An Introduction to Evaluation

1. Introduction

In this handout an overview is given of various aspects and dimensions of the evaluation of projects and programmes. The intention is not to summarise existing knowledge and literature, but rather to sketch a framework in which concepts can be understood and decisions in the evaluation process can be explained.

2. Evaluation defined

The DAC Expert Group of the OECD defines evaluation as:

- An assessment, as systematic and objective as possible,
- of the design, implementation and results (outputs),
- of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy.

In an assessment all the facts related to a specific situation are considered, after which conclusions are drawn and a judgement is made. Subsequently, recommendations can be made for the future. These recommendations should be founded on a thorough analysis that explains the project's level of performance. The assessment should be transparent, systematic and objective, or in other words, it should be repeatable. Ideally, if the evaluator were replaced by others, doing the same evaluation (same ToR, same project, same time, etc.) the findings should lead to the same conclusions and recommendations.

However, in practice, the outcome of an assessment will always be subjective to some extent. Time or financial constraints usually make it impossible to make an in-depth investigation into all the facts. Also, the step from facts to judgement is not purely value-free, as it involves interpretation from the side of the evaluator. So subjectivity cannot be avoided, but it can be accounted for in the evaluation report. The report should contain a chapter with a thorough description of the methodology used and a justification of the chosen approach. How was the necessary information collected? Is the evaluation based on literature studies, interviews, questionnaires, observation or a combination? What were the considerations to choose a certain technique? What kind of questions were asked in questionnaires and interviews? All of these aspects should be carefully documented.

The object of an evaluation is an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy. A programme is a cluster of interrelated projects. For example, a country can have a programme to improve basic health care services, implemented through basic health care projects in various regions. Another type of programme is an integrated multisectoral regional development programme, comprising projects in various fields, for example basic health, education, agriculture and irrigation. In the evaluation of a policy an assessment is made on a higher level, for example of a country's overall agriculture policy.

Evaluations are often primarily focused on an assessment of the way in which the project, programme or policy has been implemented and of the outcome that has been achieved.
However, there are strong relations between implementation and project design. It is very well possible that a project has been implemented as planned without having the desired effects. This means that in a much earlier phase of the project cycle, the identification phase or the formulation phase, a mismatch was made between the project purpose and the way in which it should be reached. If in an evaluation the focus is too much on implementation only, these kinds of observations will be missed with the result that the evaluation is in fact not complete.

3. The aim of evaluation

The aim of evaluation is to assess a project’s, programme’s or policy’s quality, usually in terms of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. In the project cycle management approach, this involves an examination of the objectives on different levels as formulated in the logical framework.

- Relevance
  The question to be answered assessing relevance is: To what extent are the intervention’s project purpose and overall objective responding to the needs and priorities of the different stakeholders?

  An assessment of relevance is different from the other four indicators in that it does not refer to the actual performance of a project. It assess the project’s intentions and not the project’s achievements.

  The project purpose is the ultimate goal to be realised by the project. It should always aim at sustainable benefits for the beneficiaries. The overall objective is a higher goal, usually at policy level, to which the project, together with other projects, programmes and policies, will contribute.

  The major stakeholders in a project are the beneficiaries, the donor and the national or local government, or other types of intermediate organisations like NGOs. In the identification and formulation phases, their objectives had to be brought in line with each other, resulting in a project plan that satisfies all parties. However, during the years of project implementation, the priorities and objectives of one or more of the stakeholders may have changed, with the result that the project purpose or overall objective does not respond to their needs anymore. An evaluation some years after the original design may assist to decide whether project purpose and overall objective need to be adjusted.

- Effectiveness
  The question to be answered assessing effectiveness is: To what extent have the project results and the project purpose been achieved?

  In measuring effectiveness it has to be determined whether and to what extent the beneficiaries are enjoying the services and products delivered by the project, as formulated in the project results, and the benefits of the project, as formulated in the project purpose. Have the activities indeed led to the results? Has the delivery of results led to the foreseen effects at the beneficiaries’ level? All internal and external factors that influenced the achievement of the results and the project purpose are
examined. Facts about the level of achievement, and also the underlying possible explanation for success or failure are the basis for analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

- **Efficiency**  
The question to be answered assessing efficiency is: Have the available means been optimally exploited?

Here it is assessed whether the human, physical and financial resources have been properly used to realise the activities and results or outputs. The actual utilisation of resources is compared to the plan and budget. Efficiency focuses on how the results are realised, not on their effects.

- **Impact**  
The question to be answered assessing impact is: What wider effects have been caused by the intervention?

The logical framework does not only describe the objectives of the intervention itself, but also the higher goal(s), the overall objective(s) to which the intervention is supposed to contribute. The overall objective is a foreseen positive effect of the intervention. Most probably, the overall objective is not the intervention’s only effect. During implementation other foreseen or unforeseen, positive or negative effects will occur.

It often is not easy to determine to what extent the intervention is the cause of a certain effect. A good knowledge of the region and sector is an important element in assessing impact. Other ways to determine a project’s impact can be by comparing projects, or simply by asking the opinion of the beneficiaries themselves.

- **Sustainability**  
The question to be answered assessing sustainability is: Is it likely that the intervention’s positive effects continue after the project period?

Depending on the nature of the intervention the following factors determining sustainability can be considered:

1. Policy support  - Do the country’s policies allow for continuation?
2. Appropriate technology  - Are the beneficiaries and intermediate organisations technically and financially capable of using the chosen technology after outside support has ceased?
3. Environmental protection  - Is the continuation of environmental protection guaranteed?
4. Socio-cultural aspects (including gender aspects)  - Socio-cultural aspects determine who will actively participate and take on responsibility. Have measures been taken to ensure ongoing participation of all members of the target group?
5. Institutional and management capacity - Have measures been taken to ensure the future functioning of organisations set up or strengthened in the intervention?

6. Economic and financial aspects - Will in the long run the benefits continue to be higher than the costs, which will now have to be entirely borne by the target group itself?

If an intervention is to be sustainable, meaning that the beneficiaries will continue to enjoy its benefits after outside assistance has ceased, its design must include provisions that make sustainability possible. To promote sustainability, the beneficiaries should participate in the project right from its start, i.e. from its identification and formulation phases. The activities to be implemented in the project must include elements like awareness raising, capacity building or income generation.

Sustainability can be measured only several years after project closure. However, usually the assignment to measure it comes right after or even just before the project ends. If this is the case, sustainability can be assessed only on probability. For instance, if during a water supply project, the contribution from the beneficiaries for pump maintenance has increased over the years, it can be assumed that also in future they will be able to generate enough maintenance funds.

![Evaluation and Intervention Logic](image)

**Figure 1: Evaluation and Intervention Logic**
Clarity, acceptance and quality of the project design determine to a large extent the project’s performance. The extent to which the qualities relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability have to be realised, have to be predetermined during the formulation phase of the intervention. This not only facilitates implementation, but also evaluation of the project.

4. Types of evaluations

One way to distinguish between types of evaluation is to make a difference between internal and external evaluations. An internal evaluation is initiated by the project organisation and primarily serves its own internal information needs. An external evaluation is initiated by a party external to the project, for example the donor or a government agency, and mainly serves to meet this external party’s information needs.

Evaluations can also be categorised by the moment in time that they are executed. In the project cycle, evaluation is located at the end of the cycle: when a project is finished, its results are evaluated. This can be done either immediately after the project has been finished or some years later in a final evaluation or in an impact evaluation. In a final evaluation, the project is mainly evaluated for its effectiveness and efficiency. The outcome of the evaluation is used to formulate recommendations for the project’s next phase or for the formulation of new projects and programmes.

Impact evaluations are done a few years after a project has finished. The project is assessed on impact and sustainability and the results and recommendations are used as input for the identification or formulation of new projects and programmes.

In addition, final and impact evaluations can be used as input for reorientation on the higher strategic level. In such a case the evaluation results of several projects and programmes are used to review the policy under which they were executed. Final and impact evaluations are often external evaluations, initiated by the donor.

Large projects and programmes often have a mid-term evaluation halfway project implementation to assess their progress. The aim of this type of evaluation is to see whether the project is still on the right track, following the project outline as agreed upon in the formulation phase. These evaluations, or reviews, assess the project organisation and project structure. Mid-term evaluations are usually internal evaluations.
Other, more specific types of evaluations that can take place in the implementation phase are:

- trouble shooting evaluations, to find solutions for specific problems that have arisen during project implementation;
- termination evaluations, which are carried out when the donor wants to end a project before full implementation. A termination evaluation aims to assess whether the donor’s motives to close the project are valid;
- audits, to assess the quality of the administrative and financial functioning of the project organisation.

5. Steps in evaluation

An evaluation can be considered a (small) project in its own right, with its own objectives to be achieved, activities to be done and organisational aspects to be arranged. The process of evaluation consists of various steps, which are described below.

**Step 1. Decision to evaluate**

First, the decision to conduct an evaluation has to be made. By whom this decision is made, depends on whether it is an internal or an external evaluation. Often, the decision to have an evaluation has been preplanned in the project’s formulation phase. Often the project plan already foresees in the execution of mid-term, final and/or impact evaluation. The reasons to have an evaluation need to be clear.
Other common reasons for deciding that an evaluation (or review) should take place are:
- to justify a decision (e.g. project extension);
- to solve problems;
- to address political questions (e.g. impact of a development programme).

The Terms of Reference (ToR) reflect why the evaluation will be held, i.e. the evaluation’s objectives, and the evaluation’s design.

**Step 2. Prepare Terms of Reference**

When it is decided that an evaluation has to take place, it has to be determined what exactly will be the object and scope of the evaluation. These are laid down in the (ToR). In addition to the object and scope, the ToR also includes a description of the background of the project, provisions regarding the approach to be followed, the expertise required and other functional or technical specifications. The drafting of the ToR can be a difficult process when there are conflicting interests or maybe even hidden agendas among the parties involved: the project team, the donor(s) and the (various) beneficiaries. Difficulties like these can to a certain extent be avoided by discussing the ToR with all parties concerned.

Another dilemma concerning the preparation of the ToR is the question of how precise they should be to ensure the correct execution of the evaluation with the risk of leaving too little freedom to the evaluator who after all is the expert. The ToR should contain a profile of the consultant, stating the expertise required and a clear indication of which part of the evaluation’s design will be left to the consultant.

**Step 3. Select and contract evaluation team**

The selection of the evaluator or evaluation team has to be done following pre-established criteria, as described in the ToR. These criteria should cover the technical and personal qualifications that are relevant for the proper execution of the evaluation.

in order to be able to select the most appropriate consultant, the tender procedure usually requires the consultants to give their interpretation of and reaction on the ToR.

**Step 4. Planning and preparatory work**

Next, the evaluation team has to prepare a time table and finalise the work plan in terms of methodology and division of tasks among the team members. Also, the team will have to prepare itself for the actual implementation by reviewing the relevant documentation, if available.

**Step 5. Implement the evaluation**

In the implementation phase of the evaluation, all relevant data are collected and a start is made with data analysis. In the process of data collection, the evaluation team will need the assistance from the project team in various ways, e.g. to arrange interviews, to identify respondents for questionnaires, to organise site visits or meetings, etc.
Step 6. Prepare the report

After all data have been collected and analysed, the evaluation team prepares a draft version of the report. Next to the conclusions and recommendations, the report should contain an exhaustive description and justification of the methodology used and, if applicable, a description of problems encountered and the way in which they were dealt with.

Step 7. Final phase

The draft report is distributed among the relevant parties, like the donor, the project team and representatives of the beneficiaries to give their comments. It may be advisable to organise a meeting in which the findings of the evaluation are discussed. Finally, the evaluation team prepares the final version of the report and distributes it. The work of the evaluation team ends here, but the project team and the donor now have to give follow-up to the recommendations made.

6. The use made of evaluation studies

The recommendations following from evaluation studies often propose elements of change. This can be on different levels: changes concerning the project objectives or activities or changes regarding management or project organisation. The donor and/or the project team now has to decide whether they will carry through the proposed changes.

Still, many evaluators and others complain that there is very little organisational learning within donor organisations and that evaluation studies play a very minor role. This is true but, as was established earlier, most evaluations are not made for such a purpose. They are implemented to justify decisions, because procedures indicate that an evaluation should take place, or sometimes even for purely political reasons. So, the statement that evaluation studies are not used is not correct. It can be concluded that often they are not used for the purposes they pretend to be intended for, but this is a quite different matter.

Similar remarks can be made on the fact that also the parties directly involved often appear to do very little with evaluation results. For them evaluations often are not really management tools but rather periods of time in which some special efforts are required to satisfy donor demands. They do not really feel free to influence the ToR, if only because these sometimes reflect a world of thinking very much different from their own.

This calls for a change in attitude, starting with improving evaluation design. As evaluations are often done simply because it is time, their ToR often lack a clear evaluation purpose: what is the evaluation intended to achieve? What does the initiator need it for and what does the user of the evaluation results need it for? In addition, users of evaluation results should pay more attention to the evaluation’s positive findings, and not focus only on recommendations for change. Good examples and best practices should be highlighted more, not only within the boundaries of the project concerned but also outside: the project can provide positive lessons for new or other projects and programmes.