



EVALUATION RESOURCE

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING GOOD EVALUATION QUESTIONS (FOR PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS)

I. Performance evaluations typically focus on *descriptive* and *normative* questions

- 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;
- Other questions that are pertinent to program design, management, and operational decision-making.

Some helpful definitions:

<i>Descriptive Questions:</i>	Seek to determine what is or was
<i>Normative Questions:</i>	Compare what is with what should be
<i>Cause and Effect Questions¹:</i>	Determine causal connection between the intervention and outcomes or make other causal inferences

II. Principles of a good evaluation question

Principle 1: A good evaluation question should be both a question and evaluative.

- *Tip #1: A question for a sector assessment or a needs assessment **is not** an evaluation question.*

Sector assessments or needs assessments tend to look at an entire sector or population to identify problems or needs and potential interventions to address them. Evaluations focus on what USAID's projects or programs did in that sector. You may choose to combine an evaluation with a sector assessment, but the statement of work (SOW) should be clear regarding which questions are evaluation questions and which are sector assessment questions.

- *Tip #2: A request for a recommendation **is not** an evaluation question.*

Recommendations might be important, but asking what you should do in the future (sometimes called a prospective evaluation question) should be based on what you can observe from the past. Your questions should ask the evaluators to understand something about what happened in the past of the project being

¹ It should be noted that this type of question is not mentioned in the definition of performance evaluations at USAID, and we often think of impact evaluations as addressing cause and effect questions. However, in certain circumstances, performance evaluations can address (and in practice, typically do address) cause and effect questions; however, they don't use the experimental logic of an impact evaluation, but rather, use other evidence-based methods and arguments for causal inference, such as process tracing or contribution analysis.

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evaluated. You can always request a recommendation from your evaluators regarding future options, but such requests should be distinguished from your evaluation questions and, ideally, linked to the evaluation question that will inform the recommendation.

Principle 2: A good evaluation question should be limited (in scope)

- *Tip #3: No more than five evaluation questions per SOW.*

Even fewer than five questions is a good idea. Moreover, five questions doesn't mean including five main questions followed by fifty sub-questions. Keep the sub-questions limited in number and germane to the main question. Nor does this mean writing one question that is actually several questions wrapped into one. Focus on what is most important to know.

- *Tip #4: Evaluation questions need not address every aspect of the activity/project/program; instead, address specific issues where you need further information.*

It's not just the number of questions you ask, but the *scope* of the questions you ask. It is impossible for an evaluator to tell you everything about your project in one evaluation. USAID projects and activities often have multiple objectives, a variety of tasks, different sets of beneficiaries, etc. Focus on the most critical issues where you need evidence-based confirmation or additional information to help you to make decisions about current or future programming. The more you limit the scope of your questions, the more likely they will be understood by your evaluator and the more likely your evaluators will be able to answer them in-depth.

Principle 3: A good evaluation question should be clear

- *Tip #5: Each word in the evaluation question should be clearly defined. Be especially careful about important (but ambiguous) terms, such as "effective," "sustainable," "efficient," "relevant," "objective," and "success."*

For instance, if you ask if a project is "effective," does that mean you are asking if monitoring targets were reached or that the intervention had a causal effect on beneficiary standards of living, or simply that stakeholders perceived it to be successful? You have to define terms. Otherwise, the evaluator will define the term for you in ways that are neither transparent nor match your understanding of the terms.

- *Tip #6: Include additional narrative along with the evaluation question to provide context and/or define your terms.*

Evaluation questions do not need to be simply listed in the SOW, one question after the other. Provide some additional narrative to the evaluation questions—descriptions as to why you are asking the question or what you mean by some terms. Make sure the narrative provides explanation relevant to the question and does not list additional questions to answer.

Principle 4: A good evaluation question should be researchable

- *Tip #7: To be researchable, there must be a way to generate objective evidence to answer the evaluation question with social science methods that will likely be applied based on the methodology section of the SOW and evaluation resources.*

Even if a question is limited and clear, it might not be answerable with the resources you have available. Consider the methods that are likely to be applied to answer the question and whether empirical data could be collected by those methods that would objectively answer the question. Don't ask an impact evaluation question about measuring the project's effect on beneficiary income when you are only

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planning to do stakeholder interviews. Don't ask about stakeholder perceptions of the project if you are not planning to do stakeholder interviews.

- *Tip #8: If you ask a normative question, it is only researchable if clear, measurable standards or criteria can be identified.*

If you ask normative questions, you are asking the evaluator to make a judgment based on the evidence collected. In order to make a judgment that is objective and verifiable, agreed-upon standards or criteria as the basis for the evaluator judgment are required. You may choose to state these in the SOW or request them from your evaluators. If you are going to ask if a project is, for example, effective, efficient, or sustainable, you need to have specific criteria for effectiveness, efficiency, or sustainability for this particular evaluation. Those criteria should be explicit. Don't start the data collection until the evaluators and the evaluation manager are both clear on the criteria that will be used to judge the evidence in answering a normative question.

Principle 5: A good evaluation question should be useful

- *Tip #9: Link your evaluation questions to the evaluation purpose (but don't make your purpose another evaluation question).*

The evaluation purpose should provide the learning or accountability framework for developing specific evaluation questions. It tells the evaluators why you are doing the evaluation and what audience the evaluation serves. But the purpose section of the evaluation SOW is not the place to state evaluation questions or to guide the evaluators as to what you expect them to do. Keep the purpose section of the evaluation SOW short. Avoid a scenario where the evaluation team is trying to address conflicting guidance in the purpose section of the report and the evaluation questions section of the report.

- *Tip #10: Involve stakeholders in developing questions.*

Consider the intended audiences of the evaluation and what will be useful for these audiences. Consider the interests of those beyond the primary USAID audience—e.g., implementers, government officials, funders, and beneficiaries. They may have good ideas about what the evaluation should address, and involving them early can increase the likelihood that the evaluation will be used.

III. Examples of going from *bad* to *better* evaluation questions:

Example 1: Questions from an evaluation of an HIV service provider support project

From:

"To what extent is the project *relevant*?"

To:

- Is the training and technical support to HIV service providers being delivered as intended according to project design?
- Does the training and technical support to HIV service providers meet the needs and priorities of project stakeholders?
- What are the financial and organizational characteristics, organizational mission, and coverage area of HIV service providers who have received the project training and technical assistance?
- Have the appropriate (as defined in project design documents) HIV service providers received the project training and technical support?

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Example 2: Questions from an evaluation of a youth employment project

From:

“To what extent is the project **effective** in meeting its objectives?”

To:

- To what extent did the intended outcome of increasing youth employment in targeted regions occur over the course of the project? Did employment outcomes differ by region or gender?
- Did the project meet its targets in training youth in employable skills? Why or why not?
- Are key stakeholders satisfied with the performance of the implementer in training youth in appropriate skills? Why or why not?

Example 3: Questions from an evaluation of a municipal capacity development project

From:

“To what extent is the activity **efficient**?”

To:

- How much did it cost to provide each municipality with budgeting software and software training? How does the cost per municipality compare to other similar projects?
- Did the project provide the software and training to the appropriate number of municipalities and individuals on time per the workplan?
- How quickly did the project respond to requests from municipalities with software installation and training? Were municipal stakeholders satisfied with the speed of the response?