

UNEG AGM 2013

Session 2: Peer Review Lessons Learned Workshop, held 17 April 2013

Final report of the workshop

Panel: Rob van den Berg (GEF), task force co-chair, Ted Kliet, Policy and Operations Evaluations Department, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ian Davis (independent evaluation expert)

The session chair, Rob van den Berg, started proceedings by mentioning that peer reviews had been inspired by reviews conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). The current peer review process sat in United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) whereas the original framework was a DAC UNEG framework. The purpose of the workshop was to examine future directions and what lessons could be learned.

Ted Kliet explained in his introduction that the OECD-DAC evaluation group was created 30 years ago and held its first meeting in March 1983. In 1988, the focus of the network was on multilateral organizations, when Norway presented a paper on joint evaluation and on evaluation capacity. It led to a shift to joint evaluations of multilateral organizations conducted by bilateral organizations. At the same time, the DAC members would conduct evaluations of projects implemented by multilateral agencies but financed by them. The many evaluations led to fatigue and raised questions about the extent to which evaluations of the multilateral evaluation functions could be used and complemented by peer reviews of these functions. The first (pilot) peer review was of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), chaired by Niels Dabelstein (then Chief, Evaluation Secretariat, Danish International Development Agency) and in 1996 a second pilot review of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was carried out. In 2010, the peer review format was refined and the peer review framework revised for it to be fully owned by UNEG. The new framework was adopted by UNEG the following year.

Ten peer reviews have been conducted to date. The peer reviews have had three purposes:

- a) Provide an independent assessment of evaluation functions
- b) Enhance better use of evaluation by management, governing bodies and other stakeholders
- c) Strengthen learning and build external confidence in evaluations conducted.

The peer reviews have been useful to the organizations reviewed. However, they have not reduced the demand for external evaluations produced by the donor community, which still demand for individual studies to be conducted.

The study presented, *'Lessons-Learned Study of Peer Reviews of UNEG Evaluation Functions'* examined the impact and usefulness of the peer review approach. The study was financed through generous contributions of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Netherlands.

In the presentation, the author of the report and evaluation expert, Ian Davis, said that he found it very encouraging to hear, at the High-level Meeting the day before, the Secretary-General of the United Nations had talked about outputs, outcomes and logic models. It signalled a major step forward. The present study was based on the experiences of the first nine reviews and a survey targeting donors.

The study focused on the following questions:

- a) Did the peer reviews make a difference in the way donors do evaluations?
- b) To what extent did the peer review process have a positive effect on the peer reviewed organization?
- c) To what extent is the current peer review framework useful?

On balance the study concluded that peer reviews had not increased donor reliance on evaluation by way of reducing the number of evaluations conducted. Donors, however, perceived that evaluation reports produced by agencies were of better quality but the study could not establish a causal link to the peer reviews.

Specifically, the study found that there had been a direct positive impact on the peer reviewed evaluation function and the organization in which the function was settled. Peer reviews had provided value added to United Nations' evaluation community. It also found that the peer review approach was useful and feasible. The approach had become more flexible and apt over the years.

Key strengths of the peer reviews included peer learning and review and raising the profile and importance of the evaluation function within the organization. The peer reviews appeared to increase the trust in the evaluation function and contribute to increased accountability. The peer reviews were considered of high quality. In fact, all reports were considered of good quality.

It was a key weakness of the peer reviews that they were not mandatory. All evaluation functions should preferably go through peer reviews on a regular basis. Other weaknesses identified included the labour intensive and costly process and limited feedback on follow-up to recommendations. There could also be a potential bias in how the peer review was financed as the funding donor could possibly exert influence on the review and team composition. The dual objectives of accountability and learning was also discussed and the need for an appropriate balance.

The study recommended that UNEG map out a strategy for professionalization of the evaluation function where peer reviews could be an integrated part (i.e., focusing on assessment, learning and support); the peer review framework should be revisited to make the purpose of the review clearer (by balancing learning and accountability); a system of quality assurance should be included; the financing of peer reviews should be reviewed and agencies to be reviewed could cover part of the costs; and the establishment of a peer review fund managed by UNEG should be considered as well as the number of peer review panel members (i.e., two members would less costs and could work quicker) should be reduced.

The floor was opened by the session chair for clarifications. The observer from Department for International Development (UK Aid) (DFID) wanted to know what bias the current funding structure might lead to. The response provided was that a bias could occur due to the practice of the funding bilateral agency suggesting external peer review members. The donor might also bring its own agenda to the review. There was also a question on reliance. The study did not find a clear linkage between higher reliance and donors doing fewer evaluations themselves. But the study showed that there had been an increase in trust and confidence in evaluation conducted by agencies. The relationship between accountability and assurance was also clarified. Accountability predominates in the peer reviews. In fact, there had not been enough distinction between accountability and assurance. The audit function had as primary function to provide assurance and the issue was how to distinguish the responsibility of assurance of the audit and the evaluation functions.

The session chair made some remarks to start off the discussion and mentioned three issues to consider. These pertained to context, framework and recommendations to UNEG. While there had not been a reduction in evaluations, a shift in studies had been observed. Donors were more interested in knowing if multilateral evaluation functions would 'fit' in their own policies and if they were satisfied with evidence provided. Should UNEG appeal to OECD-DAC members to become less fragmented and conduct agency level evaluations in a more coordinated manner?

Questions were raised on the measures UNEG could use to increase the professionalization of evaluation and for quality assurance. Perhaps UNEG should strive for a more integrated professionalization framework. The trends showed that the UN agencies are increasingly funding the peer reviews and there was less dependency on donors. A common fund could be considered to benefit less affluent organizations. The possibility was also to strengthen the peer review aspect and work with leaner peer review teams. The latter was contested by some participants who argued that peer reviews were time consuming and the burden had to be shared. A team of four seemed to be the minimum. Finally, stronger and fuller self-assessment could be considered and form a basis for the peer review and be validated by peer review teams.

Martyn Pennington, Chair OECD-DAC Evaluation Network, thanked for a succinct document and also expressed the continued interest of the DAC Evaluation Network to remain involved in the process of peer reviews. He commented that good systems can improve effectiveness to some extent, but would depend on quality and uptake of recommendations. Secondly, peer reviews should not be seen as increasing reliance and assurance on their own but could remain a key objective. On the issue of integrative systems and explicit reporting mechanisms, he would prefer to keep systems flexible. It made sense to have a lighter approach for smaller organizations.

A representative from UNDP agreed that peer reviews were valuable. However, there was a need for more coordination on the peer review exercise, especially with the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN). The network could learn from the peer review exercise. Secondly, the timing of peer review was important as it involved the governing bodies of the peer reviewed agency. The peer review of UNDP led to an important change which ensured that the director of the UNDP evaluation function could no longer be reappointed. For the second peer review of UNDP, the focus was on methodology and strengthening quality. Lastly, it was important to ensure good quality of evaluation reports in the peer reviewed agency. The evaluation reports could be reviewed in advance of the peer reviews mission and lessen the burden of review team.

Helen Wedgwood, World Food Programme (WFP), mentioned that it was currently going through a second peer review. The flexibility of the peer review format was very useful. The evaluation function was being reviewed and would assess the quality of evaluation reports. It was important to think carefully of definition of quality and the utilization. The WFP review would also look at decentralized evaluations.

Margareta de Goys, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), commented on the issue of fragmentation and stressed that the involvement of donors in UN peer reviews was useful. Donors were no longer conducting evaluations of projects financed by them but relied increasingly on UNIDO evaluation reports. Having a donor representative on the review team was constructive and gave it additional weight. The move towards second generation peer reviews was very positive. It was important for smaller organizations to have access to the peer review mechanism. On the matter of size of the review teams, it was important to consider that the peer review was not a light exercise and that the burden would have to be shared between different team members. The costs of a review for an individual agency could be reduced by allowing more people on the panel.

Ashwani Muthoo, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), mentioned that the Evaluation Cooperation Group conducted a peer review of IFAD in 2009. It was commissioned by the Executive Board – this ensured ownership and follow-up. The peer reviews should also cover independence of the evaluation function and the self-evaluation function maintained by the management. After the IFAD peer review there was an action plan drawn and effective follow up. Funding should in his view be independent. Finally, on the role of DAC in peer reviews, recipient countries should also be considered. On the IFAD board there was a growing interest of developing countries in the quality of evaluation.

Colin Kirk, UNICEF, informed that the peer review of UNICEF had led to the approval of a new evaluation policy. Donors of peer reviews, however, should be careful not to make them “donor driven”. Also, it was not feasible to have a too light process. An in-depth review would take a team with several members. He found that while professionalization seemed to point in one direction, it should not be an inward look of professionalization.

Carsten Meyer, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), informed of a quality assurance done of IAEA’s audit processes. A questionnaire was used and it had been very effective and efficient. The validators used in the exercise had been selected and cleared.

Robert Stryck, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), highlighted the advantages of being member of a review team or being reviewed. UNEG had set things in motion for strengthening the evaluation function and it would have to review progress in a few years’ time. The question was raised at what stage of the development of a function there should be a peer review? In terms of funding of peer reviews –UNRWA would not be able to pay for the review.

Robert Moore, FAO, told that FAO had benefited greatly from its peer review. It had important impact and as a result the Evaluation Office was supporting an assessment of the governance processes. The Evaluation office was in the driving seat and the peer review played a role in getting this responsibility. In the case of FAO peer reviews were mandatory and included in its Charter. Regarding funding – allowing small agencies to participate – it could be a pool of funds from donors but if the funding was to be provided by UNEG members only, it would require more contributions from the bigger agencies.

Nick York, The World Bank, found peer reviews to be valuable. Evaluation could be a lonely process and a peer review was good for mutual learning and getting ideas. Evaluators should be willing to subject themselves to evaluation to ensure their own credibility and it should not be optional. Professionalism was an important issue along with institutionalisation of professionalism. The peer review process could be particular valuable to smaller organisations.

Olivier Myard, International Civil Aviation Organization, raised the possibility of combining the two processes of peer reviews and JIU reviews.

Maria Santamaria, World Health Organization (WHO), said that it had had several reviews by the Joint Inspection Unit, CIDA, MOPAN but still no peer review. WHO would like to have a UNEG peer review. The report would have to be ready in October 2015 and presented to the Board in 2016.

The observer from DFID drew attention to reliance from the donor perspective. In fact, it was two issues, a matter of more reliance and donors doing fewer reports. There was still, however, a need to assess the quality of the evaluation reports. DFID had its own process, the Multilateral Aid Review, which use elements of the peer review.

The discussion was summarized by the session chair, Rob van den Berg, who also concluded on issues emerging from the discussion and to be brought forward to UNEG. He found it encouraging that OECD-DAC continued to support the UNEG peer reviews. At the DAC meeting to be held in June 2013 the UNEG representative could advocate for less fragmentation of DAC assessments and for use of peer reviews. Two issues were very important for further discussion in UNEG: a) how to strengthen the evaluation function of UN agencies and b) ensure professionalization through an integrated framework. Peer reviews should be seen as part and parcel of this professionalization. There was also need for a strategic shift to focus on relevance, effectiveness and impact of evaluations. Many UNEG members were still focusing on project level evaluations and UNEG would need to encourage more strategic evaluations.

On lessons regarding peer reviews: from the discussion it was clear that many felt that two panel members would not be enough for a peer review. Reducing the number of panel members could potentially conflict with a stated need to bring partners into peer review panels. The time was perhaps not yet there to turn peer reviews into a mandatory instrument for UNEG members but it could be made mandatory. The problem of small agencies and the funding of their peer reviews should be addressed and a funding mechanism for peer reviews be developed. On the matter of self-evaluation and self-assessments, these could be useful instruments within an organization but they tended to have less credibility outside the organization.

In a final word by Ted Kliet, he encouraged UNEG members to send comments on the study within the next two weeks. The report will be finalized in time for the OECD-DAC meeting in June 2013.