

Good Practices in the Management of External Development Evaluations

Evaluations are analytical assessments that help improve the decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability of programs and projects. External evaluations have become more important in the project cycle of development initiatives. Donor agencies and implementing institutions are increasingly requesting these evaluations to provide important feedback on the relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness of development projects. For this reason, in this fourth issue of Co-Praxis, the Just Governance Group (JGG) summarizes good practices and key issues that international development practitioners should consider when managing external evaluation processes.

JGG's Experience in Managing External Evaluations

Since its formation in 2006 JGG has conducted over 20 external evaluations of human rights, justice, conflict-related and democratic governance initiatives or institutions. JGG has been contracted by development agencies, inter-governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations that seek to capture results and lessons learned to improve future work. JGG perceives evaluations as an opportunity to facilitate a mutual learning process through active participation of the implementing institution in reflection, dialogue and information sharing.

Identifying Good Practices in the Management of External Development Evaluations

Through the review of key documents, JGG has identified and summarized common approaches, and techniques in the management of external evaluations. The compilation of these findings is based on the referenced documents of leading international, intergovernmental and bilateral organizations.

- Evaluations should correspond to the needs and priorities identified in the Terms of Reference (TORs) prepared by the contracting agency and/or the implementing institution.
- In order to fully respond to the TORs it is important to ensure that there is effective collaboration among the evaluation managers (the representative of the evaluation team, the contracting agency, and the implementing institution).
- Evaluation managers should establish the mechanisms for collaboration among stakeholders and define clear roles and responsibilities within each participating agency or institution.
- Key stakeholders should be prepared to commit the time and energy necessary to play an integral role in the evaluation.
- Quality assurance mechanisms ensure credibility of the evaluation and strengthen the acceptance of findings.
- Lead evaluators should invest initial time and resources to review existing qualitative and quantitative data and assess if this data can be used and what additional data is required.
- During the planning stage, evaluators should clearly describe the data collection methods that will be used in the evaluation.
- Evaluation managers should reflect on, revise and refine evaluation strategies to ensure they incorporate methods and practices that have proven to be effective.

Key Documents Reviewed

"Evaluation Guidelines: Past and Future", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2007

"Best Practice Guidelines for Evaluation", Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 1998

"Monitoring and Evaluation Guidelines", United Nations World Food Programme's Office of Evaluation (no date)

"How to Perform Evaluations", Canadian International Development Agency (no date)

"External Evaluations", Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2000

"Getting the Best from External Evaluations", Evaluation Support Scotland (no date)

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JGG Reflections on Managing External Evaluations

JGG consultants concurred with the main conclusions and key observations that were drawn from the review of documents. They complemented these findings by sharing reflections based on their own experience as external evaluators. These observations are summarized below.

Terms of Reference

- JGG consultants suggest that cooperation between donor and implementing agencies in the preparation of the TORs is important in order to identify priorities and expectations.
- The TORs should also identify the evaluation managers and include the key milestones in the evaluation process.
- After a competitive tender, it is helpful for evaluation managers to undertake a review of the TORs and adjust or clarify any points with the evaluation team leader.
- If the contracting agency and/or implementing institution have requests for additional work during the evaluation process, the lead evaluator should assess if these requests can be met within the existing TORs and approved work plan. Adjustments to the contract, TORs, or work plan may be required.

Evaluation Work Plan

- Evaluation matrixes, methodologies, and data collection techniques should be included in the work plan or inception report and be carefully reviewed and approved by contracting and implementing agencies before the data collection phase begins. The evaluation matrix, once approved, should guide interview protocol and other data collection instruments.
- It is also good practice to describe how differences of opinion regarding the findings and conclusions of an evaluation report will be managed. This is especially important when the implementing institution is the contracting agency and does not have a planning, monitoring and evaluation unit that can act as intermediary or liaison during the evaluation process.

Data Collection

- Evaluators should manage a variety of data collection techniques. Structured data collection requires a sufficiently long planning phase.
- Sufficient time needs to be allocated to review documents, finalize data collection instruments and schedule interviews. JGG has found that extra time is required to arrange interviews via phone or video-conference.
- Creating templates to register information collected helps in the efficient compilation and analysis of data at the end of this phase.

Debriefing of Preliminary Findings and Field Mission

- Allocating time to analyze trends in the data collected is important.
- Presenting preliminary evaluation findings to the implementing institution as well as to the contracting agency (if different) provides the evaluators with an opportunity to share initial observations, describe challenges and receive feedback from the major stakeholders. Next steps can also be discussed in detail.

Draft Report and Presentation

- Evaluators should respond to the major questions set out in the evaluation matrix to guide the analysis and writing of the draft report.
- Citing documents and referring to the number of responses shared across stakeholder groups provides evidence-based reporting. This helps evaluators when presenting controversial findings.
- It is good practice to present the draft report in person. This gives key stakeholders the opportunity to clarify information. When presenting the draft report, evaluators should frame observations and conclusions in a constructive manner.

Final Report

- The evaluation team leader is responsible for the quality and content of the final report. The final report should be adjusted when: there are factual mistakes; a finding or issue can be better developed; the evaluation has minimized or over-emphasized a point; and/or recommendations can be further developed to help facilitate their implementation.
- JGG consultants recommend that the lead evaluator should consider all comments but should not feel pressured to delete critical findings if these findings are supported by data collected.
- If there is major disagreement related to the finding, an implementing institution may wish to attach its response to the evaluation report. (This has rarely occurred in JGG's experience due to the participatory nature of our evaluation processes.)

Internal Coordination Issues

- JGG team leaders prepare TORs for each member of the evaluation team, specifying clear roles and responsibilities and setting out products to be delivered at each stage of the evaluation process.
- Team leaders are responsible for facilitating communication among team members. The team leader should have access to information and communication technologies and ensure that questions or doubts can be addressed promptly.