

UTILISATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION



Utilisation-focused evaluations (UFEs) are based on the principle that an evaluation should be judged according to how useful it is. UFEs should be planned and implemented in a way that increases the likelihood of the findings being used. This normally means identifying the primary users of an evaluation and ensuring that they are engaged in decision-making throughout the process.

The concept of a utilisation-focused evaluation was first popularised by Michael Quinn Patton, who also developed the concept of developmental evaluation (another type of evaluation covered in the M&E Universe series). Utilisation-focused evaluations (UFEs) are based on the principle that an evaluation should be judged according to how useful it is to its primary intended users. In many circumstances this means trying to ensure the findings of a UFE are used for their intended purposes. In some circumstances the usefulness of a UFE may also be judged on the process itself (e.g. empowering marginalised groups to engage with decision-makers during the evaluation).

A UFE should always be planned and implemented in a way that maximises the likelihood of the findings being used to inform decision-making and/or improve performance. As a result, UFEs should always be focused on the needs of real, identified users. The job of the evaluator is to facilitate the evaluation in such a way as to best meet their needs, and to engage them throughout the process. This is based on the assumption that the intended users of any evaluation are more likely to use the findings if they feel ownership of the evaluation process, and if they have been actively involved from the start (Patton 2008).

When to use utilisation-focused evaluation

A UFE is an evaluation approach that can be adopted in most circumstances. UFEs are compatible with all other forms of evaluation, and the principles can be applied in any kind of work in any sector. As a result, a UFE is almost always appropriate. However, the time and resources needed to undertake a UFE may be higher than for some other kinds of evaluation, and these costs need to be weighed up against the likely benefits.

There are some circumstances in which a UFE may not be appropriate. For example, there may be occasions where nobody is really interested in using the findings of an evaluation, or nobody has the time or resources to actively engage. This may be the case, for example, if an evaluation is only being carried out because a project or programme meets some arbitrary financial threshold, or because one was planned from the start but most stakeholders have since lost interest. In these cases a UFE would not be appropriate because it would not be possible to identify and engage the primary intended users.

How it works

There are two key questions to ask at the beginning of any UFE (see BetterEvaluation u.d., ActionAid 2016).

- *Who is going to use the evaluation?* This means identifying the primary intended users of the evaluation.
- *What needs to be done to make it as useful for them as possible?* This information should drive all other decisions made whilst planning and implementing the evaluation.

Once the primary users of a UFE have been identified they should then be involved right from the start of the evaluation process. This will allow them to explain how they intend to use the evaluation findings (or process) before any key decisions are made, such as designing evaluation questions or adopting data collection methodologies.

Apart from these key guiding principles, a UFE works in the same way as any other evaluation. There are no specific tools or methodologies, and no particular ways of analysing or disseminating information. Most of the additional tasks of a UFE come either at the design stage, or through regularly engaging with the intended users throughout the implementation period. There may also be some additional work at the end of an evaluation to support the primary intended users to understand and use any findings or recommendations.

Challenges

Although in theory a UFE is an approach that should be sought in almost any evaluation, in practice there are some challenges that may limit the extent to which a UFE can be applied. Some of these are described below.

- Compared to other approaches, a UFE may need more flexibility, and more time to fully engage with different users at different stages. For example, new users of the evaluation may emerge over the course of the evaluation, or new evaluation questions may emerge. This means that additional resources may be needed that were not anticipated at the start.
- The timing of a UFE is important, and should be planned to fit in with existing decision-making cycles.

For example, if the need is to decide whether to continue with a project or a programme then the evaluation cannot be carried out too late in the project or programme cycle.

- A UFE requires good relationships to be developed between the evaluating team and the evaluation commissioning body, as well as the primary intended users (if different). This means that evaluators need to be skilled at building and maintaining relationships, as well as having good facilitation skills.
- Equally, the primary intended users of a UFE need to be ready, willing and able to engage with the

evaluators. They need to be willing to learn, and to make decisions based on the findings emerging from the evaluation. Above all they need to be able to commit a significant amount of time to engaging with the evaluation.

In INTRAC's view, in principle, a UFE is something all evaluations should aspire to. After all, what is the point of engaging in an evaluation that nobody intends to use? However, it is always important to remember that within monitoring and evaluation (M&E) doing things properly and thoroughly, with the active participation of many different stakeholders, is rarely a quick or cheap option.

Further reading and resources

Links to some of the other types of evaluation contained in this section of the M&E Universe can be found by clicking on the links below.



Participatory evaluation



Gender-responsive evaluation



Developmental evaluation



Real-time evaluation

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.

The article on utilisation-focused evaluations referred to below (BetterEvaluation u.d.) provides a good starting point, and contains many other references and resources that can be explored.

References

- ActionAid (2016). *How to... Select a Methodological Approach for the Evaluation*. Evaluation Technical Briefing Note, #7. ActionAid, UK.
- BetterEvaluation (u.d.). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. Retrieved from Better Evaluation website: http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/utilization.Focused_evaluation, August 2017.
- Patton, M (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*, 4th edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

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