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# EVALUATION TYPOLOGY

## BRIEFING PAPER

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Evaluation, the process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of something, is a diverse and varied practice. With close links to operational research, capitalisation, implementation science, and other forms of applied social science, evaluation represents one tool in the organisational toolkit. In 2024, the SEU explored different types of evaluation – a typology – to understand different aspects, move towards a common understanding and ultimately help us select the most appropriate way to generate relevant insights for improvement and decision-making.

This paper aims to explore these types to explain them better; but more importantly, works to link evaluation questions to these dimensions. Defining and answering these questions is a central element to creating the preconditions for ensuring that an evaluation can deliver on needs and expectations – both at the project and institutional level.

### DIMENSIONS OF EVALUATION

#### EVALUATION PURPOSE

One of the earliest typologies for evaluation was based on the **evaluation purpose** and how the evaluation was going to be used. This typology distinguishes between evaluations designed specifically to inform ongoing projects (**formative**) and evaluation designed to make a final judgement about a project's merit, worth or significance (**summative**). We can also add here **developmental evaluation**, a relatively new type of evaluation designed to support innovation and guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments.

In general terms we can say that **formative** evaluation supports learning and project improvement while **summative** evaluation supports accountability. Most evaluation incorporates both **learning** and **accountability** because to learn we first need to account for what was done. Findings from a **summative** evaluation of one project can be useful to other projects, and therefore **formative**, making dependence on these distinctions unhelpful.

#### Illustrative evaluation questions:

**Formative:** *Are the program activities being implemented as planned?*

**Summative:** *To what extent did the program achieve its intended outcomes?*

#### EVALUATION FOCUS

Because of these limitations, another typology has been developed, one which differentiates according to the **evaluation focus** and the aspect of the program being examined. A **process evaluation** delves into how a program is implemented, assessing its operations, quality standards, and whether participants are reached as intended. Meanwhile, an **outcome evaluation** focuses on the extent to which a program achieved its intended results across short, medium, and long terms, and may explore

both intended and unintended outcomes. It is common to confuse **formative** and **process** as well as **summative** and **outcome** although they are distinctly different. In practice most evaluation is **formative process evaluation**.

It is worth noting that **outcome evaluation** does not necessarily address the issue of causality, i.e.) the extent to which the project has brought about the change. Issues of causality are generally addressed through **impact evaluation**. These in turn can be sub-divided into evaluations that attribute change to the project and require robust experimental designs, and evaluations that adopt a theory-based approach to identify causal contributions.

#### Illustrative evaluation questions:

**Process:** *What challenges or barriers were encountered during implementation?*

**Outcome:** *Did the program have any unintended positive or negative effects?*

**(Impact):** *How has the training program influenced participants' long-term clinical practice?*

### EVALUATION TIMING

The best time for an evaluation is an important consideration. **Mid-term evaluations** are most common, often linked to the desire to review progress and make adaptations for the future. Far less common – yet also potentially very useful – are evaluations that occur before a program begins (**ex-ante**) and are designed to strengthen the project's logic or design. Also uncommon are evaluations that take place sometime after a project ends and can assess issues of sustainability and handover (**ex-post**).

It is worth noting that, although **real-time evaluation (RTE)** is often included here, it has nothing to do with timing. **Real-time evaluation** is a mid-term evaluation which emphasises providing feedback to teams in **real-time** and during the data collection.

#### Illustrative evaluation questions:

**Ex-ante:** *What are the expected outcomes and impacts of the proposed program?*

**Mid-term:** *Are the program activities being implemented as planned?*

**Ex-post:** *Were the program's benefits sustained after its conclusion?*

### TYPE OF EVALUATOR

The **type of evaluator** conducting the work can significantly influence the evaluation perspective. **External** evaluators are often valued for their independence, objectivity, and subject matter expertise, often associated with **accountability** and a belief in knowable truths (positivism). **Internal** evaluators, often closer to the program or context, offer deep knowledge and insights and support **learning** through the belief that understanding comes from those nearest the experience (constructivism).

To leverage the strengths of both, **joint or mixed** teams combine external skills with internal knowledge, still valuing objectivity and independence. **Peer** evaluation taps into the knowledge of colleagues while maintaining some distance from direct decision-making, serving as a potential method for cross-fertilization between projects.

Regardless of who is conducting the evaluation, the approach can be **participatory**. Participatory evaluation makes a concerted effort to involve those close to the project in ways that can bridge

between the external perspective and experienced based learning. The trend in evaluation leans towards evaluators, even external ones, adopting more participatory roles as facilitators rather than just as judges or experts.

**Illustrative evaluation questions:**

**External:** *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program from an external stakeholder perspective?*

**Internal:** *What lessons have we learned that can be shared across departments?*

## NORMATIVE AND CAUSAL APPROACHES

What is not well captured by the traditional typologies is the difference between normative and causal approaches to evaluation. **Normative evaluation** assesses the extent to which something aligns with pre-defined norms, values or standards and can be particularly useful in projects where there are established guideline and protocols. This is the approach exemplified by the OECD DAC and its criteria although there are numerous other relevant frameworks such as those developed by the WHO.

The alternative, and currently in favour with institutional donors, is **causal evaluation** which aims to establish a link between the project and the intended results. These work with the logic or theory of the project to understand the cause of change rather than applying pre-determined frameworks.

**Illustrative evaluation questions:**

**Normative:** *Are the services being delivered in accordance with the organization's quality benchmarks?*

**Causal:** *To what extent can improvements in community health be attributed to the intervention?*

## CONCLUSION

### WHY DOES ANY OF THIS MATTER?

It should be apparent to the reader that, when considering the multiple dimensions of evaluation, there are a multitude of types to choose from. One could have a **mid-term formative process evaluation** carried out by internal evaluators utilizing a causal approach or an **ex-post summative outcome evaluation** carried out by external evaluators and utilizing a normative approach. Almost all combinations are possible, albeit with a few exceptions. For example, **developmental** evaluation is a continual process throughout the project life cycle and does not fit with conventional timings. Similarly, it is unlikely that a **summative** evaluation would focus on the process although it is entirely possible.

Given this, we need to avoid easy classification and ensure that we consider all the dimensions of an evaluation; its **purpose, focus, timing, approach** and finally, the profile of the **evaluator** or team. Only then do we have the complete picture and avoid falling into simple and misleading categorisations and their inherent assumptions and expectations.

There appear to be two ways of approaching this. First, and arguably the most common, is to have a **prescriptive framework** for evaluation approaches. A prescriptive framework comes from an institutional decision or commitment to, for example, *carry out mid-term evaluations of the implementation of activities and according to established policies and guidelines, for reasons of learning and in order to adapt projects for the upcoming period (mid-term, formative, process, normative)* or routinely evaluate all projects ex-post in order to understand the ongoing benefits after

handover or closure and to support accountability to patients and communities (**ex-post, summative, outcome, causal**).

The second and alternative way to approach this is through the questions that we want answered. A descriptive approach requires that we explore the questions people want answers to and design the evaluation approach accordingly. As illustrated in the example questions above, the questions we have given important insights into how the evaluation should be approached. Questions that look to attribute change to the project, or part of the project, require a robust **impact evaluation**. Questions that invoke criteria of value require a **normative approach** and questions that assess results require a focus on **outcome**, etc. All the dimensions of the evaluation are in the questions, or at least they should be!

#### WAY FORWARD

From an organisational perspective the way forward probably lies somewhere in the middle, a kind of hybrid approach. In projects that provide evidenced based care through established services it is probably enough to use a **normative** approach that assesses the extent to which activities are being carried out according to the established guidelines and protocols. In more innovative projects or those with innovative components, it may well be important to adopt a **causal** approach and determine the extent to which the project is bringing about the desired results. In practice, it will probably require a bit of both. Getting clearer on the questions we want answers to will be the best way to get there.