

UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL
ASSEMBLY



Distr.
GENERAL

A/34/286/Add.1
12 November 1979

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Thirty-fourth session
Agenda item 101

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on a glossary of evaluation terms

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Glossary of Evaluation Terms" (A/34/286).

ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee
on Co-ordination

I. General remarks

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on a glossary of evaluation terms (JIU/REP/78/5), prepared by Inspector Earl D. Sohm, is a further contribution by the Unit to the establishment of effective evaluation processes in the United Nations system, based on commonly accepted concepts and techniques. This report is a follow-up to the previous report by the Unit on evaluation in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/77/1), ^{1/} in which it was recommended that a glossary of evaluation terms be developed, a recommendation endorsed by ACC in its comments on that report (E/1978/12).

2. In the first chapter, the report outlines the historical background of evaluation in the United Nations system and recalls that it originated from the perceived need to measure the impact of technical co-operation projects. Attempted now on a broader scale and with a more comprehensive coverage, evaluation exercises employ, according to the Inspector, a loose and imprecise terminology in which the various concepts used have not yet been given a commonly accepted definition.

3. ACC agrees with the Inspector that a gradual approach is necessary and that this first attempt at a glossary should not seek to create rigid definitions of evaluation terminology, but rather to encourage a movement towards further common understanding, and the reduction of confusion and disagreement, to the extent that these arise from the absence of an agreed terminology.

4. The report offers a definition of 24 "basic evaluation terms", together with an explanation of the relationship between some of these terms, and a useful compilation of excerpts showing how these terms are used or defined by several organizations of the United Nations system. While no glossary could fully reflect all the practices of individual organization and some adjustment in practice will therefore be necessary to develop a common vocabulary, its advantages outweigh its disadvantages. The glossary developed by the Inspector will greatly enhance communication between organizations on evaluation-related matters by reducing the need for each organization to define its terms in each instance or to interpret terms used by other organizations. One of the incidental benefits of this initiative is that the glossary will be available in all official languages and that key terms will no longer need to be translated by individual organizations in an approximate manner.

^{1/} Circulated to members of the General Assembly under the symbol A/33/225.

II. Comments on the definitions

5. The ACC accepts the definition offered for the term "evaluation", which is broad and general enough to be widely acceptable while remaining precise enough to be meaningful. It defines evaluation by its purposes, its requirements, its constraints, its means and its benefits, and also by a series of a contrario statements of what evaluation should not be. This definition is given in slightly different working in paragraphs 17 and 18 on the one hand and 20 and 21 on the other hand.

6. In both places the report differentiates between "ongoing evaluation" and "ex post evaluation". Ongoing evaluation is defined as "the analysis during the implementation phase of an activity of its continuing relevance and present and likely outputs, effectiveness and impact" and is conceived in paragraph 21 "as either an interim or a continuing activity". The definition is supported in the annex by excerpts from texts received from the World Bank and the ILO.

7. Ex post evaluation is defined as "the analysis after completion of an activity of its relevance, effectiveness, and impact ... summarizing lessons learned as input for future planning". While ACC can readily accept the definition offered for ex post evaluation, the concept of ongoing evaluation as a continuing activity conducted in parallel with implementation raises problems with certain organizations. In many broad programmes of the United Nations system, in the economic and social areas, strategies come to fruition after a decade or even longer, and being to show discernible results only after several years. Although delivery of outputs by and continued relevance of such programmes can and should be checked either continuously or rather from time to time, their effectiveness and impact could hardly be assessed before a significant stage in these long-range activities has been reached. Some agencies would prefer to regard the checking of outputs and relevance rather as a monitoring than as an evaluation procedure. In the case of narrower, more specialized and shorter-term activities, however, the concept of ongoing evaluation is acceptable to many agencies.

8. The definitions offered for "internal" and "external" evaluation are also acceptable. An example of institutional arrangements for internal evaluation which proved successful in the United Nations was the establishment, under the guidance of a steering committee composed of high-ranking officials, of an ad hoc evaluation team including (a) staff from the unit responsible for the activity, (b) planning and programming staff and (c) staff from other substantive parts of the Organization.

9. The definition proposed for the term "project" is very general and cannot raise any objection in principle. However, it should be noted that most of the examples quoted below refer to field activities. This might make it desirable, in the context of the United Nations system, to propose a narrower definition more in line with UNDP terminology. Some agencies have difficulties with the explanation offered in parenthesis, which equates a project to a programme element. The agreed ACC terminology for programme planning has adopted the term programme

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element and defined it as "a project" ... or "a continuing activity with a measured output". Thus a project is one type of programme element among others. Despite this AAC recommendation, it seems that the word project has still quite different acceptations in different agencies. If the word project is to be accepted and recognized as a basic evaluation concept, it might be useful to try and give it a more precise and restricted definition.

10. While some agencies accept the proposed definition and use of the word process as a basic evaluation concept, others note that this word is not part of their evaluation terminology, but it is generally used to mean "a course of action and method of operation" ^{2/} and would prefer to continue to designate, in planning, programme budgeting and evaluation terminology, the operations of a continuous and supporting nature, exemplified by the report, by the words "continuing functions".

11. Regarding the term "appraisal", the annex, at page 6, quotes a number of examples of the use of this term to mean the assessment of a projected technical co-operation activity prior to its commencement. It should be noted, however, that the General Assembly uses also the term in the sense of an interim of ex post facto assessment, as in the case of the review and appraisal of the United Nations development decades. These review and appraisal exercises are of the nature of an evaluation operation. "Appraisal" is another term which is used with different acceptations in different agencies. Some clarification would be desirable to avoid confusion in this respect.

12. The ACC agrees with the definitions proposed for "monitoring", "inspection" and "audit". In the latter case, however, it should be noted that in the United Nations both the Board of Auditors and the Internal Audit Service are attempting to introduce a concept of "programme auditing".

13. The term "methodology" might usefully be qualified to become "evaluation methodology" while retaining the proposed definition.

14. The concept of programme objectives in the United Nations system is probably the most important in a glossary and the least amenable to a commonly agreed definition. One of the reasons for this may be that several definitions are conceivable, applicable to diverse situations, types of programmes and different views of legislative organs throughout the system. It might be useful to continue the reflexion and discussion on the concept of programme objectives in the United Nations system before one or several satisfactory definitions can be agreed upon. At this stage some agencies would like to offer the further comments, which we set forth below.

15. In the economic and social development areas, there is still uncertainty about what legislative organs would wish objectives to be at the programme or subprogramme level. Whether programme objectives are to be merely the delivery of secretariat outputs, the Organization is intent to alleviate world problems or

^{2/} For example, the request of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination for "an in-depth study of the planning process in the United Nations".

joint goals of the United Nations organizations and Member States for transforming situations within countries or regions, has not as yet been clarified. This problem has been discussed in other reports by the Joint Inspection Unit on programme planning.

16. As the report states (A/34/286, para. 31), the United Nations system objectives could and probably should be conceived in terms of a series of hierarchical levels. However, the hierarchy might need to be broadened beyond the two proposed levels, especially in the case of system-wide activities. Between the delivery of outputs of limited scope by a secretariat and the fulfilment of the most ambitious ideals of the United Nations system, as set by resolutions such as those on the new international economic order, there is room for several layers of objectives, each higher objective going beyond the range of what can be reasonably achieved when the objectives at the level immediately below have been reached.

17. As indicated in paragraph 32 of the report, in the hierarchical chain of objectives, the link between a given level and the one above would be a set of assumptions. These assumptions may in many cases be of a broader character than the instances listed in that paragraph. The hierarchy of objectives and the related sets of assumptions linking them would have to be considered in conjunction with each other when trying to "measure the effectiveness and impact of United Nations activities in the light of their objectives" in the evaluation process. Evaluation should carefully consider whether failure to reach an upper level objective is attributable mainly to internal defects in the programme conception, to implementation or to the fact that an external state of affairs, the existence of which had been assumed but which United Nations organizations could not influence, did not materialize.

18. ACC can agree with the definition of "indicators" proposed in paragraph 34. Certain agencies, however, would like to draw attention to the fact that there is a strong relation between the level of the objectives assigned to a programme and the type of indicators that would enable the evaluators to measure the extent to which those objectives had been achieved. Most examples quoted in the report would relate to objectives assigned to technical co-operation projects, that is, they are appropriate for objectives at the programme element level. While in certain agencies a large proportion of programme activities to be evaluated would consist of technical co-operation projects, this is not the case in all programmes and all agencies. Another example offered for achievement indicators is that "unemployment rates" might relate to the highest level of objectives. Independently of the complexities of measuring unemployment and underemployment, achievements at the national level in this area depend on a number of factors of national and international policies, of which the action of the United Nations system is only one - and certainly not the most decisive. Therefore, achievement indicators at that level, as well as in the case of illiteracy rates, cannot provide adequate yardsticks for measuring the impact of activities in the United Nations system.

19. The broad and simple definition of "output" proposed in the report is acceptable as a preliminary one. It should be noted, however, that in response to a recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit in its report on programming and

evaluation (A/33/226, chap. VII, recommendation 2), the Secretary-General has undertaken to submit to the General Assembly a report on the nomenclature and definition of output. This study is under preparation for submission to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination at its twentieth session in 1980.

20. ACC agrees with the definition of "impact" in paragraph 36, but notes that it differs from that given in paragraph 19, where impact is referred to as "a positive change". The neutral language of paragraph 36, referring simply to "the changes produced" is preferable, since an evaluation of the impact of an activity should examine its negative and unintended as well as positive and intended results.

21. ACC accepts in principle the definitions proposed for "relevance", "effectiveness", "efficiency" and "cost-effectiveness". It should be noted, however, that, while the effectiveness of a project can usually be assessed with a reasonable degree of accuracy, especially if the output is trained staff, an institution, a factory or an agricultural development, the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of such outputs as policy guidelines, information, exchange of experience, technical guidance in the form of a manual and, a fortiori, the effectiveness of a whole programme delivering at various times several outputs of various types may be difficult to measure, since no widely agreed methodology, criteria or standards are available. It should also be noted that the examples given under "effectiveness" are all relative and seem to presuppose two projects that are so similar in location, timing and other attributes that a simple comparison between them is possible. This happy situation rarely occurs.

22. Regarding the definition and examples proposed for "cost-benefit analysis", the report of the Joint Inspection Unit states that "such analysis is very difficult to perform satisfactorily" (A/34/286, para. 42). ACC agrees with this assessment, especially in the case of programme activities of the United Nations system. Evaluation exercises have been performed in the United Nations system at the project level for quite a period of time. When the physical and financial characteristics of the project permitted, cost-benefit analyses have been attempted in many instances, with various degrees of success. Evaluation at the programme level is more recent in the United Nations system and, so far, cost-benefit analyses have not been considered relevant to this level of programme evaluation. If, after more experience was gained and methodology improved to the extent that such analyses were considered to be of some relevance, the glossary would have to be expanded to include such distinctions as the difference between market and social costs and such related terms as "shadow-pricing", "internal rate of return", "externality" and so on.

III. Recommendations of the report

23. The glossary is an attempt "to identify current and past definitions which have achieved some degree of consensus at various levels within the United Nations system, and to work towards further consensus as to common system-wide meanings" (A/34/286, para. 14). It is understood that the glossary does not seek to create rigid new definitions of evaluation terminology and that "it will not be possible

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to obtain total agreement on each and every term" (A/34/286, para. 15). Given this flexible approach, which makes it possible to accommodate in the future development of a common terminology the foregoing comments, ACC accepts the recommendation that the glossary "be adopted as the general framework for evaluation-related terms for use by the United Nations system" (A/34/286, para. 43). Indeed some organizations, like UNESCO, have already formally adopted the glossary, with the necessary adaptations, while preserving the structure of its basic framework.

24. The ACC looks forward to the progressive development and refinement of the glossary in the light of its comments and suggestions and of the further consultations with the Joint Inspection Unit which it would welcome.