

WHY DO WE NEED FOREIGN ASSISTANCE EVALUATIONS?

Done right, evaluations are valuable investments in improving the effectiveness of foreign assistance and achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. Evaluation findings are essential to making mid-course corrections and informing future programming decisions, which can increase the impact of our foreign assistance dollars and prevent the U.S. government from spending on activities that do not achieve their desired outcomes.

Evaluations are different from audits and investigations carried out by Inspectors General, the Government Accountability Office, and other oversight bodies.

- ▶ **Audits** are generally designed to determine whether programs comply with legal and regulatory requirements. Their focus is on assessing whether money was spent as intended and on finding evidence of waste, fraud, and abuse. They are conducted by outside entities, with little or no input on the questions to be asked from the organization subject to the audit.
- ▶ **Investigations**, usually conducted by Inspectors General, are launched to resolve specific allegations or complaints of wrongdoing. They may result in administrative, civil, or criminal action, and their proceedings are typically confidential.
- ▶ **Evaluations** are undertaken to determine whether programs are achieving their aims and to understand why or why not. These lessons are then used to inform decision-making, improve program performance, and ensure accountability both to taxpayers and to beneficiaries of U.S. aid.

High-quality, rigorous evaluations produce knowledge that can help donors increase value for money and help partners maximize impact. For example:

- ▶ A randomized evaluation of 254 health clinics in Sierra Leone showed that community monitoring of health workers resulted in dramatic improvements in child and maternal health, but top-down non-financial awards did not. ¹
- ▶ A rigorous evaluation in Uganda demonstrated that primary school students saved more, spent more on school supplies, and achieved higher test scores if their savings were returned to them in cash, rather than in vouchers for school supplies. ²
- ▶ A large body of evidence demonstrated that charging even nominal user fees for lifesaving health interventions, such as insecticide-treated bed-nets and de-worming pills, substantially reduces their utilization. ³

¹ <http://www.poverty-action.org/study/improving-health-service-delivery-through-community-monitoring-and-non-financial-awards-sierra>

² <http://www.poverty-action.org/publication/loose-knots-strong-versus-weak-commitments-save-education-uganda>

³ https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/the_price_is_wrong_policy_briefcase.pdf

HOW CAN WE GET THE MOST FROM EVALUATIONS?

- ▶ **Plan them from the start.** Good evaluations take time and should be planned from the outset of a program to ensure that the necessary data is collected and that changes can be accurately measured. They should occur at various stages of the program cycle, so that findings can be used to make mid-course corrections as well as to ascertain final results and ongoing impact.
- ▶ **Go for quality.** Foreign assistance agencies should establish hiring, training, and professional development systems to ensure that those who conduct, commission, and oversee evaluations have the right qualifications, knowledge, and experience. Agencies should demand high-quality evaluations that use rigorous methodologies and produce valid data.
- ▶ **Involve local participants.** Just as U.S. taxpayers must hold the U.S. government accountable for its foreign aid spending, people in partner countries must hold their own governments and aid implementers accountable for achieving results. Local stakeholders and intended beneficiaries should have a major role not only in setting priorities, designing programs, and determining what counts as success, but also in planning and conducting evaluations.
- ▶ **Accept mixed findings.** It is almost unheard of for any program to be a 100% failure or a 100% success. To maintain the integrity of the evaluation process, it is important to acknowledge and learn from any failures or shortcomings for future efforts.
- ▶ **Share the results.** While taking steps to protect sensitive information, agencies should publish the full text of evaluations, and make available the data sets on which they are based in open, machine-readable format. Doing so builds confidence in the process and ensures that the knowledge can be widely shared and understood.
- ▶ **Use them to inform decision-making.** Those who commission evaluations must be clear about why they are being conducted and have a system in place to ensure that the findings are used to inform future program design, policy decision-making, and, when appropriate, budget allocations.

The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) all have formal evaluation policies and publish the texts of their foreign assistance evaluations online. The MCC also publishes the raw data behind its evaluation findings to enable peer review and gain further insights into results. However, many of the 22 agencies that manage foreign assistance programs either do not require evaluations or do not publish them.

STATE: <http://www.state.gov/f/evaluations/index.htm>

USAID: <https://usaid.gov/evaluation>

MCC: <https://www.mcc.gov/our-impact/independent-evaluations>