

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation **TIPS**

USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation

CONDUCTING A PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

As part of reengineering, USAID is promoting participation in all aspects of its development work.

This Tips outlines how to conduct a participatory evaluation.

What Is Participatory Evaluation?

Participatory evaluation provides for active involvement in the evaluation process of those with a stake in the program: providers, partners, customers (beneficiaries), and any other interested parties. Participation typically takes place throughout all phases of the evaluation: planning and design; gathering and analyzing the data; identifying the evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations; disseminating results; and preparing an action plan to improve program performance.

Characteristics of Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluations typically share several characteristics that set them apart from traditional evaluation approaches. These include:

Participant focus and ownership. Participatory evaluations are primarily oriented to the information needs of program stakeholders rather than of the donor agency. The donor agency simply helps the participants conduct their own evaluations, thus building their ownership and commitment to the results and facilitating their follow-up action.

Scope of participation. The range of participants included and the roles they play may vary. For example, some evaluations may target only program providers or beneficiaries, while others may include the full array of stakeholders.

Participant negotiations. Participating groups meet to communicate and negotiate to reach a consensus on evaluation findings, solve problems, and make plans to improve performance.

Diversity of views. Views of all participants are sought and recognized. More powerful stakeholders allow participation of the less powerful.

Learning process. The process is a learning experience for participants. Emphasis is on identifying lessons learned that will help participants improve program implementation, as well as on assessing whether targets were achieved.

Flexible design. While some preliminary planning for the evaluation may be necessary, design issues are decided (as much as possible) in the participatory process. Generally, evaluation questions and data collection and analysis methods are determined by the participants, not by outside evaluators.

Empirical orientation. Good participatory evaluations are based on empirical data. Typically, rapid appraisal techniques are used to determine what happened and why.

Use of facilitators. Participants actually conduct the evaluation, not outside evaluators as is traditional. However, one or more outside experts usually serve as facilitator—that is, provide supporting roles as mentor, trainer, group processor, negotiator, and/or methodologist.

Why Conduct a Participatory Evaluation?

Experience has shown that participatory evaluations improve program performance. Listening to and learning from program beneficiaries, field staff, and other stakeholders who know why a program is or is not working is critical to making improvements. Also, the more these insiders are involved in identifying evaluation questions and in gathering and analyzing data, the more likely they are to use the information to improve performance. Participatory evaluation empowers program providers and beneficiaries to act on the knowledge gained.

Advantages to participatory evaluations are that they

- Examine relevant issues by involving key players in evaluation design
- Promote participants' learning about the program and its performance and enhance their understanding of other stakeholders' points of view
- Improve participants' evaluation skills
- Mobilize stakeholders, enhance teamwork, and build shared commitment to act on evaluation recommendations

- Increase likelihood that evaluation information will be used to improve performance

But there may be disadvantages. For example, participatory evaluations may

- Be viewed as less objective because program staff, customers, and other stakeholders with possible vested interests participate
- Be less useful in addressing highly technical aspects
- Require considerable time and resources to identify and involve a wide array of stakeholders
- Take participating staff away from ongoing activities
- Be dominated and misused by some stakeholders to further their own interests

Steps in Conducting a Participatory Evaluation

Step 1: Decide if a participatory evaluation approach is appropriate. Participatory evaluations are especially useful when there are questions about implementation difficulties or program effects on beneficiaries, or when information is wanted on stakeholders' knowledge of program goals or their views of progress. Traditional evaluation approaches may be more suitable when there is a need for independent outside judgment, when specialized information is needed that only technical experts can provide, when key stakeholders don't have time to participate, or when such serious lack of agreement exists among stakeholders that a collaborative approach is likely to fail.

Step 2: Decide on the degree of participation. What groups will participate and what roles will they play? Participation may be broad, with a wide array of program staff, beneficiaries, partners, and others. It may, alternatively, target one or two of these groups. For example, if the aim is to uncover what hinders program implementation, field staff may need to be involved. If the issue is a program's effect on local communities, beneficiaries may be the most appropriate participants. If

the aim is to know if all stakeholders understand a program's goals and view progress similarly, broad participation may be best.

Roles may range from serving as a resource or informant to participating fully in some or all phases of the evaluation.

Step 3: Prepare the evaluation scope of work.

Consider the evaluation approach—the basic methods, schedule, logistics, and funding. Special attention should go to defining roles of the outside facilitator and participating stakeholders. As much as possible, decisions such as the evaluation questions to be addressed and the development of data collection instruments and analysis plans should be left to the participatory process rather than be predetermined in the scope of work.

Step 4: Conduct the team planning meeting.

Typically, the participatory evaluation process begins with a workshop of the facilitator and participants. The purpose is to build consensus on the aim of the evaluation; refine the scope of work and clarify roles and responsibilities of the participants and facilitator; review the schedule, logistical arrangements, and agenda; and train participants in basic data collection and analysis. Assisted by the facilitator, participants identify the evaluation questions they want answered. The approach taken to identify questions may be open ended or may stipulate broad areas of inquiry. Participants then select appropriate methods and develop data-gathering instruments and analysis plans needed to answer the questions.

Step 5: Conduct the evaluation. Participatory evaluations seek to maximize stakeholders' involvement in conducting the evaluation in order to promote learning. Participants define the questions, consider the data collection skills, methods, and commitment of time and labor required. Participatory evaluations usually use rapid appraisal techniques, which are simpler, quicker, and less costly than conventional sample surveys. They include methods such as those in the box on page 4. Typically, facilitators are skilled in these methods, and they help train and guide other participants in their use.

Step 6: Analyze the data and build consensus on results.

Once the data are gathered, participatory approaches to analyzing and interpreting them help participants build a common body of knowledge. Once the analysis is complete, facilitators work with participants to reach consensus on findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Facilitators may need to negotiate among stakeholder groups if disagreements emerge. Developing a common understanding of the results, on the basis of empirical evidence, becomes the cornerstone for group commitment to a plan of action.

Step 7: Prepare an action plan.

Facilitators work with participants to prepare an action plan to improve program performance. The knowledge shared by participants about a program's strengths and weaknesses is turned into action. Empowered by knowledge, participants become agents of change and apply the lessons they have learned to improve performance.

What's Different About Participatory Evaluation?

Participatory Evaluation

- participant focus and ownership of evaluation
- broad range of stakeholders participate
- focus is on learning
- flexible design
- rapid appraisal methods
- outsiders are facilitators

Traditional Evaluation

- donor focus and ownership of evaluation
- stakeholders often don't participate
- focus is on accountability
- predetermined design
- formal methods
- outsiders are evaluators

Rapid Appraisal Methods

Key informant interviews. This involves interviewing 15 to 35 individuals selected for their knowledge and experience in a topic of interest. Interviews are qualitative, in-depth, and semistructured. They rely on interview guides that list topics or open-ended questions. The interviewer subtly probes the informant to elicit information, opinions, and experiences.

Focus group interviews. In these, 8 to 12 carefully selected participants freely discuss issues, ideas, and experiences among themselves. A moderator introduces the subject, keeps the discussion going, and tries to prevent domination of the discussion by a few participants. Focus groups should be homogeneous, with participants of similar backgrounds as much as possible.

Community group interviews. These take place at public meetings open to all community members. The primary interaction is between the participants and the interviewer, who presides over the meeting and asks questions, following a carefully prepared questionnaire.

Direct observation. Using a detailed observation form, observers record what they see and hear at a program site. The information may be about physical surroundings or about ongoing activities, processes, or discussions.

Minisurveys. These are usually based on a structured questionnaire with a limited number of mostly closed-ended questions. They are usually administered to 25 to 50 people. Respondents may be selected through probability or nonprobability sampling techniques, or through “convenience” sampling (interviewing stakeholders at locations where they're likely to be, such as a clinic for a survey on health care programs). The major advantage of minisurveys is that the data can be collected and analyzed within a few days. It is the only rapid appraisal method that generates quantitative data.

Case studies. Case studies record anecdotes that illustrate a program's shortcomings or accomplishments. They tell about incidents or concrete events, often from one person's experience.

Village imaging. This involves groups of villagers drawing maps or diagrams to identify and visualize problems and solutions.

Selected Further Reading

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