



IMARK

Module

Investing in Information for Development

Evaluating an Information Project

**Lesson 2: Building Consensus**

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](http://www.imarkgroup.org)).

## Learning Objectives

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

- identify an analytical framework for the evaluation;
- be aware of how to undertake a preliminary analysis of risks to carrying out the evaluation.

## Introduction

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Up to this point in the planning of the evaluation, you should have already analysed your projects in terms of inputs, activities, outputs and impacts, and created a list of possible Evaluation Management Committee (EMC) members.

Suppose you have called the first EMC meeting, which is about to start. The next thing to do is to decide on the main topics for the agenda of the meeting.

## Reaching consensus

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Let's consider once again the case of Dr. Kumar, the Director of Publications at MSAU University:

Here is the list of members whom Dr. Kumar has included in the EMC:

- RICE NEWS Evaluation Team - Director of Publications, MSAU (Dr. Kumar)
- Director of Agricultural Extension, MSAU
- Head, Mikuni-East Rural Development Centre (a local government undertaking)
- Director of Rural Programming, KRNT (the national radio station)
- Mr. Raul Walaja (Agricultural Extension Officer)
- Director of Marketing, Midori Seeds Limited (a private-sector company)
- Executive Officer, the Mikuni branch of the National Farmers Union
- Deputy Director, Plant Pathology Research Institute
- Mr. Jomo Madamba (winner of recent "Model Rice Farmer" award)

Dr. Kumar and the members of the EMC have agreed on the following questions for the agenda:

- What will be the **main objective** in an evaluation of the project?
- What will be the **main subjects** to be included?
- What are we going to **measure**?
- What is likely to go "**right**" and what could possibly go "**wrong**"?

By the end of the meeting, Dr. Kumar hopes **to have a plan for the evaluation** that he can present to the president of the university.

The challenge during the EMC meeting will be to encourage everyone to agree on the basics of the evaluation.

Several techniques can be used to reach agreement. One of them is called the "**card technique**". Here is how it works:

1. Break down the project into four or five smaller topics. These should be topics that the members of the EMC can easily understand, will want to discuss, and that eventually will lead towards agreement on a plan for the evaluation.
2. These topics could be the four categories (inputs, activities, outputs, impacts). However, it might be easier to use simpler categories, such as: needs, beneficiaries, activities and outcomes.
  - **Needs**  
What needs is the project supposed to address?
  - **Beneficiaries**  
Who is supposed to benefit from it?

- **Activities**

What is the project supposed to be? (A forum for the publication of scientific articles, an extension publication, or something else?)

- **Outcomes**

What are supposed to be the main outcomes (or impacts) of the project?

3. Give each member of the EMC a small pile of cards and a felt-tipped pen. Start with "Needs". Ask each member to write down on the card his/her opinion about the needs the project is supposed to address. They should write down one need per card.
4. When everyone is finished with the topic, tape all of the cards on a large board so that everyone can see.
5. Lead a discussion in which people try to group these needs. The goal is to come up with between three to six main needs.
6. Do the same process for the other topics (beneficiaries, activities, and outcomes).
7. At the end, there should be agreement on main needs, main beneficiaries, main activities and main outcomes.

The information gathered through this technique can be useful later as well, when it will be necessary to develop specific questions for the evaluation.

Let's go back to Dr. Kumar and see what his EMC meeting has come up with:

Needs	Beneficiaries	Activities	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Improved cultural practices for rice.</li> <li>◆ Increased agricultural productivity.</li> <li>◆ Improved materials for agricultural extension workers.</li> <li>◆ On-the-job training for university students in newsletter production.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Farmers.</li> <li>◆ Extension workers.</li> <li>◆ Agribusiness organizations</li> <li>◆ Students.</li> <li>◆ The University (particularly the Communications Department).</li> <li>◆ The Ministry of Agriculture</li> <li>◆ The international donor agency that has supported the newsletter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Research, to produce material for the newsletter</li> <li>◆ Production of the newsletter.</li> <li>◆ Dissemination of the newsletter in hardcopy.</li> <li>◆ Dissemination of the newsletter via WWW.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ More farmer awareness on new rice production practices</li> <li>◆ More effective agricultural extension on rice-related subjects.</li> <li>◆ More efficient rice marketing.</li> <li>◆ More student expertise in the production and publishing of a newsletter</li> <li>◆ Increased rice production per hectare</li> <li>◆ Higher per capita rural incomes</li> </ul>

## Carrying out a SWOT analysis

Reaching an agreement on the Needs, Beneficiaries, Activities and Outcomes (Impacts) of the project is a very valuable step in the evaluation process. Now, it is important to be aware of what could go wrong with the evaluation **before** the whole process starts. If one identifies potential problems at the beginning of the evaluation, it may be easier to prevent them from happening later.

Therefore, during the EMC meeting you can conduct a **SWOT analysis**. Everyone will be encouraged to think about the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of the proposed evaluation.

You may use the same “card technique” and propose several questions to the members of the EMC several questions. Here is an example of questions you may ask:

1. What are likely to be the greatest **STRENGTHS** of our evaluation?
  - Has the project been evaluated before? If so, what information already exists?
  - What are likely to be the easiest parts of the evaluation?

- What can we expect to go well?
2. What are likely to be its greatest **WEAKNESSES**?
    - What tasks in the evaluation are likely to be the most difficult?
    - Are there enough funds, guaranteed, to complete the evaluation?
    - Are there enough trained people to carry out all the necessary evaluation tasks?
  3. If the evaluation goes well, what are likely to be the greatest **OPPORTUNITIES** that it will bring to us?
    - Who are the strongest supporters of the evaluation?
    - What are they likely to see as the main benefits of doing the evaluation?
  4. And what are the greatest **THREATS** to it not going well?
    - Are there data that some organizations and/or people might not want to have collected?
    - And are there data that, if collected, might actually harm the project?

Once again, let's see how Dr Kumar's meeting has dealt with these issues:

Dr. Kumar has found this discussion about SWOT very useful, even if the comments about "weaknesses" and "threats" were often very direct. Here are the **SWOT** issues that the committee has identified:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>The evaluation is supported by a large number of stakeholders</p> <p>These stakeholders are all represented in our EMC</p> <p>The EMC is undertaking a systematic planning process for the evaluation.</p>	<p>The large number of stakeholders may make agreement on the details of the evaluation difficult.</p> <p>We do not have good baseline data, so the measurement of change (impact) will be challenging.</p> <p>We are working under time pressure, so we may not be able to do as complete a job as we would like.</p>	<p>The Publications Department can use the results of the evaluation to make a case for more funds for RICE NEWS.</p> <p>The process of doing the evaluation will strengthen the university capacity to do future evaluations.</p>	<p>There may be "interested parties" that we have forgotten to include on the EMC.</p> <p>We may not be able to collect the data that we want, with the result that our findings may be questioned.</p>

After completing the SWOT analysis and achieving consensus on major issues, you may conclude the EMC meeting.

The next step in the evaluation will be to think in more detail about what you want to measure, and how to measure it.

## Summary

When planning an evaluation, we should answer the question: what are we going to measure? It is important to find an **agreement on the content** of the evaluation.

During the Evaluation Management Committee meeting, a good starting point can be to examine four different aspects of the project that must be evaluated:

**Needs, Beneficiaries, Activities and Outcomes.**

To reach an agreement, it is useful to introduce in the meeting a "**card technique**", in which everybody has the chance to write down his/her opinion about the four different aspects mentioned above.



The next step is to use the same card technique to do a **SWOT analysis**.

After reaching consensus on the major issues, the Evaluation Management Committee can move on to the details of “what” actually needs to be measured, and “how”.