ECG Practice Note

Formulation of Evaluation Recommendations

November 2018

This practice note was prepared by a Working Group led by Sabine Bernabè, Dawit Demetri, Sonia Vega Vega and Adrian Costandache (EIB). Working Group members included Maya Vijayaraghavan (ADB); Oscar Garcia and Johanna Pennarz (IFAD); Ivory Yong-Prötzel, Monika Huppi and Ana María Linares (IADB); Ahmed Ag Aboubacrine (IsDB); Geeta Batra and Neeraj Kumar Negi (GEF); and Kristin Strohecker and Bahar Salimova (IEG WBG).

The work was initiated at the ECG Fall 2016 meeting and this practice note was approved for publication by ECG members at the ECG Fall 2018 meeting.

Also see: Final Report - Working Group on Evaluation Recommendations, Management Responses and Feedback loops (November 2018).

What are ECG practice notes?

The Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG) comprises the independent evaluation departments of multiple multilateral finance organisations (www.ecgnet.org).

ECG seeks to strengthen evaluation practice and effectiveness across its member institutions through good practice standards, harmonised approaches and sharing of experience.

Practice notes provide members with guidance (rather than formal methodological standards) on topics of shared interest and operational relevance.

Introduction

Evaluation recommendations aim to improve the intervention under evaluation. They inform decision making with a view to enhancing policy, strategy, intervention design and implementation. Evaluation recommendations can also confirm the relevance of an existing situation, and may therefore propose little to no change.

Some argue that it is not the role of evaluators to make recommendations, as decision makers are responsible for laying down strategic orientations, and services are best-placed to address issues from an operational standpoint. As a matter of fact, some evaluations do not include recommendations.

Nevertheless, most commentators support the provision of evaluation recommendations and, as such, this ECG Practice Note[1] focuses on evaluations that do so.

Purpose

This Practice Note aims to provide guidance on the formulation of evaluation recommendations by putting forward "suggested features". In doing so, the Note seeks to answer the following questions: Who should formulate evaluation recommendations? When should evaluation recommendations be formulated? And how should evaluation recommendations be formulated?

The Practice Note does not attempt to comprehensively treat the issues raised by these questions, nor set out agreed standards. The Note is intended rather to provide ECG members with observations and guidance that they may find useful for formulating their own evaluation recommendations. In addition, an indicative checklist for formulating evaluation recommendations is provided in Annex 1.
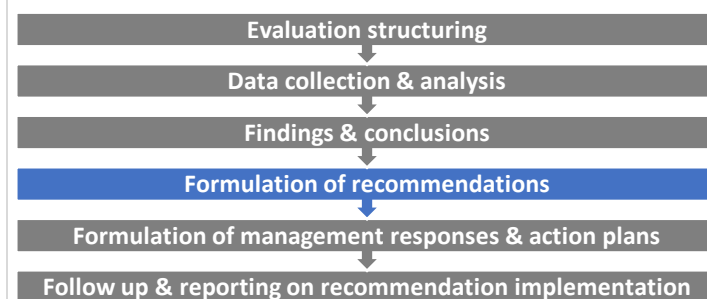
Scope

The utility of an evaluation recommendation is not solely dependent on the formulation of the recommendation itself, but is also influenced by activities that precede and follow the formulation of the recommendation (see Figure 1).

Nevertheless, this Practice Note focuses on the formulation of recommendations to Management, and subsequent Practice Notes will provide guidance on: the

Figure 1: Stages in the evaluation process

- Evaluation structuring
- Data collection & analysis
- Findings & conclusions
- **Formulation of recommendations**
- Formulation of management responses & action plans
- Follow up & reporting on recommendation implementation

---

[1] The Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG) comprises the independent evaluation functions of multiple International Financial Institutions. The ECG seeks to strengthen evaluation practice across its member institutions through good practice and knowledge sharing. Practice Notes provide members with guidance (rather than formal methodological standards) on topics of shared interest. This Practice Note builds on the Final Report produced by the ECG Working Group on evaluation recommendations, management responses and feedback loops.

formulation of management responses and action plans; and following up and reporting on the implementation of recommendations.

Suggested features

The Who

The evaluation function of ECG members should be responsible for formulating evaluation recommendations. Following this, Services and Management should be given the opportunity to meet with the evaluation function in order to discuss recommendations. Experience shows that such meetings help ensure that the recommendations are (i) developed in an iterative manner and (ii), are deemed by Services and Management as being clear, well-substantiated and actionable.

Written comments should then be provided by Services and Management to the evaluation function[2]. Following further examination, the evaluation function should address these comments if they relate to factual errors; however, the independence and professionalism of the evaluation function requires that it holds its ground if it does not find evidence for changing the recommendation, or if comments from Services or Management are based on a difference of opinion or interpretation. The final recommendations should represent the views of the evaluation function and should not be dictated by Services or Management.

Where the views of Management on a recommendation diverge from that of the evaluation function, Management should have the opportunity to express its views within the context of a Management Response[3]. Yet Management's rate of agreement with the evaluation function's recommendations is by no means an indicator of success for either party.

The When

Recommendations should be formulated after the findings and conclustions of the evaluation been drawn. Conclusions should logically derive from findings, and recommendations should logically derive from conclusions. Thus, any opportunities to reflect upon (with Services and Management) the factual accuracy of the evaluation's findings and the robustness of its conclusions should help prepare the ground for recommendations that convey, in particular, tougher messages.

The How

Recommendations should be relatively few in number. In general there should be three to six recommendations per evaluation, with not too many sub-parts. In order to limit the number of recommendations, evaluation functions should prioritise conclusions by considering *inter alia* the extent to which the corresponding recommendations will have a positive impact on the intervention under evaluation and the achievement of its objectives.

Recommendations should only be broken down into sub-parts if they warrant multiple Management Responses and/or actions. Experience indicates that sub-parts to recommendations are more likely to lead to Management only "partially agreeing" with recommendations; as they agree to certain sub-parts but not others.

---

[2] Increased participation by Services and Management in the formulation of evaluation recommendations will help ensure ownership of the recommendations and increased utility.

[3] It is foreseen that a Practice Note on the Formulation of Management Responses will be produced by this ECG Working Group at a later stage.

Recommendations should be one-sentence in length[4] and should start with an action verb[5]. They should be written in clear and plain language, and be drafted in a way to facilitate the formulation of subsequent actions. The recommendation should also be followed by a few sentences explaining the rationale and evidence-base supporting the recommendation, and may refer to specific cases or suggestions; but should not introduce other issues.

Recommendations should adopt a "SMART" format by being:

- *Specific,* by identifying a precise area for improvement and the parties to whom the recommendation relates;

- *Measurable,* by enabling the formulation of corresponding actions that facilitate the assessment of progress towards the implementation of the recommendation;

- *Attainable,* as the implementation of each evaluation recommendation is challenging but nevertheless possible to achieve, whether from an operational, strategic and/or political standpoint;

- *Relevant* to the intervention and purposes of the evaluation, which are often initially laid down in the evaluation's terms of reference, approach paper or equivalent; and

- *Time-bound,* by specifying when each recommendation ought to be implemented. Evaluations often frame recommendations as near-term (within 1 year), mid-term (1-3 years), long-term (>3 years). The maximum timeframe for implementation may also be inferred by the period of time during which the recommendation will be followed up and reported.

Recommendations should also consider the most cost-effective option for their implementation, and should consider whether the expected benefits of the recommendation exceed the expected costs of implementation.

Recommendations are typically included as is in the Executive Summary of the evaluation report, and are explained in greater detail at the end of the report, within or following the conclusions section.

Recommendations should draw on internal guidance and should be peer reviewed. ECG member institutions should draw on internal guidelines, standards and templates to facilitate the formulation of evaluation recommendations, as well as a peer review process. Peer reviews may be undertaken by: (i) staff in the evaluation function that are not part of the team undertaking the evaluation at hand; (ii) staff in the Services with knowledge of the evaluation process or the subject being evaluated, but without a stake in the evaluation itself; or (iii), external peer reviewers. An indicative checklist that might be used by internal or external peer reviewers is provided in annex 1.

Recommendations should be distinguished from identified issues and lessons, especially for evaluations that have highlighted an array of issues that may require multiple recommendations as a response. In such cases, a prior discussion with Services and Management as to the issues at hand may prove helpful. Alternatively, a recommendation that calls for a further review of the issues may also be appropriate.

Challenges and mitigation measures

An overview of challenges identified during the formulation of evaluation recommendations is provided in Table 1, along with suggested mitigation measures.

---

[4] Respecting this format may prove difficult for recommendations with sub-parts. Adopting a bullet point format for each sub-part may be an appropriate solution.
[5] Examples of action verbs include: create, launch, fund, facilitate, and coordinate.

Table 1: Challenges faced in formulating evaluation recommendations, and corresponding mitigation measures

Challenge	Mitigation measure
Recommendations being overtaken by events, as some issues initially identified by the evaluation have been acted upon prior to the evaluation report being finalised.	Evaluations should indicate how the evaluation process influenced actions prior to report finalisation. In addition, evaluation functions should endeavour to stay informed about changes in the strategy and operations of their respective institutions in order that the recommendations issued are timely and are not outdated.
Striking the right balance between recommendations that are not so broad that they become all-encompassing, nor so prescriptive that they constrain Management.	Evaluation functions should schedule an additional meeting with Services and/or Management focused specifically on recommendations. These meetings should focus on ensuring that the recommendations are clear in terms of their substance, are evidence-based, and are actionable.
Services and Management not having enough time to provide feedback on the evaluation's recommendations.	Up-front, evaluation functions should clearly explain to Services and Management the time allocated for providing feedback on the evaluation's recommendations. Evaluation functions should also make it clear that increased participation by Services and Management in the formulation of evaluation recommendations will help ensure their increased ownership of the recommendations and their greater utility.
Negative feedback from Services or Management on the formulation of evaluation recommendations.	The evaluation function should share with Services and Management any internal guidance, templates and standards on how to formulate evaluation recommendations.

Annex 1 – Indicative checklist for formulating evaluation recommendations

The Who	Has the evaluation function of the ECG member institution formulated the evaluation recommendations?	☐
	Do the evaluation recommendations represent the view of the evaluation function of the ECG member institution?	☐
	Have the evaluation recommendations been discussed with and commented upon by the Services and Management?	☐
	Has the evaluation function addressed comments from the Services and Management relating to factual errors within the evaluation recommendations?	☐
The When	Have the evaluation recommendations been formulated after the findings and conclusions of the evaluation have been drawn?	☐
	Do the evaluation recommendations logically derive from the findings and conclusions?	☐
	Were the findings and conclusions of the evaluation, particularly those conveying tougher messages, discussed with the Services and Management prior to the formulation of the evaluation recommendations?	☐
The What	Do the evaluation recommendations inform decision making in terms of policy, strategy, intervention design or intervention implementation?	☐
The How	Are the evaluation recommendations relatively few in number (generally between three and six)?	☐
	Are the evaluation recommendations only broken down into sub-parts if they warrant multiple Management Response and/or actions?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation one-sentence in length?	☐
	Do the evaluation recommendations start with an action verb?	☐
	Are the evaluation recommendations followed by a few sentences explaining the rationale and evidence-base supporting the recommendation?	☐
	Are the evaluation recommendations written in clear and plain language?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation specific in terms of (i) identifying a precise area for improvement, and (ii), the function to whom the recommendation concerns?	☐
	Does each evaluation recommendation facilitate the assessment of progress towards the implementation of the recommendation?	☐
	Is the implementation of each evaluation recommendation challenging but nevertheless possible to achieve, whether from an operational, strategic and/or political standpoint?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation relevant to the object and purposes of the evaluation?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation time-bound in terms of when the recommendation ought to be implemented?	☐
	Does each evaluation recommendation consider the most cost-effective option for its implementation?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation included as is in the Executive Summary of the report?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation explained in greater detail at the end of the report?	☐
	Is each evaluation recommendation formulated on the basis of internal guidelines?	☐
	Has each evaluation recommendation been peer reviewed?	☐
	Has each recommendation been distinguished from identified issues or lessons?	☐

Annex 2 - Useful resources

Cousins, J.B. and Leithwood, K.A. (1986) Current Empirical Research on Evaluation Utilization, Review of Educational Research Vol. 56(3), pp. 331-364.

ECG (2018) Final Report by the Working Group on evaluation recommendations, management responses and feedback loops.

Johnson, K., Greenseid, L. O., Toal, S.A., King, J.A., Lawrenz, F. and Volkov, B. (2009) Research on Evaluation Use: A Review of the Empitical Literature from 1986 to 2005, American Journal of Evaluation, Vol. 30(3), pp. 377-410.

Kirkhart, K. E. (2000) Reconceptualizing Evaluation Use: An Integrated Theory of Influence New Directions for Evaluation, Vol. 2000(88), pp. 5-23.

Patton, M. (2008) Utilisation Focused Evaluations 4th Edition.

UNEG (2017) Improved Quality of Evaluation Recommendations: Checklist, SO2 Subgroup. www.unevaluation.org/Checklist_Quality_Evaluation_Recommendations