

# Comparative study of WHO evaluation function with selected UN entities



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## Overview and context

This WHO's evaluation function has evolved since the creation of the Evaluation and Organizational Development Office in 2014, aimed at enhancing independence and visibility in response to the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) report on UN entities. Despite progress, challenges remain, including interruptions due to the demands of the COVID-19 response.

To enhance WHO's evaluation function capacity to promote learning and accountability, this comparative study looked into eight other UN agencies (FAO, ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP). These agencies were selected on the basis of their size, their global reach and the maturity of their evaluation function.

Understanding WHO's organizational context is crucial for shaping its evaluation needs and approaches and bearing in mind that there is no direct comparator to WHO in mandate, structure or size, this study identifies lessons learnt and good practices from comparator agencies which will inform the revision of WHO's evaluation policy and improve the credibility and utility of WHO evaluations.

## Purpose and use

This study identifies good practices and ways to strengthen WHO's evaluation function in such aspects as governance, coverage and resources, and makes recommendations to Member States and the Secretariat on three dimensions: policy and systems, practice and resourcing. These recommendations are intended to ensure independence, credibility and use of evaluations and to enhance the ability of the evaluation function to stimulate learning and promote accountability, transparency and effectiveness.

## Key findings

### Evaluation Policy

WHO's Evaluation Policy, established in 2012 and last revised in 2018, sets the framework for evaluation activities within the Organization. Despite an implementation framework developed in 2022 and guidance documents issued in 2023, however, there is limited awareness of these policy and guidances. Further, the policy does not provide guidance on how to operationalize decentralized evaluations, and lacks specific considerations for evaluations of WHO's work in health emergencies.

## Relevance and responsiveness

The evaluation policy outlines criteria for selecting topics, but does not specify how to achieve balanced coverage of the organization's activities between centralized and decentralized evaluations. While recent evaluations are planned to be strategically aligned to the organization's goals, planning could be more systematic. There is also a need for advocacy and collaboration for joint evaluations.

### Human resources

Despite a recent increase in the use of external expertise, WHO's evaluation function remains significantly under-resourced as compared to other UN organizations. Only five professional staff members are present in central Evaluation Office as of January 2024. Regional evaluation capacity is still developing, with varying staffing levels and availability across regions. These challenges point to a need for increased resources commensurate with the size of the Organization, and structural support to strengthen WHO's evaluation capacity.

### Financial resources

The evaluation policy mandates provision of adequate resources for implementing the organization-wide biennial evaluation workplan. Yet evaluation remains significantly under-resourced across all three levels. The central Evaluation Offices budget for 2022-2023 represented only 0.1% of WHO's overall budget, and there is no centralized tracking of resources allocated for decentralized evaluations. The move towards a costed work plan for 2024-2025 was a step forward but, at the same time, raises concerns about resource adequacy, with planned activities alone exceed the allocated budget.

### Independence

The evaluation policy defines impartiality and independence, incorporating measures like Executive Board approval of workplans and the establishment of evaluation as a distinct function. While the behavioural independence, the absence of a dedicated budget allocation, or a budget line, to evaluation limits structural independence of the function. Regular independent assessments like UNEG peer reviews have not been conducted to enhance oversight of the function.

## Quality

The evaluation policy provides quality assurance of evaluations through the use of established methodologies and independent oversight. While the credibility of evaluations is generally high, there are gaps in quality assurance system compared to other organizations, such as the absence of a systematic independent quality assurance system. Specific guidance for evaluations of emergency work and a comprehensive set of evaluation tools are also missing. Although training initiatives have begun to enhance quality, training should be more broadly available for potential commissioners and managers of evaluations, and the guidance documents need to be more broadly disseminated.

## Enabling environment and culture

WHO's evaluation culture is still emerging. Hiring experienced evaluation professionals is a positive step. However, findings from evaluation are not systematically presented and discussed with the governing bodies. Member States' understanding and advocacy for evaluation need to be enhanced, particularly in the regions. There are promising demand for evaluations in some areas of headquarters, but awareness at the country level remains limited, with persistent confusion between evaluation and audit. Senior leadership support is also not very visible, impacting evaluation's prioritization and effectiveness.

Engaging senior staff as evaluation champions is an effective way for strengthening the organizational evaluation culture.

## Evaluation use

In WHO, the practice to enhance the use of evaluations includes raising awareness, engaging key stakeholders throughout the evaluation process, delivering high quality reports, and improving dissemination. While some recent evaluations have gained prominence, it is not clear how their recommendations were addressed. Prioritizing evaluations of WHO's contribution, especially at the country level, is crucial. Dissemination efforts are basic but improving with new communication strategies. Knowledge management efforts are also underway to enhance organizational learning. Closing the learning loop and demonstrating the value added by evaluations are essential for enhancing their use within the organization.

## Engagement and follow-up

Some organizations have developed a systematic approach to tracking and acting on evaluation recommendations, with clear policies, management ownership, and regular reporting to governing bodies. In WHO, while management responses are published alongside evaluations, there is a lack of institutional incentives for action after evaluations. The current system does not systematically capture all evaluations, hindering effective tracking of management responses. There is a need for dedicated time and space for substantive discussion of evaluation findings with the governing body and senior management, as seen in other agencies like WFP and UNICEF.

## Key findings

**Evolution of WHO's Evaluation Function:** WHO's evaluation function has seen notable advancements since its inception, especially during the period from 2012 to 2018. Key milestones include the establishment of the first evaluation policy in 2012, the creation of the Evaluation Unit in 2014, and the update of the evaluation policy in 2018.



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Recent progress includes efforts to enhance centralized evaluation quality and relevance, such as bringing in more professional staff and developing detailed guidance. However, certain areas, particularly financial and human resource allocation and decentralized evaluation, still require significant improvement.

**Comparison with UN Agencies:** Over the past decade, while WHO has made progress in its evaluation function, it has not kept pace with other UN agencies. These agencies have substantially invested in evaluation and improved their systems and practices. A robust evaluation system is critical for WHO to achieve its strategic objectives, including those outlined in GPW13 and GPW14, emphasizing "delivery for impact" and a country-focused approach.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Policy development and updating:** Regularly update the evaluation policy every 5 years, informed by comparator studies, to address identified gaps and ensure relevance. Set out a fully developed roadmap on how the evaluation policy will be delivered, accompanied by a detailed results reporting arrangement.

**2. Independence:** Establish an explicit budget line for evaluation to ensure structural independence, and strengthen oversight and engagement with governing bodies.

**3. Quality assurance:** Monitor the coverage and quality of evaluations, consolidate existing quality assurance elements into a fully developed system, and enhance the quality of decentralized evaluations.

**4. Financial and human resources:** Ensure dedicated resources for evaluation, commit to a target level of resourcing, and invest in the decentralized evaluation function.

**5. Capacity building:** Build capability at regional and country levels on evaluation, including staffing regional evaluation units and developing a network of country-level focal points.

**6. Enabling environment and culture:** Build awareness of evaluation across the organization through communication and training initiatives, ensure high-level forums for discussing evaluations, and foster demand, support, and buy-in for evaluation.

**7. Dissemination and use:** Modernize and enhance the approach to dissemination of evaluations, using a wider range of tools and formats, and strengthen systems for follow-up on recommendations.