



IMARK

Module

Investing in Information for Development

Evaluating an Information Project

Lesson 1: Getting Ready

Learner Notes



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This lesson is part of the IMARK Module on “Investing in Information for Development”. The Module contains six units. The unit on “Evaluating an Information Project” comprises four lessons:

Lesson 1: Getting Ready

Lesson 2: Building Consensus

Lesson 3: Defining Content

Lesson 4: From Questions to Results

This course is available in self-paced e-learning format on CD-ROM and the Internet

(www.imarkgroup.org).

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- analyse the project that you want to evaluate in terms of inputs, activities, outputs and expected impacts;
- describe an approach for the management of the evaluation.

Introduction

The evaluation of an “information project” requires **good planning and management**. In this Unit, we will use the term “information project” to include any type of information-related activity, product or service.

A lot of literature already exists on the theory of evaluation, but it is difficult to find hands-on, practical guidelines on how to do one. Let’s start by examining the two main reasons for doing an evaluation:

:

- To **measure the impact** of a project on its intended beneficiaries.
- To **improve the performance** of the organization as it implements future projects.

This lesson will focus mainly on **impact**.

In order to illustrate the aspects of the evaluation process, we have created a scenario in which an information project – the production of a newsletter – is to be evaluated.

Dr. Kumar is the Director of Publications at Mikuni State Agricultural University (MSAU). His department is responsible for the production and distribution of all MSAU newsletters, journals and conference proceedings. One of his most widely circulated publications is **RICE NEWS**, a quarterly newsletter containing information on new varieties, new production practices and new market opportunities.

Today Dr. Kumar received a message from the MSAU president asking his department to undertake an evaluation of RICE NEWS. She wants a plan for this evaluation by the beginning of next week.

Five years ago, when MSAU started RICE NEWS, no one thought about evaluation. Dr. Kumar did not make any evaluation plans. What are the key decisions that he needs to make now about the evaluation that the president wants? Where should he start?

Basic concepts

A good way for Dr. Kumar to get started would be to call his closest colleagues for a **brainstorming meeting**. They are: Lara, who has been in charge of the hardcopy version of RICE NEWS since the beginning; and Jon, who is in charge of the digital version.

Dr. Kumar proposes that the entire rice news project be carefully analysed first, in order to decide what they want to measure, as well as what they actually can measure.

The first step in the analysis is to **break down the project to be evaluated into four areas**:

1. **Inputs**
2. **Activities**
3. **Outputs**
4. **Impacts**

Let's see what Jon and Lara are saying about it:

Jon:

"OK, I am pretty sure we can identify and describe inputs and activities, but I am not so sure about the difference between outputs and impacts. I think we should just measure outputs."

Lara:

"No, I think we should measure both. Wasn't our objective to have Rice News make a difference in the lives of people who read it? That's impact."

Probably Jon's idea of measuring outputs might seem more appealing: in fact, a lot of evaluations focus on "outputs" simply because they're easier to measure.

However, it is easy to confuse OUTPUTS with IMPACTS.

Outputs (means) lead to Impacts (ends).

If the evaluation of RICE NEWS measures only "number of readers", Dr Kumar will not know if the "attitudes and behaviour" of these readers have changed as a result of reading the newsletter. The "number of readers" (output) is probably less important than whether the "attitudes and behaviours" (impact) of these readers have changed after reading the newsletter.

The key questions, always, are:

- **Has a particular output led to an impact?**
- **If so, what is that impact, and how can an evaluation measure it?**

Once you have done a preliminary review of the four areas to be evaluated you need to **lay the management foundation** for a good evaluation.

Should you proceed only with your closest colleagues, or should you involve in the evaluation all the people who have participated to the project?

A common mistake in planning evaluations is to limit the number of people who will be involved. A senior manager like Dr. Kumar may prefer a smaller group because:

- He wants to be efficient.
- He wants to involve only those people who are likely to be supportive of the evaluation.
- He wants to evaluate only those aspects of the project that have gone well.

But this approach could carry risks: if some people are left out, they may question the results of the evaluation later.

Therefore, it is important to **involve all important stakeholders** in the planning and implementation of the evaluation. In fact, the best evaluations are based on **a broad consensus** among both supporters and sceptics.

The identification of stakeholders

We just mentioned the importance of involving a wider group of people in planning the evaluation of a project. But who exactly are these people?

The first management task in any evaluation is to develop a **list of key stakeholders**:

- Which people or organizations have had an interest in the project?
- Which ones have supported it?
- Which ones have opposed it?

And, more specifically:

- Who is contributing personnel and facilities?
- Who has been paying for it?
- Where did the original idea for Rice News come from?
- Who have been the main beneficiaries?
- Are there people or organizations that have been opposed to the project?
- Are there people who have criticized the content of the newsletter?
- Are there people or organizations that are offering a competing product?

Once you have a list of stakeholders, a good way to proceed in the evaluation to create an **Evaluation Management Committee**.

The Evaluation Management Committee

The list of stakeholders can be used as a basis for creating an Evaluation Management Committee, which will plan and manage the evaluation process.

It will have **final responsibility** for four issues:

- **Content**
What outputs and/or impacts will the evaluation measure?
- **Indicators**
How will it measure them?
- **Analysis**
How will the results of the evaluation be compiled and disseminated?
- **Logistics**
Who will do what: when and how will it be done?

Up to this point in the planning of the evaluation, you should have some ideas about the **focus of the evaluation** (the four stages: inputs, activities, outputs, impacts) and a list of possible Evaluation Management Committee members.

The next steps will be to call the first EMC meeting and decide on the **main topics** for the meeting's agenda.

Summary

The evaluation of an information project requires **good planning and management**. In this lesson, when we talk about evaluation, we consider the **impact** of a project on its intended beneficiaries.

To evaluate an information project, it is useful to start by breaking it down into four areas:

- **inputs**
- **activities**
- **outputs**
- **impacts**

For an effective evaluation, it is important to **measure all of these stages**, instead of stopping at the outputs level.

All important stakeholders should be involved in the planning and implementation of the evaluation. Therefore, it is useful to develop a list of key stakeholders that should be contacted and involved.

The list of stakeholders can be used as a basis for creating an **Evaluation Management Committee**, which will plan and manage the evaluation process. The Committee will have final responsibility for: **Content, Indicators, Analysis, Logistics**.