



European
Commission

How-to Guide: **Evaluation Planning**

In order for evaluations to be useful as learning and decision-making tools, and to serve their accountability purposes, they have to be conducted at the right time and have to be adequately resourced. This guide helps you to carefully plan your evaluations

Prepared by the evaluation services
of DG INTPA, DG ENEST, DG MENA and FPI
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Purpose of this How-to Guide: This guide is designed to assist evaluation focal points and evaluation managers in understanding the importance of evaluation planning. It outlines the steps and key considerations to guide choices on what to evaluate and when thereby ensuring that evaluations can serve their intended purpose.

Target audience: This guide is specifically prepared for evaluation focal points and evaluation managers drafting their evaluation plans. However, other evaluation stakeholders, including Heads of Cooperation, Heads of Section, Team leaders in HQ operational Units and Heads of Regional Teams could also benefit from the guidance provided.

How to use this How-to Guide: We suggest that you navigate through the key points provided in alongside your portfolio of evaluations.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is one of the key instruments of the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines and is an integral part of the external action Intervention Cycle Management. By providing evidence of what works, what does not work and why, it helps to improve the way we engage with our partners, enhances the impact of our external action partnerships and is instrumental to better programming, enhanced political dialogue and a greater visibility of results.

This guide provides information on how to make concrete choices about what and when to evaluate.

EVALUATION PLANNING

Evaluation planning is part of the obligations of EU Delegations / Regional teams and HQ Units of DG INTPA, DG ENEST, DG MENA, and FPI. Accordingly, each year, EU delegations and HQ units are called to plan and/or revise their projected evaluations in light of their priorities, needs and resource availability.

Evaluation planning is a dynamic process that offers **opportunity to reflect, discuss, and jointly identify and prioritise evaluations** based on specific needs. Discuss your evaluation plans with your Operational and Finance and Contract colleagues, as well as with your Head of Cooperation and/or Head of Unit. It is also essential to involve your counterparts, including relevant government institutions/ministries, other development cooperation partners (such as other donor agencies working in the same sector or geographic areas), the academia, and the national and international relevant civil society organisations.

The planning of evaluations is a pluriannual exercise, meaning that your evaluation plan should contain not only the evaluations planned for the year to come, but also for the following years (to the extent this is known and feasible). Even though an evaluation can be planned and carried out at any time of the year, it is however important to plan sufficiently ahead, to ensure that:

- Evaluations, and especially their findings, are **timely and useful** for **effective learning and decision-making**.
- **Resources** (financial and human) to be devoted to the managing of evaluations are secured in advance, and **efficiently allocated** within each Unit and Delegation.

WHAT IS AN EVALUATION PLAN?

An evaluation plan is a document that sets out **the list of evaluations planned** for the incoming and following years. It can take different forms:

- In the case of **DG INTPA**, it can be a word or excel file that contains a list of planned evaluations indicating, for each one: the title, indicative starting date and budget of the evaluation, as well as the interventions to be covered by the evaluation and the action or decision to use for the evaluation budget.
- In the case of **DG ENEST and DG MENA**, Operational Evaluation Plans (OEPs) must be prepared and submitted online by EUDs and HQ operational units, once a year, via the EVAL module of OPSYS.
- In the case of **FPI**, the Operational Evaluation Plan is a list of evaluations planned by the FPI Regional Teams and staff in delegations, or in Headquarters' Units, to be coordinated by FPI Unit 04 in charge of Evaluation and approved by Head of Service.

- An important **portion** of the Interventions **portfolio** is **evaluated**, for learning, accountability and transparency purposes, considering the legal obligation to evaluate in priority **programmes and activities which entail significant spending**.¹
- Partners and stakeholders are informed of the evaluation plans, actively contribute to them, and collaborate on the agenda to generate evidence on what works and what doesn't in the contexts you work in.

WHAT TO EVALUATE?

It is neither feasible nor justified to evaluate every single intervention regardless of its size, nature and interest.

By regulation, EU delegations and headquarters units are mandated to evaluate programmes and activities that represent a significant investment of funds.²

Beyond this requirement, and aside from those interventions whose evaluation would be contractually mandated, an **evaluation should be planned and implemented only when it is relevant, intended to be useful and likely to be used and disseminated**. The decision on what to evaluate is completely at the discretion of each EU Delegation/unit. A best practice is to select a well-thought-out sample of interventions for evaluation.

But how is the selection to be made?

> Step 1

Review your intervention portfolio and upcoming strategic or operational priorities to identify a sample for evaluation, keeping in mind the following criteria and rationales.

LEARNING

- **Best opportunities for learning.** Consider prioritising evaluations of interventions and topics that fit into the current or upcoming priorities of your delegation/unit, are innovative in their specific context or seemed particularly successful or unsuccessful in meeting their objectives.
- **Potential for replication and scale-up.** Consider prioritising opportunities to explore the replication or scale-up of an intervention in the same context or elsewhere.

TIMELINESS

- **Active demand.** Consider prioritising evaluations where there is active demand (e.g. from stakeholders) for evidence to inform decisions and where evaluations can be timely in terms of decision-making.
- **Linking programming and design.** Consider prioritising evaluation of interventions providing useful evidence for better design of upcoming interventions or policy strategies. When doing so, ensure that the evaluation can be carried out in time to support upcoming decision-making processes.
- **Contextual changes.** Consider prioritising interventions where contextual changes might impact their continuation as initially planned.
- **Realistic and Feasible Evaluations.** Ensure that evaluations are practical and achievable within the available timeframe and resources. They should align with current performance monitoring needs and provide valuable evidence for future programming and decision making.

1. "Programmes and activities which entail significant spending shall be subject to ex ante and retrospective evaluations, which shall be proportionate to the objectives and expenditure". [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) 2024/2509 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2024 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union](#), Article 34, 'Evaluations'

2. In line with the legal obligation to evaluate interventions that entail significant spending as per Financial Regulation, in 2025, DG INTPA, DG ENEST and DG MENA recommended prioritising the evaluation of interventions with a budget above EUR 10 million. This legal obligation should however be approached through the prism of the usefulness whereby evaluations of smaller interventions should not be discarded, especially when they can offer critical insights for operational improvement, decision-making enhancement or learning opportunities.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Significant spending.** Consider prioritising those interventions that entail significant spending, as this responds to a general duty of accountability for the use of public funds.
- **Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs): With TEIs** now integral to our funding landscape, prioritise evaluating their components and key priorities, and explore doing so jointly with other TEI members. (Particularly relevant for INTPA).
- **Consider the utility and corporate communication needs.** Consider prioritising evaluations that can help you **identify successes and results**, advancement towards strategic objectives and institutional targets that can be used in your communication activities towards the broader public and your dialogue with your beneficiaries and stakeholders (including Member States, when applicable).³
- **Risk management.** To better manage risk, consider prioritising interventions with significant investment (of money, human resources, time or community goodwill), or where there is seen to be high risk in terms of either failing to achieve intended impacts or producing significant negative unintended impacts (e.g. in contexts of fragility, conflict and violence or when dealing with sensitive issues such as sexual and gender-based violence).

RESOURCE EFFICIENCY

- **Value for money: Less is more.** Consider prioritising interventions where the cost of evaluation is reasonable, given the cost of the intervention itself.
- **Value for money: More is more.** Consider prioritising the opportunity to carry out **thematic evaluations of several interventions in the same sector/subsector**. Simultaneously evaluating multiple interventions that work in the same area, even if they are at different stages of implementation, can be highly meaningful from a strategic point of view. Thematic evaluations are more likely to provide overarching conclusions and recommendations that are relevant for reshaping the support in a sector or on a theme and would contribute towards reducing the cost of evaluation and evaluation fatigue.

> Step 2

Discuss the proposed sample of interventions for evaluations with your Operational and Finance and Contract colleagues, with your head of Cooperation and/or head of Unit.

Be realistic. Be aware of available resources when deciding which evaluations can and will be implemented.

> Step 3

Share your draft evaluation plan with your counterparts and other development partners, as well as the centralised evaluation services in HQs, there might be overlaps or synergies with their own plans that should be taken into account.

> Step 4

Finalise your multiannual evaluation plan and, encode the evaluations in EVAL-OPSYS. See the **How-to Guide: Creating and planning evaluations in EVAL-OPSYS** and for DG ENEST and DG MENA see also the [Operational Evaluation Plan Submission Guide](#).

3. As of the end of 2023, DG INTPA has worked intensely to strengthen its performance in terms of "aid transparency" via the publication of a large number of intervention-level evaluations on its [external website](#) and will continue to do so in the future. Similarly, for intervention-level evaluations carried out by DG ENEST and DG MENA EUDs and HQ units, it will be mandatory to publish highlights of the final report (i.e. lessons learnt, conclusions and/or recommendations) in the EUD websites and HQs websites. Should publication of the report or extracts of the report not be recommended (e.g. sensitive content) please notify the evaluation helpdesk.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

Q How many evaluations should I include in my plan?

A When deciding how many evaluations to include, focus on the quality and usefulness of the evaluations instead of the quantity. There is no recommended minimum or maximum number, so aim to **be realistic, ensure you do not over plan**. Analyses on previous years have shown that, on average, less than 70% of evaluations were carried out as planned. So, be aware of the resources you have when deciding which evaluations can and will be implemented. Resources include both the budget to be allocated to finance the evaluations, and the human resources needed to launch and manage evaluations.

Q How many interventions can be covered in a single evaluation?

A **There is no limit to the number of interventions that can be covered by a single evaluation** – to the extent that this remains feasible and there is a sound justification and purpose to evaluate multiple interventions together. An evaluation can focus on a single intervention, on a sample of interventions within the same sector, on one entire primary intervention and even on multiple primary interventions, as long as these are logically interconnected or inter-related. An evaluation can cover different and subsequent programming phases of a single intervention, it can be thematic or geographic⁴. The choice is yours: what matters is that it responds to your needs for decision-making, learning and/or accountability.

The possibility to carry out **thematic evaluations** (grouping the evaluation of several interventions in the same sector/sub-sector) is encouraged. The ‘theme’ covered by an evaluation can either be a sector of intervention or a cross-cutting issue. Thematic evaluations cover several interventions included in the same or successive programming cycles. The grouped interventions must however be clearly interlinked in a logical and unambiguous way – for example, their expected contribution to a common (or very similar) overall objective through the achievement of a set of consistent outcomes. The grouping of loosely interlinked interventions (or of interventions that are not logically interconnected) under a single evaluation is discouraged, as it disperses the focus of evaluators in a series of parallel and inconsistent analyses.

Q Can evaluations be conducted jointly with other partners?

A **Yes**, in the case of interventions co-financed by multiple development partners, evaluations can be conducted jointly; the choice is yours. Joint evaluations can also be launched to evaluate different interventions financed by more than one donor in a same sector. TEIs, for example, offer in principle a good framework for joint evaluations with participating EU Member States, in addition to the EIB and the EBRD. Should you decide not to conduct a joint evaluation, please do work closely with partners during planning (and implementation as relevant, e.g. participation to the Reference Group) to prevent overlapping or duplications.

Q Can Budget Support programmes be evaluated?

A **Yes**, budget support programmes can and should be evaluated. As highlighted in section 5.8 of the [2017 Budget Support Guidelines](#), there are two types of budget support evaluations:

- Strategic budget support evaluations covering all (or most) budget support operations in a given partner country over a long period or during one or two MFF periods, are launched and managed by the HQ central evaluation units using FWC SEA 2023 Lot 17 “Strategic Evaluation”.

4. i.e. it can focus on a specific subject area or region covered by different Actions or contracts, through both direct and cross-cutting contributions (e.g. contribution to gender mainstreaming in the Country X, from the year YYYY to the year ZZZZ).

- Budget support programme(s) evaluations are launched and managed directly by EU Delegations using FWC SEA 2023 Lot 16 using the dedicated ToR template with guidance for budget support evaluations available on the [SEA 2023 FWC page](#)).

Q When should I launch my evaluation?

A An evaluation can be launched at any time. What is important is that the evaluation deliverables (final report and dissemination material if foreseen) become available in time to serve decision-making or learning purposes. To this end, when defining the start date of your evaluation please remember that:

- i) Sometimes the time needed to implement the contract is much longer than the time needed to conduct the evaluation (drafting of the evaluation ToR, launch of the Request for service, signature of the contract, etc.); and
- ii) When defining the overall duration of the evaluation, please ensure that time is built in not only to carry out the activities and draft the deliverables and the outputs but also for the commenting process, for review of draft versions, debriefing sessions, for dissemination activities and distribution of dissemination deliverables.

Q Should evaluations for contracts managed by other DGs or national counterparts be included in the evaluation plan?

A **No.** Evaluations covering interventions which are under the remit of other DGs or services, or national counterparts should not be included in your evaluation plan.

Q Should evaluations done by partners be included in the evaluation plan?

A **No.** Evaluations done by partners – e.g., those contracted (or conducted) by entrusted entities⁵ (interventions under indirect management) and implementers of interventions – usually grantees, (under direct management) financed with EU funds should not be included in your evaluation plan. Please note however that it is important to keep track of these evaluations, monitor their implementation (including when possible as member of the Reference Group). Remember that planned or completed evaluations done by partners (EDPs) should also be encoded in EVAL-OPSYS. When creating the evaluation you should select “Managed by: ‘Implementing partner/ Member State / Donor” in the ‘General information’ tab. Please be aware that a simplified ToR template with guidance for evaluations done by partners under direct management is also available in the wikis (see Evaluation Methodological Guidance section in the [Evaluation Wiki](#) and Templates & Examples \ evaluation section in former [DG NEAR's wiki](#)).

If you would like to receive specific support or advice on your evaluation, please contact the Evaluation Help Desk at:

DG INTPA: INTPA-EVALUATION-SUPPORT@EC.EUROPA.EU

DG ENEST: ENEST-PERFORMANCE@EC.EUROPA.EU cc: EVALUATION-SUPPORT@MELDEA.EU

DG MENA: MENA-EVAL-MONITORING@EC.EUROPA.EU cc: EVALUATION-SUPPORT@MELDEA.EU

FPI: FPI-EVALUATION@EC.EUROPA.EU cc: EVALUATION-SUPPORT@MELDEA.EU

5. E.g. 1) agencies of MS or EFTA countries or (exceptionally) of a third donor country; 2) international organisations; 3) EIB and EIF; 4) EU specialized (regulatory, not executive) agencies.