

IRM Quality Assurance Framework

Summary of IEP Session 2: Quality and consistency of expert reviews

December 13, 2023

In attendance

- **IEP members:** Mary Francoli, Cesar Nicandro Cruz, Maha Jweied, Rocio Moreno, and Snjezana Bokulic
- **IRM Staff:** Tinatin Ninua, Gustavo Pérez Ara, Andreas Pavlou, and Mathew Tramonti

Summary

The International Experts Panel (IEP) oversees the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) to safeguard its independence and to ensure consistent application of the IRM methodology and quality research standards in its products. In 2023, the IEP approved the Quality Assurance Framework, an essential tool for ensuring that the IRM assessments meet the highest standards of quality, due diligence, research and controls to safeguard its objectivity, independence, and credibility.

The IEP held the second quality assurance session on December 13, 2023. During the 90 minute online session, IEP members examined a sample of six IRM reports, each reviewed by a different expert in the course of 2023, as well as the reviewers' accompanying cover letters. The names of the reviewers were anonymized and the IRM considered regional diversity while selecting reports with commitments in similar policy areas.

During the quality assurance session, the IEP assessed the peer review process for quality control of IRM products, provided to the IRM team by external expert reviewers. To do so, the IEP looked at two aspects of the review process:

- The adequacy of expert reviews, arguments, conclusions and recommendations provided to ensure that reports meet the IRM's quality standards when assessing action plans and commitments.
- The existing review process (including the instructions for the review process and guidance material provided) and the structure and composition of the expert reviewer pool (including number of reviewers, diversity of regional/thematic expertise, etc.).

1. Adequacy of reviews

Based on the sample analyzed, IEP found that the level of depth and focus of expert reviews varied. The reviewers generally have an understanding of how well the reports follow the IRM methodology. However, the IEP highlighted that in the samples the experts often prioritized methodological and editorial comments over policy or country specific input on the evidence or findings in the reports. For example, many reviewers focused on questioning or affirming the codings of commitments and on the quality of the writing, and less so on whether the evidence offered sufficient justification for the conclusions reached in the report. In this regard, reviewers

were generally good at identifying a balanced view of stakeholders, but less consistent at identifying a balance of evidence.

The IEP offered the following recommendations for the IRM:

- Ensure that the consistency and robustness of the evidence to support the arguments and conclusions of the report becomes a primary focus of the review process.
- Expand the focus of recommendations from expert reviewers to include strategic suggestions based on the action plan and country priorities, beyond specific milestones and commitments.
- Encourage reviewers to bring their expertise more directly to their reviews, for example by recommending reference to international indices to support IRM conclusions.
- Ask expert reviewers to provide a minimum level of scrutiny of reports, including the codings, in order to validate the report's findings vis-a-vis the action plan.
- Consider having reports reviewed by professional editors who focus on improving the way the information and evidence is presented, in addition to expert reviewers and copy editors who focus on methodological consistency and sentence structure/grammar.

2. Process and structure of the reviewer pool

The IEP found that the thematic and regional expertise of the existing expert reviewers in the pool was not always clearly reflected in the reviews of IRM reports. Additionally, the IEP highlighted the importance of prioritizing strong analytical skills as a quality in improving the reviewer pool, beyond thematic and regional expertise. The IEP questioned whether the existing number of reviewers (seven) was sufficient to meet the IRM's needs given the breadth of reports, and wondered if it may be useful to assign more than one reviewer per report. The IEP noted that the accompanying cover letters for reviews often lacked details and tended to focus on the top level aspects of the report. The IEP also wanted to know more about the typical availability of the existing reviewers in order to respond to questions on how well the pool is resourced.

The IEP offered the following recommendations to the IRM:

- Prioritize building a pool of reviewers who have strong analytical skills and an understanding of what evidence should be included in a report and what pieces of evidence are missing, as opposed to thematic or regional expertise.
- Consider pairing reviews for one report based on a matrix of reviewers' expertises (e.g., regional or specific national expertise, subject-matter expertise, other OGP experience) to select reviewers with differing expertise.
- Ask for more thorough information in the reviewers' cover letters or ask for a second review of the reports.
- Expand the number of reviewers in the pool beyond the existing seven reviewers.

Moving forward

During its monthly meetings going forward, the IEP will monitor the integration of these recommendations within the IRM work plan. The next IEP Quality Assurance Session is scheduled to take place in April 2024, where the IEP will discuss a different topic.