

Learning Lessons

Insights from the 2024 Asian Evaluation Week

Innovations for Influential Evaluation



Independent
Evaluation **ADB**

Raising development impact through evaluation

Learning Lessons

Insights from the 2024 Asian Evaluation Week

Innovations for Influential Evaluation



Independent
Evaluation **ADB**

Raising development impact through evaluation



Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 IGO license (CC BY 3.0 IGO)

© 2025 Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City, 1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel + 632 8632 4444; Fax +632 8636 2444
www.adb.org

Some rights reserved. Published in 2025.

ISBN xxx-xx-xxxx-xxx-x (print); xxx-xx-xxxx-xxx-x (electronic); xxx-xx-xxxx-xxx-x (ebook)
Publication Stock No. XXXXXXXXX-x
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/xx.xxxx/XXXxxxxxx-x>

The view expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent.

ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this publication and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of their use. The mention of specific companies or products of manufacturers does not imply that they are endorsed or recommended by ADB in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

By making any designation of or reference to a particular territory or geographic area, or by using the term “country” in this publication, ADB does not intend to make any judgements on the legal or other status of any territory or area.

This publication is available under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 IGO license (CC BY 3.0 IGO) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/igo/>. By using the content of this publication, you agree to be bound by the terms of this license. For attribution, transitions, adaptations, and permissions, please read the provisions and terms of use at <https://www.adb.org/terms-use#openaccess>.

This CC license does not apply to non-ADB copyright materials in this publication. If the materials are attributed to another source, please contact the copyright owner or publisher of that source for permission to reproduce it. ADB cannot be held liable for any claims that arise as a result of your use of the material.

Please contact pubsmarketing@adb.org if you have questions or comments with respect to content, or if you wish to obtain copyright permission for your intended use that does not fall within these terms, or for permission to use the ADB logo.

Corrigenda to ADB publications may be found at <http://www.adb.org/publications/corrigenda>.

Cover design by Erickson Mercado.

All masthead photos are from ADB.

CONTENTS

A. Introduction	1
1. Role of Evaluation in Performance-Based Budgeting	1
2. Evidence and Data Gaps in Evaluation of Climate Solutions	2
B. Navigating Development Impact in the Digital Era	4
1. Digital Technology as an Effective Enabler of Evaluation	4
2. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Action	4
3. Leveraging Data Science in Practice	5
4. Assessing and Strengthening National Evaluation Capacities	6
C. Leveraging Evaluation for Organizational Transformation	9
1. Facilitating Organizational Transformation and Institutional Delivery	9
2. Incentivizing the Private Sector to Achieve Development Objectives	10
3. Responsive Evaluation Standards	11
4. Enhancing Country Ownership as well as Partnerships	11
5. Leveraging Concessional Financing for Vulnerable Countries	12
6. Small Firms' Access to Resources	12
D. Evaluating Regional Public Goods for Sustainable Cooperation	13
1. Regional Public Goods and Scaling Up	13
2. Food Security as a Regional Good Not Yet Evident	14
E. Looking Forward	15
1. Evaluation in Times of Crises and Uncertain Future	15
2. Paradigm Shift and Transformational Agenda in Evaluation	16
Appendixes	17
List of Boxes	
Box 1: Key Aspects of Green Climate Fund's Work on Climate Change Issues	3
Box 2: Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Selected Organizations	5
Box 3: Key Insights on the Use of Geospatial Data	6
Box 4: Evaluation in Times of Crises and Uncertain Future	15
List of Figures	
Figure 1: Key Features of Diagnostic Tools for National Evaluation Systems	7



Abbreviations

3ie	– International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
ADB	– Asian Development Bank
AEW	– Asian Evaluation Week
AI	– artificial intelligence
GCF	– Green Climate Fund
IED	– Independent Evaluation Department
M&E	– monitoring and evaluation
MDB	– multilateral development bank
MEL	– monitoring, evaluation, and learning
PRC	– People’s Republic of China
SDGs	– Sustainable Development Goals

Executive Summary

This discussion paper gathers key points raised at the 2024 Asian Evaluation Week. The event's theme was Innovations for Influential Evaluation, with three sub-themes: (i) navigating development impact in the digital era, (ii) leveraging evaluation for organizational transformation, and (iii) evaluating regional public goods for sustainable cooperation.

Discussions centered on how evaluation and innovative approaches can drive transformational change, particularly in the work of multilateral development banks, which need to focus on (i) identifying ways to work better together; (ii) integrating stakeholder engagement in their evaluation processes, which is fundamental to the quality of evaluation work; and (iii) recognizing that evaluation is not an end in itself but a means to achieve better outcomes and greater impact.

Data, information, and evidence are at the heart of evaluation work, and the current deluge of information strengthens the potential for better evidence-based decision-making. However, it also raises the risk of stakeholders being drowned in information, some of which may be unverifiable or false, presenting a challenge to the evaluation community and the users of its work. For both consumers and producers of evidence, ensuring that the right evidence is presented and analyzed is of utmost importance.

Evaluative experiences across countries and global organizations highlight the importance and power of narrative and storytelling, which add depth to the information that data provides. While more data and evidence are generated in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies, evaluators should remain mindful that AI's potential lies not solely in its capabilities but also in its ability to strengthen team performance by integrating human insights with AI support. This combination prevents overreliance on AI and ensures better outcomes.

Methodological soundness in carrying out rigorous and influential impact evaluations raises important issues. Experiences in the practice of evaluation show that (i) tailoring the evaluation function to local contexts is important, and (ii) fostering behavioral change is key to leveraging innovation for long-term development impact.

Lessons from evaluation work across various sectors and thematic areas tell a compelling story of efforts to achieve—and often the attainment of—development impact. Key issues requiring deliberation in the evaluation domain include (i) effectively assessing and building national evaluation capacities; (ii) creating incentives for the private sector to play a key part in the evaluation ecosystem; (iii) evaluating policies and programs related to climate change and other sustainability crises, with inclusiveness, broadly defined, as a measure of sustainability; and (iv) identifying ways to work better together, including applying globally informed experiences in local contexts.



A. Introduction

This paper draws from a wide array of topics explored during the 2024 Asian Evaluation Week (AEW2024). This annual event is jointly organized by the Independent Evaluation Department (IED) of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and its knowledge partner, the Asia-Pacific Finance and Development Institute, Shanghai, People's Republic of China (PRC). AEW2024 took place in Shanghai on 2–5 September, with the theme Innovations for Influential Evaluation.¹

The theme underscores the need for evaluation entities to leverage innovations in methods, tools, and thought leadership to positively influence policies and programs that contribute to development effectiveness. While this need spans many dimensions, AEW2024 focused on three sub-themes: (i) navigating development impact in the digital era, (ii) leveraging evaluation for organizational transformation,² and (iii) evaluating regional public goods for sustainable cooperation. The paper presents key topical areas distilled from insights across the sub-themes.

Two topical areas that cut across all the sub-themes and guide efforts to maximize development impact are performance-based budgeting and the evaluation of climate solutions.

1. Role of Evaluation in Performance-Based Budgeting

The PRC's experiences with applying performance-based budgeting in the public sector clearly demonstrate the central role of evaluation in its effective implementation. Proper budget management is a critical responsibility of organizational management, and in the PRC, linking performance evaluation results with policy improvements and budgeting

¹ Participants included evaluation specialists, policymakers, government officials from the PRC and other countries across the Asia and Pacific region; academics; representatives of civil society; evaluation practitioner groups; and staff from multilateral and international organizations. This paper is not the proceedings of AEW2024 since it covers only selected key issues raised during the event. Details of the event, including materials presented, are available on the [AEW2024](#) website. Areas covered are summarized in **Appendix 1**, while the event program can be found online. The event focused less on finding solutions and more on sharing ideas and knowledge, framing questions, and gathering insights.

² Action verbs used during the robust discussions on leveraging evaluation for development impact included engaging, enhancing, catalyzing, transforming, shaping, revolutionizing, promoting, harnessing, and generating impact. The most prominent, however, was “leveraging,” reflecting AEW2024’s focus on maximizing the use of resources possessed by organizations and governments.

adjustments has become a key function of the public sector. The broader aim is to assess the economic, social, and ecological returns of government investments.

Several evaluation-centric measures are evident: (i) proper and realistic performance target setting; (ii) ex-ante evaluation to help organizations predict the possible impact of proposed measures; (iii) continuous performance tracking, which highlights the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and information technology systems within organizations; (iv) adoption of a multi-party working model to gather diverse views and perspectives; and (v) ex-post evaluation, emphasizing not only whether the measures were successful but also how they can be sustained. These evaluation results are expected to inform budget levels, including transfer payments to regions and organizations. The government remains committed to deepening reforms, emphasizing innovation in the budget performance management process by expanding the scope of evaluation of individual projects to broader programs and policies and placing importance on knowledge outcomes.³

2. Evidence and Data Gaps in Evaluation of Climate Solutions

The evaluation community widely acknowledges a significant gap and disparity in the available evidence on a global public good: climate solutions, such as effective climate change adaptation, particularly in sectors such as water, the environment, and institutional systems.

Evaluating climate change and climate action involves understanding the complexity of climate projects, which require structured, multisector collaboration.

Digital transformation, particularly through big data, is crucial for identifying and driving transformational change in climate projects, helping to resolve complex issues such as climate adaptation, resilience, and mitigation by providing critical insights and fostering behavioral change.

*Head, Independent Evaluation Unit,
Green Climate Fund*

Water scarcity is an integral and downstream part of the climate change debate.⁴ Within the water sector, considerably less attention is given to the softer dimensions such as empowerment, policy, and the enabling environment. Measuring these dimensions requires methodologies deeply rooted in local and contextual realities, making national and local partnerships essential. Reliable evidence can be generated only through such collaborations, enabling more effective policymaking in the fight against climate change.

The uneven distribution of evidence across sectors and geographic regions underscores the need for more targeted research and data collection to fill these gaps. For example, increased attention should be given to climate risks within communities, rather than focusing solely on adopting new practices. This approach is crucial for effective and sustained climate adaptation and resilience. Evaluations of climate interventions in

³ This commitment to reforms includes incentivizing a mindset shift among public sector organizations; conducting ex-ante performance evaluation; and focusing on the quality and efficiency of organizational actions, supported by a robust M&E system. This system stresses standardizing third-party participation. The government emphasizes dual monitoring, which combines self-assessment with random external monitoring by public finance authorities. Key identified needs for this approach include updating the performance indicator database and collecting core data on government investments.

⁴ Parallel session 18 focused on water, climate, and communities in vulnerable contexts.

vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Egypt, and Nigeria highlight the importance of impact assessments in shaping sustainability-focused policies and interventions.

The Green Climate Fund's experiences in various aspects of evaluative work on climate change issues are noteworthy, particularly in their focus on climate solutions (**Box 1**).

Box 1: Key Aspects of Green Climate Fund's Work on Climate Change Issues

The Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) actively examines the results of countries' climate change actions. Many aspects of the fund's work merit mention here.

Evaluating climate resilience. IEU takes a context-driven approach, enabling governments to report on high-level impact indicators instead of adhering to a strict set of metrics.

Adopting the right means to measure impact. GCF recognizes that measuring intervention results is challenging because of inadequate tools, technical issues, and biases. Interventions can have unintended consequences requiring careful management; hence, GCF emphasizes a more reflective practice to better understand project shortcomings.

Considering policy coherence. Country ownership is vital for policy alignment, as shown by the nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans covering sectors such as water and gender. GCF conducts evaluations using criteria such as controllership, enabling environment, and partnership.

Working on climate accountability. GCF emphasizes the importance of collaborating with national institutions (e.g., supreme audit institutions) to strengthen climate accountability. This approach deepens dialogue with countries, helping them identify effective strategies and better utilize national institutions for reporting on climate impacts and financing.

GCF: Green Climate Fund, IEU: Independent Evaluation Unit

Source: 2024 Asian Evaluation Week, Parallel Session 18.



B. Navigating Development Impact in the Digital Era

Of the three sub-themes of AEW2024 (para. 2), the focus on navigating development impact centered on digital technology and its potential to bolster national evaluation capacities through technology applications.

1. Digital Technology as an Effective Enabler of Evaluation

Evaluators need to be skeptical consumers of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning in their work.

Manager, Infrastructure, Sustainable Development, and Digital Development Unit, Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank

Should we embrace or resist AI? Neither. We should SHAPE it.

Director, Independent Evaluation Office, United Nations Fund for Population Activities

The use of technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), has become ubiquitous in many fields, including evaluation. It has certainly helped make processes more efficient, enabled evaluations to access and use data in previously inconceivable ways, and added value overall. However, in a technology-driven world, evaluators must reconcile reliance on such tools with their ethical and responsible use. The importance of instituting measures to mitigate ethical risks and harms has been strongly emphasized. Principles such as transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, data protection—always deemed important—have gained even greater significance in the age of AI. A key takeaway from this discussion was the need for human oversight and verification to ensure the accuracy and reliability of technology-generated results, highlighting the need for caution against overreliance on digital technology.

2. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Action

AI and machine learning are increasingly used across many organizations (**Box 2**). A phased adoption of AI tools, the development of custom solutions, and a focus on long-term sustainability underscore the importance of building capacity, particularly in the Global South, and ensuring that AI benefits are inclusive and equitable. The emphasis on equity—ensuring that no one is left behind in the application of tools such as AI and machine learning—has been repeatedly highlighted in forums such as the Asian Evaluation Week.

Risks associated with AI use can be minimized at various levels—individual, technical, evaluation, organizational, and policy—through education, explainable AI, error-checking routines, and regulation. A robust governance framework is essential to guide AI use, especially in managing biases. While current biases are confined to institutionally produced documents, the expanding use of AI requires careful consideration of external data sources and their potential biases.

Box 2: Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Selected Organizations

World Bank. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in evaluation has evolved into operational tools that extract valuable lessons for project delivery. Analyzing completion reports with machine learning reveals that interventions lasting more than 3 years significantly improve performance and project ratings, highlighting the importance of long-term planning in development projects.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The bank is using existing AI technology to improve efficiency and reduce costs in its operations, which primarily focus on the private sector. The approach emphasizes democratic use, safety, and phased implementation. While the bank is in the early stages of its AI journey, it shows strong interest to make AI tools more accessible to staff and stakeholders.

United Nations Development Programme. The agency's Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics system uses AI to significantly improve the evaluation process. It underscores the importance of ethical principles in AI applications, including transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and data protection. More importantly, it highlights the need for human oversight to ensure the reliability and accuracy of AI-generated results.

Asian Development Bank (ADB). ADB's Independent Evaluation Department (IED) and Information Technology Department developed EVA (experimental virtual assistant), an AI tool designed to efficiently extract valuable lessons from a vast collection of evaluation documents. The development process considered three user groups: operations departments, evaluation departments, and high-level users, significantly improving the efficiency and effectiveness of IED's work. ADB has introduced an organization-wide workbench called ADB Genie. This AI-powered research assistant uses three distinct language models to provide multiple perspectives on the same dataset.

Source: 2024 Asian Evaluation Week, Parallel Sessions 9 and 12.

The global evaluation community, governments, and other stakeholders increasingly recognize that ensuring the ethical use of AI in evaluations requires international collaboration on agreed principles for ethical AI use.

3. Leveraging Data Science in Practice

Regardless of the extent to which AI and machine learning are used, the explosion in data availability across all domains (macro, meso, and micro levels) places a premium on evaluators collecting as much data as possible from disparate sources. Evaluators must then manage and analyze the data to extract the most useful information to achieve development and/or corporate objectives.





The growing use of data science in evaluations, however, comes with caveats that merit attention. For instance, many evaluators now believe that robust evaluations should be driven by key questions rather than dictated by data availability or coverage. Findings from new tools must be triangulated with traditional data sources to ensure that evaluations are robust and reliable.

In recent years, data science has been increasingly applied to assess the relevance of spatial targeting, with a focus on incorporating diverse data types and sources, including geospatial analysis, into evaluation practices. The need for consistent and comparable data across different geographies is critical (**Box 3**).

Box 3: Key Insights on the Use of Geospatial Data

- 1. Subnational data and disaggregation.** Challenges persist in disaggregating subnational data to a more granular level, as granular data can be aggregated, but the reverse is not possible. Thus, analyses are generally conducted at the state level because of constraints on data capture.
- 2. Use of geospatial data in conflict areas.** Geospatial data offers a clear advantage in conflict areas where data collection is challenging, providing a tangible benefit.
- 3. Use of geospatial data for causal inference.** Examples of applying geospatial data for causal inference, such as evaluating the impact of roads on urban growth, demonstrate the potential of combining different data sources for robust analysis.
- 4. Importance of context in using geospatial data.** This is critical for the analysis to tell a convincing and nuanced story. Equally important is the need for systematic data capture and the consideration of context when interpreting the results.

Source: 2024 Asian Evaluation Week, Parallel Session 17.

4. Assessing and Strengthening National Evaluation Capacities

More broadly, while the role of digital technology in both the development process and the evaluation domain gains ground, increasing attention is being given to how countries can and should strengthen their national evaluation capacities.

The analytical framework of a national evaluation system generally includes (i) policy and legal frameworks, (ii) public resources and systems for their use and accountability, (iii) key stakeholders and their incentives, (iv) existing capacities and initiatives, and (v) the use of M&E data and opportunities. In countries working to upgrade their national evaluation systems, public demand is growing for information on budgets, better evaluation, and the measurement of the impact of public resource use. Tools such as the National Evaluation Capacities Index (which takes a

participatory approach) and Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Analysis (which takes a holistic approach) are central to improving national evaluation capacities (**Figure 1**).⁵

Figure 1: Key Features of Diagnostic Tools for National Evaluation Systems

National Evaluation Capacities Index	Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Analysis	Center for Learning on Evaluation and Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on a participatory approach and peer-to-peer learning in evaluation • Can be adapted by small countries (e.g., Pacific islands) • Encompasses an enabling environment at the macro level, organisational capacities at the meso level, and individual capacities at the micro level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a systems-based approach, which affords a panoramic view of issues • Focused on national evaluation capacity • Conducts intensive consultation and data collection in collaboration with national partners • Comprehensive in scope but flexible enough to be applied at any level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on a participatory approach and peer-to-peer learning in evaluation • Can be adapted by small countries (e.g., Pacific islands) • Encompasses an enabling environment at the macro level, organisational capacities at the meso level, and individual capacities at the micro level

Comparing evaluation systems provides countries opportunities to learn from each other. NITI Aayog in India,⁶ for example, is studying the evaluation programs and methodologies of various countries, including the Republic of Korea and Australia, as well as organizations such as the World Bank, to adopt best practices and tools to enhance its evaluation metrics and framework.

Focusing on project operations is key to building countries’ evaluation capacity, as it provides a simpler yet more impactful pathway to strengthening national evaluation systems. In the Pacific region, for example, ADB has collaborated with regional and local entities to better understand indigenous evaluation needs. This collaboration resulted in the development of a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, and learning system and the launch of a 14-month diploma program at the University of South Pacific. The process, which took more than 5 years, underscores the importance of partnering with the right governments and agencies to institutionalize such initiatives.

⁵ The National Evaluation Capacities Index is a diagnostic tool for assessing national evaluation capacities across multiple dimensions (Figure 1). The Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Analysis tool, developed by the Global Evaluation Initiative, is primarily used to help developing countries strengthen their M&E systems. It supports country stakeholders in gathering, structuring, and analyzing information on the current capacity of their country’s M&E ecosystem.

⁶ NITI Aayog has developed a data quality index to ensure systematic monitoring of government schemes and the accuracy of data collection.

Key messages on strengthening national evaluation capacity highlight that it is a gradual process requiring time for systems to adapt and stabilize after reforms. Any approach should emphasize context-sensitive, participatory methods, and the need for flexibility.



C. Leveraging Evaluation for Organizational Transformation

Evaluations can drive transformational changes within organizations if they are designed to deliver significant, broad, and sustained impact. For example, ADB's evaluations on climate change support and organizational strategy show how evaluations can be deep and systemic and result in lasting changes. As one of the primary objectives of evaluation is to transform organizations to take actions that will advance development effectiveness, this topic is of import to evaluators.

1. Facilitating Organizational Transformation and Institutional Delivery

Organizational transformation following innovations in evaluation requires a concerted effort,⁷ such as the approach taken by the New Development Bank, which emphasizes establishing a baseline, setting measurable goals aligned with the mission, fostering a learning culture, actively engaging stakeholders, and regularly assessing impact on performance and effectiveness. Transformation is further expedited when an organization's management underscores the value of real-time evaluations, which can provide actionable recommendations, improve performance, and strengthen commitment to learning. This approach necessitates the strategic involvement of senior management in evaluation processes. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development prioritize robust monitoring, evaluation, and resource tracking to ensure policy effectiveness. They have set up guidelines for managing these initiatives, focusing on resource and outcome monitoring.

Maintaining independence while engaging in continuous dialogue with stakeholders, both internal and external, is crucial for impactful evaluations. However, caution is needed when accepting evaluation recommendations, as management's acceptance with caveats can complicate the formulation of subsequent action plans. Engaging with internal departments and external parties, such as civil society, brings diverse perspectives, although it can be challenging and time-consuming.

A key message that emerged is that institutional mandates are dynamic and continuously evolve. Systematic performance monitoring and data-driven decision-making are therefore critical, as they promote

⁷ This particular subject matter was covered extensively in parallel sessions 6, 8, and 10 at AEW2024, all of which looked at the role of evaluation in driving organizational transformation, including the experiences of multilateral development banks.





accountability, foster continuous improvement, and drive institutional transformation.

2. Incentivizing the Private Sector to Achieve Development Objectives

To enable interactions with the government, discussions on organizational transformation must include the private sector. The evaluation community emphasizes the importance of involving the private sector in the evaluation ecosystem within countries, and highlights the need for participation from international and bilateral organizations as well as multilateral development banks (MDBs). This involvement enables the private sector to help achieve developmental objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the corporate objectives of country systems.

Evidence from AEW2024 indicates that much remains to be done to effectively incentivize the private sector in these domains.⁸ For one, evaluators in global organizations, such as MDBs, are encouraged to reflect on how their work supports the private sector. Pitching an appropriate narrative to the private sector is crucial to help them better understand the work and its context. Suggestions include creating a guidebook to clarify their role in contributing to goals such as the SDGs.

To motivate the private sector to view M&E as a learning opportunity, MDBs should connect impact evaluation with cost-benefit analysis for decision-making. Standardizing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) indicators and definitions for additionality would help the private sector better understand MDBs' objectives. Lowering borrowing costs is an effective way to encourage the private sector to meet ESG standard requirements by offsetting the efforts required for compliance. MDBs can provide training and capacity-building programs to help the private sector understand the long-term benefits of meeting ESG standards. Demonstrating how these standards contribute to better financial performance and sustainability can further motivate private sector engagement.

Go for judicious assessments that add value. Don't reinvent the wheel.

Country Director, People's Republic of China Resident Mission, ADB

Key messages that emerged from discussions on working with the private sector on the SDGs included the following: (i) Speak the language of the private sector to improve collaboration and achieve the SDGs. (ii) Simplify the lexicon of MDBs to make their communication more accessible. (iii) Emphasize the value of partnerships by not only leveraging governments, MDBs, and bilateral agencies but also engaging young, emerging evaluators to strengthen coalitions to achieve the SDGs. (iv) Make a stronger case

⁸ At AEW2024, the IED director general posed a pointed question: "Why aren't we able to convince the private sector to be on board with us?" Responses varied, but one key point was that the private sector does not recognize the global public good. Discussions, particularly in plenary sessions 3 and 5 and parallel sessions 6 and 14, revolved around strategies to incentivize the private sector to actively help meet the SDGs while participating in the evaluation ecosystem.

for the need and the value of conducting diagnostics, not as a perfunctory exercise but in an informed and participatory manner, to foster effective collaboration.

3. Responsive Evaluation Standards

The transformation of evaluation practices has long been a priority for the evaluation community. One particularly challenging aspect of this transformation involves developing a fit-for-purpose code of ethics and evaluation standards that all stakeholders can agree upon and align their work with. The Asia Pacific Evaluation Association's new Code of Ethics and Evaluation Standards, along with their e-study course on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (discussed in parallel session 4), aim to professionalize the field and transform evaluation practices. This effort creates a ripple effect, where the association's efforts to professionalize evaluation can inspire national voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs) to follow suit. Engaging with a wide array of stakeholders—such as national VOPEs, EvalYouth chapters, and academics—is crucial to this process.

A significant challenge facing many countries is the lack of robust and comprehensive university-level courses on evaluation, leaving many evaluators to enter the field without formal training. This highlights the importance of professionalizing evaluation standards.

4. Enhancing Country Ownership as well as Partnerships

Building on the emphasis on regional evaluation standards and their influence on national evaluation capacity (paras. 18–22), the discussion shifts to country engagement to promote greater country ownership of evaluation processes and of partnerships. Development partners, such as ADB, must tailor their country partnership strategies to the needs of developing member countries, understand their political economy,⁹ and improve risk assessments to add real value and provide new insights. Collaboration with other development partners and governments is essential to mitigate key risks, including sovereign and political ones. Responsive development engagement requires giving primacy to understanding local contexts through extensive stakeholder consultations, conducting rigorous and timely diagnostics, integrating private sector goals, and contributing to global and regional public goods.

Public goods, especially in the climate finance space, require clear definitions and long-term engagement. Their benefits often take time to materialize and need appropriate long-term financing, which is not always available through current MDB instruments. Success in public

⁹ The focus on political economy is relevant in all countries, but particularly so in fragile and conflict-affected states, such as Afghanistan. Combining external independent expertise with internal context-specific knowledge is important to carry out robust political economy analysis. The discussions in plenary session 3 centered on these issues as well as on how to integrate private sector goals into country partnership strategies.





goods projects, which often outlast political cycles, depends on long-term political will and capacity building. Development partners should focus on long-term investments and regional cooperation to ensure sustained impact.

A key takeaway from the discussions was that country ownership and the use of local knowledge are particularly critical during crises. Effective crisis management often relies more on informal communication and local knowledge than on formal policies and procedures. Country ownership and government involvement are vital for successful engagement in politically sensitive contexts.

5. Leveraging Concessional Financing for Vulnerable Countries

A particularly sensitive context is found in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS) and small island developing states (SIDS). Some countries, such as Samoa, are classified as both. Lessons from evaluations of development work in countries such as Samoa highlight the merits of leveraging concessional finance (e.g., grants), especially that channeled through the Asian Development Fund.

IED's evaluation on this subject has emphasized the need for a refined allocation mechanism that ensures stability and predictability of support, along with robust M&E systems incorporating better data and innovative methodologies tailored to the specific contexts of FCAS and SIDS. ADB's evaluations provide evidence-based insights that aid decision-making, improve resource allocation, strengthen accountability, and foster learning.

6. Small Firms' Access to Resources

Regarding financing and organizational transformation, evaluation insights from institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) highlight notable aspects of the access to finance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly to support green transitions and gender initiatives (as discussed in parallel session 13). The evaluations underscore the importance of setting clear targets and focusing on specific niches where SMEs need support. At an operational level, evaluators have faced difficulties in collecting comprehensive data on SMEs to assess whether the banks have fulfilled their promises.

Many organizations struggle with unclear objectives and targets, especially during front-end design. Even when objectives are clear, they often lack prioritization, a recurrent issue identified in evaluations. Evaluators rely on evidence to support their findings, emphasizing the need for better data and reporting systems. Poor baseline data often leads to inaccuracies in self-assessments, with notable variance between self-assessment success rates and validated success rates. A key takeaway is that these variance issues are not limited to SME financing but apply across sectors, meriting close attention.

D. Evaluating Regional Public Goods for Sustainable Cooperation

Key issues highlighted in the work of institutions such as ADB and EBRD, as well as global entities such as the World Bank and the United Nations, and discussed at AEW2024 (e.g., climate solutions, food security, and fragility and conflict-affected situations), can be analyzed through a regional lens.

1. Regional Public Goods and Scaling Up

Evaluations of regional cooperation in the Asia and Pacific region—such as ADB’s support for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program and the Greater Mekong Subregion, as well as the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative—show national and regional results.¹⁰ Two themes that emerge are enhancing regional cooperation and integration and exploring the scalability of regional public goods to international public goods.

The interest in scaling up good practices regionally is particularly strong in scientific fields, such as food science, where advancing the SDGs requires high-quality science and research, internal and external collaboration, effective processes, impact area leadership, and robust partnerships.¹¹ Adopting a flexible and context-sensitive approach to impact assessment is crucial, as the effects of public goods can vary greatly depending on the local conditions. This focus on context specificity, while not being constrained by it, is a key theme in cross-learning from evaluative work. Finally, forming partnerships and alliances with local actors is deemed essential to improve the effectiveness of impact assessments and ensure the successful dissemination and scaling up of public goods.¹²

¹⁰ For all three programs, one of the common recommendations of their evaluations was to improve results monitoring, including the use of proper indicators, baselines, targets, data collection, and results reporting.

¹¹ The discussions in plenary session 3 and parallel session 16 centered on regional public goods and scalability. A fair amount of work has been done on the evaluation approaches to scaling: (i) considering evidence on whether the intervention works as intended at a given (usually small) scale and under given circumstances; (ii) looking for evidence to inform the vision of scale, such as understanding the potential scope of the scale-up; and (iii) considering evidence on enabling factors, such as political, policy and regulatory, fiscal, institutional, and environmental aspects. J. Linn. 2021. Evaluation approaches to scaling—application and lessons. 3ie

¹² An appropriate framework to assess the effectiveness of impact assessments and the successful dissemination and scaling up of public goods is MELIA (monitoring, evaluation, learning, and impact assessment), which, in conjunction with SPA (scaling preparedness and action), enables governments to learn from localized achievements and assess how they could be scaled up. Evaluation is key in this learning process.





2. Food Security as a Regional Good Not Yet Evident

More than half the world's people facing hunger live in Asia and the Pacific, making food security and rural development a central issue for the region. Findings from the evaluation on this subject, discussed in plenary session 4, show that strengthening food security requires clarifying objectives, adopting a cross-sector approach, articulating an institutional framework for agriculture value chains, increasing integration with the private sector, and strengthening monitoring and reporting. The importance of monitoring is emphasized.

Equally important is the need for robust evaluative work to monitor the effects of political conflicts and climate change. Emphasizing the involvement of diverse stakeholders is crucial to ensure their input and ownership of data and policies, making evidence more accessible and actionable for policy implementation.¹³ Focusing on lessons learned and knowledge gained is essential to closing the feedback loop.

Food resilience has been evaluated, with food insecurity—a regional bad—emerging as a key issue. Focusing on food insecurity country by country, rather than adopting a trans-boundary perspective, has hindered a comprehensive understanding of food security as a regional good. MDBs can play a crucial role by adopting a more holistic approach to bolstering food security, such as by resolving water pollution while boosting agricultural production.

¹³ The work of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) is significant in this respect. 3ie's Global Evidence Commitment calls for collecting accurate evidence; maintaining rigor in the process; and spending adequate resources for evaluation work and evaluation capacity building. Organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Germany's KfW Development Bank, and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation have endorsed the commitment and internalized it in their own evaluation work.

E. Looking Forward

1. Evaluation in Times of Crises and Uncertain Future

Countries face unanimously recognized complex challenges, including climate change and inequality. Adding to these challenges is the deluge of information, which, on the positive side, offers opportunities for better evidence-based decision-making but, on the negative side, risks drowning stakeholders in information that may be non-verifiable or false.

With data and evidence at the core of evaluation work, this issue is of immediate concern to the evaluation community and the users of their work. For both consumers and producers of evidence, ensuring that the right evidence is presented, properly used, and thoroughly analyzed is of utmost importance.

Avoiding situations where evidence is used spuriously or without regard to the full picture is crucial for ensuring that evaluative results have value. Both producers and consumers of data and evidence must apply guardrails to make sense of the information presented. Given the uncertainties of the world, data users and producers must acknowledge the importance of evidence-based discoveries (**Box 4**).

Box 4: Evaluation in Times of Crises and Uncertain Future

Evaluators must have both a scout and soldier mindset to ensure accountability and adaptability... this involves asking the right questions, providing timely and digestible evaluations, and being flexible to meet the urgent needs of decision-makers.

*Director
Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank*

In times of crisis, policymakers must have access to existing evidence and resources to make informed decisions quickly. Evaluators must be flexible and prepared to provide rapid, real-time evaluations.

Executive Director, 3ie

Consumers of evidence should keep in mind three Cs: (i) stay **calm** and avoid emotional biases when interpreting data, as emotions can influence what information is derived from the data; (ii) understand the **context**



Numbers can be seductive.

Tim Harford, The Undercover Economist, on taking care not to make the metric the target



For any questions on this paper, please contact

Sonia Chand Sandhu
Independent Evaluation Department
Asian Development Bank, Manila
Phone: +632 632 85194
Email: ssandhu@adb.org

to grasp the origins and meanings of the data; and (iii) be **curious** and ask questions about the evidence. The three Cs are particularly useful in bureaucracies, where management should model (i) open-minded curiosity, (ii) a willingness to learn, and (iii) a readiness to make mistakes to set the right example.¹⁴

Producers of evidence, on the other hand, should focus on (i) presenting data in a way that helps people understand it, (ii) building evidence from the outset (and by default) to ensure high-quality outcomes, (iii) seeking broader data and evidence to enable a systems perspective, and (iv) being cautious about letting performance measures (quantitative evidence) become rigid targets that distort the underlying evidence. Producers should keep in mind that data represents more than just numbers. It reflects the lives behind those numbers.

More broadly, given the complexities of the development space and the context of evaluations, responsiveness to stakeholders and users of evaluative work must take precedence. This requires asking the right questions, employing the appropriate methodologies, and ensuring sufficient flexibility in evaluation processes.

2. Paradigm Shift and Transformational Agenda in Evaluation

The need for responsiveness to stakeholders and users of evaluation work is one component of the ongoing transformation of and paradigm shift within the evaluation profession, which must adapt quickly to change and build strong relationships to stay relevant and effective. This involves understanding and responding to rapid developments in the field. Localization, partnerships, and continuous engagement with institutions and policymakers are key. Localization, in particular, is deemed critical, as evaluation work must engage with local communities and earn their trust.¹⁵

Discussions at AEW2024 highlighted many valid points about how evaluation should adapt to ongoing changes, including leveraging innovations. In areas directly relevant to MDBs and their focus on a transformational agenda to make real impact on the ground, they should (i) identify ways to work better together, including by applying global experiences locally (globally informed but locally grounded); (ii) systematically assess whether their evaluations influence programmatic, institutional, and spatial (local) levels; (iii) incorporate stakeholder engagement into their evaluation processes, which is fundamental to quality evaluation work; and (iv) remember that evaluation is not an end in itself but a means to contribute to better outcomes and impact.

¹⁴ A scout mindset, which approaches evidence with genuine curiosity to understand the world, is preferable to a soldier mindset, which focuses solely on winning.

¹⁵ 3ie is particularly mindful of this.

Appendixes

Appendix 1. Key Topics Covered in the Asian Evaluation Week 2024 Program

Plenaries

1. Progress of the People's Republic of China's reform of performance-based budget management and evaluation
2. Evidence Talks with Tim Harford
3. Engaging for impact: Enhancing country partnerships
4. Enhancing food security and rural development in Asia and the Pacific
5. Evaluation headlines live: Evolving role of evaluation in preparing for an uncertain future

Parallel Sessions

1. Practice and innovations in performance-based management and evaluation of government investment projects in the People's Republic of China
2. Catalyzing progress: Leveraging concessional finance for development in Asia and the Pacific
3. National Evaluation Capacities Index: A collaborative initiative to assess national evaluation capacities
4. Transforming evaluation practices in Asia and the Pacific through professionalizing regional standards and code of ethics
5. Leveraging impact evaluations for development impact
6. Leveraging evaluation for organizational transformation: Insights from the BRICS, New Development Bank, and other key development partners
7. Evaluations in international development and regional cooperation: Practices and innovations
8. Shaping the multilateral development banks' transformational agenda: Is evaluation making a real impact?
9. AI and machine learning in action: Revolutionizing efficiency and innovation in evaluation
10. Utilizing evaluation for impactful change in institutional delivery
11. Promoting high-quality development of grassroots health care in the People's Republic of China: Practices and evaluation





12. Responsibly harnessing the power of Generative Artificial Intelligence in United Nations evaluations: Enhancing evaluations and upholding ethics
13. How to improve small firms' access to bank finance? Evaluation insights from the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Asian Development Bank
14. Role of the private sector in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and opportunities
15. Leveraging evaluation capacity development to strengthen transparency and good governance
16. Science bridging borders: Evaluating regionally for international public goods
17. Leveraging data science to evaluate the World Bank's spatial targeting and partnering at the country level: The case of Nepal
18. Water, climate, and communities: Generating impact evidence for climate solutions in vulnerable regional contexts

Appendix 2. Possible Areas and Issues for 2025 Asian Evaluation Week (Based on 2023 Asian Evaluation Week and 2024 Asian Evaluation Week Discussions)

1. Information in this appendix comes from
 - (i) consideration of themes and sub-themes of the 2023 Asian Evaluation Week (AEW2023) and AEW2024,
 - (ii) conclusions of this report,
 - (iii) a review of survey feedback from AEW2024 participants, and
 - (iv) a review of discussions on topics at the after-action review exercise for AEW2024.
2. The decision-making criteria for the theme and sub-themes of AEW2025 can be outlined as follows: (i) align with demand, as reflected in feedback provided after each AEW session; (ii) connect to key focus areas, such as innovation, private sector participation, application of artificial intelligence in evaluative work, national evaluation systems, and evaluation capacity development; and (iii) align with the broad areas of the work of the Independent Evaluation Department (IED).
3. Box A2 outlines possible topics for consideration by IED and the Asia-Pacific Finance and Development Institute in preparing for AEW2025. However, the list is not exhaustive.

Box A2: Possible Areas for Focus of 2025 Asian Evaluation Week

1. Understanding the macro and micro contexts of evaluation work
2. National evaluation ecosystems and capacity, including professionalization of evaluation at the country level
3. Evaluation of climate change mitigation and adaptation work
4. Engagement between governments and the evaluation community
5. Artificial intelligence and ethics
6. Engagement with, and incentivizing, the private sector
7. Measuring impact
8. Innovation in evaluation work
9. Strategic partnerships at the ground level
10. Localization of evaluation work
11. Evaluation experiences in small island developing states and fragile and conflict-affected situations
12. Increasing presentations led by countries on their experiences, aspirations, and challenges
13. Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems
14. Impact evaluation of public-private partnerships
15. Data quality management
16. Metrics of the impact of evaluation capacity development work
17. Moving beyond M&E systems to knowledge and learning
18. Evaluating performance of the independent evaluation function
19. Building capacity of young, emerging evaluators
20. Supreme audit institutions, evaluation, and accountability

Sources: 2024 Asian Evaluation Week (AEW) and AEW2023.





Innovations for Influential Evaluation

2-5 September 2024, Conrad Hotel Shanghai, People's Republic of China



Learning Lessons

Innovations for Influential Evaluation

This online edition of Learning Lessons reviews and analyzes lessons drawn from evaluation of ADB support to the education sector over the last 10 years. It provides an expanded perspective of the risks that can reduce development effectiveness at the sector, program, and project levels. Lessons presented in this synthesis are not prescriptive. When viewed properly from a contextual perspective, they can help deepen understanding of ADB's sector experience and provide inputs into the design and delivery of future country partnership strategies, programs, and projects.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.



ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City

1550 Metro Manila, Philippines

www.adb.org