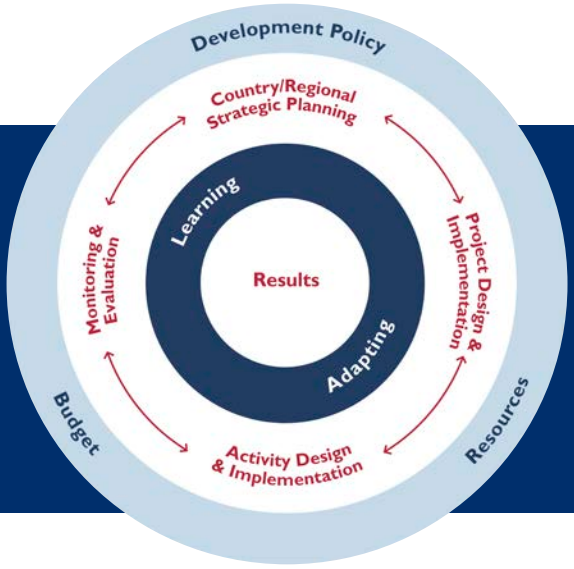
PROGRAM CYCLE

HOW-TO NOTE

Preparing Evaluation Reports



This Note describes key steps and good practices to creating evaluation reports that are clear, credible, and useful.

How-To Notes are published by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning and provide guidelines and practical advice to USAID staff and partners related to the Program Cycle. This How-To Note supplements USAID ADS Chapter 201.

This Note supplements USAID's Automated Directives System (ADS) 201 and provides current good practice in preparing evaluation reports, the main deliverable for most evaluations. Following these practices will help to establish clear expectations for evaluation reports during the preparation of evaluation statements of work and the in-briefing of the evaluation team. These practices also serve as a guide for reviewing the quality of draft evaluation reports submitted by the evaluation team. This Note is also a resource for USAID partners and independent evaluators of USAID strategies, projects, and activities. An evaluation report template and sample evaluation report covers are available as additional resources.

BACKGROUND

The most important outcome of an evaluation is that it is used to inform decisions and improve USAID strategies, projects, and activities. A key factor in using evaluation findings is having a well-written, succinct report that clearly and quickly communicates credible findings and conclusions, including easy-to-understand graphics and consistent formatting.

REQUIREMENTS

USAID's Evaluation Policy, ADS 201, ADS 201maa Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report, and ADS 201mah Evaluation Report Requirements provide guidance on evaluation report structure and content, and steps in the process of creating a report. These are listed in Table 1. The report must present a well-researched, thoughtful and organized effort to objectively evaluate a USAID strategy, project or activity. Findings, conclusions and recommendations must be based in evidence derived from the best methods available given the evaluation questions and resources available. The evaluation methods, limitations, and information sources must be documented, including by providing data collection tools and the original evaluation statement of work as annexes to the main report. Finally, the findings should be shared transparently and widely, to ensure accountability and to promote learning from USAID's experience.

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TABLE 1: EVALUATION REPORT GUIDELINES
(from ADS 201mah USAID Evaluation Report Requirements)

Guiding Principles	▪ Evaluation reports should be readily understood and should identify key points clearly, distinctly, and succinctly. ▪ Evaluation findings should be presented as analyzed facts, evidence, and data and not based on anecdotes, hearsay, or simply the compilation of people's opinions. ▪ The evaluation report must identify the evaluation as either an impact or performance evaluation per the definitions.
Abstract and Executive Summary	▪ Include an abstract of not more than 250 words briefly describing what was evaluated, evaluation questions, methods, and key findings or conclusions. The abstract should appear on its own page immediately after the evaluation report cover. ▪ Include a 2 to 5 page Executive Summary that presents a concise and accurate statement of the most critical elements of the report. It should summarize key points (purpose and background, evaluation questions, methods, findings, and conclusions).
Evaluation Purpose and Questions	▪ State the purpose of, audience for, and anticipated use(s) of the evaluation. ▪ Describe the specific strategy, project, activity, or intervention to be evaluated including (if available) award numbers, award dates, funding levels, and implementing partners. ▪ State the evaluation questions. ▪ In an impact evaluation, state evaluations questions about measuring the change in specific outcomes attributable to a specific USAID intervention.
Background	▪ Provide brief background information. This should include country and/or sector context; specific problem or opportunity the intervention addresses; and the development hypothesis, theory of change, or simply how the intervention addresses the problem.
Methods and Limitations	▪ Describe the evaluation method(s) for data collection and analysis. ▪ Describe limitations of the evaluation methodology, especially those associated with the evaluation methodology (e.g. selection bias, recall bias, unobservable differences between comparator groups, etc.). ▪ In an impact evaluation, use specific experimental or quasi-experimental methods to answer impact evaluation questions. NOTE: A summary of methodology can be included in the body of the report, with the full description provided as an annex.
Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations	▪ Address all evaluation questions in the Statement of Work (SOW) or document approval by USAID for not addressing an evaluation question. ▪ If evaluation findings assess person-level outcomes or impact, they should also be separately assessed for both males and females. ▪ Findings and conclusions should be specific, concise, and supported by strong quantitative or qualitative evidence. ▪ If recommendations are included, separate them from findings and conclusions. ▪ Support recommendations with specific findings. ▪ Provide recommendations that are action-oriented, practical, specific, and define who is responsible for the action.

TABLE 1: EVALUATION REPORT GUIDELINES (CONTINUED)
(from ADS 201mah USAID Evaluation Report Requirements)

Annexes	▪ Include the following as annexes, at minimum: ▪ Evaluation Statement of Work. ▪ Full description of evaluation methods (if not described in full in the main body of the evaluation report). ▪ All data collection and analysis tools used, such as questionnaires, checklists, survey instruments, and discussion guides. ▪ All sources of information—properly identified and listed (key informants, documents reviewed, other data sources). ▪ Any "statements of difference" regarding significant unresolved differences of opinion by funders, implementers, and/or members of the evaluation team. ▪ Signed disclosures of conflicts of interest from evaluation team members. ▪ Summary information about evaluation team members, including qualifications, experience, and role on the team.
Quality Control	▪ Convene an in-house peer technical review of the Evaluation Report with comments provided to evaluation teams. Missions and Washington OUs may also involve peers from relevant regional and/or pillar bureaus in the review process as appropriate. ▪ Review reports for quality against ADS 201maa Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report
Transparency	▪ Submit the report to the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) within three months of completion. ▪ Share the findings from evaluation reports as widely as possible with a commitment to full and active disclosure. ▪ Contribute datasets—and supporting documentation such as code books, data dictionaries, scope, and methodology used to collect and analyze the data—compiled under USAID-funded evaluations to the Development Data Library.
Use	▪ Using a Post-Evaluation Action Plan, integrate findings from evaluation reports into decision-making about strategies, program priorities, and project and activity design and implementation. ▪ Openly discuss evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations with relevant partners, donors, and other development actors.

STEPS IN THE PROCESS

1. DEFINE REPORT REQUIREMENTS IN THE EVALUATION STATEMENT OF WORK AND FINAL WORK PLAN

All evaluation statements of work (SOW) should clearly define requirements and expectations for the final evaluation report. All of the items in Table 1 must be included as requirements for the final report. Ensure that all requirements in the SOW are also included in the final evaluation work plan that is put in place once the evaluation team is on board. Adjustments can be made at this time, as long as the minimum requirements are met, and additions can be included such as defining when the first draft will be due, how many days USAID will have to review and provide comments, and when the final report will be submitted.

2. REVIEW FIRST DRAFT

Program Offices must ensure that evaluation draft reports are assessed for quality by management and through an in-house peer technical review and comments provided to the evaluation teams. USAID staff may consider including implementing partners and other direct stakeholders in the review process. Tools such as the USAID Evaluation Report Checklist can be used.

3. FINAL DRAFT AND STATEMENT OF DIFFERENCES

Evaluation reports are independent products and therefore the evaluation team leader reviews the comments and determines which to incorporate into the final draft. Once the final draft is submitted to the USAID Mission or office, the content should not be changed without the permission of the evaluation team leader. USAID, other funders, implementing partners, and other members of the evaluation team can decide to include a *Statement of Differences* as an annex to the report, if there are differences related to the evaluation findings or recommendations.

4. SUBMIT TO DEC AND SHARE FINDINGS WIDELY

USAID Program Offices must ensure that evaluation final reports (or reports submitted by evaluators to USAID as their final drafts) are submitted within three months of completion to the Development Experience Clearinghouse at http://dec.usaid.gov. The actual submission can be done by USAID staff or by the evaluation team with USAID concurrence (once an opportunity has been provided for USAID or others to include a *Statement of Differences*, if appropriate). In addition to submission to the DEC, USAID should also consider how to share the evaluation report widely to facilitate broader learning. This could include posting the report on the USAID Mission website, translating a summary into local language, and hosting presentations of the evaluation findings.

5. USE EVALUATION FINDINGS TO INFORM DECISIONS

The value of an evaluation is in its use. Evaluations should be distributed widely, inform decision making, and contribute to learning to help improve the quality of development programs. Per 201.3.5.18, Mission and Washington OUs must develop a Post-Evaluation Action Plan upon completion of an evaluation in order to help ensure that institutional learning takes place and evaluation findings are used to improve development outcomes. While the Program Office in a Mission should ensure this happens, it is the responsibility of all USAID staff. Further guidance and templates for Post-Evaluation Action Plans are available in the Evaluation Toolkit.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

GENERAL STYLE

When writing a report, the evaluation team must always remember the primary audience: project managers, activity CORs/AORs, policymakers, and direct stakeholders. The style of writing should be easy to understand and concise while making sure to address the evaluation questions and issues with accurate and data-driven findings, justifiable conclusions, and practical recommendations.

REPORT SECTIONS AND CONTENT

At a minimum, all reports should include the following sections: Abstract (not more than 250 words); Executive Summary (2- 5 pages); Evaluation Purpose and Questions; Background; Methods and Limitations (with full version provided in an annex); Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations; and, Annexes. Reports may include additional content, split the sections up differently, or present the sections in a different order.

- *Executive Summary*

The Executive Summary, between two to five pages in length, should stand alone as an abbreviated version of the report. All content of the full report should be summarized, and the Executive Summary should contain no new information.

- *Evaluation Purpose and Questions*

The evaluation purpose should be clearly defined at the beginning of the report. It should describe in about one page or less why the evaluation is being conducted now, how the findings are expected to be used, what specific decisions will be informed by the evaluation, and who the main audiences are for the evaluation report. The evaluation questions are linked to the purpose, and should be listed here.

- *Background*

This section should summarize background information in one to three pages, including country and/or sector context, the specific problem or opportunity the intervention addresses, any changes that have occurred since the project was started, a description of the beneficiary population, geographic area of the project, and the underlying development hypothesis, theory of change, or simply how the intervention addresses the problem. If a CDCS results framework or logical model (for projects or activities) is available, this should be included here. For projects designed under the project design guidance released in 2011, the evaluation team should have access to the final Project Appraisal Document (PAD) and related annexes (which includes a logical framework and original monitoring and evaluation plans, among other things). This information provides important context for understanding the evaluation purpose, questions, methods, findings and conclusions.

- *Methods and Limitations*

This section should provide a detailed description within one to three pages of the evaluation methods for data collection and analysis and why they were chosen. If more space is needed, additional detailed information on the methods should be provided in an annex. The reader needs to understand what the evaluation team did and why to make an informed judgment about the credibility of the findings and conclusions and the underlying evaluation design including the data collection and analysis methods.

Evaluation methods should correspond directly to the questions being asked and should generate the highest quality and most credible evidence possible, taking into consideration time, budget and other practical considerations.

This section should provide information on all aspects of the evaluation design and methods, including tradeoffs that led to selection of specific data collection and analysis methods, a description of data availability and quality, and sampling strategies (purposive, random, etc.), including how interview subjects or site visits were selected. Just as important as describing the evaluation methods is describing any limitations in data collection and analysis, data quality, access to data sources, or any other factors that may result in bias. To show the relationship between the evaluation questions and methods, it is useful to include a chart that lists each evaluation question, the corresponding evaluation method to be used for data collection and analysis, data sources, sample sizes, and

limitations.

In the case of an impact evaluation, specific experimental or quasi-experimental methods used to answer impact evaluation questions should be detailed.

- *Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations*

Findings, conclusions, and (if requested in the evaluation SOW) recommendations, make up the main body of the report, synthesizing what was learned during the evaluation and presenting it in an easy to understand and logical fashion. Findings are empirical facts based on data collected during the evaluation and should not rely only on opinion, even of experts. Conclusions synthesize and interpret findings and make judgments supported by one or more specific findings. Recommendations, if applicable, are specific actions the evaluation team proposes be taken by program management that are based on findings and conclusions. The reader should be able to discern what evidence supports the conclusions and recommendations. Whenever possible, data should be presented visually in easy to read charts, tables, graphs, and maps to demonstrate the evidence that supports conclusions and recommendations. All graphics must have a title, be clearly labeled, and include a caption.

- *Annexes*

All evaluation reports must include the following as annexes:

1. the Evaluation SOW,
2. detailed description of the evaluation design and methods,
3. copies of the actual data collection tools such as survey or interview questions,
4. a list of information sources (including documents reviewed, sites visited, and key informants, assuming they gave permission to be identified),
5. any "statements of difference" regarding significant unresolved differences of opinion by funders, implementers, and/or members of the evaluation team,
6. signed disclosures of any conflict of interest by including a signed statement by evaluation team members that attests to a lack of conflict of interest or describes an existing conflict of interest relative to the project being evaluated,
7. summary information about evaluation team members, including qualifications, experience, and role on the team.
8. Additional annexes can be included at the discretion of the evaluation team and USAID, and in some cases implementing partners.

FORMAT AND GRAPHIC STANDARDS

REMINDER ON USAID GRAPHIC STANDARDS

The USAID Graphic Standards Manual is available at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADB334.pdf. Evaluation report authors and reviewers should be familiar with the USAID Graphic Standards and apply them consistently. These include requirements and guidance related to USAID branding, choice of typography, and color palette.

COVER

The cover of an evaluation report should be attractive and provide enough information that a reader can immediately understand that it is an evaluation and what was evaluated. All evaluation report covers should:

- Follow USAID Branding and Graphics Standards.
- Include a title block in USAID light blue background color.
- Include the word "Evaluation" at the top of the title block and center the report title underneath that. The title should also include the word "evaluation."
- Include the following statement across the bottom: "This publication was produced at the request of the United States Agency for International Development. It was prepared independently by [list authors and/or organizations involved in the preparation of the report]." For an internal evaluation team, use the following statement: "This publication was produced at the request of [USAID/Mission or OU] and prepared by an internal evaluation team comprised of [list authors and affiliation]."
- Feature one high-quality photograph

representative of the project being evaluated. The photo should be high resolution, visually simple, colorful, and in focus. Include a brief caption on the inside front cover explaining the "who, what, when, where, and why" of the photo and with photographer credit.
- State the month and year of report publication (e.g. when final and approved by USAID Operating Unit).
- State the individual authors of the report and identify the evaluation team leader.

TITLE AND TITLE PAGE

While titles are determined by the evaluation team and the USAID Mission or operating unit commissioning the evaluation, all evaluations will be submitted to the DEC and therefore titles should be clear to the general reader. A review of recent evaluation titles leads to the following suggestions for good practice:

- Compose a title that is informative, clear and compelling (e.g., "Improving Community Health in Fredonia: Evaluation of the USAID/Fredonia Community Health Project").
- Avoid acronyms and do not use implementing partner names (e.g., "XYZ LTD Evaluation").
- Include the word "evaluation" in the title. This will help the DEC correctly archive the document.
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The report title should be repeated on the title page, the first right-hand text page of the report. The title page also includes the subtitle, if any, and the standard disclaimer for publications by external authors: "The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government."

ACRONYMS

Keep the use of acronyms to a minimum, and define all acronyms used in the report by including an acronym list in the beginning of the report.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This comes before any content referenced in the table with the exception of the Abstract which comes between the cover and the table of contents. Sufficient detail should be provided to guide the reader through the report, including page numbers.

COMPANION PRODUCTS

USAID staff should consider other products to include in the evaluation SOW that can complement the report and aid in disseminating evaluation findings to a broader audience. These could include photos documenting the evaluation, a short video that combines footage from the evaluation with a summary of the findings, a short fact sheet, a local language translation of the executive summary of the evaluation report, or a presentation via webinar of the evaluation report. Some products are not appropriate to ask as a deliverable from an evaluation team, such as "Success Stories" as this would put the evaluation team's objectivity and independence into question.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used as samples or templates, or provide more information on evaluation reports and on evaluation in general. Some other resources exist but are out-of-date with current USAID guidance. Where information differs, the USAID Evaluation Policy and the USAID ADS (Automated Directives System) 200 series takes precedence over that in other resources.

- USAID Evaluation Policy: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/USAIDEvaluationPolicy.pdf
- ADS 201 Program Cycle Operational Policy: https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/200/201
- ADS 201maa Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report: https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/200/201maa
- ADS 201mah USAID Evaluation Report Requirements: https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/200/201mah
- Evaluation Report Template: http://tinyurl.com/SampleEvaluationReportTemplate
- Evaluation Cover Samples: http://tinyurl.com/SampleEvaluationCover
- Sample Disclosure of Conflict of Interests Form: http://tinyurl.com/DisclosureofConflictofInterest
- USAID Graphic Standards Manual: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1869/USAID%20Graphics%20Standards%20Manual%20and%20Partner%20Co%20Branding%20Guide%20February%202016.pdf
- USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation Publications: Style Guide: Guidelines for Project Managers, Authors, and Editors, December 2001 http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACN266.pdf