

TOOLS AND GUIDANCE

Dimensions of evaluation quality at UNFPA



Version 1

UNFPA Evaluation Office

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to clarify how to understand the concept of evaluation quality and to set out the underpinning principles of it. It is intended to increase the understanding of evaluation staff and external evaluation consultants on how these principles translate into UNFPA evaluation quality assurance and assessment work, with the aim of improving the overall quality of evaluations and thereby support the effective use of evaluative evidence for programming and policy decisions.

Background

Overall, UNFPA adheres to UNEG norms and standards for evaluation¹ and the definition of evaluation therein; *“An evaluation is an assessment, conducted as systematically and impartially as possible, of an activity, project, programme strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area or institutional performance. It analyses the level of achievement of both expected and unexpected results by examining the results chain, processes, contextual factors and causality using appropriate criteria such as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency impact and sustainability. An evaluation should provide credible, useful evidence-based information that enables the timely incorporation of its findings, recommendations and lessons into the decision-making process of organisations and stakeholders”*

Evaluation at UNFPA serves three main purposes that support the organisation’s drive to achieve results:²

- ▶ Evaluation as a means to demonstrate **accountability** to stakeholders on performance in achieving development results, and on invested resources.
- ▶ Evaluation as supporting **evidence-based decision making** in order to achieve sustainable development results.
- ▶ Evaluation as contributing to important **lessons learned** to the existing knowledge base on how to accelerate implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and on how UNFPA can best support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Thus, the purpose of the evaluation function at UNFPA is to ensure institutional accountability and learning through high quality evaluations that are **used** to support evidence-based decision making in order to achieve sustainable development results. The UNFPA evaluation policy and evaluation function therefore places strong emphasis on quality assurance of evaluation processes and products.

¹ UNEG, Norms and Standards for Evaluation, June 2016

² UNFPA Evaluation Policy, 22 April 2013

The concept of evaluation quality and UNFPA quality assurance and assessment system

So how to understand the concept of high quality evaluations? What are the principles and underlying dimensions of determining evaluation quality? Overall, the UNFPA evaluation policy clarify its adherence to the foundation documents of UNEG and thereby to the norms of utility, credibility, independence, impartiality, ethics, transparency and human rights and gender equality.³

In 2016, the UNEG Norms and Standards were updated and the approach upgraded to give greater prominence to ethics, transparency and human rights and gender equality.

The UNFPA evaluation policy also states that all evaluations shall meet the minimum quality standards and criteria defined by the Evaluation Office.⁴ The Evaluation Office has made efforts in recent years to strengthen evaluation quality, first focusing on the quality review of country programme evaluations.

In 2016, the evaluation quality assurance and assessment system was expanded to cover all programme-level evaluations and corporate evaluations. The revised system aims to strengthen quality throughout the evaluation process as well as to assess the quality and potential use of the final evaluation report.

In setting up the evaluation quality assurance and assessment system, three overall and internationally agreed evaluation principles have been used:

- ▶ **Independence and Impartiality**
- ▶ **Credibility**
- ▶ **Utility**

Independence and Impartiality

Independence and impartiality are fundamental to attain credibility and utility of evaluation. Independence of evaluation entails the ability for evaluators to work without undue influence by any party. It includes, for instance, freedom for evaluators to choose the design of the evaluation and to select suitable methods and tools for data collection and analysis.

Independence should also lead to impartiality, which implies that evaluators must not have been directly responsible for the policy setting, design or management of the evaluation subject.

Key elements of impartiality are objectivity, professional integrity and absence of bias. Both independence and impartiality requires transparency and should exist at all stages of the evaluation process, from the planning stage and the formulation of mandate and scope, through to conducting the evaluation and formulating findings and recommendations. All UNFPA evaluation reports are publicly available on the Evaluation Office website.⁵

³ UNEG, Norms and Standards for Evaluation, June 2016

⁴ UNFPA Evaluation Policy, 22 April 2013

⁵ Website found at - <http://www.unfpa.org/evaluation>

Credibility

Credibility is enhanced with greater independence and impartiality of evaluators and process, but needs to be ensured by competence of the evaluator and evaluation manager. The quality of evaluation depends on the design and methodological rigor, a transparent and inclusive evaluation process, the reliable use of data, the ability to perform systematic, logical and sound analysis reported in a structured way. For evaluators and evaluation managers, it requires technical skills on evaluation design, methodologies, data collection techniques and a high degree of analytical abilities. It requires skills such as reflective practice and communication skills.

The principle of credibility for evaluation quality also relates to the integration of human rights and gender equality and ethics in the evaluation process. Within UNEG⁶ there is a commitment to improve human rights and gender equality responsive evaluations within the UN system. A high quality evaluation should thus integrate gender equality throughout the evaluation process - from determining the evaluation scope, criteria and questions through to using a gender responsive methodology, methods and data analysis techniques and to have findings, conclusions and recommendations reflect a gender analysis.⁷

UNFPA also places great importance on ethical principles to be upheld when conducting evaluations, in line with UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation and the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation.⁸

Utility

Utility is not guaranteed with independence and credibility but requires that the evaluation is undertaken with the intention to use its results and that it is conducted at a time when the results can meaningfully inform decision-making processes. The underpinning principle being that evaluations are undertaken to influence change and stimulate learning.

For an evaluation to be used it needs to be relevant to the stakeholders aimed to use it, which requires efforts to ensure their participation. This requires stakeholders' consultations throughout the evaluation process to enable ownership. UNFPA evaluation policy states that evaluations should be *"...planned and conducted ensuring national ownership and leadership of evaluation processes by rights holders and duty bearers."*⁹

The principle of utility and use is thus closely linked to intended use by intended users.¹⁰ Utilization-focused evaluations enhance the potential use of evaluations and provide credible information to support decision-making to inform planning, implementation and improvements in policies and programmes.¹¹

Evaluations should be designed and monitored with careful consideration for how the process and product will affect use. This requires evaluation managers to be skilled in communication, ensuring that reports are easy to read/understand, concise and to the point.

⁶ UNEG Guidance Document – Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations, August 2014

⁷ UNEG Guidance Document – UN-SWAP Evaluation Performance Indicator Technical Note, August 2014

⁸ UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation and UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN system, June 2008

⁹ UNFPA Evaluation policy, 2013

¹⁰ Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 4th Edition, Michael Quinn Patton, 2008

¹¹ UNFPA Evaluation policy, 2013

Summary

The evaluation principles set out form the basis for UNFPA perception and definition of the concept of high quality evaluations, the development of its quality assurance and assessment system and for its elaboration of criteria against which to determine evaluation quality.

Within each principle there are several dimensions of evaluation quality, which are translated directly into UNFPA practical evaluation quality assurance and assessment work, including terms of reference, capacities of evaluation teams, design/inception reports and draft and final evaluation reports.

The principles also translates into Evaluation Office guidance, specifically UNFPA handbook for conducting country programme evaluations, its templates, checklists and other existing tools. It also translates into the newly revised tool for quality assessments of final evaluation reports.

For more information please see UNFPA webpage where you find the handbook for conducting country programme evaluations, quality assurance templates and checklists, and the new Evaluation Quality Assessment template for assessments of final evaluation reports. All UNFPA programme-level and corporate evaluations are published on the evaluation database, together with the Evaluation Quality Assessment document and a Management Response.



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