Program Evaluation: Definitions and Uses

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What is Program Evaluation?

- A systematic assessment of how well a program is working, and why

- Applied research using objective measures and analysis to answer questions about performance

- Note: "Program" can be any activity, project, function, or policy that has an identifiable purpose or set of objectives

Relationship to Performance Measurement

☐ Performance measurement – Ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments and progress towards goals

☐ Program evaluations – Individual systematic studies that complement performance monitoring by exploring performance in more depth to inform program and policy decisions

Why conduct evaluations?

Provide feedback for:

- ☐ Program improvement – Answer questions about results and the processes that managers directly control to achieve results

- ☐ External accountability – Document efficiency, effectiveness, and value added to society
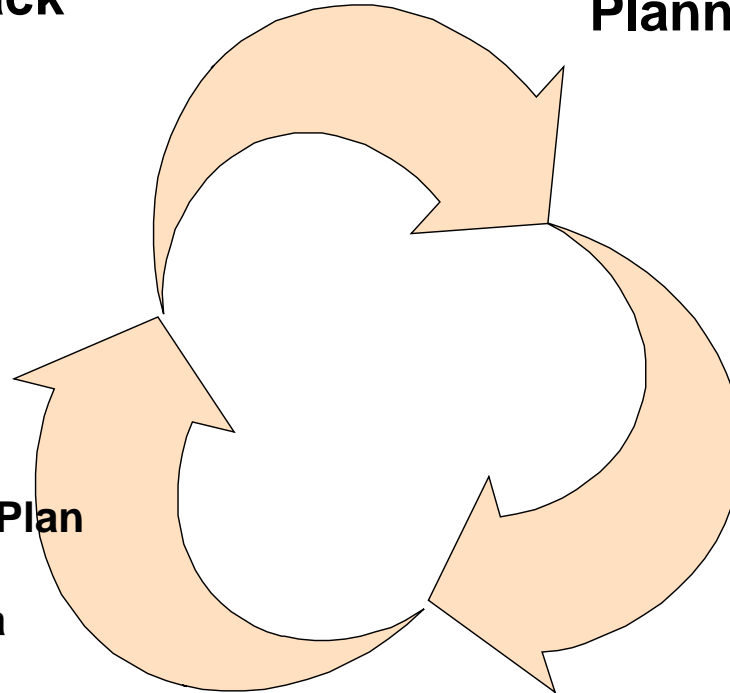
Evaluation / Management Cycle

Evaluation Feedback

- Feedback Evaluation Findings to Managers

- Refine Program

Implementation

- Actualize the Program Plan

- Collect Evaluation Data

- Analyze Data

Planning/Decision Making

- Identify Needs, Problems, Solutions, Refinements

- Conceptualize Program

- Formulate Evaluation Questions and Design
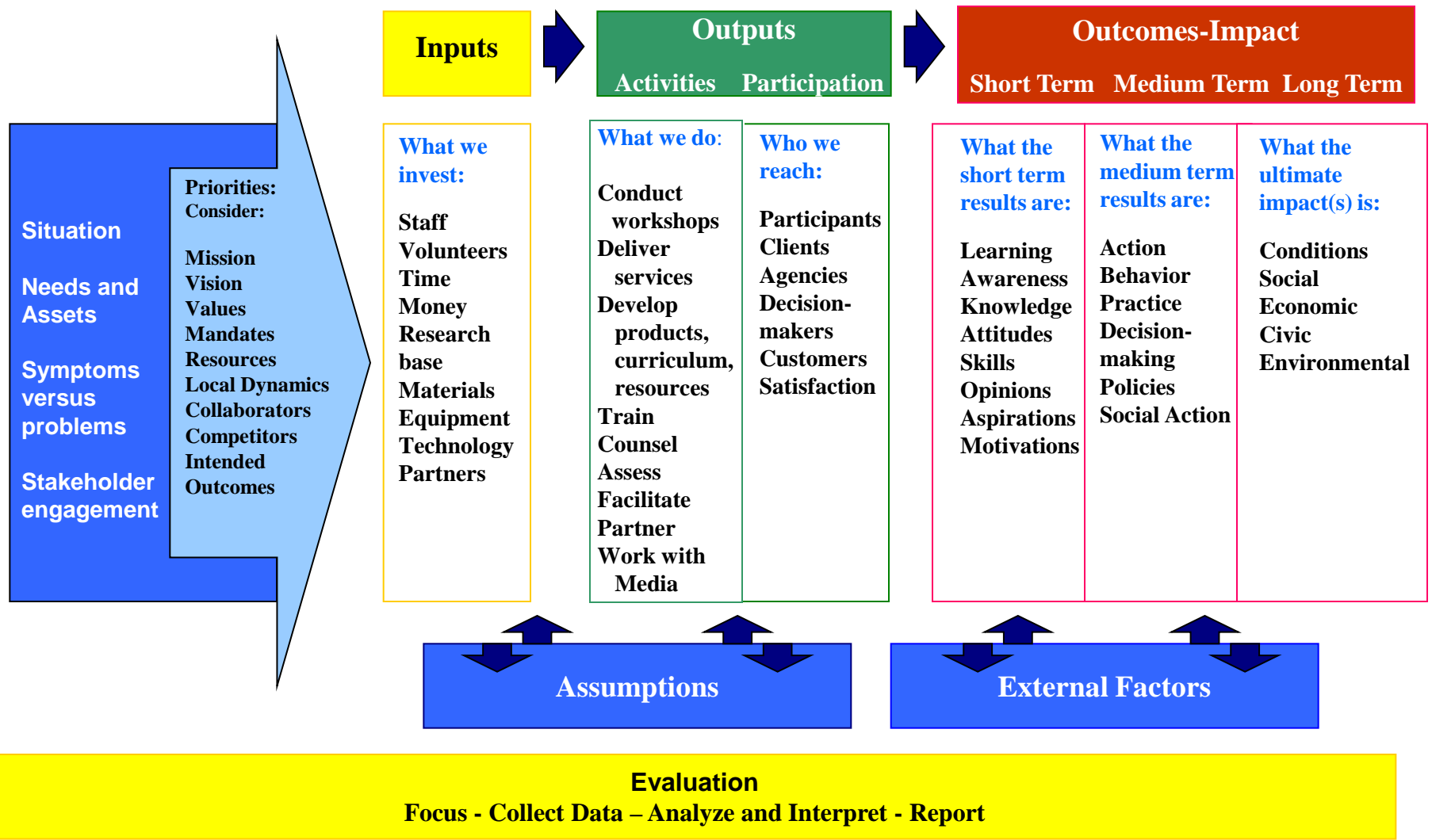
What steps do evaluators use?

1. Conceptualize the program
2. Develop relevant and useful evaluation questions
3. Select appropriate evaluation approaches for each evaluation question
4. Collect data to answer evaluation questions
5. Analyze the data and draw conclusions
6. Communicate results and recommendations

Step 1. Conceptualize the program – using a program logic model

- ☐ Illustrate the program's strategy for achieving its goals
- ☐ Tell the program's story of what is supposed to happen
- ☐ Reflect stakeholders' expectations
- ☐ Identify key features and causal relationships

Generic Logic Model Worksheet

Inputs

Outputs

Activities   Participation

Outcomes-Impact

Short Term   Medium Term   Long Term

Situation

Needs and Assets

Symptoms versus problems

Stakeholder engagement

Priorities:
Consider:

Mission
Vision
Values
Mandates
Resources
Local Dynamics
Collaborators
Competitors
Intended
Outcomes

What we invest:

Staff
Volunteers
Time
Money
Research base
Materials
Equipment
Technology
Partners

What we do:

Conduct workshops
Deliver services
Develop products, curriculum, resources
Train
Counsel
Assess
Facilitate
Partner
Work with Media

Who we reach:

Participants
Clients
Agencies
Decision-makers
Customers
Satisfaction

What the short term results are:

Learning
Awareness
Knowledge
Attitudes
Skills
Opinions
Aspirations
Motivations

What the medium term results are:

Action
Behavior
Practice
Decision-making
Policies
Social Action

What the ultimate impact(s) is:

Conditions
Social
Economic
Civic
Environmental

Assumptions

External Factors

Evaluation
Focus - Collect Data – Analyze and Interpret - Report

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Step 2. Develop relevant and useful evaluation questions

Why are good questions important?

- ☐ Articulate the issues and concerns of stakeholders

- ☐ Posit how the program is expected to work and its intended achievements

- ☐ Frame the scope of the assessment

- ☐ Drive the evaluation design

Common evaluation questions asked at different stages of program development

- Early stage of program or new initiative within a program

- Mature, stable program with well-defined program model

- Are services delivered as intended to the targeted recipients? Is the program well-managed? (Process evaluation)

- Are desired program outcomes obtained? (Outcome evaluation)

- Did the program cause the desired impact? (Net impact evaluation)

Step 3. Select appropriate evaluation approach for each evaluation question

Criteria:

- ☐ Matches evaluation question

- ☐ Fits available resources – time and funds

- ☐ Data are available or can be acquired

- ☐ Appropriate to the program purpose and context

Process and Outcome Evaluations

Assess whether the program is operating as intended (Process), or achieving intended objectives (Outcome)

Compare program performance to goals or standards, e.g. statutory requirements, logic model or professional standards

Outcome evaluations are typically used with business-like enterprises with few if any alternative explanations for observed outcomes

Controlling for influence of external factors

- Identify forces external to the program and beyond its control that are expected to affect its outcomes (e.g., climate, economic conditions, actions by third parties)

- Use design elements that control for alternative explanations, and multiple indicators

- Build a strong argument

Randomized control-group impact evaluations

Assess whether the program produced the desired change in outcomes by:

- Comparing outcomes of those randomly assigned to participate with outcomes for those assigned not to participate

Typically used to assess impact of clearly defined interventions where coverage is limited and random assignment is practical and ethical

Where random assignment is not well-suited

Random assignment is not possible

- ☐ Entitlement programs; laws
- ☐ Broadcast media
- ☐ Negative events

…or is not practical

- ☐ Staff refuse to use
- ☐ Rare events or long time lags
- ☐ Broad, flexible policies

Example of a rigorous alternative: Interrupted time series design

Assess whether the program produced the desired change in outcomes by:

☐ Comparing multiple measures of the desired outcome before and after the intervention

☐ Statistically controlling for alternative causal explanations (external factors)

Typically used to assess laws and regulatory programs where everyone is affected at the same time

How do we determine the quality of an evaluation?

- ☐ Evaluation questions address important issues for program or policy decisions
- ☐ Objectives address stakeholders' concerns
- ☐ Evaluation approach matches the questions
- ☐ Data are collected and analyzed according to professional standards
- ☐ Conclusions are built on strong logical arguments

For more information

- *Program Evaluation: A Variety of Rigorous Methods Can Help Identify Effective Interventions*, GAO-10-30 http://www.gao.gov/Products/GAO-10-30

- American Evaluation Association, *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government,* February 2009 http://www.eval.org/aea09.eptf.eval.roadmapF.pdf

- Lists of evaluation resources http://www.fedeval.net

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