

Strengthening Structural Fund Evaluation Systems

General Introduction: Online Training

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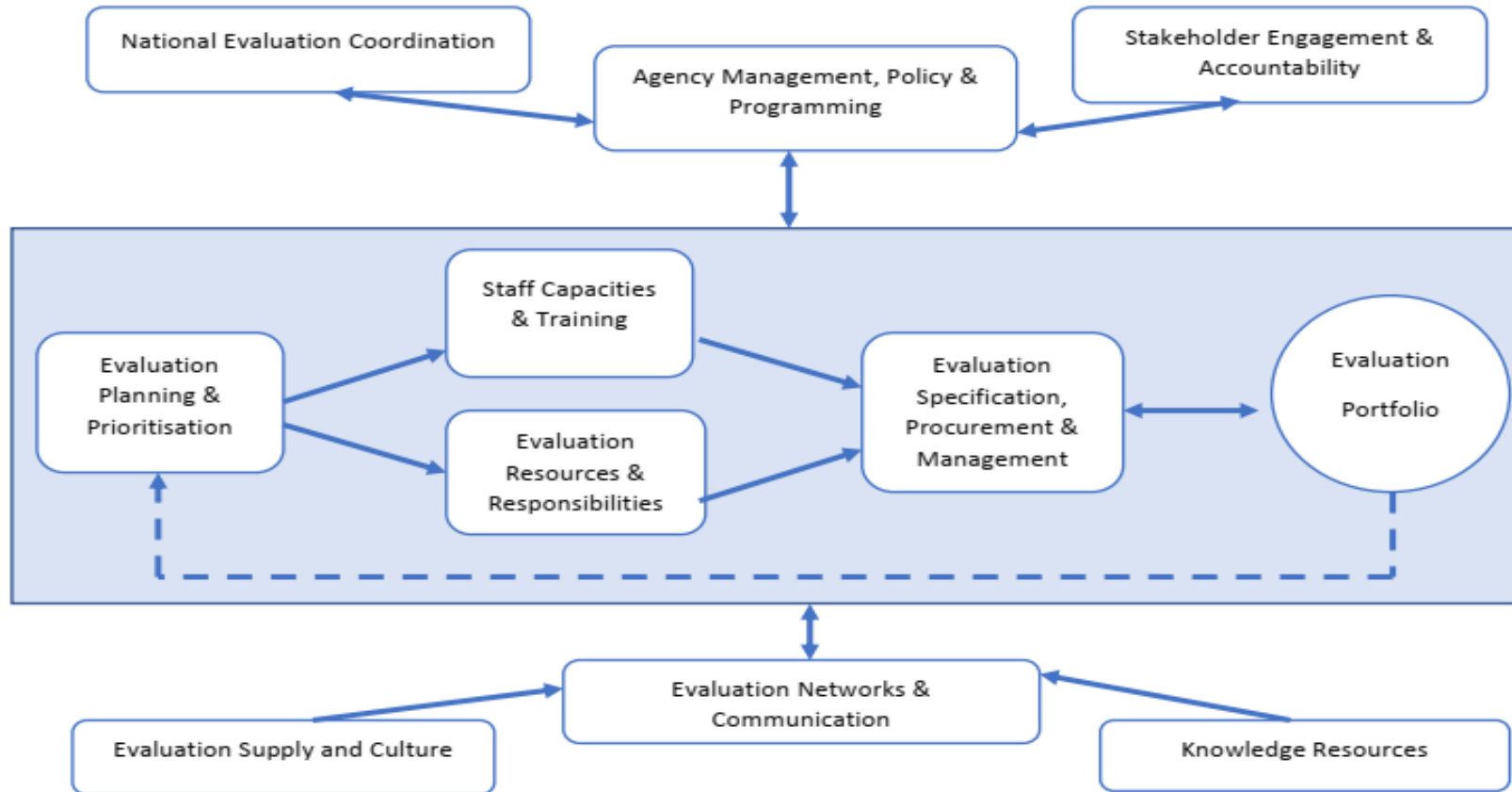
Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

- Most participants here today are responsible for commissioning and managing evaluations - some also have wider responsibilities for planning and policy, evaluation use and even capacity development
- The main focus of the training will be to exchange experience of how to manage evaluations in relation to specific 'thematic' priorities such as RTDI, SMEs and low carbon energy
- We know however that the quality, relevance and use of evaluation is embedded in a wider evaluation system – including how evaluations are planned and resourced; the way evaluation specialists are organised and trained; engagement with stakeholders; evaluation capacity

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

- This introduction sets operational tasks such as evaluation design, drawing up ToRs, commissioning evaluations, contracting consultants and managing the evaluation process into the wider evaluation context
- Not everything in this context can be controlled, but it is possible to strengthen evaluations by being more aware of the determinants of evaluation quality and taking a 'total quality management' approach across the evaluation system
- This mirrors the journey of *Evaluation Helpdesk* – from assessing the quality of evaluation reports & portfolios to identifying opportunities for *systemic* improvement: how ToRs formulated; evaluations managed; methods chosen; evaluations planned; evaluation capacity improved

Representing the Structural Fund Evaluation 'System'



Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

Core evaluation activities usually include:

- Evaluation planning and prioritisation – deciding what gets evaluated, with what budget and where to focus efforts
- Evaluation resources & responsibilities—staff with specific evaluation job descriptions and skills
- Training or capacity-building – in-house training, workshops, Helpdesk
- Evaluation, specification, procurement & management – drawing up ToRs, selecting proposals/consultants and managing the process

These core activities are themselves embedded – in programming, policy and accountability; and in an evaluation supply & 'ecosystems'

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

Evaluation portfolio reviews reveal familiar problems:

- Reports that fail to answer EQs
- Poor methodology choice or implementation – following fashion; or ‘I have a hammer, this must be a nail’
- Confusing outputs and intermediate outcomes with results
- Over-reliance on single techniques (e.g. surveys, interviews) or limited data sets
- Conducting evaluation too early to judge results
- Presenting conclusions & recommendations that are weakly linked to evidence

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

- Overall impression is that evaluation quality is slowly and unevenly improving
- There are now many 'good enough' evaluations – especially when EQs ask basic but important questions: Did intervention reach intended targets or did planned investments/activities take place?
- Weaker addressing results and impacts – which is not easy especially in complex programmes – and sophisticated 'impact evaluations' not always needed

The interesting question if we want to improve and strengthen evaluations is: what drives the problems that do occur? This is why considering the evaluation system is important. Not enough just to ask to 'improve reports'!

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

Core evaluation system offers many explanations of weak evaluations:

- Over-ambitious ToRs asks for too much – too many evaluation questions
- Undifferentiated budgeting across a portfolio – lack of prioritisation
- Lack of evaluation team experience designing evaluations, selecting evaluators, structuring contracts
- Poor understanding of methodologies, e.g. Theories of Change, when to apply counterfactuals and what are suitable 'theory-based' approaches
- High workloads over-stretches evaluation management – 'consultants manage us'
- Lack of quality assurance processes – often left to the end when too late to correct i.e. quality control not quality assurance

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

Interface with wider evaluation system – outside of the 'core' - also explains limits to evaluation quality

- Importance of consulting stakeholders to identify Evaluation Questions – to avoid response: 'reports did not answer our questions'
- Without capacity development too few consultants capable of bidding
- An accountability rather than learning ethos: weak 'ownership' - 'we do this for Brussels'
- Ignoring past evaluations of similar programmes and research
- Evaluation (and programming) delays due to inflexible administrative and procurement procedures
- Timing of evaluations not aligned with programming

Strengthening the Evaluation 'System'

A 'systemic' view make it easier to remedy evaluation weaknesses

- Engaging with stakeholders increases the likelihood of evaluation relevance, learning and use
- Better planning and prioritisation can ensure that scarce evaluation resources are well-targeted
- Smart specifications & ToRs compensate for limitations in evaluation supply (e.g. Approach Papers that pre-prepare ToCs; staged evaluations; commissioning 'Knowledge Reviews' from local universities..)
- Ongoing evaluation network-building increases likelihood of better bids when needed
- Joint evaluations across different programmes and with other MAs can increase evaluation efficiency and make more sophisticated methods more affordable