



Priority setting for evaluation: Developing a strategic evaluation portfolio



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ABSTRACT

Resources for evaluation are frequently scarce and best use should be made of them to deliver against the typical purposes of an evaluation function to (i) enhance accountability and (ii) promote operational improvement and learning. This paper presents a method for analyzing and prioritizing potential evaluations to improve the selection of a portfolio of activities that give the greatest pay-off. The method establishes the relative priority of 'evaluation opportunities' against criteria that relate to the usual primary purposes of an evaluation function. The method was developed in the context of a multilateral organization but is of general utility to the wider evaluation community and, with suitable adaptation can be applied to help ensure that scarce evaluation resources are used to their best advantage.

A range of benefits are expected to accrue to an organization from adopting a more thorough, analytical priority setting process. These include:

- Enhancing the relevance of evaluations to the wider organizational agenda
- Providing structured justification for allocating funds to evaluation activities
- More transparent, predictable decision-making
- Enabling realignment of evaluation priorities with changing needs and circumstances
- Improved credibility with stakeholders
- Providing a clear direction and sense of purpose to evaluation staff
- Documenting a clear framework for the development of an organization's evaluation portfolio.

The paper describes a priority setting method, including the key criteria that are used to assess 'evaluation opportunities', and presents different analyses of an evaluation portfolio. Examples from a practical application of the approach to the preparation of an evaluation work plan in a multilateral environmental agency are given.

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1. Background

Due to limits in evaluation spending in most organizations (even in rich countries), it is imperative that evaluation resources are judiciously spent on a selection of an evaluation portfolio that would yield the greatest benefit to the organization and provide the required feedback into policy planning, programming and budgetary processes. Only in this way can evaluation optimize its influence.

In a situation of resource scarcity, better guidance on the use of evaluation resources is critical.

The published literature on evaluation priority-setting is limited. Different organizations approach the setting of evaluation priorities in different ways ranging from a simple list of evaluation opportunities prioritized by the date of programme or project closure through to a set of evaluations negotiated with the management of an organization and its Board to more sophisticated approaches involving the use of combinations of parameters and defined sets of criteria and risk assessment tools.

For example, within the United Nations System, the Joint Inspection Unit develops its inspection and evaluation portfolio through an inter-agency consultative process where proposals for inspection and evaluations on specific topics are sought from participating agencies. A long list of proposals is rated by focal points of the agencies. Using the aggregate agency ratings and its own priorities the Unit prepares a prioritized short list of inspections and evaluations that the Unit can undertake in a calendar year with the resources available to it.

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The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) uses a risk-based approach to prioritize evaluations. In its biennial report to the 64th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on “Strengthening the role of evaluation and the application of evaluation findings on programme design, delivery and policy directives” the office stated that the risk-based planning approach was aimed at ensuring that “OIOS evaluation and inspection activities are relevant to United Nations governance, management and stakeholders by addressing oversight and strategic priorities in a regular and timely way, focusing its limited resources on areas requiring most urgent attention”. In selecting potential topics, the Division used a planning framework that considers risk factors, strategic issues, and systematic and cyclical coverage. Programmes are rated based on a ranking of aggregate weighted scores for 11 proxy risk indicators. They are: (1) total resources; (2) number of posts; (3) discretionary vulnerability; (4) complexity of coordination needs; (5) output implementation rate; (6) availability of programme performance information; (7) evaluation coverage; (8) resources spent on evaluation; (9) timeliness of reporting (slotting dates); (10) e-PAS (a staff performance assessment tool) compliance rate; and (11) gender equality. In addition to risk assessment, the Evaluation and Inspection Division scopes General Assembly and other international conference agenda to identify crosscutting thematic topics of strategic and Secretariat-wide interest in order to ensure that its evaluations and inspections are relevant and timely to United Nations stakeholders. OIOS also considers systematic and cyclical coverage of secretariat programmes in preparing its inspection and evaluation plan.

The Evaluation Plan (2010–2011) for the United Nations Environment Programme states that human resource availability is the principal limiting factor in the design of its evaluation plan. Since the volume of work on the evaluation work plan exceeds the available capacity to complete it, priorities must be clearly set. A number of principles are used to inform a simple scoring approach to rank the prospective evaluation activities in the rolling work plan. They include the following: (1) afford the highest priority to more strategic (Subprogramme and Thematic) evaluations; (2) afford high priority to project evaluations that contribute to the strategic evaluations; (3) evaluations of projects that have already been completed should be undertaken before those that are yet to end; (4) prioritize projects with larger total budgets over smaller ones; (5) prioritize projects where magnitude/distribution of benefits are likely to be greater; (6) undertake mid-term evaluation of projects only where the projects have been reported as being at risk or are jointly implemented with other agencies. On-going evaluations are automatically incorporated into the work plan, as they are no longer prospective, together with an estimate of the staff time required to reach their completion. Prospective evaluations are scored against criteria associated with the principles listed above and ranked in order of priority. A staff time estimate for each evaluation was made. The scope of the feasible work plan can be estimated as when the cumulative staff time required to complete evaluations, in order of priority, equates to the total staff time available within the Evaluation Office.

The UNDP undertakes several categories of evaluations and the evaluation portfolio at any one time draws from these categories. For the Assessment of Development Results (ADRs), the Evaluation Office draws from the universe of countries that have new country programmes that will be considered by the Executive Board in the following year. The goal is to achieve maximum coverage. The number of programmes submitted to the Board varies from year to year. In years when the Office cannot cover (close to) all programmes, priorities are set by country “importance”, past evaluation history, and evaluability, among other factors. Often, there are negotiations with the regional bureaus. In the case of global and regional programmes 100% coverage is required by the

Board towards the end of the cycle. With thematic evaluations, the process is more consultative. The Evaluation Office presents the proposal to the Board often following a request to the Evaluation Office to provide strategic evaluation coverage which often involves a fairly rigorous analytical process, looking at the Strategic Plan, its main focus areas and crosscutting themes, with utility and evaluability as key considerations. The result is often a combination of substance-focused and organization-focused evaluations.

In preparing the Canadian International Development Agency’s (CIDA’s) five year Evaluation Work Plan (2011–2012 to 2015–2016), several considerations were highlighted. They include: the requirement to evaluate 100% of CIDA’s direct programme spending over 5 years; the duality of the evaluation function at CIDA (i.e., centralized and decentralized evaluations); and the need to further promote the use of evaluation results at the Agency. With regards to evaluation coverage, the Evaluation Directorate had to develop a manageable portfolio of evaluations which collectively represented a manageable timeline sequenced in such a way as to optimize the utility of the evaluations. The sequencing of the evaluations was determined by several factors including: programme priorities; materiality (importance in financial terms); and the contribution of the evaluation to decision-making processes (e.g. renewal of the programming strategy or replenishment of funding to partner organizations and institutions). These factors were complemented by a preliminary risk assessment to determine the level of security and stability of the countries evaluated and the complexity of undertaking a specific evaluation.

The examples cited above are by no means exhaustive. They are reviewed here to provide an insight into how varied evaluation priority setting processes are across different agencies within the bilateral and multilateral system.

2. Methods

2.1. Priority setting framework and context

Priority setting methods that use an ‘attractiveness’ and ‘feasibility’ framework (Fig. 1) have been successfully applied in a variety of situations especially in the area of Research and Development. This framework has been used at national level in New Zealand, Australia (Blyth & Upstill, 1994), and Turkey (Dasdemir, 2005) institutional, programme and project levels (CSIRO Australia 1991) the Czech Republic (Klusacek, 2001) and some International Agricultural Research Centres (ICLARM, 2000). This general priority-setting framework has been adapted for use in prioritizing evaluations. The method requires the definition of a set of criteria and indicators to determine the relative ‘attractiveness’ and ‘feasibility’ for a set of mutually exclusive potential evaluations which we term ‘evaluation opportunities’.



Fig. 1. The attractiveness and feasibility framework for priority setting.

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