Writing Terms of Reference (ToRs) for an Evaluation

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The purpose of this guideline is to provide suggestions on how to write clear and detailed Terms of Reference (ToRs) for an evaluation.

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

What are ToRs?

- ToRs present an overview of the requirements and expectations of the evaluation.
- ToRs are an explicit statement of the roles, resources, and responsibilities of the evaluators and the evaluation client.
- ToRs provide clearly detailed parameters for:
  - *why* and for whom the evaluation is being done;
  - *what* it intends to accomplish;
  - *how* it will be accomplished;
  - *who* will be involved in the evaluation, and;
  - *when* milestones will be reached and when the evaluation will be completed.

Thoughtfully prepared ToRs should be drafted by IDRC staff before the evaluation begins and can be used as the basis for a contract with the external evaluator(s) or to develop a workplan with the internal evaluator(s). Consultants may be involved in further refining the ToRs but, as the client, you have to be clear and comfortable with the content.

Internal or External Evaluator?

Before the evaluation can proceed, a decision needs to be made as to whether the evaluation will be conducted internally, externally, or by a mixed team. In deciding between an internal or external evaluator, you need to consider factors such as time, budget, and intended uses of the evaluation. The main question is whether the evaluator is internal or external to the project, program, or organization being evaluated and it reflects the evaluator's obligation to the initiative being evaluated. Representatives of funding agencies are considered internal if they are involved in carrying out the evaluation. Both internal and external evaluations are legitimate and each has strengths and limitations. A combination of internal and external evaluators will often provide the most reliable and thorough understanding of the interventions being evaluated. In instances where the decision to employ an external consultant for an evaluation has been made, see *Guideline 8 – Selecting and Managing an Evaluation Consultant or Evaluation Team*.

What to include in your ToRs?

While the ToRs of any evaluation process will need to be tailored to the particulars of that study, what follows are some generic elements to include:

1. Provide concise **background information** about the pertinent project/program/issue to be investigated, the nature of the problem being pursued, historical, and environmental information as well as the organizational context in which the evaluation will occur. It should also situate the important stakeholders, including donors, partners, implementing agencies and organizations. This will flow into, and clarify, subsequent sections of the ToRs – particularly the objectives and the rationale for the study.

2. The **purpose/objectives/rationale for the evaluation** provides a clear and succinct response to the question: Why are we doing this evaluation?

3. The ToRs should specify **the intended user(s) and use(s)** of the evaluation (see *Guidelines 6 and 7).* From beginning to end, the evaluation process is designed and carried out around the needs of the primary intended users. They have the responsibility to do things differently (e.g., make decisions, change strategies, take action, change policies, etc.) because of their engagement in the evaluation process or with the evaluation findings.

   Both process and findings uses should be articulated. Using the findings of an evaluation can entail: making judgments of merit or worth; facilitating improvements, or generating knowledge. Process use(s) occur as a result of the learning that happens during the evaluation process. It is evidenced by changes in procedures and culture.

   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.

4. The **issue** to be studied in the evaluation and the **questions** to be answered should be clearly detailed (e.g., what is it you want to find out through this evaluation?). You cannot evaluate everything so you will need to make strategic choices about what warrants in-depth study. There are many interesting and important questions that could be asked, but the group needs to prioritize based on the primary intended uses of the evaluation by the primary intended users. Identifying the questions can take time and considerable negotiation but the questions should be as specific as possible, because vague questions usually yield vague answers.

5. The **principles and approach** that will guide the evaluation (e.g. transparency, partnership, openness, cost-effectiveness, etc.), should be expressed. Given the nature of international development research, questions on gender awareness and cultural sensitivity should be incorporated into this section of the ToRs. A statement on the need for the evaluator to follow appropriate research ethics and procedures should also be included.

6. Once the overall evaluation design has been selected, the methods of investigation should be articulated and should be consistent with answering the evaluation questions, the intended users/uses, the principles and approaches as well as the budget and timeline for the evaluation. The **methodology** section should specify as much detail as possible on:
   - Data collection instruments, protocols and procedures
   - Information sources / Documents to be reviewed
   - Sampling procedures
   - Provisions to obtain needed permissions to collect and report data
   - Provisions to store and maintain security of collected information
   - Procedures for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data
   - Protocols for anonymity/confidentiality
   - Inclusion or not of response from those being evaluated
   - Data presentation and dissemination methods

7. By clearly delineating **roles and responsibilities** of all those involved in the evaluation process, you are more likely to avoid substantive, administration and communication problems. Consider the following and outline clearly who will do what.
   - Who will collect and analyze data?
   - Who will facilitate use?
   - Who will present/disseminate findings?
   - Who will write the report?
   - Who will participate in what meetings/workshops?
   - Who will make logistical arrangements?
   - Who will provide information and access to documents?
   - Who will manage the contract/evaluation process and serve as a liaison with the evaluator/evaluation team?
   - Who will approve the final products?
   - Who will arrange and participate in travel?

8. The **reporting requirements** should spell out the desired:
   - Format (oral, written, video, etc)
   - Dissemination materials (summary, briefs, presentation materials, newsletter article, etc.)
   - Intended audience(s)
   - Content
   - Length
   - Decision on whether the evaluation report should/should not include recommendations
   - Decision on whether you want the completed data sets returned (filled out questionnaires, surveys, interview notes and tapes, etc.)
   - Method of delivery (All reports should be electronically delivered to IDRC in addition to any other form of delivery)
   - Restriction/permission to publish information from or based on the evaluation

   Evaluation *Guidelines 3 "Formatting Evaluation Reports at IDRC"* should be provided to the evaluator/evaluation team.

9. An accurate and detailed **estimation of the cost** of the evaluation for the Fees or Expenses portion of the contract should be presented. An evaluation budget should include the costs of:

- Personnel (e.g. evaluator(s), research assistant, support staff, etc.) per day or lump sum
- Travel (transportation, per diem, travel mobilization expenses, consider class of travel)
- Supplies, equipment and materials (while the Centre cannot purchase equipment or pay overhead on consulting contract where warranted equipment may be rented and direct costs such as long distance phone interviews, can be covered. All indirect costs should be built into fees.)
- Direct communication costs such as phone, fax, email, postage
- Translation
- Copying and printing
- Workshops (design, findings verification, utilization, etc.)
- Facilitation of use by intended user

10. A section should be allocated to detailing the **timeline and milestones** that will be achieved. You can break the phases into:

- Planning
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Reporting
- Facilitation of use (although use will happen throughout)
- To consider reporting and a payment schedule for fees/expenses if applicable

11. The ToRs should alert the evaluator(s) that **the quality of the evaluation report** they produce will be judged by IDRC's Evaluation Unit on four internationally recognized standards: utility, feasibility, accuracy, and propriety. A copy of Evaluation *Guideline 4 "Quality Assessment of IDRC Evaluation Reports"* should be given to the evaluator/ evaluation team.

IDRC staff and management can call on the Evaluation Unit for support in reviewing and revising its evaluation ToRs 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