Identifying the Intended User(s) of an Evaluation

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The purpose of this guideline is to provide suggestions on identifying the primary intended user(s) of an evaluation. It is designed to shed light on the importance of identifying the user(s) from the initial planning stage and provides a 'further readings' and 'web resources' section.

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

"A psychology of use undergirds and informs utilization-focused evaluation: intended users are more likely to use evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings; they are more likely to understand and feel ownership if they've been actively involved; by actively involving primary intended users, the evaluator is training users in use, preparing the groundwork for use, and reinforcing the intended utility of the evaluation every step along the way."

- Michael Quinn Patton, 1998

Who is an evaluation user?

An evaluation user is one who has the 'willingness', 'authority', and 'ability' to put learnings from the evaluation process or evaluation findings to work in some way. The primary intended users are those particular individuals or groups who are affected by the outcome of the evaluation, are in a position to make decisions about the evaluation, and intend to use the evaluation process or findings to inform their decisions or actions. The primary intended users should be designated at the outset of an evaluation, and the evaluator should maintain frequent interaction and involvement of the users to be sure that the evaluation specifically addresses their values and needs.

It is important to distinguish between the intended *audience* and the *user(s)* of an evaluation. An audience is a group, whether or not they are the client(s), who will or should see and may react to an evaluation [Scriven, p. 62]. The audience is interested in the evaluation but has a more passive relationship with it than the primary intended user(s). For example, a PI may conduct an evaluation on the effectiveness of its projects' dissemination strategies in reaching municipal politicians in order to use that information to plan future projects. That PI is the primary intended user and one dimension of the evaluation's quality will be judged based on whether that PI integrated the findings into its future projects. Other PIs and agencies may also be interested in the topic and the evaluation report may be disseminated to them but their use of the findings will not be the responsibility of the evaluator. In order to reach different audiences, the evaluation findings may have to be packaged and disseminated in a variety of ways.

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.

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

By involving users in the process – i.e., clarifying intended uses and identifying priority questions, preferred methods, and appropriate dissemination strategy with them -- the evaluation becomes more focused on aspects that will inform and influence their future actions or decisions. This increased involvement in all stages of the evaluation process typically results in increased use of the evaluation. If these individuals or groups are not included, the evaluation runs the risk of producing results that may never be used.

Facilitation Questions

1. Who are the primary intended users of the evaluation? For whom are you doing the evaluation?
2. Who are the target audiences of the evaluation? (i.e., interested in knowing about the evaluation findings)
3. Which groups/individuals are most likely to be affected by the evaluation?
4. Which groups/individuals are most likely to make decisions about the project/program being evaluated?
5. Whose actions and/or decisions will be influenced by their engagement with the evaluation process or evaluation findings?
6. How can the intended users of the evaluation be involved?
7. What challenges/barriers might you face in identifying and involving users?

Promoting Evaluative Thinking Among Primary Intended Users

It is important to foster evaluative thinking in the primary intended user(s). Those who require or use evaluations may not be well versed in evaluation practices and approaches. Thus, promoting intended use by intended users requires an interim step – the fostering of a general awareness and understanding of the practices and procedures of evaluation. Characteristics of evaluative thinking include:

- increased clarity, specificity and focus;
- being systematic and making assumptions explicit;
- operationalizing program concepts, ideas and goals;
- distinguishing inputs and processes from outcomes;
- valuing empirical evidence; and,
- separating statements of fact from interpretations and judgments (Patton, 1997).

Since primary intended users are often unaccustomed to thinking 'evaluatively', the practice has to be learned. Beyond professional education and training, perhaps the best means of promoting evaluative thinking among users is to involve them directly in each phase of the evaluation. It is the responsibility of the evaluator to guarantee ongoing iterative discussion and feedback, and generate a culture of dialogue with the intended users (the evaluator is the person or team who conducts the evaluation process and has responsibility for facilitating use).

IDRC staff and management can call on the Evaluation Unit for support in identifying evaluation users 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

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

Scriven, Michael. 1981. Evaluation Thesaurus. Fourth Edition, Sage Publications, California.

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. 1999. *Evaluations – for Whom and for What Purpose?* Sida Evaluations: Newsletter.

Web Resources

Evaluation Checklists: http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/checklistmenu.htm