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# **Independent Review of EvalForward Community of Practice**

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Annex 5.  
Change stories

## Introduction

1. EvalForward has consistently increased its membership over four years to 1 306 individual profiles on the website (as of August 2022). As part of the Independent Review, seven active members of EvalForward were contacted to see if they would be interested to share their stories of change. The purpose of this method was to lightly test the main causal propositions from EvalForward's implicit theory of change and gather stories that illustrate contributions to change. The change stories are not being used in the overall analysis to produce findings. This is because the interviewees were purposively sampled to be from among the most active members and so have a positive bias risk if used otherwise. However, excerpts from the change stories are used in the report to help illustrate findings already made by analyzing the evidence from other methods.
2. Six members (three women and three men across six regions) took up the challenge and conversations were held remotely and anonymously with the Evaluation Lead. The members' roles included:
  - i. M&E for Agriculture Consultant based in Europe and working Internationally
  - ii. Senior M&E Specialist for an international NGO
  - iii. Agricultural M&E Consultant and Senior Member of National Evaluators Professional Community
  - iv. MEL Expert Supporting NGOs and Governments
  - v. Senior NGO Executive
  - vi. Senior Government Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Specialist
3. To start each conversation, members were asked to react to the following statement (the causal propositions derived from EvalForward's implicit TOC).
4. "EvalForward seeks improvements to national capacities in conducting or using evaluations and monitoring related to agriculture, rural development and food security. It does this by contributing to positive changes in:
  - i. Individuals' professional experience and technical skills in evaluation/monitoring
  - ii. The enabling environment for evaluation/monitoring in institutions and organizations"
5. Because the statement reflects the EvalForward TOC causal proposition, it is necessarily a positive hypothesis about affecting change. The interviewer introduced the statement as such and asked for members' reactions to it rather than a binary Yes / No response (although some chose to respond in that manner).
6. These are the change stories that emerged from those conversations.

## Respondent 1

7. That statement of how EvalForward intends to contribute to change largely reflects my positive experience.
8. Being a member of EvalForward enabled me to get to know about a new M&E toolbox developed by FAO (Climate-Smart Agriculture Farm Sustainability Assessment Framework). I first started looking for papers on M&E and rural development through the EvalForward resource library. I then saw highlights about issues relating to COVID and signed up to become a member and began contributing myself. I read about the toolbox in an EvalForward Blog and then began considering whether we would pilot its use at the INGO I work for. We were able to get in direct contact with the FAO staff behind the toolbox to see if we could become a regional partner because they had listed their emails on the blog. EvalForward enabled that institutional cooperation. In practice, it was easier to discover the toolbox through EvalForward than it would have been through FAO's website. Also, the national FAO office is really small now and not as close to the research and development departments that are conducting statistical and monitoring work as it needs to be. Hence the value of finding the FAO toolbox through EvalForward.
9. There was also an EvalForward webinar about the FAO toolbox that was useful in helping to clarify some questions we had and, in the context of the COVID lockdown, seeing the FAO staff's faces really helped to get a sense of who they were. Hearing the questions posed by other members during the webinar revealed information we hadn't considered ourselves but which was relevant to our pilot. EvalForward was very proactive in getting all members to participate during the webinar.
10. The project we are piloting the FAO toolbox with had earlier been getting requests from the project donor for data on livelihood changes. So the toolbox appeared at the right time and was useful in responding to that demand for evidence. So, finding the FAO toolbox on EvalForward was relevant to M&E capacity needs in our country. It is a necessity to network with other M&E and agricultural development practitioners because the sector is not very developed nationally compared to M&E of political or social issues. I tend to share useful resources from EvalForward with my INGO colleagues and other organizations and networks nationally.
11. More generally, through EvalForward I am able to network with other M&E professionals in agricultural development – it brings members closer together. I find opportunities to share my views with other members and get their reactions. I also get recommendations for webinars to attend and documents to read. EvalForward is the main networking space for M&E professionals in agricultural development, with other networks being focused on different audiences (e.g. EvalYouth doesn't focus on food security, agriculture and rural development).
12. Because of my contributions, other members have contacted me, including on LinkedIn as my profile on EvalForward mentions my profile there. EvalForward gives out the impression of being open to anyone sharing ideas and receiving feedback. It feels very friendly and is always working to share helpful innovations. I am very glad to be a part of it. I also participated in EvalForward fora in 2021 on tools to assess the COVID pandemic and in 2022 on innovations in M&E tools. Both experiences were amazing.

13. As an instigator of an EvalWeek event supported by EvalForward and as a co-speaker, I have also seen changes for the other speakers. They get the opportunity to share their deep experience with others and as a result, also improve their networks through email and LinkedIn connections that arose.
14. As a member of EvalForward, I have seen the membership has grown quite organically and many more members are now from Africa and Asia than from Latin America or my own country. I would like to see EvalForward promoted more to Latin American Agricultural Development M&E practitioners, so we get more of their experience being shared. I think EvalForward could collaborate with the FAO Regional Office for Latin America's M&E focal point. A regional event could be organized on EvalForward, maybe centered around a book launch or similar opportunity.

## **Respondent 2**

15. Yes, EvalForward's statement partly reflects my experience. At an individual level, EvalForward has built some capacity for me, but it's hard to know the exact contribution as I get knowledge from a lot of sources. For example, Better Evaluation, the European Evaluation Association, the American Evaluation Association, Blue Marble and Google Search. As a consultant, I explore many networks, articles and grey literature sources to discover knowledge. The quality of knowledge on EvalForward though is high.
16. Being a member has enabled me to contribute my views to the Food Security Monitoring discussion in 2021 and to discussions on using Participatory M&E Tools. The email-based discussion list is my primary way of engaging with EvalForward. It is the easiest channel for me to see what others are discussing and interesting questions are posted that are relevant to my profession and sector. The contrasting and diverse opinions are highly valuable. I appreciate the way the information comes directly to me. By contrast, the newsletter is more formal and the website is more passive.
17. With twenty years of professional M&E experience, I understand many technical tools and If I need a new one I know how to explore the wide online literature. But I also need to test what I already know and EvalForward is valuable and relevant in supporting this because of the diverse discussions. EvalForward also helps to keep me up to date with emerging trends in M&E in the sector.
18. In June 2022 I was in Denmark for the European Evaluation Society conference and met other members of EvalForward. We had EvalForward stickers that helped us identify each other among the other participants at the conference. Others talked positively about their experience of EvalForward and how nice it was to be a member. There is a positive social vibe/dimension to EvalForward as well as the technical aspects. That is important.
19. Looking forward, nationally we need to increase support young and emerging evaluators as there is no clear route for them to join or stay in the profession. In our National Community of Professional Evaluators, we have organized training for young and emerging evaluators, but they often move on to other careers if they can't get hired. It would be good if EvalForward could advocate for more internship opportunities for young and emerging evaluators at a national level. This could be in organizations or within programmes, including through links to the Rome Based Agencies. This would be complementary to what EvalForward is already doing.

### Respondent 3

20. I agree with the statement of how EvalForward aims to contribute to change, but acknowledge that my experience is international rather than of M&E capacity in one nation. Deep specialism in M&E for agriculture is generally lacking and EvalForward providing insights and sharing member views raises awareness, including among the commissioners of evaluation. Commissioners can be unrealistic about the kinds of methods that can be used in the sector as compared to the health sector, for example.
21. I have had two positive experiences running webinars on EvalForward. In October 2021 I ran a webinar on the evaluation of a donor-funded agriculture project. The webinar shared an innovative evaluation tool we had developed. I asked a colleague from the donor side to co-present with me. We were also joined by a staff member from a related agriculture team. We got good questions from other members and this helped us to further refine the tool. The donors to the project encouraged us to share our innovations widely and so EvalForward was an ideal platform. EvalForward has a wider international audience than an alternative EU-focused platform we could have collaborated with. EvalForward was also more open to my suggestions for webinar topics and more flexible to collaborate with as a speaker than the other platform. The webinar idea began from meeting the facilitator when they presented EvalForward at an event and encouraged people to join. This personal connection encouraged me to post to EvalForward as I had received a good impression about it, especially compared to other evaluation networks that can seem less open. After I had contributed to a couple of discussions, the facilitator asked if I had any ideas for webinars and I proposed this one.
22. The second webinar emerged from an EvalForward discussion of a particular evaluation approach that helped to identify practical gaps in current practice, especially in the commissioning of that approach within evaluations. I helped to summarise the discussion and at the suggestion of EvalForward's facilitator, I and another discussant delivered a webinar to follow up the discussion. I got positive feedback from other members after the webinar, including on LinkedIn. There were 120 or so participants which is a high number in my experience. I have heard that knowledge shared through the two webinars has been positive for participants' work.
23. I believe that the changes coming from the webinars have been highly relevant to evaluation capacity needs. For example on the second webinar about evaluation approaches, I had previous experience as an evaluation team leader where issues with indicator design had come up through the evaluation. This becomes very sensitive with the donor of the project being evaluated. The webinar highlighted other people's experiences and confirmed the topic was a common problem for other projects and evaluators. It helped to highlight this as an important issue needing further discussion.
24. Whilst running these EvalForward webinars I was very busy with three projects. I had to prioritize and balance my time input. Reminders from the EvalForward facilitator on what needed doing for the webinars was very helpful. EvalForward's provision of online support, facilitation and translation was invaluable in letting me focus on the content of the webinar. The EvalForward team is very supportive. The facilitator has strong writing, communication and social media skills with an ability to put technical terms into user-friendly language.
25. Looking ahead I think EvalForward should organize a physical event on the side of an existing Agricultural Statistics Conference in Rome. This will help to strengthen social

familiarity among members, which will then strengthen capacity building and collaboration. The event could include some training workshops on trending M&E topics with speakers and member contributions.

#### **Respondent 4**

26. I agree with the statement about how EvalForward supports change. It helps peer learning of individuals and, as a member of an NGO and the National Evaluation Association, I can say it is positive for the evaluation community as a whole. EvalForward has helped to bring national evaluators together in this country that weren't all aware of each other before. I have personally learned a lot from international and national evaluator's experience through EvalForward. In terms of government ministries, it is hard to say, but together we do slowly influence other organizations.
27. A positive change I experienced is learning about evaluation methods, in particular Rapid Assessment. This helped our NGO to adopt the Rapid Assessment tool and this led us to identify when we were actually off-track toward achieving our project's impact during COVID. Within six months this enabled us to correct project activities by additionally helping girls to access education in a remote region. I came across the Rapid Assessment tool when it was shared in an EvalForward webinar, with links given to the documents available from WFP and other organizations. Participating in the webinar helped to identify what documents were most relevant to our NGO and project. I was originally made aware of the webinar through the EvalForward E-Newsletter. I find the newsletter easy as it comes straight to my inbox and then I can directly access the EvalForward website.
28. To realize this change I worked with an external evaluator on deploying the Rapid Assessment tool. We sub-selected and adapted the questions provided in the tool's spreadsheet. The original set was too thorough and needed to be fitted to our context, which was rather different. The tool envisaged a humanitarian crisis with displaced people, but in our project context people were still in their homes.
29. The Rapid Assessment tool was hard to use during COVID as we had to evaluate over the phone and not all beneficiaries own a personal phone. So when beneficiaries had to borrow another person's phone this may have impacted the quality of their response if the phone owner was present. More widely, our national evaluators typically do not look into details of gender equality. The Rapid Assessment tool led our NGO to ask more about girls' experiences than we might have otherwise. EvalForward is a good influence.
30. EvalForward responds to my needs. For example, the TOC Review discussion and webinar were asking a very key question and it was nice to see it discussed from different international and organizational perspectives. The chat exchange within such webinars is an important dimension.
31. I have also seen positive changes for other members. For example, the president of our National Evaluation Association has told me they benefit. The Association got more exposure to people outside of the RFE network (of which it is a part) by sharing on EvalForward. More people got to hear about the Association and its National Conference
32. In future, I think EvalForward could offer to help review official evaluations to assess the gender equality strength of the methods used. I also believe that the independence of EvalForward is important to maintain, especially the topics that it discusses and who can

be members. I trust the Rome Based Agencies to sustain its independence. EvalForward should no longer be seen as an experiment and the Founding Agencies should put their budget and decision-making onto a sustainable basis.

### **Respondent 5**

33. I largely agree with the statement about how EvalForward contributes to change, especially in relation to building the capacity of individual members. Regarding national institutions and systems, I would say perhaps a 50/50 agreement, but it is hard to say from my personal experience.
34. In my role as MEL Adviser for an INGO last year I benefited from access to guidelines on evaluation of Climate Smart and Regenerative Agriculture (Climate-Smart Agriculture Farm Sustainability Assessment Framework). I was responsible for commissioning evaluations of an agriculture project and found these FAO guidelines very helpful. I referred to the guidelines very early on in the MEL planning stage and when writing the evaluation TORs. Later the wider Evaluation Reference Group referred to the guidelines when quality assuring data collection tools set out in the Evaluation Inception Report.
35. A few other events contributed to this positive change. I participated in our National M&E Week at the same time and the Director of Planning from the Ministry of Planning mentioned evaluation of Climate Smart Agriculture. I also heard reference to Climate Smart Agriculture evaluation when I virtually attended the African Evaluation Association Conference. Earlier, when I was MEL Adviser at the INGO, I had come across MEL guidelines on Agriculture and Food Security from donors like USAID, SIDA, AGRA, and the Dutch. Reflecting on that broad guidance, I saw the Climate Smart and Regenerative Agriculture evaluation guidelines were more specific and it was clear that it was a key issue of interest to people.
36. I tend to cross-check with other sources before using a resource, but for the Climate Smart and Regenerative Agriculture materials, because I can see it was authored by FAO I did not. I followed the link on EvalForward to the FAO website and there found additional materials. EvalForward doesn't have everything, but it does flag who to link up with.
37. Technically I found the FAO materials very relevant, almost 95 percent, to our capacity needs. The materials were good quality and even given my 15 years of MEL experience, still added to my knowledge of innovative approaches. It wasn't just confirming my existing knowledge but provoking me to learn more and discover other underlying materials.
38. There are many steps from awareness to the use of knowledge like the FAO materials. Sometimes I see something on EvalForward Twitter that leads to a blog that I read, and sometimes I download related documents (e.g. an infographic) or view a YouTube video. Sometimes I enter via the DGroups Email ListServe. I regularly visit the website to browse the blogs and search for materials, often following alerts in the E-Newsletter. I find the Discussion Forum really helpful to hear the views of members and learn through my engagement with other members. Sometimes the discussions give examples and links that are also useful.
39. I also initiated an EvalForward discussion on supporting the use of evaluation findings through Good Report Structuring and produced a related blog. INGO colleagues of mine found that useful and referenced the blog in evaluation TORs they produced. I have also

found helpful materials on emerging topics like Complexity Aware Evaluation, Outcome Harvesting, Outcome Mapping and Contribution Analysis from EvalForward.

40. I have some suggestions for EvalForward. Firstly, the topics of localizing evaluation and of community-led development have become more prominent lately. So guidance on how to evaluate community-led agricultural development would be welcome. There is a big gap in evaluation capacity at decentralized levels and so a focus on agriculture and local evaluation would be welcome. The materials available are currently quite general from a sectoral perspective. Secondly, could EvalForward have thematic teams/groups of members as quite broad membership as a whole? People could sign up to these groups in the way you can as part of the American and European Evaluation Associations. As a group, EvalForward is quite mature now and so it's a good time to analyze what topics are of most interest and form sub-groups. Maybe there could be three member volunteers to lead each group? Finally, it would be interesting to know the geographic share of members and if it is low in some regions, we should encourage more members to join from there through an outreach strategy.

### **Respondent 6**

41. An example of change occurred for me while I was organizing our fifth National Evaluation Week. I shared the conference topics on EvalForward and the President of the National Evaluation Association of a neighboring country contacted me after getting my email from the EvalForward Facilitator. I invited them to run a panel and speak, supported by access to UNDP funding for their travel and attendance. For me, this was the first time I had been contacted in this way and I was pleased we found a way to collaborate. His attendance helped to make the week more dynamic. They brought an external perspective and experience from UNDP. Our government would like our National Evaluation Association to be more proactive, raise its own funds, and be self-organizing and publish rather than expecting the government to do it all. The added dynamism advanced that agenda.
42. Another example was in 2019 when I was able, through EvalForward, to connect with national colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture that I had not met before even though we are in the same country. I was organizing a roundtable at the Réseau Francophone de l'Évaluation (RFE) conference being held in our country that year. One Ministry of Agriculture colleague was already an EvalForward member and the facilitator encouraged me to contact them. I visited them in person, and we collaborated on delivering the round table. We shared our national experience of institutionalizing evaluation and how the Ministry of Agriculture was using evidence in policymaking. EvalForward was able to sponsor one of the ministry colleagues to attend the RFE conference. Since then we have continued to collaborate on other studies and reports.
43. The last example of change relates to a blog I wrote on EvalForward to share my experience of institutionalizing evaluation in government and then transferring to a monitoring role. I learned that ministers and presidents are much more interested in monitoring evidence because it is timelier. These decision-makers are elected and have a short mandate, so they want evidence updated daily – not from evaluations in three months or several years. In response to the blog I received a lot of interest, it generated debates on EvalForward DGroups, and we ran a related webinar. It was a real benefit to share my experience widely. A very good capacity development experience



44. For my capacity development needs, I have got what I expected from EvalForward – outside perspectives that help me judge if my work is in line with international standards. This gives me confidence that I am on the right track and that if I make mistakes, I have access to others' experiences to sharpen my approach. My ambition with EvalForward, to expand my professional network, to find consultancy opportunities and speak at a conference is being achieved. I will be speaking on a topic I blogged about on EvalForward as a sponsored participant soon. This will further extend my network. Interacting with other EvalForward members speaking English has helped improve my language skills. Other colleagues, I know who don't read English value the good translation support on EvalForward.
45. I am involved in other networks, but EvalForward is very dynamic compared to some others and it is a South-South capacity development network which I value. The regularity of the exchanges on EvalForward around a monthly topic with a summary at the end is useful. Even if I don't participate in every debate, I follow the discussion.
46. Looking ahead I would suggest the idea of an EvalForward book capturing members' experiences. Members could share writing chapters. I have already participated in something similar on the M&E collaboration platform for Southern Africa - Twende Mbele.

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