

Identifying the Intended User(s) and Use(s) of an Evaluation

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The purpose of this guideline is to provide ideas and suggestions for identifying the primary intended user(s) and the intended use(s) of an evaluation and draws attention to the importance of doing so from the initial planning stage.

At IDRC, evaluation should only be conducted if the primary intended user(s) and use(s) can be identified. Unused evaluation is a waste of limited human and financial resources. The decision to evaluate should be strategic and not rote.

IDRC staff, partners, and management can call on the Evaluation Unit for support in identifying evaluation user(s) and use(s) at any stage. The Evaluation Unit provides technical input during evaluation planning and implementation and provides resources to support the ongoing evaluation work of the Centre and its partners.

Utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. Use concerns how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process. Therefore the focus in utilization-focused evaluation is on intended use by intended users.

Michael Quinn Patton (2012)

Who is an evaluation user?

Primary intended user(s): From beginning to end, the evaluation process is designed and carried out around these individuals' needs. 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.

An evaluation user is one who has the 'willingness,' 'authority,' and 'ability' to put learnings from the evaluation process or findings to work. The primary intended users are those particular individuals or groups who are affected by the outcome of the evaluation, are in a position to make decisions about the evaluation, and intend to use the evaluation process or findings to inform their decisions or actions. They should be designated at the outset, and the evaluator should maintain frequent interaction and involvement of the users to be sure that the evaluation specifically addresses their values and needs.

It is important to distinguish between the intended audience and the user(s) of an evaluation. An audience is a group, whether or not they are the client(s), who will or should see and may react to an evaluation (Scriven, 1981). The audience is interested in the evaluation, but has a more passive relationship with it than the primary intended user(s). For example, a program may conduct an evaluation on the effectiveness of its projects' dissemination strategies in reaching municipal politicians in order to use that information to plan future projects. That program is the primary intended user and one dimension of the evaluation's quality is whether that program integrated the findings into its future projects. Other programs and agencies may also be interested in the topic and the evaluation report may be disseminated to them, but their use of the findings will not be the responsibility of the evaluator.

Why is it important to identify the intended user(s) of an evaluation?

By involving users in the process – i.e., clarifying intended uses and identifying priority questions, preferred methods, and an appropriate dissemination strategy – the evaluation becomes more focused on aspects that will inform and influence the users' future actions or decisions. This involvement in all stages of the evaluation process typically results in increased use of the evaluation. If these individuals or groups are not included, the evaluation runs the risk of producing results that may never be used.

Facilitation questions:

1. Who are the primary intended users of the evaluation?
 - a. Which groups/individuals are most likely to be affected by the evaluation?
 - b. Which groups/individuals are most likely to make decisions about the project/program being evaluated?
 - c. Whose actions and/or decisions will be influenced by their engagement with the evaluation process and/or evaluation findings?
2. How can the intended users of the evaluation be involved?
3. What challenges/barriers might you face in identifying and involving users?
4. Who are the target audiences of the evaluation (i.e., those who are interested in knowing about the evaluation findings)?

Promoting evaluative thinking among the primary intended user(s)

It is important to foster evaluative thinking in the primary intended user(s). Those who require or use evaluations may not be well-versed in evaluation practices and approaches. Promoting intended use by intended users may require an interim step of fostering general understanding of evaluation and thinking 'evaluatively'. One strategy is to involve users in each phase of the evaluation. It is the responsibility of the evaluator(s) to generate a culture of dialogue with the intended users.

Why is it important to identify the intended use(s) of the evaluation?

Q: 'What do you think is the most important key to evaluation?' A: It is being serious, diligent and disciplined about asking the questions, over and over: 'What are

we really going to do with this? Why are we doing it? What purpose is it going to serve? How are we going to use this information?' This typically gets answered casually: 'We are going to use the evaluation to improve the program'— without asking the more detailed questions: 'What do we mean by improve the program? What aspects of the program are we trying to improve?' So a focus develops, driven by use.

Michael Quinn Patton (1997), in conversation with IDRC

What are the intended uses of the evaluation? This is one of the most critical, and too often overlooked, questions involved in planning an evaluation. By clarifying the intended use(s) of the evaluation for each user, evaluation planning will be more explicit and focused, and the evaluation process, more effective.

How to determine the intended use(s) of the evaluation?

Determining the intended use(s) of an evaluation should involve a discussion between the evaluator(s) (who have a responsibility for facilitating use) and the primary intended user(s). Many evaluations will have multiple uses. By involving all the primary intended users in the process of determining the type of evaluation that is needed, the various perspectives are better represented and users can establish consensus about the primary intended use(s).

Facilitation Questions:

1. How could the evaluation contribute to the improvement of the project/program?
2. How could the evaluation contribute to making decisions about the project/program?
3. What outcomes do you expect from the evaluation process?
4. What do you expect to do differently because of this evaluation?

What are possible intended use(s) of evaluation?

Evaluation is characterized by an array of designs, methods, and uses. Identifying use helps to clarify the appropriateness of different approaches within different situations and to make transparent what is expected of the evaluation.

The findings, conclusion, recommendations, or process of an evaluation can support decision-making or changed thinking and behaviour by the primary intended user(s). Evaluation can be used to make summative judgments, support formative improvements, support accountability, generate knowledge, or adapt a model to emergent conditions.

Process uses are changes in procedures, practice, and culture that result from participation and involvement in an evaluation. Examples of process uses that can intentionally be built into an evaluation include enhancing shared understanding, increasing engagement and ownership, nurturing an evaluation culture, and building capacity.

The need for clarity on use is essential. For example, engaging a project team in an evaluation process and telling them that it's for learning or improvement, and then using that evaluation to make summative decisions about the worth (or continuation) of the project, is unethical.

Examples of intended uses:	
Formative evaluations - often focus on improvement and tend to be more open-ended, gathering data about strengths and weaknesses to inform the program	Learning and improvement
Developmental evaluations - focus on providing rapid and ongoing feedback to guide adaptation of the program in emergent and complex environments (Patton, 2011)	Capturing or looking for the unexpected
Summative evaluations - usually conducted after the program has been implemented and are often intended to judge the overall effectiveness or worth of the program	Deciding whether to keep funding a program

The importance of timing

Evaluations that emphasize use should be timed so that their findings are available when decisions are being made or actions are being taken. For example, although it may seem most appropriate to evaluate a given project at its end – when ‘results’ should be observable – this is often the least opportune time for the evaluation findings to be used because critical decisions about the program or project have likely already been made.

Questions to ask intended users to establish an evaluation’s intended influence on decisions:

1. What decision, if any, are the evaluation findings expected to influence?
2. When will decisions be made? By whom? When, then, must the evaluation findings be presented to be timely and influential?
3. What is at stake in the decisions? From whom? What controversies or issues surround the decisions?
4. What’s the history and context of the decision-making process?
5. What other factors (e.g., values, politics, personalities, promises already made) will affect the decision-making? What might happen to make the decision irrelevant or keep it from being made? In other words, how volatile is the decision-making environment?
6. How much influence do you expect the evaluation to have – realistically?
7. To what extent has the outcome of the decision already been determined?
8. What data and findings are needed to support decision making?
9. What needs to be done to achieve that level of influence?
10. Who needs to be involved for the evaluation to have that level of influence?
11. How will we know afterwards if the evaluation was used as intended?

Michael Quinn Patton (1997)

Sources:

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