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A GENERAL GUIDE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN EVALUATION REPORT

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This guide has been developed following a critical reading of 5 draft evaluation reports submitted by Trainees in USAID East Africa Certificate Program in Evaluation, offered in 3 phases between June and August, 2004.

One of the central problems in preparing a report is deciding what material goes where so that the reader is able to follow the logical thread of the report. The following annotated outline is designed to assist in this process. Experienced writers will recognize that constructing a narrative thread is a matter of judgment and skill. Still, like playing a composition by Mozart or Beethoven, one can interpret but not change the basic musical structure of the work.

Evaluations are about human efforts to intervene in a situation to “make it better” in some way. They ask, what was the problem and why, what did people try to do to address the problem and why, what were the results, both intended and unintended and why? And often they ask, are the results desirable, affordable, replicable, and sustainable. Evaluation reports are a combination of accurate description, presentation of new information (data), analysis and interpretation of the facts, and reaching general conclusions about the value of the intervention. To make evaluations useful, evaluators are usually charged with the task of making recommendations, and, sometimes, stepping back to say, what more general lessons do we learn from this experience?

Good evaluation reports strike a balance between depth and length. Reports should be kept to less than 30 pages as a general rule. Additional materials can go in the annex. Another tradeoff is between the use of sophisticated ‘scientific’ language and a narrative that captures and holds the interest of the reader.

Evaluation reports do have a basic structure.

I. Acknowledgements

This is where you thank all the people who provided support and answered your questions.

II. Executive Summary

This section is an abbreviated version of the most important parts of the report. The busy executive reader should come away with an understanding of what the project was about, how well it was implemented; whether it achieved its objectives, and what the major conclusions and recommendations are. Nothing should be in the executive summary that is not based directly on what is in the report.

III. Introduction

The introduction should inform the reader about the context in which the intervention took place. This would include a summary statement of the relevant history, demography, socio-economic status and basic political arrangements. It is also the place to introduce the purpose of the evaluation.

IV. The Problem

The development problem is what the project was trying to fix, improve, remove, or otherwise change for the better. It is the “gap” between a desirable condition and the current reality. The people who design foreign assistance interventions can define the problem correctly, or not. When the problem is not well defined or is wrongly stated, the ensuing intervention may be well done, but will have little impact. So it is important for the evaluator to determine whether the problem was correctly identified and stated in the first place.

Sometimes it makes sense to put this section with the Introduction, other times a separate section is better. Much depends on how complicated and well articulated the problem is in the original project design. Often the problem is not well stated, so you have to reconstruct it.

Describe in as much detail as possible the nature, scope, and history of the problem that the intervention has tried to address. Every effort should be made to construct a pre-intervention base line that tells the reader, this is the situation that was unacceptable. If the problem is theft and violence, a credible quantitative baseline should give the reader a fairly precise statement of how much theft and how much and what kind of violence prevailed prior to the intervention.

The Problem statement should also describe all the plausible theories, propositions and hypotheses that experts, scholars, other wise people can advance to explain WHY the problem exists.

The Problem statement should be derived from the project proposal. If this is weak or non-existent, then the evaluation team has to reconstruct the baseline problem as best they can from available data.

V. The Theory of the Intervention

Ideally, the design of an intervention follows an analysis of the problem. Such analysis will look at the context, assess the information available about the unacceptable situation, prioritize the various explanations, extract the main causal factors, and develop the main hypotheses about what are the most important factors to change and/or manipulate in order to bring about a better outcome.

This process creates the underlying program theory of the intervention.

The theory of the Intervention (Program Theory) can usually be deduced from the project proposal that lays out the design of the project. This is sometimes modified in the process of awarding a grant or contract.

At this point, the process of intervention design begins. As the intervention takes shape, it may become a project, or an activity.

VI. The Design of the Project

Sometimes this section can be combined with the “theory” section previously discussed. If the project is relatively small and not too complicated, it makes sense to do this.

The reader now knows all that is necessary about the context, the problem, and the “theory” which underlies the project. Now the reader wants to know, “OK, so what were these people going to do about this, and, did it make sense?”

The evaluator must give the reader a picture of

- a. what the project was going to do
- b. what the objectives were
- c. how it was to be done
- d. who was going to do it
- e. at what cost.

This part of the report gives the reader a clear picture of what the designers of the intervention wanted to accomplish and how they were going to go about doing it.

VII. Purpose and Methodology

This section sets out the main questions that the evaluation will attempt to answer as derived from the Scope of Work. It will summarize the basic elements of the evaluation design, including the unit of analysis, selection of samples, data collection instruments, types of data collected, analytic techniques used, who did it and when it was done. This must be summarized, and all the back up material placed in an annex.

VIII. What did the project achieve?

This section is where you put your findings about implementation, achievement of objectives, and results. This is where the program hypotheses are tested. These findings can be presented in two subparts:

- A. Findings about the management and implementation of the program...were the right people in place, were the inputs well organized and timely, were reports and evaluations done and used, did the implementation process interfere with or advance the achievement of stated objectives. In many projects, how the project is implemented may be as important as whether the objectives were achieved. Findings about management should cover issues from bottom to the top

The extent to which the evaluation pays detailed attention to management issues is a function of the Scope of Work and whether the evaluation is mid term or final.

- B. Findings about the project's achievements. Here it is very important to have independently verifiable indicators of achievements. Ideally, if it is a USAID project, these should be found in the project design...but if not, the evaluator will have to come up with acceptable indicators. This is a difficult part of the job.

Findings are generally organized in terms of 4 main questions.

1. Was the project well managed?
2. Did the project realize its predicted outputs and objectives? If not, to what extent? What factors explain either full or partial achievement?
3. Did the project achieve its intermediate and, if appropriate, final results?
4. Did the project have unintended consequences? Were these positive, negative or both?

IX. Analysis

It is easy to confuse findings and analysis. Findings are the facts, analysis tells you what those facts mean in terms of the questions you have been asked to address.

In the analysis section, the job is to interpret and give meaning to the facts as presented above. The analysis section is the bridge between findings and conclusions. If you found, for example, that the project achieved all of its objectives, and that there were positive changes of the type expected, you must explain why or why there was not a CAUSAL linkage between the objectives (strengthening of institutional capacity) and the result (reduced level of violence in the target area.).

Sometimes, analysis goes better immediately following findings. For example, a project may have three objectives: capacity building of local CBOs; sustained interaction of different peoples on common projects, and the establishment of active early warning networks advising authorities of rising tensions in a community. Let's say that the capacity building objective was achieved. So what? An intermediate analysis may be presented on capacity building, for example, demonstrating that increased organizational capacity of a CBO has led to more participation from potentially hostile groups in joint resource management activities, such as water hole restoration and maintenance. A sub-conclusion can then be reached that the objective contributed to an important intermediate result; building trust and cooperation while reducing scarcity through better resource management.

When you present the final analysis and conclusions, you can re-visit this and integrate it into the more general analysis of the impact of the project. It may turn out that while cooperative efforts in resource management did take place, a murder of one of the cooperators by someone from another tribe led to a withdrawal of support and participation in the joint enterprise.

Or, one can lay out the analysis of findings about all the objectives in one place. In some cases, all three objectives may be achieved, and the level of theft and violence still goes up. A more holistic or system analytical framework may be needed to determine why the project failed to achieve the desired result.

Back to the beginning

This is where you return to underlying “theory of the project” and examine whether the causal factors that the project design put forward as most important were indeed the right ones. It may be that another factor turned out to be far more important but was not addressed. For example, it may be that young males and females were left out of the activities, but these are the age groups producing most of the theft and violence....or, it may be that early warning information is ignored by local authorities, who either are not prepared, don’t care, or are corrupt and in collusion with thieves.

This is where you advance **alternative explanations**. In one report about theft and violence connected with cattle stealing among nomadic tribes in Kenya, it was noted that cattle raids would occur shortly after an intertribal peace meeting organized by the project. It was learned that these meetings were the occasion for thieves from one side to check out the resources and security of the other tribe, and shortly thereafter, take advantage of the relaxed attitude following the peace meeting to mount a cattle raid on the other group.

X. Conclusions

Conclusions are where you sum up for the reader the findings and analysis. The job here is set forth your judgments about the utility and value of the project in terms of the problem it was supposed to address.

Some reports set out “Positive” and “Negative” conclusions. Most projects accomplish something, but there are almost always failures. Both need to be stated in the conclusions.

Conclusions must link up with the findings and analysis presented in previous sections, but they also go beyond that to establish whether benefits of the intervention were sufficient to warrant the effort, and whether those benefits will be temporary or long lasting. Conclusions about unintended consequences may be that while the project did not achieve its objectives, it may have produced other effects which had very great value.

This section is often the place where the evaluator's judgment calls are most apparent. It is good idea to make that clear, especially when the findings are ambiguous about the projects achievements. It may that objectives were only partially met, but that the objectives were set too high, and the project still accomplished much of value.

XI. Recommendations

This is where you get a chance to say what changes need to be made. If the project was a complete success, you may want to recommend simply continuation, or even replication in other areas with similar problems.

More likely you will want to make recommendations that will improve the project. These can apply to everything from recommending a different design to restating the objectives and expected results. The key to good recommendations is 1) that they follow directly from the findings and the conclusions, and 2) they are "actionable" ...the changes can be made by the project authorities.

XII. Lessons Learned

Not all clients are interested in this, nor are efforts to derive Lessons Learned always appropriate. Usually, end of project or ex post impact studies are better for lessons learned, as the project experience is longer and more mature than would be found in a mid-term evaluation.

XIII. The Annex

This is a useful place to put important material that doesn't go into the main body of the report, but can be helpful to the reader who wants to know more.

What usually goes into the annex?

- The Scope of Work
- A list of persons interviewed.
- A more complete description of the methodology used.
- Questionnaires used.
- In depth analyses of specific issues in the report...
- Dissenting views by a team member who may not agree.
- Maps and additional evidentiary documents of interest.