Designing Useful Evaluations: Lessons Learned

Encouraging utilization
The following factors increase the likelihood that an evaluation will help enhance the performance and impacts of development policies, programs and projects:

- **The importance of a conducive policy environment.** The findings of the evaluation are much more likely to be used if they address current policy concerns and if there is a commitment of key decision-makers to accept the political consequences of implementing the findings.

- **The timing of the evaluation.** The evaluation should be launched when decision-makers have clearly defined information needs. The findings must be delivered in time to affect decisions, and key results must often be communicated informally before the final report is completed.

- **The role of the evaluation.** The evaluation is rarely the only, or even the most important source of information or influence for policy makers and managers. A successful evaluation must adapt to the context within which it will be used, and the evaluator must understand when and how the findings can most effectively be used.

- **Building a relationship with the client and effective communication of the evaluation findings.** It is essential to establish a good relationship with key stakeholders, listen carefully to their needs, understand their perception of the political context and keep them informed of the progress of the evaluation. There should be “no surprises” when the evaluation findings are presented.

- **Who should conduct the evaluation?**. The case studies identified two different ways to organize the evaluation, each with advantages and drawbacks:
  
  - Option 1: The evaluation is conducted by the evaluation unit of the managing or funding agency. This usually has the advantage of better access to the key actors and to data, and a better understanding of the political and organizational context within which the evaluation is conducted. A potential risk, however, is that the evaluator becomes too involved in the political context, losing sight of the “big picture” and finding it difficult to explore sensitive areas.
  
  - Option 2: The evaluation is conducted by an outside organization or body. This can ensure independence and credibility and can make it easier to explore sensitive issues such as local political pressures or the exclusion of vulnerable groups. However, outside evaluators may have less access to decision-makers and to needed data.
  
  - A third option, not reflected in these case studies, is to attempt to achieve the advantages of the first two options—by managing and/or conducting an evaluation jointly, involving some combination of external or independent agencies and program staff.

The scope and methodology of the evaluation.
There is no single best evaluation methodology; the approach must be adapted to the specific context, the evaluation questions and priorities, and the available resources. The evaluator will often recommend broadening the proposed scope of the evaluation to assess, for example, the implementation process as well as outcomes, or to study more deeply the social and political context within which the program operates. Most of the evaluations also used a multi-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods, both to increase the reliability of the findings and to provide a broader framework for their interpretation.
How much should the evaluation cost?
The value of an evaluation should be assessed, like any other project or program expenditure, in terms of its potential cost-effectiveness. A seemingly “expensive” evaluation may be fully justified if it can produce a reduction in costs or an increase in benefits significantly greater than its own cost. The evaluations described in this volume ranged in cost from as little as $4,500 to $500,000, but in each case the question “Was the evaluation justified?” was assessed by comparing the benefits produced with the costs of conducting the study.

While in some cases both costs and benefits can be monetized, in other cases the benefits may concern increased equity, environmental quality or overall program effectiveness— in which case decision-makers must make a judgment as to whether it was “worth” investing in the evaluation to produce a certain set of qualitative benefits.

Assessing utilization of evaluation findings and their cost-effectiveness
Most assessments of evaluations are conducted with time and budget constraints, and often even with political constraints limiting which stakeholders can be contacted and what types of questions can be asked. Within these real-world contexts it is rarely possible to conduct the types of rigorous assessment of evaluation methodology or attribution analysis recommended by the textbooks.

The methodology for assessing utilization will often be limited to a review of available research reports, discussions with the evaluation team (in person or by phone or e-mail) and in some cases soliciting the opinions of local experts (such as staff from the World Bank or other donor resident missions).

Attribution analysis, in which the extent to which the observed policy or program outcomes can be attributed to the effects of the evaluation, is difficult in the best of circumstances (but even more so with the types of constraint listed earlier). The techniques described in the OED publication *M&E: Some Tools, Methods and Approaches* represent a range of analytical tools normally available for attribution analysis. Where possible, the assessment should combine and compare as many of these techniques as are available:

- Construction, where possible, of counterfactuals describing the situation which would have obtained if the evaluation had not been conducted (Bulgaria, Pakistan)
- Reviewing references to the evaluation in government reports and planning documents (India, Employment Assurance Scheme; Philippines; Uganda)
- Critical analysis of statements made in the evaluation reports concerning impact of the evaluation (India, Employment Assurance Scheme; Bulgaria; Indonesia; Uganda) and interviews with the evaluators.
- Opinions of stakeholders obtained either in structured interviews (India, Citizen Report Cards) or more commonly in response to e-mail requests (Bulgaria; Indonesia).

In most of the case studies, *cost-effective analysis* was used to compare the financial or numerical benefits of the evaluation with its monetary costs. In most cases it was not difficult to identify the potential impacts of the evaluation (such as reduced administrative costs, increased sales, reduced fines, more beneficiaries), and the challenge was to estimate the proportion of the observed changes which could be attributed to the evaluation. A key lesson is to ensure that the assumptions and methods of estimation of the cost-effectiveness analysis are clearly stated so that the reader can judge the validity of the methods.