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PROMOTING INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT INTO EVALUATIONS IN THE UN SYSTEM

(Prepared by the Independent Evaluation Office of the GEF)

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2019, the GEF Independent Evaluation Office has assumed a leadership role in the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) work towards integrating environmental considerations into all evaluations conducted and commissioned by UNEG's 53 members. A UNEG working group was established with the objective of developing tiered guidance to UN evaluation offices to improve the coverage of environmental aspects in evaluations. Within the framework of 2030 Agenda and SDGs, it is important that evaluations where the environment is not the main object integrate environmental assessments. Since its inception, the working group has conducted a stocktaking of UNEG member units' guidance documents, undertaken a review of good practice evaluations, and is moving towards web-based guidance tailored to UN evaluation offices and functions. This document includes some of the s of the findings of the stocktaking exercise and review of the evaluation practice. There is tremendous variability across UN agencies in how environmental sustainability is addressed in evaluations, but the consensus view is that more needs to be done. The work highlights an active demand from UN evaluation units for guidance in this respect. There is also an opportunity to align evaluation with the overall UN environment management standards and systems.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) is an interagency professional network that brings together the evaluation units of the UN system, including UN departments, specialized agencies, funds and programmes, and affiliated organizations. Its website currently lists 53 member units, six observers and one partner institution. Membership is reserved for the units responsible for evaluation in the UN system, which should have, or aspire to have, the required professional knowledge, experience and responsibility for evaluation as defined by the updated UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016). The Group's operations are guided by the UNEG Principles of Working Together (2019) and the UNEG Strategy 2020-2024.

2. In 2019, the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) established a Working Group on Integrating Environmental and Social Impact into Evaluations (ESI). Its objective is to establish a common UN-wide approach, norms, and standards for incorporating environmental and social considerations into all evaluations, in line with the UN system-wide effort to move towards a common approach to environmental and social standards for UN programming. This Group operates under UNEG's Strategic Objective 1: Develop and Safeguard Professional Norms, Standards and Guidance. *The Working Group brings together evaluation staff from 15 UN agencies and offices.* The coordinators are the Global Environment Facility (GEF), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The Director of GEF Independent Evaluation Office was elected as the first Chair of the Working Group and retains this position to date.

II. FIRST ACTIVITY OF THE ESI WORKING GROUP – STOCK-TAKING EXERCISE

3. Although foundational to the 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the environment is not covered under UNEG Norms and Standards. The Group decided that, to scope and define the way forward, a stock-taking review should be conducted to explore the extent to which the mandate and practices of UN agencies reflect environmental and social considerations of their activities, and whether these are adequately reflected in policies and guidance for evaluation.

4. The exercise consisted of the assembly and review of evaluation policies and guidance documents of UNEG members, and a survey that was administered to the evaluation offices. A total of 40 guidance documents from 39 agencies were collected and analyzed, and 29 full sets of survey responses from agencies were received.

5. Overall, the review found that the importance placed on social and environmental considerations partly depends on the extent to which the agencies define their mandates to cover these areas. Although both areas are generally seen as important, agencies vary in their perception of how much interaction their main work areas have with them. Overall, 70% of the agencies stated that their work is highly engaged with social aspects and 45% think so about the environment. Overall, social considerations have a higher profile than those of the environment, but almost all agencies also report medium- or high-level engagement with the latter.

In keeping with the importance of these considerations, almost 60% of agencies reported having environmental or social safeguard policies, which need to be applied during the preparation of projects or programs and which could then provide an entry point for evaluations to address these issues.

6. It is evident that all agencies have unique mandates, which can be highly specialized regarding appropriate evaluation methods. To meet their specific needs, almost all agencies have developed their own evaluation guidelines, tailored to the specifics of the work they undertake. It would be appropriate if these guidelines adequately covered the social and environmental considerations from the agency perspective, but this is not the case. In fact, 68% of responding evaluation offices feel that social considerations have not been well addressed, and as many as 84% feel this to be the case for environmental aspects. The survey results show a highly consistent perception among UNEG members that there is a need for additional guidance, particularly around the environment. However, in terms of the precise areas that should be included, a less clear picture emerges.

7. Guidance on the environment was found to be limited and inadequate for both current and emerging needs. This was confirmed by both the document review and the survey. Specific areas that were identified as priorities where guidance would be needed included: climate change (which tends to be the agencies' primary environmental concern); environmental impacts of development projects and how to minimize environmental footprints of interventions; and environmental risks. The latter topics are obviously central issues for mainstreaming environment into development processes as well as evaluation.

8. A broad range of agencies realize that their activities may have unanticipated environmental effects. This could in fact be a basic assumption, as it seems safe to assume that anything we do will have some level and type of environmental effect. There is also a heightened awareness of the interactions between social and environmental factors, clearly driven by the SDGs' explicit emphasis on these interlinkages.

9. From the survey of evaluation offices in particular, there emerges a clear recognition that individual agencies are not best positioned to produce guidance to evaluate all effects of their work, whether intended or unintended. Since UNEG's earlier guidance on evaluating gender and human rights effects is generally well regarded and widely used, many agencies see it as a clear model for new work in the environmental area as well. Advantages of developing guidance through UNEG include: its institutional neutrality; the understanding that its evaluation guidance can be more detailed in specific areas than most agencies would be able to produce; and the view that it can address common needs identified by a broad range of agencies.

10. Although not fully anticipated in advance, the fact that environmental effects (particularly of projects not specifically focused on the environment) emerged as an area of serious weakness across UN evaluation systems has made it particularly appropriate for the GEF to Chair and Co-Coordinate this working group. This is so because: on the one hand, the GEF Independent Evaluation Office has a range of skills and experience of evaluating a huge range of environmental effects, which can provide a firm foundation for guidance in this area; and on

the other, global environment benefits must be derived from both specialist programmes and projects and from appropriate attention to environmental effects across the entire spectrum of development interventions. The GEF therefore has a substantial interest in ensuring that standards across all UN agencies are raised to meet the challenge, particularly to help meet the objectives of the SDGs.

11. The two volumes of the Stock-Taking exercise were reviewed by an online conference of Working Group members called and managed by the GEF Chair in June 2020. The members endorsed the report as comprehensive, logical, and clear and it was finalized after their detailed comments had been received and presented to the UNEG Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 2021. A two-pronged approach to moving ahead was agreed:

(a) On the social side, where more guidance is available (including the UNEG guidance on gender and human rights), UNEG should focus on building upon the past work and strengthening aspects related to identified gaps (such as vulnerability, disability and indigenous peoples). At the moment, the Working Group does no further work in this area.

(b) On the environmental side, more effort needs to be made, since this area starts from a much lower baseline. The Working Group decided to continue, by exploring the possibility of providing guidance for incorporating environmental considerations into all evaluations within the SDG framework (that recognizes interlinkages and interactions between environment and development). The approach taken would initially be a minimum requirements framework (e.g., all evaluations should identify potential environmental impacts and possible trade-offs between environmental and social/economic goals). The Group suggested identifying good examples from existing agency guidance, as well as from evaluations that have assessed environmental effects well, to provide some of the resources needed as a basis for a UNEG guidance document.

III. Second Activity of the ESI Working Group – Assessment of UN Evaluations with Environmental Coverage

12. In the second phase, 53 evaluations selected by member Agencies as providing some coverage of environment were assessed. Review of these evaluations, plus the agency guidance documents (reviewed under the first activity), suggested nine specific potential areas for inclusion in any future UNEG guidance document on environmental considerations (of projects not primarily focused on the environment). These are described below.

Potential areas for coverage by ESI guidance

(a) *Addressing all dimensions of agency interventions.*

Challenge: UNEG members present complex range of interventions for coverage by common guidelines:

- 50+ agencies. Huge range of issues

- Levels of intervention from community projects to global agreements
- May be multiple implementers and stakeholders in any intervention

Response: The ESI guidance should provide considered advice on how to ensure that evaluations adequately assess both the direct and indirect effects of interventions, to ensure that such aspects as institutional development, capacity building and generation of guidelines and policies are not assessed as an "end in themselves", but as contributions towards actual environmental benefits.

(b) *Outline process for agencies to map out potential connections between their major types of intervention and environmental considerations.*

Challenge: There is a need to move from the current situation, where each intervention is often evaluated as if it is unique and has completely unpredictable "side-effects" to one where the overall repertoire from which actual unintended consequences may occur is identified in advance**.**

Response: The ESI guidance should outline a process through which each agency can collate the environmental considerations arising from its interventions to produce a "map" of common patterns of unintended consequences, which may occur from its different types of activity.

(c) *Promoting strong coverage of environmental considerations through the use of Theories of Change.*

Challenge: Where an intervention has not been built upon an explicit and documented Theory of Change, it can be challenging for evaluators to make explicit the range of targeted causes and effects and their interaction with other factors, including the environment. In many evaluations, one of the first tasks of the evaluators is to hold detailed discussions with project stakeholders to devise a retrospective Theory of Change**.**

Response: The ESI guidelines should promote the value of creating a retrospective Theory of Change, for those situations in which this is not present and introduce the process, with suitable references for more detailed methodological guidance**.**

(d) *Emphasis on maximising available evidence through mixed methods and triangulation*

Challenge: the limitations of over-reliance on disconnected data sets. Particularly noted was the use of scattered small-scale case studies inadequately triangulated with other relevant data sets.

Response: Guidance should cover the types and combinations of evidence, which might provide a basis to raise and address environmental considerations adequately.

(e) *Ensuring coherent evaluation of environmental considerations through joint evaluations of inter-agency interventions*

Challenge: Many complex interventions are implemented through inter-agency collaboration. Such activities may lead to disconnected approaches, which do not adequately specify or evaluate intended environmental benefits. In many such cases, joint evaluations will be the best option to ensure that the interconnections between social and environmental results chains are suitably assessed

Response: ESI guidance could provide an important outline on how to integrate environmental considerations into complex multi-agency interventions, in which no agency is a clear "environmental lead".

(f) *Channelling attention to timescale and priorities.*

Challenge: Environmental considerations are increasingly embedded in complex interventions, spanning different areas of focus (e.g., irrigated agriculture as a means of climate change adaption), as well as in "hybrids, which combine different areas of focus in one development concept (e.g., green economy).

Response: The ESI guidance should provide advice on how evaluators can best address the long timescales of multifocal and hybrid projects, where the environmental approaches may be implemented as a lower priority than other aspects and where their realization is therefore likely to be some way along the results chain.

(g) *Guidance on influencing agencies to ensure that environmental considerations are included in intervention design.*

Challenge: It is extremely challenging for an evaluation to make a coherent and evidence-based assessment of environmental effects of an intervention if these were not considered in the original project design. This is because in such situations it is highly unlikely that the institutions involved in implementation will have gathered any coherent evidence, particularly monitoring data, which can be reviewed or used by the evaluators as the basis for findings or conclusions, still less for recommendations.

Response: Evaluation offices should take a long-term approach by ensuring that environmental considerations are included clearly in their Terms of Reference and that evaluators address these adequately. One means of ensuring quality will be to include this coverage in their evaluation quality rating system.

Furthermore, evaluation offices should consistently ensure that evaluation recommendations regarding the importance of environmental considerations are

entered into the Management Action Record system and from there over time into standard project design procedures.

(h) *Guidance to agencies on how to systematically consider the extent to which "lessons learned" on the environment are actually used in project design and implementation.*

Challenge: In most agencies there are relatively few projects, which cover completely new issues and activities, so it is generally the case that a fairly comprehensive set of lessons could in principle be available to aid project design and implementation. Insofar as previous evaluations have raised environmental considerations, these should therefore be explicit in the designs of those projects that have taken account of lessons. One of the key uses of lessons should therefore be to convert the majority of unintended effects into intended effects and to incorporate them into project designs, building on the accumulated knowledge from previous evaluations.

Response: ESI guidelines should point evaluators to the importance of exploring the extent to which they have enabled project designs to incorporate available lessons concerning environmental considerations and to establish how straightforward it is within their agency to locate and utilize those lessons, which are relevant to the type of activity under preparation or evaluation.

(i) *Match environmental considerations to DAC criteria to raise their profile in evaluations*

Challenge: The DAC criteria are at the heart of most evaluation Terms of Reference. Given prevalent restricted resource allocations, particularly for evaluations built around fieldwork, evaluators will tend to address the compulsory elements of ToR first and then move on to other aspects. In most cases, this is likely to reduce attention to environmental considerations, unless these are centrally placed in the ToR.

Response: ESI could therefore provide guidance on how environmental considerations can be dovetailed into the DAC criteria. This matching process could be an extremely important input of the guidance, although it would still need to be tailored by evaluation offices to the specific types of interventions their agencies practice.

IV. Contribution of ESI Working Group Second Activity Findings to Mainstreaming Environment into International Development Evaluation

13. The issue of how best to mainstream environment into international development evaluation approaches is currently under review by a range of stakeholders. Of particular interest to the UNEG guidance exercise is the work of Footprint Evaluation[1], presented and updated on the Better Evaluation website[2]. "Footprint evaluation is grounded in the premise

[1] Footprint is located within The Better Evaluation Knowledge Platform, which is part of the Global Evaluation Initiative, itself supported by major evaluation offices, notably UNDP IEO and World Bank IEG.

[2] Source: website: betterevaluation.org, headings – cross-cutting themes – footprint evaluation.

that all evaluations should include consideration of environmental sustainability, even when this is not a stated goal of the intervention. This is so that decision-making can consider the potential and actual impacts of planned interventions (projects, programs, policies) on the environment". Footprint's work has covered similar ground to that of the current UNEG ESI work and has come to some similar conclusions and potential solutions, although within a broader institutional framework than UNEG. Footprint draws attention to the importance of the DAC evaluation criteria, which also strongly emerged from the first two stages of the ESI work. Regarding the need to promote a strong rationale for including environmental considerations in all evaluations, Footprint promotes reference to international environmental agreements, which partner countries have ratified, to leverage inclusion.

14. Whilst this aspect could indeed be highlighted in activities at country level, the ESI approach advocates another channel specifically for UN Agencies. It proposes that UNEG approaches to environmental evaluation should be related to the overall UN Environmental Management Group proposed Model Approach to Environmental and Social Standards, as part of a longer-term intention to fully incorporate evaluation into this approach, from which it is currently largely omitted. This would both raise the status of evaluation within the UN Environmental Management system and strengthen that system by informing its successive iterations based on the difference made (or not made) by earlier stages such as Environmental Screening.

15. The Canadian Evaluation Society has conducted a study[3] covering some of the same ground as the ESI and Footprint Work. This concludes that: "sustainability is not being systematically addressed by evaluators in either Canada or the United States. The focus of publications, grey literature, and most evaluation projects continues to be on human systems, and even evaluations dealing with environmental or natural systems issues tend largely to focus upon operational and program processes (i.e., the human dimension) of those programs". An additional element of this study, which has great relevance to the ESI work is a Theory of Change proposing how sustainability-focused evaluation might be introduced into the evaluation community. This is beyond the scope of the proposed guidance document, but it certainly raises in a concise manner the pressing question of what difference the ESI guidance might make across the UN system. As shown by the Theory of Change, as well as technical guidance, UNEG member offices will need to considerably enhance their efforts to place evaluation as a core element of approaches to Social and Environmental Standards. Even if the guidance leads to improvements in the coverage and technical quality of environmental considerations in evaluations, this will lack significance if evaluation offices are "on the outside looking in" to overall UN environmental management systems.

16. These connections with a range of international evaluation good practice interventions, show that the ESI work is centrally located in a broader movement of experts to place environmental evaluation centrally in the overall development field. The key role played by GEF IEO in helping to support and sustain the multi-agency efforts (both within the UN system and

[3] CANADIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY SUSTAINABILITY WORKING GROUP. REPORT ON STOCKTAKING FOR SUSTAINABILITY-READY EVALUATION. Submitted to: CES National Council December 2020

beyond) to provide authoritative guidance through the ESI is therefore promoting the Office as a central player in assisting all stakeholders to realistically and expertly evaluate progress of the contribution of multilateral interventions towards realization of the SDGs.

17. The interaction of the ESI workstream with initiatives beyond the UN system has been pursued through presentation of a technical paper at the European Evaluation Society conference in Copenhagen, at which the role of GEF and co-hosts of the Working Group were presented and acknowledged by other key stakeholders in the field of environmental evaluation. Access of a broader interested public to the ESI work has also been promoted through blogs and webinars. The relatively modest resource inputs of GEF IEO to the ESI have therefore brought substantial dividends in terms of:

(a) Sustaining the GEF's role as a leading contributor to environmental evaluation at all development levels

(b) Confirming its "place at the table" in critical dialogues on the role of evaluation in supporting progress towards the SDGs, recognizing that these goals bring together in a new and unique way the inter-connectedness of environmental, social and economic development

(c) Enabling the intellectual capital of the GEF IEO to be incorporated into high level UN-wide evaluation approaches, through consistent participation of the Office Director.

V. ESI Third Activity: Assessment of Approach and Think Piece to help Produce the Guidance Document

18. The first two ESI activities had assessed the need for guidance on social and environmental impacts of UN agencies' development activities. Based on the reports produced, the Working Group decided to focus first on environmental considerations. As shown in Section 3 above, specific challenges were identified for inclusion in the guidance document. At its Working Group meeting on July 6th, 2022, the members gave the following pointers towards the overall shape and scope of guidance to be offered, including the following:

(a) The Working Group opts for a web-based guidance – to develop a guidance applicable to all organizations and drill down when needed to reflect specific mandates of them and stay relevant to varying levels of awareness and advancement of these organizations.

(b) Some considerations in developing the guidance:

- The guidance should be clear about the audience it targets – evaluation heads, commissioners of the evaluation, evaluation teams, and users of the evaluations, etc.

- The Working Group recognizes the diversity of mandates of the UNEG members and the associated variety of (intended and unintended) environmental consequences of their actions. Moreover, awareness of, and experience in integrating ESI in evaluations varies among members. The guidance needs to reflect this diversity without becoming unwieldy and excessively long.
- One idea would be to tailor guidance to types of agencies (humanitarian, peacekeeping, development…). This could be accompanied by identifying typical environmental risks pertaining to their programming and operations.
- An entry point to address this diversity could be the *Environmental Safeguards* if the member organization has one. The evaluations could draw from the risks identified in these safeguards.
- Collaboration with ongoing UNEG efforts (such as Methodology Working Group and Peer Review Working Groups) will be beneficial. The goal should also be to fully integrate environmental sustainability into UNEG Norms and Standards.
- Guidance should clarify the roles and responsibilities of evaluation offices (and their director) and evaluation teams in integrating ESI in evaluation.

19. In a new "think piece" document prepared in 2022, it is first emphasized that "for more than a decade, the UN has been trying to encourage consistency among its member bodies in terms of Social and Environmental Management, under the auspices of the Environment Management Group (EMG). In 2012, the EMG launched a framework intended to provide a foundation to bring coherence to the UN system's environmental approaches"[4]. The think piece therefore proposes that the UNEG guidance on environmental evaluation should be consistent with and preferably embedded in this broader UN system-wide effort for consistency.

20. The document reflected on well-documented assessments that overall, the UN system has been weak with regard to the use of environmental and social safeguard systems, particularly in comparison with international development banks. Despite this poor performance, there are screening processes for environmental effects in a range of UN organizations. Although risk categories and terminology vary, there is broad adoption of a three-tier system of risk assessment categories:

(a) **High**: Possibility of environmental impacts that are significant in scale and/or severity and may have irreversible effects

(b) **Medium:** Possibility of environmental impacts that are limited in scale and severity, for which remedial actions may be effective

(c) **Low:** Minor impacts that can be remedied or no impacts.

[4] A FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM. Prepared by Environment Management Group. 2012.

21. This system could be proposed in the UNEG guidance to enable evaluation offices to assess to what extent and how evaluation ToRs need to include environmental considerations. Each risk category should be associated with procedures, ranging from a Full Environmental Impact Assessment for high-risk interventions, through smaller scale, less formal and often more localized reviews, to "no further action required". One of the institutional impacts of strengthened attention to environmental considerations in evaluation should (over time) be the risk assessment of all project or program proposals, using an appropriate screening system. In turn, this would enable the initial questions in evaluation ToRs to focus on whether the project or program proposal was adequately screened. If so, to what extent were any elements in medium or high-risk categories evaluated for actual effects? If not, why not and (potentially), include in the evaluators' ToR a rapid screening using the standard criteria of Social and Environmental Standards to see if any effects occurred, which had not been screened for.

VI. Potential Shape and Coverage of the UNEG Guidance on Mainstreaming Environment in UN Agency Evaluations

22. Building on the three activities of the ESI group to date, the Working Group made a preliminary suggestion for an outline of the guidance as follows:

(a) Brief introduction to the guidance

(b) How to use the guidance

(c) Aligning evaluation with the overall UN environment management standards and systems.

(d) Aligning evaluation with agency-specific environmental management systems

(e) Assessing whether the intervention under evaluation (the evaluand) was subject to environmental screening during preparation phase.

(f) If no screening, were there any environmental considerations that should have been subjected to screening? If so, what were these and how can they be evaluated?

(g) If screening was conducted, what environmental considerations have been raised and how have they been addressed during implementation?

(h) Did this intervention have a Theory of Change and, if so, to what extent did this include environmental aspects? If not, create a retrospective Theory of Change to assess how environment affected or was affected by the intervention.

(i) To what extent has the intervention contributed towards environmental effects (positive or negative) in the following areas?

- Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management
- Climate Change and Disaster Risk
- Pollution Prevention and Resource Efficiency.

(j) To what extent has the intervention contributed towards environmental effects (positive or negative) arising from the following social areas of activity?

- Community health, safety and security
- Displacement and Resettlement
- Indigenous people

(k) To what extent did implementation of the intervention have an "environmental footprint" of its own, independent of project/programme effects? If any, what were these?

(l) Are there any lessons from this intervention, which suggest changes necessary to improve the Agency's environment management system and processes?

(m) How can recommendations from this evaluation for system changes with regard to environmental considerations be promoted and institutionalised in the Agency and more broadly?

VII. PLANS TO DELIVER THE ESI GUIDANCE

23. At its meeting of 20th October 2022, the Working Group gave the following mandate to move towards completion of the guidance.

(a) The members agreed that the think piece provided a rich and strong basis for developing the guidance.

(b) Members agreed that the purpose of the ESI effort is to create an awareness of this critical issue within the broader evaluation community and to provide inspiration for a more systematic inclusion of environmental considerations into all evaluations. The experiences of the Gender Mainstreaming and Disability Inclusion efforts would be of benefit to this Working Group. It was noted that evaluations paying attention to the environment will for their part influence policy, programming and operations.

(c) It was noted that the environment should not be considered an add-on, but rather a missing part in evaluating efforts towards sustainable development. It was agreed that all evaluations should at the minimum go through the thought process of how important environmental impact will be to assess. The evaluation management / team should provide a justification regarding the decision on how they engage with the environment.

(d) It was reaffirmed that the guidance to be produced would best be a web-based document allowing for digging deeper into resources as required. Developing such a document should not be done in a rush.

(e) Members agreed on the scope and ambition of the material to be presented to the UNEG January 2023 AGM, namely, to present the key considerations for the guidance and to give a flavour of what would be forthcoming. The think piece contains most of the elements of such AGM product

VIII. ENHANCED VALUE OF THE ESI WORK ON GUIDELINES

24. On July 28th, 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution enshrining the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right and called for greater global efforts to ensure that this principle is upheld. Although not mandatory, this resolution highlights the significance of the environment across the UN's work and suggests that this dimension be properly considered in all UN evaluations. *The ESI programme will therefore feed into a major trend of UN progress and emphasis in environmental evaluation, reinforcing the value and importance of the lead and support offered by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office as Working Group Chair and budget manager for the necessary consultancy work.*