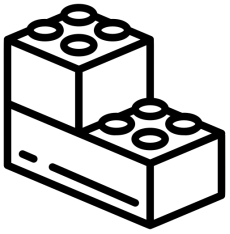


Evaluation Design Building Blocks

1 Build on Evaluation plan

2 Map uses and users

3 Prioritise

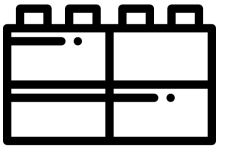
4 Ask meaningful questions

5 Elaborate a Theory of Change

6 Secure data

7 Choose approach and methods

8 Involve stakeholders



Thomas Delahais for DG REGIO HELPDESK (Applica / Ismeri)
Summer school 7-8 October 2021, Tallinn.

Evaluation Planning

Activities

Align reporting with known policy/decision cycles including annual implementation and progress reports

Identify a provisional list of required evaluations – including preparatory studies - to be kept under review

Set objective at strategic and programme level – balancing themes and coverage

Align Programmes with related EU and national and priorities/policies including sectoral and territorial strategies and National Energy and Climate Plans

Distinguish between what we already know and areas of uncertainty and risk in order to decide budget/ methodological parameters

Clarify meta-level questions about methods used that the entire portfolio should answer

Outline a preliminary plan for 'impact evaluations' including which approaches match which measures

Conduct/commission an evidence review drawing on past evaluations and relevant studies (partly a national planning task)

Specify broad methodological approach including unit of analysis (cross OP? cross MA?) and High Level Questions for individual evaluations

Purposes

Inform policy and decision making at EU, national and territorial level

Integrate the priorities of EU, national and territorial stakeholders

Ensure that 'horizontal' principles are integrated, e.g. gender equality; energy efficiency; climate change adaptation

Delineate the scope of the plan, what is to be covered

Prioritise and focus so as to allocate funds proportionately

Build on all available evidence

Ensure evaluation resources are used to maximal benefit and evaluations are well managed

Ensure that evaluations are of appropriate quality – in terms of their relevance, methods & usefulness

Put in place the elements that will allow synthesis across evaluations (e.g. at thematic, sectoral & thematic level)

Build in flexibility and a contribution to mid term reviews and reprogramming if required

Barriers / Preconditions

Effective coordination arrangements at MA level – e.g. with planning and senior management steering group, monitoring committee

Engagement & dialogue with stakeholders, partners and beneficiaries

Effective coordination across MAs and with national/regional government and agencies

Liaison arrangements with domain experts including academic departments and specialist consultants

An effective, qualified and adequately resourced evaluation function

Data availability and data cleaning to support evaluations and performance indicators

Knowledge of evaluation design and methodological approaches

Procurement and contracting that is fit-for-purpose i.e. adapted to evaluation market

QA systems incorporated into all evaluations and at portfolio level including assuring evaluation

Evaluation capacity able & willing to bid for evaluations when announced

A communication system to encourage evaluation use and awareness nationally & across EU

Ex post Evaluation Design

Activities

Organise dialogue with MA (and external) stakeholders about use of evaluation

Adapt provisions of Evaluation Plan with focus on proportionality and practicality

Consider effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and EU value-added, as well as other criteria if they can be relevant to the MAs' needs.

Decide whether preparatory studies are needed (e.g. evaluability assessment) and what should be included in inception report

Ensure transparency of process and communication on results

Decide on focus and 'target' of conclusions – are recommendations required?

Decide on 'unit of analysis' which may cut across OPs, time and even MA boundaries (scale and scope of evaluation)

Ask a few questions that matter for policy making.

Investigate delivery, implementation and management of funds

Track 'distance travelled' e.g. progress made towards long-term outcomes and results

Review and build on existing Theories of Change/ Programme Theories/ Intervention Logics

Incentivise collaboration among service providers, including consultants, experts and researchers

Purposes

Contribute to future Structural Funds programmes and policies (and other policies)

Judge measures against evaluation criteria

Extend judgment across the entire programming period

Understand and demonstrate the links between programme interventions and intended and unintended effects (accountability)

Understand why measures work or not, to what extent, in what context

Learn how to implement programmes more effectively and efficiently in future

Further develop/strengthen evaluation capacity, create buy-in for evaluation process

Learn about the strengths and limitations of methods used across contexts - meta-evaluation

Support dialogue with stakeholders, partners and beneficiaries over results and lessons learned - & their contribution

Barriers / Preconditions

Sufficiently shared priorities among policy makers, partners and other stakeholders

What follow-up activities are envisaged, including communication and validation workshops with partners and stakeholders

Access of evaluation function to other Departments and senior policy makers.

Adequate initial budget allocation and availability of supplementary funds if needed

Availability of data, including administrative data; and sufficient data cleaning where necessary

Existing cooperation arrangements - quality of relationship with other MAs and national/regional partners

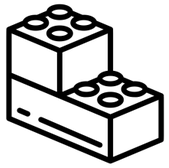
Clear expectations from stakeholders and policy makers

Communications and 'dialogue' arrangements previously planned and agreed with policy makers, partners and other stakeholders

Expertise of service providers in social science methods / in evaluation designs.

Evaluation design and evaluation management resources available in MA/evaluation function

Evaluation capacity identified and 'mobilised' – e.g. briefing meetings, evaluation networks



Evaluation Design Building Blocks

1 Build on Evaluation plan

Structure your evaluation using the Evaluation Plan as a foundation in terms of scheduled resources, management, array of methods, quality assurance and so on. Identify which elements should be present for future synthesis across evaluations. Use built-in flexibility to make the evaluation more relevant and useful in context.

2 Map uses and users

Take into account the priorities set in programming documents. Look forward to 2021-2027 priorities. What is not known? What uncertainties could affect policies to come? Engage with colleagues in MA: what would they like to know? when? to do what? Create buy-in by looking at potential uses outside structural funds too: how could your colleagues in other Departments (or other MAs!) or policy makers use the evaluation? Possible uses include improving design of future programmes, implementation arrangements, but also more thought-provoking uses (what distance have we travelled until now? what can we learn about the problems we want to address and the deployed solutions?). Are recommendations required to answer these possible uses?

3 Prioritise

Define the scale and scope of what you will evaluate to match interest of policy makers and potential uses. Evaluating everything with the same level of detail may be impractical and even irrelevant, even in the (optional) All-Encompassing Ex Post Evaluation. Define a "unit of analysis" that is defensible. The OP/MA limits (or current programming period) should not come in the way: set meaningful boundaries. Within this perimeter, think in terms of proportionality (to the budget, policy salience of measures, raised expectations, knowledge gains...) and practicality (information available, etc.). Prioritising means knowing (at least partially) what is the portfolio of projects and their implementation status (achieved yet? since when?) and their ToC, at least at a basic level, to make the right choices.

4 Ask meaningful questions

Consider the expectations of users and translate them into questions. Use the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU value-added criteria, as well as others (e.g. inclusiveness, non-discrimination and visibility) to help you asking questions that matter and provide evaluative judgement. Start with high-level evaluation questions in evaluation plans and consider what questions could be asked under that umbrella. Be ready to discuss the questions in the Evaluation's Inception Steering Committee, with the members and the service provider. This will avoid any ambiguity and limited changes in questioning may trigger additional uses and gain some buy-in for the evaluation.

5 Elaborate a Theory of Change

Use existing information to develop a basic Theory of Change. Make the links between programme interventions and intended (or unintended) effects explicit. Assess rapidly whether the current portfolio could plausibly have these effects. To do so, review and build on existing ToCs from previous studies or evaluations commissioned by other MAs. See if the ToC has consequences on prioritisation or evaluation questions. Consider how additional work on the ToC (deepening definition of problem to be solved, assumptions related to solutions including mechanisms associated with success or failure...) could be useful for the next programming period.

6 Secure data

Verify that needed information is available to the evaluation. This includes access to programme data and other internal data sets that may be useful to describe the intervention and context of intervention. In particular, obtaining data on end beneficiaries (not direct recipients of funding) could be difficult. Prior cleaning means a more efficient use of the evaluation's budget. Secure needed external information (e.g. collected by the National Statistical Office) in advance when needed. Confidentiality arrangements may also be identified and negotiated before the evaluation starts.

7 Choose approach and methods

Contemplate the pros and cons of available methods that could be used to answer the evaluation questions. Some methods and approaches rely on specific datasets, which may not be available. In that case, what is the array of approaches that could be used? Decide whether preparatory studies (e.g. an evaluability assessment, or database cleaning) are needed, and if methods are to be pre-specified (even in general terms) or if this is left to the service provider. Consider the capacity of service providers to deliver the needed approaches. Verify whether foreseen time and budget are consistent with the methodological consequences.

8 Involve stakeholders

Explore different opportunities for involving stakeholders in the process, using existing dialogue/co-operation arrangements when they exist. Think about how the Steering Committee for the evaluation could be composed to involve policy partners, knowledgeable actors. Consider possibilities to entrust the SC with fine-tuning the evaluation design and engaging with the results and lessons learned. Plan for additional communication on the results.

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What to do if... Nobody seems to be interested in the evaluation? There is an intense political pressure around the topic being evaluated

What to do if... The actions being funded are not well known? There are too many different types of funded projects or interventions / targeted publics under a SO/TO? Structural funds are used in support of a larger policy?

What to do if... No projects have been funded yet or effects did not have time to time to unfold?
Provisions of the EP are not relevant anymore

What to do if... Objectives are unclear? Overambitious? Expected effects are contradicting or not articulated with each other?

What to do if... The authority funds other interventions more likely to contribute to expected impacts? Stakeholders want to ask too many questions? Stakeholders do not agree about what constitutes success?

What to do if... No monitoring data is available? Data is not gathered in a database? Beneficiaries/operators did not provide data related to end beneficiaries

What to do if... Expected changes are difficult to measure? It is difficult to determine in advance which methods would be best to evaluate? There is a risk of political interference with the choice of cases to be investigated?

What to do if... The authority is not used to associate external stakeholders? Targeted publics of the intervention are not well represented? Stakeholders are reluctant to participate in the evaluation?