MONITORING & EVALUATION

ShortCuts

Guidelines and Tools to Plan for an Evaluation

Preparing for an Evaluation

September 2008

Introduction

This *Short Cut* provides practical instructions in how to prepare for an evaluation. Most donors require midterm and final evaluations, and these periodic assessments often provide the most detailed information of a project's progress and achievements. However, when expectations and requirements are poorly defined or misunderstood, evaluations can be very stressful to staff and beneficiaries.

To streamline and simplify the evaluation process, it must be planned well ahead of time. Ensure that standard information requests, project documentation, and an understanding of the purpose and utility of the evaluation contribute to improved communication and coordination, better evaluation management, and, in the best case, enhanced use of the evaluation results among field, donor, and partner staff. Communication is key to all seven steps described below, as it clarifies expectations, defines responsibilities, and encourages ownership of the evaluation results. Even with good communication, however, steps are often missed during an evaluation that can compromise its utility; the full module details ways to remedy these issues.

7 Steps to Preparing for an Evaluation

Step 1 Identify and empower the evaluation manager

Step 2 Clarify guidance and expectations

Step 3 Draft the evaluation scope of work and work plan

Step 4 Identify the evaluation team and finalize the scope of work

Step 5 Organize the project documentation

Step 6 Organize project information

Step 7 Plan evaluation logistics

Step 1 Identify and Empower the Evaluation Manager

The Evaluation Manager's Role

The first step in conducting a well-planned evaluation is to assign one person as the evaluation manager. This person is often the project manager or the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) officer,

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but it can be anyone with a clear project commitment. The evaluation manager is responsible for ensuring that specific pre-evaluation tasks are completed in a timely manner. In larger projects with multiple teams and many timelines, an evaluation manager's responsibilities can be split among several people. When responsibilities are divided, however, they need to be made very clear, and good communication is crucial between the people involved.

The project manager or country director should inform all staff about the evaluation manager's new responsibilities and ensure that the manager has enough time to accomplish this new role. This will establish the individual as the clear focal point for the evaluation and help ensure cooperation from the field staff over time.

The Evaluation Manager's Location

Some organizations want the evaluation manager to be based at headquarters, others at a regional office, or at the main in-country project office. But as long as communication is reliable (Internet, phone, and so on), the location doesn't matter as much as the individual's ability to organize, coordinate, and get things done. However, if the evaluation manager is not in the same country where the evaluation is going to take place, then a local staff person should backstop the process to ensure that the field is well represented throughout and that field coordination is good. This will help ease communication between the evaluation team and the project staff.

Step 2 Clarify Guidance and Expectations

Determine Requirements

Donors generally have standards for an evaluation. Implementing organizations also have standards that are frequently more rigorous. Before writing the scope of work, find out what the evaluation requirements are. This will inform the evaluation process including the timeline and the evaluation team skills needed. There are two places to find the evaluation standards: the donor's original proposal writing guidance and the project's approved M&E plan. In addition, other resources can provide information on the indicators that the evaluators will need to measure directly and the ones that will require additional data collection (such as a survey). Project staff can provide input on who can take charge of different elements (by Strategic Objective, for example).

Including all these resources and other relevant M&E documents in a briefing book—at CRS, it is called an M&E operating manual—ensures that all the information will be readily accessible to the evaluation team and all project staff. The senior management can use

Tips from the Field

Get organized before the evaluation team arrives. Don't leave this until the last minute. Every project office has boxes of papers, from the initial proposals to trip reports, and many more electronic files on each computer. Prepare an organized file or directory to get the evaluation team off to a good start.

the briefing book (see table 1) as a reference for different evaluation components; with this information, they can make informed choices about how to deploy existing resources or decide if they need additional help.

Communication Needs

The next step is to convene a meeting with the evaluation manager, project manager, and senior management to discuss evaluation requirements. This meeting will give senior management advance notice about resource allocation and a brief background before they are asked to review the evaluation scope of work (SOW). It also prepares these individuals for more substantial project organizational tasks.

Briefing books make great handouts for donors and current and potential partners. A briefing book should be short and to the point, packed with facts, and easily customized!

Table 1: Evaluation Briefing Book Contents

Contents	Why Is This Needed
Donor Guidance	The evaluation SOW needs to match the most current donor requirements. However, two versions should be included in the briefing book: the first is from when the proposal was approved, and the second is the most current version. Note the changes between the two and contact the appropriate donor representative to determine the best compromise between the two versions.
M&E Plan	Use the original approved M&E plan, with any modifications. Make sure all staff review this document.
Other Donor-Sanctioned Guidance	Some donors provide additional technical assistance on data collection, especially for indicators that were recently added to donor requirements. This will also help establish the evaluation team requirements.
Internal Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Guidance	Many PVOs have their own standards for conducting evaluations. Make sure you have a copy of these standards.
Briefing Book Summary	Because many senior managers and field staff are inexperienced in working with evaluators, a simplified briefing book can help the evaluation manager to communicate the evaluation process to all these individuals. Try to summarize all the different evaluation requirements on a single page. This will also be helpful in writing the SOW.

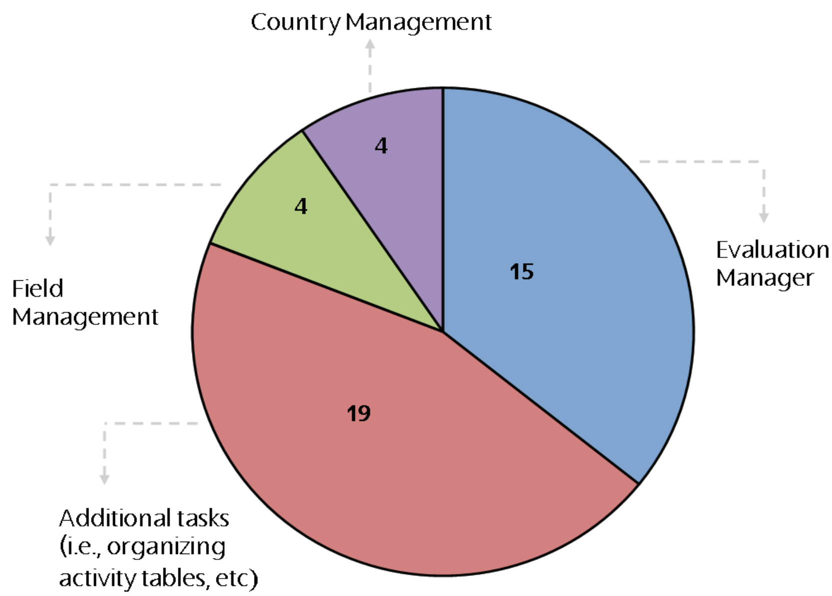
Step 3

Draft the Evaluation Scope of Work and Work Plan

Develop a Timeline

Set the timing for the pre-evaluation by working backwards from the evaluation start date (see exhibit 1). For Title II projects, the evaluation manager should plan on 15 days of work, and some project staff should plan on 19 days. Field and country management will likely take about 4 days each. This could entail a total of 42 staff days before the evaluation, spread out over different staff members and usually not consecutively (see section 2 of the complete module for more suggestions about timing). The number of days could be higher or lower depending on the project complexity and the organization of existing materials.

Exhibit 1: Staff Work Days



Draft the Evaluation SOW and Work Plan

What is the difference between an evaluation SOW and an evaluation work plan? The SOW provides details on what is to be done and why the evaluation is needed, while the work plan describes who is doing what, when, and how. Both are needed to organize an evaluation effectively.

The draft SOW gives the project team a chance to focus on the most important questions to ask during the evaluation and on the methods to be used. The evaluation manager can modify an existing SOW to fit the evaluation needs. The manager does need to ensure that there is sufficient time in the SOW for the field office staff and stakeholders to review the draft, provide comments, and think about the evaluation requirements.

The work plan helps to organize the evaluation step-by-step, including the logistics, and helps the field staff to manage their time in preparing for the evaluation.

Standard SOW Elements

- *Project overview*
- *Evaluation objectives*
- *Suggested technical expertise of the evaluation team*
- *Major evaluation issues and questions*
- *Key documents and information*
- *Timetable*
- *Report format*

Things to Consider

There are many things to consider when organizing the SOW and work plan. If a lot of field time is needed, who will organize this process? Are specific permissions from local authorities that will be needed ahead of time? Are there specific evaluation questions that address the design elements, such as partner capacity building or project management, that need to be added to an existing template? Get as many answers as possible before moving to step 4. Better communication and organization now mean improved coordination later.

An Internal or External Evaluator?

An additional challenge is determining whether to use internal or external evaluators. There are advantages and disadvantages with each—the complete module discusses this in more detail—but the bottom line basically comes down to three factors: the learning curve, objectivity and access. Internal evaluators tend to have shorter learning curves and better access. External evaluators tend to be more objective as they see events without the institutional context and bring a fresh perspective. Setting up a team that combines the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages of each can work well.

Step 4 Identify the Evaluation Team and Finalize the Scope of Work

Select an Experienced Team Leader

Good team leaders should have demonstrated experience evaluating this type of project or experience with a similar type of project. This background is important to ensure that the evaluation meets donor expectations.

Team leaders must also have a demonstrated ability to manage and synthesize the input and participation of the core evaluation team members as well as that of various government officials, PVO partners, and donor teams. Each of these individuals or groups has a different mission goal or agenda. The team leader's job is to involve the different individuals and groups so that each core team member can satisfy some of their specific evaluation questions, while still working toward the common goal of a constructive evaluation. Good verbal and written communication skills are essential. Note that communication doesn't just mean talking; it also means active listening. This is a key skill that cannot be assessed through a writing sample. References are critical!

Choosing an Evaluation Team

The first step in hiring an evaluation team—especially the team leader—is to identify a suitable pool of candidates. Organizations often have a list of people who they have used before and want to use again. Start with that institutional list, then ask other organizations—those in the same sector and those in the same country—for recommendations. Start small, with no more than five candidates. Once the candidates are identified, send around the draft SOW, and ask the candidates for expressions of interest and for writing samples.

Next, choose a team leader from among the candidates. This individual needs to be available for the entire evaluation, including additional time before and after the evaluation. The extra time is needed for the team leader to discuss the evaluation methodology, the other team members, and the logistics with the evaluation manager; to ensure that the evaluation is appropriately organized; and to ensure that the evaluation report is submitted on time.

The evaluation team leader's input is key to finalizing the scope of work with the evaluation manager. There may be specific data collection methodologies that are preferable based on seasonality or other local issues (for example, if it's the rainy season and many of your communities are inaccessible—so random sampling at site visits is going to be less than perfectly random). The team leader should incorporate these variables in the final SOW.

A Balance of Experience

Make sure the evaluation team represents a balance of experience, preferably country experience, sectoral experience, or other specific technical expertise. Once the team is selected, finalize the SOW based on the team's input, place the final version in the briefing book, and send a copy to the donor and senior management. The evaluation manager or team leader may also want to attach a memo about the reasoning behind some of the methodological choices while the decision is still fresh.

The donor and the implementing organization may prefer certain evaluation methods, and, in some cases, require particular approaches. The evaluation team leader may recommend alternatives, but it is important to respect requirements; ultimately, the team leader is responsible for the choice of evaluation methods.

Step 5 Organize Project Documentation

Project Documentation Defined

Project documentation refers to the existing paper files, starting with initial assessments. Two products should emerge from step 5: a bibliography and a project briefing book.

A Bibliography and a Briefing Book

The project bibiliography is the list of core project documents by category. The project briefing book includes only the most important documents. Include an updated project bibliography in the briefing book. Organize all the project files. Delete files that are no longer useful. Many documents will also be available electronically—indicate which ones in the project bibliography. Create a CD (or place on a flash drive) the most important project documents.

The evaluation manager should ensure that the field staff organize their files for the evaluation team in advance of the team's arrival. Getting all the project documents organized is not something anyone wants to do after flying for 20 hours, and it's not something the project should pay a consultant to do! Here's a golden opportunity for everyone to get all their shelves and electronic files cleared out and organized.

Knowing about an evaluation in advance means that this task can be scheduled a little at a time, rather than in a rush before the evaluation team leader arrives. With the evaluation manager providing oversight and coordination, everyone in the office can take responsibility for assembling key documents, often in magazine boxes or in some type of smaller cardboard boxes that fit onto shelves. Have a supply of labels handy to organize the documents by box.

Review

- *Clean up and organize project files (Clean, clean, clean & organize!)*
- *Organize the project documents in a project briefing book and list them in a bibliography*

Step 6 Organize Project Information

Project information is not the same as project documentation. Project information consists of the nuts and bolts of the project, and this will take some effort to assemble. Most of the information may be found in annual reports, but often it has not been put into summary tables.

In the *Key Project Information* text box to the right are the key project information elements. The full module provides more details on how to assemble each element and why each is useful. A few illustrative elements follow:

Key Project Information

- *Chronology and history (timeline)*
- *Staffing patterns and turnover*
- *Training—summary of outputs and expenditures*
- *Major meetings (partners and donors)*
- *Institutional capacity building*
- *Financial system and accounting*
- *M&E system and methods (the M&E operating manual)*
- *Indicator Performance Tracking Table (IPTT)*
- *Technical sector updates*
- *Village/community/activity matrices*
- *Maps*

Chronology and Staffing Patterns

Knowing the chronology of project events and staffing patterns is useful when evaluating project outcomes. For example, if three project managers were hired over the first two project years and this information is reviewed side-by-side with some other events (such as civil unrest) in the project history (see table 2), it can create a picture of external events affecting staff retention. A view of the big picture is needed, or the conclusion may be wrong. Having staff contribute to this type of timeline or chronology is a useful group exercise; this process can include the administrative and finance support staff. Their contributions to project success are often neglected components in an evaluation, yet such staff frequently have the best institutional memory and do not have a particular technical bias. The health team can do a sectoral timeline and the agricultural team its own timeline—management and external factors should be included, so as not to miss key connections and interactions.

Indicator Performance Tracking Table

Most evaluators will note that the indicator performance tracking table (IPTT) is a helpful project overview. However, many projects don't keep this table up-to-date, and there is often a mad scramble each year to get the numbers updated before the annual report is due, despite it being a Title II requirement. This is not a good process either at the time of the midterm evaluation or during the final evaluation. And worse, projects often expect the evaluator to fill in, not only the most current numbers, but all the missing data. Many IPTT indicators are required yet challenging to collect in the midst of implementation. Staff may have changed, and no one knows how to collect that information any more. Or the project has shifted focus, and a particular set of activities has stopped. These may all be good excuses for postponing an IPTT update.

Table 2: Project Calendar

Chronology and History	2006				2007			
	1st Qtr	2nd Qtr	3rd Qtr	4th Qtr	1st Qtr	2nd Qtr	3rd Qtr	4th Qtr
Civil Unrest								
Earthquake								
Manager A								
Manager B								
Manager C								

Step 7 Plan Evaluation Logistics

Good logistical planning is key to a successful evaluation. As armies move on their stomachs, so do evaluation teams. If logistics are poorly thought out and funded, even the best evaluation design will fail. The result of the seventh, and final, evaluation step should be a detailed, clearly coordinated, logistics plan.

Critical pre-planning must:

- Have a key individual—who reports to the evaluation manager—tasked with logistics responsibility
- Negotiate preliminary dates and objectives of the site visits with local PVOs, organizations, government officials, and village-level leaders, and finalize the site visit times and dates one to two weeks before the evaluation team arrives at the project site
- Identify dates when district officials will be notified by the evaluators of the schedule for visits to specific villages
- Develop a one-page announcement, to be signed by a representative of the project's host ministry, informing communities of the upcoming visit; the announcement should include a brief description of the purpose of the visit, the anticipated dates of the site visits, and the names of the evaluation team members (in the local language)
- Organize food, transportation, office space, computing and printing facilities, and lodging for the team.

Why Can't a Pre-Evaluation Be Part of the Evaluation?

It can! The problem is that when the pre-evaluation and evaluation processes are combined, it slows down the evaluation unless the process of producing the pre-evaluation outputs is built into the evaluation work plan. Planning for an evaluation takes time (the module has a detailed estimates for each level of staffing). An evaluation will probably take an evaluation manager about a month of dedicated time.

In most cases, the options are clear:

- Pay up front—in staff time—to produce the pre-evaluation products; or
- Pay later—in staff time—to produce the pre-evaluation products during the evaluation exercise; or
- Pay later and pay more for external consultants to assemble both products.

If the pay later option is chosen, it tends to cost much more in terms of staff time and for payment to consultants to supervise these efforts. In addition, there is the risk of frustrating partner organizations that have to find information, while they are hosting the evaluators, instead of being able to collect the information prior to the evaluators' visit.

Four Basic Options for a Pre-Evaluation

1. Project management takes responsibility for steps 1 and 2, and then an experienced evaluation manager conducts a one-week workshop with project staff to assemble the other products listed in steps 3 to 7. This process can happen over several months in advance of the actual evaluation. If the evaluation manager is part of the field staff, this workshop could actually be shifted to separate meetings, with homework assigned for different sectors or different products.

2. A facilitator works with the evaluation manager to assemble most of the products, and the evaluation team leader has steps 5 and 6 added to his/her scope of work. This is a good choice when the evaluation manager is a novice, but it is an added expense to the evaluation.

3. Separate the pre-evaluation into two phases. The first phase occurs several months (or even a year) before the evaluation itself and includes steps 1 to 4. The second phase begins about a month before the evaluation and includes steps 5 to 7. The evaluation manager serves as the critical bridge, especially when there is more than one implementing organization.

4. Conduct steps 1 to 4 as a separate phase and assign steps 5 to 7 to existing project staff in addition to their regular duties. However, this decision may overburden project staff and, as a result, steps 5 to 7 may not be done until the last minute, right before the evaluation team leader arrives. This is not a recommended scenario.

The Preparing for an Evaluation full module includes numerous sources for developing a SOW:

- Specific tasks and deliverables, including the project timeline
- Planning checklist for each step
- Institutional capacity assessment tool
- Stakeholder analysis
- Sample bibliography
- Detailed bibliography of additional resources

This edition of Short Cuts was produced in 2008. Please send your comments or feedback to: m&efeedback@crs.org.

Other Sources Include:

- USAID TIPS No. 3 "Preparing an Evaluation Scope of Work" (www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/#02)
- The CRS ProPack II (www.crs.org/publications)

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- www.crs.org/publications
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