Volume 10: Performance Evaluation and Feed the Future

What are Performance Evaluations?

According to the USAID Evaluation Policy: "Performance evaluations focus on descriptive and normative questions, such as: what a particular project or program has achieved (either at an intermediate point in execution or at the conclusion of an implementation period); how it is being implemented; how it is perceived and valued; whether expected results are occurring; and other questions that are pertinent to program design, management and operational decision making. Performance evaluations often incorporate *before-after comparisons*, but generally *lack a rigorously defined counterfactual*."

Impact evaluations, in contrast, require a counterfactual. USAID's performance evaluations generally focus on the **programmatic, technical, managerial, and organizational** elements of a project. Impact evaluations, on the other hand, focus on causal effects and the evidence to attribute results to certain projects and programs.

The Purpose of Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluations are designed to identify accomplishments, performance issues, and constraints in the **implementation** of the project. They **identify results and lessons learned** in **project implementation**. As a result of performance evaluation programming, decisions are made on what activities to continue, modify, or enhance.

Examples of performance evaluation questions may include the following:

- What has the project or program achieved (either at an intermediate point in execution or at the conclusion of an implementation period)?
- How is the project or program being implemented?
- How is the project or program perceived and valued?
- Are expected results of the program or project occurring?
- To what extent is the project progressing towards the achievements of its objectives and goals?

The Role of Performance Evaluation in Monitoring and Evaluation

Performance *evaluation* is not the same as Performance *monitoring*. Performance *monitoring* tracks changes in performance indicators, and reveals whether desired results are occurring and whether implementation is on track. Performance monitoring tracks progress towards planned results through **project inputs and outputs**, and the **near-term** consequences of project activities.

Performance *evaluation* focuses on measuring the progress and process of achievement of project results and **whether and how inputs and outputs are producing outcomes and impacts**. Good performance monitoring is essential for enabling good performance evaluation.

- To what extent has the project capacity building efforts been successful in improving the management skills, and efficiency of the local partner implementing project activities?

Performance Evaluation Design

Performance evaluations should be designed to generate the highest quality and most credible evidence that corresponds to the questions being asked. Performance evaluations often incorporate before-after comparisons, but generally lack a rigorously defined counterfactual. Performance evaluations are designed to

identify accomplishments, performance issues, constraints in the implementation of the project, as well as results and lessons learned in project implementation. Usually as a result of the performance evaluations, decisions are made on what program or project activities to continue, modify, or enhance

Performance Evaluation Methods

FTF performance evaluation data collection and analysis can employ quantitative or qualitative methods, or both. An evaluation design that uses "mixed methods" (both quantitative and qualitative) is usually best in that it offers both rigor and richness of data. Performance evaluations should combine qualitative and quantitative methods, and depending on the purpose of the evaluation, use primary and secondary data collection sources.

Data collection methods should be selected to provide the **highest quality and rigor** in answering the performance evaluation questions. The choice of method is determined **by the information that is needed** and **by the cost of collecting the data**. Below are some data collection methods that can be used when conducting performance evaluations:

1. ***Performance Monitoring Data***
   Analysis of program performance or program monitoring data is an excellent source of data during performance evaluations. This can be used to evaluate **service delivery projects** because a well-designed service delivery project should always have a system in place for routinely collecting monitoring data. This data is easy to access through the project monitoring system; it provides an assessment of how the project is performing and helps answer questions on progress of projects towards its objectives.

2. ***Structured Surveys***
   Structured surveys represent important methods of data collection for performance evaluations, especially when collecting information over *large areas*, for example at a district level or nationally. These may include **socio-economic (household) surveys**, which aim at establishing the economic and social characteristics of the target population, including: demographic data, access to and use of services and infrastructure, and sources of income. **Farm management surveys** provide data on all aspects of the farming system, such as livestock numbers and types, agricultural and livestock inputs, technology, yields or production, and markets. Surveys may also target a specific outcome of interest in the evaluation, such **health** or **labor**. Structured surveys provide robust data for more complex analysis during a performance evaluation. For example, structured surveys can be used in collecting baseline data on beneficiaries, and the same survey repeated during a mid-term evaluation, as well as during the final evaluation. This allows us to rigorously do before and after comparisons during performance evaluations.

3. ***In-Depth Key Informant Interviews***
   In-depth key informant interviews involve conducting **intensive individual interviews** with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation. One of the advantages of an in-depth interview is that it provides much more **detailed information** than what might be available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. It is suited for describing both program processes and outcomes *from the perspective of the target audience or key stakeholders* of the project. In-depth interviews are usually conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire, with open and closed-ended questions, and can be conducted over the telephone or face-to-face.

4. ***Self-Administered Questionnaires***
   A self-administered questionnaire is a questionnaire that a respondent completes on his/her own, either on paper or via computer. Where money, personnel, and time present themselves as constraints, quantitative data can be collected through self-administered questionnaires. There are several challenges using this method - e.g. respondents might not be literate enough to complete the questionnaires themselves. Decisions will have to be made as to when to use this method, based on the characteristics of the population from which respondents will be selected.

5. ***Focus Group Discussions***
   A focus group is a small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator. It is a semi-structured qualitative data gathering method in which a purposively selected set of participants gather to discuss issues and concerns based on a list of key themes drawn up by a moderator. Usually no more than 10 questions are asked in a focus group – but the discussion is free-flowing. Focus groups are economical to conduct, and they can yield detailed qualitative information about a project or program from a relatively large number of respondents.

6. ***Participant Observation***
   Participant observation is an anthropological data collection method, which provides data on **nonverbal expressions** of feelings to determine **who interacts with whom**, **how participants communicate** with each other, and **how much time is spent** on various activities. This method may include: observation of farm activities, guided farm tours and informal discussions with people on their farms or at the market. Participant observation may be conducted to (1) obtain an understanding of the daily routine of farm life; (2) observe farming practices first hand; or (3) observe any experiments under way from a total systems perspective.

7. ***Review of Literature and Project Documents***
   As part of a performance evaluation, published and unpublished literature on the project that is being evaluated may be reviewed as a source of data on project progress. These may include: quarterly and annual reports, project performance monitoring plan, baseline report and analysis, etc. These documents provide valuable background on project design and progress.

When to Conduct a Performance Evaluation

According to the USAID Evaluation Policy, each operating unit is required to conduct **at least one evaluation** (performance or impact evaluation) for each project that equals or exceeds in dollar value the mean (average) project size of each operating unit. This is intended to ensure that the majority of resources under management will be subject to evaluation.

The performance evaluation must be timed so that the findings will be available as **decisions are made** about new strategies, project designs and procurements. This will often mean, for example, that the evaluation will be **designed and commissioned 18 months** or more before the planned conclusion of the project. It is vital to think about and design the evaluation when designing the project, instead of waiting until the end of the project to design the evaluation.

Operating units are encouraged to identify opportunities for evaluations of their **programs**, rather than focusing only at the project level. Such evaluations are **particularly valuable in the period preceding the development of a new strategy**, when questions are likely to be asked about the overall effectiveness of engagement in a particular sector or broad portfolio of activities.

Reference

USAID/PPL/LER, 2011. USAID Evaluation Policy, Washington DC: USAID