



UNEG
United Nations Evaluation Group

Lessons Learned Paper #1 - Quality assurance of decentralized evaluations

UNEG Interest Group on Decentralized Evaluations

In 2020, the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Interest Group on Decentralized Evaluations started documenting key lessons on specific topics drawing from its webinars with the view to facilitate the dissemination of key lessons among UNEG members and the wider evaluation community. The first issue of this series focusses on quality assurance of decentralized evaluations. This paper reflects the approaches and experiences of five agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the World Food Programme (WFP). It concludes with lessons learned shared by other DEIG members.

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1. Background

1. Maintaining quality standards of decentralized evaluations (DEs) is instrumental to the utility and success of these evaluations. A quality assurance system aims to contribute to improving the quality of DE products; achieving useful and impartial evaluations that meet UN principles, norms and standards; and increasing the application of sound approaches and methods. Delivering high-quality decentralized evaluations and maintaining quality over time is a key challenge considering the limited evaluation management capacity at country office level; rarely can agencies afford to have experienced and dedicated evaluation officers at decentralized level. Hence, a quality assurance system also aims to indirectly contribute to enhancing evaluation management capacity across organizations.

2. Quality assurance approaches of different UN agencies

2. The following elements of quality assurance are largely shared across agencies:
 - **Purpose.** In addition to improving the quality of the evaluation reports, the quality assurance function has a role to play in promoting and improving learning, utility and the use of evaluations, and ensuring their impartiality.
 - **Normative framework and guidelines.** The overarching common framework for DEs draws and builds upon the UNEG Norms. In addition, the quality assurance and support systems draw from the evaluation policy of each agency and the detailed guidelines created by the agencies for that purpose.
 - **Governance and procedures.** Roles and responsibilities are divided between different stakeholders at the country and regional levels, who are in charge of or share responsibility for quality assurance, and the headquarters level, which generally sets the standards and supports quality assurance. The key actors are the respective offices of evaluation, country and regional level offices, evaluation and programme managers and regional evaluation officers.

2.1. An outsourced approach to quality assurance: the experience of WFP

3. WFP decentralized evaluation quality assurance system applies to evaluations commissioned by country offices, regional bureaus and headquarters divisions other than the Office of Evaluation. An outsourced quality support service for decentralized evaluations, managed by the WFP Office of Evaluation, provides real time expert feedback on draft terms of reference (TOR), inception and evaluation reports. The use of the quality support service is mandatory for all DE products and is available in English, French and Spanish. The service is free for users as its costs are covered by the Office of Evaluation. This service is complementary to the responsibilities of the regional evaluation officers, the evaluation reference group, and evaluation committee and evaluation manager
4. The service is outsourced to a firm that provides a systematic and impartial assessment of the quality of the draft deliverables against a set of criteria in line with WFP's evaluation normative framework and UNEG Norms and Standards. Feedback on evaluation products is delivered within five to six days, using a detailed scoring grid, highlighting strong and weaker areas, and making constructive recommendations on how to improve the deliverable. A follow-up phone call is encouraged between

the external reviewer, the evaluation manager and the evaluation team leader to discuss and clarify the recommendations made to enhance the quality of the draft TOR, inception or evaluation report. With a pool of 15 reviewers - all experienced evaluators - the system is scalable to allow to respond to fluctuating needs. To continuously strengthen the service, peer reviews, systematic feedback from users and annual analysis are conducted to monitor its performance and identify areas for improvement.

2.2. An internal approach to quality assurance - the experience of FAO and UNRWA

5. FAO's approach to quality assurance and support to decentralized evaluations is applicable at the same levels as WFP's. The information below is in accordance with the draft policy on decentralized evaluations, which was presented for approval to the FAO's Governing Committee in May 2020.
6. The FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) will be responsible for setting the standards for decentralized evaluations. Responsibility for quality assurance against those standards during the evaluation process, and of the evaluation products, rests with the evaluation manager. The regionally-based evaluation officers (who report to and are staff of OED) will guide the evaluation managers, in particular on aspects covering the impartiality of the evaluation team, quality of the TORs and quality of the final reports. It is recognized that the decentralized offices often lack capacity on evaluation. Therefore, the Office of Evaluation will expand on capacity development activities targeting evaluation managers.
7. Similar to WFP and FAO, DEs at UNRWA are managed by the Agency's field offices (country level) or headquarter departments. The UNRWA central Evaluation Division provides the normative framework and guidelines for quality assurance, in addition to managing a capacity development programme and giving technical support to staff managing DEs. Evaluation Division staff complete quality assurance reviews of the TOR, inception report and the draft evaluation report for all DEs. DEs are generally funded by donors, and the staff designing and managing them are predominantly experienced in programme management and monitoring. Consequently, the Evaluation Division also provides hands-on support to TOR development.
8. UNRWA has developed Standards and Procedures for Quality Assurance in evaluation (based on UNEG Norms, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), and the 2006 ALNAP guide), however revisions are planned to strengthen its guidance on gender and human rights mainstreaming, planning and budgeting, and commissioning DEs. The Evaluation Division chairs a DE interest group that meets quarterly, and is taking a multifaceted approach to develop staff capacity in evaluation. For example, in 2020 field monitoring officers have participated in a centrally-managed real-time evaluation of the UNRWA operational response to the Covid-19 crisis.

2.3. A mixed approach to quality assurance: the experience of UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Regional Office

9. The UNICEF MENA Regional Office experimented with a mixed approach to evaluation quality assurance for a couple of years. Regional offices provide quality assurance for evaluations managed by the country offices at no-costs to the latter, and sign long-term agreements with quality assurance service providers. Evaluation TOR, inception reports and draft reports for all evaluations at country level are required to be sent to the evaluation unit at the Regional Office for quality assurance. The external quality assurance provider reviews these documents via dedicated checklists with a system of scores, traffic lights and comments. Additionally, the thematic experts at the Regional Office and the regional evaluation specialist (and occasionally colleagues at headquarters), also share their feedback. This practice has allowed for comprehensive and timely inputs and guidance (three to eight working days).
10. The above process, including the interaction of the regional evaluation specialist with the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) officers at the country level, has contributed to improve the quality of the evaluation reports in the region and the capacities at the country offices level – although both outputs have not been measured quantitatively. Several colleagues at the country offices have started to use the checklists for in-country quality assurance and in their interactions with external evaluation teams, in order to assure adherence to quality standards and to set expectations even before starting to draft the key documents.
11. At the moment, UNICEF is reviewing this system and particularly the use of the long-term agreements.

2.4. Real-time quality control combined with *ex post* external quality assurance: the experience of ILO

12. ILO uses a layered approval process involving evaluation managers, departmental evaluation focal points, regional evaluation officers and senior evaluation officers that provide real-time quality assurance for decentralized project evaluations. ILO has augmented this system to include quality appraisals conducted by external appraisers in order to ensure that systemic problems can be quickly identified and addressed.
13. The most important finding from the most recent *ex post* quality appraisal is the significant increase in the proportion of reports that obtained ratings equal or above somewhat satisfactory. Indeed, while 92 percent of reports pertained to that category in 2015-2016, nearly 97 percent obtained this rating in 2017-2018, representing a 7 percent increase. In ILO's case, this indicates that the quality control measures, coupled with years of investment in capacity building and practical guidelines, have started to show a real effect which took longer to materialize than expected. Quality is relatively consistent across ILO's ten departments and five regions.

3. Lessons learned

14. Despite the differences across agencies such as in the size of portfolios and the operational context, some common challenges have also been identified:

- **Capacity development.** Capacity on evaluation preparation, management and implementation, especially at the country office level, remains limited, which affects the quality of deliverables and the evaluation process. To generate useful evaluations for accountability, learning and decision-making, training and timely technical support must be provided to DE evaluation users and managers to gain a better understanding of what is required of them. A combination of face-to-face training with a practicum leading to certification to ensure trainees have internalized the skills is recommended to ensure good results.
- **Human and financial resources.** Sound investments in evaluation exercises is critical for quality evaluations. However, studies have shown that there is no clear association between the total rating of the evaluation report and the budget used for the evaluations as there is no clear correlation between both variables. In other words, evaluation budgets do not alone explain the variance in the quality of the evaluations. Additional investments are required to strengthen the quality of DEs, such as trainings and capacity development at decentralized level or the set-up of formal systems (centralized or not). An outsourced approach to quality assurance increases costs due to sub-contracting but lessens burden on the offices of evaluation. An internal approach to quality assurance benefits from the in-house expertise and organizational knowledge of the offices of evaluation and increases collaboration between headquarters, regional and country levels. However, this approach creates additional workload and may not be an entirely impartial process.
- **Planning and coverage.** The number, type, scope, timing and completion rates of the DEs remains fluid despite the existence of coverage norms objectives. Evaluation planning takes place at country level and, at times, is difficult to track. Tasking evaluation focal points or managers with monitoring evaluation planning (e.g. UNESCO) can aid in a timely provision of quality support and assurance.
- **Tools to complement quality assurance.** Post hoc quality assessment systems are useful to report independently on the quality of the DEs. Several agencies are making use of such assessments, contracted to an external entity to safeguard impartiality. In order to ensure consistency, it is important that post hoc assessments are aligned to the same criteria as the quality assurance mechanisms.