

COVID-19 EVALUATION IN THE TIME OF COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing risks and changing environments related to UNODC's mandated areas of work, most notably in corruption and organized crime. This means that the need for effective evaluation of UNODC's programmes and projects is as important as ever. The Independent Evaluation Section has responded to the crisis by investing in resources to guide evaluators and programme/project managers, testing innovative approaches to data collection, and, sharing lessons with evaluation functions across the UN system.

As Ms. Katharina Kayser, Chief, Independent Evaluation Section (IES), put it, "during these unprecedented times, we are reminded of the critical role of evidence in policy and programming. It becomes clear that understanding whether we are doing the right thing, at the right time and in the right way is critical. The need for evaluation-based knowledge to inform decision making is even more imperative during this crisis".

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However, the question is how to conduct evaluations given all the changes the pandemic has brought. Ms. Katherine Aston, Deputy Chief, IES, makes it clear that "there are multiple challenges to conducting evaluations and undertaking evaluative activities now, including the inability for field missions."

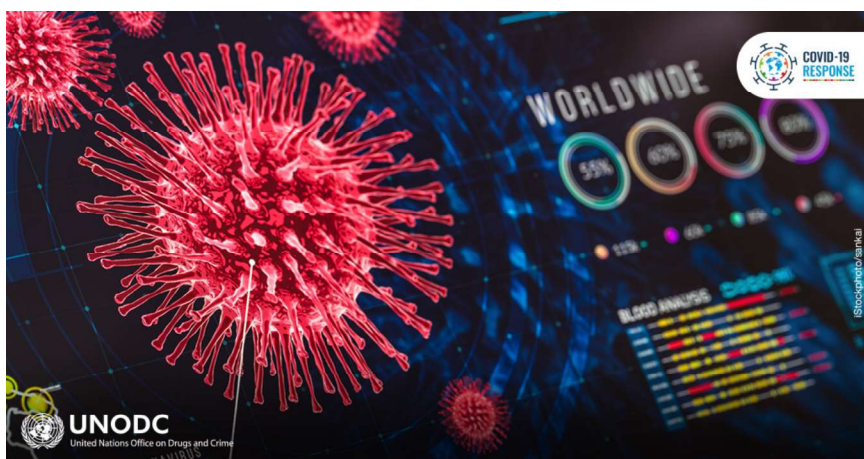
Numerous countries have established restrictions on international travel, quarantines and physical distancing measures. So, like evaluation functions in many other organizations, IES had to adapt its approaches.

When the pandemic hit, IES had a large number of evaluations underway. But the field work required of those was no longer an option. It was clear that new procedures, protocols, methods and systems would be needed to ensure continued evaluation work, most importantly the collection of data.

As part of IES' immediate response, a [1-page Brief](#) in English and Spanish was prepared together with a dedicated [Guidance Note](#) for programme/project managers and evaluators on how to adjust to COVID-19 in ongoing and planned evaluations. Several alternative evaluative activities were initiated, and UNODC staff have appreciated the various new options for collecting evaluative evidence.

In June, IES held two webinars to give UNODC staff the chance to discuss the Guidance Note, ask questions and share ideas. 67 people attended the webinars, including programme/project managers, as well as focal points involved with UNODC evaluations that are currently ongoing or that are planned to start in the second half of 2020. Of those participating, a little over 50% were women, 80% were from our field offices and 20% from headquarters (HQ).

The webinars were chaired by Ms. Katharina Kayser and Ms. Katherine Aston, with IES Evaluation Officer, Mr. Carlos Asenjo as moderator. Mr. Asenjo noted that "first, and most importantly, all evaluations and evaluation activities should ensure a do no harm approach and adhere to UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation."



One highlight of the webinars was hearing Mr. Jim Newkirk share his experience in adapting an evaluation to the current COVID-19 pandemic in collaboration with UNODC field offices. Mr. Newkirk is a Senior Evaluator Advisor at I4DI, and a development practitioner with over 35 years experience. He is currently leading the evaluation of UNODC work in West and Central Asia. “I’ve been doing this kind of work a long time, in a lot of places, but I have not had this type of experience before,” he said.



To that Mr. Newkirk added, “we have standard approaches, but now many of them are not available to us. We will now need to be creative. We may even need to try certain approaches and find that they fail, and then have to try another approach. This is the key.”

Based on exit surveys following the webinars, 100% of the participants rated the webinars as “very good” or “excellent”, and 100% were also “likely” or “very likely” to apply what they had learned.

Apart from developing guidance resources for evaluators, IES has heavily invested in enhancing

remote data collection. More importantly, IES is engaging in an even closer communication with programme/project managers at HQ and in the field to ensure that evaluations will be finalised and the accountability needs of Member States are met. This has included ensuring better coordination with field offices to arrange e.g. phone interviews, further increasingly using online interviews for data collection and investing in new technology to ensure robust methodology continues to be implemented in all UNODC evaluations.

To strengthen these efforts, IES staff have participated in the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET), as well as a hackathon to identify approaches, tools and methodologies to safeguard “no one left behind” when doing remote data collection.

In addition to working with our colleagues at UNODC, IES is also engaged in numerous activities related to building an evaluation architecture in the UN reform context. In collaboration with other members of the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG), IES has invested in several initiatives that will help evaluators continue to do their work while minimizing risk. These include working more with national evaluators and experts. For example, five national evaluators have been recruited to assess UNODC’s work in West & Central Asia.

IES is also engaging with UNEG to contribute to UN system-wide efforts relating to evaluation during the COVID-19 crisis. In order to enhance these contributions, IES includes specific questions related to UN reforms in all evaluations. Moreover, UN Country Teams and Resident Coordinators are involved as stakeholders in evaluations in order to understand UNODC’s contribution to the UN reforms at the national and regional level.

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IES is also developing a concept note on new and innovative technologies for evaluations – from big data to more structured qualitative data analysis tools. Several UN entities, NGOs and academic institutions have been interviewed to learn what options are available, what has worked and under what circumstances. These include, UNHCR, FAO, UNICRI, UNDP and UNICEF as well as JPAL/IPA. The final product will be shared with UNEG.

Looking forward, at the beginning of 2021, IES will produce a short Meta-Synthesis of evaluation findings related to COVID-19 to capture key findings, best practices and lessons learned related to this crisis.