PROGRAM CYCLE

EVALUATION TOOLKIT

CONDUCTING AN EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT FOR USAID EVALUATIONS

Introduction

When asked about barriers to evaluation quality and use, USAID staff members often cite instances of an evaluation taking place at the wrong time, focused on the wrong questions, or failing to engage stakeholders from the beginning. Similarly, external evaluation teams can find themselves challenged to collect and analyze data while simultaneously reconstructing the theory of change and adapting to the evolving needs of stakeholders.

To address these barriers, in recent years, USAID has emphasized better evaluation planning (ADS 201.3.6.7), which is reflected in higher standards for evaluation statements of work (SOW), as well as renewed Country Development Coordination Strategies (CDCS) and activity or project design processes that incorporate evaluation planning at the onset (ADS 201.3.1.2.A). One approach to further strengthen evaluation planning is to take a strategic pause before conducting an evaluation and conduct an evaluability assessment.

What is an Evaluability Assessment?

In ADS 201.3.6.7 Evaluability Assessment is defined as the process that examines the extent to which an activity or project can be evaluated in a reliable and credible fashion. It helps in determining whether an OU should undertake an evaluation, and, if so, what questions it should ask and how to design the evaluation.

Evaluability assessment is also a approach for determining the changes that are needed to increase readiness and the type of evaluation approach most suitable to assess the project or activity's performance and/or impact.

While most staff at USAID consider these concepts when writing an evaluation SOW, an evaluability assessment offers a systematic process for assessing readiness, which can inform the scoping and development of an evaluation SOW. It can also generate recommendations for necessary changes to the activity or project to be implemented before the evaluation takes place.

An evaluability assessment can take many forms depending on the specific context. USAID staff and partners can conduct the assessment internally or engage an outside consultant or consultant team. If engaging consultants, it is important to keep in mind that their role is to facilitate the process rather than to produce a deliverable independently. In either case, USAID staff should expect to dedicate time and effort to the evaluability assessment.

Why conduct an Evaluability Assessment?

When planning an evaluation, an operating unit may decide to undertake an evaluability assessment as an initial step to increase the likelihood that an evaluation will provide timely and credible information for decision-making. Even when valid information needs exist and leadership supports conducting an

evaluation, there may still be outstanding questions regarding whether conducting a planned evaluation is appropriate and feasible.

For instance:
1. Will the evaluation findings be provided in time to inform decisions such as exercising option years, designing a follow-on program, creating a country or sector strategic plan, or making a policy decision?
2. Is there a demand for the evaluation among potential users?
3. Is an adequate budget available to fund the evaluation?
4. Will it be possible to answer the proposed evaluation questions based on facts, evidence, and data with findings supported by quantitative and qualitative information that is reliable, valid, and generalizable?
5. Will the benefits of the evaluation exceed the costs of the evaluation (including both monetary costs and burden on staff, implementers, beneficiaries, and stakeholders)?

An evaluability assessment can help answer these questions. It does not replace the need for strong activity or project design, active management, and internal consideration of information needs. However, it does present an opportunity for a strategic pause to maximize the usefulness of a proposed evaluation. Reasons to conduct evaluability assessments include:
1. Prevent waste of resources on a premature or misfocused evaluation
2. Guide decisions on the worth and usefulness of the evaluation
3. Determine if and how activity or project design, implementation, and monitoring should be adjusted to support a more useful evaluation
4. Help design an appropriate evaluation
5. Build consensus among decision makers

How do I conduct an evaluability assessment?

STEP ONE: CLARIFY THE PURPOSE OF THE EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT

Identify the purpose of the evaluability assessment and what it will focus on. Consider:
- Will the assessment examine an entire activity or project, or a subset of geographic regions or sites?
- What specific components of the activity or project and intended results are of greatest interest?

If you are unsure about either of these questions, you can use the evaluability assessment to clarify them. If you are considering collecting data on comparison groups as part of the evaluation, the evaluability assessment could also explore what comparison groups/sites to use.

STEP TWO: INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS AND INTENDED USERS

In addition to USAID staff, a wide variety of stakeholders often have a role in contributing to and using evaluation findings, including implementing partners, partner country governments, and other donors. Engaging stakeholders in the evaluability assessment helps to understand the possible demand for the evaluation and to generate buy-in for the evaluation.

First, determine their needs and expectations related to the evaluability assessment. This will include

establishing a common understanding of each stakeholder's role and ensuring a transparent process for decision-making —both for the evaluability assessment and the evaluation itself. Use this stage to understand what type of feedback each stakeholder group would find most helpful, and how they would like to receive this feedback.

Second, based on this information, determine how often and when each individual/group should be involved. For example, you may plan to conduct a stakeholder workshop or convene a small advisory committee to oversee key decisions for the evaluation, such as what evaluation questions to include in the SOW.

STEP THREE: DOCUMENT THE ACTIVITY OR PROJECT DESIGN AND CLARIFY INTENT

Collect information from a variety of sources in order to develop a strong understanding of the activity or project, including:
- Goals and objectives
- Theory of change
- Resources and organizational inputs
- Target population
- Activities
- Outputs
- Desired short-term and long-term outcomes
- Context

Much of this information is documented in the mission's CDCS, the Project Development Document (PDD), Activity Approval Memorandum (AAM), the solicitation Statement of Work or Objectives, implementing partner proposals or work plans implementer workplans, and monitoring and evaluation plans. However, other data collection approaches could include conducting a literature review related to the activity or project theory of change, identifying other evaluations on similar topics or with similar target populations, and brainstorming with project staff and stakeholders to fill gaps in the activity or project design.

STEP FOUR: DOCUMENT ACTIVITY OR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION, DATA QUALITY, AND EVALUATION CAPACITY

If the activity or project to be evaluated has already started implementation, the evaluability assessment should determine the current status of implementation and explore *how* the activity or project is being implemented to better understand if it is ready for evaluation and, if so, what type of evaluation design would be appropriate. Information collected in this step will help you assess options for more rigorous evaluation designs.

This is typically the most time-intensive stage of the evaluability assessment. You may use a variety of methods such as document review (including a review of the most recent workplans and quarterly and annual performance reports), key informant interviews, focus groups, and observation. Available performance indicator data should be reviewed to determine if data is being collected and targets are being achieved. During a full evaluation, the details of activity or project implementation will be explored more completely. During the evaluability assessment, you are seeking information on key aspects of "implementation reality" compared to activity or project design that would affect the evaluation, such as start-up timing and broader roll-out activities, any shifts in the overall project (if applicable) focus and planned activities, notable changes in local political, economic, or security situation, new development partners and new stakeholders, etc.

In this step, you should also identify and assess the quality of data systems. This includes partner data management as well as information from partner country information systems, third-party sources, and any other sources you may use in the evaluation. Recent data quality assessments of relevant performance indicators should be reviewed. Document the strengths and limitations of the data systems to monitor implementation of activities, measure outputs, and measure outcomes. This analysis will help you understand what data is available and to what extent it can be used to answer the questions in your evaluation.

STEP FIVE: ANALYZE READINESS FOR EVALUATION AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information collected during the evaluability assessment, analyze the activity or project's readiness for evaluation in the areas listed below.

- **Activity or Project Design**: Is it plausible that the activity or project would achieve its results? Consider:
  - Past research/theory
  - Logic of the theory of change
  - Level of resources provided
  - Level, consistency, and fidelity of implementation of activities
  - Reach of the program
  - Timeframe for implementation
- **Data Availability**: Is there sufficient information available in order to answer key evaluation questions, or can this information be collected? Consider:
  - The outcomes and results of greatest interest to stakeholders
  - Partner monitoring system and capacity to provide data for evaluation
  - Quality of data on key areas of intervention
  - Baseline data availability
  - Costs of new data collection and analysis (financial and time)
- **Context and Environment**: Is the operating environment conducive to conducting the evaluation? Consider:
  - USAID and partner commitment to learning from and using evaluation findings
  - Timing due to political events, seasonality, and other factors
  - Resources to complete the evaluation (financial, staff, equipment, etc.)

Using this analysis, revisit the initial evaluation plans. If the evaluability assessment suggests that the activity or project is ready for evaluation as planned, the information from the evaluability assessment should be used to refine the evaluation SOW and evaluation design.

If the evaluability assessment suggests that the activity or project is not ready to be evaluated as planned, you may (1) consider alternative evaluation approaches or (2) develop recommendations based on the evaluability assessment to increase activity or project readiness. For example, the evaluability assessment may determine it is too early to see significant quantitative results of activity or project end-outcomes, suggesting that it is not appropriate to focus an evaluation on the achievement of those outcomes. However, it may be appropriate to launch an evaluation to explore intermediate results through quantitative and qualitative methods. On the other hand, the evaluability assessment may determine that you cannot feasibly measure all desired outcomes in the evaluation. Instead, the evaluation could focus on a subset of which stakeholders are most interested.

Recommendations to increase activity or project readiness may include:

- **Strengthen the activity or project design:** Revise the activity or project logic to establish a theory of change that is clear, measurable, realistic, and agreed-upon
- **Improve implementation:** Modify activities or projects to have a greater chance of reaching the stated objectives
- **Improve activity or project management:** Apply corrective management actions to improve fidelity to project design and smooth operations
- **Improve measurement:** Develop or improve data systems for project and activity monitoring
- **Strengthen commitment to evaluation:** Generate a common understanding of the evaluation's purpose and use among stakeholders

Acknowledgments and References

Materials for this discussion note were drawn from Dr. Deborah Rog's course on Evaluability Assessment at The Evaluator's Institute, as well as:

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