Evaluation Capacity Development (ECD) Project – Uganda 1 "How To": Write an Evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR)

1 author:

Japheth Kwiringira
Kyambogo University

"How To": Write an Evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR)

By Japheth Kwiringira
Kyambogo University

1. Introduction

This resource provides the general principles of what a 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is; how it is conceptualized, developed, and used to guide an evaluation. The document provides information regarding the expected content of the ToR (depending on the phase of the project cycle). This recommended method of writing a ToR is not prescriptive; the document is aimed at assisting those charged with the task of drafting a ToR[1] for evaluating any kind of project. Drafting a ToR may be considered as a skill that tends to improve as more practical experience is gained.

1.1 Structure of the Terms of Reference

The ToR defines the objectives and the scope of an evaluation, outlines the responsibilities of the consultant or a consulting team, and provides a clear description of the resources available to conduct the assignment. A ToR must also support and facilitate the evaluation exercise to completion with high quality outcomes. Therefore, a well prepared ToR provides the following clearly detailed parameters: why do the evaluation, for whom the evaluation is being done, who initiated the evaluation, timing, the stakeholders[2], what is being evaluated and what the evaluation intends to accomplish, how the evaluation will be accomplished, who will be involved in the evaluation (stakeholders and their roles), how the evaluation will be managed, when milestones will be reached, when the evaluation will be completed, and what resources are necessary and available to conduct the evaluation. It is important to note that a ToR can cover an entire evaluation operation or just a subset of tasks. ToRs can be detailed and specific or general. A good ToR should be written in simple plain language and should be agreed upon by the evaluation commissioners, managers and users prior to the final agreement with the evaluators. Below is a guide on some of the requirements under the proposed sub-headings in a ToR.

1.1.1 Background information

This first section includes the information about the organization commissioning the evaluation and the intervention to be evaluated, i.e. a ToR should define all aspects of what is to be evaluated. Define the purpose and use of the evaluation, i.e. is the evaluation purpose for learning or accountability or both? Address why the evaluation is being undertaken at this particular point in time, why and for whom the evaluation is being undertaken, who initiated the evaluation, and how the evaluation will be used.

Box 1: Details for the background information

Project Location	Specify region, country, or landscape as appropriate
Project Name	
Project Reference Number	
Project Budget	State total budget for this project (noting the contract currency and exchange rate used)
Donor(s)/ Funding sources	State all donors and (where applicable) precise funding sources.
Project Duration	State project duration and the evaluation period (if different)

[1] The exact content of the ToR may vary greatly depending on: scope of program implementation, the assignment in question, the donor and the stakeholder requirements.
[2] These are parties with vested interests in the program/project and evaluation; therefore, the evaluation and contracting process should be engaging and consultative before and during contracting. Early identification of stakeholders minimizes both latent and manifest conflict during and after the evaluation process.

1.1.2 Specify objective(s) of the evaluation

Clarify what the evaluation aims to find out, i.e. the rationale and objectives of the evaluation. For example, why is the evaluation being done – is it to document achievements? And for what purpose – to ascertain results? Or assess the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance? Within the objectives and specific objectives, the ToR describes what is being evaluated and what the evaluation intends to accomplish.

Explain clearly why the evaluation is being done, what triggered it, and how it will be used. This should provide the broad orientation, which is then further elaborated in the scope of the evaluation.

Box 2: Example of an objective and specific objectives

Objective

Evaluate decision makers' professional evaluation conduct as a result of evaluation's findings on accountability.
The specific objectives are:

1. Review the quality and use of the Uganda Evaluation Standards developed by Uganda Evaluation Association
2. Review the quality and use of the Public Sector Evaluation Guidelines prepared by OPM
3. Access Parliament's role to discuss how evaluations can be used better to strengthen accountability and learning in the public sector in Uganda

1.1.2 Evaluation scope

The ToR should define the scope of the evaluation in terms of the time period, funds spent, geographical area, target groups, organizational set-up, implementation arrangements, policy and institutional context. This section should present any discrepancies that might exist between the planned and actual implementation of the project/program to be evaluated.

Why specify the evaluation scope?

- To identify the commissioning body's expectations and define clearer priorities for the evaluation
- For the evaluation team to focus on priorities and not to waste its resources on areas of secondary interest.

Box 3: Some elements to include in the scope

- Geographical area (the world (global evaluation), a region, a country and one or more areas within a country).
- Period under consideration – the entire period during which the evaluated intervention was implemented (case of an ex post evaluation), or only that which was implemented during the years [n-4 to n-2] so that the evaluation team can observe real effects in the field or by including the preceding and/or next intervention.
- Regulatory framework – a project, a support programme to sector policy, a country strategy, a regional co-operation agreement, an instrument.
- The relevant sector, i.e. an entire sector or field of intervention (education, agriculture, etc.), a sub-sector or a set of sectors.
- Key stakeholders, i.e. implementers, beneficiaries, evaluation users and funders.

1.1.3 Evaluation questions

The initiative to be evaluated needs to be clearly defined, including a description of the intervention logic or theory. An agreed set of Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) makes it easier to decide what methodology to use, what data to collect, how to analyze it, and how to report it. However, in some cases the KEQs are already prescribed by an evaluation system or a previously developed evaluation framework. In case the KEQs are not specified, then they need to be developed and agreed on at the beginning of evaluation planning. Key Evaluation Questions are derived from the purpose(s) of the evaluation. It is important not to have too many Key Evaluation Questions – a maximum of 5-7 main questions will be sufficient. It might also be useful to have some more specific questions under the KEQs.

The evaluation questions to be answered should be clearly detailed (e.g. what is it you want to find out through this evaluation?). It is important to be aware of the fact that you cannot evaluate everything so there will be need to make strategic choices about what warrants in-depth study. There are many interesting and important questions that could be asked, but priority should be given to the primary intended uses of the evaluation. Identifying the questions can take time and considerable negotiation but the questions should be as specific as possible, because vague questions usually contribute to poor quality evaluations.

What should be borne in mind is that there should be a logical progression between the purpose of the evaluation, its specific objectives and the questions posed in relation to each objective[3]. The evaluation questions help to build an understanding of the scope, process, and expectations for the desired task.

The evaluation objectives are translated into relevant and specific evaluation questions; which are the basis for findings and reporting. The evaluation questions also address cross-cutting issues, such as gender, environment and human rights.

2. Methodology

The evaluation questions should be decided on early enough to inform the development of evaluation methodology. The ToR should outline how the evaluation will be conducted. ToRs should provide a brief description of the methodology and leave room for the evaluators to define a more detailed methodology in line with the scope and objectives.

The methodology in ToRs can specify a few methods and data collection processes expected to be used, expected indicators to be measured, and various stakeholders to be involved that allow the evaluators to provide technical variations in methodology. This allows the evaluation commissioner to differentiate proposals according to quality of the proposed methodology.

3. Professional Qualifications

This denotes the expertise, education qualifications and experience required of the evaluator(s). This section should state the profile of the consultant(s) (and composition), including the skills and experience commensurate to the task at hand. The desired credentials should be listed: a mix of knowledge, skills, expertise and experience, as well as noting the minimum professional requirements or competencies relevant to the field and the subject of evaluation. The ToR should specify as clearly as possible what the profile of the evaluator or team should be to attract the strongest candidates for conducting the evaluation. Further specifics should relate to: whether an individual or a team is required and expected for the evaluation assignment or whether both possibilities could be considered, and language proficiency if applicable. The commissioner ought to determine whether an internal or external evaluation consultant will be needed. In case of an evaluation team, show how the different capabilities among team members can be complimentary, integrated and managed, e.g. through a team leader or coordinator, with a clear distribution of responsibilities.

[3] *Copying and pasting information from previous similar projects is not acceptable practice as each project is unique, just as the needs of each beneficiary and stakeholder are unique.*

4. Deliverables, work plan, timeframe and schedule

There is a need to indicate the expected outputs against time and the reporting requirements. In all cases, the commissioner should clearly specify the expected deliverables, timelines and any work plan if available should be shared in good time to enable better planning and coordination in view of logistics and human resources. It is good to beware that the schedule should be manageable and realistic within the budget allocation. The ToR may list other products that the evaluator should develop as part of the assignment, e.g. reports, presentations, structure and format for each output, and language of communication in agreement with the organizational standards and practices.

5. Who will provide what? Budget, governance and accountability issues

While the ToR is being prepared, the commissioner should consider what funds are available to support the tasks envisioned for the evaluator. Where funds are limited and likely to constrain the scope and methodology of the evaluation, a pragmatic approach is to state the available resources (budget) and ask the bidders to state what they can achieve in the circumstances. In cases of a flexible budget, the ToR can ask the bidders to come up with their own estimates based on the ToR tasks.

It is a good practice to specify what amounts are available for staff costs, travel, consumables and other additional payments that could be anticipated, such as translators, data processors etc. This section should cover special clauses, e.g. refunds, values and disclaimers, compensation, insurance, budget, mode of payment, equipment (support and resources being provided by the commissioning agency, e.g. cover letters), legal and ethical inclinations, transparency, cost effectiveness, confidentiality, and anonymity among others.

6. Proposal structure, submission guidelines and Reference materials

The ToR should provide instructions regarding the proposal format, content and submission process including the required proposal structure, deadline, submission modes and transmission, e.g. email, hard copy submissions, number of copies, page limits, criteria and time lines for judging proposals, opportunities for clarification, etc. It is prudent to draw on existing knowledge regarding relevant previous and ongoing evaluation work. Sometimes there is need to mention or provide other materials that offer insight, guidance and comparison as far as the assignment at hand is concerned. These should be listed or provided for the sake of the evaluator. It may be good to include easily accessible materials as annexes to the ToR.

Note: Sometimes it may be difficult or impossible to offer details and provide all these requirements before an evaluation begins. It is important to know that ToRs are most effective when they can fulfil these expectations upfront in order to mitigate unnecessary conflicts, negotiations and delays.

7. Common problems of a bad ToR

Below is a list of poor practices that should be avoided when one is developing a ToR:

- Objective is not clear, e.g. a lengthy list of objectives;
- Scope of work is not comprehensive;
- No clear description of expected output;
- No implementation timeframe or expected date of completion;
- Mode of payment or budget is not clear;
- Responsibilities for task team member are not specified.

List of References

- CIDA (2000) *How to Perform Evaluations –Model ToR.* Evaluation Division, Performance Review Branch, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada
- European Integration Office (2011) *Manual for Preparing Terms of Reference* SIDA/International Management Group –IMG
- International Development Research Centre-IDRC (2004) *Writing Terms of Reference (ToR) for an Evaluation*. Ottawa, Canada: Evaluation Unit.
- The World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (2011) *Writing Terms of Reference for an Evaluation: A How To Guide* ISBN -13:978-1-60244-166-8
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (2009) *Guidance note on Development of Terms of reference for Evaluations*. New York: UNIFEM Evaluation Unit.