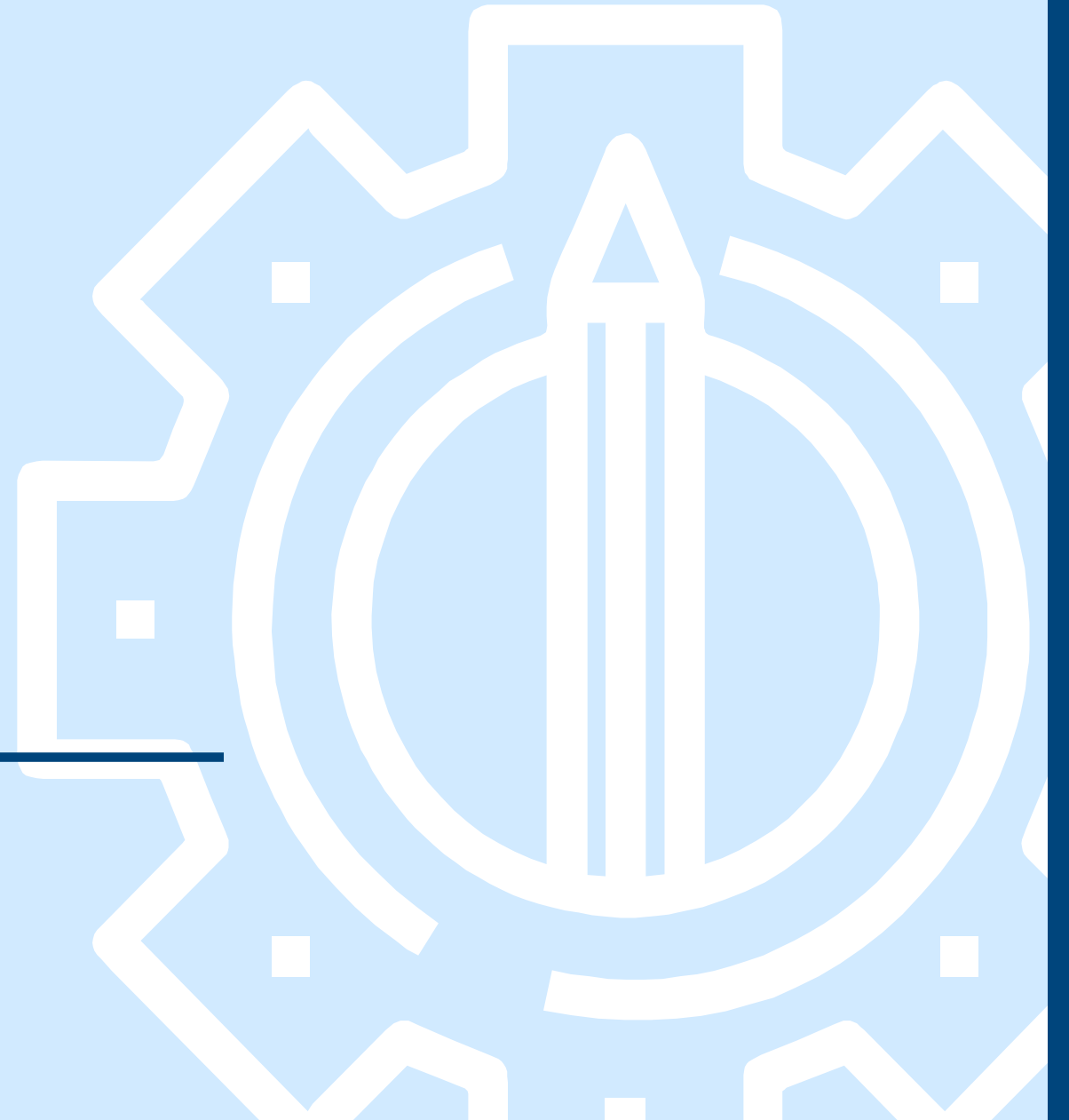




UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Best Practices



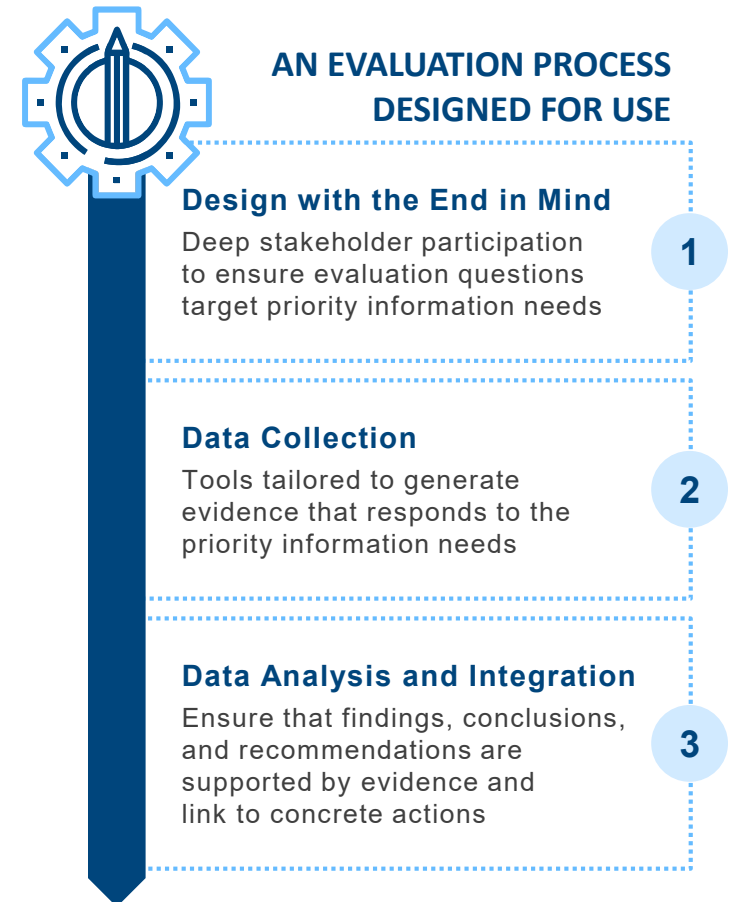
Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

What are evaluation recommendations?

Evaluation recommendations are statements conveying the specific actions distinct actors should take, based on the evaluation's evidence.




These statements are the bridge between an evaluation's evidence—the findings and conclusions—and one way that decision makers use this evidence. Good recommendations are evidence-based, context-aware, and practicable. Practicable means they are action-oriented, time-bound, and define who is responsible.

Recommendations can include those that decision makers can act on right away, those that require some intermediate action, and those that are more aspirational. Aspirational recommendations might not be feasible now, but they could be later if the context changes.



Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

Bringing the Evidence Together

-  **Findings** are analyzed facts derived from quantitative and qualitative data (evidence). They are not based on anecdotes or hearsay. They are also not a compilation of people’s or even experts’ opinions. Findings represent the range of data collected during the evaluation. They answer the question, “What have we learned from the evaluation?”
-  **Conclusions** synthesize and interpret the findings and make judgments supported by one or more specific findings. They may also draw on relevant evidence from other studies to support interpretation. Conclusions are the broader implications and answer the question “So what?” that follows from the findings.
-  **Recommendations** are suggested actions based on the evaluation evidence and the context. They answer the question “Now what?” that follows from the conclusions.



RESOURCE

USAID Learning Lab:
[How-To Note:
Preparing Evaluation
Reports](#)

Recommendations and Types of Evaluation Use

One common use of evaluations is [instrumental use](#)—helping stakeholders make decisions. This type of use ties directly to the evaluation’s recommendations. However, stakeholders use evaluations in many other ways. [Conceptual use](#) builds understanding. [Process use](#) involves stakeholders’ learning from participation in evaluation processes. A fourth, less desirable type of use is [symbolic use](#) (“checking the box”). For more detail on different types of use, see Michael Quinn Patton’s [Utilization-Focused Evaluation](#).

Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

What makes for strong and useful recommendations?



The value of an evaluation is in its use. ... While learning and utilization are most often considered at the conclusion of the evaluation process, learning and utilization can happen at various phases in the evaluation process ... Utilization and learning should be planned for and actively facilitated.

Evaluation Toolkit, USAID Learning Lab



Strong and useful recommendations do not emerge automatically at the end of an evaluation. Developing them begins during the evaluation design phase, with intentional activities that encourage deep participation from stakeholders.

Best-practice steps to make sure an evaluation results in strong and useful recommendations:

1. Ensure stakeholder participation in the evaluation design phase
2. Co-create recommendations with stakeholders to ensure they align with the context
3. Organize recommendations to clearly indicate whom each one targets, the ideal timing, and how it maps to the evidence

Recommendations must be based entirely on the evidence presented in the evaluation report. The readers should be able to discern which evidence supports the recommendations. Recommendations can refer to specific findings to help readers make this link.



RESOURCE

USAID Learning Lab,
Evaluation Toolkit,
Section 5: [Sharing,
Using, and Learning](#)

Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

How can co-creation facilitate stronger recommendations and utilization?

Stakeholders have an essential role in generating good recommendations (practicable and context-aware ones). Meanwhile, evaluators have a responsibility to facilitate this process while staying true to the evidence. Effective evaluation practice thus emphasizes the benefits of co-creating recommendations through participatory processes, facilitated by the evaluation team, that involve a wide variety of stakeholders. Meaningful involvement of participants also builds buy-in, increasing the chances that stakeholders use the recommendations.

Co-creation can happen as part of a findings workshop or in a separate workshop. In rare cases when co-creation is truly not feasible, evaluators should lead an extensive validation process with deep involvement of program experts in reviewing and providing inputs on draft recommendations.



Recommendations developed by an external evaluation team often lack an insider perspective of what is politically or operationally feasible, thus hindering their chances of being used. ...Evidence-based evaluations add considerable value to [the evaluation commissioner's] learning efforts, but the recommendations for moving forward in response to the evidence can and often should be an inclusive effort. Including the evaluation users in developing recommendations will help “ground-truth” their feasibility and improve the chances that they will be acted upon.

USAID Learning Lab, [Utilizing and Learning from Evaluations](#)



RESOURCE

BetterEvaluation's [Rainbow Framework](#) includes a variety of participatory methods that can facilitate co-creation of recommendations with stakeholders.



Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

Contextually Aware Recommendations



Recommendations should acknowledge that an activity's context is not separate from programmatic work. Rather, it is integral to defining feasible actions, given enablers or barriers beyond the control of target decision makers. Enablers and barriers can take a variety of forms, from legal, institutional, and financial factors to political and socio-cultural ones.

CASE STUDY

This [case study](#) from Uganda shows how co-creating policy recommendations can work in practice.

Co-creation and Bias

Evaluators should not take participants' inputs at face value. Rather, they should structure recommendations in a way that stays true to the evidence. If participants want to remove a draft recommendation but the evidence bears out that recommendation, it is the evaluation team's responsibility to retain it. Often, the team can address concerns by adjusting wording (while staying true to the data). If differences are irreconcilable, an evaluation report can include a "statement of differences" annex, in which stakeholders state their perspective in their own words; this keeps the evaluation true to the evidence while honoring stakeholders' perspective and avoiding symbolic involvement.

Often, evaluators are subject-matter experts in the area they are evaluating. In such cases, it could be appropriate for them to offer recommendations based on their expertise, as long as the evaluation evidence supports their recommendations and the co-creation process provides a check on the evaluators' potential biases and ensures contextual awareness. If an evaluator contributes suggestions based on their expertise but beyond the evaluation's evidence, it is more appropriate to include these recommendations in a "further considerations" annex.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

How should recommendations be organized?

There are many ways to organize recommendations in an evaluation report, and the most appropriate option depends on the evaluation's intended audiences and use. The evaluation team should facilitate a participatory discussion on this topic in broad strokes during the design workshop and revisit it during the findings workshop to reach a final decision about how best to organize recommendations in the report. Common options for organizing recommendations include grouping them by:

- Implementing actors (e.g., recommendations for implementing partners, USAID, government, civil society partners, future evaluators)
- Theme (e.g., different aspects of a project, global/national/local, evaluation questions)
- Pairing of recommendations and conclusions in a single section, such that specific recommendations appear under each conclusion
- Visually mapping recommendations to findings and conclusions can make the link to each recommendation's evidence clearer for the audience

To ensure that recommendations are not going beyond the evidence, EnCompass evaluation practice includes a step of mapping the findings and conclusions to the recommendations to ensure all recommendations have evidence behind them. This step supports evaluators in their responsibility to base recommendations on the evidence.



Aspirational Recommendations

While the identified actors should be able to act on the majority of recommendations under current circumstances, in many cases, it is useful to also include “aspirational” recommendations, which are evidence-based, but may not be immediately implementable due to context or other factors beyond the target actors’ control. Whether or not to include aspirational recommendations is a key consideration that should be discussed in the findings workshops. If aspirational recommendations are included, they should articulate what factors would need to shift for them to become actionable and identify any ways evaluation users can influence those factors.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation Recommendations

How do evaluators and evaluation commissioners support strong recommendations?

Evaluators are experts in the evaluation data—the findings. When they generate recommendations, however, evaluators go one step beyond this core expertise. This is because good recommendations require contextual and other types of programmatic knowledge that lies with funders and program implementers. In the ideal evaluation, the evaluators' role is to facilitate a process that generates recommendations with those experts, ensuring that final recommendations are both grounded in the evidence and reflect the perspectives of stakeholders.

Evaluation commissioners ensure findings workshops include adequate time for deep collaboration in co-creating (or validating) recommendations, and that the right stakeholders are included. They also encourage stakeholders to review evaluation evidence deeply, and be open-minded about actions they may need to take.

For a more complex evaluation, during the design phase, the evaluation team should engage the commissioner in a participatory discussion about the duration of the findings workshop. The two parties should revisit the resulting decision when the analysis is complete. If the evaluation requires a long findings workshop, recommendations can be co-created as a separate activity after the findings workshop.



RESOURCE

EnCompass' white paper on [outcome mapping](#) demonstrates how theory of change exercises can provide a framing for understanding the various stakeholders and actors that may be targeted in recommendations.

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Ready to Go Deeper?

Lori Wingate (2014),
Recommendations in
Evaluation, Evaluation Center,
Western Michigan University.
https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guide/recommendations_in_evaluation



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encompassworld.com
+1 301-287-8700

