

Evaluability Assessments: an Invitation to Reflect and Discuss

Summary of the EvalForward discussion

SEPTEMBER 2024

Amy Jersild, Ph.D. Candidate at Western Michigan University, USA, initiated a discussion within the EvalForward Community of Practice, focusing on the significance of evaluability assessments (EAs). Jersild invited EvalForward members to share their experiences and reflections on the role of EAs in evaluation.

The following guiding questions were posed to stimulate discussion and reflection:

- 1. To conduct an EA or to not conduct an EA:** What factors enter into a decision on whether to conduct, or not to conduct, an EA? What purpose have you formulated for an EA depending on what is being assessed and when?
- 2. Distinguishing between EAs and other kinds of evaluative exercises:** How can we bring clarity to the EA process for programmes and/or monitoring colleagues in order to help facilitate a successful outcome? How easy is it to convince funders of the relevance and usefulness of EAs in the context of budgetary constraints?
- 3. Use of EA results for decision-making processes:** Do you have examples of how EA results have been used for decision-making purposes? Have you encountered any challenges in facilitating the use of EA results?
- 4. Use of EAs in assessing evaluability of interventions designed to contribute toward realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Are there examples of the use of EAs to determine the evaluability of country level or organizational level contributions to the realization of SDGs? Are there any particular considerations for EAs in these examples?



BACKGROUND

The Evaluation Function of the CGIAR Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES), collaborating consultants, and the EvalForward team supported the in-depth and lively discussion on the role and value of EAs in program evaluations. The online discussion gathered 42 contributions. Participants come from diverse professional backgrounds and many regions of the world. Participant profiles included monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialists, evaluation leads, evaluation specialists, founders, researchers, consultants, and government representatives, among others. The discussion was both dynamic and respectful, reflecting a wide range of perspectives and fostering a constructive exchange of ideas.

KEY SUBMISSIONS

Key issues which emerged from the discussion are summarized below. The full discussion is available [here](#).

Submissions in Favor of EAs

- Participants argued that EAs serve as a crucial tool for ensuring that evaluations are feasible, cost-effective, and focused. EAs can help establish a clear scope and identify potential challenges early on, particularly in complex programs.
- By mapping out key interventions and testing elements like the Theory of Change (ToC) through the development of a [checklist](#), EAs can help refine a program's evaluation strategy before it progresses too far.
- This approach encourages reflection within program teams, helping to adjust and improve program design before significant resources are invested into a full evaluation. As a result, the evaluation can be more relevant, feasible, and aligned with [stakeholder needs](#), potentially saving resources and improving outcomes.
- Additionally, EAs can foster early [collaboration between evaluators and implementers](#), to facilitate communication throughout the evaluation process.

Concerns Regarding EAs

- Some participants expressed concerns that a rigid application of EAs may not add value in all contexts. The EvalForward team agrees that every context is different, questioning the need for an EA solely based on large budgets (often used as a proxy for program complexity).
- While larger programs tend to involve more stakeholders and objectives, an EA may not be necessary if the program's goals and interventions are straightforward.
- The decision to use an EA should be nuanced, considering the specific context and nature of the program, rather than broad criteria such as budget size. Considerations may include institutional and physical context, the intervention design, stakeholder demand, and data availability.

Another critical perspective emerged regarding the [redundancy of EAs in projects with already robust M&E systems](#).

- Some contributors argued that if a program has a well-defined logical framework, clear indicators, and ongoing data quality assessments, there is no need for an EA, suggesting that scarce resources are better allocated toward strengthening the existing M&E framework.
- Many projects are already highly structured and subject to various monitoring processes, which may decrease the added value of EAs.

- Concerns were raised about the reduced benefits of EAs in some organizations, where their broad application may become a bureaucratic process instead of promote effective evaluations.

In light of these concerns, the moderators reiterated the potential for EAs to play a more transformative role when used thoughtfully and at the appropriate place and context. EAs could help organizations move beyond rigid evaluation approaches, particularly by offering a more reflective and context-specific analysis of whether a program is truly ready for evaluation. This could lead to more targeted and meaningful evaluations, or in some cases, the decision to not proceed with an evaluation if it is considered unnecessary or premature. Therefore, rather than arguing for or against EAs, the focus should be on developing **more nuanced and flexible guidelines for their use**.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the discussion reflected a wide range of views. While some see EAs as a critical tool for improving evaluation quality and focus, others question their necessity in programs with strong M&E systems or view them as a bureaucratic hurdle. The general consensus is that EAs should not be applied rigidly or universally, but rather tailored to the specific context of each program, ensuring that they contribute meaningfully to the evaluation process without duplicating existing efforts or wasting resources. Balancing the potential benefits of EAs with their costs, both in terms of time and financial resources, remains a key challenge for evaluators and organizations alike.

Way Forward

The discussion results were presented at the designated session of the just-ended 2024 EES Conference: **Food and agricultural system: Improving food and agricultural systems through evaluation** on 26 Thursday September 2024.

Acknowledgements

The EvalForward team would like to thank all participants once again for their great contribution to the discussion.

Discussion moderation and results curation and collation: Amy Jersild, Rick Davies, Svetlana Negroustoueva (CGIAR), Gaia Gullotta (CGIAR), and Innocent Chamisa.

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