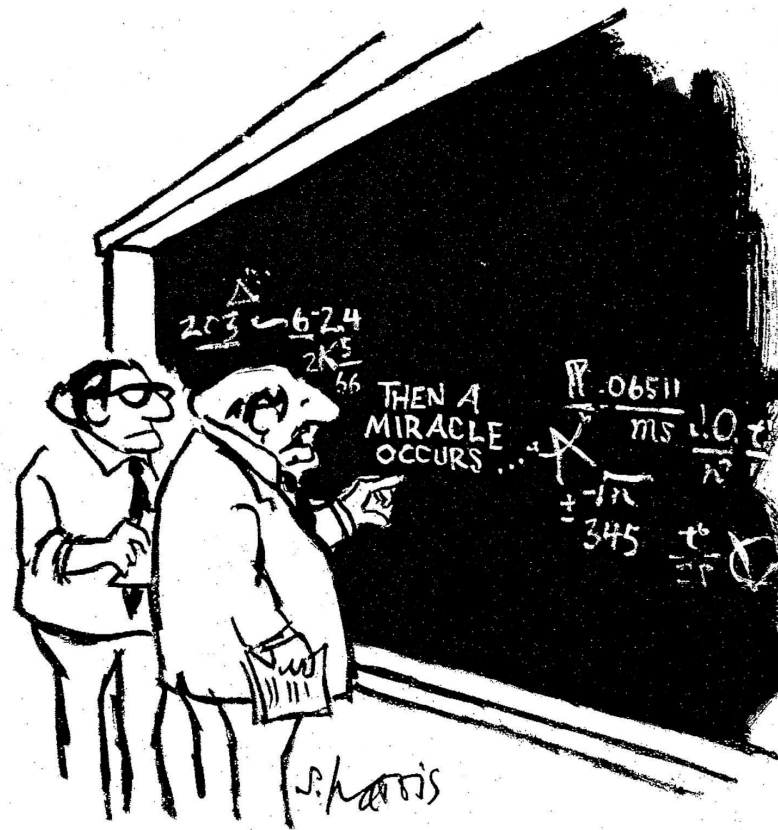
# How can we use evidence?

- Evidence can determine:

  - What works best to achieve specific outcomes
  - For which groups of people
  - Over what time frame
  - At what costs

- Good evidence can help to depoliticize important and difficult decisions

# There are different types of evidence e.g.:

- Expert knowledge
- Published research
- Other research
- Stakeholder consultations
- Policy and programme evaluations
- Administrative data analysis
- Statistical data

- Beneficiary consultations
- Costings of policy options
- Performance expenditure
- reviews
- Economic and statistical modelling
- Research synthesis including
- systematic reviews

"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

I think you should be more explicit in step 2

# Be realistic - policy is not simply derived from evidence

# VNRs and evidence from Evaluations

VNRs main means for reporting on progress towards Agenda 2030. They are **mainly** based on **monitoring data** and answer questions about what and how much has been achieved (rarely **why and for whom)**

By providing credible evidence, evaluations are fundamental for evidence-based VNRs. Evaluations **inform, complement, and enrich** the VNRs, provide deeper analysis explaining the progress (or lack thereof) on SDGs
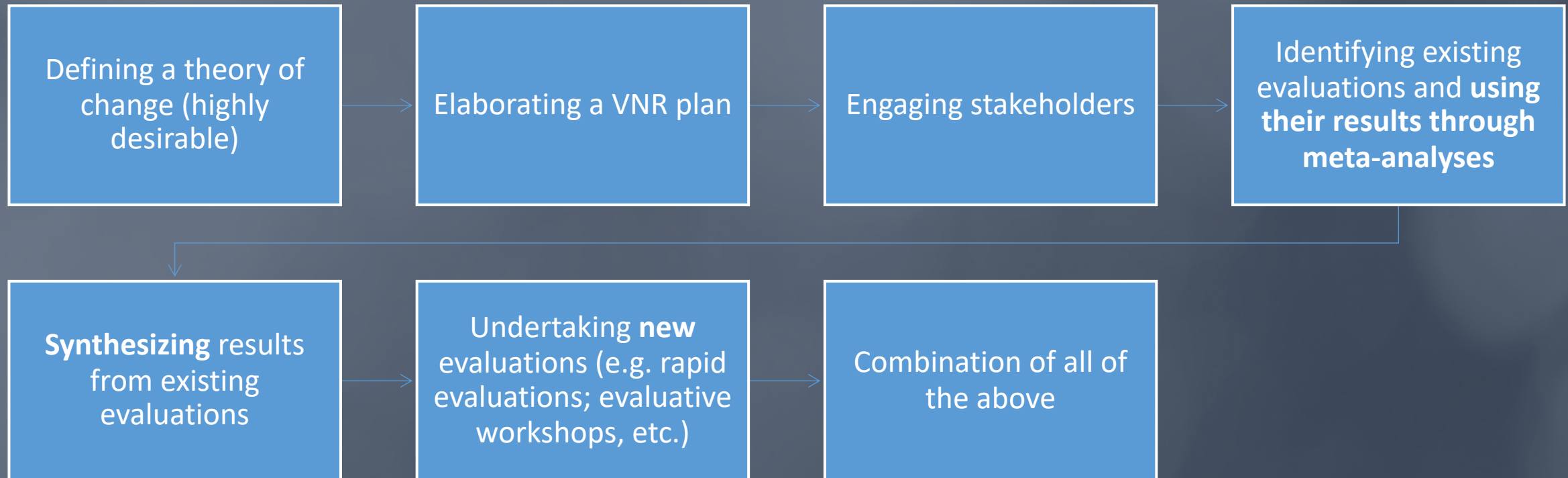
BOTH VNRs and evaluations are necessary for the follow-up and review of Agenda 2030 (Reference: Agenda 2030 Chapter on Follow –up and review processes)
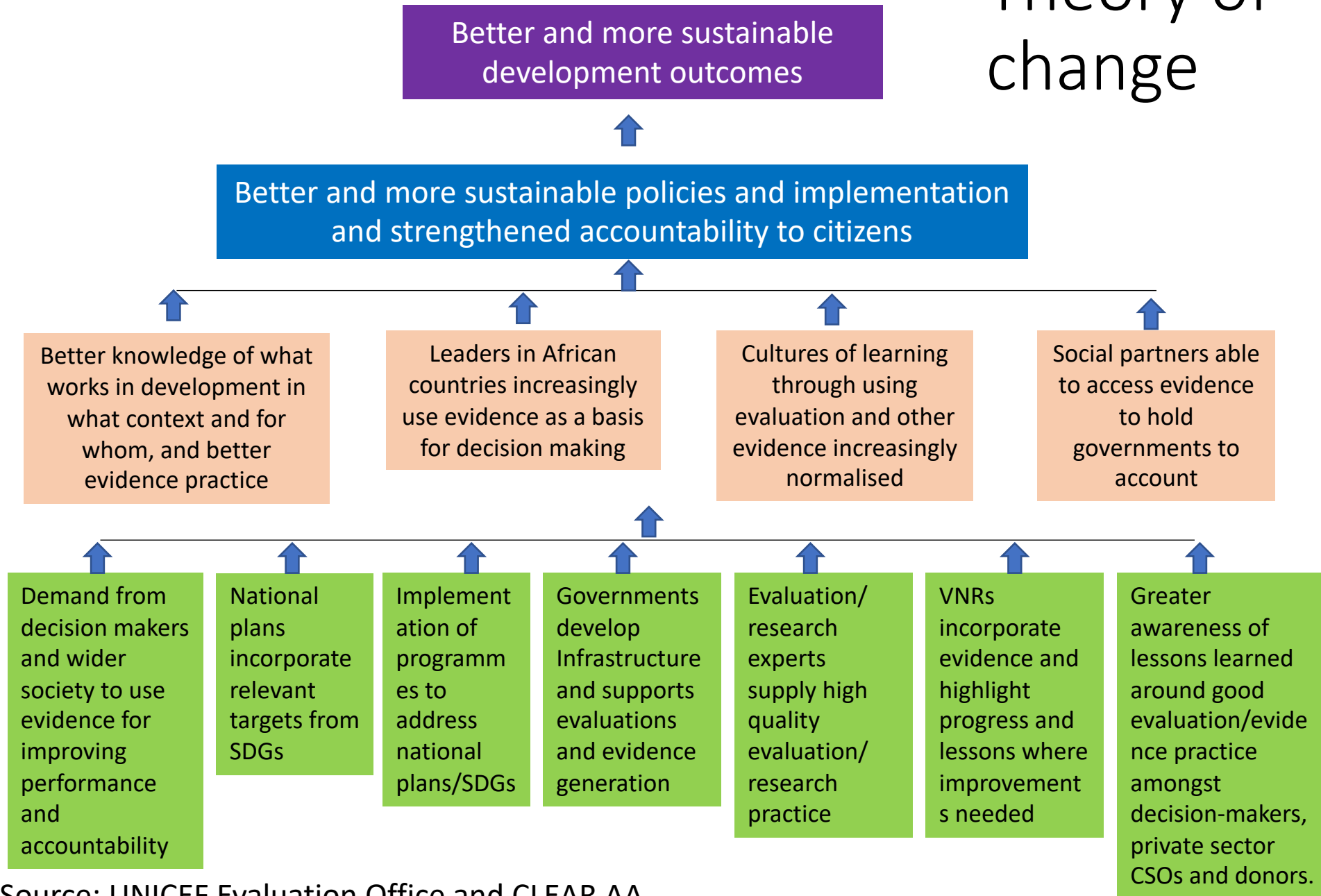
# VNRs and Country-led Evaluations

| VNRs | Country-led Evaluations |
|---|---|
| Measure and report on national progress towards achieving the SDGs | Explain not only targets and progress but the extent to which progress is underpinned by the **agenda principles. Evaluations** support decisions, by addressing the complexity of the SDGs, in relation to national policies and programmes |
| Track ongoing progress in programme implementation in outputs and in outcomes | Builds upon VNR monitoring data **to further analyze** how well implementation, outputs and development outcomes were achieved, as well as with determining long-term development impact |
| Report on indicators against targets | Examine and help answer 'why' progress or lack thereof |
| Driven by accountability to achieve the SDG targets | Driven by accountability towards the transformative nature of the Agenda 2030. It also incorporates a learning dimension to inform policy choices and influence national strategies and programmes. |
| **Engage a variety of stakeholders at all levels** ||

# How to embed evidence from evaluations in Voluntary National Reviews

Defining a theory of change (highly desirable) → Elaborating a VNR plan → Engaging stakeholders → Identifying existing evaluations and **using their results through meta-analyses**

**Synthesizing** results from existing evaluations → Undertaking **new** evaluations (e.g. rapid evaluations; evaluative workshops, etc.) → Combination of all of the above

# Theory of change

**Better and more sustainable development outcomes**

**Better and more sustainable policies and implementation and strengthened accountability to citizens**

| Better knowledge of what works in development in what context and for whom, and better evidence practice | Leaders in African countries increasingly use evidence as a basis for decision making | Cultures of learning through using evaluation and other evidence increasingly normalised | Social partners able to access evidence to hold governments to account |

| Demand from decision makers and wider society to use evidence for improving performance and accountability | National plans incorporate relevant targets from SDGs | Implementation of programmes to address national plans/SDGs | Governments develop Infrastructure and supports evaluations and evidence generation | Evaluation/research experts supply high quality evaluation/research practice | VNRs incorporate evidence and highlight progress and lessons where improvements needed | Greater awareness of lessons learned around good evaluation/evidence practice amongst decision-makers, private sector CSOs and donors. |

Source: UNICEF Evaluation Office and CLEAR AA

# Elaborating a VNR Plan

- Developing budget and getting approval, mobilising political and financial support from national gov and partners

- Developing workplan allowing time for consultation, including:

- Setting up lead agency and coordination mechanism with stakeholders

- Setting dates for main coordination meetings with stakeholders, linking to deadlines

- **Deciding on priority SDGs**
  - Then deciding on priority targets for the SDGs you are focusing on

- Contracting consultants if needed (be aware of needs for process not just technical)

- Agreeing structure of report and approximate number of pages

- Mobilising data to support the priority targets

- Searching for existing evaluations and research relevant to the priority SDGs and sections of the report (eg improving delivery)

**STAKEHOLDER MAPPING**

# Engaging stakeholders

- Line ministries are of special importance, but there also be other actors (see below)
- Develop a stakeholder engagement plan.
  - Identify key stakeholders, methods of engagement and consider online and other means through which stakeholder contributions could be gathered.
  - All sectors and levels of government, civil society, private sector, trade unions, members of parliament and national human rights institutions, should be considered
  - Identification of a focal point to liaise with stakeholders can facilitate communication and follow up.
  - It can also be considered to establish a more institutionalized mechanism to engage stakeholders, which can be used for future involvement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- **Building upon the spirit of Agenda 2030: Include other actors: academia, vopes, think thanks, parliamentarians**
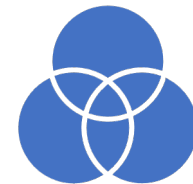
# Identifying data

- The global indicator framework was adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. See https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/

- Ideally, invest time to analyse and domesticate these indicators.

- Access to high quality, up-to-date, and disaggregated data.
    - What does national statistics agency have? Probably outcome and maybe output data – but how old. If patchy evaluations can provide snapshots of certain places/groups.
    - UN Open Data Hub useful if national data is not available.

- Draw on existing reports. Find all existing evaluations by searching national data and other databases (UN, 3iE)

- Use existing national platforms and processes that could contribute to the VNR writing and analysis process. Examples include:
    - national frameworks such as national development plans and national sustainable development strategies;
    - reports submitted to international bodies

*Plan your data gathering to answer the specific needs of the priority goals and targets you have selected.*

# Rapid evaluations

"an intensive, team-based, programme/goal/target-focused assessment that

i)     uses multiple methods of data collection;

ii)     has an iterative process for collection and analysis; and

iii)    relies on **stakeholder** participation in order to quickly develop a holistic understanding of a programme/goal/target from both an insider's and an outsider's perspective."

*International Training and Education Center for Health (2008) **Rapid Evaluations**. University of Washington: Washington.*

# Rapid evaluations - Features

**Intensity** – focused evaluation executed within a short-compressed period

**Time** – reduced timelines in comparison with full scale evaluations – 1-4 months

**Teamwork** – typically two to four team members

**Appropriate skills** – evaluation and policy/programme expertise

**Smaller budgets**

**Evaluation design flexibility** - trade-off between research rigour and speed

**Mixed evaluation research methods** – with strong use of existing qualitative and quantitative data and reports, document rather than lit review, key informants, fewer data points

**Planning** – tightly planned to deliver within typically short periods of 4 weeks to 4 months

**Evaluation management** – less bureaucratic but more collaborative – team of evaluator/M&E and programme staff

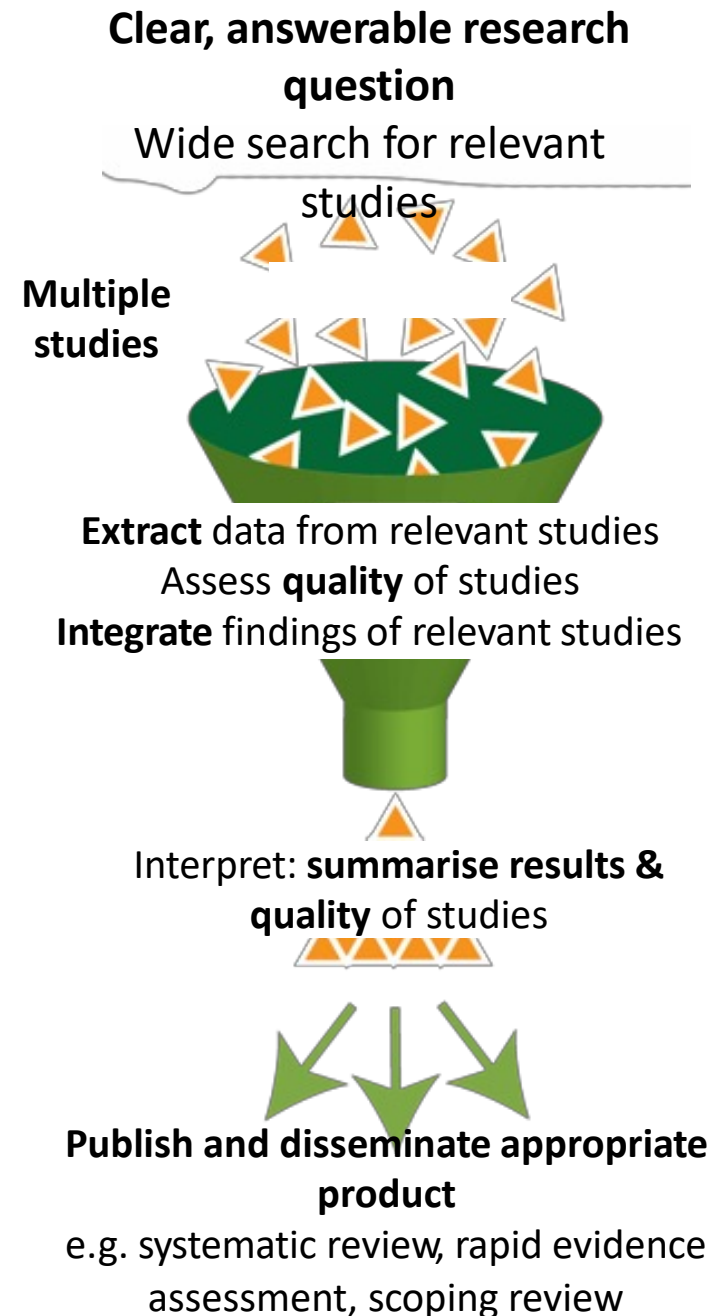**Focus** – implementation, outcome rather than impact.

# Methods/tools

- Document review
- Theory of change with key stakeholders
- Develop evaluation matrix to focus evaluation questions (evaluation question – method to find – source)
- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups so get collective view – quicker
- Workshop key elements

# **Research synthesis** is an important approach to find answers

'Research synthesis is the process through which two or more research studies are assessed with the objective of summarizing the evidence relating to a particular question.'

**Sir Iain Chalmers**

*Nigeria and Finland examples*



**Clear, answerable research question**

Wide search for relevant studies

**Multiple studies**

**Extract** data from relevant studies
Assess **quality** of studies
**Integrate** findings of relevant studies

Interpret: **summarise results & quality** of studies

**Publish and disseminate appropriate product**
e.g. systematic review, rapid evidence assessment, scoping review

# Research synthesis

Review **as much of the existing evidence as possible**…

**Systematic searching** electronic scientific databases & literature

**Critically appraise** the studies/evidence identified

**Extract and analyse** the findings systematically
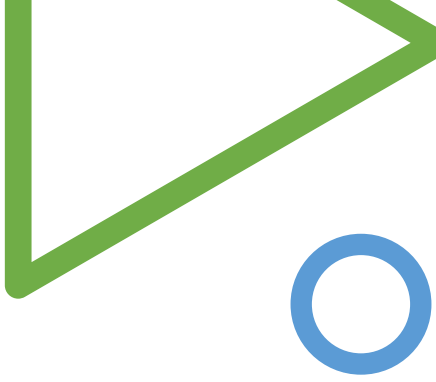
**Summarise** the **findings and quality**

**Document** how you have done it so it can be replicated

# Research synthesis vs. meta-analysis

A **meta-analysis** is *"a statistical procedure that integrates the results of several independent studies considered to be combinable."* Egger et al, BMJ 1997

Combines results of studies addressing the same question.

**Nigeria case**

## What exactly is an evaluation synthesis?

Evaluation synthesis **brings together existing studies**, assesses their relevance and reliability, and **draws together their data to answer specific questions** (DPME, 2014)

An evaluation synthesis is a **systematic procedure** for organizing findings from several disparate evaluation studies. (GAO, 1992)

# Steps: Evaluation synthesis

- Need identification
- Stakeholder consultation
- Agreeing on question & purpose
- Agree on scope

- Relevance
- Quality

- Sense making
- New insights from existing data

| Questions & scope | Searching | Appraisal | extraction | Synthesis |
|---|---|---|---|---|

- Academic i.e. data bases
- websites
- Key experts

- Descriptive of studies included
- Relevant findings
- Qual and quant findings

# Different ways to synthesis

**Meta-analysis**
- Statistical
- Combines quant data from primary studies
- Data is reanalyzed

**Narrative synthesis**
- Focuses on qualitative data
- Findings that are in text form
- Similar to thematic analysis
- Focuses on coding common themes emerging from primary studies

# EVALUATIVE WORKSHOPS

An evaluative workshop is an ==internally driven evaluative exercise== that is ==quick== to run but ==requires good preparation and facilitation==.

Can range from a 2 hour- meeting to a 3-day workshop. It is a small scale, internal exercise that can be led by programme managers working closely with the M&E practitioners within an organisation.

Departs from existing data, expressed in questions that needs to be further discussed to reach levels of consensus among stakeholders.

# Different forms of evaluative workshops

Many different ways they could be run – we will consider 3 options:

Where the programme team develops a **detailed progress report prior** to the workshop, and the workshop can concentrate on validating that.

Where all the content is to be **developed at the event.**

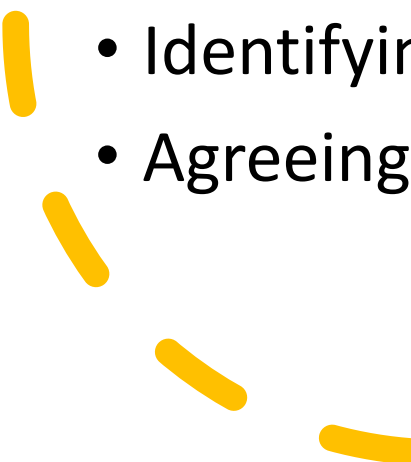Where there is a need to Complement or triangulate Findings from other evaluative studies

# How the workshop works

- Groups could be organised by workstream, or outcome depending how the programme is structured.

- Groups work through pre-determined questions

- Groups depart from pre-prepared reports systematically and in an evaluative way, validating, refining, adding to the report.

- Workshopprovides an opportunity to give recommendations as to how the programme or policy should be strengthened.

# *Evaluative workshop -Process*

- Introducing the workshop and the methodology being adopted;
- Going through the report(s) and validating them working in groups looking at components, eg outcomes, to maximise participation;
- Coming together in plenary to report on group work and to validate across the whole policy/programme;
- Identifying cross-cutting issues and how they should be dealt with;
- Agreeing key recommendations for changes.

# Resources

- [Guide on: Embedding Evaluation in Voluntary National Reviews](#)

- [Strengthening Voluntary National Reviews trough Country Led – Evaluations – UN Resolution April 2023](#)

- [VNRs and SDGs evaluations in Anglophone Africa and in Latin America](#)