Independent Review of EvalForward Community of Practice

Final report

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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations and acronyms

CoP — community of practice

FAO — Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

IFAD — International Fund for Agricultural Development

M&E — monitoring and evaluation

MEL — monitoring, evaluation and learning

NECD — National Evaluation Capacity Development

TOC — theory of change

WFP — World Food Programme

Executive summary

Overview of EvalForward community of practice

EvalForward is a community of practice on Evaluation for Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development. Its purpose is to "Improve national capacities in conducting or using evaluations related to agriculture, rural development and food security through the establishment of an international network (built around an interactive online platform) open to evaluators, development practitioners, policymakers and researchers across national institutions to share evaluative information and knowledge on food security-related interventions"(EvalForward 2018 Strategy).

Independent Review

The purpose of the Independent Review (hereinafter the Review) is to draw lessons from the four years of operation of EvalForward (2018-2022) to evaluate its appropriateness and usefulness for its members and to identify areas where adaption is needed to improve results. (EvalForward 2022 Independent Review TORs).

Findings on relevance

1. **EvalForward activities and content respond to most of the needs identified in the 2017 Needs Assessment which informed the 2018 Strategy design** *(e.g. preferred ways of learning, topics for discussion and content, languages for reading and discussion, devices to access online services, developing country demographics).*

2. **EvalForward activities are partially appropriate to meet its stated purpose of improving national capacities to conduct or use evaluations related to Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development** *(e.g. at a national level, mostly relevant to individual capacity strengthening through peer learning and less relevant to building the capacity of organizations and systems).*

Findings on effectiveness and impact

3. **EvalForward has made a strong contribution to facilitating knowledge sharing to enhance capacities in Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development evaluation** *(e.g. members engaging to share their knowledge and experience, facilitation of members' learning and networking, curation of existing knowledge)* **and a medium contribution to facilitate knowledge generation** *(e.g. blogs, producing notes of community discussions and webinars).*

4. **EvalForward has made a strong-to-moderately positive contribution to most dimensions of change in members' non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practices assessed by the Review** *(e.g. deepening understanding of problems and challenges, contextualization of knowledge, understanding how to put knowledge into action, incentives and motivation to use evaluation and monitoring to make change).*

5. **EvalForward activities that already amplify and spread impact could be prioritized for scaling** *(e.g. collaborative activities with external partners, expanded the collection of technical documents)* **and ideas for new activities could be prioritized for testing** *(e.g. national chapters, showcasing reports from nationally led evaluations).*

Findings on coherence

6. **EvalForward has struck a good balance between pursuing its objective of responsiveness to the policy aspirations of the founding agencies** *(e.g. facilitates member influence over which topics get discussed and highlights messages of founding agencies).*

7. **EvalForward is well-positioned in relation to existing initiatives in the evaluation community with a distinctive focus on the Evaluation for Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development and on evaluation practitioners in developing countries** *(e.g. opportunities to deepen collaboration with other initiatives).*

8. **Synergy and complementarity with relevant initiatives in the evaluation community have been consistently established at the level of individual activities as envisaged in the EvalForward 2018 Strategy** *(e.g. collaboration on specialized webinars and events has established credibility with peers but opportunities to deepen have not been realized).*

Findings on efficiency, management and sustainability

9. **The set-up of EvalForward enables efficient delivery of its mandate** *(e.g. an external project within an agency, light touch governance, professional consultant facilitator and incentives for member contributions).*

10. **There are insufficient mechanisms in place to ensure sustainable funding of and support to EvalForward by the founding agencies or potential external partners** *(e.g. EvalForward is included in mainstream budgets and plans, but its governance is underperforming in briefing and outreach).*

11. **Existing governance and management arrangements have sustained EvalForward over four years but there are suggestions to refresh and adapt them** *(e.g. half-yearly updates to the EvalForward Executive Group, and alternates at the P3 [mid-professional] level on the EvalForward Steering Committee).*

12. **EvalForward promotes access to its services for three major language groups by translating content. It also collects basic gender data on members who establish profiles on the website** *(e.g. discussions and webinars with translation or replication in English, French and Spanish).*

Conclusions

13. **EvalForward delivers on most of the areas prioritized by its 2018 Strategy** *(e.g. sharing of tools and methods, facilitating online discussions and running webinars, responsive and relevant, uses a community of practice approach well).*

14. **EvalForward is an effective and appreciated facilitator of knowledge sharing and peer learning** *(e.g. improves members' soft skills, is complementary to formal training and can now strengthen its delivery approach).*

15. **EvalForward has a distinctive niche in evaluation capacity strengthening but needs a reinvestment of political capital to strengthen its position** *(e.g. has strengths, does not duplicate or oversupply, but needs help to get to a tipping point to realize its greater potential).*

16. **EvalForward operates efficiently and with a hybrid set-up that bridges the founding agencies' systems and rules but faces risks inherent in its lean and novel set-up** *(e.g. empowered consultants deliver, founding agencies' culture, systems and rules are bridged, but in-kind support to management and governance is insufficient at times).*

Recommendations

17. **Continue providing an EvalForward community of practice** with a professional facilitator, proactive online services, management, governance oversight and in-kind support from staff in the founding agencies *(e.g. through a strategy refresh, leveraging its theory of change [TOC] and right sizing its purpose).*

18. **Realize a major partnership opportunity** to strengthen and sustain EvalForward's distinctive contribution to change *(e.g. through a senior governance offer and ask the Global Evaluation Initiative that builds on comparative strengths).*

19. **Strengthen the delivery approach** of EvalForward to amplify and spread its contribution to change *(e.g. through online optimization, refreshing topics, volunteers and marketing to under-represented Spanish-speaking developing country evaluators).*

20. **Invest in a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system** for EvalForward to improve accountability to governors, learning for managers and peers and sustain value-for-money *(e.g. through a logframe linked to its TOC and using the Review as the baseline).*

21. **Update governance and management arrangements** for EvalForward to strengthen engagement and broaden participation *(e.g. expanded annual report/agenda for the executive group, P3 alternates on the Steering Committee and collaborator and member representative governance seats).*

1.

Review design and implementation

The **purpose** of the Review is to draw lessons following more than four-years of the EvalForward community of practice (CoP)'s operation (2018-2022) based on an assessment of its achievements to date. Its intended **uses** are to confirm the appropriateness and usefulness of this CoP for its members and/or identify areas where it needs to adapt to improve results in the future. The Review presents findings, draws conclusions and, as appropriate makes recommendations on future directions, investments and partnerships to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the CoP. It also presents a simplified theory of change (TOC) for EvalForward and shares lessons.

The immediate **intended users** of the Review are the evaluation offices of the founding agencies – FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), WFP (World Food Programme) and CGIAR – who are jointly supporting and funding the initiative. This includes the Directors of Evaluation at FAO, IFAD, WFP and the CGIAR Independent Evaluation and Advisory Service (IAES)**1** who constitute the executive group for EvalForward. The review will also serve as a learning exercise for other CoPs facilitated by these agencies and others.

The Review has been **commissioned** by the Steering Committee of EvalForward as set out in the terms of reference (**Annex 1**) and conducted independently by Carl Jackson (Director, Westhill Knowledge) who was responsible for delivery against the evaluation team leader role.

The **Evaluation Questions** explored by the review as set out in the inception note (**Annex 2**) are presented in Table 1 along with related evaluation criteria.

The **approach** to the Review combines the most relevant elements of theory-based and participatory approaches (**Annex 2**). To maximize the strengths and minimize the weakness of both approaches the Review:

■ worked with the Steering Committee to reveal the **implicit TOC** for EvalForward so this could be reflected upon with peer organizations outside of the founding agencies;
■ facilitated the participation of the Steering Committee to help **verify** preliminary findings and to co-create recommendations and lessons;

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1 CGIAR- Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IAE) at the time of EvalForward launch; CGIAR Advisory Service Secretariat (CAS) from 2019-2022, Independent Advisory and evaluation Service (IAES) at the time of publishing this report.

■ created a purposive sample[2] of the most active users to develop **Change Stories** to complement findings already revealed by core methods.

The core **methods** used for evidence collection, aggregation, validation and analysis to support this overall approach are set out in Table 2.

The **stakeholders** of EvalForward can be put into five groups as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Evaluation Questions by criterion

No.	Evaluation Question by criterion
	Criterion: Relevance
1	To what extent are EvalForward activities and contents responding to the needs of its members?
2	To what extent are activities appropriate to meet the purpose of EvalForward in improving national capacities to conduct or use evaluations related to agriculture, rural development and food security?
	Criterion: Coherence
3	How successfully has EvalForward balanced pursuit of its objective with responsiveness to the aspirations and guidance of the evaluation offices of the supporting agencies?
4	Is EvalForward positioned coherently with existing initiatives in the evaluation community?
5	Has EvalForward been able to establish synergies and complementarities with relevant initiatives in the evaluation community with direct benefits to users or wider strategic value?
	Criterion: Efficiency
6	To what extent does the current set-up of EvalForward allow efficient delivery of its mandate?
	Criteria: Effectiveness and Impact
7	To what extent and how has EvalForward contributed to facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge generation on evaluation in order to enhance evaluation capacities in the Food Security, Agricultural and Rural Development (FSARD) sectors?
8	To what extent has EvalForward peer learning contributed to changes in members' non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practices?
9	What is and could be done to amplify or spread the likely impacts of EvalForward?
	Criteria: Management / Sustainability
10	Are there mechanisms in place to ensure sustainable funding of and support to the CoP by the supporting agencies and potential external partners?
11	Are governance and management arrangements appropriate to facilitate engagement and ownership by the supporting agencies and potential external partners?
12	How does EvalForward promote and monitor access to and the relevance of its services for different genders and those groups at risk of marginalization within the intended user group?[a]

Note[a]: An example of relevance for different genders is resources on interview protocols for evaluations consulting girls and women. An example of access related to groups at risk of marginalization is translation of materials into multiple languages.

Source: FAO, CGIAR/IAES, IFAD, and WFP. 2023. Independent Review of EvalForward Community of Practice. Terms of Reference. Rome.

2 A purposive sample is one where individuals are selected because each matches criteria considered useful for the evaluation's purpose. This can be contrasted to a randomized sample where individuals are selected blind from within the population to be understood.

Table 2. **Review methods by evaluation approach and evidence type**

Method	Theory based	Participatory	Qual	Quant
Collection				
Theory of Change Reveal and Reflection	✓		✓	
Member Survey [a]		✓	✓	✓
Document Review	✓		✓	✓
Platform Review	✓		✓	
Google, Twitter, YouTube, DGroup Analytics	✓			✓
Change story interviews		✓	✓	
Steering committee and executive group Key Informant Interviews (KII)[b]		✓	✓	
Aggregation				
Pre-formatted Google sheets (text)	✓	✓	✓	
Google sheets and charts (numbers)	✓	✓		✓
Google slides (objects and relationships)	✓	✓	✓	
Validation				
Preliminary findings workshop		✓	✓	✓
Analysis				
Triangulation by method at Review question level	✓		✓	✓
Complementarity by methods at Review question level	✓		✓	✓
Application of standard for judging performance or descriptive synthesis at Review question level	✓		✓	✓
Reference to propositions in theory of change	✓		✓	✓
Lessons and recommendations co-creation workshop		✓	✓	✓

Note[a]: Triangulation across methods in the analysis stage has been used to offset the positive bias risk associated with a self-selecting population of respondents created through the Member Survey method (see Annex 3).

Note[b]: The key informant interview data (individual anonymised transcripts) were analysed in a pre-formatted table by first clustering correlating responses to identify emerging themes. These were ranked according to the number of responses per theme. A synthetic overall finding was written based on the highest ranked themes and any significant outliers.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 1. **EvalForward stakeholders**
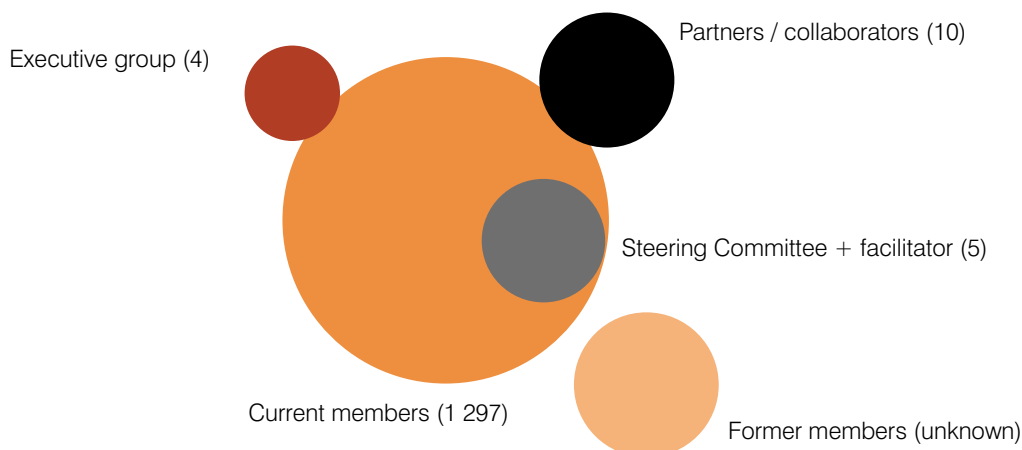
Source: Author's own elaboration.

For the Review these stakeholder groups were **sampled** as follows:
- Current members: total population included in Member Survey; purposive sample of seven of the most active members invited to participate in the Change Story interviews;
- Former members: total population excluded as no records held.
- Steering Committee and facilitator: total population included in the Theory of Change Reveal and Reflect, interviews, validation workshop, recommendations and lessons co-creation workshop. Equal representation of the four founding agencies. Steering Committee will also be included by default in Member Survey as all current members.
- Executive group: total population included in key informant interviews. Equal representation of the four founding agencies; may also be included by default in Member Survey if current members.
- Partners and collaborators: purposive sample of eight of the most engaged partners and collaborators to the Theory of Change Reveal and Reflection interviews; may be included by default in Member Survey if current members.

The Review **commenced** on 24 May 2022 and the final report is scheduled to be approved before the end of February 2023.

The **evidence base** collected and analysed by the Review consists of:
- Key informant interviews x 10 Steering Committee and executive group members;
- TOC Reflection interviews x 5 peer organizations outside of the founding agencies;
- Member Survey x 149 respondents from 44 countries (**Annex 3**);
- Document Review x 13 items;
- Membership statistics from website profiles as of August 2022;
- Website use metrics x 4 years, plus content and functionality assessments (**Annex 4**);
- E-Newsletter, DGroups, Twitter and YouTube metrics from start of accounts (**Annex 4**);
- Financial reports – budgets and actuals x 3 full years;
- Change Stories x 6 EvalForward members.[3]

Some **limitations** were encountered in the Review including:
- delayed availability of some key stakeholders to participate in key informant interviews. This was addressed initially by oversampling and later by updating and re-analysing evidence for this method;
- variable availability of Steering Committee members to comment on Review draft tools and products. This was addressed by creating additional feedback loops to ensure full oversight and guidance were maintained.

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[3] Change Story evidence was not directly included in the analysis – see **Section 4 - Findings.**

2.

Overview of EvalForward

The purpose of EvalForward set out in its 2018 strategy is to "*improve national capacities in conducting or using evaluations related to Agriculture, Rural Development and Food Security* through the establishment of an international network (built around an interactive online platform) open to evaluators, development practitioners, policymakers and researchers across national institutions to share evaluative information and knowledge on food security-related interventions" (FAO, 2018). The evaluation offices of FAO, IFAD, WFP and CGIAR joined forces to create and launch EvalForward in 2018.

EvalForward stands for **Eval**uation for **F**ood security, **A**griculture and **R**ural **D**evelopment. EvalForward is **the only long-term formal collaboration** to date among all four of the evaluation offices of the founding agencies. It responds to a need to reinforce national evaluation capacities for reporting requirements on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in support of the related General Assembly Resolution A/RES/69/237 (2014).

EvalForward operates in a **context** where "Agricultural and food security systems are undergoing significant transformation driven by population growth, rising demand for food and changes in nutrition patterns, as well as the effects of climate change." Evaluating these transformations is recognized as highly complex but the evidence generated can help make "food production, supply and consumption more resilient, adaptive and efficient" (FAO, 2018).[4]
Although the landscape of international, regional and national initiatives in evaluation is diverse, EvalForward was designed to address what the founding agencies saw as a **gap** in supporting developing country evaluators and evaluation users working in the Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development sectors.

EvalForward adopted a **community of practice (CoP) approach to capacity development**. The CoP approach has been extensively documented, particularly in the private sector (Wenger, 2002). A CoP is a group of individuals with a **shared interest**. They interact regularly to learn from one another how to better accomplish the activities they are interested in. For example, pediatric nurses across different hospitals regularly share their knowledge, experience and challenges to improve the treatment of a difficult children's disease. CoP is the technical name given to this kind

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[4]   Quoted in EvalForward Independent Review TORs.

of forum for informal learning where peers come together from across different teams, businesses or organizations, with a common desire to improve their practices.

Outside of work, these kinds of forums might be called clubs, circles or associations. Similarly, a CoP is driven and sustained by its members, with light-touch governance and management from sponsors. This informality and passion are key ingredients that enable CoPs to achieve learning outcomes that are complementary to and ahead of formal training. Whereas training courses focus on what is well-documented and share this with those who are inexperienced, communities of practice excel in sharing cutting-edge and undocumented "tacit" knowledge among those who have experience and want to maintain their skills or apply them to a new challenge.

In a community of practice, every member is both a teacher and a student, both an expert and a novice. This means that **trust** is the other key ingredient. To have these dual roles, members must be brave enough to share both their doubts and their wisdom. This happens when members trust each other to be respectful and supportive in their words and actions. Building relationships based on trust is also the kind of work done within a community of practice. It involves sharing information about ourselves and the story of how we came to be who we are. To gain the benefits of membership, not everyone has to be vocal all the time. It is common for a majority of members at any one time to be in "reading" rather than "contributing" mode until something novel ignites their desire to speak up.

The EvalForward CoP has a public-facing **structure** (Figure 2) built as an interactive online platform, with targeted panels at face-to-face events.

Figure 2. **EvalForward structure**

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The EvalForward **Website** (www.evalforward.org) operates as a hub coordinating the elements and has sections covering:

- **topic discussions** raised by members which are mirrored on the DGroups Email ListServe;[5]
- **blogs** written by members and guest authors;
- **webinars** on thematic topics delivered by members and guest speakers which are more recently shared as YouTube videos;
- **a calendar** of external events, EvalForward panels and other face-to-face events
- **a resource library** of guidance, tools, methods and best practices;
- **member profiles** with professional information supporting networking for peer learning and consulting opportunities.

An email newsletter (hereinafter the E-Newsletter) and Twitter channel proactively market the above EvalForward services and highlight new content. A snapshot of EvalForward activity over the last four years is given in Table 3 (for a full list of activities, see **Annex 12**).

Table 3. **EvalForward activities 2018-2022**

Activity	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Discussions	7	11	11	7	7	43
Webinars		1	8	13	9	31
Blogs	7	18	25	17	15	82
Participation in events	2	5			2	9
Publications			1	1	1	3

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The **day-to-day delivery** of EvalForward is led by a consultant facilitator (0.9 full-time-equivalent) who benefits from the supervision and decision support of a **manager** (a light touch responsibility within the role of an Evaluation Officer in the Office of Evaluation at FAO). Other essential services are bought in from external suppliers (e.g. webmaster, translator, editor, graphic designer). The **governance** of EvalForward is provided for by a Steering Committee and executive group. The Steering Committee is responsible for budget management, quality, monitoring and partnerships. It is formed by four staff from the founding agencies. The executive group is responsible for decision-making, performance oversight, leadership and external advocacy. It is formed by the four Directors of Evaluation of the founding agencies. FAO acts as the managing agency hosting the facilitator and providing an administrative base for the CoP.

The annual **financial resources** that enable EvalForward's delivery are contributed in varying shares by the founding agencies according to their plans and budgets. In the current financial year (2022/23) this is forecasted to be USD 143 000. In-kind resources including founding agency staff time are also provided. This supports management, governance and knowledge contributions to blogs, webinars, panels, etc.

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5 An Email ListServe is a software that receives and re-distributes email messages within a group of participants registered with the service to support group discussions. An Email ListServe provides similar functionality to app based tools like WhatsApp.

Target members of EvalForward were set out in the 2018 EvalForward Strategy (FAO, 2018) as:

- Core participants: evaluation practitioners whose regular professional activities involve evaluation.
- Secondary participants: government officials, academia and development professionals who are not regularly or actively engaged in evaluation work.

As of August 2022, there were 1 297 members with profiles on the EvalForward website. This is an underestimate of the total number of **users**, as a member profile is not required to access the website or other online platforms. There would be duplication from adding up the user numbers below (so this is not attempted), but the figures in Table 4 give a sense of the higher levels of engagement achieved, all of which are on a positive upward trend over time. Further information about users' geographies is available in **Annex 11**.

Table 4. Snapshot of EvalForward user metrics

Online platform	Users June 2021	Users June 2022
Website users[a]	2 371	↑ 3 400
DGroups Email ListServe members	986	↑ 1 241
E-Newsletter subscribers	1 606	↑ 1 781
Twitter followers	66	↑ 639

Note[a]:The term "website users" mean the number of computers (i.e. desktops, laptops, tablets, mobile phones) with a unique IP address that accessed the website. This is commonly used as a proxy for use of the website by a human. By default these metrics exclude access by computer bots that crawl website pages to index content (e.g. search engines).

Source: Author's own elaboration.

A snapshot of the roles that members of EvalForward hold can be taken from the Member Survey (Figure 3 and **Annex 3**) which showed that most respondents report being involved in conducting or using evaluation (around 70 percent and 55 percent respectively). Almost 50 percent of respondents report taking part in conducting monitoring, with some 40 percent using monitoring. Those not involved in conducting or using evaluation or monitoring account for less than 10 percent of respondents. The survey allowed members to respond by selecting one or more of the role options.

The website profiles also provide a snapshot of the sectors where members of EvalForward are employed (Figure 4). Around 24 percent are employed in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 21 percent in international cooperation organizations, 15 percent in academia and research organizations, 12 percent are independent consultants, 10 percent are in the public sector and 9 percent are in the private sector.

Figure 3. Member Survey respondent roles

Role in Evaluation and / or Monitoring
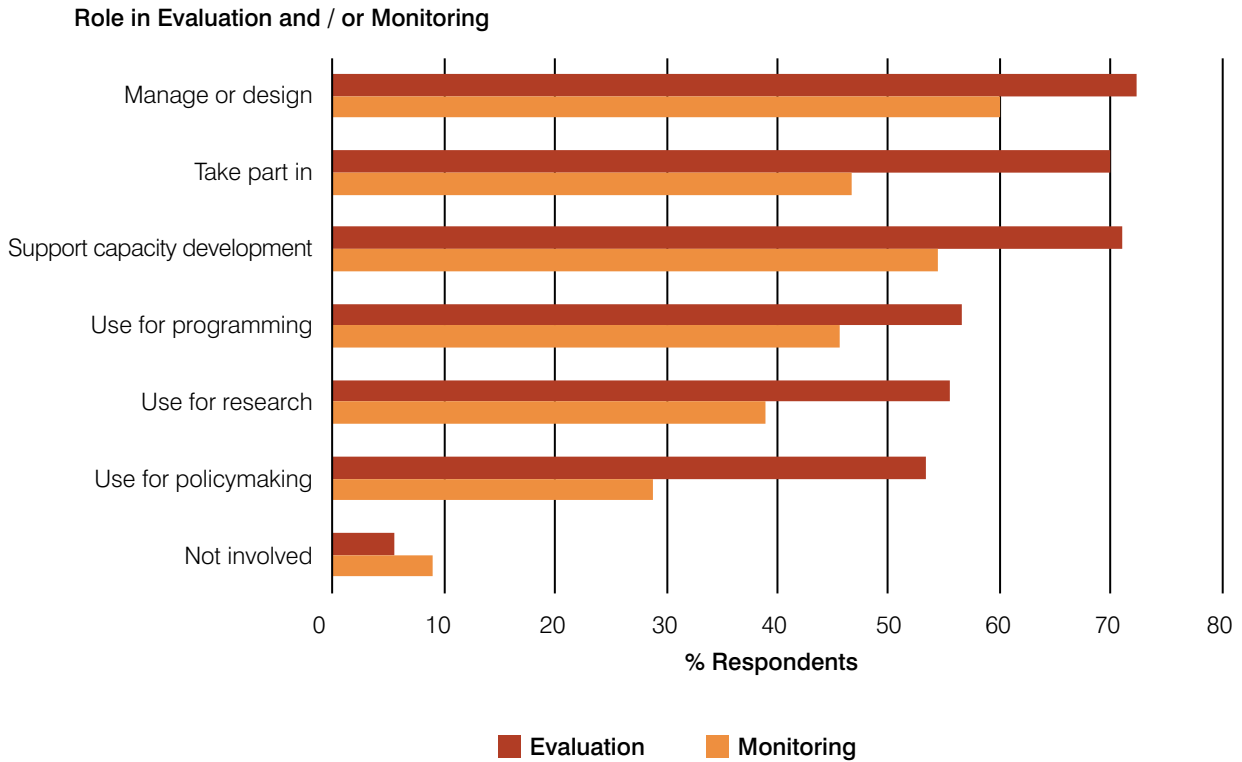
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 4. Employment sector of EvalForward members with profiles

Employment Sector

Source: Author's own elaboration.

3.
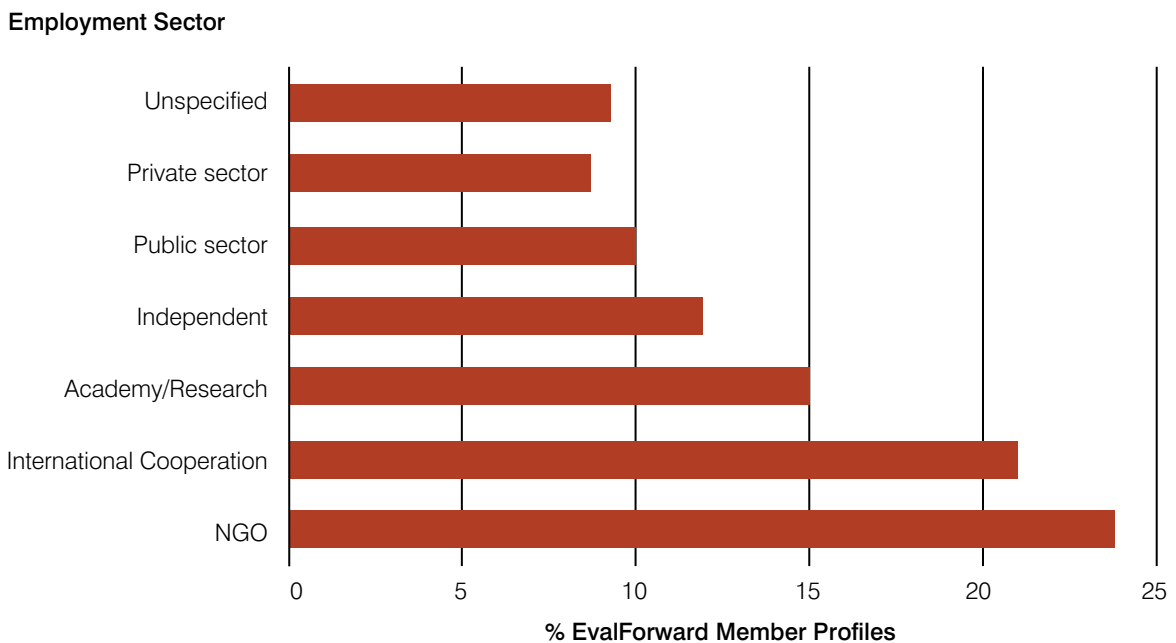
Simplified theory of change

The Review's Theory of Change Reveal and Reflect method produced an implicit TOC for EvalForward. This was first co-created with the Steering Committee and facilitator and then discussed with partners and collaborators to reflect on its logic and sufficiency (**Annex 6**). As EvalForward has never had an explicit TOC before, and internal and external stakeholders found it useful, the Review was asked to take the TOC a step further to produce a simplified version for communication that also reflects the impact of recommendations made in **Section 6**. The key to the TOC and the simplified TOC diagram follow (Figure 5, Figure 6).

Figure 5. Key to EvalForward TOC

Causal links

▢ Individual Capacities Change Pathway

▢ Enabling Environment Change Pathway

▢ Founder / Partner Secondary Benefits

Assumptions

1 There are opportunities to sharpen learning through practice and / or access to formal training elsewhere

2 There is funding for evaluation capacities

Notes

A Change in part. for those who have been blog authors

B Change in part. for those who have been webinar speakers

C Includes appreciation / role of evaluation at the Research for Development Nexus

Rec 2 Related Review Recommendation

Figure 6. EvalForward Simplified TOC and recommendations
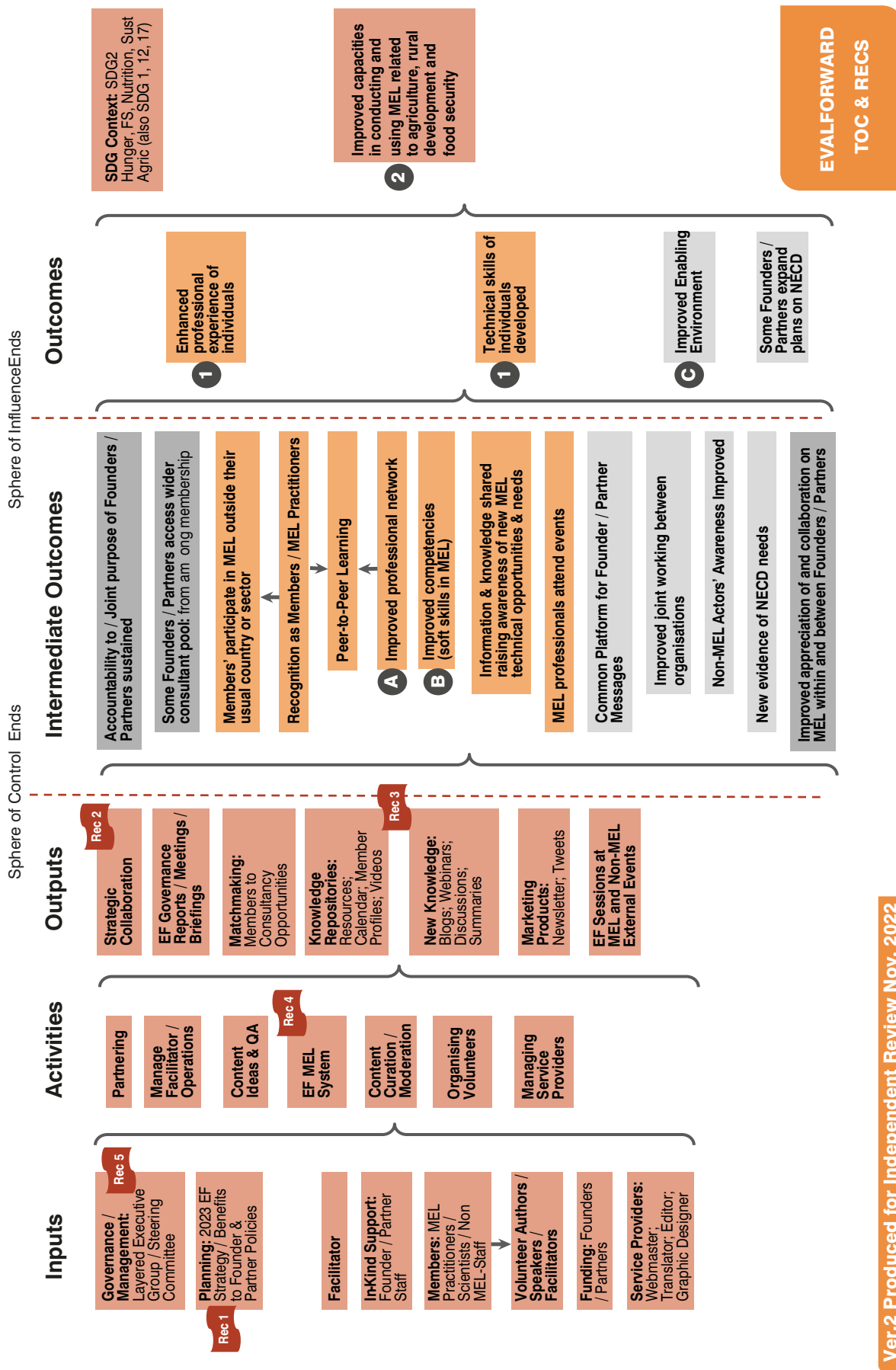
Source: Author's elaboration based on co-creation and consultation.

4.
Findings

This section presents **findings** grouped around related evaluation criteria for a flowing narrative. Findings in order of Evaluation Question are also available as an annex (see footnote references by Finding to **Annex 7**).

Preliminary findings were presented and discussed at validation meetings held with the EvalForward Steering Committee on 8 September and 6 October 2022. Access to the analytical tables supporting the preliminary findings, with evidence presented by collection method, synthesized by Evaluation Question, was also made available to the Steering Committee to support validation. The Steering Committee discussion and written feedback served to verify and enrich the findings.

The findings are based on an analysis of the evidence base set out in **Section 2**, excluding Change Stories. The Change Stories were not used within the analysis itself because the interviewees were purposively sampled from among the most active members and so present a positive bias risk if used otherwise (**Annex 5**). Where excerpts from the Change Stories help to illustrate findings, these are provided.

The Evaluation Matrix (**Annex 2**) sets out the Evaluation Questions for which it would be possible to give a Red Amber Green **(RAG) Rating** and those for which only a descriptive synthesis could be provided. For findings with a RAG Rating, Green corresponds to a good level of performance, Amber to a moderate level of performance and Red to a poor level of performance.

4.1 Relevance

Findings and conclusions in the area of relevance focus on the responsiveness and appropriateness of EvalForward.

Finding 1: RAG Rating Green

EvalForward activities and content respond to most of the needs identified in the 2017 Needs Assessment[6] which informed the 2018 Strategy design.[7] This rating is supported by a consensus across the stakeholders consulted.

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6 All the needs identified were: sharing of tools, methods, best practices; facilitation of events, conferences, partnerships; online discussions and peer-to-peer support; sharing job vacancies and training opportunities; sharing evaluation reports, syntheses and formal e-learning courses; webinars.
7 Related Evaluation Question 1 – see **Annex 7,** Q1.

EvalForward has been most responsive to the needs of members in terms of their preferred ways of learning, topics for discussion and content, languages for reading and discussion and devices to access online services. The Member Survey's finding that EvalForward is seen as "Very Responsive" or "Responsive" to members' needs by a majority of respondents is supported by analysis of the website and other EvalForward online platforms. This shows that the majority of priority services identified in the Needs Assessment (2017) are being delivered: sharing of tools, methods and best practices; facilitation of events, conferences and partnerships; online discussions and peer-to-peer support; sharing job vacancies and training opportunities. Analysis of the categories and rates at which content is added to the website also shows this pattern of service delivery. Website metrics also show that 68 percent use the internet in English, 15 percent in French and 9 percent in Spanish, which matches the three languages supported by EvalForward translation and shows EvalForward's responsiveness to the language and device needs of its members. The same metrics show that 68 percent access the website from computers with increasing mobile and tablet use. EvalForward has responded by optimizing its website for use by both types of devices. The Document Review further confirms the findings from the member survey and website and other online platforms analysis. It illustrates a management approach that adapts to changes in member needs, for example by diversifying the types of online platforms used, but also shows less responsiveness to the need for content on monitoring and for training in evaluation.

That the majority of members are from least developed or middle-income countries suggests EvalForward is responding well to the needs of this demographic as intended in the 2018 Strategy. Analysis of website user profiles shows that most users reside in least developed or middle-income countries and that the number of user profiles representing staff employed by the founding agencies is small at some 15 percent. The percentage of founding agency staff employed in the Rome headquarters is even smaller at 7 percent. It is reasonable to state that EvalForward has this membership demographic because it is primarily responding to the needs of users in middle-income and least developed countries.

EvalForward has been less responsive to members' needs for access to evaluation reports, formal training, resources related to monitoring and a larger number of webinars and discussions than is currently offered by EvalForward. The Member Survey found that two services identified in the Needs Assessment (2017) but largely not responded to are sharing evaluation reports, syntheses and formal e-learning courses and webinars. Analysis of the categories and rates at which content is added to the website show lower levels of content than needed for evaluation reports, e-learning, webinars and discussions.

Although the number of subscribers and followers of the EvalForward E-Newsletter, DGroup, Twitter and YouTube accounts are still increasing, it is noted that the relative level of engagement through these channels by individuals has peaked or may be declining. Analysis of the metrics for other online platforms used by EvalForward suggests a note of caution within the positive trend of increasing subscribers and followers. The E-Newsletter's subscribers are increasing but there is a relative decline in the number of times individuals open it or click links within it. DGroup subscribers continue to increase but with a significant relative decline in contributions to the platform. This may be because the EvalForward website now competes with the DGroup as a place for members to contribute their views. Twitter followers show an increasing trend, with Impressions and Mentions[8] by users keeping pace with the increase, possibly due to the

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8 For Twitter an "impression" occurs when somebody's computer scrolls over or points at a Tweet. A "mention" occurs when another Twitter account includes the @Eval_Forward account name in a Tweet.

increasing rate of tweets by EvalForward. The YouTube channel has an average of 72 views per month (i.e. times any video on the channel is played) and 67 subscribers.[9]

> **Change Story excerpts**
>
> 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.
>
> 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 of capacity development.

Finding 2: RAG Rating Amber

EvalForward activities are partially appropriate to meet its stated purpose of improving national capacities to conduct or use evaluations related to Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development.[10] This rating reflects the mixed opinion across stakeholders consulted.

EvalForward is seen as mostly relevant to individual capacity strengthening at the national level. Conversely, at this level, EvalForward is seen as less relevant to building the capacity of organizations and systems. Here, EvalForward's purpose may be both too ambitious and the related implicit TOC logic underdeveloped. The key informant interviews found that, at a national level, EvalForward is relevant to individual capacity building but less so for building the capacity of organizations and systems. At the same time, EvalForward is seen as being overambitious and lacking a formal training offer at this level. This finding is supported by those from the TOC Reflection. The logic for the related Enabling Environment Change Pathway for organizations and systems is found to be lacking in detail and innovation, though it is recognized that external evidence for how to affect change is less well established here than for individual capacity building.

Most EvalForward services are seen as appropriate to purpose. The Member Survey found that most EvalForward services are appropriate for improving capacity, especially discussions, DGroups, webinars and E-newsletter. This is supported by analysis of website use showing the most popular sections are "Home", "Discussion", "Blog", "Webinar", "Events" and "Resources". That "Discussions" comes out strongly confirms that EvalForward is succeeding in deploying a core community of practice approach of peer-to-peer learning. There are mixed opinions on how appropriate YouTube and Twitter are for EvalForward's purpose, which may partly reflect the degree of familiarity of some Member Survey respondents with these platforms.

The increasing trend for the majority of file downloads from EvalForward to be of technical documents is a positive one in line with EvalForward's capacity-strengthening purpose. In the beginning, the most downloaded documents were event brochures, suggesting that users increasingly see EvalForward as a trusted source of technical material.

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9 The facilitator has to date decided only to use YouTube to host uploaded EvalForward videos and has not promoted it as a channel in its own right.
10 Related Evaluation Question 2 – see **Annex 7**, Q2

That members from public sector organizations are declining as a proportion of total members probably reflects the evidence that EvalForward is seen as less relevant to building the capacity of organizations and systems at a national level. Government officials were identified as intended users in the 2018 Strategy, but only at a secondary level. Analysis of website member profiles shows that the number of users who say they work in the public sector has declined from 23 percent of respondents at the time of the 2017 Needs Assessment to 2 percent in 2022. More evidence on this trend is needed if this group is still seen as a significant although secondary set of users, as stated in the 2018 Strategy.

Change Story excerpts

Deep specialism in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for agriculture is generally lacking and EvalForward providing insights and sharing member views raises awareness, including among the commissioners of evaluation.

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.

4.2 Effectiveness and impact

Findings and conclusions in the area of effectiveness and impact focus on EvalForward's contribution to knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, changes in members' non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practices, and what can be done to amplify and spread these and other impacts.

Finding 3: RAG Rating Green/Amber

EvalForward has made a strong contribution to facilitating knowledge sharing to enhance capacities in Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development (FSARD) evaluation.[11] This Green rating is supported by consensus across the stakeholders consulted. **EvalForward has made a medium contribution to facilitate knowledge generation to enhance capacities in FSARD evaluation.** This Amber rating reflects the mixed opinion across stakeholders consulted.

Knowledge-sharing contributions include members engaging to share their knowledge and experience with a strong trend of increasing website use, facilitation of members' learning and networking, and curation of existing knowledge with many suggestions from members of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) techniques, tools and topics they want to share. The Member Survey found that EvalForward has made a strong contribution to facilitating members sharing their knowledge and experience and to facilitating their learning. EvalForward is also found to have made a medium to strong contribution to gathering and organizing existing knowledge, highlighting professional opportunities, building professional culture and systems and raising the profile of evidence availability and use. These findings are supported by the Document Review where value is found to have been added through facilitating knowledge sharing, member engagement, professional networking, individual capacity strengthening and raising international awareness. This is further supported by an analysis of website use that found

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11 Related Evaluation Question 7 – see **Annex 7**, Q7.

an increasing trend in the numbers of users and unique visits to the website, with each user visiting more often over time.

Analysis of the website shows that Blogs are the second most popular section and are the primary activity where knowledge generation is facilitated (e.g. by encouraging members to capture and communicate their experience and know-how). The other way knowledge generation is facilitated is through making and uploading "Notes of Discussions and Webinars", but downloads of these files only account for a small percentage of the total. EvalForward has produced three original publications in four years. Analysis of website use found that unique visits to the "Blogs" section account for on average 15 percent of unique visits per quarter. This analysis also found that downloads of files from the website related to knowledge generated by EvalForward (primarily 'Notes of Discussions and Webinars') account for on average 5 percent of the total per quarter. Analysis of website content supports this mixed finding, with EvalForward having published one original research report in collaboration with FAO and two briefing notes to date.

Change Story excerpts

I was responsible for commissioning evaluations of an agriculture project and found the FAO Climate-Smart Agriculture Farm Sustainability Assessment Framework 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.

An EvalForward webinar helped our NGO to adopt the Rapid Assessment tool, and this led us to identify when we were actually off-track towards achieving our project's impact during COVID-19. 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.

Finding 4:

EvalForward has made a strong to moderately positive contribution to most of the dimensions of change[12] in members' non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practices assessed by the Review.[13]

The Member Survey found a strong to moderate positive contribution is being made to five of the seven dimensions of change in members' non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practices assessed by the Review: a deeper understanding of evaluation and monitoring problems and challenges; acquiring new technical knowledge about evaluation and monitoring;

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12 The seven dimensions of change assessed draw on Fisher, C. 2022. Peer Learning for Climate Action. In *Direct Results of Peer Learning Processes* pp.19-21. Bonn. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. They were chosen because, in the absence of any having been set by EvalForward, they provided an evidence based set of relevant indicators to assess changes to members non-technical knowledge, attitudes and practice. The seven dimensions are: deeper understanding of evaluation and monitoring problems and challenges (e.g. exploring issues as they arise in particular contexts, not in the abstract); acquiring new technical knowledge about evaluation and monitoring (e.g. receiving recommendations to access trusted and relevant sources); contextualization of evaluation and monitoring knowledge (e.g. making sense of and adapting methods to specific needs); understanding of how to put evaluation and monitoring knowledge into action (e.g. cultural and political aspects of implementing MEL); incentives and motivation to use evaluation and monitoring to make change (e.g. gaining inspiration and confidence from other evaluators' examples and values); interpersonal skills conducting or using evaluations and monitoring (e.g. soft skills in convening groups, engaging informants, influencing evaluation users), and quality of professional relationships (e.g. building a support network to sound out ideas or undertake joint projects).
13 Related Evaluation Question 8 – see **Annex 7**, Q8.

contextualization of evaluation and monitoring knowledge; understanding of how to put evaluation and monitoring knowledge into action; and incentives and motivation to use evaluation and monitoring to make a change. The Document Review also found that EvalForward's support of incentives and motivation is seen in enabling members to make a difference to others, increase their professional visibility, and gain recognition from their employer. Two other dimensions of change reviewed were interpersonal skills conducting or using evaluations and monitoring, and the quality of professional relationships. In these areas, while the Member Survey found a strong or moderately positive contribution was being made, a significant minority said the contribution was weak or negligible.

> **Change Story excerpt**
>
> 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.

Finding 5:

Suggestions on what is and could be done to amplify or spread the likely impacts of EvalForward arose from key informant interviews, the Member Survey, Document Review, Website Review and review of other online platforms. The suggestions fall into two areas – existing activities and ideas for new activities.[14]

Suggestions for EvalForward activities that already amplify and spread impact and which could be prioritized for scaling include collaborative activities with external partners, the technical documents collection, webinars, events, social media marketing, website functionality and structure, E-newsletter subscription guidance and links to the website on DGroups and YouTube.

Suggestions for new activities that could be prioritized for testing include producing community knowledge products, national chapters, showcasing reports from nationally led evaluations, certified online training, mentoring, exchange visits, prize competitions, volunteer facilitators, a LinkedIn group, non-evaluator speakers and authors, incentivizing Southern Think Tank engagement, an E-newsletter archive and guiding new members on how to participate in EvalForward.

> **Change Story excerpt**
>
> Nationally, we need to increase support to 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 national level.

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14 Related Evaluation Question 9 – see **Annex 7**, Q9.

4.3 Coherence

Findings and conclusions in the area of coherence focus on EvalForward balancing demand, and on positioning, synergy and collaboration with other evaluation initiatives.

Finding 6:

EvalForward has struck a good balance between pursuing its objective with responsiveness to the policy aspirations of the founding agencies.[15]

Key informant interviews found that EvalForward has both supported members to influence which topics are covered, for example in webinars, blogs and email discussions, and enabled the founding agencies to highlight messages aligned with their policy interests. This task has been made easier by the relatively similar purposes and policies around evaluation capacity development among the founding agencies. EvalForward has enabled the founding agencies to highlight their work and their messages by coming together on a common platform that enabled a facilitated exchange, for example, the UN Food Systems Summit Independent Dialogue and the Dialogue on the Role of Evaluation for Climate Action. The Document Review found that EvalForward sits squarely within FAO's Office of Evaluation strategy commitments (2021) to national monitoring and evaluation capacity development and knowledge management, and FAO's evaluation workplan's (2021) explicit commitment to host and support EvalForward and to step-up engagement in National Evaluation Capacity Development (NECD) including through EvalForward until 2025. EvalForward is part of IFAD's work programme and budget through 2024 with an explicit mention under communication and knowledge management.

Finding 7:

EvalForward is well positioned in relation to existing initiatives in the evaluation community with a distinctive focus on the Evaluation for Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development and evaluation practitioners in developing countries.[16]

The Member Survey finding that EvalForward is very well or well positioned among 26 other evaluation initiatives that Members participate in is supported by key informant interview opinion that the evaluation focus on food security, agriculture and rural development and evaluation practitioners in developing countries is distinctive. These interviews also suggest two opportunities to further improve EvalForward's position. First, through collaboration with a philanthropic foundation[17] or the Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI) on formal training and other areas. Second, through having more content curated around themes that EvalForward's governors consider to be strategically important within the wider NECD context.

EvalForward's implicit TOC needs to recognize that members' access to formal training in evaluation would be provided by other initiatives. The TOC Reflection found that EvalForward's programme logic is missing an assumption about whether members have access to formal

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15 Related Evaluation Question 3 – see **Annex 7**, Q3.
16 Related Evaluation Question 4 – see **Annex 7**, Q4.
17 Philanthropic foundations are private charitable bodies like Lego, Ikea, Gates, Rockefeller – note that the mention of specific foundations does not imply that these have been endorsed or recommended by FAO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

training elsewhere that complements peer learning on EvalForward. This finding is supported by the Document Review that shows that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) are the main multilateral actors involved in formal training for NECD and that the GEI is seen as presenting an opportunity for greater NECD collaboration.

Change Story excerpts

EvalForward is the main networking space for M&E professionals in agricultural development, with other networks being focused on different audiences.

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.

Finding 8:

Synergy and complementarity with relevant initiatives in the evaluation community have been consistently established at the level of individual activities as envisaged in the 2018 Strategy (e.g. more specialized webinars and events).[18]

Key informant interviews show that EvalForward has established credibility with relevant initiatives, and this presents opportunities for deeper collaboration. However, a lack of investment by EvalForward's governance mechanisms has not yet brought opportunities for institutional, financial or strategic collaboration to maturity. This finding is supported by the Document Review that shows how collaboration envisaged in the 2018 Strategy has been reported annually at the activity level, but that formal collaboration initiatives have started but not been completed.

An updated strategy and TOC for external communication would be welcomed by external partners. The TOC Reflection found that existing collaborating organizations want to continue in this mode and have very positive impressions of EvalForward as a capable and trustworthy partner. The TOC Reflection further found that if the EvalForward TOC could explicitly show areas for future collaboration in a simplified version for external communication this could lead to deeper collaboration.

4.4 Efficiency, management and sustainability

Findings and conclusions in the area of efficiency, management and sustainability focus on the operational set-up, funding, support, governance, management and accessibility and relevance of EvalForward.

Finding 9:

The set-up of EvalForward enables efficient delivery of its mandate.[19]

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18 Related Evaluation Question 5 – see **Annex 7**, Q5.
19 Related Evaluation Question 6 – see **Annex 7**, Q6.

The perception that EvalForward is efficiently delivering its mandate is largely attributed as being due to EvalForward being delivered like an external project from within an agency (FAO), with light touch governance, the recruitment of a professional consultant facilitator and incentives for member contributions. These positive attributes originate in the good design and adaptive set-up of EvalForward. The Key informant interviews found that the light touch governance arrangements and set-up of EvalForward as an external project with delivery by consultants have lowered administrative and management costs. The interviews also found that the recruitment of someone to the position of consultant facilitator with appropriate skills and experience to run a CoP has become an asset to efficiency and value for money. In some other CoPs, these roles can be handed to non-professionals who struggle to deliver efficiently. However, the consultant facilitator being an asset is a significant risk to EvalForward's operation as there are no plans for succession should the post holder no longer be available.

These findings are supported by the Document Review that found that governance and incentives to members were both designed with efficiency in mind. The Steering Committee was designed to have oversight of the consultant facilitator to monitor their value for money. Incentives were designed so that members who increased their profile through contributions to EvalForward might be alerted to consulting opportunities with the founding agencies. The key informant interviews found that some existing ideas to strengthen efficiency had stalled due to governance not reaching a consensus, for example delegation of some facilitation tasks to members and rotating the role of facilitator through the founding agencies to strengthen relationships.

The Document Review highlighted other risks arising from the rudimentary monitoring system, which lacks indicators, and increasing financial variance between budgets and actual expenditure increasing. The Financial Reports Review however showed that some of this variance is due to COVID-19 disrupting planned activities.

Change Story excerpt

Whilst preparing to speak at two 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.

Finding 10:

There are insufficient mechanisms in place to ensure sustainable funding of and support to EvalForward by the founding agencies or potential external partners.[20]

Existing mechanisms for sustainable funding are limited and there are other sustainability risks. The key informant interviews found that EvalForward is included in the multi-year horizon regular budgets and workplan of most founding agencies, but subject to annual confirmation based on wider priorities and EvalForward performance. The interviews found few other mechanisms and several risks. Without additional mechanisms there are sustainability risks should EvalForward not

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20 Related Evaluation Question 10 – see **Annex 7**, Q10.

effectively brief incoming senior decision-makers in the founding agencies. Also, EvalForward's light touch governance has insufficient capacity to sustain outreach to potential partners, as was envisaged it would do in the 2018 Strategy. Finally, the small scale of EvalForward's budget may make it inefficient for potential co-funders to become involved. Key informant interviews also found that bundling EvalForward with other FAO projects for co-funding was explored in the past but not thought to be practical.

> **Change Story excerpts**
>
> The independence of EvalForward is important to maintain, especially the topics that it discusses and who can be members. I trust the founding agencies to sustain its independence. EvalForward should no longer be seen as an experiment and the founding agencies should put its budget and decision-making on to a sustainable basis.

Finding 11:

Existing governance and management arrangements have sustained EvalForward over four years. Suggestions on ways to refresh and adapt governance to contemporary engagement and ownership needs fall into five areas. Action on some of the suggestions would imply additional staff resources in-kind from the agencies for governance and management.[21]

The Document Review found that EvalForward governance and management might be underdelivering on the fundraising, promotion and internal burden-sharing objectives set out in the 2018 Strategy. The 2018 Strategy also envisaged that external partners and a core group of active members would become involved in governance but neither has happened. Key informant interviews found there are suggestions to improve governance and management. These include, first, introducing a half-yearly update and an expanded annual report and agenda for the executive group, that covers EvalForward performance, horizon scan, strategic direction and content priorities, for example. Second, offering individual briefings and the experience of being an EvalForward member to the executive group. Third, adding P3 (mid-professional) level founding member staff alternates to the Steering Committee to share the load and help it return to a quarterly cycle. Fourth, introducing layered governance categories, for example founding agency, funder, collaborator and core group member. Fifth, increasing administrative support for widened participation in governance.

Finding 12:

EvalForward promotes access to its services from three major language groups by translating content. It also collects basic gender data on members who establish profiles on the website.[22]

No other actions are taken to promote or monitor access to and the relevance of its service for different genders and those groups at risk of marginalization within the intended user group. Whilst seen as an important topic, it is said to require clarity, strategic thinking and advocacy to take forward, including before more data are collected from members. The key informant interviews found that EvalForward already provides translation of its services into English, French

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21   Related Evaluation Question 11 – see **Annex 7**, Q11.
22   Related Evaluation Question 12 – see **Annex 7**, Q12.

and Spanish and collects basic data on the gender of members through a website profile question. No other at-risk groups or targets or criteria for services are set. The interviews also found that this is considered an important topic, but one that has so far not been considered by EvalForward governance.

Suggestions on how to take gender equity and social inclusion forward were gathered in the Member Survey and fall into four areas. Providing training, more webinars and more discussions on gender equality and social inclusion, including collaboration with other communities and networks specialized in the topic. Increasing participation by different genders and those at risk of marginalization in all aspects of EvalForward, including as speakers and discussants, through proactive outreach and provision of space to these groups. Improving the resource library collection and categorization of relevant documents, for example Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) evaluation and monitoring methods and evaluation reports exploring GESI. Increasing the use of social media to reach out to those at risk of marginalization.

5.

Conclusions

Informed by the findings set out in **Section 4**, this Section draws four **conclusions** about the EvalForward CoP after four years of operation (2018-2022) based on an assessment of its achievements to date.

Conclusion 1:

EvalForward delivers on most of the areas prioritized by its 2018 Strategy.[23] In its strategy, EvalForward set out to primarily target evaluation practitioners in developing countries and, four years on, it is delivering for them in most of the areas of need it committed to supporting. It is both **responsive and relevant** to individual capacity building in conducting evaluations related to agriculture, rural development and food security. It **does what a community of practice should do and does it well** in terms of curated knowledge sharing and facilitated peer learning through open discussions, crowdsourced recommendations and networking. Within its means, it has been responsive to members' expressed needs and innovative in bringing new modes of interaction into the community such as webinars. It has shown it can be a **valuable asset** supporting technical knowledge transfer, adaptation and use such as M&E frameworks.

Where EvalForward has been less responsive and relevant, this has been in two areas where the **2018 Strategy flagged caution** from the outset. In that document, non-evaluators in government, academia and development agencies were secondary targets and the demand for formal training was only to be met under an ideal funding scenario two and a half times the level achieved to date. Building the capacity of organizations and systems, alongside that of individual evaluators, is an implicit dimension of National Evaluation Capacity Development. However, it is not the dimension that EvalForward has been explicitly designed or funded to deliver upon.

EvalForward is making a strong contribution to changes that support the capacity-building purpose set in the 2018 Strategy. However, as with all programmes, in some areas of need, for example formal training, it assumes complementarity with other initiatives that are also making a leading contribution. The Review's work on revealing and reflecting on EvalForward's implicit theory of change has made this clear and **set the stage for a refreshed strategy**. In this strategy

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23 Conclusion 1: Related Findings 1 + 2

relative contributions and opportunities for a systematic collaboration with partner initiatives on NECD[24] can be explicit and realistic.

Conclusion 2:

EvalForward is an effective and appreciated facilitator of knowledge sharing and peer learning.[25] By design, a community of practice primarily shares knowledge by facilitating members to share their own, often undocumented, knowledge and experience, rather than primarily disseminating its reports. It does this by **getting members to network and engage** as peer learners and by **curating the best knowledge** products other organizations have to offer. EvalForward CoP has become an effective and appreciated facilitator of this kind of knowledge sharing and peer learning around technical aspects of evaluation. It is also contributing effectively to **improving members' soft skills**, attitudes and practices – the kinds of competencies and capabilities that enable evaluators to build stakeholder trust and influence intended users such as in presentations, discussions and written products. EvalForward's valuable contribution through knowledge sharing and peer learning is being made in ways that are **complimentary** to the formal training and self-guided learning evaluators might pursue elsewhere. EvalForward's founding agencies should continue enabling it to do so.

EvalForward has produced less than a handful of publications and this was not a 2018 Strategy commitment. However, where it does document knowledge generated in the CoP through blogs, discussion summaries and webinar notes, it should further amplify and spread their use. With four years of experience and multi-lingual coverage, **EvalForward can now strengthen its delivery approach** in this and other areas.

Conclusion 3:

EvalForward has a distinctive niche in evaluation capacity strengthening but needs a reinvestment of political capital to strengthen its position.[26] Similar evaluation initiatives and CoPs that support development exist at all levels, are both broad-based and thematic. Evaluators in developing countries should and do have a choice as to where and how they engage in capacity strengthening. The 2018 Strategy saw coherent positioning amongst existing evaluation initiatives as a dynamic process with opportunities for synergy and complementarity. By efficiently **filling a thematic gap in provision** around food security, agriculture and rural development with a CoP, EvalForward neither duplicates existing provision nor over-supplies in its distinctive niche. Users and other initiatives know what to expect from EvalForward *vis-à-vis* its strengths and offering. Notably, EvalForward has gained a favourable **reputation as a collaborator** amongst peers' initiatives in just four years, with opportunities to strengthen its position within grasp.

However, to realize these opportunities would take a coordinated reinvestment of political capital by the four founding agencies to **push the focus and outreach of EvalForward's governance** beyond a tipping point that is currently limiting EvalForward's greater potential. This reinvestment would be likely to pay dividends and be a low risk because EvalForward has already proven that it

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24 UN Evaluation Group defines National Evaluation Capacity Development as "*The process whereby state and non-state entities and individuals expand, reinforce and sustain national capacity to manage, produce and use evaluation.*"

25 Conclusion 2: Related Findings 3 + 4 + 5.

26 Conclusion 3: Related Findings 6 + 7 + 8.

can deliver **secondary benefits to the founding agencies.**[27] It has enabled them to find a shared platform for sharing key messages and generated considerable trust and respect among users and peer organizations who are also the founding agencies' stakeholders.

Conclusion 4:

EvalForward operates efficiently and with a hybrid set-up that bridges the founding agencies' systems and rules but faces risks inherent in its lean and novel set-up.[28] The most successful and sustainable communities of practice, for example, Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev), exhibit a strong element of self-direction and organic growth and by design cut across organizational structures and professional boundaries. This can pose a challenge for agencies that wish to create them, and many sponsored CoPs have faltered by being over-engineered or bureaucratic. Partly by design and partly out of necessity, EvalForward's operational set-up has largely overcome these challenges and come up with an efficient mode of delivery that still respects the organizational cultures of the four founding agencies. Similarly, EvalForward's financial, management and governance set-up is a largely successful hybrid that bridges the four agencies' internal systems and rules in a way that highlights **larger collaborative possibilities** for them.

However, the positive factors of efficient operation and hybrid set-up in EvalForward entail risks. To sustain the benefits of these factors, mitigation actions should be taken to decrease the likelihood of these risks leading to severe disruption or closure of the support EvalForward provides to MEL capacity strengthening. Efficient operations run very tight margins and can be less resilient to shocks as a result. EvalForward may have insufficient management capacity, that is, staff time, to ensure its operating procedures and systems are up-to-date, relevant and well-documented. As in the world of plant breeding, hybrid arrangements are difficult to reproduce and can lose their vigour if the generative conditions that produced them are not nurtured. EvalForward may have insufficient champions inside and outside the agencies who share its strategic vision and would appreciate synergies and complementarity. EvalForward has a good track record of promoting accessibility to three major language groups but has not gone any further with strategic thinking about promoting and monitoring access to and the relevance of its services to different genders and those groups at risk of marginalization within its intended user group.

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27 Secondary benefits means positive outcomes which are related to the purpose of EvalForward, but not directly sought.
28 Conclusion 4: Related Findings 9 + 10 + 11 + 12.

6.

Recommendations

Building on the conclusions set out in **Section 5**, this Section makes five **recommendations** for future direction, investments and partnerships to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of EvalForward. Sub-recommendations provide detailed suggestions for implementation.

Recommendation 1:

Continue providing an EvalForward community of practice with a professional facilitator, proactive online services, management, governance oversight and in-kind support from staff in the founding agencies.[29]

1.1 Continuation should be underpinned by a new needs assessment leading to a refreshed strategy. The needs assessment should include disaggregation by categories considered relevant to EvalForward, for example gender, MEL role, country - with economic status, and MEL employment sector. To capture most needs and avoid bias, the needs assessment should be conducted using a purposive sample by categories, with randomized sub-sampling within each category. Remote interviews using a structured quantitative questionnaire would be an appropriate method for data collection.

1.2 The refreshed strategy should focus on EvalForward's purpose on what it already does well, that is, knowledge sharing and peer learning for individual capacity strengthening of the overall MEL ecosystem for the Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development sector. The strategy should be explicit about how this purpose for EvalForward will support relevant named policy objectives and plans of the founding agencies, both individually and together, for example, by providing a common platform for external collaborative engagement on evaluation capacity strengthening.

1.3 A simple theory of change and logframe should form part of the strategy to guide, monitor and test its delivery, and communicate EvalForward's design to senior stakeholders.

1.4 Knowledge generation and organization as well as system-level capacity strengthening should only be pursued as a purpose through synergy and collaboration with external initiatives that are already better placed to deliver at this level. This should recognize the contribution that individual capacity building makes to the overall MEL ecosystem because of the flow of MEL professionals through different organizations and systems over their careers.

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29 Recommendation 1: Related Conclusions 1 + 2.

Recommendation 2:

Realize a major partnership opportunity to strengthen and sustain EvalForward's distinctive contribution to change.[30]

2.1 Building on the refreshed strategy (Rec.1), EvalForward should offer to share with a new partner its distinctive M&E for a Food Security, Agriculture and Rural Development user base, knowledge and reputation. EvalForward should ask a new partner to support members in developing countries to access formal training and internship opportunities, to empower Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), and to champion nationally lead evaluations. Such a partnership should be synergistic and complementary and build on comparative strengths to maintain EvalForward's niche and reputation.

2.2 The Global Evaluation Initiative's interest in collaboration with EvalForward should be reciprocated at a senior level through EvalForward governance.

Recommendation 3:

Strengthen the delivery approach of EvalForward to amplify and spread its contribution to change. Building on the new needs assessment and refreshed strategy (Rec.1) the following steps should be taken.[31]

3.1 Optimize existing online platforms. This should include improved website functionality (see **Annex 8** for options) and all channels having links to and from the website, consistent branding and acceptable behaviour criteria to safeguard public discussion.

3.2 Refresh knowledge topics by improving collection and categorization, including the in-demand topics of monitoring, gender equality and social inclusion, qualitative methods, data science, uptake by decision-makers and theory of change.

3.3 Document standard operating procedures for the consultant facilitator role succession, facilitation methods, management and governance of EvalForward, delegation to volunteers – with capacity building and efficiency benefits – and consultant facilitator role cover.

3.4 Prioritize a few activities to scale or test, for example, promoting EvalForward to prospective members in under-represented Spanish-speaking developing countries, showcasing reports from nationally led evaluations or more frequent webinars.

Recommendation 4:

Invest in a MEL system for EvalForward to improve accountability to governors, learning for managers and peers and to sustain value-for-money.[32]

4.1 The MEL system should operationalize the "to-be-refreshed" EvalForward strategy theory of change and logframe (Rec.1) and have appropriately disaggregated indicators, for example gender, intended user groups, geography and low-middle-high-income country status.

4.2 Qualitative evidence should be included, for instance through repeating the Change Stories and Member Survey to allow evidence generated in this Review to become a baseline.

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30 Recommendation 2: Related Conclusion 3.
31 Recommendation 3: Related Conclusions 2 + 4.
32 Recommendation 4: Related Conclusion 4.

Recommendation 5:

Update governance and management arrangements for EvalForward to strengthen engagement and broaden participation.[33]

5.1 This update should be underpinned by the new MEL system (Rec.4) to provide a half-yearly update, expanded annual report and agenda including performance, horizon scan, strategic direction and content priorities, and proactive briefings for governors in the executive group.

5.2 Management should be strengthened through a one-off investment of additional management staff time to put EvalForward's operating procedures and systems onto a sound footing.

5.3 Strengthen management by introducing alternates at the P3 (mid-professional) level within the Steering Committee, a six-monthly rotation of management responsibility across the four founding agencies to deepen ownership and succession planning for the facilitator and other roles.

5.4 Introduce layered governance categories, for example founding agency, funder, collaborator, core group volunteer, to create space for partners (Rec.2) and volunteers (Rec.5) should they be forthcoming.

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33 Recommendation 5: Related Conclusions 3 + 4.

7.

Lessons

Evidence from the Review has also generated a set of four lessons of a more general nature. These may support learning by other CoPs sponsored by the founding agencies or by other actors.

Lesson A:

A CoP can be a bridge that helps to span gaps in evaluation social networks. A CoP can zoom in and out to see a system at different scales on account of it being in a privileged position at the edge of many networks. For example, practitioners implementing evaluations and influential decision-makers who could use the evidence they generate, are often too busy to do so. Without a strong national evaluation association to bring them together, these actors do not meet or even become aware of one another even though they may be working in the same location. A CoP with access to, and agency in, relation to membership profiles can spot opportunities to introduce and motivate actors at national, regional or international levels around a shared task, for example delivering a panel discussion at an event. This facilitated convening builds social capital that can keep actors independently networking and collaborating for quite a time thereafter in evaluation implementation and use.

This lesson is likely to be most applicable in situations where Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation do not exist or have limited capacity, especially in engagement with non-evaluators. Limitations to this lesson are likely to arise when CoP membership profiles get out of date and in countries where identity politics limit convening opportunities among professionals, for example, when at a given moment in time independent consultants are predominantly from one particular ethnic or religious group and decision-makers who have entered government are from another.

Lesson B:

A CoP can become an invaluable asset to knowledge exchange, adaption and use of evaluation techniques. The open and trusted spaces a CoP can offer enable a technical resource such as a monitoring guide or an analytical tool to be shared with potential users in a participatory and focused way. For example, in a CoP-sponsored webinar with the technical authors, potential users can hear questions posed by other CoP members in different countries and with contrasting expertise. These questions and the answers to them may reveal information some CoP members would not have considered themselves but which is relevant to their context. Other CoP members

get to know and trust the technical authors by hearing about their backgrounds and motivations. In the CoP online discussion held several months after the webinar, CoP members find a space to come back and share experiences from early use. They see if they are on a similar path to other early adopters and maybe adjust course. They may inspire others to use the technique if they found it useful. From the other perspective, the technical authors connect with CoP members they did not know before, who become collaborators to help with a pilot. The feedback received helps to sharpen the guidelines and tools. The exposure helps the technical authors to be accountable and transparent in their work to real users, not just to funders or peer reviewers.

This lesson is likely to be most applicable in situations where the technical authors of a resource are interested in co-production and uptake and have been well-matched by the CoP facilitator to the learning interests of a significant sub-set of CoP members. Limitations to this lesson are likely to arise when evaluators have limited scope to test novel approaches such as in situations where evaluation commissioners have very prescriptive quality assurance systems for methodological design.

Lesson C:

Implanting a CoP secretariat as a multi-consultant project within one of the founding organizations can be more efficient and flexible than commonly used alternatives. In terms of management, finance and resource use, this hybrid arrangement works better than either pooled funding with an internal staffing model or an external project hosted by a separate delivery partner. For example, an empowered core team of consultants can get the job done without the imposition of the organizational routines of the sponsor. There is the flexibility to use simplified procurement to allow a group of funders to pay for discrete CoP consultancy costs such as web hosting, editing and facilitation. There is less of a tendency for the human resource to be fungible and reassigned to activities outside the CoP. There is also a connection to the everyday information flows of the sponsoring organizations by being part of their operational systems that is denied to an external delivery partner.

This lesson is likely to be most applicable in situations where the sponsoring organizations have experience with consultants working for them in a semi-staff mode and where the human and financial resources for the CoP are small enough in part or total to not raise employment or fiduciary risks. Limitations to the lesson are likely to arise when the sponsoring organizations are not able to provide sufficient management resources for oversight and sponsorship of the consultants' hybrid working arrangements.

Lesson D:

A CoP facilitator can aggregate individual member micro contributions and behaviours into a whole that amplifies and spreads their potential impact. Highly skilled CoP facilitators proactively scan the CoP horizon looking for weak signals of positive behaviour and gleaning snippets of tacit knowledge. For example, a new member setting up a profile or a longstanding member becoming vocal after a long pause triggers outreach by the facilitator. This engagement supports members to share some or more of their evaluation knowledge and experience, for example by writing a blog or starting a discussion topic. Comments on the blog start to snowball from the initial contribution and calls for a webinar are raised and met. The webinar attracts and engages a wide audience on the day and through sharing an online video recording via social media that is accessible in different time zones and as interest arises for different evaluators.

This lesson is likely to be most applicable in situations where there is a professional facilitator who focuses on one CoP for at least a year, so they feel highly motivated and can build-up a detailed understanding of and trusted relationships with members. Limitations to the lesson are likely to arise when the role of facilitator is split among multiple people who have other larger responsibilities or ambitions or when there is a rapid turnover in a dedicated facilitator role due to poor management or inadequate terms and conditions, or both.

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Appendix: Stakeholders consulted

Twenty-two stakeholders directly participated in interviews and discussions for the Review. Their views are anonymized in the report, but their insights and suggestions are gratefully acknowledged.

Name	Role and organization
Allison Smith	Director, Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service, CGIAR
Andrea Cook	Director of Evaluation, WFP
Anna Maria Augustyn	International MEL Consultant, Poland
Aurelie Larmoyer	Senior Evaluation Officer, WFP
Clemencia Cosentino	Director Evaluation, OED, FAO
Dugan Fraser	Program Manager, Global Evaluation Initiative
Elias Segla	M&E Specialist Senior Researcher, President's Office, Benin
Fabrizio Felloni	Deputy Director of Evaluation, IFAD
Florencia Tateossian	Evaluation Specialist, UN Women
Fumiko Nakai	Senior Evaluation Officer, IFAD
Genny Bonomi	Evaluation Officer, OED, FAO
Gordon Wanzare	MEL Expert, Kenya
Juan Jose Portillo	Senior Operations Officer Independent Evaluation Office, Global Environment Facility
Malac Kabir	Research Assistant Independent Evaluation Office Global Environment Facility
Malika Bounfour	President, Association Ayur for Development of Rural Women, Morocco
Megan Kennedy	Head Evaluation Unit, Development Cooperation Directorate, OECD.
Nayeli Almanza	M&E Sustainable Landscapes Specialist, Mexico
Olivier Cossée	Senior Evaluation Officer, OED, FAO
Rachel Sauvinet Bedouin	Senior Evaluation Officer, OED, FAO
Ram Khanal	Executive Board Member, Community of Evaluators, Nepal
Renata Mirulla	EvalForward Facilitator, OED, FAO Consultant
Svetlana Negroustoueva	Evaluation Lead, Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service, CGIAR

Annexes

Annex 1. Terms of reference
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5172en /cc5172en.pdf

Annex 2. Inception note
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5098en/cc5098en.pdf

Annex 3. Member survey evidence
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5173en/cc5173en.pdf

Annex 4. Online platforms evidence
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5174en/cc5174en.pdf

Annex 5. Change stories
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5175en/cc5175en.pdf

Annex 6. Implicit theory of change
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5176en/cc5176en.pdf

Annex 7. Findings by evaluation question
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5177en/cc5177en.pdf

Annex 8. Website functionality options
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5178en/cc5178en.pdf

Annex 9. Note of validation workshop
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5179en/cc5179en.pdf

Annex 10. Matrix of feedback from steering group and changes to report
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5180en/cc5180en.pdf

Annex 11. EvalForward member locations and quantities
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5181en/cc5181en.pdf

Annex 12. EvalForward activity 2018–2022
https://www.fao.org/3/cc5182en/cc5182en.pdf

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