

Learning from Evaluation

By Olivier Serrat

Evaluation serves two main purposes: accountability and learning. Development agencies have tended to prioritize the first, and given responsibility for that to centralized units. But evaluation for learning is the area where observers find the greatest need today and tomorrow.

Redirecting Division-of-Labor Approaches

Because the range of types (not to mention levels) of learning is broad, organizations have, from the early days, followed a division-of-labor approach to ascribing responsibility for learning. Typically, responsibility is vested in a policy (or research) unit to allow managers to focus on decision making while other organizational constituents generate information and execute plans. Without doubt, this has encouraged compartmentalization of whatever learning is generated. What is more, since organizational constituents operate in different cultures to meet different priorities, each questions the value added by the arrangement. Table 1 redirects traditional approaches to evaluation by recognizing, with reference to nongovernment organizations, that different groups of stakeholders have different learning needs, not all of which can be met by centralized evaluation agencies. Table 2 develops this argument further by making clear that even decentralized learning is itself prone to several types of failure.



Increasing Value Added from Independent Operations Evaluation

In many development agencies, independent evaluation contributes to decision making throughout the project cycle and in the agencies as a whole, covering all aspects of sovereign and sovereign-guaranteed operations (public sector operations); nonsovereign operations; and the policies, strategies, practices, and procedures that govern them. The changing scope of evaluations and fast-rising expectations in relation to their use are welcome. However, the broad spectrum of independent evaluation demands that evaluation units strengthen and monitor the results focus of their operations. This means that the relevance and usefulness of evaluation findings to core audiences should be enhanced. Recurrent requests are that evaluation units should improve the timeliness of their evaluations, strengthen the operational bearing of the findings, and increase access to and exchange of the lessons. Minimum steps to increase

*Give me a fruitful error any time,
full of seeds, bursting with its own
corrections. You can keep your sterile
truth for yourself.*

—Vilfredo Pareto

value added from independent evaluation involve (i) adhering to strategic principles, (ii) sharpening evaluation strategies, (iii) distinguishing recommendation typologies, (iv) making recommendations better, (v) reporting evaluation findings, and (vi) tracking action on recommendations.¹ Here, performance management tools such as the balanced scorecard system might enable them to measure nonfinancial and financial results, covering soft but essential areas as client satisfaction, quality and product cycle times, effectiveness of new product development, and the building of organizational and staff skills.

Table 1: Learning in Nongovernment Organizations

Who Should Be Learning?	What Should They Be Learning?
Field Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in practice • Effective empowerment • Local-level collaboration with government and other nongovernment organizations • Gender dimensions of local development
Technical Specialists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good practice in their area of expertise • Ways of integrating with other disciplines • How to improve cost-effectiveness • How existing internal and external policies affect performance
Operational Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors make interventions and projects work well or badly, for example, funding conditions • How to be more cost-effective • How to coordinate internally and externally
Fund-Raisers and Development Educationalists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles and insights to be used in negotiation with professional donors • New messages to get across to private contributors • Examples of impact and what made things work or fail
Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How policy choices and strategies work out in practice • How to make external relationships more effective • How best to exert influence • What environmental factors have had unforeseen effects and must be taken into account
Governors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality and costs of donors • The degree of stakeholder satisfaction • Consistency between mission, strategy, and impact • Improving social standing and credibility of the organization

Source: Adapted from Fowler, A. 1997. *Striking a Balance: A Guide to Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organizations in International Development*. London: Earthscan.

¹ ADB. 2007. *Acting on Recommendations and Learning from Lessons in 2007*. Manila: ADB. Available: www.adb.org/documents/pers/rpe-oth-2007-15.asp

Table 2: Types of Learning Failure

Stage	Category
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failures of intelligence: not knowing enough at the early stages of project formulation, resulting in crucial aspects of the project context being ignored. Failures of decision making: drawing false conclusions or making wrong choices from the data that are available, and underestimating the importance of key pieces of information.
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failures of implementation: bad or inadequate management of one or more important aspects of the project. Failures of reaction: inability or unwillingness to modify the project in response to new information or changes in conditions that come to light as the project proceeds.
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failures of evaluation: not paying enough attention to the results. Failures of learning: not transferring the lessons into future plans and procedures.

Source: Adapted from Nolan, R. 2002. *Development Anthropology: Encounters in the Real World*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Even so, the problématique of independent evaluation is still more complex.² At the request of shareholders tasked with reporting to political leadership, taxpayers, and citizens, feedback from evaluation studies has often tended to support accountability (and hence provide for control), not serve as an important foundation block of a learning organization. Some now argue for a reinterpretation of the notion of accountability. Others cite lack of utility; the perverse, unintended consequences of evaluation for accountability, such as diversion of resources; emphasis on justification rather than improvement; distortion of program activities; incentive to lie, cheat, and distort; and misplaced accent on control.³ Table 3 suggests that the two basic objectives of evaluations—accountability and learning—are generally incompatible.

Table 3: Characteristics of Accountability and Lesson-Learning as Objectives of Evaluation Activity

Item	Accountability as the Objective	Lesson-Learning as the Objective
Basic Aim	The basic aim is to find out about the past.	The basic aim is to improve future performance.
Emphasis	Emphasis is on the degree of success or failure.	Emphasis is on the reasons for success or failure.
Favored by	Parliaments, treasuries, media, pressure groups	Development agencies, developing countries, research institutions, consultants
Selection of Topics	Topics are selected based on random samples.	Topics are selected for their potential lessons.
Status of Evaluation	Evaluation is an end product.	Evaluation is part of the project cycle.
Status of Evaluators	Evaluators should be impartial and independent.	Evaluators usually include staff members of the aid agency.
Importance of Data from Evaluations	Data are only one consideration.	Data are highly valued for the planning and appraising of new development activities.
Importance of Feedback	Feedback is relatively unimportant.	Feedback is vitally important.

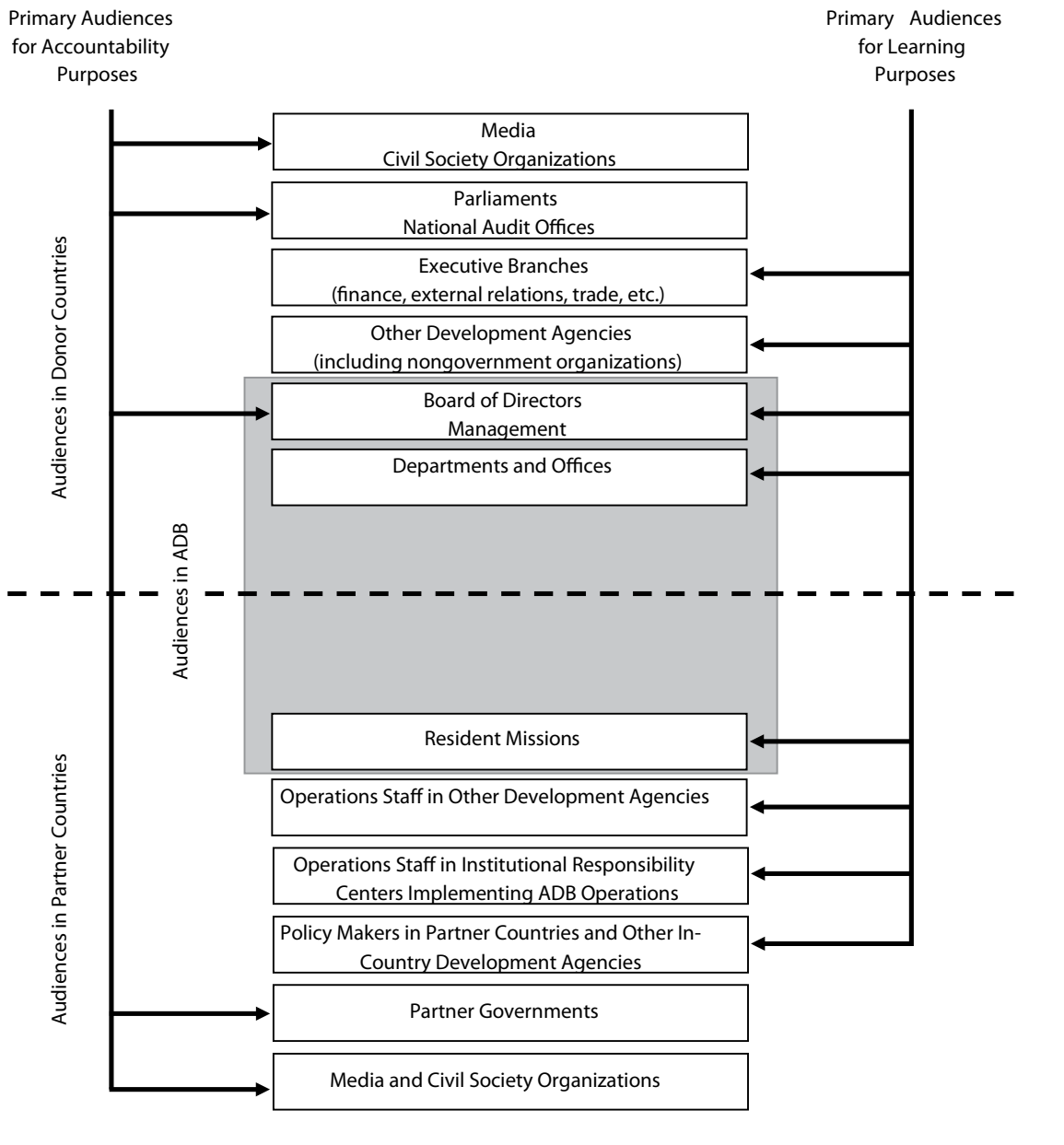
Source: Adapted from Cracknell, B. 2000. *Evaluating Development Aid: Issues, Problems, and Solutions*. East Sussex: Sage Publications.

The tension between the two functions of evaluation demands also that evaluation agencies distinguish primary audiences more clearly. Figure 1 illustrates how, barring some overlap, audiences for accountability and learning differ. Obviously, this has implications for the knowledge products and services that evaluation units should deploy to reach different target groups, including the dissemination tactics associated with each, and underlines the message that one approach cannot be expected to suit all audiences. Table 4 lists the key ingredients of the distinct reports that would have to be tailored for each. Naturally, several knowledge management tools mentioned earlier would be leveraged to quicken the learning cycle of practice, experience, synthesis and innovation, dissemination, and uptake with one-time, near-term, and continuous efforts.

² Serrat, O. 2008. *Increasing Value Added from Operations Evaluation*. Manila: ADB. Unpublished.

³ Lonsdale, J., B. Perrin, and M. Bemelmans-Videc, eds. 2007. *Making Accountability Work: Dilemmas for Evaluation and for Audit*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Figure 1: Target Audiences for Evaluation Feedback



ADB = Asian Development Bank.

Source: Adapted from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2001. *Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness No. 5. Evaluation Feedback for Effective Learning and Accountability*. Paris. Available: www.oecd.org/dataoecd/10/29/2667326.pdf

Table 4: Key Ingredients of Effective Reports

Evidence	Persuasive Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear purpose • Cohesive argument • Quality of evidence • Transparency of evidence underpinning policy recommendations (e.g., a single study or a synthesis of available evidence)
	Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear purpose • Cohesive argument • Quality of evidence • Transparency of evidence underpinning recommendations (e.g., a single study or a synthesis of available evidence)
Context	Audience Context Specificity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses the specific context (e.g., national, local) • Addresses the needs of target audience (e.g., social, economic policy)
	Actionable Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information linked to specific processes • Clear and feasible recommendations on steps to be taken
Engagement	Presentation of Evidence-Informed Opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of author's own views about the implications of findings • Clear identification of argument components that are opinion based
	Clear Language and Writing Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily understood by educated nonspecialists
	Appearance and Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visually engaging • Presentation of information through charts, graphs, and photographs

Source: Adapted from Jones, N., and C. Walsh. 2008. *Policy Briefs as a Communication Tool for Development Research*. Overseas Development Institute Background Note. May. Available: www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/0805-policy-briefs-as-a-communication-tool.pdf

This is not to say that evaluation units face an either-or situation. Both accountability and learning are important goals for evaluation feedback. One challenge is to make accountability accountable. In essence, evaluation units are placing increased emphasis on results orientation while maintaining traditional checks on use of inputs and compliance with procedures. Lack of clarity on why evaluations for accountability are carried out, and what purpose they are expected to serve, contributes to their frequent lack of utility. Moreover, if evaluations for accountability add only limited value, resources devoted to documenting accountability can have a negative effect, perversely enough. However, evaluation for learning is the area where observers find the greatest need today and tomorrow, and evaluation units should be retooled to meet it. Table 5 suggests how work programs for evaluation might be reinterpreted to emphasize organizational learning.

Table 5: Programming Work for Organizational Learning

Organizational Level	Strategic Driver^a	Reporting Mechanism	Content/Focus	Responsibility	Primary User and Uses	Timing
Corporate						
Policy						
Strategy						
Operations						

^a The strategic drivers might be (i) developing evaluation capacity, (ii) informing corporate risk assessments by offices and departments, (iii) conducting evaluations in anticipation of known upcoming reviews, (iv) monitoring and evaluating performance, (v) critiquing conventional wisdom about development practice, and (vi) responding to requests from offices and departments.

Source: ADB. 2007. *Acting on Recommendations and Learning from Lessons in 2007*. Manila: ADB. Available: www.adb.org/documents/pers/rpe-oth-2007-15.asp

Evaluation capacity development promises much to the learning organization, and should be an activity in which centralized evaluation units have a comparative advantage. Capacity is the ability of people, organizations, and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully; and capacity to undertake effective monitoring and evaluation is a determining factor of aid effectiveness. Evaluation capacity development is the process of

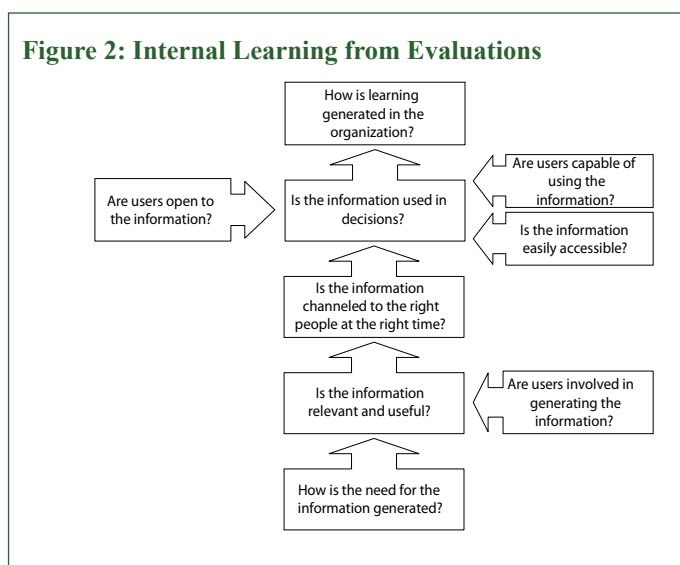
reinforcing or establishing the skills, resources, structures, and commitment to conduct and use monitoring and evaluation over time. Many key decisions must be made when starting to develop evaluation capacity internally in a strategic way.⁴ Among the most important are

- **Architecture.** Locating and structuring evaluation functions and their coordination.
- **Strengthening evaluation demand.** Ensuring that there is an effective and well-managed demand for evaluations.
- **Strengthening evaluation supply.** Making certain that the skills and competencies are in place with appropriate organizational support.
- **Institutionalizing evaluations.** Building evaluation into policy-making systems.

Why development agencies should want to develop in-house, self-evaluation capacity is patently clear. Stronger evaluation capacity will help them

- Develop as a learning organization.
- Take ownership of their visions for poverty reduction, if the evaluation vision is aligned with that.
- Profit more effectively from formal evaluations.
- Make self-evaluations an important part of their activities.
- Focus quality improvement efforts.
- Increase the benefits and decrease the costs associated with their operations.
- Augment their ability to change programming midstream and adapt in a dynamic, unpredictable environment.
- Build evaluation equity, if they are then better able to conduct more of their own self-evaluation, instead of hiring them out.
- Shorten the learning cycle.

Figure 2 poses key questions concerning how an organization may learn from evaluation, combining the two elements of learning by involvement and learning by communication. It provides the context within which to visualize continuing efforts to increase value added from independent evaluation, and underscores the role in internal evaluation capacity development. It also makes a strong case for more research into how development agencies learn how to learn.



Source: Adapted from Scanteam International. 1993. *Internal Learning from Evaluations and Reviews. Report No. 193.* Oslo: Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁴ A discussion of the benefits of external evaluation capacity development is in Serrat, O. 2008. *Increasing Value Added from Operations Evaluation.* Manila: ADB. Unpublished.

Further Reading

ADB. 2007. *Acting on Recommendations and Learning from Lessons in 2007*. Manila: ADB. Available: www.adb.org/documents/pers/rpe-oth-2007-15.asp

———. 2009. *Learning for Change in ADB*. Manila: ADB. Available: www.adb.org/documents/books/learning-for-change/default.asp

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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