

EVALUATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONALISATION

Objectives

Two over-all objectives as to why evaluations are carried out in the first place can be differentiated: accountability and improvement. While they do not exclude each other, they do call for a different distribution of time and resources during the execution. Accountability relates to an "inspectorial" exercise, which seeks justification for an activity undertaken. Depending on the customer, it should investigate if best value was achieved for money invested, or reinforce a "licence for practice" for the organisations. The evaluation provides a "measuring stick" for judgement on the activity. Improvement as a main objective, in contrast, means to provide the actors with a thorough review of the achievements against the potential of an activity. An evaluation exercise is principally aiming at providing recommendations for future continuation or repetition of certain activities or programmes. The result of the evaluation is rather a "torch" which allows for illumination and development.

While the accountability dimension is often requested by national or EU legislation and the need to demonstrate that taxpayers' money was well spent is stressed, it is, however the conviction of the author that the improvement dimension is even more important. Whatever - excellent or disappointing - the results of the project or programme were, policy development and reform continue, and the products of the programme need the utmost valorisation in the present (and future) context. Knowing what happened in the programme is above all a resource for inserting useful input to the national or regional system for its ongoing improvement. Moreover, it is necessary to pay specific attention to the management processes and communication lines between the different institutions and actors in the programme ("paymaster", "provider", and "participants"). All of them need to be consulted and assessed in terms of objectives, performance and outputs. This includes an early investigation on the Policy or Strategy documents itself, and whether they set the right objectives for the given situation and context.

Process

Our understanding of what evaluation in the given field should achieve can be explained by a clear-cut three-step process: the image of "translating" the available input (information, documents, interviews, etc) into output.

1 Evaluation Input (Past)

When collecting input, we will pre-define "Dimensions of Performance" in order to answer the question "What are we looking for?" and Information and Data Gathering Methods (our performance indicators) in order to know "How do we look for it?".

2 Core Evaluation (Execution)

The analytical part of evaluation needs to be based on clarity on "How to make judgements?" based on the input (Performance Indicators).

3 Evaluation Output (Future)

Communicating the evaluation's findings in an appropriate way to the desired addressees is an indispensable part of the exercise. By answering the question "How do we represent the findings, judgements and recommendations?" we attach highest importance to the character of deliverables and products (beyond the called-for Final Report). Only by targeted dissemination and communication, in particular with decision-makers and actors in the field, the evaluation can have the desired impact on future programmes, policy cycles and activities.

ad 1: It is anticipated programme evaluation that solid information is available at the PMU. However, additional information will need to be gathered from other sources like the target groups, project managers, the Ministries involved, scientific institutes and universities, government institutions, and others. Language and communication skills are necessary to guarantee that the evaluation can make best use of the interviews in terms of full understanding and un-mediated communication. Guidelines for these interviews will be developed to ensure comparable and comprehensive data. Among the ultimate end-users of the programme's products are the end-users and target groups. Their learning process and degree of satisfaction will be captured via a qualitative questionnaire (combining ranking of pre-defined statements and open questions to be filled in during the evaluation meetings, and analysed electronically thereafter. In addition, a sample of pilot groups will be visited by the Evaluation team to get a direct impression on the actual implementation and learning processes.

ad 2: As is explained below in more detail, the actual measuring will benchmark the performance of the actors against other similar programmes and projects in neighbouring countries or regions. At the same time, projects and programmes in other sectors will be looked at to find out the specific achievements of experts, and programmes by other donors will be contacted to see the individual contribution and successes of this programme within the foreign technical assistance for the national or regional policy and social system. In order to reinforce the outside view, it is helpful to invite administrators and teachers from non-pilot groups in the field to a Programme Valorisation Meeting, and produce a second questionnaire asking for their views and knowledge on the programme ("peer review").

ad 3: Often Terms of Reference foresee the holding of a Programme Review Conference (PRC) during the evaluation exercise. It is meant to combine a presentation of programme achievements with the findings and recommendations of the Evaluation Team. However, a future-oriented view of the evaluators triggers the author to propose an adapted version of the PRC; it will – if accepted - be held in a smaller scale, and with a more focussed aim. It should in the first place initiate personal inter-action with most of the relevant actors of the programme, and provided a forum to announce the holding, objectives and steps of the evaluation itself to the participants. But its main aim should be to become a "programme valorisation meeting" (PVM) at the end of the Evaluation duration. Reduced in size and scopes, but deepened in terms of content and focus, it will mainly serve to expose the hypotheses, findings and recommendations of the Evaluation Team to the recipient actors – with a forward-looking attitude. A draft discussion paper by the Evaluation Team - to be distributed to the PVM participants beforehand - will create a common knowledge base on the programme outputs, provoke in-depth discussions, and test results and proposed actions. A PVM will therefore allow for more action-oriented recommendations, and should culminate in practical proposals on how to implement recommendations, and how to target future assistance by the programme donor

and other donors in the field. Nevertheless, ultimate decisions on the objectives and design of the PVM are to be taken jointly with the donor and the PMU once after the contract is awarded.

Reference Bases

Amongst the three types of measuring results for evaluation (criteria-referenced, norm-referenced and ipsitive-referenced), again all three types are implicit in most Terms of Reference: external criteria (the objectives of the programme) were set in accordance with the Strategic Document or work programmes, and need comparison with the results at the end of the programme. However, the view on other programmes (in other sectors; in other regions or countries; or by other donors) indicates the preparation of a judgement on how well this specific programme did as opposed to similar ones. The economic and - above all - political environment which the programme was surrounded and constrained by may have caused the strongest influences of all external factors on the ultimate performance.

Finally, a judgement of the internal capacities of the institutions, organisations and people involved is crucial to allow for thorough findings on the performance of the programme - compared to itself. It is illuminative to see how much learning actually took place by the structures and end-users over time; it is equally imperative to see the limitations and borders of the programme; it is crucial to compare the functioning of policy-making before and after the programme; in conclusion, to answer the question if the programme made a difference to the political and social structure as such. Here the critical requirement is to investigate how much the programme experts were able to transfer knowledge to their counter-parts, and how far day-to-day work in the management of the system was improved in a sustainable way.

The evaluation cycle for projects and programmes is well described in the following scheme. It convincingly argues for the logical sequence of external factors (aims - 1) translated into concrete internal objectives for the programme (2), the pilot programme's internal outputs (3), and their repercussions on the policy system and society in general (impact, often translating into new programmes - 4). While the theoretical understanding of evaluation is closely related to this cyclical improvement mechanism, it remains however clear that the timing, scope and dimensions of most evaluations are far from aiming at such a complex picture (e.g. by developing long-term impact indicators to name but one).

