AVOIDING PITFALLS IN PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

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Many performance evaluations (PEs) involve a team of researchers conducting numerous interviews in the field over three to four weeks. Commissioners often complain about the accuracy, reliability, and usability of findings of such studies. The Addressing Learning and Evaluation Challenges (ALEC) initiative of USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance examined seven common challenges in PEs and offered guidance to address them. Most of this guidance is oriented towards the learning partners (LPs) and evaluation teams (ETs) carrying out PEs; however, the actions and decisions of PE commissioners can either exacerbate or help avoid these challenges. This two-pager summarizes guidance for LPs and ETs and what PE commissioners can do to avoid these common pitfalls.

CHALLENGE	SUMMARY GUIDANCE FOR ETS AND LPS
Site selection: Many PEs select a small number of localities for deeper analysis. If not selected thoughtfully, sites can provide an inaccurate sense of the program or not address the evaluation questions.	Determine site selection based on the evaluation questions and the analytical goals of the evaluation. Clearly identify the population of potential localities and consider representative or purposive site selection approaches. Do not select sites using convenience sampling.
Respondent selection for individual and group interviews: As above, evaluations will produce inaccurate data if study participants are not selected thoughtfully.	Similar to site selection, select study participants using representative or purposive approaches that are best positioned to answer evaluation questions. Selection requires identifying and mapping types and populations of potential participants and tracking nonresponse and its potential implications on findings.
Social desirability bias (SDB): ETs ask program participants if they are satisfied with a program, many will answer positively regardless of their true beliefs.	Offer confidentiality, be thoughtful about question wording–appropriate–and create a trusting atmosphere in interviews. Flag potential bias in notes and take SDB seriously in data analysis and report writing, including using more objective sources of data to complement interview data.
Qualitative data capture: Interview notes are a key data source for findings and conclusions, yet some teams do not adequately capture or store notes to support meaningful analysis.	Use a systematic method to capture and organize data that is clearly articulated in their work plan or design. Record interviews when appropiate and have a plan to consistently capture a near-verbatim record of each qualitative event. LP staff should have access to the ET's notes and conduct quality spot checks.
Qualitative data analysis: Without a systematic, documentable, and somewhat replicable approach to data analysis, ETs risk biases and will face difficulties in collaboration and quality control.	Use and document a systematic approach for arriving at findings using all data sources. For analysis of qualitative data, this should include structured thematic or content analysis. LP staff should provide oversight ensuring that analysis plans are carried out faithfully.
Evidentiary support for findings: Qualitative evidence in PEs at times appears anecdotal and unconvincing.	Cite the source of evidence in a way that provides basic information about the source while maintaining confidentiality. Only quantify qualitative data when using highly structured instruments on a large sample. Findings should be based on multiple data points.
Clarity of findings to facilitate use: PE reports are often lengthy and key points risk being buried or never read by intended users.	Provide a summary of the question response at the outset and use bolded topic sentences throughout the narrative to summarize individual findings. LP staff should review drafts using a checklist to ensure well-written reports.

SUMMARY GUIDANCE FOR COMMISSIONERS

1 PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

Many of these challenges could be reduced with planning and more realistic timelines. For example, PEs should be commissioned six to eight months before a final report is needed, and timelines should include five weeks to draft a report after data collection to allow for internal review. The timeline needs further adjustment for scopes of work (SOW) development, peer review, approval, and evaluation procurement.

2 COMPILE INFORMATION AHEAD OF TIME

ETs will need information about program locations and participants to select sites and respondents. USAID staff need to request this information, along with other program documentation, from IPs when preparing to commission a PE.

3 USE SOWS TO REQUIRE AND INCENTIVIZE ALEC GUIDANCE

Much of the guidance produced under the ALEC study (e.g., work plan requirements, expectations around transcriptions, use of software-assisted coding) can be incorporated into SOWs based on the needs of your PE. See here for a template SOW.

4 GET YOUR QUESTIONS RIGHT

Numerous challenges are exacerbated by SOWs that include too many evaluation questions or questions that are too broad in scope. The SOW development and peer review process should ensure that questions are specific, clear, answerable, and that their responses will be useful and utilized.

5 CHECK YOUR BIASES

All commissioners have biases and need to be aware of them throughout the evaluation process. For example, many expect PEs to provide confirmatory evidence that an intervention is effective. Commissioners should be open to negative or null findings and view them as an opportunity to help improve programming.

6 DO NOT EXPECT RAW DATA TO BE SHARED

Evaluation data has the potential to be useful if made publicly available. Doing so with qualitative data, however, requires disclosure to participants, resource-intensive anonymization efforts, and may impact the honesty of respondents. If qualitative data is to be shared, it should only be done with highly structured qualitative data collection approaches and planned and budgeted for from the beginning.

7 DISCUSS EXPECTATIONS AROUND THE FINAL REPORT

While the structure of reports is often standardized around evaluation questions, there is still a need to discuss the extent of and style in which evidence will be presented. Commissioners often expect qualitative data to be presented like quantitative data (e.g., 15 of 67 respondents said…), when that might not be appropriate.

8 PLAN FOR DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION

Read reports with decision-making and use in mind. While it is easy for reviewers to get bogged down in editorial issues of report structure and writing style, users should remain focused on what the findings mean for their decision-making. While USAID might be the core user of the evaluation, reports should be shared with and serve as a source for learning for other stakeholders (e.g., government partners, other donors).

DISCLAIMER: The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government. This guidance was developed for the DRG Learning, Evaluation, and Research contract. For more information on the ALEC Study and Guidance, please see the full report.