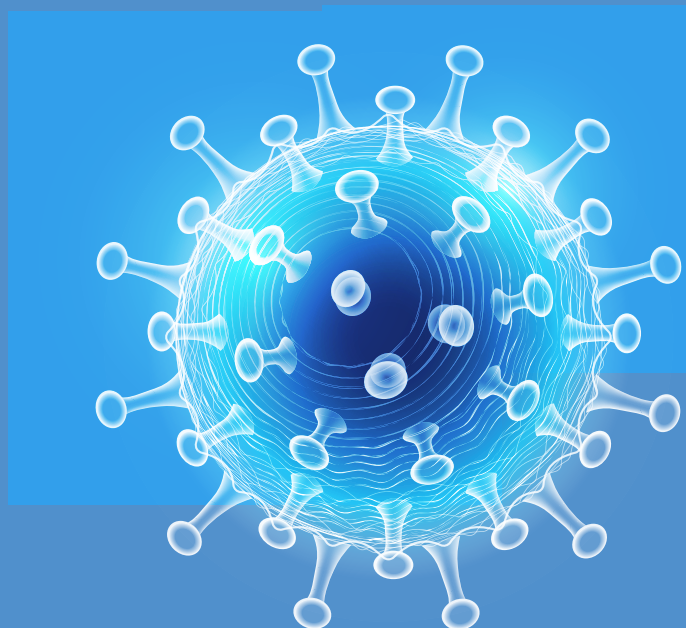


Synthesis of Guidelines for UN Evaluation under COVID-19

June 12, 2020



Office of Internal Oversight Services
Inspection and Evaluation Division

1. Background and objective

1. Within the past five months, the global COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of life, including the conduct of evaluation. In response to the crisis, the evaluation community has had to repurpose and adapt its approach to ensure its utility in the new world created by the pandemic. Evaluations that were ongoing or previously planned for 2020 will face several challenges that will require changes in all steps of the evaluation cycle. In addition, evaluation now has the opportunity to play a critical role by providing real-time information to inform evidence-based decision-making and facilitate learning in developing effective responses to the crisis. This will require innovation and “out of the box” thinking, as well as repurposing of existing tools and approaches.
2. This synthesis document has two objectives. First, it provides a descriptive synthesis summary of 11 evaluation guidelines that were recently issued as a response to the COVID-19 crisis (presented in Section 2). Second, building from the synthesis, it discusses issues Secretariat entities may want to consider when rethinking and adjusting the context, planning and conduct of their evaluations during the pandemic (presented in Sections 3, 4 and 5).
3. To produce this synthesis, the Inspection and Evaluation Division (IED) of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) reviewed the guidelines¹ issued by the evaluation units of eleven organizations, including nine UN entities², the World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). All eleven guidelines were published between 25 March - 20 May 2020 and reflect the urgent and evolving needs identified by their Evaluation Units. The guidelines are listed in Annex 1.

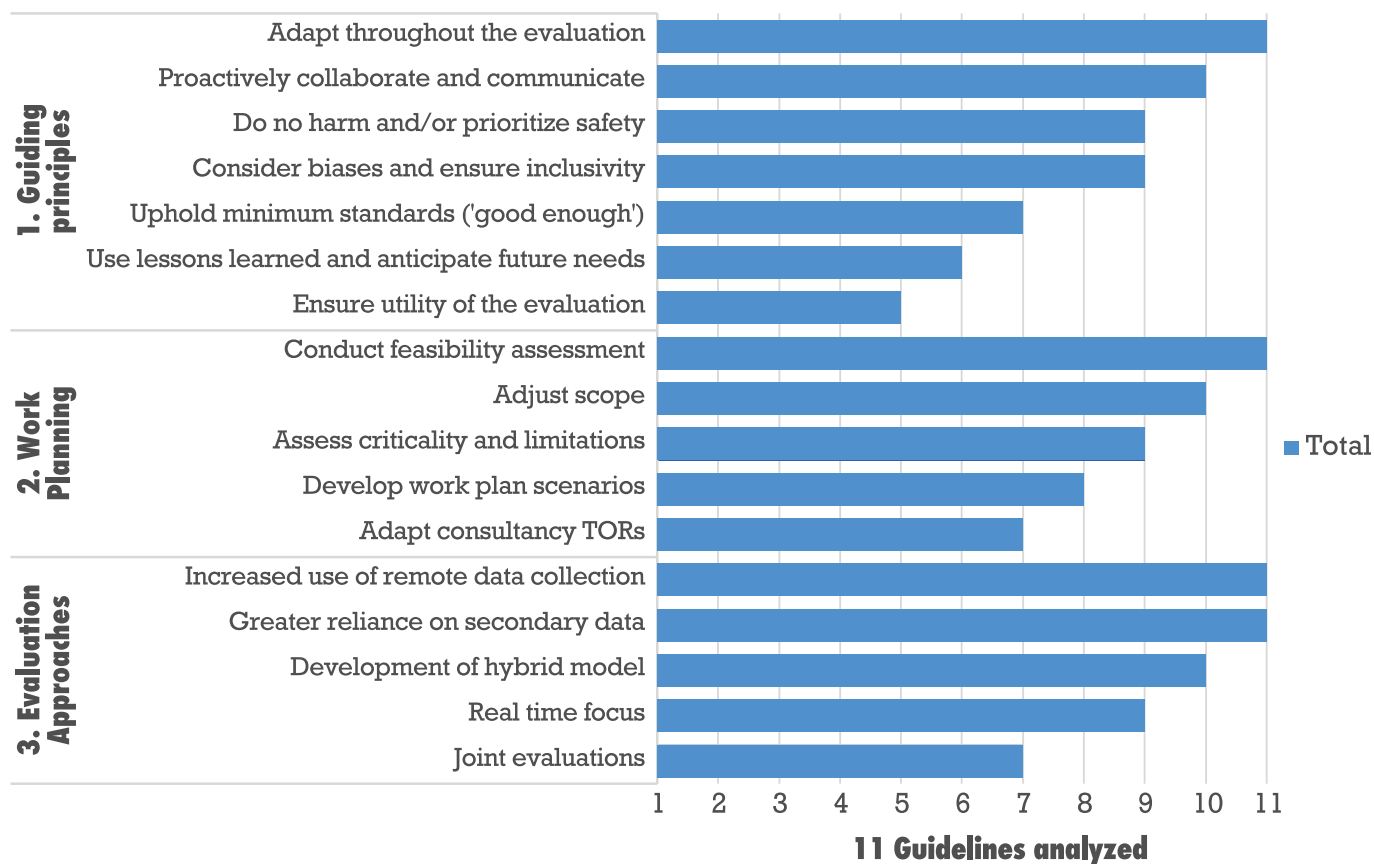
¹ The COVID-19 guidelines issued by the Evaluation Offices ranged from full guideline documents, to booklets and infographics. Most guidelines were issued by one entity, with the exemption of the OEDC/UNDP joint publication. The material analyzed for UNHCR was a revised and annotated Evaluation Workplan.

² These are: FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNODC, UN-Women and WFP.

2. Synthesis of evaluation guidelines

4. After reviewing the 11 guidelines, a list of common themes were identified and organized into three over-arching dimensions, which are presented in Chart 1 below. The over-arching dimensions included: 1) Guiding principles for the conduct of evaluation; 2) Work Planning; and 3) Evaluation approaches.

Chart 1: Synthesis Summary of COVID-19 Evaluation Guidelines³



³ Due to the small number of guidelines reviewed and different entity mandates and evaluation functions, these dimensions and themes should not be seen as representative across the entire UN system.

3. Guiding principles for the conduct of evaluation

5. All eleven guidelines identify guiding principles for evaluation to be followed during the pandemic. While many are not new, their relevance and significance are amplified and create a changing framework for the conduct of evaluation during the pandemic.
6. All 11 guidelines stress the need to **adapt throughout the evaluation** process.⁴ Evaluation offices need to be flexible and adapt the objectives, scopes and methods of their evaluations, which will require work plan and design adjustments on an ongoing and continuous basis.
7. In 10 guidelines, evaluation offices are strongly encouraged to **proactively communicate and collaborate** across teams, units, and entities, as well as through constant engagement with stakeholders. This includes, for example, the collaboration between headquarters, regional offices and implementing partners to assess evolving needs, as well as consider the possibility of shared data collection and/or joint evaluations. In addition, evaluators are encouraged to proactively share their experiences and learn from each other, through professional evaluation networks, resource and learning hubs, and/or virtual collaboration platforms.
8. Nine guidelines mention the principle to “**do no harm**” and/or **prioritize safety** as being paramount during the pandemic, since unintended (negative) consequences are even harder to anticipate in this volatile environment. Beyond the obvious health-related risks, evaluation offices need to systematically assess risks and benefits for both the evaluand and the evaluation team, including local consultants, throughout the evaluation process.
9. Nine guidelines also discuss the need to **consider biases and ensure inclusivity** throughout the evaluation cycle. Overall, the guidelines note that if data is collected remotely, the risk of bias increases due to unequal beneficiary and stakeholder access to communication technology, especially for vulnerable and marginalized groups.
10. Seven guidelines discuss that it is important to **uphold minimum standards** to ensure evaluation results are accurate and reliable. These are referenced with regard to the

⁴ Words in bold hereinafter directly reference the themes from Chart 1.

‘**good enough**’ principle, which acknowledges that evaluation teams may be unable to conduct evaluations with the same standards as adhered to before COVID-19, but that they still need to provide relevant, credible and timely information.

11. Six guidelines point to the need to **use lessons learned and anticipate future needs**. The evaluation community has a wealth of expertise on conducting evaluation during crises, from conflict and natural disaster induced humanitarian crises, to the 2008 financial crisis, and past health epidemics such as Ebola. Beyond the immediate changes presented, COVID-19 will directly or indirectly affect the evaluand for a prolonged time; anticipating future demands, as well as systematically documenting ongoing initiatives, will improve the quality of the monitoring and evaluation of efforts to assess the UN’s COVID-19 response.
12. Lastly, five guidelines mention the need to **ensure utility of the evaluation** by assessing evaluand and organizational needs and engaging with stakeholders at all stages of the evaluation. The guidelines suggest including the impact of COVID-19 as an evaluation objective, as well as prioritizing evaluations that provide critical information for the organization’s COVID-19 response efforts.

4. Work planning for evaluations during the pandemic

13. All 11 guidelines acknowledge the need for evaluation offices to adapt their work plans, beginning by **conducting a feasibility assessment** of current and planned evaluations considering the new conditions posed by COVID-19. Due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, and uncertainties regarding future constraints, ten guidelines refer to the need to **adjust the scope** of evaluations on a regular and continuous process. Nine guidelines recommend that evaluation offices assess the **criticality and limitations** associated with its evaluation assignments, and eight suggest the need to **develop work plan scenarios** to take into account all possible scenarios, including possibly postponing or cancelling evaluations already planned when the pandemic began. Lastly, seven guidelines for entities with greater reliance on consultants or external monitoring and evaluation firms highlighted the need to **adapt consultancy TORs and contracts**.
14. Within this context of work planning for evaluation during COVID-19 and taking into account all of the points made above, the guidelines discuss a framework that assesses how critical an evaluation is for providing objective evidence for decision-making during the pandemic as well as the limitations, such as health risks and limited mobility for travel, associated with it. If planned evaluations have low criticality and face high limitations, they should be deemed low priority and possibly cancelled. If planned evaluations have low criticality and face low or medium limitations, they should be identified as having moderate priority and possibly postponed. Evaluations with medium or high criticality, but few limitations, should be the highest priority for an evaluation office they should be undertaken. In making these assessments, both the evaluand and other stakeholders should be consulted.
15. The guidelines also stress that while adjusting work plans, evaluation offices should consider the potential backlog of evaluations and its implication in terms of resource availability and commitments to donors and/or Member States. Several guidelines also noted that cancelation of evaluations should be the last resort, as now is not the time to deprioritize institutional and programme learning.

5. Adaptation of evaluation approaches

16. All 11 guidelines point out that during the pandemic, evaluation offices are reassessing and adapting how evaluations should be conducted, including making necessary adjustments to both the types of and methods for evaluation undertaken.
17. **Greater reliance on secondary data** is discussed by all 11 guidelines. Secondary data includes data that are readily available, such as other assessment reports, national statistics, and the own entity's monitoring, financial and administrative data. In this context, all guidelines discuss the need to shift some of the planned evaluations in 2020 to primarily desk-based assessments relying mainly on documentary evidence derived from desk review. Nevertheless, the guidelines identify two potential risks with greater reliance on secondary data: a narrower scope of the evaluation focus, and the possibility that limited personal interaction will reduce the depth of evaluation analysis, both of which may lead to less compelling and/or relevant findings and recommendations.
18. Further to greater use of secondary data, eight of the eleven guidelines also predict that innovative types of secondary data (such as satellite images, GIS, social media data), and novel methods of data mining (such as text mining, un-supervised machine learning of documents, big data analysis) will be used more widely.
19. The **increased use of remote data collection** is also discussed in all 11 guidelines. All of them discuss the need to rely heavily on remote data collection for current and planned evaluations. Quantitative data collection through online, mobile and telephone surveys is already well established and will be used even more extensively. However, it is expected that survey populations will diversify and expand, as groups who have been previously typically interviewed face-to-face will now need to be reached virtually. For qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, evaluators will need to learn and adjust to collect data virtually.
20. While acknowledging the need to rely more on remote data collection, many guidelines also point out that remote assessments may increase the risks of access and selection biases. Evaluation teams need to be even more deliberate about limitations and biases by diversifying the samples and ensuring that marginalized and vulnerable groups are included in data collection efforts. Another risk highlighted by the guidelines is

that virtually collected data may lack the same depth and richness of as data collected in-person, due in part to the above-mentioned access and selection biases, as well as the evaluation team's limited exposure to the operative environment and inability to engage in direct observation.

21. Ten guidelines reference the **development of a hybrid model** combining remote and on-site data collection methods (where possible). This approach is usually implemented in two phases: remote data collection while the risks of the pandemic are still high, followed by on-site data collection when travel restrictions are lifted. Thus, as the COVID-19 situation evolves, the evaluation team needs to remain flexible and continually communicate with the evaluand. In addition, the evaluation team will have to adjust the timeline and review available resources to accommodate both phases; for example, there may be a need to increase the use of local consultants if local travel restrictions are lifted earlier than international ones.
22. Nine guidelines discuss a possible enhanced **real time focus** to evaluations. These evaluations are valuable to provide real-time feedback and information to facilitate agile evidence-based planning and implementation of UN programmes during the pandemic. A real time evaluation is formative in nature as it is conducted while the programme implementation is ongoing and hence cannot replace planned mid-term or summative evaluations. A real-time evaluation is particularly relevant for rapidly assessing the COVID-19 response itself, as well as contributing to the collection of monitoring data for future evaluations.
23. Finally, seven guidelines suggest the possibility to conduct more **joint evaluations** and/or combine data collection efforts between evaluations. This both reduces the burden on the evaluand and increases efficiencies. These joint assessments can be inter- or intra-institutional, as evaluation offices harmonize their respective work plans to identify overlapping and/or complementary assignments.

6. Conclusion

24. There was a consensus among all the entities that produced COVID-19 evaluation guidelines that it is no longer “business as usual” for evaluation; the function needs to repurpose and adapt its focus and approach to reflect the limitations posed by the current crisis and ensure its utility in supporting the Organization’s response. While many of the ways in which this will happen are not new – in fact, many approaches have been around in the evaluation community for quite some time – the pandemic has amplified their application and relevance. This synthesis of COVID-19 evaluation guidelines aims to support the efforts of Secretariat evaluation functions by providing a high-level scan of the situation of evaluation during the pandemic, as well as by illustrating how other evaluation offices are repurposing and adapting their work. While the guidelines reviewed do not always provide specific details, they offer a useful framework for thinking about evaluation during this time.
25. As expressed by the members of the OECD/DAC-Network on Development Evaluation (EvalNet), even during and also after the pandemic, evaluation has an important role to play by ensuring the UN gets back on the path to the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the provision of objective and credible evidence for decision-making.⁵

5 OECD-UNDP Joint Guidance Note, page 5.

Annex 1

List of COVID-19 evaluation guidelines reviewed

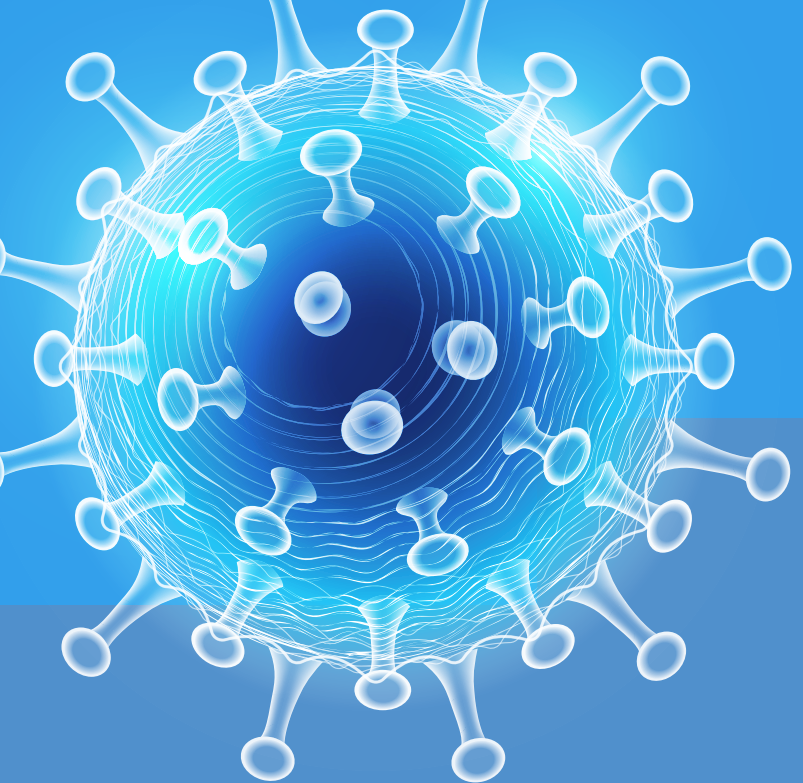
The following 11 evaluation guidelines, published since March 2020, comprise the material reviewed for this synthesis report.

1. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), '[Risk analysis and guidance for the management and conduct of evaluations during international and national level COVID-19 crisis and restrictions](#)', OED Guidelines Series, 04/2020
2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Evaluation Plan 2020 – Responding to COVID-19', (Work Plan internal document), 21 April 2020
3. United Nations Children's Fund, '[Response of the UNICEF Evaluation Function to the COVID-19 crisis](#)', Technical Note, 30 March 2020
4. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), '[COVID-19, UNDOC's approach to evaluation in crisis](#)', accessed 05 April 2020
5. International Labour Organization, '[Implications of COVID-19 on evaluations in the ILO. Practical tips on adapting to the situation](#)', 24 April 2020 (version 3)
6. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), '[Good practices during COVID-19. OECD/DAC and IEO/UNDP Joint Guidance Note for Evaluation Units](#)', April 2020
7. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), '[Evaluation planning and implementation during COVID-19](#)', Evaluation Guidelines, 31 March 2020; and '[Evaluation during a crisis: COVID-19](#)', Infographic, (accessed 08 April)
8. United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA), '[Adapting evaluations to the COVID-19 pandemic](#)', April 2020
9. UN Women, '[Pocket tool for managing evaluation during the 'COVID-19' pandemic](#)', May 2020
10. World Bank (Independent Evaluation Group), '[Conducting evaluations in times of COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)', (accessed 08 April 2020)

11. World Food Programme (WFP), '[Technical note for planning and conducting evaluations during COVID-19](#)', (accessed 07 April 2020)

Other Material Consulted

12. United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), '[Norms and Standards for Evaluation](#)', 2016
13. World Bank (Independent Evaluation Group), '[Bowling in the dark: Monitoring and evaluation during COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)', (accessed 05 April 2020)



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