

# Evaluating Your Project

Practice Brief Issue 1

## The Key Message

Success predominantly depends on how much effort you are willing and able to put into planning your project and its evaluation.

## Why bother with evaluations?

**Accountability** – Health professionals often talk about how successful a project has been. Without conducting an evaluation these types of statements are meaningless.

**Improvement** – Evaluations also help us to learn:

- What worked and what didn't?
- How can I repeat the successes and minimise the mistakes?

**Knowledge** – Lastly, and perhaps for some most importantly, evaluations contribute to our evidence base around health practices and promotion, as well as enabling us to prove to our funding bodies and other interested parties that we did what we said we were going to do.

## Step One: Designing the Evaluation

Is your project ready for evaluation? Evaluations don't need to be complicated or overly time consuming, however, it is important to clearly define <sup>[1]</sup>:

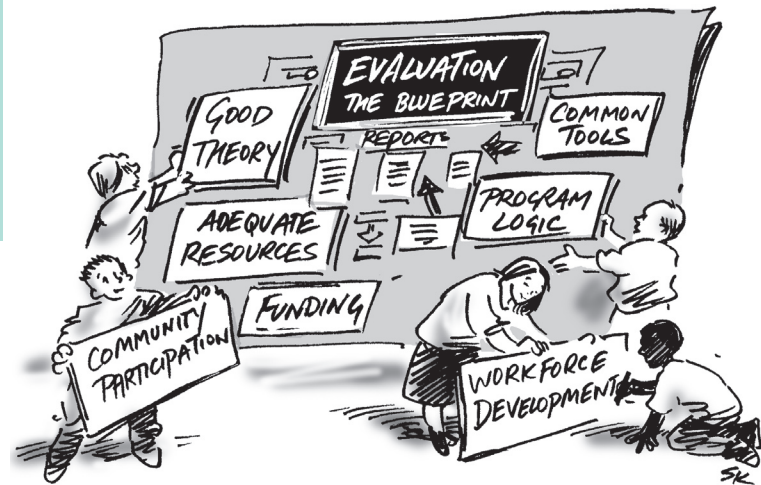
- the health issue or problem being addressed,
- how this project will address the issue or problem,
- the target groups or communities; and
- the primary objective/s or purpose.

In particular, make sure your objectives are SMART or:

- **S** pecific
- **M** easurable
- **A** chievable
- **R** elevant; and
- **T** ime bound.

Do not develop project objectives that are over ambitious or too vague <sup>[2]</sup>. General statements of intent <sup>[3]</sup> such as 'increasing people's knowledge about smoking' or 'building community networks' should be avoided. Examples of SMART objectives could include:

- To increase the number of children who participate in after school sports activities by the end of summer.
- To provide information on the benefits of breastfeeding to all mothers in our community with children under 6 months of age by the end of the year.



## Steps to Evaluation

1. Understand what your project is trying to achieve
2. Develop an evaluation plan
3. Select the potential participants
4. Collect data/information
5. Analyse and interpret the data/information
6. Report on and use your findings

**Always carefully plan your evaluation.**

## Step Two: Designing the Evaluation

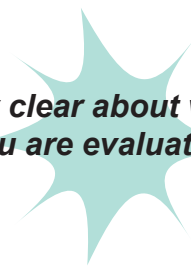
Ideally, project evaluations should be designed at the very beginning of the project so that information or data can be automatically collected along the way. However, if this is not possible, don't despair - you may just need to put a little bit more effort into designing the evaluation.

### Who is the evaluation for?

First, you need to consider the types of people that will be using your evaluation. Knowing their expectations before you start the evaluation will help ensure that the final report meets their specific needs. One very important member of this audience is YOU! Don't forget that any evaluation can also help to improve the services that you provide by identifying what works and also what may need to change in the future.

At a minimum, your evaluation findings need to be: [4, p. 53]:

- reliable, accurate and of reasonable quality,
- easy to understand,
- relevant,
- not too critical; and above all else
- useful.



**Be very clear about what it is you are evaluating.**

### What is being evaluated?

Depending on the needs your audience/s, you can choose to evaluate one or several aspects of your project. Be very clear about what it is you are evaluating [5, 6].

- **Process Evaluations** – assess the processes involved in organising and/or implementing the project. The focus here is on evaluating organisational and project capabilities rather than results.
- **Impact Evaluations** – assess short term objectives which suggest that your larger goals are being achieved. Impact evaluations are much easier to measure because they consider benefits in terms of changes in beliefs and attitudes, skills, behaviour and/or policies, structures and systems.
- **Outcome Evaluations** – assess how effective you have been in meeting big picture goals. The difficulties associated with outcome evaluations include:
  - attributing change to any one particular project,
  - long periods between the project and being able to see change; and
  - finding reliable and valid ways of gathering this type of information.

It is possible to choose one particular type of evaluation to suggest or infer likely outcomes. For example, projects which are well organised and implemented will often lead to successful short term impacts, which eventually result in the desired longer term outcomes. However, because health projects are often complex, involving a number of activities and/or partners it may be necessary to develop an evaluation portfolio which includes, for example, a process as well as impact evaluation.

## Step Three: Selecting Potential Participants

Whether you are conducting an outcome, impact and/or process evaluation, information or data about a defined group or population need to be collected. If you are dealing with a small population it may be possible to obtain the data from each and every individual. However, when the potential population base is large, you may only be able to obtain data from a few people or sample of the total population [7-9].

Purposeful sampling from your population is not about ensuring equal numbers of males and females or age groups, but instead is concerned with whether your sample is appropriate. When you intend to interview a small number of people, the most important consideration may be to only include individuals who are best able to provide the information you require. Conversely, when surveying a larger population you may be more concerned about making sure the mix of people or participants in your sample is similar to that found in your total population. Things to consider in this case might be the mix of [10]:

- genders,
- ages,
- ethnic groups,
- educational levels; and/or
- social status etc.



**Try testing or piloting your data collection method on colleagues before using it.**

## Step Four: Collecting the Data

There are three important questions that need to be answered prior to choosing a data collection method or methods and designing the data collection tools <sup>[11]</sup>.

1. What do you need to find out?
2. What is the best way of doing this?
3. Who should collect the data?

The answers to these questions will depend on the participants you hope to involve. You may wish to think about designing a data collection tool which will consider their particular:

- cultural beliefs
- literacy levels
- individual preferences

In order to be sure that your chosen method of collecting data is right for your particular project evaluation, you could test or pilot the tool prior to use. Piloting your data collection tool will help to ensure that it collects the information you need, and at the same time that participants won't be offended by or feel uncomfortable with the process <sup>[12]</sup>.

Some of the most common ways of collecting data include:

**Surveys and Questionnaires** – can be used to obtain a broad understanding from a relatively large population. Questionnaires can be administered via mail, telephone, email or face to face and can comprise of forced choice and/or open ended questions with spaces for short replies. Careful attention must be given to the construction of questionnaires to ensure that they are appropriate and that the participants understand and are able to answer the questions that are being asked <sup>[13]</sup>.

**Interviews** – are more time consuming but also more useful for gathering in-depth information. They are best conducted by a trained researcher face to face or via a telephone and therefore are often time consuming and costly [6]. Because typically only a smaller number of individuals are involved it is important to choose your participants wisely according to whether they are in a position to provide you with the information you require. In addition, the questions that you ask need to be developed well in advance, considering the particular beliefs, preferences and abilities of the participants <sup>[15]</sup>.

**Focus Groups** – are also useful for gathering in-depth information, which may be further enriched by the sharing of ideas and thoughts within a group. Similar to interviews, the limitations include the cost of getting a group of people together and the need to employ a trained facilitator who is able to effectively manage group interactions. In order to obtain the information you require, careful consideration must also be given to the selection of participants and the types of questions that are asked <sup>[11, 13]</sup>.

**Observations** – The primary difference between this and many of the other data collection methods is that there is often limited intentional interaction between the participants and the data collector. Instead, the aim is to systematically observe changes to people and/or their environment. Observational data collection methods can also record aspects of activities and events such as <sup>[11, 14]</sup>:

- The setting
- The people taking part
- The content
- The frequency and duration

**Diaries and Logs** – are used to record the processes and accomplishments of an entire project or a particular activity within a project <sup>[10]</sup>. They can also be useful for tracking various decision making processes. In addition, activity logs are often used to record statistical data such as the number of people at an event or the level of participation in particular activities.

***You can use one or several data collection methods at the same time.***

## Step Five: Analysing and Interpreting the Data

Analysis and interpretation has been likened to 'questioning' your data. The particular questions you might be interested in asking will depend upon the type of evaluation you have undertaken and the data you have collected. The process generally involves the following three steps <sup>[15, 16]</sup>:

1. Preparing your data so that it is all together and easy to read.
2. Analysing your data in order to develop a general sense of what it is telling you.
3. Interpreting your data which involves reflecting upon the analysis and presenting an understanding which integrates the mass of information that has been collected.

While using a combination of data collection methods may mean you need to go through this process several times, the benefit is that you can cross check the findings from various sources. There is, however, always the potential that the findings from different sources may differ <sup>[6]</sup>. Nevertheless, this in itself is interesting and worth investigating.

## Step Six: Reporting on and Using Your Findings

This brings us back to the very beginning when we suggested that your evaluation could be used to:

- establish the differences your project has made;
- ensure that successes are repeated and the mistakes are not; and
- demonstrate to funding bodies that your project was worthwhile.

Findings of your evaluation could also be used to support a learning environment by:

- providing a focus for group reflection,
- empower the group to move forward,
- articulating some of the unsaid knowledge which is often forgotten; and
- documenting the process for new staff.

Disseminating your findings to the wider primary health care community ensures that others can learn from your evaluation. Gain a wider audience by:

- promoting your work in SACHRU's next newsletter - Email: [sachru@flinders.edu.au](mailto:sachru@flinders.edu.au) ,
- notifying other professional organisations ,
- obtaining an ISBN so that libraries can distribute your report - <http://www.thorpe.com.au/isbn/> ; or
- submitting an abstract or full text version of your report to Google Scholar <http://scholar.google.com.au/intl/en/scholar/about.html>

## Free Online Resources

If you would like more information about evaluation you can obtain links to free online resources by visiting our Policy and Practice Briefs website <http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/SACHRU/briefs/>

## References

A full reference list can be obtained from visiting our website at <http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/SACHRU/briefs/> However, the following texts may prove especially useful.

- Patton, Michael Q (2002). Qualitative research and evaluation methods, SAGE, Thousand Oaks.
- Weiss, Carol H (1998). Evaluation: methods for studying programs and policies, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River.
- Pawson, Ray and Tilley, Mick (1997). Realistic Evaluation, SAGE, Thousand Oaks.

***Never let your hard work go to waste!!!***

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