PROGRAM CYCLE GUIDANCE

ADS 201 Additional Help

MANAGING THE PEER REVIEW OF A DRAFT EVALUATION REPORT

All draft evaluation reports are required to go through a peer review process. This document shares good practices for conducting and managing this review. An effective review process is an important step to successfully sharing, applying, and learning from evaluations.

Policy

The Automated Directives System (ADS) establishes the minimum criteria for all evaluation reports. ADS 201.3.5.17 specifies that the evaluation report should be reviewed against **ADS 201maa, Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report**. It requires that the peer review of a evaluation draft report **be** organized by the office managing the evaluation. Mission Orders on Evaluation outline the standards for the peer review process. Final content of the evaluation is determined by the evaluation team.

Guidance

The Evaluation Toolkit provides several tools to assist in the process to monitor compliance of evaluation reports with the USAID Evaluation Policy (see How-To Note: Preparing Evaluation Reports; the Evaluation Report Template; and the Evaluation Report Checklist and Review Template). In addition, the Toolkit contains guidance on documenting Statements of Difference (which is part of the review process).

Types of reviews

Similar to the process for reviewing an Evaluation Statement of Work (SOW), there are different kinds of reviews for draft evaluation reports. The processes and purpose of these reviews often vary. Good practice is to recognize different processes that exist.

- **Compliance review.** This review is usually best conducted by the Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) of the Evaluation in the Program Office or the Evaluation Point of Contact (EPOC) to ensure the evaluation meets the standards established in the Evaluation Policy (Tool: Evaluation Report Checklist).

- **Peer review.** The COR of the Evaluation should coordinate this review. The review will include two kinds of peer reviewers:

- *Individuals who have not directly participated in the evaluation, project, or activity but bring subject matter and/or technical expertise to an evaluation.* Working with the Technical Office, the COR of the Evaluation may choose individuals from regional and/or Washington bureaus to participate in the peer review. Staff from the Program Office may also contribute to this review, identifying issues, questioning analyses and providing suggestions to the evaluation team on the merits of methods (Tool: Evaluation Report Review Template).
- *USAID staff managing and implementing the project or activity being evaluated*: No more than half of the peer reviewers should be from the Development Objective (DO) team. These individuals should review the document for factual clarifications of findings and conclusions (Tools: Evaluation Report Review Template and Statements of Difference) and ask questions about recommendations that will assist implementers to take actions based on the recommendations.

- **Stakeholder review** (including implementing partners, alliance partners, host-country government partners, and others). Similar to the review by USAID staff involved directly in the project or activity, this group of reviewers should identify factual clarifications or address any limitations that the evaluators may have noted in the report (e.g., missing documentation, data, etc.). Likewise, they should be able to ask questions about recommendations relevant to their work. These reviewers may prepare a Statements of Difference following the review of the draft report.

What is the value of the review of the draft evaluation report?

There are numerous reasons to engage stakeholders, USAID staff, and peers in a review beyond its requirement by USAID. These include:

- Ensuring that the required elements are included.
- Improving the overall quality of the evaluation. The peer review process can involve experts in evaluation and the technical subject area of the evaluation.
- Increasing the independence and objectivity of the evaluation. By bringing in additional staff members from other parts of the mission or Agency, the response to an evaluation can benefit from perspectives that are not too close to the activity, project, or program being evaluated, thereby promoting a more neutral and unbiased perspective.
- Facilitating buy-in from internal stakeholders regarding the content of the evaluation. Evaluations are only as worthwhile as their utility to the users. By bringing in the primary audiences who may use the evaluation results, the review can help ensure that, without creating bias, the evaluation report meets the needs of these audiences.

Before the draft evaluation report is received

There are several steps that the individual managing the evaluation in the Program Office can take to streamline the review process:

1. Document any minor adjustments made in carrying out the evaluation from the original SOW or through a letter modification by the Contracting Officer. This is critical, given that a peer reviewer assessing the quality and compliance of the evaluation report will not necessarily know all of the decisions that have been made amid changing circumstances, problems with reaching sites, etc.
2. Engage with the Program Office, Technical Offices, and Contract Office to update them on the evaluation process.
3. Share the Statements of Difference guidance with the stakeholders who are reviewing the draft evaluation report so they understand how to incorporate their comments into a draft evaluation report.
4. Set aside time to synthesize and integrate the comments that will be sent to the evaluation team leader.

Managing the review process

Once the evaluation report is received and is ready to be shared beyond those most directly involved in the drafting, the COR of the Evaluation should organize the review process. While there is no standard way of conducting a review, some standard practices are outlined in each Mission's Mission Order on Evaluation. Mission staff should consult their own Mission Order on Evaluation for peer review practices specific to their mission. Below are some key questions to answer when conducting a peer review:

When to conduct the reviews?

When planning the reviews, missions should aim for conducting it after a **full draft of the evaluation** has been completed and incorporates the evaluation team's full analysis. Furthermore, the COR for the Evaluation should avoid circulating an evaluation draft report that he or she finds incomplete. Instead, he or she should consider returning the evaluation to the evaluation team with instructions for completing the report. A complete draft will streamline the review and ensure that the reviewers focus on substantive issues within the report rather than on formatting or missing sections.

While divergent comments may be useful to an evaluation team in formulating a final evaluation report, the evaluation manager should avoid sending comments that are contradictory and/or fit the criteria of statements of difference. When scheduling the peer review, the COR for the Evaluation should ensure that sufficient time is allowed after the peer review to compile, consolidate, and prioritize comments prior to returning the draft to the evaluation team.

How many and which individuals will be involved in the peer review?

The mission's Evaluation POC in the Program Office (or their designee) should lead a peer review. This is normally the COR for the Evaluation. He or she should take lead responsibility for ensuring that the evaluation report meets the procedural standards and requirements of ADS 201 and the Evaluation Policy so that other peer reviewers can focus on content.

The peer review should include no fewer than two individuals in addition to the COR for the Evaluation or EPOC (or designee). Emphasis should be placed on finding at least one peer reviewer with evaluation methods expertise. Peer reviewers may include individuals from the DO team and Program Office as well as USAID/Washington regional and technical bureaus, the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research, and local partners. It is best practice, however, for no more than half of the peer reviewers to be from the Technical Office that oversees the project or activity being evaluated. USAID/Washington regional bureaus have a particular responsibility to participate in peer reviews when requested by missions. Mission staff should consult the M&E POC's List for Washington bureau contact information.

How much time will be provided for the peer review?

The Mission Order on Evaluation in each mission should specify the length of time peer reviewers will have to review the draft evaluation report. This timeline is often established in the contract with the evaluation team. Best practice is to allow 10 business days for comments. Some USAID/Washington offices may have their own standards for how long they typically take to review a draft evaluation report, so check with them if considering including USAID/Washington staff members in your peer review.

How will comments be received for the peer review?

There are a variety of ways of structuring the peer review process. Missions may choose to have a peer review meeting where individuals can discuss their comments on the draft evaluation report, request written comments on the draft, or both. However, note that circulating the document in Microsoft Word for reviewers to insert their comments often leads to excess comments and/or contradictory comments.

Many missions choose to ask the peer reviewers to fill out standard review sheets or checklists (see Evaluation Report Checklist and Review Template) while others prefer reviewers to send comments utilizing a standardized format.

Regardless of the method chosen, the COR for the Evaluation should provide clear instructions to the peer reviewers regarding the means for providing comments on the draft evaluation report.

After the review

The COR for the Evaluation should consolidate and share the comments with the Evaluation Team. The use of the Statement of Difference documentation should typically be used for comments from USAID staff and implementing partners involved directly in the project or activity.

If Statements of Difference are received, the COR for the Evaluation should share them with the evaluation team. The evaluation team should be given the opportunity to revise and/or respond to the statements in the evaluation report.

For more information

For more information on the requirements for Evaluation Reports to inform the peer review process, check out the following:

- Your Mission's Standardized Mission Order on Evaluation and the Model Mission Order for Evaluation (noting that the new ADS 201 supersedes any conflicting language)
- ADS 201.3.5.17: Evaluation Reports
- ADS 201maa: Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report
- ADS 201mah: USAID Evaluation Report Requirements

From the Toolkit:

- Guidance: How-to Note: Preparing Evaluation Reports. This Note provides current good practice in preparing evaluation reports, the main deliverable for most evaluations. These practices also serve as a guide for reviewing the quality of draft evaluation reports submitted by the evaluation team.
- Tool: Evaluation Report Template. This Template is an optional tool to help improve consistency of the evaluation report with USAID formatting standards.
- Tool: Evaluation Report Checklist and Review Template. This Template includes two tools: a checklist for compliance and a peer review template. The tool includes guidance for users on each tool and the correct usage.
- Guidance: Statements of Difference. Each USAID evaluation report should include any Statements of Difference as an annex. These statements describe any significant unresolved difference of opinion on the part of funders, implementers, and/or members of the evaluation team.