EVALUATION RESOURCE

UTILIZING AND LEARNING FROM EVALUATIONS

The value of an evaluation is in its use. Evaluations should inform decision-making, contribute to learning, and help improve the quality of development programs. This guidance is intended to assist USAID program and evaluation managers in ensuring that evaluations serve these purposes and support improvement and learning.

Different types of use

The use of evaluations can take different forms. The literature identifies several types of use:

- **Instrumental use** involves the direct use of an evaluation to make decisions or to adapt or change some aspect of a program. For example, USAID may use the findings from a mid-term evaluation of an activity to update some aspect or aspects of the program for the remainder of its implementation, or the findings from the final evaluation of an activity may be used in the design for a follow-on project or activity.
- **Conceptual use** refers to the development of enhanced knowledge or improved understanding of how programs work. For example, an evaluation may contribute to the learning agenda for a Mission's Development Objective (DO) team or Technical Office.
- **Process use** involves gains for those who participate in the evaluation, regardless of the findings, and could include a better understanding of the program being evaluated or the process of evaluation. USAID may use an evaluation to help build the capacity of a local government counterpart or its own staff—for example, by including select individuals on the evaluation team.
- **Symbolic use** refers to token use, intended only to fulfill a requirement or provide justification for actions already taken. Symbolic use implies a "box-checking" exercise, and is not a type of use generally encouraged by USAID or other donors.

These types of uses are not mutually exclusive: A single evaluation may be used in several ways.

Planning for use

Use can happen at various stages in the evaluation process. Evaluation use may occur before or during the evaluation, shortly after it is completed, or long after the findings have been presented. At whatever stage it occurs, if evaluations are to be used as intended, utilization should be planned for.

Identify users and uses. The first step in planning for use is to identify the intended users and the potential uses for the evaluation. Often, USAID commissions evaluations to inform the design of a project or activity (instrumental use), to influence the future direction of an ongoing activity (instrumental use), or to determine the effectiveness of a particular approach

(conceptual use). Sometimes, the evaluation results may be used to influence policy (instrumental use). In these cases, the intended users are USAID, implementing partners, and policymakers. In other cases, intended users may include civil society organizations, local communities, or other donors.

The planning team should consider conducting a stakeholder analysis to identify the range of potential users and uses. They may also find it helpful to distinguish between primary, secondary, and tertiary users and uses. For example, if USAID/Zambia were planning to conduct a final evaluation of one of its health activities, the Mission may identify their health office, the associated DO team, and the implementing partners as the primary users of the evaluation. The Global Health Bureau in Washington may be a secondary user, and the American and Zambian public may be tertiary users.

Consider the timing of use. Consideration of use should affect the timing of the evaluation. For example, if an intended use is to inform the design of an upcoming project, the evaluation should be complete before USAID begins the project design process. Or if USAID hopes the evaluation results will influence policymaking in the host country, the evaluation should be timed so that results are available at the appropriate stage of the legislative calendar.

Simulation of Use

An evaluation planning team would follow these steps to conduct a simulation of use exercise:

1. Devise several potential findings based on the proposed evaluation design and knowledge of the program.

2. With the primary intended users, hold a guided discussion to interpret the potential findings and discuss the decisions or actions that might result.

3. Interpret the simulation to determine if changes to the evaluation design, the evaluation team, data collection, or other aspects of the process would increase utility.

4. With the primary intended users, make an explicit decision to proceed with the evaluation give the likely costs and uses—before data collection begins.

Source: Utilization-Focused Evaluation Checklist. Evaluation Checklists Project. Michael Quinn Patton, January 2002.

Engage users in evaluation planning. To the extent possible, the intended users should be involved in the planning process by developing or reviewing evaluation questions, raising timing considerations, and contributing to the development of the scope of work for the evaluators. In addition to bringing USAID staff, local government counterparts, partners, or others into the process as intended users, the planning team may consider, for example, co-funding an evaluation with another donor if that donor is an intended user or has relationships with other intended users.

Conduct simulations of use. The team may consider using simulations during the evaluation planning stage to further engage intended users and to enhance the likelihood of future use. This activity involves considering several potential outcomes of the evaluation and developing scenarios based on those outcomes (see box). The planning team and intended users would think through the decisions and action points triggered by the potential evaluation findings.

Simulations can help users and stakeholders determine if they should adjust the evaluation questions or scope of work. They can also foster a greater sense of ownership over the evaluation process and prompt users to seriously consider whether an evaluation is worth doing given the costs and the realistic range of uses.

Facilitating use

USAID and other stakeholders are more likely to use the evaluation findings if utilization is facilitated. The following strategies can assist the team in facilitating utilization;

Engage potential users in conducting the evaluation. As the previous section notes, engaging intended users in the evaluation process helps increase the likelihood of future use. Evaluation specialist Michael Quinn Patton notes, "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… preparing the groundwork for use and reinforcing the intended utility of the evaluation." (Utilization-Focused Evaluation Checklist, January 2002.) To enhance the feeling of ownership, the USAID team may want to include an intended user or other stakeholder on the evaluation team. Such participation may also facilitate process use, such as building an evaluation culture or strengthening the capacity of stakeholders to conduct evaluations.

Engage potential users in developing the evaluation recommendations. Most evaluations include recommendations, but developing recommendations need not be the sole responsibility of the evaluator. Recommendations developed by an external evaluation team often lack an insider perspective of what is politically or operationally feasible, thus hindering their chances of being used.

Evidence-based evaluations add considerable value to USAID's learning efforts, but the recommendations for moving forward in response to the evidence can and often should be an inclusive effort. Including the evaluation users in developing recommendations will help "ground-truth" their feasibility and improve the chances that they will be acted upon. The USAID team commissioning the evaluation may consider a facilitated discussion on recommendations in which the evaluation team presents the evaluation findings and potential recommendation options, intended users review and reflect on the findings, and all parties consider and agree upon the final evaluation recommendations to be included in the evaluation report or a separate annex.

Track recommendations and follow up. Following up on recommendations is another way to facilitate and track utilization. USAID staff may use the Post-Evaluation Action Review Template to describe the actions associated with each accepted recommendation and assign responsibility for follow up. During subsequent Portfolio Reviews, the status of the action plans and their use in respective decisions is discussed and documented. An action plan tracker also helps to document how an evaluation was used, should that information be needed for reporting, audits, or other accountability purposes.

Ensure that resulting products are appropriate for intended users. When considering the intended users during the planning process, the team should also think through the products that would be most appropriate for each audience. Are the intended users interested in reading the entire report? Or would a one-page summary be more helpful? Would the use of infographics or other data visualization techniques help convey the findings?

In addition to a report, the planning team may consider other types of products that might be helpful for intended users, including videos, one-or multi-page briefs, presentations, or posters. USAID may consider incorporating some of these activities—such as developing a multi-pager or creating key graphics—into the scope of the work for the evaluators, if appropriate. Consult the section of the Toolkit on Dissemination Plan Guidance for more information.

Reflect on the evaluation process. As with any other activity or effort that involves significant effort, USAID should consider holding an [After Action Review](#) (AAR) soon after the evaluation is complete to reflect on the experience, discuss what happened, and gather lessons to apply in future evaluations. AARs are especially valuable for evaluations that included process use as a goal so that participants in the evaluation have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on what they learned and how they plan to use that knowledge.

Consider use throughout the Program Cycle. The planning team should consider the Program Cycle and where and how an evaluation might contribute to the various phases. For example, the evidence from an evaluation could be used in the design of a project, be cited in a Country Development Cooperation Strategy, contribute to the evidence base for the development of an Agency policy or implementation guidance, or inform portfolio reviews.