

CHAPTER II

Introduction to Program Evaluation

Evaluation is not a new concept. It is something we all do, informally or formally. It involves thinking to make choices. It involves making value judgments.

We frequently engage in informal evaluation. Whether we are buying a computer, a television, or clothes, we evaluate options based on several criteria, such as our needs, size, and budget. We may read Consumer Reports magazine or a website to aid in decision-making. When we choose a career or a spouse, we use some other criteria to reach a decision. Sometimes we ask our friends or families for their opinions. In all of these scenarios, we are making judgments.

In a formal setting, we conduct evaluations by gathering information through a systematic process. We apply appropriate criteria or standards to this information to arrive at an informed judgment. We make the findings public to defend our conclusions.

The practice of evaluating the effectiveness of social programs in the United States began in the 1930s. Although evaluation of select social programs started in the 1940s and 1950s, assessment of The War on Poverty program initiated in the mid-1960s marked the beginning of large scale government-funded evaluation. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 required schools or grant recipients to file an evaluation report (Weiss, 1998). About this time, evaluations of technology were conducted to determine the “bang for the buck” from investment through cost-benefit studies. Other economic impact assessment models followed.

Public interest in evaluation and accountability has grown steadily. Managers of foundations, civic organizations, and policy makers started raising questions such as:

"How is your extension program or project doing? What have you achieved?"

"We have supported this extension project for five years; why should we continue this support?"

"What programs or activities of your agency have been effective? What problems have arisen? What are you doing to improve or terminate ineffective programs?"

"What new programs need to be developed to meet the needs of the people you intend to serve?"

Evaluation helps answer these questions. Evaluation is a management tool that measures and reports the results of programs and projects. It involves judging a program’s merit or worth. It pinpoints the improvements needed by a program. Weiss (1998) defines evaluation as “the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contribution to the improvement of the program or policy” (p. 4).

Case, Andrews, and Werner (1988) argue that “to evaluate is to make an explicit judgment about the worth of all or part of a program by collecting evidence to determine if acceptable standards have been met.”

For the purpose of this guide, program evaluation is a continual and systematic process of assessing the value or potential value of extension programs or policies to guide decision-making for the program's future.

These definitions include three key elements of evaluation:

Evidence, or information: gathered systematically about a program or policy;

Standards, or criteria: used to judge a program or policy; and

Judgment, or assessment: reached when evidence is compared against standards.

WHEN WE EVALUATE . . .

- We examine the context and assumptions upon which a program or policy is based.
- We study the goals and objectives of the program or policy.
- We collect information about a program's inputs and outcomes.
- We compare it to pre-set standards. We make judgments about the program or policy.
- We report findings in a manner that facilitates their use.

Evaluation is both an art and a science. The art of evaluation involves identifying purposes and audiences, creating appropriate designs, and interpreting data about a program or policy. The science of evaluation involves systematically gathering and analyzing evidence about the outcomes and impacts.

Extension programs and policies are designed to reach certain goals and beneficiaries. Evaluations assess the programs and policies and help determine if goals have been achieved or benefits have been realized by the intended audience. Because agricultural extension has an educational delivery and technology transfer mission, evaluation in extension looks at changes in awareness, knowledge, skills and/or behaviors in targeted audiences, whether they are individuals, families, work groups, organizations, or communities.

Extension programs, no matter how large or small, need to be assessed to determine if they accomplished the stated objectives. Through evaluation processes, we find out what impact the program or policy had on the audience – how they reacted, what they learned, and whether the program was worth the time, money and resources invested.

First, let us differentiate between program evaluation and policy evaluation. A program typically includes subject matter focus, human resources, and infrastructure such as office space, staff, or vehicles. On the other hand, a "policy" is more likely to be a regulation or standard, with or without infrastructure. For example, a program to assist families with filing federal income taxes would need an office and staff, whereas a subsidy for chemical fertilizer could become a policy without the need for infrastructure.

The impact of an income tax assistance program could be measured by the number of tax returns filed, timeliness of filing, amount of tax collected, or number of citizens trained to file income tax returns correctly. On the other hand, the impact of the fertilizer subsidy could be determined by the increase in

amount of fertilizer used, increase in crop production due to fertilizer application, and/or level of export or import of food crops.

Why Evaluate a Program?

Agricultural extension programs are generally supported by public funds and/or through donor assistance. In recent years, the demands on extension for proof of program effectiveness and for public accountability have increased. Evaluation can help meet these demands in various ways. Also, organizational improvement cannot occur without evaluation. Only through evaluation can one learn: how well a program is doing, is there room for improvement, or in what direction should it be moving?

EVALUATION IS CONDUCTED FOR VARIOUS REASONS. THE PURPOSE(S) INCLUDE:

- Planning for change:
 - To assess needs and/or issues facing the community we are working with.
 - To set priorities to better direct allocation of resources.
 - To guide policy development.

- Analysis of program effectiveness or quality:
 - To determine achievement of project objectives.
 - To identify strengths and weaknesses of a program.
 - To determine if the needs of beneficiaries are being met.

- Effective decision-making:
 - To improve program management and effectiveness.
 - To expand or to terminate a program

- Maintaining accountability to stakeholders, funding sources, and the general public.

- Discover a program's impact on individuals, families, organizations and/or communities.

- Advocacy purposes:
 - To gain support from policy makers, advisory councils, and donor communities.
 - To direct attention to needs of particular stakeholder groups such as women farmers, small agribusiness operators, fishermen, etc.

What is the Role of the Evaluator?

The role of an evaluator is continually expanding. The traditional role of an evaluator was a combination of expert, scientist, and researcher who uncovered clear-cut cause-and-effect relationships. Today, evaluators are often educators, facilitators, consultants, interpreters, mediators and/or change agents. Evaluators could be internal or external to an organization

Patton (1997) asserts, “The evaluator is also a stakeholder – not the primary stakeholder – but in every evaluation, an evaluator’s reputation, credibility, and beliefs are on the line (p. 364).”

As professionals, evaluators should take into consideration the needs and interests of primary users of the evaluation. S/he should coach an internal team through the steps of the evaluation as well as conduct certain parts of it. This will enhance credibility as well as use. Remember, when the concerns of primary stakeholders have been incorporated into the evaluation process, evaluation findings are more likely to be used.

AN EVALUATOR’S CREDIBILITY

An evaluator is judged by his or her competence and personal style. Competence is developed through training and experience. Personal style develops over time through a combination of training, experience and personal characteristics.

COMPETENCE

- Capacity to fully understand a program’s context, goals and objectives
- Conceptual skills to design the evaluation
- Mastery of qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection
- Basic quantitative and qualitative data analysis skills
- Report writing and presentation skills

PERSONAL STYLE

- Communication skills – verbal and written
- Confidence in the use of evaluation methods for project or policy being evaluated
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Ability to nurture trust and rapport
- Sensitivity in reporting evaluation findings
- Cross-cultural skills if engaged in international evaluation