

NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

EVALUATION POLICY

▶ ▶ LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE



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1. INTRODUCTION

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is a non-governmental humanitarian organisation. Humanitarian programs are to some extent different from regular development co-operation programs, as they often operate under considerable time pressure and in rapidly changing contexts. Daily working environment in NRC, both at headquarters (HQ) and in the field, is characterised by rapidly changing environments, fast start-up in new emergencies and large staff turn-over. This means that it is crucial for the organisation to have systems for linking together the acquisition of knowledge taking place in the field and in the headquarters, for collection and institutionalizing the experience gained and lessons learned from a micro to macro level, and between training and further development of personnel at home and in the field.

The policy paper of Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) states that NRC is an experienced-based expertise organisation. NRC is with this evaluation policy document introducing an evaluation policy that is intended to make further contribution towards NRC's capacity for organisational learning, performance review and accountability.

This policy takes effect on 1st July 2005.

2. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE POLICY DOCUMENT

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is committed to increasing and improving

- the level of evaluation activity within the organisation
- the staffs knowledge on evaluation planning and management
- the effectiveness of its evaluations methods and management
- the utilization of evaluation findings and recommendations

The objective of this document is to

- outline why, how and when NRC should use evaluations
- provide improved knowledge on evaluation planning and management
- ensure that the evaluations undertaken will meet the need of NRC and be in accordance with mandate and the policy program as well as commonly agreed principles and criteria for evaluations
- ensure commitment to organisational learning and accountability

While an Evaluation Advisor at NRC HQ will be the focal point for evaluation activities in NRC, particular effort will be made to develop a broader sense of ownership and involvement in relation to the evaluation function. There is a need to develop an organisational culture within NRC that is amenable to the development of an effective evaluation function.

This implies that ¹

- managers are fully committed to organisational learning and performance review
- using evaluation to bring about change is positively encouraged
- staff are held accountable for the activities they manage

With the introduction of this evaluation policy, NRC will increase its level of evaluation activity in a principled manner and more systematic and dynamic approaches to the utilization of evaluation findings will be introduced. As a result the organisation will appear more professional and transparent.

To support the introduction of this new evaluation policy, NRC HQ will also provide a number of additional resources:

- NRC resource folder on evaluation (tool kit)
- database – e-team evaluators (consultants, consultant companies)

¹ UNHCR's evaluation policy, September 2002

3. THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

There are several ways of describing and defining evaluations, and how it compares and is distinguished from monitoring and review. Drawing upon the description used by the Acting Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), NRC defines evaluation as:

«A systematic and impartial examination of humanitarian action intended to draw lessons to improve policy and practice and enhance accountability».

Evaluation is one component of NRC's broader performance review framework, which also includes activities such as inspection (field visits), annual audit and monitoring. Monitoring can be defined as a

«Continuous collection and analysis of information to assess project progress²».

Monitoring is complementary to evaluation and is normally carried out by project staff for project management. Monitoring is a cost-effective way of adding value to the humanitarian endeavour and is crucial for the organisational learning process.

The purpose of evaluations is a combination of learning, guidance and control based on an assessment of what has been achieved and the process that has led to it. An evaluation is intended to provide information that is both credible and applicable. It shall be performed in such a way as to satisfy the need for adequate information for decision-making purposes at both the operative and strategic levels. Hence, the goal of an evaluation will usually be two-fold:

- a) A retrospective review for validation and control. i.e. getting an independent verification of effectiveness, impact, relevance and sustainability of the activity performed
- b) A more future-oriented review aimed at learning and administration, i.e. facilitating better decisions and developing better tools to work with current or new activities.

Hence, the primary purpose of NRC's evaluation function is to

Provide NRC managers and staff with useful information, analysis and recommendations, thereby enabling the organisation to engage in effective policymaking, planning, programming and implementation.

The value of the evaluation depends on the follow up, that is, on how the information produced affects future decisions. Hence, the end users of the results should be clearly identified right from the start, as should the decisions the evaluation results could potentially be used to support, and thus the consequences various evaluation scenarios might entail.

NRC will strive to ensure that inspection, audit, program monitoring and evaluation function in a coherent and complementary manner.

4.1. Types of evaluation

NRC recognises the diversity of evaluation types and encourages managers to select the most appropriate approach. The types of evaluation NRC chooses in a given situation or period should respond to the organisations need for lessons learned policy development etc. Below are some examples relevant for NRC:

a) Country programs

Evaluation of the totality of NRC's activities in a given country or situation. It should also include an evaluation of the performance of the NRC country team.

b) Individual projects/programs

Evaluation of an individual project/program, e.g. an education project, in a specified country.

c) Core activity (sector)

The NRC policy to focus on a set of core activities, gives a good opportunity to enhance the knowledge and lessons learned across country programs, and to «test» how different models and program design will work in different contexts.

d) Cross-cutting or other thematic issues

Evaluations can be focused on a policy or one theme across a number of projects or country programs, or across the organisation as a whole. Thematic evaluations can be good tools for developing policy issues. Relevant themes for NRC would be: protection, advocacy, gender, participation, environmental issues, coping strategies, inclusion of non-traditional target groups (local population and ex-combatants) among the target groups and HIV/Aids.

e) Organisation and management

Evaluations can also be focused on a policy, a function or a set of procedures. Organisations like NRC will have to periodically adapt structure and procedures to new needs and challenges. Evaluations can help to assess the effectiveness and rationale of new systems, organisational models and decision making procedures at head office as well as in the field. Organisation and management may well also be an element in country or project/ program evaluations.

4.2. When to evaluate

The timing of the evaluation is crucial for how it can feed into strategic decision making and policy development. There will sometimes be «windows of opportunity» where recommendations from an evaluation will have greater potential to change and improve practice and policy.

Evaluations can be conducted:

a) At an early stage of an operation (in «real time»)

The starting up of NRC projects and programs is often taking place in an emergency situation, and thus planning must be rapid and swift. Adding changing humanitarian needs etc., and there might be a need for evaluations and assessments.

b) Mid-point

This will usually take place when the project/program has been running for a while, and there are pending decisions on if and how to continue. Working in unstable and changing environments increases the need for «stepping back» and recheck the relevance of goals and strategy, as well as determine whether programs are relevant to changed context.

c) After finalising a project or a program

Evaluations have often been based on very broad mandates requesting detailed analysis of the developments throughout the life of a project/program. The result has often been a much too detailed analysis at the expense of more decision-oriented analysis at a higher level. With appropriate monitoring systems and sufficiently frequent and comprehensive project reviews, there should be no need for detailed historical investigations when the project/program is evaluated. Rather, the evaluation team should be able to concentrate on the evaluation itself, i.e. to assess the impact and relevance of the project/program and lessons learned in order to improve future projects/programs.

4.3. What to evaluate

Planning and evaluation goes hand in hand. It is assumed that there is a general agreement about the improved situation before project planning takes place, as this will make it possible to agree on the purpose and the goal of the project/program. It is important that the desired future situation is described in such a way that it is possible to check at a later stage to what extent the project/program has been successful in relation to its objectives and the target groups.

Further, a project/program is based on input of resources, the implementation of certain activities, and will result in a number of outputs which are expected to contribute to the desired objectives. If (overall) goal, purpose, outputs and activities are not clearly stated in the project/program design, it is very difficult to evaluate the effectiveness, impact and relevance of the project/program in relation to its objectives, target groups and other affected parties, and in relation to its inputs. Hence, in order to make evaluation an integrated part of planning, project/program design and evaluation design must be seen as a single unit.

Country strategies, action plans and project applications should include plans for evaluations.

Below are some of the evaluation criteria that are most central to NRC:

a) NRC mandate and overall objective: Protection and durable solutions

Evaluation of efficiency, effectiveness, impact, relevance and sustainability of a NRC project/program must always relate to NRC mandate and overall objectives: «...to promote and protect the rights of all people who have been forced to flee (...)». To the extent possible, all evaluations undertaken or commissioned by NRC will include a focus on protection and human rights issues. Evaluations of NRC programs should reflect whether assessments of protection needs has taken place, if the programs were designed and implemented according to protection concerns and to what extent protection needs were met. Evaluation questions should also include advocacy efforts, whether advocacy concerns were raised, and how.

b) Efficiency

Efficiency measures how well the various project activities have transformed the available resources into the intended results (outputs). Were the things done right? Value-for-money is an important aspect here: could similar results have been achieved by other means at lower costs but in the same time?

Key questions:

- How much, in terms of time and resources (material, financial and human) has it taken to achieve whatever has been achieved? (This requires a detailed cost/resource analysis).
- Could they have been achieved with fewer inputs?
- What constraints and opportunities existed or developed which have, or could have, influenced resource costs (e.g. particular problems which may have reduced efficiency, or opportunities which may have increased efficiency)?
- Were the right staff and materials (logistics and procurement) available in the right place at the right time?

c) Effectiveness

Effectiveness concerns how far the project's results were used or their potential realised, in other words, whether they achieved the project purpose. The key question is what difference the project/program made in practice, as measured by how far the intended beneficiaries really benefited from the products or services made available.

Key questions:

- What do the project documents say would be done? How well have the objectives been achieved?
- What results were achieved based on an analysis of key indicators and standards (e.g. SPHERE and other sources)?
- To what extent did the targeted direct and indirect beneficiaries actually benefit from the project?
- What do beneficiaries and others say about the value, quality and quantity?
- («coverage») of the project?

d) Impact

DAC defines impact as

«The totality of positive and negative, primary and secondary effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended».

NRC's primary interest is to measure the impact of the program on the target group (refugees and internally displaced persons). This should not exclude the assessment of the intended or unintended effects on the local population, the environment, the conflict or other factors, according to the «Do no harm» principle.

Key questions:

- What positive effects (intended/unintended) are produced by the intervention?
- Any negative unintended effects produced by the intervention?
- Are we producing the most appropriate impact, given the situation and resources available?

e) Relevance

When measuring relevance one checks whether the objectives, project design and activities are consistent with the humanitarian and protection needs and the situation in general. Complementarily and coherence with related activities undertaken by other actors is also an important component of relevance.

Key questions:

- Who chose and designed the projects/program in the first place, how and why?
- Are we doing the right thing?
- What alternatives exist (including non-emergency programs)?
- Does the project/program make sense?

f) Sustainability

An assessment of the extent to which the positive effects of the project/program will still continue after external assistance has been concluded. As already stated, most of NRC's activities are of an emergency or «medium-term» nature, and not long term development programs. NRC must nevertheless ensure that NRC projects and programs are carried out in a context which takes long-term and inter-connected problems into account.

Key questions:

- Are the changes that have been achieved likely to be sustained?
- How long should and will that impact last? Can/how can monitoring and evaluation systems track impact?

4.4. Who does the evaluation?

One can distinguish between external and internal evaluations. Internal evaluations are cheaper and more cost effective as the evaluator(s) know the basics (mandate, program areas etc). In addition, they provide ownership and create learning. However, NRC's main focus is on external evaluations as they are most likely to be impartial (ref. definition of evaluations). However, evaluations can also be conducted by a team consisting of external consultants, NRC employees and stakeholders (mixed evaluation teams).

5. THE CONDUCT OF EVALUATIONS IN NRC

A minimum of one evaluation in each NRC program country should be conducted every second year. The international department is responsible for the identification of evaluation projects in the program countries.

Management (including Country Directors), program coordinators, advisors and project leaders should have knowledge of how to plan, manage and follow up evaluations as well as basic knowledge of evaluation techniques and methods.

5.1. Evaluation principles and standards

NRC's evaluations will be guided by the following principles:

a) Relevance

Evaluations should focus on those operations, functions and operational policy issues that are of most direct concern to NRC, its partners and beneficiaries. Evaluations are used as a means of enhancing the organisation's capacity to fulfil its mandate on behalf of refugees and internally displaced.

b) Consultation

NRC's stakeholders, including refugees and internally displaced persons, should when appropriate be consulted regarding the identification, planning, implementation and utilization of evaluation projects.

c) Transparency

Evaluation activities are conducted openly; terms of reference, findings and recommendations are placed in the public domain and major evaluation contracts are awarded through a process of competitive bidding.

d) Independence

The final findings and recommendations of evaluations are not subject to the control or interference of senior NRC management; the independence of the evaluation function is ensured through the extensive use of external evaluators.

e) Integrity

Staff members and external evaluators engaged by NRC will maintain the highest possible professional and personal standards. In particular, they will ensure the honesty and integrity of the evaluation process, and respect the security and the dignity of the stakeholders with whom they interact.

Information and documentation gathered in the course of an evaluation project shall not be used for any other purpose without the prior permission by NRC. Evaluators who collect significant evidence on issues which fall beyond their terms of reference should provide that information immediately and on a confidential basis to NRC HQ.

5.2. Terms of reference

Separate Terms of References (ToR) will be established for every evaluation project initiated by NRC. These terms of references will identify

- background to and rationale for the project/program
- reasons for evaluation
- scope and focus of the evaluation
- primary issues to be addressed
- methodology to be used
- timetable
- process established to ensure stakeholder consultation
- reporting

5.3. External evaluations

Major evaluation consultancy opportunities with NRC will be advertised and competitive procedures will be employed to select consultant and consultancy teams or companies for major evaluations. Consultants / consultancy companies will be paid only for satisfactory work, completed in accordance with their terms of reference. All evaluations will be properly budgeted and undertaken in a cost effective manner. Funds for evaluations will as far as possible be sought from external donors.

5.4. Methodology

Conducting evaluations one can use a range of different evaluative, analytical and participatory techniques. Evaluations can be fully external and independent or involve NRC partners and NRC staff.

The primary concern of NRC evaluations is the effectiveness and impact of NRC's work on the NRC target group; refugees and internally displaced persons. NRC will strive to develop evaluation methods that enable refugees, internally displaced and other beneficiaries to articulate their opinions and aspirations.

Mixed evaluation teams should consist of a combination of external consultants, NRC staff and possible representatives of partner organisations. NRC evaluation teams should as far as possible include both men and women, be culturally diverse and multidisciplinary in nature.

Participation in mixed evaluation teams represents an important learning opportunity for NRC staff members. NRC staff participating in an evaluation team should not have had any direct responsibility for the activity being evaluated.

NRC wishes to promote the use of participatory self-evaluation exercises as this is, among others, a cost-effective means of giving a voice to beneficiaries and other affected populations as well as providing NRC staff with learning opportunities. It is important to ensure that self-evaluation exercises are undertaken in a consistent and principled manner.

5.5. Utilization

In NRC, as in many other humanitarian organisations, evaluations have traditionally focused on the presentations of a final report, containing a set of recommendations. With the introduction of this evaluation policy, NRC will strive to enhance the impact of the evaluations function by pursuing what is known as an «utilizations-focused» approach to evaluation, based on the following principles³:

- Decisions concerning the terms of reference, design, methods and timing of any evaluation will be made in such a way as to maximize the potential for the findings and recommendations of the evaluation to be effectively utilized.
- At the outset of the evaluation, a stakeholder analysis will be undertaken to identify the intended users of the evaluation and to ensure their active participation in it. Ownership to an evaluation will strengthen the learning.
- Particular findings and recommendations of any evaluation project will be summarized, communicated to and discussed with relevant entities and managers within NRC so to ensure they are effectively utilized.
- Evaluation reports will be published in a hard copy and disseminated to interested parties within and outside the organisation. In addition, other activities and outputs will be generated, (e.g. presentations, workshops, and articles) and presented to other groups of internal and external stakeholders.
- NRC recognizes the important relationship that exists between organisational learning and individual learning. Lessons learned from the evaluations should be included in the NRC staff training, both in the basic training of NRC staff and at more specialized training, e.g. in core

³ Michael Quinn Patton (1997): Utilization focused Evaluation: The new Century Text, Sage Publications, London

activities, conducted by NRC. Different approaches are required to meet the different learning needs.

To facilitate the introduction of this approach, a Steering Committee will be established for each evaluation project⁴. The function of the Steering Committee will be to assist in the following areas: establishing the terms of reference for the project, selecting external evaluators, reviewing preliminary findings and recommendations and establishing a dissemination and utilization strategy.

5.6. Management response

Effective mechanisms are required to ensure that NRC's increased investment in evaluation leads to real improvements in the quality and impact of the organisation's work. To meet this objective managers (both at HQ and in the field), advisors and program co-ordinators are expected to respond appropriately to the findings and recommendations of any evaluation, especially those which focus on ongoing projects and programs. In such cases, evaluation findings and recommendations should be used by country offices in their developments of their country strategies and action plan.

Within two months of the receipt of a final evaluation report the manager responsible for the project or program under review will ensure that a management response is produced and sent, through the program co-ordinator at NRC HQ, to the management of the International Department. The response shall comment on the findings of the evaluation and describe what action is being taken to implement each of the accepted recommendations, including a time frame. If recommendations are not accepted, the response should explain why the recommendation is rejected, and this should be approved by the management of the International Department. The management's response is included in their job description.

The international Department are responsible for the use of recommendations and findings in further policy development and planning of new projects/program.

In the case of global or thematic reviews (e.g. protection, evaluation of NORSTAFF) the management response will be prepared by the manager in charge at the NRC HQ and presented to the NRC management group.

5.7. Quality control

At the conclusion of each evaluation project, lessons learned exercise on the conduct of the evaluation will be undertaken, so as to ensure that NRC's evaluation principles, procedures and methods are appropriate and effective. The questions of «To what degree have we learned from this experience and shared the learning?» should also be asked.

The Evaluation Advisor at NRC HQ is acting as a focal point for evaluation. The Advisor has the overall responsibility of the development of the organisation's evaluation function, including helping to build organisational capacity for evaluation, supporting the spread of good evaluation practise across the organisation and organisational learning from evaluations. Responsibility for the implementation of the recommendations lies, as earlier mentioned, with the International Department.

5.8. Relations with evaluation forums

In Norway, NRC will participate in «Evalueringssnettverket» in Bistandstorget, and co-operate with NORAD. NRC is also committed to an active engagement with international evaluation forums, particularly the Acting Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)⁵. NRC evaluations will be made available to ALNAP so as to ensure that they are incorporated in their database and annual review of humanitarian evaluations.



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