

What is the purpose of evaluation?

**Presentation by Jeff Crisp,
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I would like to use this presentation to address a very basic question: what is the purpose of evaluation?

At first sight, the answer to this question would appear to be quite straightforward. As most evaluation textbooks will tell you, the purpose of evaluation is to review the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization in meeting its planned objectives. According to this definition, evaluation is intended to act as a catalyst for organizational change and improvement, by providing managers with useful information, intelligent analysis and feasible recommendations.

During the past two-and-a-half years, we have tried to put these principles into practice. From the evaluation of UNHCR's role in the Kosovo emergency, which was published at the beginning of 2000, to the review of UNHCR's work with refugee children, which was completed last month, we have seen how evaluations have the potential to make an important contribution to the process of organizational change.

We should not overestimate that contribution. Evaluations alone rarely lead to major change. But when they are combined with a recognition of the need for change by senior management, and when they are supported by an organization's key stakeholders, evaluations can have a significant impact on the way that an organization goes about its business.

While organizational change is clearly a primary objective of the evaluation function, I would like to suggest that evaluation has a number of other and equally important purposes. And I am going to discuss those purposes under seven main headings.

1. Reinforcing accountability

The issue of corporate and individual accountability has been a prominent feature of the humanitarian discourse in recent years. Recent events in West Africa, where humanitarian workers are alleged to have been involved in the sexual exploitation of refugee girls, have demonstrated the continued relevance of this issue.

One of the principal purposes of the evaluation function is to reinforce the accountability of UNHCR to its key stakeholders. And when I speak of key stakeholders I mean accountability not only to those states which sit on the Executive Committee, but also refugees, other beneficiaries, partner organizations and UNHCR's staff members. Indeed, a key function of evaluation in UNHCR is to ensure that all of these different actors have a chance to voice their opinions and assessment of UNHCR's activities.

UNHCR's new evaluation policy statement introduces procedures that will maximize the extent to which evaluation serves the purpose of reinforcing accountability. These include a pledge to facilitate the active participation of beneficiaries in evaluation activities, as well as a commitment to the highest possible standards of transparency and independence. We call upon the states and other actors represented in this room to commit themselves to similar approaches in their own evaluation activities.

2. Facilitating institutional and individual learning

Evaluators have a bad reputation in many organizations. And that bad reputation is often justified. For in too many cases, evaluation is concerned primarily with criticism. It focuses on what went wrong and on what failed to work.

No-one would deny the need for organizations to learn from their mistakes. At the same time, the evaluation function has a responsibility to identify examples of good practice and to draw attention to successful initiatives which might be replicated elsewhere. In this respect, there is considerable scope for evaluation findings to be used as a basis for training activities.

UNHCR has made some progress in this respect, with the result that evaluation findings are now being incorporated more systematically in the organization's learning programmes. But we have not yet fully exploited the potential of this relationship, and it is an area where we will strive to do better in the months to come.

3. Team-building

In some organizations a very clear distinction is made between the people who do evaluations and the people whose work is evaluated. Not surprisingly, the latter have a tendency to resent the work of the former. In this respect, evaluation can act as a divisive force.

In UNHCR, we believe that evaluation has the potential to bring people together. Rather than provoking disunity, evaluation can be used to facilitate the task of team-building.

We are increasingly using evaluation methods which serve that particular purpose. One example of this approach is to be found in the establishment of Steering Committees for each evaluation project - committees which bring together a cross section of UNHCR staff members with an interest in a particular programme or policy. Another example is to be found in the use of evaluation workshops, where UNHCR staff members have the opportunity to discuss and develop a consensus on the organization's approach to a specific issue. As stated in our new evaluation policy, we intend to make more systematic use of such approaches in future.

4. Strengthening partnerships

One of the weaknesses of the evaluation function in the humanitarian sector is the extent to which it focuses on the work of individual agencies. This problem became particularly apparent during the Kosovo crisis, when at least 25 different humanitarian actors undertook separate evaluations of their work. A similar problem is emerging in relation to Afghanistan

In UNHCR, we believe that evaluation has an important role to play in strengthening partnership between humanitarian actors, thereby enabling those organizations to review their work in a more collective and comprehensive manner. It is for this reason that we have undertaken joint evaluations with agencies such as OCHA, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, as well as a number of Executive Committee members.

Unfortunately, we are still a long way from undertaking genuinely system-wide evaluations of humanitarian operations. And perhaps we will never attain that very ambitious goal. Nevertheless, we believe that the increased use of joint and inter-agency evaluations is a step in the right direction.

5. Promoting understanding

Someone recently said that the recommendations provided by an evaluation project are much less important than the analysis on which those recommendations are based. In the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, we would tend to agree with that statement.

Contrary to the opinion of many people, the purpose of evaluation is not simply the implementation of recommendations. Another, and arguably more important purpose of the evaluation function, is to promote organizational and individual understanding. And by that I mean an understanding of the operational environment in which UNHCR has to work; an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of UNHCR's own activities; and an understanding of the interests and behaviour of the other actors with whom UNHCR is obliged to work.

Evaluation, in other words, is a form of intelligence. If conducted and disseminated effectively, it should assist UNHCR managers and staff members to make intelligent decisions about the policies and programmes for which they are responsible.

6. Supporting advocacy efforts

Evaluation and advocacy are not usually regarded as related activities. While evaluation is thought to be about impartial and dispassionate analysis, advocacy is perceived as the partisan promotion of particular causes and interests.

I think that this traditional view is based on a misunderstanding of both functions. On one hand, it is entirely legitimate for evaluations to be used as a means of drawing attention to particular refugee issues or situations, especially those which have been neglected or forgotten by the international community.

On the other hand, I believe that advocates have a responsibility to base their promotional efforts on accurate information and coherent analysis. Evaluations, I believe, provide exactly the kind of information and analysis that advocates could and indeed should be using.

7. Influencing organizational culture

I would like to conclude by suggesting that a primary purpose of the evaluation function is to influence the organizational culture of UNHCR.

Evaluation, I would like to suggest, embodies a number of principles which are of considerable organizational value. If it is undertaken in the right way, evaluation encourages staff members to assess the impact of their work. It encourages them to strive for improved performance. It promotes an inquisitive, self-critical and transparent approach to the work of UNHCR. It contributes to the development of UNHCR's institutional memory. And it can be used to operationalize that part of the UNHCR mission statement which says that beneficiaries have a right to be consulted about decisions that affect their lives.

The Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit is committed to these principles, and will do its best to promote them within UNHCR.

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