



## SUMMARY NOTES

### EEAP WEBINAR 26

## Impact Evaluation at UNDP

On April 28, 2026, the Energy Evaluation Asia Pacific (EEAP) organized its 26th webinar, focusing on the topic of Impact Evaluation at UNDP. The session featured presentations by:

- **Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu**, Chief Corporate and Thematic Evaluations, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP, New York.
- **Ben Murphy**, Evaluation Specialist, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP New York

The webinar explored how impact evaluation can be applied in complex development settings, where change is often indirect, system-driven, context-specific, and shaped by multiple actors. The discussion emphasized that impact evaluation is not only an accountability tool, but also an important mechanism for learning, adaptation, scaling, and improving development programming. A key focus of the session was UNDP's approach to impact evaluation. Vijayalakshmi explained why UNDP needed a practical and tailored guidance framework that reflects its operational realities, including policy advisory work, capacity strengthening, governance support, public-private finance mechanisms, and implementation in fragile or fast-changing contexts. The presentation highlighted the importance of counterfactual thinking, mixed methods approaches, and strategic choices about when an impact evaluation is appropriate.

The second presentation focused on UNDP's first global impact evaluation of its approaches to off-grid energy access. Ben Murphy explained why off-grid energy is a suitable and important area for impact evaluation, particularly because energy access is closely linked to development outcomes but does not automatically translate into equitable benefits. The evaluation examines whether UNDP-supported off-grid energy systems are reliable, affordable, sustainable, and able to contribute to development gains, including for women and last-mile communities.

Overall, the webinar provided practical insights into how impact evaluation can be designed for complex development interventions, especially in the energy sector. It showed that credible impact evidence requires a balance between methodological rigor, contextual understanding, appropriate comparison group, stakeholder engagement, and a clear connection between evidence and decision-making. This document summarizes the key discussion points and takeaways from the webinar.

## Webinar Agenda

Time (EDT)	Sessions/Speakers
12:00-12:05 PM	<b>Welcome Remarks &amp; Context Setting</b>  <i>Edward Vine, Affiliate, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) and Steering Committee Member, EEAP</i>
12:05-12:40 PM	<b>Presenters</b>  <b>1. Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu</b> , Chief Corporate and Thematic Evaluations, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP, New York. <b>2. Ben Murphy</b> , Evaluation Specialist, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP New York
12:40-12:55 PM	<b>Moderated Audience Q&amp;A, Edward Vine,</b>
13:00 PM	<b>Concluding Comments &amp; Vote of thanks</b>

### Introduction and Context Setting

Edward Vine, Affiliate, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) and Steering Committee Member, Energy Evaluation Asia Pacific (EEAP)



Ed greeted the participants and speakers, introduced EEAP and provided a context for the webinar.

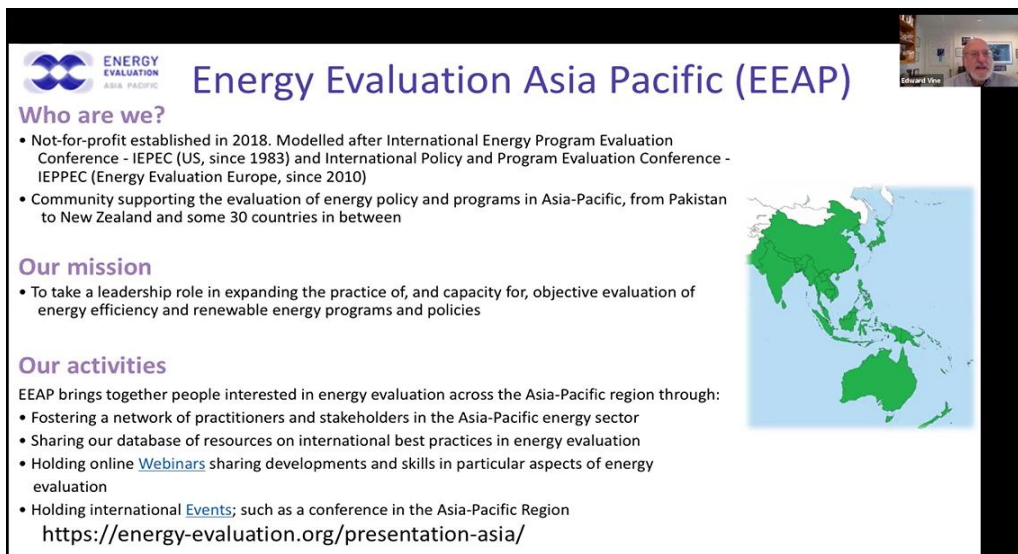
#### **Introduction to Energy Evaluation Asia Pacific (EEAP)**

Ed greeted the participants and speakers, introduced EEAP, and provided the context for the webinar. He described EEAP as a community of practice specializing in energy evaluation across the Asia-Pacific region. Established as a non-profit organization in 2018 and modeled after similar evaluation communities in the United States and Europe, EEAP aims to expand the practice and capacity of objective evaluation in energy efficiency and renewable energy programs and policies.

He emphasized that EEAP supports learning and capacity building through webinars, conferences, workshops, resources, and engagement with diverse stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, research institutions, evaluators, and practitioners. He highlighted the role of evaluation in helping answer key questions such as which actions pay off, how programs and policies can be improved, and what approaches can be scaled up.

Ed also framed the webinar in the context of the growing importance of evidence-based decision-making at a time of technological, environmental, and climate-related risks. He noted that strong evaluation is essential for policy adoption and implementation, behavioral change, and understanding broader economic and environmental benefits beyond energy savings. He also

acknowledged the passing of EEAP Steering Committee member Hidetoshi Nakagami from Japan and recognized his important contributions to energy efficiency and ESCO-related work.



**Energy Evaluation Asia Pacific (EEAP)**

**Who are we?**

- Not-for-profit established in 2018. Modelled after International Energy Program Evaluation Conference - IEPEC (US, since 1983) and International Policy and Program Evaluation Conference - IEPPEC (Energy Evaluation Europe, since 2010)
- Community supporting the evaluation of energy policy and programs in Asia-Pacific, from Pakistan to New Zealand and some 30 countries in between

**Our mission**

- To take a leadership role in expanding the practice of, and capacity for, objective evaluation of energy efficiency and renewable energy programs and policies

**Our activities**

EEAP brings together people interested in energy evaluation across the Asia-Pacific region through:

- Fostering a network of practitioners and stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific energy sector
- Sharing our database of resources on international best practices in energy evaluation
- Holding online [Webinars](#) sharing developments and skills in particular aspects of energy evaluation
- Holding international [Events](#); such as a conference in the Asia-Pacific Region

<https://energy-evaluation.org/presentation-asia/>



### “Impact Evaluation at UNDP”

Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu, Chief Corporate and Thematic Evaluations, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP, New York.

Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu began by situating impact evaluation within the broader challenge of understanding whether development interventions are truly making a difference in people’s lives. She noted that impact evaluation has often been treated as an accountability tool, but that its role is increasingly shifting toward learning, program adaptation, and strategic decision-making.

She explained that UNDP’s operating model makes impact evaluation particularly complex. Unlike institutions that rely primarily on large and predictable capital investments, UNDP works across more than 170 countries and supports policy advisory services, capacity building, governance systems, crisis response, livelihoods, environmental sustainability, and development programming in diverse and often fragile contexts. Because UNDP’s contribution is frequently indirect and mediated through systems, institutions, government partners, and enabling environments, attribution is not always simple or linear.

This complexity led UNDP to develop a suite of practical impact evaluation guidance documents tailored to its program realities. These resources are intended to support country offices and program managers in deciding when impact evaluation is appropriate, how to plan and manage impact data, and which approaches and methods can be used. Vijayalakshmi emphasized that the guidance seeks to combine rigor with practical flexibility, recognizing that not all UNDP programs are suitable for impact evaluation.

A central part of the presentation focused on defining impact and impact evaluation. Impact was described as significant effects that may be positive or negative, intended or unintended, primary

or secondary, and attributable to UNDP interventions. Impact evaluation was presented as a systematic empirical approach to assessing causal effects and answering the question: “So what?” In this sense, impact evaluation goes beyond observing change and asks whether that change would have happened anyway.

Vijayalakshmi emphasized the importance of the counterfactual as a non-negotiable concept in impact evaluation. A credible assessment of impact requires comparing observed outcomes with what would likely have happened without the intervention. This comparison helps evaluators move from correlation to causation and isolate the contribution of a program from other contextual factors.

She also introduced the idea of an impact continuum. Because UNDP programs vary in duration and scope, the guidance recognizes different timeframes for impact measurement, including longer-term effects, intermediate effects, and short-term catalytic changes. This is particularly important because many UNDP interventions last one to three years, while transformational changes often require longer time horizons.

Another important message was that impact evaluation should be a strategic choice, not an automatic requirement. Vijayalakshmi noted that impact evaluations are resource-intensive and should be reserved for interventions where the evidence will be used for important decisions, such as scaling, replication, redesign, or investment. Impact evaluations are especially useful for innovative programs, programs testing new hypotheses, and interventions of high strategic importance.

On methods, she cautioned against assuming that randomized controlled trials are always the gold standard or the most appropriate method. Given the nature of UNDP’s work, she emphasized the value of mixed-methods approaches that can combine quasi-experimental methods with qualitative analysis to understand not only what happened, but also how and why it happened.

### Key takeaways from the presentation:

- Impact evaluation at UNDP must reflect the complexity of development work, including indirect, system-level, and context-dependent contributions.
- Counterfactual thinking is central to credible impact evaluation, but methods must be adapted to the realities of the intervention and context.
- Impact evaluation should be used strategically when the findings are likely to inform important decisions on scaling, replication, redesign, or investment.
- Mixed-methods approaches are particularly important for understanding both causal effects and the mechanisms behind those effects.



### “Evaluation of UNDP Approaches to Off-Grid Energy”

Ben Murphy, Evaluation Specialist, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP New York

Ben Murphy presented UNDP’s first global impact evaluation, focusing on UNDP’s approaches to off-grid energy access. He explained that off-grid energy was selected after careful consideration, as it is closely linked to development objectives, SDG 7, and UNDP’s commitment to “leave no one behind.”

He noted that energy access is important for development, but the link is not automatic. Providing energy does not necessarily mean that all people will benefit equally or that development outcomes will follow immediately. Factors such as affordability, reliability, sustainability, productive use, and gender dynamics influence whether energy access translates into meaningful benefits for households, communities, and businesses.

The evaluation looks at UNDP's off-grid energy work as a global portfolio rather than focusing on a single country or project. Ben described UNDP's approaches in several broad areas: energy governance and capacity support, including planning, regulations, and skills; finance and investment facilitation; system-level support such as mini-grids and solar home systems; and business development or productive-use support to help convert energy access into development gains.

The evaluation covers countries across different regions, with a strong focus on African countries due to remaining energy access gaps, while also drawing lessons from Asia, particularly Nepal and Cambodia. The evaluation includes deeper country-level work in selected countries and community-level surveys in several locations.

Ben outlined four main impact areas of interest. The first is whether energy access systems are appropriately established, reliable, affordable, and sustained over time. The second is whether access leads to equitable development benefits, including benefits for both men and women. The third is whether renewable off-grid energy displaces non-renewable sources such as kerosene, diesel, or biomass. The fourth focuses on the enabling environment, including whether UNDP support helps make countries more conducive to public and private investment and whether this contributes to scale-up.

A major methodological issue is the use of comparators. Because most UNDP-supported off-grid energy interventions were not randomly assigned, the evaluation cannot use a randomized controlled trial design. Instead, it uses quasi-experimental thinking and carefully selected comparator groups. These include communities or groups that are similar to intervention groups before the intervention and that still use similar energy mixes to those used by intervention groups before receiving support.

The evaluation also uses temporal comparisons, including before-and-after analysis, as well as retrospective questions where baseline data are not available. Data collection includes a modified Multi-Tier Framework household survey, site visits, focus group discussions, key informant interviews with governments, investors, implementers, and other stakeholders, and deeper country case studies.

Overall, the presentation showed how UNDP is applying impact evaluation to a complex global portfolio where both direct household-level effects and broader system-level changes matter. It also demonstrated the importance of designing evaluations that are useful for future programming decisions, especially around which approaches should be scaled, adapted, or strengthened.

#### Key takeaways from the presentation:

- Energy access is essential for development, but benefits are not automatic and may differ by gender, context, affordability, and productive-use opportunities.
- UNDP's off-grid energy work includes not only infrastructure and energy systems, but also governance, capacity, finance, market development, and enabling environment support.

- The evaluation uses quasi-experimental approaches, comparator groups, retrospective data, household surveys, and qualitative methods to assess contribution and impact.
- The evaluation is intended to inform future UNDP programming by identifying which approaches are most effective and under what conditions.

### **Moderated Audience Q&A**

The Q&A session was moderated by Edward Vine and focused on methodology, the role of government and private sector actors, engagement with national evaluators, and the use of foresight in evaluation.

- **Quasi-experimental design and comparators:**

In response to a question on whether the evaluation uses quasi-experimental designs, Ben explained that a randomized controlled trial was not possible because UNDP support was not randomly assigned. Intervention sites were often selected as demonstration sites or based on national development priorities. Therefore, the evaluation uses a quasi-experimental approach, comparing supported groups with similar groups that have not received the intervention and still rely on comparable pre-intervention energy mixes.

- **UNDP, governments, and the private sector:**

Vijayalakshmi explained that UNDP works with both governments and private sector actors, including financial institutions and service providers. However, she emphasized that a particularly important role for UNDP is to help governments engage effectively with the private sector, de-risk markets, create enabling policies, and mobilize development finance. This is especially relevant for off-grid energy, where private sector participation is critical for scale and sustainability.

- **Engagement with national evaluators:**

Ben noted that the evaluation will involve country-level case studies and broad consultations with government, private sector actors, academia, civil society organizations, and evaluators. He welcomed input from the energy evaluation community, especially on countries such as Nepal and Cambodia, where lessons from Asia may be useful for understanding what has worked and what could be transferred to other contexts.

- **Use of foresight methods:**

On foresight, Ben noted that while the off-grid energy evaluation does not use a dedicated foresight methodology, it does take account of changing energy sector conditions, including geopolitics, oil prices, currency fluctuations, solar technology costs, socioeconomic conditions, and national development priorities. Vijayalakshmi added that UNDP has invested in foresight analysis in recent years, but also reflected that strong evaluation practice already requires thinking about future relevance, future positioning, and how recommendations will influence development cooperation over time.

## Presenters' Bio



### **Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu,**

Chief, Corporate and Thematic Evaluations, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP, New York.

Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu is the Chief of the Section for Corporate and Thematic Evaluations at the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, where she leads a multidisciplinary team. She conducts global and country-level evaluations, is involved in national evaluation capacity development, and represents IEO in the Executive Board deliberations. Vijaya has over twenty-five years of international development policy, evaluation, and applied research experience. She has worked across multi-agency national development programmes, within the United Nations system, and in the international non-governmental sector, complemented by extensive analytical and policy-oriented research. She was a Visiting Professor at the Division of Global Affairs, Rutgers University. She holds a PhD in Sociology.



### **Ben Murphy,**

Evaluation Specialist, Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP New York

Ben Murphy is an Evaluation Specialist at the Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP. He has conducted global evaluations on energy access, climate resilience, biodiversity and social protection, amongst other topics. He is currently conducting an impact evaluation of UNDP approaches to off-grid energy.

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