

Writing Better Evaluation Questions

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ON THE COMMISSIONER'S SIDE

Commissioners can have a hard time formulating evaluation questions (EQ), if only because the stakeholders involved in this initial process do not always know what they want to ask, or how an evaluation can answer their concerns.

Commissioners have a technical role in turning these concerns or vague interrogations into EQ. They should ensure that these are *evaluation* questions, i.e. interrogating the assumptions of an intervention or its actual consequences – not merely descriptive questions, or questions related to audit or control concerns.

Commissioners should acknowledge that formulating evaluation questions is an iterative process. During the whole process of collecting evaluation-related questions from decision makers and other stakeholders and formulating them, commissioners should observe three rules:

- it should be possible to **learn from the answer**. Commissioners should verify what people know, think they know, do not know about the interventions and its consequences. An EQ should call for empirical evidence in support of claims.
- **the questions should clarify what is judged and how**. What would be a positive or a negative answer to the EQ, and why, is an important matter of discussion in an evaluation.
- **they should help solve identified problems**. It is necessary to have an initial understanding of the stakeholders' agenda or the issues they currently face and see where the answer to the EQ would fit.

It should not be presumed that the evaluation stakeholders know what they want, apply explicit values to the evaluated intervention or understand the problems they are facing and how evidence and judgement can help them address them. This is why the apparently simple process of asking questions can be long and complicated.

Commissioners should therefore plan for sufficient time at the beginning of the evaluation to rephrase or reframe the questions, with the help of evaluators. It's OK to have vague, too numerous, or too generic questions if formulating a small number of relevant questions is explicitly identified as an evaluation step. In the end, **commissioners should ensure that the evaluation stakeholders own the questions and are actually expecting the answers**.

ON THE EVALUATOR'S SIDE

Evaluators will often have a significant role in the final wording of the evaluation questions, not to mention breaking them down into sub-questions or criteria. It is easy for an evaluator to use their expertise to rephrase questions; it is better to make the EQ formulation process explicit to support ownership. It typically includes using theories of change or other causal maps (e.g. for unintended effects); or relying on checklists or predefined lists of evaluation criteria.

Evaluators should work against their own biases and common good practices, and ensure that they are:

- **keeping room for manoeuvre**, e.g. by keeping some leeway in how EQs are phrased. EQ should not be too vague, it's true. But in many cases, when the evaluation begins, evaluators do not know what is worth investigating and why. They are not aware of the (sometimes very) different perspectives that are attached to an intervention.
- **sufficiently aware of the implications of answering the questions**. Even when initial EQs are vague or generic, they have a purpose. Evaluators should understand why a question is asked and for what reason. It may be about gaining knowledge, solving issues, or defending (or attacking) against other models or stakeholders, or supporting decisions already taken, etc. It is then up to the evaluator's ethics to make choices about whether they will decide to challenge these questions or not (for instance asking themselves if, ultimately, answering that question serves the needs of the programme).
- **not too reasonable**. Evaluators tend to make prudent assumptions, often implicit, about what an organisation can realistically achieve or not. They may subsequently reduce the ambitions stated in a question accordingly. And yet, it can be a role of the evaluation to directly challenge grand political objectives and show the discrepancy between the means and the outcomes. They can rather voice their doubt and examine the plausibility of assumptions underlying the questions before data collection is engaged.
- **not limiting the scope of the questions to their area of expertise or comfort zone**. They should however express their own limitations in answering a question and see if they can be addressed. Evaluators also sometimes see evaluations as opportunities to pursue their pet projects, which is fine so long as it doesn't interfere with or hijack the project. As a general rule, evaluators should answer evaluation questions only (an evaluation is not an audit or an expert advice), but in practice, caveats may apply.
- **not avoiding political risk**, e.g. by softening a question too much or turning difficult subjects into vague interrogations in anticipation of future conflicts. The evaluation approach can be made to integrate conflict early on, for instance by mapping existing controversies.