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# **Evaluation Office Operational Strategy**

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**Evaluation Office**

**United Nations Environment Programme**

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## Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .....	3
2. PURPOSE.....	3
3. THE OPERATIONAL CONTEXT FOR EVALUATION IN UNEP.....	4
Evaluation Policy .....	4
Recent History and the MOPAN Assessment of the UNEP Evaluation Function .....	5
4. EVALUATION STRATEGIC PRIORITIES.....	6
PRIORITY 1: Develop and Maintain a Strategic Evaluation Agenda .....	6
PRIORITY 2: Enhance the Use of Evaluation Throughout the House.....	7
PRIORITY 3: Maintain a Focus on Quality of Evaluation Processes and Products .....	9
PRIORITY 4: Build Capacity across the House for Management-Led Reviews.....	10
PRIORITY 5: Establish a Stable Resource Base and Funding Approach for the Evaluation Function .....	10

# 1. Introduction

1. This document presents a short strategy to help direct and strengthen evaluation in UNEP. The strategy reflects a view that the evaluation function operates as a system that is integrated into UNEP at all levels and is complementary to other functions and oversight mechanisms in the organisation. It reflects recent changes to the approach to evaluation in UNEP, formalised in the Evaluation Policy, 2022.
2. Evaluation is an essential component of governance, accountability, transparency, learning and management decision-making to achieve results. As such, the Evaluation Operational Strategy is aligned with the UNEP Medium Term Strategy 2022-25 and helps reinforce its focus on transformational results to address the planetary crises of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change that are driven by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. It is also aligned with, and complementary to, the Evaluation Policy (2022) and Evaluation Manual (2022).

# 2. Purpose

3. The overall purpose of the Evaluation Operational Strategy is to help UNEP strengthen performance against commitments specified in the 2022-2025 Medium Term Strategy (MTS) and, through the MTS, the UN Common Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, by enhancing the contribution of the evaluation function to accountability, organisational learning and evidence-based decision-making. It aims to provide a clear direction for the UNEP evaluation function, to highlight priorities and focus efforts and resources. In turn, this will help to strengthen evaluation operations and help ensure the evaluation function is of maximum utility for UNEP.
4. The strategic priorities set out in this document are those areas and issues considered most important for the evaluation function to achieve its intended results. Five strategic priorities are identified for the period 2022-2025:
5. In summary, the strategic priorities for evaluation in UNEP are:
  - Develop and maintain a strategic evaluation agenda
  - Enhance use of evaluation throughout the house
  - Maintain a focus on quality of evaluation processes and products
  - Build capacity across the house for robust project-level performance assessments (management-led review)
  - Establish a stable resource base and funding approach to support the evaluation function

### 3. The Operational Context for Evaluation in UNEP

6. The context in which UNEP operates has changed significantly in recent years, dominated by three interconnected crises – climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. All three are driven by unsustainable production and consumption patterns, which put global economic and social well-being at risk and undermine the environmental foundations that provide opportunities to reduce poverty and improve lives. This already challenging global situation has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of nationalism threatening multilateralism, and armed conflicts causing disruptions to global markets, international political processes, peace and security.
7. UNEP has articulated its intended response to this situation with the development of its Medium-Term Strategy 2022-25. The MTS aims to drive “transformative, multi-stakeholder actions that target the causes of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. In doing so, UNEP will ensure that science remains at the centre of decision-making processes, and that environmental rule of law continues to underpin global environmental governance. UNEP will boost efforts to use digital technologies for inclusive, transparent and innovative outcomes.”
8. In addition, in recent years, the UN Secretary-General has overseen an extensive UN reform effort and in his report A/72/492 on “Shifting the management paradigm in the United Nations: ensuring a better future for all”, indicated his intention to strengthen the evaluation capacity within the UN Secretariat to better inform programme planning and reporting on programme performance. He stressed that results of evaluations will be used by programme managers to better plan and adjust their activities. As such, evaluation is integral to learning and supports improved results-based management and increased transparency on programme delivery to Member States.

#### Evaluation Policy

9. The UNEP Evaluation Policy was approved in 2009, updated in 2016 and fully revised in 2022 in-line with current good practice, new UN Secretariat requirements and to reflect the new strategic setting in which it sits. The Evaluation Policy 2022 recalls the mandates for evaluation, sets out the purpose of evaluation and describes the organization and management of the evaluation function, including what evaluation types are carried out, what products are generated, the principles that guide evaluative work and which evaluation criteria are assessed. The Evaluation Policy also outlines the general processes by which it is operationalized, how evaluation findings and recommendations are to be used and how the performance of the evaluation function itself will be assessed.
10. The evaluation approach in UNEP is driven by the policy, but also pays due regard to other UNEP policies and strategies, including Gender, Human Rights, Monitoring, Partnership, Safeguards, Disability and Inclusion and the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology and Capacity Building. The operationalization of the Evaluation Policy is further specified in the

Evaluation Manual which outlines UNEP's performance assessment processes and the UNEP Programme and Project Management Manual, which covers the roles of many divisions and offices involved in the project cycle and the implementation of the MTS.

## Recent History and the MOPAN Assessment of the UNEP Evaluation Function

11. Over the past decade the Evaluation Office has established a solid reputation, both internally and within the UN Evaluation Group, for high-quality, credible and objective evaluative work. As highlighted by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) in its most recent assessment of UN Secretariat evaluation functions (report A/76/69, 2021), UNEP was identified as having a very productive evaluation function able to deliver a large volume of work with a small staff.
12. However, over time, the Evaluation Office has also recognised some shortcomings of its approach to operationalising the Evaluation Policy. Specifically, the sample of UNEP work evaluated has lacked a strong strategic basis, because the majority of the Evaluation Office resources (i.e. staff time) have been directed towards project-level evaluations and the projects being evaluated have been determined based on their operational completion dates. Staff time and financial resources directed towards strategic and cross-cutting evaluations have been limited, whereas resources to fund project-level evaluation have remained available, held in each project budget. Over time, as the number of UNEP projects has increased the demand for project level evaluations has exceeded the Evaluation Office's capacity to meet the demand, leading to backlogs and delays. The November 2021 report of UNEP by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) provided a comprehensive assessment of UNEP's evaluation function. The following points summarise the findings:
  - UNEP's evaluations are based on design, planning, and implementation; are quality oriented; and use appropriate methodologies. This is ensured through both the current evaluation policy and the Evaluation Office's frequently issued guidance documents. As a result, UNEP's independent evaluation function operates effectively, and evaluation processes and products are of good quality;
  - Internal mechanisms and incentives exist for ensuring evaluation lessons and recommendations inform new strategic plans and projects. These mechanisms and incentives have received renewed support from UNEP's leadership. Evaluation feedback into project design needs to be timely;
  - Current arrangements have led to a donor-driven bias in favour of project evaluations to the detriment of sub-programme evaluations and the assessment of broader initiatives. This suggests a shift in focus of evaluation efforts is needed towards more strategic assessments that may provide richer learning opportunities for the organisation, including an identified need to strengthen ex post evaluation of projects and sub-programmes;
  - Evaluation findings should be systematically presented to and discussed by the governing bodies on a regular basis; and
  - There is a need to strengthen the financing of evaluation and give greater attention to the assessment of PoW outcomes, the results of UNEP's knowledge products and other normative activities.

## 4. Evaluation Strategic Priorities

13. The Evaluation Office has adopted a new strategic approach to ensure that the organization complies with its mandate to assess UNEP's performance with respect to the intended results set out in the Programme of Work and Medium-Term Strategy. The evaluation approach aims to foster organisational learning and evidence-based decision-making, support improved results-based management and increase transparency and accountability on programme delivery. The efforts required are presented in five interrelated priority work areas.

### **PRIORITY 1: Develop and Maintain a Strategic Evaluation Agenda**

14. The Evaluation Office will seek to maintain a more balanced coverage of the thematic areas that are representative of UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy, and enhance UNEP's ability to learn from the wide range of initiatives across its environmental mandate

#### **Shift the Balance of Effort Towards Strategic Evaluations**

15. The Evaluation Office will allocate a greater proportion of staff time and its available financial resources to strategic or thematic/portfolio evaluations. To meet current UN Secretariat coverage norms (ST/AI/2021/3), one sub-programme evaluation (i.e. evaluation of one of the thematic, foundational or enabling pillars/transformations) will need to be completed and an additional sub-programme evaluation launched per annum to meet the requirement of all seven UNEP sub-programmes being covered in a six year period.
16. Strategic evaluations that will provide balanced coverage of UNEP's policies, strategies and core planning instruments will be selected to : a) assess UNEP's results in key areas; b) provide evidence-based learning for existing areas of investment and for the development of new areas (i.e. provide evidence to re-examine organisational goals / POWs / investment areas / strategies / etc.) or c) provide insights into cross-cutting issues (e.g. gender, South-South cooperation, poverty reduction etc.). These strategic or thematic/portfolio evaluations will draw on existing material, including project-level evaluations or Management-led Mid-Term or Terminal Reviews, as well as carrying out new evaluations as required.

#### **Purposively Sample Completing Projects for Evaluation Coverage Representative of the UNEP Programme**

17. Rather than attempt to attain evaluation coverage of all completing projects, the Evaluation Office will purposively sample individual projects for evaluation every year in-line with the available Evaluation Office staff capacity. The selection of project evaluations will be driven by the need to evaluate the performance of the Programme of Work and selected projects will represent the key features of UNEP's programme: sub-programmes, funding sources, operational divisions and geographic distribution. The preparation of a known quantity of evaluations in a sample will allow an even greater focus on high quality. The

findings, trends and performance ratings from project-level evaluations are collated over time and regularly analysed and reported in the Biennial Evaluation Synthesis report.

### Selectively Evaluate Impact

18. Impact Evaluations or Impact Studies will be introduced into strategic evaluations undertaken at a rate of a minimum of 1 per biennium. Credible Impact Evaluations require planning as part of the project design, awareness of the evaluation design on the part of the Project Manager during project implementation and more funds than project Terminal Evaluations. Essentially, they require data collection before and after implementation from both an intervention and non-intervention group. Given the resources needed, it is advisable to select work of central strategic significance and with quantifiable results' indicators for impact evaluations. An Impact Study can be carried out where the causal link between the project outcome level and the long-lasting impact has already been well-established in peer-reviewed science (e.g. levels of greenhouse gas emissions caused by different fuel types). In such a study it may be that only a contribution to impacts can be asserted. The approach to both impact evaluations and impact studies will be selective. Priority will be given to project/programmes where both the magnitude of the intended effect and the attributive ease of the project/programme to the effect are both high.
- KPI UNEP meets UN Secretariat's sub-programme coverage targets. Target = 7 evaluations per 6 years.
  - KPI Strategic evaluations. Target = 5 per annum
  - KPI Ratio of selected evaluations to projects active over an MTS period by sub-programme / region / division. (Target To be determined)
  - KPI Number of completed Impact Evaluations or Impact Studies per MTS Period. Target = 2

## PRIORITY 2: Enhance the Use of Evaluation Throughout the House

19. UNEP's evaluation function must be driven by the usefulness of its work. As such, attention needs to be paid to building the ownership of evaluation findings and the timely delivery of evaluation findings into decision-making and management processes. This needs to be coupled with robust follow-up processes to promote the acceptance and implementation of evaluation recommendations.

### Promote Acceptance and Implementation of Evaluation Recommendations and Regularly Provide Feedback on Compliance to Management

20. All UNEP evaluations follow a rigorous process that is comprehensively described in Evaluation Office guidance, the Evaluation Manual and the UNEP Programme and Project Management Manual. Evaluation processes are participatory, and whilst conducted independently of management, the approach used aims to foster learning and reflection among UNEP staff throughout the process. Where efforts to build a constructive interactive dialogue between evaluators and managers succeed, the ownership of evaluation findings increases and, along with it, the utility of an evaluation.

21. The Evaluation Office will ensure that recommendations clearly define the issue/problem to be resolved. The proposed prescription made in the evaluation can then be discussed with managers alongside other possible approaches to resolve the stated problem / issue. This approach moves evaluation recommendation compliance beyond a 'tick box' exercise and helps evaluations to support decision-making and promote meaningful improvements. To this end, the Evaluation Office will aim to discuss the findings and recommendations of each completed evaluation with the responsible manager(s). Interactive dialogue is an effective means of further promoting uptake and implementation of evaluation recommendations.
22. Often, evaluations identify problems that cannot be resolved / addressed solely by the managers responsible for the policy, programme or project being evaluated. In such circumstances, these recommendations are designated as 'UNEP-wide' recommendations. The Evaluation Office will collate the issues / problems associated with such recommendations and bring them to the attention of the relevant senior managers. The solutions required to address the problems / issues identified in 'UNEP-wide' recommendations are often multifaceted. The Evaluation Office aims to catalyse management dialogues around such issues and keep track of developments by recording a 'narrative' of the discussions held and the actions taken. This strategy is thought to be more effective than the alternative of deconstructing the issues into a large number of separate compliance actions of more limited scope which would risk losing sight of the broader issues/problems at stake and reduce compliance to a more 'administrative' tick-box exercise.

### **Feed Evaluation Findings into UNEP Management Processes**

23. The work of the Evaluation Office feeds into the operations of UNEP in a variety of ways beyond the findings and recommendations stemming directly from evaluation reports. The Evaluation Office will collate findings from higher level evaluations that are of relevance to UNEP's strategic planning processes and communicate them to senior management.
24. Similarly, the Evaluation Office will maintain an overview of UNEP's performance, especially at project level, through the aggregation of standardised ratings against evaluation criteria. This body of knowledge, with time-series data available since 2010, allows robust observations to be brought to the attention of project designers, project managers and those staff involved with quality assurance roles in project approval processes.
25. The same body of knowledge informs external assessments of UNEP; OIOS, MOPAN and the Board of Auditors will often seek information from the Evaluation Office. The Evaluation Office provides regular inputs into corporate monitoring processes including the Quarterly Business Review. To facilitate this work, the Evaluation Office must consistently apply quality standards and ensure that evaluation-related information is stored in a well-organised and accessible manner.

### **Develop Communication Products from Strategic Evaluations**

26. As the work of the Evaluation Office progressively includes a greater emphasis on strategic evaluations, there will be an enhanced focus on communication and dissemination of



evaluation results through communication products and activities (e.g. briefs, presentations, panel discussions, webinars, workshops, videos) that synthesise the findings and observations with a broader target audience, especially in-house and promote organisational learning. Other areas of learning that can be derived from desk-based analysis of existing evaluative material will also be identified and may be featured in communication products. These areas may include specific evaluation criteria (e.g. financial management, monitoring, sustainability, etc.) or cross-cutting issues/ factors affecting project performance which may be utilised in improving the project management cycle.

### **Enhance Communication on Evaluation to the Committee of Permanent Representatives**

27. The frequency of communication with UNEP's governing body will be increased and include the presentation of findings from strategic evaluations, the findings aggregated from project-level evaluations through the Biennial Evaluation Synthesis Report and regular updates on UNEP's level of implementation of evaluation recommendations.
- KPI Production of 4 communication products per annum
  - KPI Evaluation recommendation acceptance rates per annum. Target 90%.
  - KPI Provision of recommendation compliance information by Division to UNEP. Target = 2 reports per year
  - KPI Citation of evaluation findings in planning documents – Project documents, Medium Term Strategy, Programme of Work and external assessments of UNEP
  - KPI Presentations and briefings on evaluation made to the CPR. Target = 2 per annum

### **PRIORITY 3: Maintain a Focus on Quality of Evaluation Processes and Products**

28. It takes considerable time and effort for an evaluation function to build up a reputation for high quality work, that conforms to international norms and standards. Reputations are easily lost and therefore continuous effort and attention must be paid to the establishment and maintenance of robust evaluation quality assurance processes. The Evaluation Office strives to maintain and improve the quality of its work and it will maintain clear guidance documents and provide tools to assist in the delivery of high-quality evaluation processes and products. Work processes must reinforce the emphasis on evaluation quality and credibility. Record-keeping must also be of high quality.
29. An Evaluation Manager and an internal Peer Reviewer, drawn from the staff of the Evaluation Office, will be designated for each evaluation process. More complex evaluations may also involve the creation of a bespoke Evaluation Reference Group to provide substantive thematic feedback from knowledgeable stakeholders on the evaluation deliverables throughout the process.
30. Particular attention to quality standards in evaluation will be applied at the following stages; finalisation of Terms of Reference, the Inception Report, and the [Draft and Final]

Evaluation Report both before and after stakeholder comments are solicited. Particular attention will be paid to the quality of evaluation recommendations to ensure that they clearly identify the problem / issue to be resolved and are feasible for implementation within a 12-month timeframe. Formal quality assessment of evaluation reports will be prepared for the first draft of an evaluation report and for the completed final evaluation report.

- KPI External assessments of evaluation quality OIOS, MOPAN, GEF
- KPI Quality of Evaluation reports issued Target 80% “Satisfactory” or better.
- KPI Evaluation quality assurance system. Average evaluation report quality rating for first draft of reports received compared to the average evaluation report quality rating for final published reports. Target = average report quality rating for final reports is 1 (or more quality) category higher than the average rating for first drafts.

## **PRIORITY 4: Build Capacity across the House for Management-Led Reviews**

31. With the increased allocation of Evaluation Office staff time towards strategic evaluations and the introduction of a purposive sampling approach for a fixed number of project-level evaluations per annum, there will be an increase in the number projects reaching operational completion that will be required to assess their performance and meet their accountability requirements through the preparation of a management-led Terminal Review.
32. To advance this approach the Evaluation Office will continue to provide systematic support to Project Managers running Terminal Reviews in the form of a comprehensive suite of practical tools and guidance documents for use by Project Managers and Review Consultants that will be regularly updated in response to feedback received.
33. In addition, the Evaluation Office will prepare training materials, establish a group of Project Performance Assessment Focal Points and hold training webinars to help build the capacity of Project Managers in preparing and overseeing credible management-led reviews.
  - KPI Quality of Management-led Terminal Reviews submitted, monitored over time
  - KPI Number of staff attending Training webinars or accessing recorded webinars
  - KPI Final Review Report quality rated ‘satisfactory’ or better (%)

## **PRIORITY 5: Establish a Stable Resource Base and Funding Approach for the Evaluation Function**

34. The efficient operation of the evaluation function in UNEP requires adequate resourcing. The allocation of UNEP Environment Fund is expected to continue throughout the MTS period at the levels set out for 2022. A key funding principle that will be introduced and respected is that the costs of the evaluation of projects and programmes supported by

extrabudgetary resources (including Global Environment Facility (GEF)/Green Climate Fund (GCF)) should be covered by those resources. These costs include the direct evaluation costs (evaluation consultant fees, travel etc.) and the costs associated with the work undertaken by the Evaluation Office that includes the management, oversight, and extensive quality control of evaluations and the independent validation and quality assessment of management-led Terminal Reviews. The cost requirements for this work will be agreed as a percentage of extrabudgetary funding sufficient to cover the staff time required for work done by the Evaluation Office. The funding mechanism will be set out in the UNEP Programme and Project Management Manual and reflected in the Evaluation Policy.

- KPI Evaluation Office receives EF and XB a consistent allocation of resources to maintain a staff cadre sufficient to deliver a strategic evaluation agenda
- KPI The Evaluation receives EF resources for evaluation of strategic themes and topics in addition to resources for compulsory sub-programme evaluations