UNEG
United Nations Evaluation Group

Peer-validated Self Assessments of Small Evaluation functions

Proposed Concept Note

Dates: 16-17 May 2019

Location: Room 3, UN Gigiri Compound, Nairobi

Hosts : United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Human Settlements Programme

This report was prepared by the sub-group of the Peer Review Task Force focused on peer reviews for small evaluation functions. It is being submitted for discussion under the Review of UNEG Working Group activities Strategic Objective 1 on 17 May.

1. Introduction

In support of the professionalisation of evaluation across the United Nations system, one of the key tools developed and rolled out by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) in recent years has been a mechanism designed to ensure peer reviews of UNEG members evaluation functions. Conducted typically by Heads of Evaluation or senior evaluation specialists from both the UNEG and/or Evalnet community, these peer reviews have used the UNEG Norms and Standards as the normative framework against which the performance of evaluation functions should be judged.

The peer reviews are typically conducted over a four- to six- month period of time and involve both desk review and site visit phases to validate the initial analysis carried out, and to build ownership of the peer reviewers' findings and recommendations with senior managers in target organisations. A total of eight peer reviews have been conducted since 2014, mostly of independent evaluation offices with direct reporting lines to governing bodies.

As part of its 2018 – 2019 work programme, and in response to demand from smaller evaluation functions to undertake peer reviews, the UNEG Peer Review Task Force committed to developing a methodology and approach for so-called peer-validated self assessments of Evaluation Offices with five staff members or fewer.

This concept note is intended to propose an approach to conducting 'light' peer reviews that includes both the normative framework that should underpin the exercise as well as the different steps that would be needed to conduct the peer review. Once approved, this concept note can be used as the basis for developing a fuller set of guidance, suggested elements for which are included in Annexes to this concept note.

2. Proposed revised approach

Normative framework

The proposed normative framework for the 'light' peer review as in all peer reviews remains the UNEG Norms and Standards. The Norms and Standards have long been the framework for evaluation in the United Nations and should be considered the cornerstone of any assessment of the performance of its evaluation functions by a group of peers or by any other assessment modality.

The Norms and Standards are also intended to be an aspirational and progressive framework to help strengthen the performance of evaluation functions across the UN system; in proposing a systematic approach to assessing the performance of the smaller evaluation functions, we have kept this objective very much in mind.

In proposing the normative framework for this type of peer review, it is important to recognise that in the same way that UN entities vary greatly in terms of mandate, size, and available resources – so do the evaluation functions that support them; hence the need for a 'lighter' assessment framework that accommodates these variations while not compromising on the broader Norms and Standards to which all UNEG members are committed to upholding.

We propose to 'lighten' the peer review modality in two ways: i) refining the scope of the assessment compared to current approaches; ii) reducing the amount of time and level of effort needed for the exercise in line with the reduced size of the evaluation functions that will be assessed. In doing so, we have retained the capacity development objective of the peer reviews in line with commitments by UN evaluation entities under the Norms and Standards very much in mind.

Refining the scope of the assessment

In order to respect the need for a framework incorporating as far as possible the full Norms and Standards (N+S) while reducing the time needed for the assessment, it is proposed to retain the broad categories of the norms and standards for the exercise while reducing the number of elements to be assessed.

To achieve this, we have looked at an example of an existing framework – the JIU maturity index – which incorporates a set of performance indicators across the various categories of the norms and standards against a maturity index (which is highly relevant for the capacity development objective of this exercise given its ability to map out a set of -performance improvements under the different aspects of performance being assessed).

In practice, and still referring to the JIU as our operational framework, this would mean retaining the six broad categories of assessment: i) demand and intentionality; ii) enabling environment; iii) relevance; iv) credibility, both in terms of impartiality as well as validity; v) utility and operational impact and vi) direction setting/reflection as well as the eighteen questions that underpin while at the same reducing the number of criteria that need to be assessed (as well as the time taken to assess them). (*The group is still reviewing this but it is likely that the universe of assessment criteria for review of small evaluation functions would be reduced to around two-thirds of the current 90 performance questions*)

Ensuring the capacity development objective of the exercise

The JIU evaluation matrix – appropriately 'lightened' – was judged to be the most appropriate assessment framework for this exercise given not only its ability to assess an evaluation entity on the index at a certain point in time but also to articulate clearly the different levels of performance that would be needed for the entity to advance against the index.

With the same spirit, and following the example of the OIOS tool, we also propose including a peer assessment of a small sample of evaluation reports against the standard since we judge that this can be a very direct way of providing capacity development directly to evaluation managers working within an evaluation function.

Reducing the time needed to complete the assessment

In its review of *Modalities for Evaluating, Reviewing or Assessing an Evaluation Function* of April 2018, the UNEG Peer Review Working Group proposed a number of modalities to assess smaller evaluation functions, including ***UNEG Peer – Validated Self Assessment***, **UNEG-validated self assessment** and a **publicly-disclosed self-assessment** against the Norms and Standards, each with varying advantages and disadvantages, notably in terms of rigour and independence. For our purposes, all would seem to have the virtue of taking less time than peer reviews currently take and therefore qualify as possible options for a 'lighter' form of peer review.

Taking the peer-validated self-assessment as our modality of choice, we propose a total time period of 2 - 3 months that would incorporate: i) finalization of the Terms of Reference, ii) setting up the peer review team, iii) preparation of the self-assessment by the entity being assessed, iv) review of the self-assessment by the team, including assessment of the evaluation reports v) 3 to 4 day visit by the assessors to the evaluation entity being assessed; vi), discussion of preliminary observations and findings, vii) preparation of the final report; viii) receipt of comments and finalization of the report and ix) management response. These steps are described in more detail in Annex 1.

3. Conclusion

We hope the approach set out above satisfies the expectations of a significant number of smaller UNEG evaluation entities that would like to consider being the subject of a full UNEG-validated peer review, while not requiring the same time and effort of the current approach to peer reviews of the larger offices. We hope the approach will also help contribute not only to providing a one-off assessment against a maturity index of the performance of evaluation entities against the Norms and Standards but also sets out a pathway for the strengthening of their performance against these Norms and Standards over time.

4. Annexes [to be completed]

Annex 1: Overview of the different steps in the peer review process

Annex 2: Draft **Terms of Reference** for the whole exercise for the visits to each evaluation function, including standard invitation letters to senior managers from the UNEG Chair and/or the Lead Evaluators in the exercise [to be developed]

Annex 3: **Template for the self-assessment tool** including the key categories and accompanying performance indicators of evaluation performance being assessed presented in the form of a maturity index.

Annex 4: Grid for assessing the **quality of evaluation reports** [we plan to adapt the quality standard for the UNRWA peer review which in turn was based on a quality standard for UNDP evaluation reports recognising that the standard should be relevant for all UN entities and not just those with a UNDG mandate]

Annex 5: **Terms of reference for the consultant** supporting the peer review when this is the case [to be developed]

Annex 6: **Draft template** for the final reduced-scope peer review evaluation report or "validation report"

Annex 7: **Draft template** for the response from management to recommendations made by the team: "management response". [we plan to use the existing management response template being used by the agency; perhaps we can develop a UNEG standard template in cases where agencies don't have this?]

Annex 1:

Step 1: Finalisation of the **Terms of Reference for the peer review, including the normative framework** to be applied for the peer review, highlighting this special issues and contexts that are realate to the level of resourcing and the mandate of the evaluation entity being assessed. This should be approved by the UNEG Chair or whichever UNEG colleague has delegated authority to oversee the UNEG peer review work programme, as well as the Head of the Evaluation Unit that has requested the peer review.

Step 2: Setting up of the peer review team - This should include a senior UNEG member (ideally one that has already served on a full Peer Review panel or has been in a function that was 'Peer Reviewed') and another senior UNEG (or Evalnet) member, one of whom should be an evaluation 'Head'. The team may also be joined by **a representative from a Eval Net member entity** as appropriate as well as **supported by a consultant** in the case for example of bundled Peer validated Self Assessments. The team should present a variety of expert profiles, including ideally experience of the thematic area that the agency being peer reviewed is supporting as well as experience of working in smaller evaluation functions in the UN system.

Step 3: A **self-assessment against the agreed normative framework** should prepared by the evaluation function being 'Peer Validated'.

Step 4: **Starting the peer review exercise**. The exercise begins with a **review of the self-assessment as well as other relevant documents and evaluations** by the peer review team

Step 5: The team of Peers **make a 3 or 4 day visit to the function**, engage with evaluation staff and prepare preliminary findings and observations aimed at enhancing the evaluation function. In parallel, the peer reviewers with the support of the consultant (if present) conduct an assessment of evaluation reports produced by the evaluation entity against the quality standards for evaluation reports (annexed)

Step 6: Preliminary observations and **findings** are shared with evaluation staff and representatives of senior management of the UNEG entity during the visit.

Step 7: The team of Peers prepare a final short-form peer review report/validation report that summarises key findings and makes a series of observations / recommendations aimed at enhancing the evaluation function.