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Advancing Evaluation Capacity for Development Goals in Sierra Leone

Policy Brief

1. Background

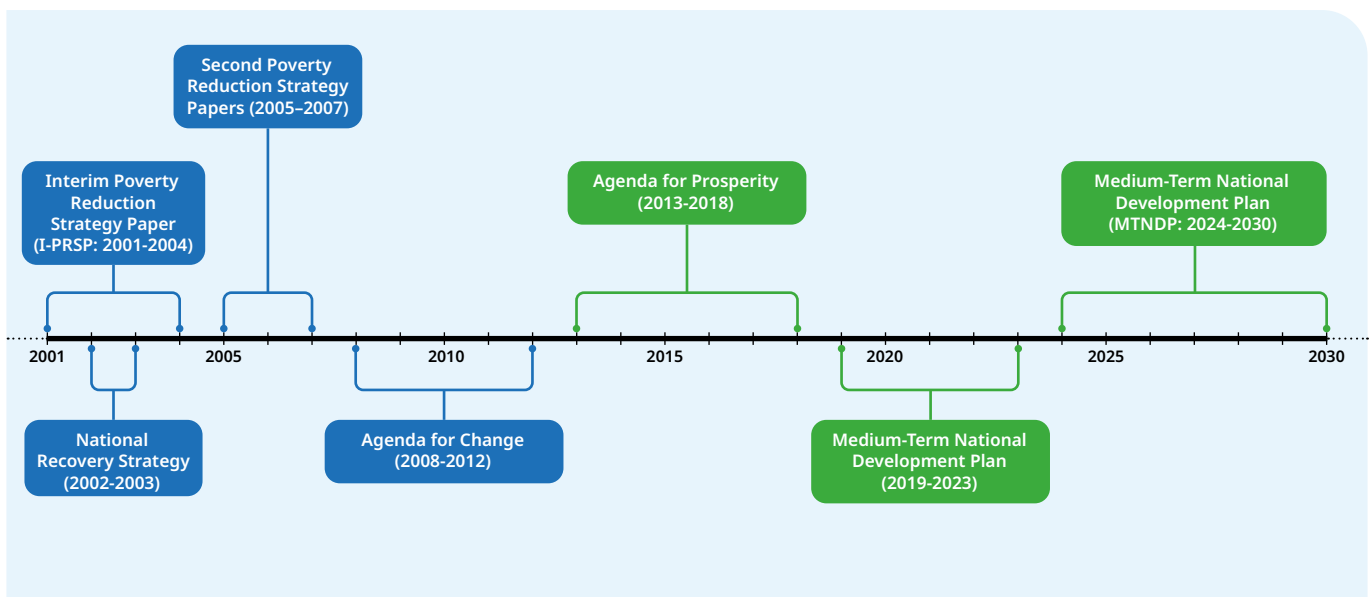
Over the past two decades, Sierra Leone has taken important steps to strengthen democratic governance and accountability. The **2004 Local Government Act** laid the foundation for decentralized decision-making by empowering elected local councils and expanding citizen participation. Its **2022 amendment**, which aligned council terms with other elective offices, further reinforced the stability of local governance structures and reduced electoral costs.

These governance reforms created an enabling environment for systematic national development planning. Since 2002, the Government of Sierra Leone has launched a sequence of medium- and long-term development strategies—ranging from the **Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (2005–2012)** to the **Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018)** and the **Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019–2023)**. Together, these

plans have progressively strengthened national systems and provided a framework for aligning domestic priorities with global commitments.

Crucially, this evolution has also set the stage for building a **national culture of evidence use**. As development planning became more structured, the need for credible data and robust evaluation grew in importance. Each successive plan has highlighted not only the imperative of delivering results for citizens but also the role of **monitoring and evaluation (M&E)** in tracking progress, ensuring accountability, and informing policy choices. For Sierra Leone, this signals a shift from externally driven assessments toward a vision of nationally owned evaluation capacity—one that can sustain learning, improve governance, and accelerate progress toward the **SDGs** and **Agenda 2063**.

Figure 1: Sierra Leone’s governance and development planning milestones (2002–2024)



2. Evaluation Capacity Assessment Report

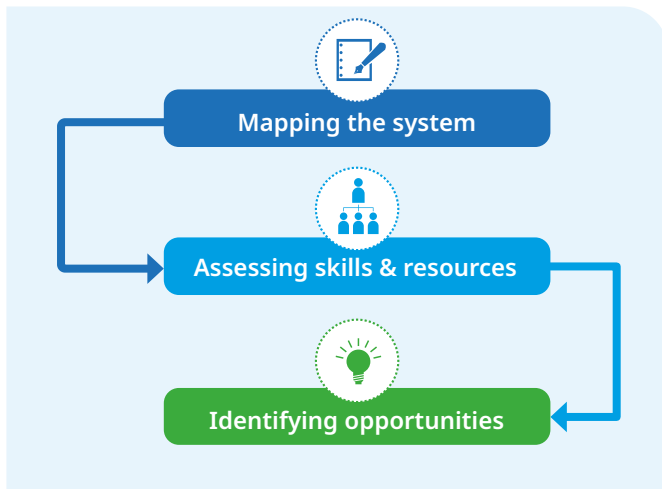
As Sierra Leone advances with the **Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030)**, the demand for credible evidence has become central to achieving national priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union’s Agenda 2063. Monitoring and evaluation play a critical role in this process, not only by strengthening accountability but also by ensuring that policies and programmes deliver meaningful results for citizens.

To support this ambition, the **National Monitoring and Evaluation Agency (NaMEA)**, in collaboration with **UNICEF Sierra**

Leone, implemented a comprehensive assessment of the country’s evaluation capacity. This work builds on the 2014 assessment, which had highlighted the absence of standardized frameworks, weak data systems, and fragmented practices across ministries and local councils. Since then, important reforms — most notably the establishment of NaMEA as a semi-autonomous agency — have laid the groundwork for a more coherent national evaluation system. The present review takes stock of progress made since 2014, identifies the challenges that remain, and sets out practical recommendations for the way forward.

2.1 Assessment Objectives, Scope and Audience

Figure 2: The three pillars of the assessment



The review was designed to provide NaMEA with a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses within Sierra Leone’s evaluation ecosystem. It set out to map how evaluation is currently organized across government institutions, to assess the skills

and resources available to manage and use evaluations, and to identify opportunities to make evaluation more relevant to national priorities. It also aimed to generate evidence to guide the forthcoming **National Evaluation Capacity Development Plan and new Evaluation Guidelines**.

While NaMEA was the primary audience, the findings are equally relevant for government ministries and departments, development partners, the Sierra Leone Evaluation Association, academia, and civil society. The scope of the work extended beyond central government in Freetown to include perspectives from local councils in Makeni, reflecting the importance of evaluation at both national and subnational levels.

Methods at a Glance

- 50+ documents reviewed
- 26 interviews
- 2 national workshops
- 70 participants

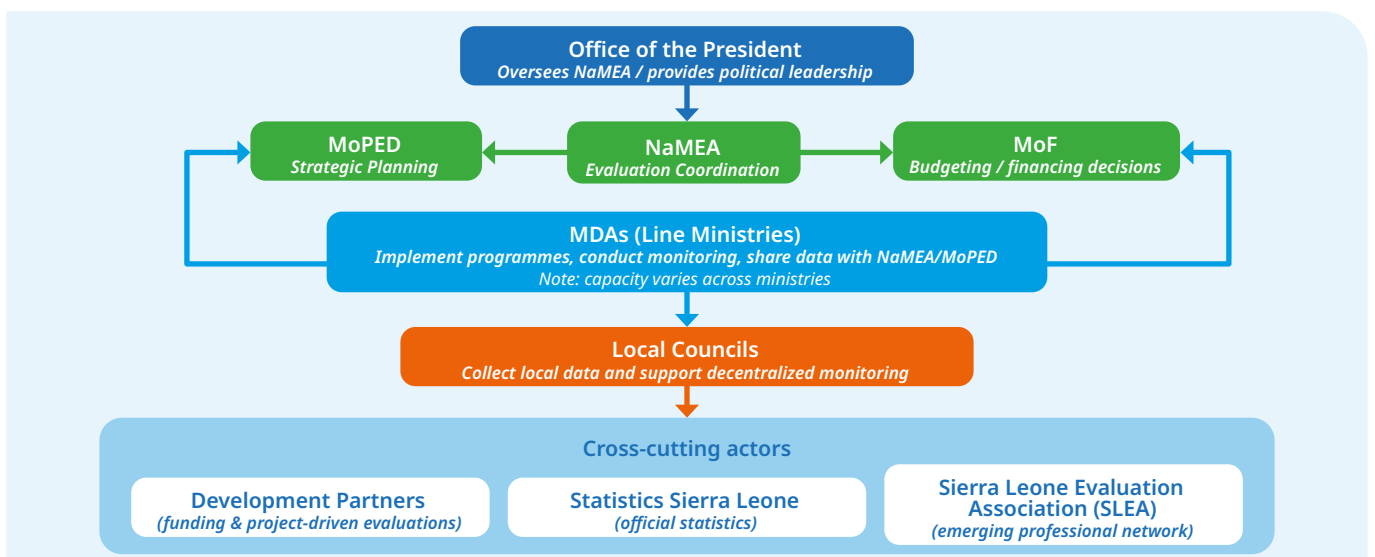
3. Findings

3.1. National Evaluation System

Sierra Leone has made steady progress in embedding monitoring and evaluation into its development planning. From the early Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers to the present Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030), evaluation has evolved from a narrow focus on outputs to a broader vision

of tracking reforms, economic growth, and national priorities. The establishment of the National Monitoring and Evaluation Agency (NaMEA) in 2024, building on its predecessor NaMED, represents a landmark in this journey. For the first time, Sierra Leone has a central body with a clear mandate to coordinate evaluations across government, supported by a national policy and strategy.

Figure 3: How Sierra Leone’s National Evaluation System Works



At the policy level, evaluation is now formally recognized as essential for governance. Each successive development plan has reinforced this vision, and the current MTNDP sets out concrete steps to expand evaluation across ministries. Yet, implementation remains uneven. While NaMEA staff demonstrate strong ownership of the national M&E policy, awareness and consistent application across ministries is still evolving. In many cases, ministries continue to rely on donor-driven frameworks, which are tailored to project or programme needs but not always fully aligned with national priorities. Financing also remains a challenge. Although provisions exist for allocating a share of large public investment projects to NaMEA, resources in practice are dispersed, unpredictable, and insufficient to cover the scope of evaluation needs. Faced with these constraints, ministries tend to give greater attention to monitoring, while evaluations are more often supported through development partner funding.

Institutionally, NaMEA has brought structure and authority to what was once a fragmented evaluation landscape. Its positioning under the Office of the President provides political visibility and weight, though it has also prompted questions around independence and, in some ministries, a degree of hesitation where evaluation is still perceived more as scrutiny than as a tool for learning and improvement. The establishment of the Sierra Leone Evaluation Association (SLEA) represents a promising step toward cultivating a professional evaluation community, though awareness and membership are still in their early stages.

Across ministries, arrangements for evaluation remain uneven. Some, such as Health and Planning, have dedicated units, while others combine M&E with unrelated functions or have yet to formalize structures. Local councils generally have clearer mandates under the Local Government Act, but coordination with central institutions is not yet systematic. Similarly, the respective roles of NaMEA and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED) are broadly complementary—strategic planning for MoPED, monitoring and evaluation for NaMEA—but not always well communicated across the system. Collaboration with ministries and development partners, while present, is often ad hoc and project-driven. Informal tools, including messaging groups, help bridge gaps but cannot replace the structured coordination needed to sustain a coherent and nationally owned evaluation system.

3.2. Evaluative Capacity

Sierra Leone’s evaluation capacity shows both progress and persistent disparities. Within key ministries such as Health and Finance, where donor support and political backing are strong, dedicated teams have developed the technical skills to lead evaluations independently. NaMEA itself has steadily expanded its staffing and expertise, reaching nearly full capacity in recent years. Yet across most ministries, capacity remains lim-

ited: staffing levels are low, evaluation is often conflated with monitoring, and leadership teams lack advanced technical knowledge. Opportunities for professional development are scarce, with few academic programmes dedicated to evaluation and most skills acquired informally through on-the-job learning, short-term trainings, or donor-supported initiatives.

These uneven capacities shape how evaluation is understood and applied. While NaMEA actively promotes a culture of evaluation, many officials outside the agency continue to view evaluation as a secondary or compliance-driven exercise, particularly when commissioned by development partners. This perception—as a costly obligation or even a mechanism for scrutiny—limits its integration into policy processes and can generate resistance within ministries with weaker systems. Emerging initiatives, such as the Sierra Leone Evaluation Association (SLEA), have the potential to strengthen awareness and build a professional community of practice, but these remain at an early stage.

Figure 4: Conceptual representation of uneven evaluation capacity

	INSTITUTION TYPE			
	Central agencies	Social sector MDAs	Economic sector MDAs	Other MDAs
M&E unit	Strong	Mix	Moderate	Weak
Eval staff	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Weak
Budget	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Weak
Data Systems	Strong	Mix	Moderate	Weak
Use of Findings	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Weak

This figure is a conceptual illustration of the relative concentration of evaluation capacity based on qualitative NECRA findings. It does not represent individual MDAs

At the organizational level, decision-making around evaluations is often externally driven, with ministries typically responding to donor requirements rather than setting their own evaluation agendas. Performance targets for evaluation are inconsistent, and resources—both financial and human—remain inadequate. High staff turnover, disparities between civil servants and donor-funded personnel, and inconsistent recruitment practices weaken continuity and morale. Meanwhile, limited IT infrastructure constrains efficiency, with many ministries still relying on

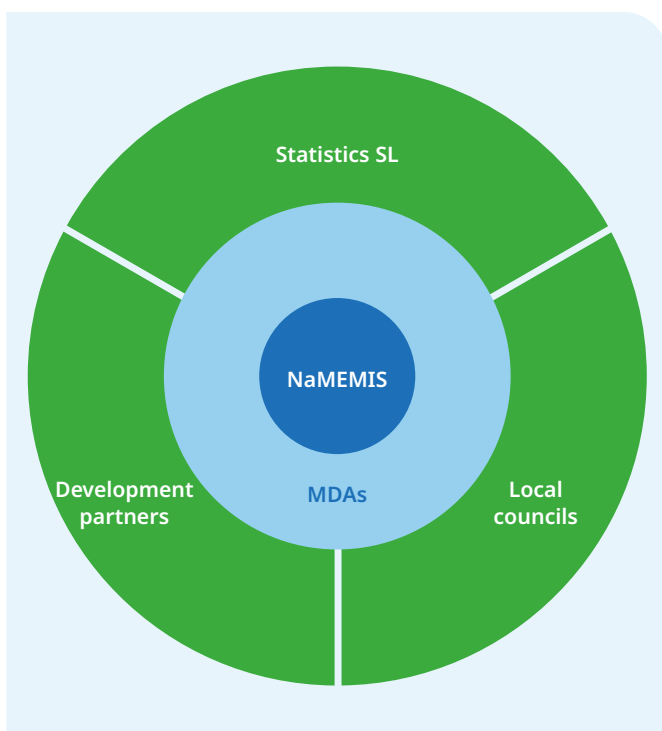
manual processes and lacking access to modern analytical tools. These challenges underscore the need for a more coordinated strategy to build stable, skilled evaluation teams and ensure that evaluations are not only conducted but used systematically to inform national development priorities.

3.3. Data Management and Use

Data management across ministries and agencies in Sierra Leone remains highly uneven. While some institutions, such as the Ministry of Health with its DHIS2 platform, have adopted advanced systems that enable real-time data collection and analysis, many others continue to rely on basic tools such as Excel spreadsheets stored on personal laptops. This creates risks of data loss, weakens security, and limits consistency. Although agencies like Statistics Sierra Leone and NaMEA have introduced more structured, cloud-based approaches, overall practices remain fragmented.

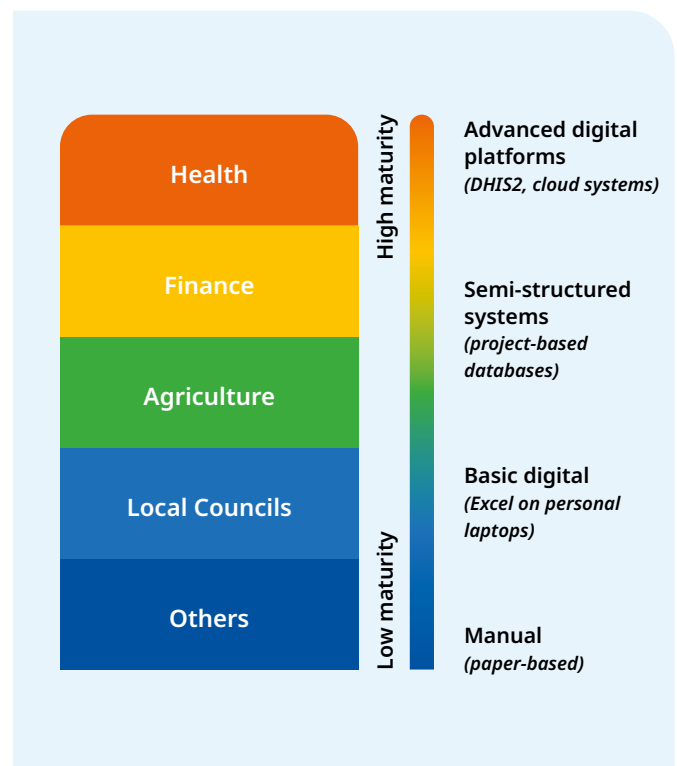
NaMEA's efforts to establish a centralized Management Information System (NaMEMIS) offer a promising step toward integration, yet uptake has been slow. Several MDAs are aware of the system but do not use it systematically, citing functionality gaps and the need for further training. Development partners have played a critical role in strengthening sectoral data systems, but these initiatives are often project-based and difficult to sustain once external funding ends. The absence of long-term financing and coordinated planning has resulted in duplication and siloed systems, leaving many ministries unable to fully leverage data for evaluation.

Figure 5: Data ecosystem circle diagram



Access and use of data remain a cross-cutting challenge. Internal government datasets are often restricted, leading to delays in evaluation processes, while reliance on manual data entry persists in some ministries and local councils. Local governments highlight the lack of standardized tools and complex procedures for data sharing as major barriers to efficiency. Despite these constraints, opportunities exist: aligning donor investments, strengthening NaMEMIS as a central hub, and enhancing training for staff on data security and digital tools would significantly improve Sierra Leone's ability to generate and use reliable evidence for national development planning.

Figure 6: Data Maturity Spectrum across MDAs



3.4. Demand and Use of Evaluations

The demand for evaluations in Sierra Leone remains largely external and reactive, with most assessments initiated in response to development partner requirements. Within government, evaluations are often perceived as accountability tools rather than as instruments for learning and policy improvement. While NaMEA has taken steps to raise awareness of their value, its engagement with ministries is still largely informal and resource-constrained. This, coupled with hesitancy among some senior officials who fear evaluations may expose inefficiencies, has limited the emergence of a strong evaluation culture across ministries and agencies.

Where evaluations are undertaken, they are frequently conducted in isolation and tied to donor-funded projects, with limited integration into national policy processes. Although NaMEA and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development play im-

portant roles in supporting evaluation linked to national strategies, there is no formal system to ensure findings are consistently applied. As a result, lessons from evaluations are often underutilized, and ministries rarely initiate evaluations independently. Positive examples exist, such as in the health sector where evaluation findings have informed operational improvements, but these remain exceptions rather than the rule.

At present, the absence of structured follow-up mechanisms, such as management responses, means that many evaluation

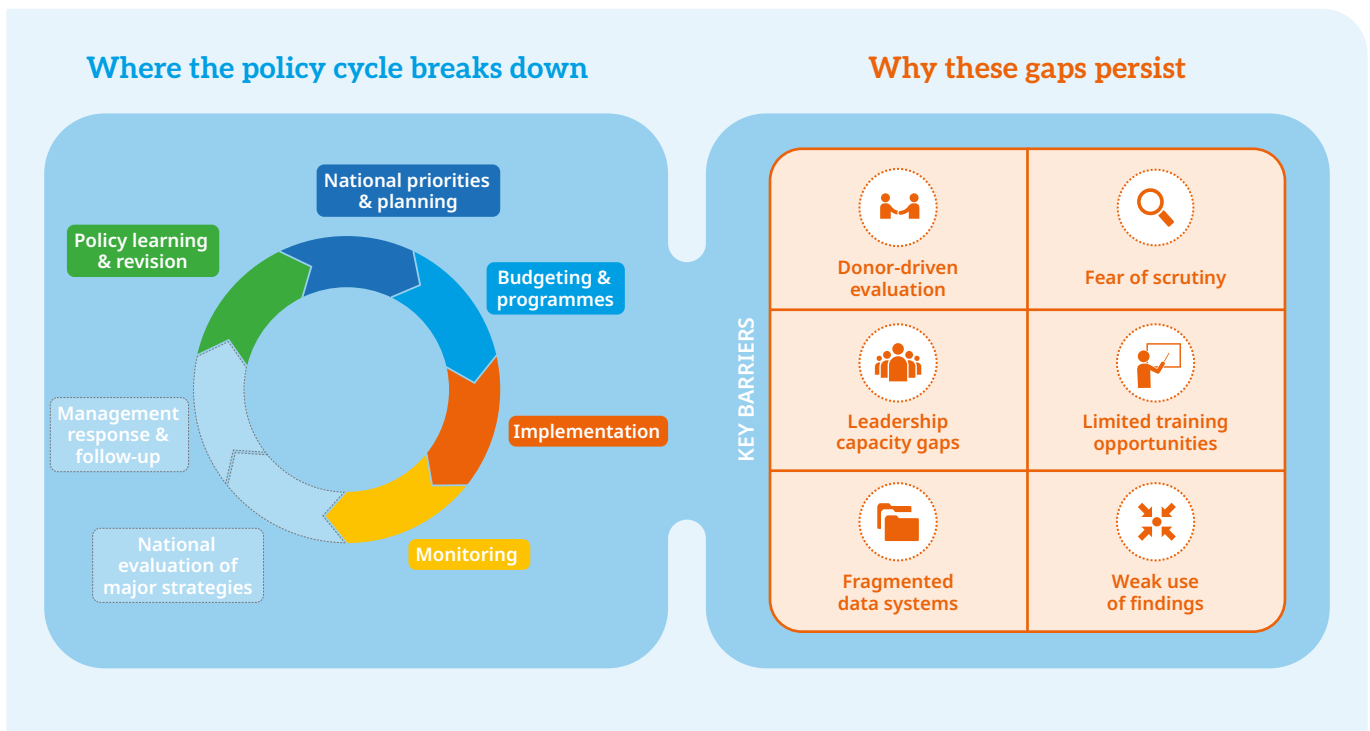
recommendations are not acted upon or institutionalized, contributing to the loss of institutional memory. The lack of an evaluation of the previous Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019–2023) further illustrates the gaps in embedding evaluation into the policy cycle. Moving forward, strengthening institutional frameworks, investing in capacity, and ensuring consistent financing will be critical to building a demand-driven evaluation culture that supports continuous learning and informs the design and implementation of Sierra Leone’s development plans.

4. Reflections: Then and Now

A comparison between the 2014 national M&E assessment and the 2024 review offers valuable perspective on Sierra Leone’s progress. Over the past decade, integration of M&E into national development planning has become more formalized,

supported by the creation of a national policy and the establishment of NaMEA. Collaboration between ministries and the central agency has also improved, and some advances have been made in adopting new data systems.

Figure 7: Policy cycle gap diagram



At the same time, many of the challenges identified a decade ago remain. Implementation of the national policy is still uneven, with ministries often relying on donor-driven frameworks. M&E units within government institutions are inconsistently structured, leadership capacity remains limited, and training opportunities are scarce. Data management continues to be fragmented, and evaluations are frequently conducted in response to donor requirements rather than as part of a national learning agenda.

This reflection underscores an important lesson: progress in building a sustainable evaluation culture requires more than new policies and structures. It calls for sustained investment in leadership, professional capacity, and predictable financing, alongside stronger institutional mechanisms to ensure that evaluation findings are systematically applied. Addressing these gaps will be critical if Sierra Leone is to shift from a reactive to a proactive evaluation culture that drives accountability and learning at the heart of governance.

5. Way Forward

Sierra Leone has laid important foundations for a stronger evaluation system, with NaMEA at the center and monitoring and evaluation now embedded in the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030). These steps provide a platform for building a culture of evidence-informed decision-making.

However, the comparison with the 2014 assessment shows that while progress has been made, many challenges remain. Implementation of the national M&E policy is still uneven, reliance on donor frameworks continues, and technical capacity and institutional structures are fragmented. Limited domestic

financing and the absence of mechanisms to systematically apply evaluation findings further undermine sustainability.

The way forward is to turn commitments into consistent practice. This will require clarifying institutional roles, strengthening leadership and professional capacity, ensuring predictable national financing, and embedding mechanisms that link evaluation findings directly to policy and planning. By addressing these gaps, Sierra Leone can move from a largely reactive to a proactive evaluation culture—transforming its system into a driver of accountability, learning, and progress towards national development goals and the Sustainable Development Goals.

6. Roadmap for Strengthening National Evaluation Capacity

This roadmap outlines priority actions to consolidate progress and address the key challenges identified in the assessment. It highlights short-, medium- and long-term steps that can help

Sierra Leone move towards a coherent, well-resourced, and learning-oriented evaluation system that supports national development goals and the SDGs.

Priority Area	Key Actions	Timeline
Individual Capacity	Develop a national evaluation training programme in partnership with academia and development partners; expand opportunities for practical learning through internships and mentorships.	Short-term
Institutional Capacity	Institutionalize M&E units across all MDAs with clear mandates, staffing, and budgets; ensure formal integration of evaluation into annual work plans and budget processes.	Medium-term
Financing	Establish a predictable, pooled national M&E fund drawing from both government and development partner contributions, aligned with long-term evaluation needs.	Medium-term
Governance & Roles	Clarify and communicate the respective roles of NaMEA and MoPED in planning, monitoring, and evaluation; strengthen collaboration through joint reviews and awareness-raising.	Medium-term
Follow-up & Use	Introduce a formal tracking system for evaluation recommendations to ensure systematic follow-up and integration of lessons into policy decisions.	Short-term
Culture of Learning	Promote evaluation as a tool for learning and improvement by sharing best practices, engaging senior leadership, and supporting evaluation champions across government.	Ongoing
Coordination	Create a national M&E coordination platform bringing together MDAs, development partners, CSOs, and academia to align priorities and foster joint funding.	Short-term
Data Systems	Strengthen and expand the use of NaMEMIS and other digital platforms to enable real-time, cross-sectoral data collection and sharing.	Long-term



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