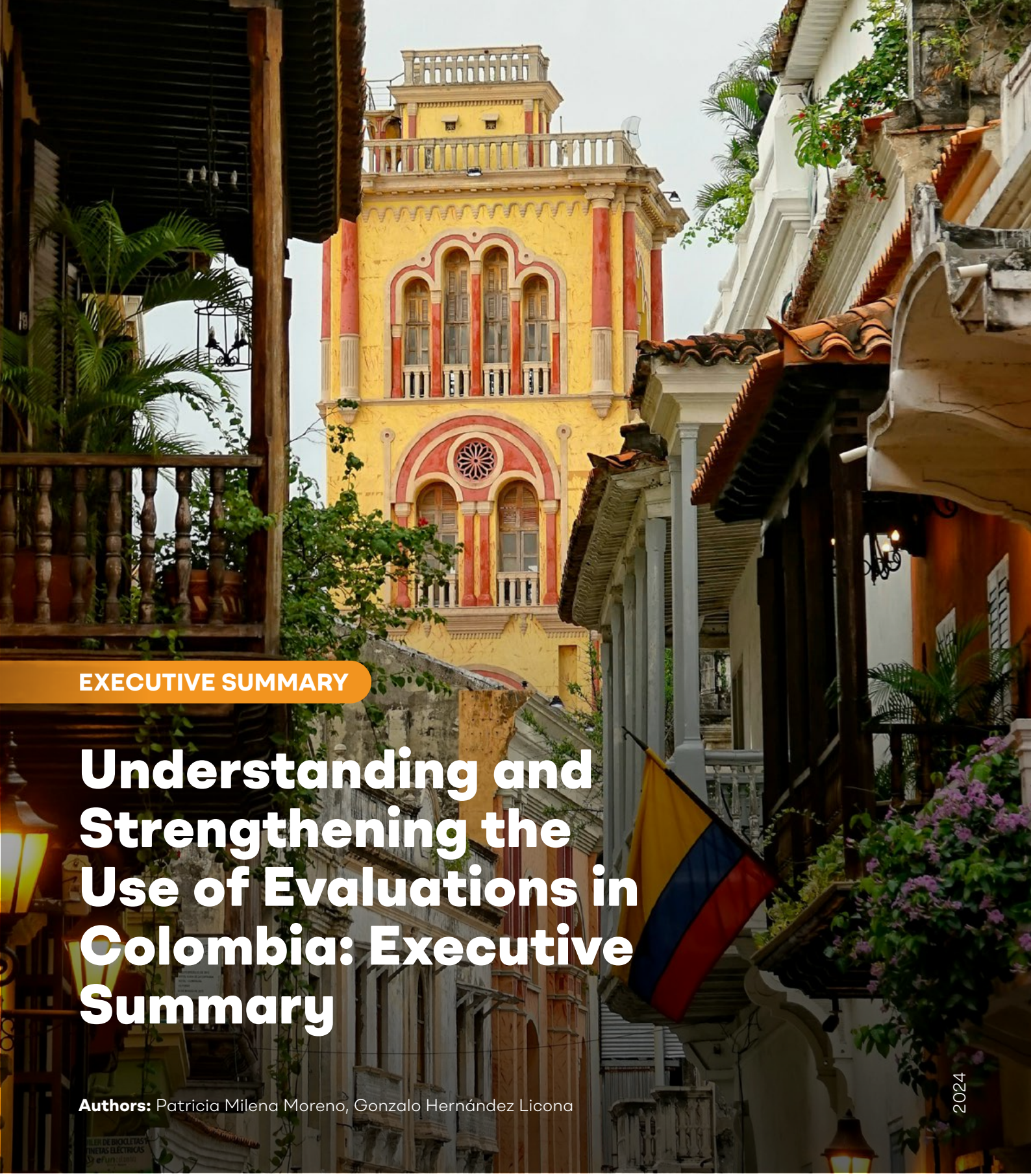

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Understanding and Strengthening the Use of Evaluations in Colombia: Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Colombia strengthened its planning system in the 1950s and by 1990, it decided to complement the system with the monitoring and evaluation of its public policy. Colombia's National Department of Planning (DNP) has long recognized that evaluation results are a valuable source of information for better governance and a tool for accountability among the citizenry. Yet, despite the development and generation of evaluations across a broad spectrum of sectors and ministries, evaluation results are not used to their full potential. It is a situation that many countries face. In 2022, the Colombian government approved the National Council for Economic and Social Policies' (CONPES) document 4083, which aims to further strengthen the institutional framework for the evaluation of public policies and promote the use of the results and recommendations of the evaluations for decision making in the country.

The assessment presented here feeds into the ongoing improvement process. It draws on first-hand interviews with key actors, as well as previous diagnoses prepared by CONPES 4083 in 2020 and by the National Indicator of Evaluation Capacities (INCE) in 2020-2022, to identify the most important barriers that prevent greater and better use of the evidence generated by Colombia's evaluation system. The findings point to ways to improve the use of evaluation results among decision makers, administrators, and citizens at large.

The Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI) conducted this assessment using diagnostic tools from its Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Analysis (MESA) and in close collaboration with theDNP's Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies (DSEPP).

The current use of evaluation: Strengths and weaknesses

Comparative analysis of national evaluation systems shows Colombia to be one of the most advanced countries in the Latin American region. It has a long-standing commitment to national planning underscored by regulatory advances and efforts to strengthen evaluation standards and practices since the 1990s. The National Planning Department (DNP) coordinates the evaluation system for public policy through its Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies (DSEPP).

Interviews and research conducted for this assessment reveal the processes for generating evaluations are well institutionalized and a culture of evaluation has emerged. The DSEPP has a high degree of credibility with the most important actors in the evaluation ecosystem and the demand for evaluation is high and continues to grow. The DSEPP's annual call for proposals to shape its yearly agenda receives an average of 150 applications from a wide range of sectors. With its small staff and an annual budget of approximately $1.5 million, the DSEPP is able to carry out about 15 percent of the evaluations requested each year.

The Department for Social Prosperity; the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism; and a few other government agencies seek evaluations (and even conduct their own internally) to better understand what works and what does not in their programs. They use evaluation results to improve their performance, but overall, the intentional use of evaluation for more informed decision making is not widespread across sectors and follow-up on recommendations is uneven. This may be due to time and capacity constraints or a lack of political will. Much of the demand for evaluation is driven by compliance or a fear of being left behind in the evaluation process. Certain sectors, such as defense and justice, do not engage in evaluation at all.

Other challenges hampering the effectiveness of evaluation include a misalignment with planning and budgetary cycles. Evaluation recommendations often come too late to be enacted or make a difference during the annual budget process. Poor coordination between the DNP and the Ministry of Finance has prevented the latter from engaging in and using the evaluations in a meaningful way. Opportunities to connect with policymakers, citizen groups, and other key stakeholders are also missed through the dissemination of overly technical and long evaluation documents. Another limiting factor is the type of evaluations on offer; most focus on the impact of individual programs with no scope to analyze broad policies, enact

rapid evaluations, or relate to international evaluation findings. Evaluation is also absent from the territories due to a lack of resources and local capacity. Finally, there is no mechanism for monitoring evaluations and their use.

Recommendations to improve the use of evaluation

There are many opportunities to use evaluation more and better in Colombia and build on government progress thus far. For example, the process of shifting the evaluation cycle to be more compatible with the annual budget process has already begun. The DESPP and the technical directorates of the DNP have launched efforts to require programs to follow up on at least two recommendations of an evaluation, and work is underway to shorten evaluation reports and disseminate evaluation findings more broadly. In 2022–2023 for the first time ever, a non-technical summary of the past four years of evaluation findings was carried out to inform the incoming administration. To increase the quality of the recommendations, the DSEPP has started sessions with experts who provide their knowledge and suggestions in the final stage of the evaluation.

To further solidify the culture of evaluation, the DNP must continue to look for ways to make evaluation more accessible to decision makers and other key stakeholders. Additional recommendations include the following:

INCREASE COLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

1. Initiate a permanent dialogue between the DNP and the Ministry of Finance to advance a common evaluation agenda and enable better use of evaluations in the budget process. This engagement will enable the Ministry of Finance to make more specific, purposeful demands for evaluations of both programs and strategies.
2. Establish a permanent dialogue between the DNP and Congress to build awareness of the value of evaluation and encourage its use by members of the legislative branch.
3. Create training programs for ministries and agencies on the importance of continuous learning and concepts related to managing for results engendered by evaluation.
4. Explore collaboration with the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) to incorporate big data and Artificial Intelligence methodologies into the evaluation process.
5. Develop an annual or biennial evaluation award to recognize excellence in the generation and use of evaluation within government programs, ministries, and departments.

EXPAND SCOPE

6. Establish a public policy analysis unit linked to the DSEPP to collect national and international evidence beyond the annual evaluations currently conducted. This can further enrich decision making of the Colombian government.
7. Expand the type of evaluations conducted annually, including formative evaluations on the design and implementation of programs to inform course corrections, as well as summative evaluations on pilot projects to assess impact and the possibility of scale-up.
8. In compliance with the standards, explore flexible ways to conduct timelier, quality-enhancing assessments to support decision making.
9. Take the evaluation process to the territories in a phased approach. Launch a pilot program in a few select territories to gain insight into the challenges and solutions before a broader, nationwide rollout.

ENHANCE COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

10. Develop a novel and comprehensive communication process that integrates various platforms and uses non-technical language to publicize evaluation results.
11. Train DSEPP staff and the technical directorates of the DNP in knowledge brokering so they are better able to translate the technical aspects of research into layman's terms for policy applications and broader communication.
12. For every evaluation, map the key actors and spaces where the evaluation and its recommendations should be disseminated, such as senior officials, Congress, beneficiaries, and civil society. Messages and dissemination formats should be tailored to each stakeholder group to enable their engagement.
13. Craft executive summaries for all evaluations and generate a "Transition Kit" to inform the new government about the most relevant findings from evaluations, as well as DNP's evidence-generating instruments.
14. Report annually on lessons learned in all evaluations undertaken. This knowledge sharing can expose pitfalls and wins and inform the design of future assessments.
15. Upgrade the repository of evaluations and recommendations and make the public interface more user-friendly.
16. Train the DNP technical directorates on conveying to all sectors the importance of the evaluation process and adopting evlaution recommendations.

PROMOTE RECOMMENDATIONS

17. Involve program and sector end-users in the entire evaluation process, particularly at the end when recommendations are formulated. Their knowledge of the specific program or sector can strengthen recommendations and eventual uptake.
18. Drawing on the DNP monitoring system already in place, develop a pilot platform for monitoring recommendations. Include a public dashboard to facilitate greater transparency on recommendation uptake.
19. Develop an indicator on the use of evaluation and link it to the mechanism for monitoring recommendations.

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