MONITORING & EVALUATION

Short Cuts

Guidelines on Designing an Evaluation Reporting and Communication Strategy

Communicating and Reporting on an Evaluation

September 2008

Introduction

This edition of *Short Cuts* provides practical instructions on how to design an evaluation communication and reporting strategy using tailored reporting formats that are responsive to audience profiles and information needs. Most donors require midterm and final evaluations, and best practice indicates that these periodic assessments provide the most detailed information about a particular project's progress. An evaluation represents a large investment in time and funds, yet private voluntary organizations (PVOs) often report that evaluation reports are not read or shared, and in some cases, a report's recommendations are not used.

In planning a communication and reporting strategy, it is important to include a variety of reporting formats—tailored to audience information needs—to engage evaluation stakeholders in discussion and decision making. Clear, jargon-free language should be used, accompanied by graphics to help ensure the evaluations are understood, used, and contribute to organizational learning.

4 Steps to Effectively Communicate and Report on Evaluation Results

Step 1
Identify communication and reporting challenges

Step 2
Define the communication purpose

Step 3
Select the communication methods

Step 4
Develop an evaluation communication and reporting strategy

Step 1 Identify Communication and Reporting Challenges

The first step is to identify communicating and reporting challenges, and, in turn, to learn from the results. These challenges are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Communication and Reporting Challenges

Challenge	How it affects communicating and reporting
General evaluation anxiety	• Just the word "evaluation" can provoke anxiety among staff and cause resistance, because the results can affect decisions about staffing or resource allocation. • External evaluators, who need time to establish trust and relationships, may increase anxiety.
Failure to plan from the start	• Not communicating regularly with stakeholders can cause disengagement, disinterest, and, ultimately, the non-use of findings. • Evaluation teams can find out too late that no budget was allocated for report production, verbal presentations, or dissemination.
Organizational culture—defined as management operating style, the way authority and responsibility are assigned, or how staff are developed	• Preconceptions are held about the project that are resistant to change. • Staff may view negative or sensitive evaluation results as shameful criticism and resist discussing them openly. • Communication may be inefficient due to the loss of institutional memory because of rapid staff turnover or other reasons. • Leaders who do not want to share performance information in open meetings hinder dissemination of performance findings. • Ongoing communication during an evaluation is inhibited by the organization's dysfunctional information-sharing systems.

Overcoming Challenges

In theory, anxiety and resistance should be lessened by the participatory, utilization-focused evaluation approach and mitigated by a focus on evaluation as dialogue and learning, rather than on judgment and accountability. Treating evaluation stakeholders respectfully, in a way that protects their dignity, will also help to lessen anxiety.

Step 2 Define the Communication Purpose

Once the challenges are identified, the next step is to define the purpose of the communication. How can you best meet stakeholder and other audience needs? First, identify stakeholder and audience needs and then match those needs with the appropriate communication and reporting strategies. Think about why you are communicating with the stakeholders and what you want to communicate. Review the evaluation purpose from the scope of work and consider the expectations that stakeholders express. Then, answer the questions below for each individual or group of stakeholders.

Questions About Stakeholders/Audiences	Answers
1. Do they need to be informed about evaluation decisions? If so, when and for what reason?	☐ To build awareness ☐ To gain support ☐ To show respect
2. Do they need to review interim or final findings? If so, when and for what reason?	☐ To review evaluation progress ☐ To learn and improve ☐ To promote dialogue and understanding among partners
3. Do they need to be involved in decision making? If so, when and for what reason?	☐ To assess the likelihood of future support ☐ To help develop recommendations ☐ To ensure use of the recommendations

Step 3 Select Communication Methods

Now that you have identified the audience needs, the next step is to select the best communication methods. Start by asking the following questions of each individual or group:

Questions for Stakeholders/Audiences	Answers
1. What is their familiarity with the program or the project being evaluated?	☐ Very familiar ☐ Somewhat familiar ☐ Not at all familiar
2. What is their experiences using evaluation findings?	☐ Long experience ☐ Some experience ☐ No experience
3. What is their reading ability?	☐ High ☐ Mid ☐ Low or non-reader (illiterate)
4. What language(s) do they use to communicate?	☐ ____________________ for writing ☐ ____________________ for reading
5. How accessible are they?	☐ Easily ☐ With some effort ☐ Isolated

(Adapted from Torres et al. 2005.)

For example, if the group has a high degree of literacy, written communication can be used. If the audience is largely illiterate, however, visual and oral communications will be better communication methods.

Step 4 Develop a communication and reporting strategy

With this assessment of stakeholder characteristics and knowledge of information needs, the next step is to develop a responsive communicating and reporting strategy. The strategy should describe who, what, when, and how to communicate. Use the example in table 2, below, to plan the strategy.

Table 2: Sample Planning Communication and Reporting Strategy Worksheet

Stakeholder and audience group or individual and summary of characteristics and purpose	What information (content) do they need?	What format is best for them?	When do they need it?	Who will prepare and deliver the information?	What are the costs?
Program donor, located in Washington, D.C., needs to review final evaluation report for decision making about future funding	Findings and recommendations	Final evaluation report with executive summary Debriefing meeting to be held at donor offices to present findings, recommendations, and intended actions	June 15th June 30th	Evaluation team to prepare written reports; PVO headquarters staff to prepare debriefing meeting agenda and presentation	Printing costs for 25 copies of written report; travel costs of staff to Washington, D.C., for meeting; and time to prepare and debrief

Reporting Menu of Options

A final written report is an important way to communicate and report on an evaluation, and the full evaluation report should be distributed to program staff, partners, government officials, and donor agencies, but other formats should also be considered for other audiences. Based on stakeholder characteristics and information needs, and funding options, consider other formats such as brochures, debriefings, panel presentations, print and broadcast media, video presentations, drama, poster sessions, working sessions, or electronic communications.

Table 3, below, presents a wide range of reporting options and descriptions of each option. Use table 3 to choose formats that fulfill the evaluation purposes and meet the needs of different stakeholders and dissemination audiences (Patton 1997).

Table 3: Evaluation Reporting Menu

Written Reporting	Verbal Presentations	Creative Reporting	Critical Reflection Events	Reporting Using Electronic Formats
• Final evaluation report • Executive summary • Interim or progress reports • Human interest, success and learning stories • Short communications such as newsletters, brochures, memos, e-mails, postcards • News media communications (print media)	• Debriefing meetings • Panel presentations • Broadcast media (radio or television) • Informal communication	• Video presentation • Dramas or role-plays • Poster sessions • Writeshops	• After-action Reviews • Working sessions	• Website communications • Synchronous electronic communications such as chat rooms, teleconferences, video and web conferences • Podcasts

Sources: Patton 1997; Torres et al 2005.

WRITTEN REPORTING

The final evaluation report presents the full view of the evaluation. It serves as the basis for the executive summary, oral presentations, and other reporting formats, and is an important resource for the program archives. Many program donors have a prescribed format for required reports; follow this format carefully. Usually, at least one draft evaluation report is circulated to stakeholders for comments and additional insights prior to the final report production.

An executive summary is a short version—usually one to four pages—of the final evaluation report, containing condensed versions of the major sections. Placed at the beginning of the final evaluation report, it communicates essential information accurately and concisely. Executive summaries are typically written for busy decision-makers and enable readers to get vital information about the evaluation without having to read the entire report. The executive summary may be disseminated separately from the full report and should be understandable as a stand-alone document.

Condensing 50 pages of a final report into a one-page summary can take considerable time. Use the tips in the box below to make this job easier.

> "I'm sorry that the letter I have written you is so long. I did not have time to write a short one."
>
> George Bernard Shaw

Tips for Writing an Executive Summary

- *Read the original document from beginning to end*
- *Start the executive summary with conclusions and recommendations*
- *Underline all key ideas, significant statements, and vital recommendations*
- *Edit the underlined information*
- *Rewrite the underlined information*
- *Edit the rewritten version by eliminating unnecessary words and phrases*
- *Check the edited version against the original document to ensure that the essential information is captured, including the project successes and challenges*
- *Ensure that only information from the original report is included*

Interim or progress reports present the preliminary, or initial, draft evaluation findings. Interim reports are scheduled according to specific decision-making needs of evaluation stakeholders. While interim reports can be critical to making an evaluation more useful, they can also cause unnecessary difficulties if interpreted incorrectly. To avoid this problem, begin interim reports by stating the following:

- Which data collection activities are being reported on and which are not
- When the final evaluation results will be available
- Any cautions for readers in interpreting the findings (Torres et al. 2005).

Human interest, success, and learning stories are different ways to communicate evaluation results to a specific audience. Donors are increasingly interested in using short narratives or stories that put a human face on M&E data.

- **Human interest stories** document the experiences of individuals affected by PVO projects and help to personalize the successes and challenges of PVO work.
- **Success stories** are descriptions of "when, what, where, how, and why" a project succeeded in achieving its objectives.
- **Learning stories** narrate cases of unanticipated project difficulties or negative impacts, how these were identified and overcome, and what was learned that might be helpful in the future to others (De Ruiter and Aker 2008; Long et al. 2006). These stories can be included in the final report or in an appendix.

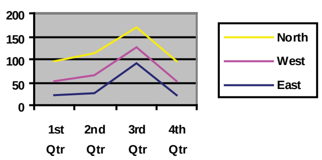
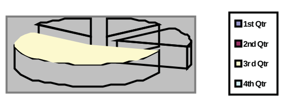
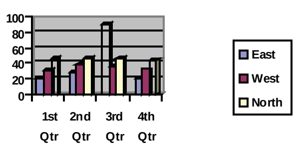
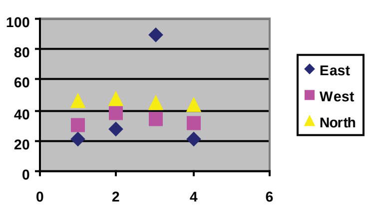
For more information on how to write these stories, consult *Human Interest Stories: Guidelines* and *Tools for Effective Report Writing* (De Ruiter and Aker 2008) and *Success and Learning Story Package: Guidelines and Tools for Writing Effective Project Impact Reports* (Long et al. 2006); and *Writing Human Interest Stories for M&E* (Hagens 2008).

Short communications—newsletters, bulletins, briefs, and brochures—serve to highlight evaluation information, help to generate interest in the full evaluation findings, and serve an organization's public relations purposes. Their format can invite feedback, provide updates, report on upcoming evaluation events, or present preliminary or final findings. However, the short formats may be less useful if the evaluation is primarily qualitative, and when a full description of the evaluation context is critical to interpreting results (Torres et al. 2005). These types of communication use photos, graphs, color, and formatting to be attractive and eye-catching to the reader.

News media communications are another method for disseminating evaluation results. The project can send the evaluation report to the news media, send them press releases on the report findings, or encourage interviews of evaluation team members or evaluation stakeholders (Torres et al. 2005). The news media provides access to a larger audience, such as the general public or a specific professional group.

Use of media can also be tricky—there are no guarantees of what the reporter will write. For this reason, it is important to promote a clear message to the media, to brief the evaluators and stakeholders on the main points to speak on, and to contact the media only after other key stakeholders have reviewed the evaluation findings—no one likes to be surprised by reading about their program in the press.

Table 4: Overview of Graphics

Graphic Types	Information Communicated	Tips
Line Graph  	• Shows trends over time, movements, distributions, and cycles	• Label lines rather than using a legend • Try to use three lines at most • Use different colors or different textures if in black and white
Pie Chart  	• Shows parts of a whole	• Use six or fewer slices • Arrange slices from largest or most important from "12 O'Clock" • Use bright contrasting colors • Label pie slices
Bar Chart/Cluster Bar Chart  	• Compares differences between similar information (for example, percent distribution) • Cluster bar chart compares several items	• Use as few bars as possible • Use color or texture to emphasize data aspects • Place numbers showing bar values at top or inside the bar
Other Charts (flow, time series, scatterplot)  	• Show processes, elements, roles, or parts of a larger entity	• Use white space effectively • Convey the message in the title • Add the data source

<table>
<tr>
<td>Tables
<table><tr><th></th><th>Title1</th><th>Title2</th><th>Title3</th><th>Title4</th></tr><tr><td>1</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>2</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>3</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>4</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>5</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr></table></td>
<td>• Describe, tabulate, show relationships and compare
• Conveniently present large quantity of data</td>
<td>• Assign each table an Arabic numeral
• Place the title immediately above the table
• Clearly label rows and columns
• Show the data source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations (diagrams, maps or drawings)
</td>
<td>• Effectively convey messages or ideas that are difficult to express in words
• Show organizational structures, demonstrate flows
• Show direction
• Use flow charts to show issues
• Use map charts to show results comparable across geographic regions or countries</td>
<td>• Keep it simple—if a lot of explanation is needed, use text instead
• Use illustrations creatively as they help to communicate
• Include a legend to define any symbols used
• Use white space</td>
</tr>
</table>

Sources: Torres et al 2005; Kusek and Rist 2004; Tufte 1989.

VERBAL PRESENTATIONS

Oral or verbal presentations communicate evaluation progress and findings to stakeholders and other audiences. With this method, audiences can ask questions and communication is more interactive. Oral presentations with facilitated discussions can lead to dialogue among stakeholders and commitment to actions (see critical reflection, below) (Torres et al. 2005).

Debriefing meetings typically begin with a brief presentation, followed by discussion of key findings or other issues. Ongoing debriefing meetings may be held to communicate evaluation progress to program managers. A final debriefing meeting can be held with stakeholders to share and discuss key findings and recommendations from the final evaluation report.

Panel presentations can be used to bring together evaluation stakeholders to present key evaluation findings and recommendations or other evaluation components. Usually composed of three to four panelists, each individual makes a short presentation on some aspect of the evaluation. A moderator then facilitates discussion among panelists and between panelists and the audience (Kusek and Rist 2004).

Broadcast media can be useful when evaluation findings need to be disseminated beyond the primary stakeholders. Radio is a very effective way to disseminate information. Community radio stations—with a mandate for development—provide low-cost production and often have local language translation capacity.

CREATIVE REPORTING

Consider using creative but less-traditional communication formats to report on evaluation findings. These formats can be crucial when reporting information to illiterate stakeholders, as they show respect for local communication traditions such as oral history. Information on how to use video presentations, dramas or role plays, roster sessions, writeshops, critical reflection events, after action reviews, and working sessions are presented below.

Video presentations bring the combined power of visual imagery, motion, and sound. Videos can be shot in digital formats, edited on computers, and disseminated in CD-ROM or digital videodisk (DVD) formats. Although it is advantageous to have a presenter, videos can be distributed and viewed by wide numbers of audiences. Videos are especially useful to do the following (Torres et al. 2005):

- Present qualitative evaluation findings, such as interviews
- Document evaluation processes
- Present evaluation findings about new programs
- Shares evaluation findings with illiterate groups

Video Tips

- *Establish the video purpose and criteria for selecting program events to be filmed.*
- *Obtain permission from program participants before videotaping.*
- *Ensure the videos for stand-alone pieces include sufficient background information about the program and the evaluation.*
- *Consider the intended audience when determining length; shorter videos (20–30 minutes) have a better chance of being included in meeting agendas.*

Dramas or role plays are powerful ways to portray evaluation findings and to illustrate potential applications of recommendations. Torres (2005) describes three theatrical formats where evaluation findings are presented and used to spark dialogue.

1. **Traditional sketches** are developed from evaluation data—especially interviews and focus groups—and may also portray evaluation findings. Actors perform a sketch and then exit. The sketch is followed by a facilitator-guided discussion with audience members.

2. **Interactive sketches** are provocative scenarios that engage audience members in thinking and talking about evaluation issues and findings. Following an interactive sketch, the audience discusses their reactions with the actors, who stay in character, again guided by a facilitator who also provides evaluation data. After the facilitated discussions, actors repeat the sketch, changing it according to the audience discussion outcomes.

3. **Forum theater workshops** use role playing. A facilitator presents evaluation findings; participants can be both actors and audience members. Participants create mini-scenes based on evaluation findings and their own experiences. These are dynamic scenarios; participants can move in and out of acting roles, and actors can change strategies mid-scene. A facilitator then elicits questions and leads discussions about each mini-scene.

Drama followed by a sequence of open questions—*What did you see happening here? Why does it happen? How does it happen in our situation? What can we do about it?*—is a powerful way to communicate evaluation findings, especially those on sensitive topics to groups. For example, role plays are used in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa to communicate findings on stigma related to HIV/AIDS.

Poster sessions provide quick, visual, and easily read information to audiences with little or no knowledge about a program or organization. An informative display is combined with a verbal presentation. Posters typically include photographs, diagrams, graphs, tables, charts, drawings, and text on poster-size boards. Poster sessions are often used at large, multi-session conferences to display condensed evaluation information. Audience members see the displays and can stop be for brief discussion. Evaluators can be present at poster sessions to communicate key ideas and issues and elicit questions, but poster sessions can also be set up to as stand-alone events (Torres et al. 2005).

Poster Session Tips

- *Audiences should be able to read a poster from a distance.*
- *Posters should convey main ideas clearly and concisely, using report headings with bulleted points.*
- *Posters should include visuals and graphics and attract attention through color.*
- *Consider juxtaposing pictures of participants next to direct quotes from interviews.*
- *When making posters, use lined flip chart paper and extra broad markers to write clearly.*

Source: Torres et al 2005.

Writeshops are an innovative technique that can involve even low-literate project stakeholders in report writing. The writeshops help program participants to be active creators of information, not just passive providers of information. Writeshops consist of two- or three-day workshops where program participants, PVO staff, and artists work together. PVO staff interview participants and elicit stories that highlight evaluation findings, best practices, or lessons learned. These stories are transcribed and edited. Artists prepare illustrations as per participant instructions. Participants and the PVO facilitators review the drafts reviewed by for content, language, and appropriateness prior to their publication.

CRITICAL REFLECTION EVENTS

Critical reflection events help to validate information coming from the evaluation, analyze findings, and then use this knowledge to inform decision making. Critical reflection can occur throughout the evaluation process, for example, during weekly review meetings or at the end, during a lessons-learned workshop.

Critical reflection involves individuals or groups who are invited to interpret and analyze information—such as evaluation findings—in a respectful, open atmosphere. Dialogue is promoted; this exchange of ideas and opinions produces new learning and raises awareness of underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions.

Sequenced open questions are used in critical reflection to encourage people to discuss, reflect, and analyze information (see text box, above). Authentic dialogue also requires that a facilitator or group establish an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration among evaluators and stakeholders. Critical reflection is enhanced when people:

- Ask pertinent questions and display curiosity
- Admit what they do not know
- Uncover and examine beliefs, assumptions, and opinions against facts, evidence, and proof
- Listen carefully to others
- Adjust opinions when new facts are found
- Examine successes and problems closely and deeply

After action reviews are a sequence of reflective activities that can be used during an evaluation to process an evaluation team's initial findings or to review progress or obstacles in the evaluation process. As with other critical reflection events, after action reviews work best in a safe environment where people can express their ideas openly; a facilitator poses open questions and leads the group discussions. After action reviews are conducted while memories are still fresh. The facilitator asks a series of sequenced questions as follows and records key points made by the group, such as:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What did we learn?
- What were successes or shortfalls?
- What should we do to sustain successes or improve upon shortfalls?

Working sessions with evaluation stakeholders are the hallmark of a collaborative participatory evaluation and can be conducted at any time during the evaluation (Torres et al. 2005). Effective working sessions apply adult learning principles, such as those used for workshops. Guidance for conducting productive working sessions is described in the box, below.

Guidelines to Planning and Facilitating an Effective Working Session

- *Clearly define the session purpose*
- *Prepare an agenda*
- *Choose appropriate procedures—such as brainstorming and small group tasks—and prepare all necessary materials, such as flipcharts or whiteboards and markers to record ideas, handouts, and documents*
- *Set up the meeting room to promote exchange and discussion*
- *Choose a meeting time that is convenient to participants*
- *Share the agenda well in advance and review it at the start of the meeting*
- *Use short games to help participants to get to know each other*
- *Invite participants to set ground rules or norms for how everyone will work together*
- *Clarify roles such as who is facilitating, who is recording ideas, and so on*
- *Use facilitation techniques or hire a competent facilitator to paraphrase comments, synthesize and integrate ideas, encourage diverse viewpoints to surface, manage time, invite the group to refocus when necessary, and build consensus*
- *Balance dialogue with decision making*
- *Plan and articulate next steps*
- *At the end, ask for feedback and use this information to improve the next working session*

Source: Torres et al 2005.

REPORTING USING ELECTRONIC FORMATS

Web sites can be used to disseminate written evaluation reports and evaluation documents. Web sites may be hosted by a donor, a particular development community—relief, peacebuilding, public health, communications, and so on—a PVO consortia, a UN- or government-hosted working group, and/or a resource center. Possible Web postings include reports, video presentations, PowerPoint presentations, newsletters, meeting schedules, and press releases. In the peacebuilding community, a number of Web sites have begun to post evaluations of peacebuilding projects (Lederach et al. 2007).

Synchronous electronic communications, such as web communication systems and conferencing tools, can facilitate collaboration with stakeholders in different locations during all evaluation phases. Chat rooms, teleconferences, videoconferencing, live Web conferencing, virtual meetings, and podcasts are online events and tools that allow stakeholders who may be located across the globe to work together easily (Torres et al. 2005).

- **A chat room** is an area on the Internet where two or more people can have a typed conversation in real time; this method is ideal for routine conversations about data collection or evaluation procedures.

- **Teleconferences** can be arranged through communication service providers. A single number is given to participants to call; speaker phones are used to accommodate many people. Teleconferences are especially useful for discussing and getting feedback on evaluation documents that are distributed and reviewed by participants prior to the call.

- **Videoconferences** are meetings between people at different locations using a system of monitors, microphones, cameras, computer equipment, and other devices. Videoconferences can be used with evaluation stakeholders in place of face-to-face meeting. Note that reliable videoconferencing technology can be costly to use and that technical expertise and information technology professionals are needed to facilitate a successful videoconference.

- **Web conferences** are meetings between people at different locations done through an Internet connection that allows them to view the same document or presentation on computer monitors simultaneously, along with audio communication. Features of Web conferencing software vary and may include a chat room feature or video and/or audio communication. Web conferences can be used for planning, presenting information, soliciting input and reactions, and editing evaluation plans and reports. Web conferences can be arranged through companies specializing in the service or through the Internet.

- **Podcasts** are a series of digital media files that are distributed over the Internet for playback on portable media players (e.g., iPods) and computers. Podcasts enable evaluators to communicate and report information with stakeholders at any time. For example, if a stakeholder is unable to attend a final debriefing meeting, a meeting podcast allows him/her to download the podcast of the event. Although used infrequently at present, this electronic format holds much promise for the future.

DIFFERENT OPTIONS TO COMMUNICATE EVALUATION RESULTS

There are many options in evaluation communication and reporting, and often several techniques or formats are used or sequenced to promote greater dissemination of results. For example, evaluators may draft a written report with preliminary findings, and then hold a working meeting with key evaluation stakeholders to validate findings, followed by a radio program to disseminate the final results. Sequencing a series of communication formats in a skillful way can be very influential in communicating a written report's findings and recommendations (Torres et al. 2005).

See the full module for references and suggestions for further reading.

This edition of Short Cuts was produced in 2008. Please send your comments or feedback to: m&efeedback@crs.org.

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- www.crs.org/publications
- www.foodsecuritynetwork.org/icbtools.html
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