PARTICIPATORY SELF-EVALUATION

A GUIDE FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

2018, Evaluation and Monitoring Unit
The Evaluation and Monitoring Unit (EMU) of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) provides normative tools, guidelines and templates to be used in the evaluation process of projects.

This document has not been formally edited.

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INTRODUCTION

Participatory Self-Evaluations (PSEs) are structured exercises through which UNCTAD staff, government counterparts, beneficiary institutions, implementing partners and final beneficiaries (if applicable) jointly assess a project’s relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. These evaluations can take place at mid-point or end of project implementation, depending on a range of factors. PSEs are led by staff that are entrusted with the design and delivery of a project and engage stakeholders that are involved in, or benefiting from, the project.

PSEs are part of an ongoing reinvigorated approach towards results-based management at UNCTAD where an effort is being made to integrate project-level results with branch, divisional and organizational results frameworks. PSEs will be the primary tool to identify lessons learned that ensure a learning loop back into ongoing and future project design and implementation.

Additionally, the UN Secretary General’s report on management reform[1] places a significant emphasis on self-evaluation. The Secretary General stresses that:

“I intend to strengthen the self-evaluation capacity of the Secretariat to better inform programme planning and reporting on programme performance. Results of self-evaluation will be used by programme managers to better plan and adjust their activities. Information on self-evaluation, including lessons learned, will be reflected in the annual programme budget to increase transparency on programme delivery to Member States. Self-evaluation will be both a learning tool and a management tool. It should provide further quality assurance on programme delivery and be central to providing greater accountability and transparency to Member States.” (p. 17)

“...the result of the programme evaluations, self-evaluations and lessons learned would be reflected more clearly in the new annual budget format to increase transparency in programme delivery.” (p.11) “...The changes in the budget report would enable Member States to assess past performance, the lessons learned from improved evaluation and how they were applied to subsequent programme planning and resource requests.” (p. 12)

The 2016 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review[2] calls upon the United Nations agencies to support national evaluation capacity-building in support of the 2030 Agenda where feasible. This self-evaluation process directly addresses this recommendation as it also engages national stakeholders in developing and strengthening their evaluation capacities.


The United Nations Secretary-General Guterres has stressed that to be fully accountable, “we need a culture of evaluation, independent and real-time evaluation with full transparency.”
INTRODUCTION

It is important to note that major programmes at UNCTAD (such as ASYCUDA and DMFAS) already have an institutionalized self-evaluation practice. The intent of this document is to build upon the existing self-evaluation experiences at UNCTAD and harmonize these best practices across the house. This guide is meant to serve as a flexible tool and starting point for project managers to adapt and tailor the approach to their specific needs.

OBJECTIVES

PSEs have four over-arching objectives:

- **Accountability**: Self-evaluations demonstrate to UNCTAD at large, Member States and other stakeholders that the project achieved planned outputs, outcomes and the objective, and that this was relevant and implemented efficiently, effectively and in a sustainable manner.

- **Opportunities for Dialogue**: By providing a useful platform for stakeholders to come together to discuss the subject of the evaluation and other areas of common interest, participatory evaluation processes help to build relationships and ensure a better understanding of the different needs and interests of participants and other stakeholders, as well as opportunities for further collaboration.

- **Knowledge generation**: Self-evaluations produce knowledge about the specific topics that are part of UNCTAD’s mandate, and innovative practices. Such information is compiled from multiple evaluations and then synthesized and shared by the UNCTAD evaluation function.

- **Learning**: Self-evaluations build knowledge and evidence about the extent to which certain strategies, interventions, approaches, activities, etc. have been effective (or not) in their respective contexts and why.
INDEPENDENT EVALUATIONS VS. PARTICIPATORY SELF – EVALUATIONS

It should be noted that PSEs and independent evaluations share the same basic goal - to enable improved performance through systematic analysis and assessment. There are, however, two key differences:

- PSEs are undertaken by project managers, who were directly involved with the project design and implementation. Independent evaluations are objective exercises undertaken by persons (independent evaluators) not involved in programme development or implementation.

- PSEs provide more autonomy to the project manager, who can focus on issue(s) of particular interest and utilize the lessons learned, good practices, and possible recommendations, in decision-making (including for follow-up activities) at his/her own discretion.

PSE’s are also different from impact evaluations that place a strong focus on tracing cause and effect over the long-term, to demonstrate if an intervention actually produced desired results.

HIGH QUALITY EVALUATIONS

Good evaluations are those that:

- Meet the expectations of those commissioning the evaluation, as well as those of key stakeholders;

- Are useful for, and timely enough, to feed into decision-making processes at the organization - evaluations only have value when they are actually used; and

- Provide credible and trustworthy results, as well as pertinent and actionable recommendations.[3]

EVALUATIVE THINKING

Evaluative thinking is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action.\[^{[6]}\]

For PSEs, using constructive critical thinking is essential in conveying the complexity in UNCTAD’s operating environment. While UNCTAD interventions vary widely in terms of their levels of complexity, in reality, very few interventions have all the ideal elements in place for a relatively straightforward evaluation: a clearly defined outcome, a single causal pathway, SMART indicators, robust monitoring data, and stable implementation process. Instead, projects often encompass diverse and interlinked organizational mandates, constantly changing political and economic environments, uncertain funding, and new opportunities and challenges. Using linear methods to design, implement and evaluate these types of programmes and projects imposes strong limitations to their effectiveness and impact.

At the core of critical thinking lies the core evaluative question designed to address complexity: ‘what works in which circumstances and for whom?’ could include:

- **How do we know?**
- **What evidence do we have?**
- **How credible is that evidence?**
- **What are some alternative explanations?**
- **What assumptions are we operating under?**

Such an approach will allow programme/project managers and intended users to reflect critically on key aspects of the intervention, knowledge gaps, and the implications of evaluation findings, recommendations and lessons learned.[7]

Evaluative thinking should also provide reflections on innovations as UNCTAD continues to identify and develop approaches and solutions to complex development challenges, and inform adaptation in uncertain and dynamic conditions.

Any original concept, new or improved product, business model, process or service can be considered an innovation. Evaluations are an important prerequisite to scaling up or replication of innovations, which in turn are essential to ensuring coverage, impact and sustainability of development initiatives.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES: GENDER, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

UNCTAD project managers are required to assess the extent to which gender equality and women’s empowerment issues are sufficiently embedded in the interventions. It is also important to assess to what extent the intervention has contributed to the promotion and protection of human rights (including labor rights) or equity issues. In order to do this, a special section in the PSE template to create a report is included, for both project managers and stakeholders.

Besides addressing gender equality and human rights through a set of questions, the project manager should make all reasonable efforts to sure that gender is mainstreamed throughout the whole process of PSE, including gender balanced stakeholder participation on the PSE workshop. Women, as well as persons representing various (including vulnerable) groups, should be included in the consultation process, in order to be able to assess how the results of the project/programme benefited women and men from various groups.

Finally, where relevant, the evaluation should also assess the extent to which environmental sustainability considerations have been integrated into activities. This could involve mainstreaming environmental protection and sustainable natural resource management into project activities or mitigating any adverse environmental impacts of programmes and projects.

Human rights and gender responsive evaluations focus on creating space for the diversity of stakeholders involved in the intervention to engage directly in the evaluation and take some ownership over the evaluation process.
Project managers are encouraged to focus and adapt the PSE approach and methodology to fit the specific needs and context of their projects. They can also utilize additional data collection methods including interviews, focus group discussions or surveys with stakeholders to collect useful knowledge and experience of the project.

The standard PSE life cycle comprises of the following phases (see Annex 1 "Flowchart" for more details):

Similar to independent evaluations, the credibility of the information and data gathered for self-evaluations is very important for further analysis and conclusions. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the data, it is recommended to use a mixed-method approach, including more than a single source of data.

The quality of evidence is the basis of a credible evaluation.
I. PREPARATORY PHASE

The main deliverable of the preparatory phase is an evaluation plan in the related project document. EMU advises project managers to **plan for self-evaluations when project budgets are less than USD 1 million.**

Alternatively, project managers may choose to undertake a self-evaluation with the objective of **supplementing independent programme evaluations** with reflections at the project-level or **undertaking a mid-term self-evaluation to complement a final independent evaluation.**

The evaluation plan in a project document should encompass the following aspects: type of evaluation; objective; timing; budget; previous evaluations; roles and responsibilities and an optional evaluation matrix.

See [Annex II: Guidelines for Planning a Participatory Self-Evaluation](#), for more details.

II. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The project manager will draft the first version of the PSE (see parts A and B of Annex 3 Participatory Self-Evaluation Report Template). The project manager starts the PSE by filling in section A and B then circulates the document to relevant stakeholders.

The stakeholders fill in section C during a workshop or via email, and submit their responses to the project manager. The project manager then finalizes the PSE Report by filling in section D (consolidating feedback received in section C) and removing all pages with orange headings of section C to ensure anonymity of respondents.

The finalized PSE Report (i.e., sections A, B and D) is to be submitted to the EMU ([madeeha.bajwa@un.org](mailto:madeeha.bajwa@un.org) and [janna.sofroni@un.org](mailto:janna.sofroni@un.org)) for review and clearance, from an evaluation quality-assurance perspective.
Prior to commencing the PSE, an evaluation design needs to be thought through. Utilizing the evaluation report template (Annex 3, Part B), the project manager can identify key evaluative questions that will guide the assessment.

A useful way to construct the evaluation is by linking it with the results chain (as captured in the project/programme logical framework). See Figure 2* below for some examples of questions and results chain.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation design includes strategies to engage all stakeholder groups and is guided by a human rights and gender equality approach [8]. It has mechanisms to ensure confidentiality of sources and carefully considering any limitations as well as mitigating measures.

A key tool utilized by evaluators is an evaluation matrix. It is a planning as well as analysis tool used to ensure that the evaluation addresses the key questions in a sufficiently robust manner [9]. A comprehensive evaluation matrix, which will guide the evaluation team through the evaluation process outlines the evaluation criteria and questions, indicators and data for each question, data collection methods, data sources, sampling and lines of inquiries.

DATA COLLECTION

Desk review documents refer to all relevant project documents and these can include needs assessment and stakeholder analysis, original and updated programme/project plans, monitoring data, progress reports, and reports of any previously conducted evaluations.

It will also include material relevant to the topic and geographic location such as UNCTAD strategy documents, country/region specific plans, lessons learned from similar interventions, relevant strategies of other international or regional organizations on the topic under evaluation, documents and strategies in the light of the SDGs, research publications, etc.

Specific attention should be placed on documenting progress against indicators, utilizing means of verification as identified in the project logical framework.

There are a number of external resources that summarize good practice for desk reviews – see http://www.betterevaluation.org/resources/guides/document_review.

Project managers can also explore additional data collection techniques, to focus on specific lines of inquiry or build a stronger methodological basis. These can include:

- in-depth interviews (including by skype/telephone);[10]
- focus group discussions;[11]
- expert panels;[12]
- online surveys;[13] and
- case studies.

Appropriate tools and methodologies can be discussed further with EMU and adapted to suit the needs of the intervention.

DATA ANALYSIS

Although analysis of information and data occurs throughout the implementation stage, once data has all been collected, a different analytical process is undertaken. This involves systematically organizing, comparing and synthesizing information that was obtained through a mixed methods approach.

All data analysis should be strongly based on triangulation.[14] This will enable project managers to make judgments based on the evidence and to develop their findings, which their conclusions and recommendations will be based upon.

See Figure 4 for examples of analysed data and its use in the evaluation report.

[12] A variety of experts can be engaged when highly specialized input and opinion is required. The experts typically represent different fields. They are brought together during an evaluation in real-time, via on-line discussion forums, or e-mail exchanges to debate and discuss various courses of action and make recommendations.
[14] Triangulation involves using more than one option to gather data, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents.
The potential of utilizing big data for evaluations is promising yet unexplored in UNCTAD. Capturing different types of data from social media platforms, national statistics and third-party monitoring systems could help to estimate UNCTAD contributions to transformative change. In some cases, big data can also help where data gaps exist – for example, in some cases density of phone coverage can also be used as a proxy for level of economic development. Matching can be strengthened when satellite data is complemented by ICT (GPS mapping, remote sensors) or survey data. [15]

As part of a good evaluation report, the methodology should be clearly outlined and explained. In particular, any limitations and mitigating measures should be discussed.

http://unglobalpulse.org/sites/default/files/IntegratingBigData_intoMEDP_web_UNGP.pdf
DRAFTING THE REPORT

The report will be written on the basis of the project manager’s experience in implementing the project, a desk review of project and related documentation and stakeholder feedback on the project. The PSE report needs to be evidence-based, well-structured, balanced, clear and concise.

The main purpose of report is to inform stakeholders about the context of the intervention being assessed, the way in which the assessment was carried out, and evidence-based findings, conclusions and recommendations. The following considerations must be kept in mind when drafting the PSE:

**LOGIC**

Useful and quality reports systematically link evidence from the findings through to the conclusions and recommendations. The report must draw overall conclusions based on the evaluation findings, which are developed from the data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the lessons learned also need to be based on the findings and evidence presented in the report. The lessons learned should not be written as recommendations, nor as observations or descriptions.

**UTILITY**

The report should provide clear, useful, time-bound and actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing the project performance and improving the sustainability of results. The degree of utility will also be increased if the report is delivered in time for UNCTAD decision-making. It is at the discretion of the project manager to determine the most useful timing of the evaluation, whether at mid-term or at the end of the project (or both).

**CONTEXT**

The background of the project should be described in order to anchor the analysis in the relevant context. Sex-disaggregated data has to be presented and analyzed to understand gender context-related aspects.
In most cases, the main body of the report should not exceed 25-30 pages. Annexes should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Evaluation reports must avoid sexist or discriminatory language and stereotypes, and use inclusive and gender-sensitive writing.

Project managers must ensure that the PSE Report does not attribute findings or assessments to individual respondents.

Project managers can adapt the PSE template to suit their needs. The report should be carefully checked with respect to format, spelling and grammar before being submitted for review.

Once the first draft of the evaluation report has been drafted by the project manager, one of the following two PSE modalities must be utilized: workshop PSE or desk-based PSE.
The project manager drafts the PSE report and organizes a final workshop where the project manager (and/or other members of the project team – depending on funding availability) meets face-to-face with stakeholders to discuss the assessment of the project utilizing the evaluation criteria to assess progress against the project logical framework.

The workshop can be organized as a standalone event or merged with already planned project activities. For more complex projects, a dedicated end-of-project evaluation mission could be organized. Where such a mission is not foreseen, project managers are encouraged to organize the PSE workshop on the sidelines of final project workshops or meetings in the interest of efficiency.

The PSE Report Template should be circulated to project stakeholders in advance of the workshop in order to ensure meaningful discussions. The project manager then finalizes the PSE report based on the workshop outcomes.

If a workshop PSE is not feasible, the project manager drafts the PSE Report and incorporates feedback from project stakeholders (utilizing part C of Annex III). This can be circulated by mail or in the form of an online survey to stakeholders who then have the opportunity add their insights and experiences.

The project manager then finalizes the PSE report based on the written stakeholder feedback and circulates the report to project stakeholders for their review and comments (if any).

The output of both the workshop and the desk-based exercise is a PSE Report reflecting a common understanding between management and stakeholders with respect to the project interventions as well as a transparent appraisal of areas where there was a discrepancy in views. This report should be shared with stakeholders for their final review (prior to clearance phase).

See Figure 4 for factors to consider when choosing a PSE modality.
METHODOLOGY

Figure 4: Factors to consider when choosing a PSE modality

FACTORS TO CONSIDER
WHEN CHOOSING A PARTICIPATORY SELF-EVALUATION MODALITY

WORKSHOP
- **Pros**
  - Opportunity for real-time feedback and clarifications
  - Increased buy-in and ownership of process and results
  - Interactive learning experience for project team and stakeholders

- **Cons**
  - Requires coordination and additional resources

DESK-BASED
- **Pros**
  - Opportunity to reach increased number of geographically dispersed stakeholders
  - Provides stakeholders more time to submit their feedback

- **Cons**
  - No opportunity to achieve consensus on findings or to seek clarifications
III. CLEARANCE PHASE

The project manager shares the final PSE report with the EMU for review and clearance. Within a window of one week, EMU provides feedback from a quality-assurance perspective.

The report is then shared by the project manager to project stakeholders for any final comments and feedback. This version is then shared with EMU as the final document.

IV. FOLLOW-UP

Project managers disseminate the final PSE report to in-house and external project stakeholders, especially those that participated in the process. In addition, project management proactively seeks to implement and absorb recommendations in future initiatives.

Project managers can also organize learning events or present PSE findings to management and stakeholders to maximize utility and up-take of findings.

EMU, together with TCS and the RBM Focal Point, will also explore modalities to share findings and lessons learned identified in PSE reports to contribute to organizational learning, strengthen project implementation and inform future projects, programmes and policies.
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

MANAGEMENT

The Division Director holds the oversight responsibility for PSE exercises within the Division, and designates a PSE Manager – usually the responsible project manager - responsible for conducting the exercise. The PSE Manager is responsible for the inclusion of the evaluation plan in the project document and implementing the PSE, ensuring its timely completion as well as appropriate dissemination and follow-up. Particularly, she/he should prioritize relevant learning and accountability aspects of the evaluation and integration of PSE findings in decision-making.

STAKEHOLDERS

Given the number and diversity of stakeholders involved in a certain project or programme, getting the right mix of stakeholders to contribute is key, especially if the number of persons that can be involved in a PSE is limited. Efforts should also be made to ensure that the various stakeholders are represented at the appropriate level. While there is no single formula, a PSE should typically include some or all of the following: government officials, beneficiary institutions and direct beneficiaries (if the case), local M&E office, partners (NGOs, universities, international organizations etc.), donors, and relevant UNCTAD staff.

Stakeholders should be consulted and informed on their roles in the PSE as early in the process as possible. Also, if possible, it is recommended to establish a designated focal point from the different stakeholder groups to facilitate the process. Stakeholders provide their feedback on the project interventions against evaluation criteria.

Should some stakeholders only have participated in limited project activities, project managers should adapt the questionnaire (Part C of Annex III) to reflect the individual workshop/seminar/study tour/peer review. EMU can share adapted models for this purpose.
EMU will provide customized advice to the PSE Manager on evaluation planning and methods as well as drafting of the PSE report. EMU clears the PSE Report from a quality assurance perspective.

The Unit facilitates the process of promoting lessons learned and good practices generated from PSE, which will be taken into account in the annual evaluation synthesis report. The EMU does not follow up on the implementation of the PSE recommendations. PSEs are included in the EMU annual evaluation work-plan as part of the project clearance mechanism.

For learning purposes, Technical Cooperation Service and the Results Based Management (RBM) Focal Point can extract the key learning messages from PSEs, and disseminate as appropriate.

Confidentiality of sensitive information will be assured.
The PSE plan is the responsibility of the project manager during the project design phase as part of the minimum requirements for RBM. This Annex provides detailed information on relevant elements that should be included in the PSE plan. EMU clears all evaluation plans as part of the project clearance mechanism.

**THE PSE PLAN SHOULD COVER THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS:**

1. **OBJECTIVE**
   Indicate rationale for undertaking the evaluation and communicate, if available, intent with respect to the utilization of evaluation findings (e.g. inform mid-course corrections, capturing innovative dimensions, planning for future project phase, presenting findings at a specific event).

2. **MODALITY**
   Indicate whether a desk-review PSE or a workshop PSE will be undertaken.

3. **TIMING**
   Indicate when the PSE will be undertaken. In the case of project revisions and/or amendments, indicate whether initially planned evaluations are rescheduled.
ANNEX II: GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING A PARTICIPATORY SELF-EVALUATION

4. BUDGET

In cases where a standalone evaluation workshop will be conducted (i.e., not integrated into ongoing project activities), indicate the costs of the following (as needed): mission costs for PSE Manager; participant travel and DSA; venue (if not covered by the beneficiary government); materials/stationery; translation; and any other logistic costs. Additionally, if there is available budget, the project can recruit an external facilitator/consultant in designing and implementing the PSE.

5. PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Indicate if the project has undergone previous evaluation. Refer to how evaluation findings, lessons learned and recommendations have fed into the new project design. Consideration of lessons learned is one of the ten minimum requirements for RBM.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Indicate the specific role and responsibilities of the project manager, EMU, and stakeholders. (EMU has standard text for this section that can be adapted).

7. EVALUATION MATRIX

Mention the evaluation criteria and related questions to be explored in a matrix annexed to the project document (based on current DMFAS/ASYCUDA models). (OPTIONAL)
The PSE Report template serves as a guiding tool for project managers to adapt to their specific needs.

The template contains instructions in italics and dedicated sections for responses in four sections to be filled in by the project manager (Part A and Part B) and stakeholders (Part C):

(A) Project Information;
(B) Assessment of Project Performance;
(C) Stakeholder Feedback; and
(D) Summary.

The templates for parts A, B, and C are available for project managers in Word format to adapt as appropriate.

Find the templates at: