UNEG
United Nations Evaluation Group

Development of Culturally Responsive Criteria for Evaluations

Concept Note

UNEG Strategic Objective 3: Evaluation informs UN system-wide initiatives and emerging demands

Culture and Evaluation Interest Group

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Background and context

In early 2017, an Interest Group on Culture and Evaluation established within UNEG commissioned a stocktake to draw lessons about the use of Culturally Responsive Evaluations (CRE) within and outside the UN system. The stocktake was presented at the last AGM meeting in Vienna.

UNEG members considered the implications of the stocktake for evaluation practice within the UN system. Initially, members considered developing a set of guidelines to ensure evaluation practice was informed by CRE literature and practice. However, as discussions progressed, UNEG members felt it was more appropriate to develop CRE as a potential evaluative criteria along the lines developed by the Development Assistance Committee for evaluating development assistance i.e. relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

Evaluation cannot be separated from the sociocultural contexts within which programmes are implemented and particular attention will need to be given to different dimensions of cultural responsiveness in respect of the principle of 'leaving no one behind' of the 2030 Agenda. In a study conducted by the University of the South Pacific, together with UNESCO, Sustainable Development is explored in the Pacific context (UNESCO, 2008). Interestingly, the report highlights the importance of the cultural and traditional backgrounds of Pacific Island Countries, the ongoing influence of culture on development and the requirement to mainstream local knowledge and practices into modern development planning. The report notes "The Pacific PICTs have one of the highest level of indigeneity of any part of the world, with over 90% of Pacific populations comprised of indigenous Pacific people. Traditional culture and societies are therefore strong and form a key part in shaping lifestyles and responses to globalisation" (UNESCO, 2008). Customary approaches to environmental sustainability, specifically natural resource management, were particularly emphasised as being able to contribute to sustainable development outcomes. The report placed people ("human-centred" development) and culture at the centre of sustainable development in the Pacific (UNESCO, 2008).

As a fairly new and emergent approach, there remain many gaps in knowledge about how to integrate notions of culture and cultural context into evaluation practice as well as gaps in knowledge about how to conduct and implement evaluations in different cultural settings. Consideration of CRE is likely to bring about enduring change, as CRE criteria would be explicitly considered and applied by all those engaged in commissioning and/or implementing evaluation assignments.

This concept note is a preliminary attempt at consolidating our growing understanding of CRE and developing CRE as a potential evaluative criteria to guide development aid evaluations. The note identifies a range of questions in efforts to lower the 'barriers to entry' for institutions and individuals to make their evaluation practices more equitable and inclusive. It is intended to facilitate reflection and dialogue about CRE within UNEG and potentially test the core elements of the criteria with 2-3 international evaluators who are recognized and reputed in the field of CRE. This will serve as a validity check.

Understanding Culturally Responsive Evaluation

Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE) builds and extends the principles of other evaluation approaches including responsive evaluation (Stake, 2003), democratic evaluation (House & Howe, 2000), and participatory evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Growing disparities and increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural contexts globally have heightened awareness of and the need for an evaluation approach that is responsive to contextual and cultural environments. Evaluations that endeavor to respond to cultural and cultural context are variably referred to in the literature as 'culturally competent', 'culturally sensitive', or 'culturally responsive'.

CREs are based on the notion that evaluation cannot be separated from the sociocultural contexts within which programmes are implemented. Culture shapes the behaviours and worldviews of its members and is therefore central to our understanding of individuals' motivations, attitudes and responses to an intervention.

Culture can be described as the socially transmitted pattern of beliefs, values and actions shared by groups of people. Programmes and policies are firmly embedded within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts all of which profoundly affect programme development, implementation and outcomes. Conducting an evaluation that demonstrates an understanding of and sensitivity to these cultural beliefs and values at every stage of the evaluation [design, implementation, analysis and reporting] is therefore the responsibility of both evaluation practitioners and commissioners of evaluations. Such an approach ensures that an evaluation is respectful of and responsive to those involved. Whose voices get heard? Whose interests dominate? Who determines the purpose and focus of the evaluation? Whose knowledge is valued? How is the evaluation used? These questions are central to an evaluative inquiry, not simply as methodological considerations but as theoretical and normative constructs guiding evaluation practice [Chouinard & Cousins, 2009].

Learning lessons from gender-responsive, 'gender-sensitive' evaluations

As acknowledged in the initial CRE stocktake/report, there is strong evidence of gender responsive practice in evaluations within and outside the UN system [insight #5, p. 10]. There may be opportunities to accord the same level of methodological and analytical consideration to integrating culturally responsive evaluation practice. The parallels between gender sensitive evaluation and culturally competent or responsive evaluation exist in many dimensions:

Understanding economic, social and legal structures and how these affect different genders is equally important in terms of culturally responsive analysis. Different racial or ethnic groups face different economic, social and legal challenges, which in turn shape their experiences; consequently, programmes and policies that are designed to help overcome these challenges are likely to have varying impacts on different cultural groups and/or various groups within a single cultural background.
Just as gender analysis helps gain an understanding of the different patterns of participation that men and women display in policies, programmes and/or projects, culturally competent evaluation will consider the effects of culture on various groups.
Social, political and economic disparities amongst distinct cultural groups (religious or ethnic etc.) involve a thorough analysis into the history and current state of the cultural context. To be 'culture-blind' in evaluation runs the risk of perpetuating inequalities, in the same way that 'gender-blind' evaluation or policy does.

While mainstreaming gender analysis allows for a thorough investigation into the conditions and contexts for different genders, such analysis presents results within the binary of gender. Differentiating only the conditions and context for gender may in fact overlook factors outside of gender that could potentially influence and affect disparities between social groups. If we limit focus only on, or prioritize gender analysis, we may miss seeing the bigger picture. Similarly, focus on ethical considerations in evaluations serve to minimize harm to participants; by contrast, CRE displays positive values of responsiveness and embraces diversity thus enhancing the richness and rigor of evaluation activities and its outputs.

A culturally responsive method of analysis offers an intersectional method of analysis, which would respond to all factors that contribute to disparities between groups beyond gender. These include class, race/ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. Mainstreaming culturally responsive evaluation entails taking into account gendered differences, whereas gender mainstreaming does not necessarily entail taking into account wider cultural differences.

Towards CRE as an evaluative criterion

UNEG agencies have collectively adopted the standard OECD-DAC criteria for evaluation. The five DAC criteria that guide evaluation practice include relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. In addition there are three crosscutting criteria relating to equity, gender and human rights-based approach to programming. The expectation is that within each 'generic' criteria, more specific indicators - appropriate to the type and context of the intervention – will be developed and agreed with key stakeholders either in the Terms of Reference or during the initial stages of the evaluation process. It must be noted that not all of the criteria are used in every evaluation, as some are seen as more appropriate to certain interventions and/or types of evaluation.

This is true for CRE as well. When faced with the question as to whether CRE is appropriate for all evaluations, the short answer is 'it depends'. As noted in the Stocktake on CRE in and outside the UN system, if the design of the programme and/or policy being evaluated is not culturally responsive, there is limited scope for using culturally responsive evaluation practice. In spite of this, there are significant opportunities for UNEG members to encourage use of CRE practice to bring about enduring change. Applying CRE ensures, at a minimum, that the evaluation activity is undertaken in culturally appropriate ways, and honors the cultural context in which the evaluation takes place. Evaluation can also play an important role in gathering the evidence to demonstrate if an intervention has been gender blind and/or whether implementation has integrated cultural considerations.

The main condition for applying CRE is a receptive and willing commissioning agency and a skilled, culturally competent evaluator. In considering CRE as evaluative criteria, the following definition can provide some guidance:

The extent to which the evaluation acknowledges and responds to the values, norms, beliefs and the sociocultural contexts within which the policy, programme and/or project is implemented. This requires evaluators to be sensitive and responsive to the cultural context in which the policy, programme and/or project is operationalized at all stages of the evaluation process, particularly in instances when the participants' culture is known to have a major influence on outcomes.

Using the criteria

To help determine the extent to which the key principles and intent underpinning CRE [as reflected in the definition] is integrated in an evaluation, some sample questions have been developed for each of the four main stages of an evaluation – design, implementation, analysis and reporting and communication and dissemination. The questions provide useful guidance to enable evaluators to assemble more culturally competent teams; craft more culturally responsive evaluation designs; gain valuable perspectives from people who have previously been silent, ignored or misunderstood; and more fully understand the reach, effectiveness and impact of development interventions.

Since CRE is an emerging approach, it is necessary to consider a staged approach to implementing it – it is unrealistic and even inappropriate to consider applying the approach in its entirety from the outset. The table below identifies the kind of questions that could be posed as a minimum [e.g. considerations of cultural context in the design and implementation of the evaluation] as well as aspirational questions [e.g. how does the evaluation value different ways of knowing and/or respond to issues of power within the evaluation] that could be considered when commissioning an evaluation.

Stage of the evaluation	Illustrative Evaluation Questions
DESIGN	How is culture conceptualized within the evaluation? How is culture thought to impact the evaluation, the programme and the context? How are these issues discussed?

Examples of more specific evaluation questions to address application of CRE in the design stage include:

At a minimum,
- What rationale is given for the inclusion of cultural context in the evaluation? Are the implications of this inclusion for the evaluation design discussed?
- Does the design identify the important cultural groups and their differences?
- Are the evaluation questions sufficiently nuanced to take account of the cultural context within which the intervention is implemented?
- Does the composition of the evaluation team reflect required cultural diversity?
- Do evaluator competencies take account of their cultural competence and experience in working cross-culturally?

At an aspirational level:
- What input has been sought from participant groups? Has space or platform has been created to facilitate community engagement and input in the design of the evaluation?
- How is the role of the identified cultural groups defined? Are they seen as informants, and/or data gatherers and/or integral to the evaluation?
- Does the evaluation pay attention to issues relating to power and how these might be addressed within the evaluation?
- Does the design discuss how cultural context and perspectives will be integrated in all stages of the evaluation?

IMPLEMENTATION	Is the evaluation implemented in culturally appropriate ways?

Examples of more specific evaluation questions to address application of CRE in the Implementation stage include:

At a minimum,
- Are cultural protocols and norms observed when undertaking data collection and fieldwork in-country?
- Do evaluations discuss or present cultural challenges and/or difficulties during fieldwork and its impact on validity of the results?

At an aspirational level,
- Does the evaluation team include local evaluators for data collection? Does the rationale for their inclusion go beyond their linguistic competence to also value their cultural knowledge and wisdom?
- What training is offered to evaluators to enable them to be sensitive and responsive to cultural context during the data-gathering phase?
- What reviewing mechanisms are in place to ensure data quality?
- Do evaluators discuss key principles of engaging with stakeholders and different cultural groups and the strategies deployed to gain respect and trust?
- Are the data collection instruments and methods tested for their cultural appropriateness?

ANALYSIS & REPORTING	How is cultural knowledge and understanding valued and integrated in the analysis and reporting of results?

Examples of more specific evaluation questions to address application of CRE in the analysis and reporting stage include:

At a minimum,
- Does the evaluation examine outcomes through different cultural lenses where appropriate?
- Do the evaluations describe the processes used to ensure sensitivity to, and understanding of the cultural contexts in which the programme/intervention is implemented?

At an aspirational level,
- How does the evaluation take into account participants' perspectives and experiences in defining success or failure of the intervention? What is the weight given to their comments and reflections?
- Who is involved in the sense-making process?
- Did the report tell a compelling story and make evaluative judgements in a way that was affirming to that culture?

DISSEMINATION	What channels are used to communicate findings back to the participants?

Examples of more specific evaluation questions to address application of CRE in the dissemination stage include:

At a minimum level,
- Are the results shared in accessible ways?
- Is the chosen medium appropriate for the cultural context and/or groups?

At an aspirational level,
- What are the principles that guide the dissemination strategy and the extent to which they reflect the spirit of reciprocity and openness?
- Does the evaluation output reflect information preferences of the cultural groups involved in the study?

Decision-making considerations

As noted earlier, programmes and policies are firmly embedded within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts all of which profoundly affect programme development, implementation and outcomes. This suggests that culturally responsive evaluation is appropriate for all evaluations. However this is not realistic or feasible. Therefore it would be most useful to consider CRE as an approach during the evaluability assessment stage. Commissioners need to reflect on the following questions:
- To what extent is CRE criteria integral to the purpose of the evaluation?
- How much and what kinds of information do potential users need?
- Is the criterion a useful or appropriate measure for the particular evaluation?
- Which criterion will produce the most useful information given available resources?

There are a number of other considerations too:

- Purpose and scope of the evaluation – while there are some that believe culture shapes **all** evaluations regardless of type [process, outcome, impact], setting [government, academia, business] or evaluand [policy, practice, teaching], there are others who are of the view that the decision to apply CRE depends on the purpose and focus of the evaluative inquiry. If the evaluation does not involve primary data collection, or is focused on methodological synthesis for instance,

then the value of committing to CRE needs to be carefully examined. CRE approaches span a continuum and for some evaluations considerations of culture and cultural context may suffice, whereas in other evaluations focused on relevance and effectiveness of programmes and services delivered to marginalized groups, a more authentic and meaningful engagement with priority populations will be required.

- Resources and time – conducting a culturally competent evaluation requires resources and time. CRE is premised on the principle of building an inclusive and collaborative relationship with different groups within the evaluative setting – between the evaluators and the identified cultural groups; between the identified cultural groups and commissioners/programme teams, and among the different voices within the identified cultural groups themselves, as they cannot be treated as a cohesive, unified group.

These considerations need to be acknowledged and dealt with in the Terms of Reference.

Way Forward

This Concept Note is shared with members of the Culture and Evaluation Interest Group, as well as several international evaluators and experts in CRE. It is expected to be finalized and presented to the UNEG AGM in May 2018.

UNESCO's Evaluation Office further proposes to host a 1-2-day international seminar on the subject of CRE in the fall of 2018.

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