

AGENDA ITEM III.

Managing Evaluations

Room Document 2.

MANAGING EVALUATIONS: DIVISION OF LABOUR AND THE USE OF EXTERNAL CONSULTANTS

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In recent years more and more bilateral evaluation units/departments have decided to include their evaluation staff in evaluation teams. The level of “participation” seems to vary a lot, from staff members being the team leader of the evaluation to accompanying the external consultants during field visits as observers. Whereas this role is rather “new” for bilateral donors, most evaluation departments of multilateral organizations and development banks conduct evaluations themselves with only minimal support of external consultants.

Naturally, various experiences and opinions have been acquired in different organizations and institutions.

According to the OECD DAC Quality Standards for Development Evaluation a central evaluation unit/department should be structurally independent from line ministries or line departments. Evaluators should be independent from the development intervention, including its policy, operations and management functions as well as intended beneficiaries. If an evaluation department is positioned accordingly, then independence (from an organizational perspective) should be well ensured, at least in theory. One issue highlighted, in the email discussion preceding the meeting, was the perception about evaluation staff within an organization or institution. Are evaluation staff perceived as internal or external, synonymously often meaning more or less independent and objective? Some reasons, amongst many others, for the decision to involve evaluation staff more in evaluations may be related to personal opinions about the competencies of individuals, the inner-organizational dynamics and the role of evaluation as such in the respective organisation. In people’s opinions and perceptions it also seems to make a difference whether an external consultant or a colleague from the evaluation department presents critical findings.

On one side feedback suggests that in many cases external consultants are perceived to be more independent and more credible than evaluation staff, on the other side, points were raised that external consultants are not always independent and objective since they might be interested in future assignments (“not bite the hand that feeds you”). Also complaints were expressed about the methodological experience of external consultants and the quality of evaluation reports they delivered. The latter seems to have influenced some donors to include evaluation staff in order to be in a better position to influence and raise the quality of the evaluation.

Whether or not to include external consultants altogether will also depend on the capacity of the evaluation department itself. It certainly will make a difference whether there are two, five or ten plus people in an evaluation department and the amount of the allocated budget and the size of the portfolio they are charged with evaluating. Besides the organizational boundaries, also the complexity of the evaluation itself and the technical knowledge of the evaluation staff will be critical factors to decide upon the composition of the evaluation team. Comments were made that specific external expertise is often needed either from a methodological perspective and/or from a technical/thematic point of view. The evaluation staff does not always have the necessary knowledge about a complex topic and /or about elaborated evaluation methods in order to conduct evaluations, but often it is sufficient to manage them.

Which mixture of experts is best for a strategic evaluation? Possibly, no general recommendations can be made but advantages and disadvantages of different options can be compared and experiences shared.

The session will cover the following questions:

- 1) What factors are driving decisions to use external consultants only, mixed teams (which include staff from the evaluation departments and external experts) or staff-only evaluation teams?
- 2) What are positive and negative experiences so far? Specifically what are the implications of the different set-ups in terms of quality, credibility, use, learning and knowledge management?
- 3) What is the exact division of labour in the field between the external consultants and staff from the evaluation department?

It will also be interesting to see if there is a difference in these dynamics when dealing with a centralized or de-centralized evaluation system.

The situation becomes even more complex when program staff also becomes part of the evaluation teams. In the evaluation literature an intensive debate can be followed about the advantages and disadvantages of internal versus external evaluation team members.