UNEG
United Nations Evaluation Group

Improved Quality of Evaluation Recommendations Checklist

This document was submitted to 2017 AGM for discussion by SO2 Use of Evaluation Working Group.

I. Purpose

1. This note on Quality Evaluation Recommendations sets out the United Nations Evaluation Group's (UNEG) checklist of expectation and requirements to improve the quality and utility of evaluation recommendations. It is not intended to be a tool for monitoring by interagency evaluation offices. The main purpose is to provide a quality assurance tool for their formulation, structure and content in line with and complementing UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, 2016.[1] The process leading to recommendation needs to be rooted in establishing the logical link between findings to conclusions, which can vary substantively among evaluation offices. Moreover, the level and nature of engagement with stakeholders can differ between accountability and learning-focused evaluations, recognizing that UNEG is diverse and not all UN Evaluation Offices might be able to apply this checklist in its entirety.

II. Rationale

2. At the 2015 UNEG annual general meeting, UNEG members determined that improving quality of recommendations was a top priority for enhancing the use of evaluation, and as a central issue, being the most direct means by which evaluations influence the future work of UNEG members. As recommendations are forward looking part of an evaluation report, poorly formulated recommendations risk discrediting otherwise high standard evaluations. Recommendations are especially crucial because they can be the cornerstone for improved decision making among stakeholders including Senior Management and Governing Bodies.

3. An ongoing debate is taking place on whether evaluations should or should not include recommendations and who is responsible to formulate them. **UNEG has already determined that most evaluations should include recommendations as a key point of the different Organizations' governance, learning and accountability functions**. The need for recommendations in evaluations is explicit in the definition of evaluation and in several sections of UNEG Norms and Standards 2016[2], especially the standard 4.10, dedicated exclusively to recommendations.

4. A desk review of international practices from a range of sources[3] (bilateral development agencies, UN humanitarian agencies, and well-known NGOs, networks, and literature articles) identified a number of weaknesses commonly found in recommendations, including:

- Evaluation stakeholders may not be sufficiently involved in the recommendation creation process; hence recommendations may lack relevance and/or feasibility of action;

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[1] The drafting team used OEV/WFP's TN as a background reference for discussion and drafting this document.

[2] UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation (June 2016), http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914

Recommendations are mentioned in norm 2 (utility), norm 3 (credibility), norm 5 (impartiality), norm 14 (evaluation use and follow up), standard 1.4 (Management response and follow up), standard 2.1 (Head of evaluation), standard 4.1 (Timeliness and intentionality), standard 4.6 (Stakeholder engagement and reference groups), standard 4.9 (Evaluation report and products), standard 4.10 (Recommendations), standard 4.11 (Communication and dissemination) and standard 5.3 (Quality control at the final stage of evaluation)

3 For further readings, please refer to the bibliography at the end of the Technical Note.

- Lack of clarity on evidence and rationale for recommendations, and the implications of using them;
- An excessive number of recommendations;
- Insufficient prioritization, strategic alignment, phasing and sequencing;
- Recommendation wording insufficiently specific to intended change or action, timing and implementation responsibility; and
- Recommendations have unrealistic funding and implementation ceilings, with insufficient time envisaged for full implementation.

5.   Thus, this document recognises quality of recommendations as an integral component of the evaluation delivery and transparency process intended to stimulate learning, accountability and organizational effectiveness, and endeavours to provide support and guidance towards ensuring their highest quality. However, accountability focussed evaluations may require limited engagement with stakeholders in this regard.

III. Definition

6.   Recommendations are usually linked to the concept of **utility** as they are used for improving projects, programmes, policy or strategy. Recommendations are intended for use as a basis for management decisions to improve performance, results or impact. It is widely accepted that no single definition of an evaluation recommendation exists. Instead recommendations are made to suit the needs of the Organizations that will be using them. As a result, recommendations in a mid-term evaluations can look quite different to those in an evaluation of an intervention that is close to its end, recommendations related to normative work can lead differently from those for operative work, and recommendations provided by a formative evaluation can be quite different from those of a summative evaluation.

7.   UNEG defines evaluation recommendations as '*proposals aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, relevance, sustainability, coherence, added value or coverage of the operation, portfolio, strategy or policy under evaluation. Recommendations are intended to inform decision making, including programme design and resources allocations.*' In June 2010, UNEG also provided broad guidelines for quality recommendations.[4]

IV. UNEG Checklist

8.   There are four main areas to affect a recommendation's development and ultimately its use. These are:

   a)   the process of formulating recommendations;
   b)   the structure of the recommendations;
   c)   the content of the recommendations; and
   d)   the implementation and follow-up of the recommendations.

9.   The first three will influence performance in implementing the recommendations and hence ultimately the utility of the evaluation. For each of the first three areas, the following standards have been identified. The fourth area has already been largely addressed in the UNEG Good Practice Guidelines for Follow up to Evaluations.[5] For each of the areas, the following standards have been identified.

   a)   **Process of formulation of recommendations:**

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[4] UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports (http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/607)
[5] UNEG Good Practice Guidelines for Follow up to Evaluations (http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/610)

10. The primary responsibility of formulating recommendations rests on the evaluation team. The team should ensure appropriateness and alignment of recommendations with the evaluation purpose and type, and with recommendations that were not addressed. Multi-stakeholders participation in forming the recommendations is recognised as a key element to ensure **ownership** of recommendations and, as a result, to ensure a greater probability of use. There is a close link between **utility**, recommendations take-up and ownership/participation. The following table indicates the criteria to be taken into account when formulating recommendations.

	Criteria	Mandatory	Desirable
1	To add multi-stakeholders perspectives in the formulation of recommendations		✓
2	To identify the likely implementers of the recommendations, in Terms of Reference and Inception Reports		✓
3	To provide clarification, in the Evaluation Terms of Reference, on how the evaluation results will be utilised and by whom		✓
4	To include likely implementers of the recommendations in shaping the evaluation questions, as part of reviewing the Terms of Reference and Inception Reports		✓
5	To include likely implementers of the recommendations in the Internal Reference Group for the evaluation		✓
6	To give the opportunity for likely implementers to review draft recommendations and provide comments or suggestions for refinement; provided this step will not compromise the required accountability purpose	✓	

    b) **Structure of recommendations**

The following table indicates the criteria to be taken into account when setting the layout or structure of recommendations.

	Criteria	Mandatory	Desirable
1	Recommendations are limited in number (no more than 10)	✓	
2	Recommendations are prioritized and sequenced		✓

	Criteria	Mandatory	Desirable
3	Recommendations are internally consistent and take into account interdependencies.	✓	
4	Recommendations need to be aligned within groups		✓

c) **Content of recommendations**

The following table indicates the criteria to be taken into account when writing recommendations.

	Criteria	Mandatory	Desirable
1	Recommendations must be written clearly in a comprehensive and precise way.	✓	
2	Recommendations must be sensitive in the choice of words (e.g.: use words like should or must to express advisability or necessity).	✓	
3	Recommendations must be firmly based on evidence and analysis (not be opinion-based) and should logically follow from the evaluation findings and conclusions.	✓	
4	Recommendations should indicate what is needed to achieve the objectives of the subject under evaluation and the changes required. Depending on the subject of the evaluation, recommendations could indicate strategic directions or be more focused on operational matters.		✓
5	Recommendations must be formulated with clear priority actions and their use in mind, reflecting an understanding of the commissioning organization and potential constraints to follow-up.	✓	
6	Recommendations must be clear on who needs to implement them. They identify who should take actions and oversight responsibility; clearly identify the target group for each recommendation.	✓	
7	Recommendations must be action-oriented (human, financial and technical resource implications outlined), without being overly prescriptive. They should reflect an	✓	

		Criteria	Mandatory	Desirable
		understanding of the commissioning organization and potential constraints to follow-up.		
8		A timeframe and priority for implementation is proposed or timing issues are identified.		✓
9		Recommendations must leave room for fine-tuning implementation approach by implementers and users, whilst remaining balanced and impartial.	✓	
10		Recommendations are relevant to the object and purposes of the evaluation and once drafted, be presented to relevant stakeholder, for further refinements, as appropriate	✓	
11		Recommendations must be gender and human rights sensitive.	✓	

d) **Implementation and follow-up of the recommendations**

11. The implementation of evaluation recommendations should be systematically followed up. A periodic report on the status of the implementation of the agreed evaluation recommendations should be presented to the governing bodies and/or the head of the organization. The following table indicates the criteria to be taken into account when writing the status of implementation of recommendations.

	Criteria	**Mandatory**	**Desirable**
1	All recommendations should be included, indicating whether management agrees, partially agrees or disagrees with each recommendation.): If a recommendation does not have a formal response from management, an agreed deadline for that response should be included.	✓	
2	The status should include the feasibility in implementing the actions in the management response. These actions should be concrete, objectively verifiable, time-bound and clear on the responsibilities for implementation (SMART).		✓
3	A focal point should be nominated by management to coordinate the management response.		✓

4	In the case of joint evaluations involving several agencies/partners, an ad-hoc group with management representatives of the different agencies/partners should be formed to elicit a coordinated management response.		✓
5	In case the concerned managers lack experience in preparing a management response, the central evaluation unit should routinely provide support by showing good examples of management response and clarifying any doubts, making reference to the evaluation policy of the organization (if there is one).		✓
6	Management Responses should be disclosed in conjunction with the evaluation.		✓
7	A systematic review of the implementation of management response should be instituted to facilitate follow up and identification of repetitive issues that may require attention from Management or Governing Bodies.		✓

Useful references

- ALNAP – 2005, 'Assessing the Quality of Humanitarian Evaluations The ALNAP Quality Proforma 2005 (v. 02/03/05);
- ALNAP – 2006, 'Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: An ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies';
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- CIDA – 2002, 'How to Perform Evaluations – Evaluation Reports';
- CIDA – 2004, 'CIDA Evaluation Guide: Overcoming Challenges, Delivering Results, Meeting Expectations, Making a Contribution';
- CIDA – 2006, 'Peer Review of Evaluation Function at United Nations Children's FUND (UNICEF)';
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- IFAD, 'Good Practice Recommendations', ppt.
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- SIDA – 2011, 'Sida's Management Response System', Sida Studies in Evaluation 06/01
- UNEG – 2010, ' Good Practice Guidelines for Follow-up to Evaluations',
- UNEG – 2016, 'Norms and Standards for Evaluation';