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Identifying the Intended Use(s) of an Evaluation

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The purpose of this guideline is to provide ideas and suggestions for identifying the intended uses of an evaluation. It draws attention to the importance of identifying the uses of the evaluation from the initial planning stage and provides 'further readings' and 'web resources'.

All of the evaluation guidelines and highlights referenced are available on the Evaluation Unit's website at: http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-32492-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

"What do you think is the most important key to evaluation?" It is being serious, diligent and disciplined about asking the questions, over and over: "What are we really going to do with this? Why are we doing it? What purpose is it going to serve? How are we going to use this information?" This typically gets answered casually: "We are going to use the evaluation to improve the program"— without asking the more detailed questions: "What do we mean by improve the program? What aspects of the program are we trying to improve?" So a focus develops, driven by use"

- Michael Quinn Patton, 2002

Why is it important to identify the intended use(s) of the evaluation?

The question – "What are the intended uses of the evaluation?" – may seem exceedingly straightforward; in fact, so much so that it can be overlooked. Yet, this is one of the most critical questions involved in planning an evaluation. The quality of most other aspects of the evaluation will hinge on how well you have addressed this fundamental query. By clarifying and exposing the intended use(s) of the evaluation for each user, the complex task of evaluation planning will be more explicit and focused, and the evaluation process itself, more effective.

At IDRC, if you cannot identify and articulate the primary intended users and uses of the evaluation you should not conduct the evaluation. Unused evaluation is a waste of precious human and financial resources.

How to determine the intended use(s) of the evaluation?

Determining the intended use(s) of an evaluation should involve a negotiation between the evaluator/evaluation team (the person or team who conducts the evaluation process and has responsibility for facilitating use) and the primary intended user(s). In most cases, the evaluation will have multiple uses. By involving all the primary intended users in the process of determining the type of evaluation that is needed, the various perspectives are better represented and users can establish consensus about the primary intended use(s).

Primary intended users

From beginning to end, the evaluation process is designed and carried out around these individuals' needs. They have the responsibility to do things differently (e.g., make decisions, change strategies, take action, change policies, etc.), because of their engagement in the evaluation process or with the evaluation findings.

What are possible intended use(s) of evaluation?

1. Formative vs. summative evaluation

Evaluation research is characterized by its array of designs, approaches, methods, and uses. Identifying use helps to clarify the appropriateness of different approaches and methods within different situations, and to make transparent what is expected of the evaluation. Consider, for instance, the general intended uses of formative versus summative evaluations. On the one hand, formative evaluations typically focus on improvement and tend to be more open ended, gathering varieties of data about strengths and weaknesses with the expectation that both will be found and each can be used to inform an ongoing cycle of reflection and innovation. Generally, the intended use of a formative evaluation is learning.

On the other hand, summative evaluations generally serve “third party” interests (i.e., donor organizations, board members, key stakeholders, etc.), and are conducted after the program has been implemented. They render judgment about the overall effectiveness, merit or worth of the project/program. Generally, the intended use of a summative evaluation is accountability.

The need for clarity on use is particularly stark with formative and summative evaluations. To engage with a project/program team in an evaluation process telling them that it's for learning and improvement and then using that evaluation to make summative decisions about the merit or worth (or continuation) of the project/program is unethical. They will not trust evaluation processes after that and will lose an important way of improving their effectiveness.

2. Process vs. Findings Uses

Process use(s) are changes in procedures, practice, and culture that result from the conduct of an evaluation, as participants learn from their involvement in the evaluation. Some examples of process use(s) that you can intentionally build into, and expect from, an evaluation include:

1. Enhancing shared understanding
2. Supporting and reinforcing the program intervention
3. Increasing engagement, self determination and ownership
4. Nurturing an evaluation culture within the organization
5. Learning evaluative thinking
6. Building capacity
7. Enhancing communications

The findings, conclusion, or recommendations of an evaluation can support decision-making or changed thinking and behaviour by the primary intended user(s). This can include:

1. Making judgments of merit or worth
2. Facilitating improvements
3. Generating knowledge (Patton, 76)

Facilitation Questions

How could the evaluation contribute to program/project improvement?
How could the evaluation contribute to making decisions about the project/program?
What outcomes do you expect from the evaluation process?
What do you expect to do differently because of this evaluation?

The importance of timing

When thinking about intended use(s), you should also consider the timing of the evaluation. Evaluations that emphasize use should be timed so that their findings are available when decisions are being made or actions are being taken. For example, although it may seem most appropriate to evaluate a given program or project at its end – when ‘results’ should be observable – this is often the least opportune time for the evaluation findings to be used because critical decisions about the program or project have likely already been made.

Questions to Ask of Intended Users to Establish an Evaluation’s Intended Influence on Decisions

- What decision, if any, is the evaluation finding expected to influence?
- When will decisions be made? By whom? When, then, must the evaluation findings be presented to be timely and influential?
- What is at stake in the decisions? From whom? What controversies or issues surround the decision?
- What’s the history and context of the decision-making process?
- What other factors (values, politics, personalities, promises already made) will affect the decision-making? What might happen to make the decision irrelevant or keep it from being made? In other words, how volatile is the decision-making environment?
- How much influence do you expect the evaluation to have – realistically?
- To what extent has the outcome of the decision already been determined?
- What data and findings are needed to support decision making?
- What needs to be done to achieve that level of influence?
- Who needs to be involved for the evaluation to have that level of influence?
- How will we know afterward if the evaluation was used as intended?

IDRC staff and management can call on the Evaluation Unit for support in identifying evaluation uses at any stage. The Evaluation Unit provides technical input, facilitates planning and implementation processes, and provides print and electronic resources to support the ongoing evaluation work of the Centre and its partners.

Sources & Further Reading

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Feinstein O. 2002. *Use of Evaluations and the Evaluation of their Use*. Evaluation. vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 433-439(7), Sage Publications Inc.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 1997. Utilization-Focused Evaluation. Sage Publications, California.

Stufflebeam, D. 2001. *Evaluation Models*. New Directions for Evaluation. Volume: 2001, Issue: 89.

Weiss, Carol. 1995. *The Four I's of School Reform: Ideology, Interests, Information, and Institution*. Harvard Education Review. V.65 N.4, Winter 1995, p. 571-592.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation. 1998. W.K Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook. Michigan.

Web Resources

Overseas Development Instrument: Evaluation Follow-up: Types Of Use
http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/modules/m2/pdfs/10_2.pdf

Utilization-Focused Evaluation: <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/ufecchecklist.htm>

Weiss, Carol. Evaluating Capacity Development: Experiences from Research and Development Organizations Around the World (Ch. 7, Using & Benefiting from an Evaluation). [http://www.agricta.org/pubs/isnar2/ECDBook\(H-ch7\).pdf](http://www.agricta.org/pubs/isnar2/ECDBook(H-ch7).pdf)