Writing an evaluation framework or plan

What are evaluation frameworks and plans?

Evaluation frameworks and plans are designed to provide guidance for evaluation – what will be evaluated and how evaluation will be conducted. Ideally, all proposed programs, trials or pilots will have built evaluation into their design, by way of a framework or plan.

Evaluation frameworks differ from evaluation plans in that frameworks focus on what needs to be evaluated (strategic) while plans detail how an evaluation will be conducted (operational). Specifically:

- an evaluation framework outlines the parameters of your approach to evaluate a program at multiple points in time or groups of programs at one or more points in time.
- an evaluation plan outlines how an evaluation will be conducted at an operational level. It is usually applied to a specific program, at a specific point in time.

Evaluation plans and frameworks should be informed by stakeholder input and draw from the evidence base of similar programs and evaluations.

When to develop a framework or a plan?

Evaluation frameworks and plans are best developed early in the program design process by whoever is conducting the evaluation, in consultation with the evaluation's decision-making authority and key stakeholders. The earlier you plan for your evaluation, the earlier you can ensure you have tools, systems and people in place to collect the information you need.

We're just starting to plan our evaluation. Should I be writing an evaluation plan, framework…or both?

Well, that depends on what you're evaluating.
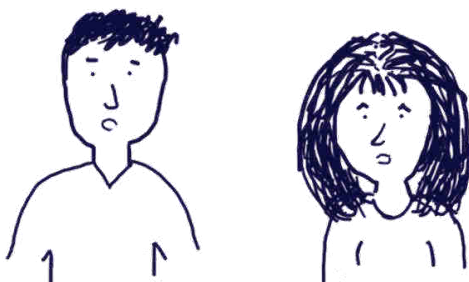
Evaluation frameworks

An evaluation framework is beneficial when evaluation is expected to be complex (e.g. include multiple programs) large-scale (e.g. a program with state-wide, multi-agency implementation) or conducted over many phases (that is, requiring several evaluation plans).

Frameworks are often required for system reforms, strategies, or whole-of-government initiatives.

For example:

A framework may be useful to underpin a 10-year program evaluation with a developmental focus. It would seek to integrate learnings from one evaluation cycle into the next. To implement, it may be necessary to rethink and adapt your design and methodological choices over time and develop a new evaluation plan for each new phase of evaluation.

Evaluation plans

An evaluation plan (or series of evaluation plans) may form part of a broader evaluation framework or be developed as a standalone document to support one-off evaluation of a program.

Program evaluation will always require an evaluation plan but not necessarily an evaluation framework.

KEY CONSIDERATION

Evaluation frameworks and plans have many common components (see table on the next two pages) but they differ in the level of detail they provide, as well as their intended use and audience.

For example:

Although both frameworks and plans outline the key questions that an evaluation will seek to answer about a program over time, evaluation plans will specify which of these questions will be answered (in part or in full) during the current data collection, analysis and reporting period. This will often involve outlining point-in-time:

- evaluation objectives, design choices, data sources, data collection instruments and methods
- sub-questions (that are realistic and measurable)
- logic models and theories of change
- stakeholder consultation strategies
- reporting and dissemination strategies.

What are the similarities and differences between evaluation frameworks and plans?

	Components	Evaluation Framework	Evaluation Plan
	Overview of program and evaluation objectives and scope The objective should be as specific and measurable as possible The scope may include the target population, geography or time period	✓	✓
	Principles of evaluation of programs Principles often underpin the evaluation approach and methodology. Examples are to ensure evaluation is: integrated with program design and delivery; accessible to inform decision making; fit for purpose; informed by evidence; adaptable, financially accountable; culturally and ethically sensitive.	✓	
	Key evaluative questions What are the questions that can be answered by the evaluation? These questions may apply to one or more programs. Common examples include asking about the extent to which a program: • had an appropriate design and implementation process • was efficiently delivered • was effective for whom, why and under what conditions • represented value for money • distributed benefits equitably and ethically to intended recipients?	✓	✓
	Pre-evaluation assessment May include evaluability assessments, feasibility studies or literature reviews that consider: relevant existing evidence or evaluation findings; what can be realistically achieved with access to data and stakeholders; resources, budget and timeframes; ethical, cultural, political or other issues to be managed	✓	✓
	Program logic reflecting the theory of change Program logic models can be presented as a conceptual framework for a whole system, groups of programs or individual programs. Generally, a program logic model should be designed to be iterative and adaptive so its theory of change can be informed by ongoing stakeholder feedback, program implementation, monitoring and review. Key components include program inputs, outputs, outcomes (directly or indirectly influenced by the program; short and long term), assumptions and threats to validity.	✓	✓
	Evaluation structure The broad structure for evaluation is usually communicated in an evaluation framework. For example, you may outline that there is evaluation planned for a single program (micro), a group of similar programs (meso) and/or a broad suite of related programs under an overarching initiative (macro). A flagship case study may be conducted by an independent, external provider while the lead implementation agency may conduct smaller scale evaluation with suitable support and training.	✓	
	Evaluation design Evaluation design choices should be linked to your key evaluation questions and informed by your pre-evaluation assessment, timeframes and the resources available. Each evaluation design will be unique to each program. Your chosen design will influence the type and level of evidence required and what methods may be used to collect, analyse and interpret data. Common design options to understand a program's effectiveness (ranked by the rigour of evidence they can generate to inform decision-making) include: experimental (e.g. randomised controlled trial), quasi-experimental (e.g. matched comparison, pre-post), non-experimental (intervention group only).		✓

Components	Evaluation Framework	Evaluation Plan
Evaluation approaches, methods and tools A range of approaches, methods and tools are available to support the execution of an evaluation design. Where possible, using multiple lines of inquiry and combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches will increase your likelihood of answering the evaluation's questions. For example, to address effectiveness of a policy affecting different cohorts of the population, an evaluator may triangulate quantitative surveys and qualitative research and incorporate contribution analysis, outcome mapping or realist evaluation. To address value for money of a social policy, an evaluator may conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis.		✓
Monitoring plan and performance reporting A monitoring plan can inform the evaluation and ensure ongoing measurement of key performance indicators across the life-span of the program. Regular, systematic collection and analysis of program data provides program managers and key stakeholders with an indication of how well a program is meeting its stated objectives. The monitoring plan may indicate when data are reported, to whom, and by whom. It may include a combination of primary and secondary data sources.	✓	✓
Data management plan Includes identifying data requirements for collecting, managing and reporting as well as describing data quality and limitations.	✓	✓
Governance An evaluation framework should outline the governance arrangements for a program or group of programs. These arrangements typically include clear accountabilities, processes for oversight and decision-making, information sharing arrangements, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and processes for managing risks, ethical concerns, privacy and cultural sensitives relevant to evaluation.	✓	✓
Evaluation resources The human and financial resources expected or required for evaluation. An evaluation framework may explain whether evaluation will be conducted within agencies or be commissioned. It may describe the guidance, support and level of capacity building that may be provided, and by whom.	✓	✓
Stakeholder engagement and communication Outlines when, how and by whom evaluation products will be delivered. The evaluation's timeline should align with the program's implementation timeline (and any other relevant timelines, such as the Cabinet or Budget cycle). This will inform when you should plan to collect, analyse and report data and who should be involved in each phase.	✓	✓
Glossary of terms	✓	✓