

PROCESS EVALUATION



Process evaluations focus mainly on internal project or programme issues. They are designed to generate information, findings and recommendations that can help to improve the management of a project or programme. Process evaluations are normally carried out during a project or programme, instead of at the end. Many other kinds of evaluation contain some elements of process evaluation.

Process evaluations focus mainly on internal project or programme issues. They can be designed to cover a range of different areas such as:

- whether or not activities have been carried out according to schedules;
- the quality of the work carried out during a project or programme;
- how management policies and practices have affected that work;
- how internal capacities and culture have affected the project or programme;
- whether a project or programme has the right resources to function adequately;
- whether all the planned target populations have been reached;
- how target populations have reacted to the project or programme outputs; and
- how external socio-economic factors have affected the delivery and quality of the project or programme.

A process evaluation can be seen in contrast to an impact (or outcome) evaluation, which concentrates primarily on the changes brought about by a project or programme. In practice, many evaluations contain elements of both impact / outcome and process evaluation. However, an evaluation is only likely to be called a process evaluation if the focus is primarily on internal processes.

Process evaluations are almost always formative in nature. This means they are designed to generate information, findings and recommendations that help to improve a project or programme. For this reason, process evaluations are normally carried out during a project or programme, instead of at the end. However, in some situations they may be carried out at the end of a project or programme: for example, if the project or programme is about to enter a new phase, or an organisation wants to learn from one project or programme in order to influence similar interventions elsewhere.

Process evaluations may be major exercises carried out at key times, such as the mid-point of a project or programme. However, it is also possible to carry out smaller, more regular process evaluations throughout a project or programme. This kind of process evaluation may be very similar to an internal review. It may be conducted

by internal staff (known as self-evaluation) or by external facilitators. It may be formal or informal in nature. And it may be based on existing information or involve the collection and analysis of new data.

When to use process evaluation

A process evaluation can be used in many different circumstances. It is most likely to be used in situations where it is important to understand how the internal dynamics of a project or programme (or organisation) are affecting, or are likely to affect, the end results. This could include the following circumstances.

- A process evaluation may be used if specific processes are considered an essential part of a project or programme's design. For example, if capacity or cultural change within supported partners is important for ultimate changes to be sustainable. Or if internal changes within an organisation are required as a pre-condition for successful engagement with other stakeholders.
- Process evaluations may be carried out where organisations are engaged in implementing pilot or innovative projects or programmes. This is because it is often important to understand how any desired changes came about, so that successful projects and programmes can be replicated or extended. In these cases a process evaluation may attempt to identify the internal practices or processes that were important in bringing about positive change.
- Process evaluations may be appropriate in large, complex interventions, where there are many actors working towards the same goals. In these circumstances a process evaluation might attempt to assess how different organisations are working together, and what changes are needed to improve the effectiveness of the collaborations.
- A process evaluation could be carried out if there are serious doubts about whether a project or programme is being implemented properly, or how far initial, required changes are being achieved. The process evaluation might help identify whether a project or programme is not working because it is not being implemented properly, or because the theory underlying the project or programme is wrong.

As stated above, however, a process evaluation may be carried out in almost any circumstance. And many kinds of evaluation focus partly on process issues, even if they are not formally called process evaluations.

How it works

There are no fixed steps for a process evaluation, and the same basic steps should be taken as for any evaluation. In general, a process evaluation would not be expected to use rigorous methodologies such as randomised control trials (RCTs), qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) or contribution analysis. Instead process evaluations tend to rely on simple methods of data collection such as literature reviews (financial records, policy documents etc.) backed

up by interviews, focus group discussions, observation and questionnaires.

Perhaps the most importance difference is that the primary users of a process evaluation are often the management and staff of the organisation (or organisations) concerned, rather than the targeted beneficiaries. This means it is important to ensure that these internal staff have a large degree of input into the design of the evaluation, including helping to define the evaluation questions.

There is little point in carrying out a process evaluation unless the findings will be used to improve performance in the future. It is therefore important that a process evaluation properly considers at the start how any findings and recommendations will be used, and who will primarily be responsible for using them.

Further reading and resources

Other relevant papers in this section of the M&E Universe can be found by clicking on the links below.



The Better Evaluation website (www.betterevaluation.org) contains the largest set of resources in the world covering evaluation in the social development sector. The site offers step-by-step guidance for those managing or implementing evaluations. Experienced evaluators, or those with an interest in evaluation, are recommended to go to that site and search through the different materials.

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