

FACT SHEET

INTRODUCTION TO NONPROFIT EVALUATION FOR FARMER ASSOCIATIONS

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Evaluation is the process of critically examining a program or initiative. It includes systematically collecting and analyzing data related to the program. What we know today as program evaluation began after World War II when an increase in U.S. federal funding led to increased scrutiny of programmatic outcomes (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The science of evaluation began growing in the 1960s and 1970s. There are now many different scientific journals dedicated to the science of evaluation.

The goal of evaluation is to create an assessment about the value of a program and how it can be improved (Patton, 1987). Evaluation is used by businesses, nonprofit organizations, and governments to increase organizational effectiveness. Evaluations are also shared with funders and members as evidence of an organization's success. Additionally, regular evaluation builds stronger organizations because employees and volunteers pay more attention to what and how they are doing it.

This article describes the two key types of evaluation and how to build evaluation into all of your key activities.

Types of Evaluation

There are two main types of evaluation: formative evaluation and summative evaluation. See Table 1.

Formative evaluations are conducted during the process and provide immediate feedback that can be used to improve the process. For example, if an organization has established a strategic goal to improve revenue by 10% this year, then the organization should measure its progress toward that goal so that it knows whether or not it is on target. If they are not on target to meet their goal during the middle of the year, then they can adjust their strategy. The key question asked by a formative evaluation is: are we on track to meet our goals and, if not, how can we improve?

A formative evaluation will increase your chances of success because it will allow you to identify and address problems during the program. This continuous improvement will naturally result in an overall better outcome. *Summative evaluations* are conducted at the end of a process and provide final measures of performance. For example, if an organization has established a strategic goal to improve revenue by 10% this year, the summative evaluation would take place at the end of the year and would answer the question: did we meet our goals and, if not, why?

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A summative evaluation will provide evidence to support the replication of an initiative or changes to future activities. Findings from a summative evaluation can be used to demonstrate to funders and members that their investments are making a difference.

Many organizations and programs will include both formative and summative evaluation processes as part of their overall evaluation plan. In fact, much of the data collected for a formative evaluation can continue to be collected throughout the project for the summative evaluation.

Table 1: Types of Evaluation

Type of Evaluation	When It Occurs	Key Questions	Why It's Important
Formative	During the process of implementing a process or program	Are we on track to meet our goals and, if not, how can we improve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases chances of programmatic success Allows for continuous improvement
Summative	At the end of a program	Did we meet our goals and, if not, why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides evidence to support replication or changes to future activities Demonstrates return on investment to the organization's members and funders

While the questions each type of evaluation is asking are fairly simple, it requires some careful thought to figure out how to best answer each question. These are not just yes or no questions. For example, to address whether an organization is on track to meet its goals and why, the evaluator must consider a number of different factors. For example, thinking about that same organization that wants to raise revenue by 10%, the evaluator must look at factors including efficiency of production, marketing, sales, external threats (such as broad civil unrest or an impending hurricane season), and more. Each of these factors must be considered to identify how, if at all, they are contributing to the organization's progress and what can be done to improve in each of these areas.

What Questions to Ask and What Data to Collect

The most important part of evaluation is deciding what questions to ask. If the question is too narrow or too hard to answer, the evaluation will be useless. If the question is too broad or you capture too much data, it will be difficult to identify recommendations. There are three criteria to use in determining whether an evaluation question will be good or not (adapted from Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

First, the question must be reasonable and appropriate. This means the question must be in line with the overall scope and direction of your work. For example, a farmer's association may wonder if their work has had any impact on the nutritional intake of your members. There is a logical link between farming and nutrition; however, if the program did not introduce any new foods or encouraged them to change their diet, this

question is not appropriate. Instead, identify a question that has a direct and logical link to the goals of the project or program.

Second, the question must be answerable. The organization must be able to collect data that will address the question. If they cannot collect data, it is not worth conducting an evaluation to answer the question. When deciding whether it is possible to collect the data, it is best to consider logistical challenges such as who will collect the data, how it will be stored, and who will analyze it. It is important to be specific here in regard to time and responsibility. If data collection is time consuming or is not built into a staff member’s daily priority task list, it will likely not be completed.

Third, the question must have a useful answer. The organization must be able to take action to improve based on the results. The key question here is this: when we have the answer to this evaluation question, will we know how to improve? If the organization can use the evaluation data to improve, then the evaluation was worth the effort. If it cannot use it to improve, then the evaluation was a waste of time and money.

Each organization has multiple business domains such as membership, marketing, sales, human resources (staff or volunteers), and more. Any of these can and should be evaluated. However, if an organization is new to evaluation, is it wise to focus on one area first to build evaluation expertise. Over time, an organization can integrate evaluation into their overall business operations for the entire organization. Table 2 presents the core business domains for farmer associations and, for each domain, identifies possible evaluation questions and strategies.

Table 2: Evaluation of Various Business Domains: Possible Questions and Strategies

Business Domain	Possible Evaluation Questions	Possible Evaluation Tactics
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are we meeting our members’ needs? - Are we retaining members? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Percentage of members who do not renew each year. - Survey of non-renewals to identify why - Percentage of new members - Survey of new members to identify why they started participating - Survey of current members to identify level of satisfaction, knowledge of benefits, and use of benefits -
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What marketing strategies work best? - How, if at all, should marketing change for different types of customers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Survey of customer to identify how they heard about us - Survey of customers to identify how they think of us - Analysis of different types of customers, possibly categorizing them into 2-5 categories (e.g., household shopper, business owner, exporter, etc.)

Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are our volunteers and employees satisfied? - Are we providing the necessary equipment, training, and support to these people? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Survey or interviews of volunteers and staff - Review of trainings provided - Review of support provided
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How effective is our transportation process? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cost per mile to transport our goods - Review of process to maintain and/or use vehicles -
Profit and Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How efficiently are we operating? - Are we producing enough net profit? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review of expenses - Review of income - Review of net profit

How to Incorporate Evaluation into Your Activities

Evaluation is an ongoing process that should be a part of all key planning conversations. Evaluation should be built into an organization’s operations. For example, the board or management of an organization should regularly be looking at data to determine how to improve the organization. This might include reviewing a copy of the budget at each meeting, surveying staff and volunteers once a year, and logging and regularly review data about transportation-related costs.

At first, this may seem like busywork. But, if the organization is consistent in collecting and analyzing data, it will soon identify areas where it can improve. As it improves, it will identify additional new areas. Over time, the organization will strengthen its capacity every year. Because this is a long-term process, it is okay to start small. If the organization can evaluate one area of the organization regularly, it will develop internal capacity, which can be used to evaluate a different area.

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