7) Finishing and reporting

Before closing the project, the results of the evaluation need to be consolidated, written down or recorded in some manner. Often there are also financial reports to finish. And in many cases there are also other types of reports and documentation to be secured.

Reporting the outcomes of the evaluation is very important. It is a tool for sharing information, findings and conclusions with the different actors and the first step to involving them in the follow-up and future projects. Reporting the outcomes does not only consist of summarising the findings and putting them in a report for the funding authorities. Reporting requires a certain amount of planning, structure, focus and adaptation according to the target groups that we want to reach.

Generally, for writing high quality report you will need:

- data that you have collected and analysed
- an understanding of the people who will be reading your report
- helpful colleagues to read your drafts.

There are several steps that should be done in order to make a high-quality report.

1 Consider your audience

Think about the people you are reporting to so you can tell them what they need to know. You should consider:

- what kind of information they need (eg whether they need to know more about the difference you've made or the way in which you've delivered your work)
- how they would like the information presented (eg as tables, case studies or infographics), and when
- why they need the information and what you want them to do as a result
- whether there are any accessibility needs that you need to consider (eg does the report need to work on a screen reader?).

2 Plan your report

Having a clear structure makes your report easier to read. Before you write, plan your headings and subheadings. Most evaluation reports will include the following sections.

- Executive summary: a synopsis of your key findings and recommendations
- Introduction: a brief description of what you are evaluating, the purpose of your evaluation and the methods you have used (eg surveys, interviews)
- Findings and discussion: information on what you delivered, how you delivered it and what outcomes occurred
- Recommendations: actions that need to be taken to respond to the evaluation findings

3 Write about your findings

Reports will vary depending on the nature of your work, but you will probably need to include findings on:

- outcomes - what outcomes have been achieved, for whom and under what circumstances. You should also report on intended outcomes that have not been achieved
- outputs - what has been delivered, when and to whom. You should also report on how satisfied beneficiaries were with your outputs
- processes - information about how you delivered your outputs. You may need this information to explain why something worked particularly well, or why it didn't work.

In your report, you should describe your data and interpret it – analysing your data before you start writing will help with this.

Description means presenting what the data tells you. You might describe, for example, what outcomes were achieved, by whom and in what circumstances.

Interpretation moves beyond description to say what the data means – make sure you word your report clearly so the reader can tell when you are describing data and when you are interpreting it. To help you interpret data, you could:

- make connections, looking for trends, patterns and links. For example, if two groups had very different outcomes, what factors might have led to this?
- put data in a meaningful context. Numbers don't speak for themselves. Is 70% good or bad? How do you know?

When you interpret your data, you could discuss:

- why outcomes were achieved, or not achieved. Understanding this may help you make decisions about future service planning. Many funders will also want to know about this
- what worked and what didn't. Knowing about this will put you in a good position to improve your work. It may also be useful to share with partners or funders to improve practice in the sector
- answers to your evaluation questions. When you planned your evaluation, you may have had two or three key questions you wanted it to answer. For example, you may have wanted to know whether your service works equally well for all groups.

Subheadings will make your report clear for your readers. Looking back at your evaluation framework can help you generate ideas for subheadings. It often makes sense to have a subheading for each intended outcome.

Sometimes you will have collected data about the same outcome from a range of different sources such as questionnaires, interviews, observation or secondary data. When you analysed your data, you probably looked at each source separately. In your report, it usually makes sense to write about all the data relating to each outcome together (rather than having separate sections on data from different sources).

A common mistake is to try to present all your data, rather than focusing on what is most important. It helps to narrow down to what people reading your report need to know.

It's also important to think about how you will present your information. You could consider the following points.

Which key numbers do your audience need to know?

- Decide whether to report using percentages, averages or other statistics.
- Think about whether you need to compare numerical data for different groups. You may want to look at whether men were more likely to experience outcomes than women, for instance.

Which quotations will help you illustrate your themes?

- Choose quotations that bring your outcomes to life. Don't choose too many or they will distract the reader from the point you want to make.
- Have a mixture of typical responses and those that don't fit easily into your categories.

What visual aids will you use?

- Diagrams, graphs or charts should be used to highlight the most important information, rather than information which is less relevant.
- It's very easy for diagrams to mislead your audience. If you think a diagram might be misleading, it's better to leave it out.

As far as possible, present data that has been analysed or summarised rather than raw data, to make it as easy as possible for the reader to follow.

4 Write accurately and clearly

It's important to write accurately and clearly so that your report can be easily understood and is not misleading.

Be transparent. Being transparent means being open about what you can and can’t say, and clear about how you reached your conclusions and about the limitations of your data.

Just as it is important to minimise bias when collecting or analysing data, it's equally important to minimise bias when reporting.

- Avoid overclaiming your role in making a difference. Your work may not be solely responsible for the outcomes that have occurred for individuals or organisations you have worked with. Remember to report on evidence of any other contributing factors (eg support received from other organisations or other sources).
- Choose case studies carefully. Evaluation case studies are not the same as marketing case studies. They should illustrate your learning points, not just the very best of what you do. You won't have a representative group of case studies, but as far as possible, choose case studies – and quotations – that reflect the full range of responses you had.
- Explore alternative interpretations or causal links. Sometimes, data is ambiguous and there could be more than one interpretation. All of us are prone to 'confirmation bias' – paying more attention to data that fits our existing beliefs. It's important to look for and talk about reasonable alternative interpretations or explanations of your data.
- Be clear about the limitations of your data. If there was a group you weren't able to hear from, or your sample over- or under-represents a particular group, say so.
- Be open about your sample size. In general, the smaller your sample, the less able you are to make generalisations about everyone in your target group.
- Report negative findings. If the data shows something isn't working or an outcome hasn't been achieved, don’t ignore it. Reporting negative findings will help your audience to use the evaluation to learn and improve.

When you collected your data, respondents will have said whether they wanted to remain anonymous (most do) and whether you should check with them before using a quote or case study in your report. Make sure you do any checking with plenty of time before you need to complete the report.

Depending on the size of your sample and how easy it is to identify individuals, you may have to do more than just change the name to make someone anonymous. You might have to change their age or other identifying details, or remove references to anything that would allow people to identify them as an individual.

Evaluation reports need to be as clear and precise as possible in their wording. Be especially careful about using the word 'proof' or 'prove'. To 'prove' something requires 100% certainty, which you are very unlikely to have. 'Indicates', 'demonstrates', 'shows', 'suggests' or 'is evidence for' are useful alternative phrases.

Keep your language simple and straightforward. Remember to explain any terminology that might be unfamiliar to your audience.

5 Develop your recommendations

Your recommendations are likely to be one of the most important parts of your report. Good recommendations will make your evaluation findings more likely to be used.

Recommendations are more likely to be implemented if they are:

- supported by evidence - be clear how the recommendations build on the key findings. It can help to structure the recommendations in the same order as the main findings to help readers understand the evidence base for each
- specific - say exactly what action needs to be taken and when
- within the control of the evaluation users - make sure individuals or groups have the authority and capability to take forward what you’re suggesting

- realistic and achievable - recommendations should be feasible. You can categorise them by which ones are easy to implement and which are less so. More ‘difficult’ recommendations might need budget or staff changes. These should still be stated, but so should their implications
- prioritised - it’s helpful to indicate some priorities for action. You could, for example, split your recommendations into ‘essential’ versus ‘optional’ or ‘for consideration’ versus ‘for action’. Make sure the number of recommendations you include is achievable.

6 Involve people in the reporting process

You can involve other staff, beneficiaries and external stakeholders at several points. For example, you could share your report drafts and ask them to help you refine the conclusions. This 'co-production' of findings can be valuable and yield interpretations you may not have thought about.

You can also co-produce recommendations by sharing the findings with stakeholders and asking them to suggest and prioritise recommendations. If you do this, take care to guide people to base their recommendations on the evidence, and not their own interests or preoccupations.

7 Finish the report

Allow time for a couple of report drafts and make sure that there are people available to review the report for you. It is good to have someone look at it with ‘fresh eyes’. If the report is being widely shared, you could have someone from outside your sector review the draft to make sure it is clear for external audiences.

To complete the report, leave time for proofreading and editing, checking references, and design and print if needed. You might include your data collection tools in appendices – this could help other organisations working in your field to improve their evaluation.

Good use of the outcomes of our evaluation can be useful at a very practical level. The same is true for the educational level. If talking about educational evaluation reports, it also should be taken into consideration, that the evaluation report is not the only way of reporting the outcomes: oral reports, articles, photos or other informal ways can also be excellent channels.

Nevertheless, the evaluation report is usually a key tool for reporting the outcomes of the evaluation. The evaluation report offers quite a comprehensive vision of the project, covering many different aspects, from different perspectives and with a certain distance.

This makes it a very useful learning tool for participants and organisers, both present and future. It can be used to improve the quality of your next projects, by focusing on the strengths and by trying to tackle the weaknesses revealed by the evaluation. It can also help others who may want to undertake and implement similar projects.

Thinking about the evaluation report when planning educational evaluation may prove to be very useful. By doing so:

We can decide which information we need to analyse

We can decide which methods are likely to be most effective for getting that information

We can foresee which stakeholders would we like to target

We can think in advance what we would like to emphasise to whom

The emphasis of reporting shifts according to who it is intended for. If the report will be read by experts in Brussels, it will have to have a different emphasis and probably also style than if it is going to be read by the secretary of the Mayor of our town or by other youth workers. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should tell different stories to different people. In the report, the order of presentation and the emphasis may shift, not the significance of the outcomes of the evaluation.

In principle there are three specific types of reader that will use our report: the participants of the activity, the stakeholders in the activity and outsiders who may potentially benefit from the findings presented in our evaluation.

Another important potential audience to keep in mind when writing the evaluation report is those who may in the future benefit from a similar project. This is a wide group of stakeholders and can include actors ranging from the funding authorities to volunteers in the organisation. Therefore, the report should be clear and comprehensible.

All aspects of the evaluation should be described in sufficient detail to permit an outsider to reach more or less the same conclusions as someone who attended the activity. This is especially true if we have used questionnaires or interviews. If we present an interpretation, we should make sure to support that interpretation with direct quotes from interviews or with relevant and comprehensible statistics.

Transparency is a very important aspect of reporting evaluation. All participants of the project should receive a copy of the evaluation report once it is ready. Participants might not find their own words in the report, but they should feel that it is representative of their experience. The report should, of course, cover both the negative and positive aspects of the evaluation outcomes. By respecting transparency, we contribute to the sense of collective ownership of the project.

If we use quantitative data and statistics in the report, we should present them in a very clear and comprehensible way for the readers. It is a good idea and readerfriendlier to use simple visual representations of statistical data such as pie charts and colour coded graphs, rather than just numbers, numbers and more numbers. Tables, charts, and figures, if any, should be integrated into the text of the report, appearing near that portion of the text discussing them. Sometimes people describe their analyses in the body of the report and place all the tables in an appendix at the end. This method can be quite problematic for the reader. As a general rule, it is best to (a) describe the purpose for presenting the table, (b) present it, and (c) review and interpret it.

Every evaluation report is and should be different. We can, nevertheless, identify some common parts which should be covered by any well presented and structured evaluation report.

We should give enough information to an outside reader about the process and what we are evaluating. The introduction should include:

All the relevant background information about the project

Who conducted the evaluation and with which competencies

The criteria and the perspective of the evaluation

The description of the design and execution of the evaluation

After this important introduction, we should present our findings. The presentation of findings (statistics from questionnaire, qualitative analysis of interviews), and our interpretations should be integrated into a logical whole. It can be very frustrating for the reader to go through a list of seemingly unrelated analyses and findings with a promise that all the loose ends will be tied together later in the report. Every step in the analysis should make sense to the reader. We should present our rationale for a particular analysis, present the data relevant to it, interpret the results, and then indicate where that result leads next. At times, the inclusion of some personal reflections (i.e. quotations of participants) can help to illustrate more clearly some ideas. However, we should always make the distinction between personal reflections and results clear at all times.

Having provided the general overview and the results, it is essential to summarise the most important points. We should avoid reviewing every specific point in the evaluation, but we should review all of the significant ones, pointing once more to their general significance. The focus of each evaluation is different and, therefore, it is difficult to indicate what information would be the most significant in an evaluation report. The conclusions concerning the "format" of the project that may eventually lead to changes are very relevant (for example, change of target group, of duration, of educational approach). Suggestions for follow-up (i.e. further projects, support measures for participants, systematization of results in a publication…) are also important.

The report can conclude with a statement of: what we have discovered about the educational progress, the direction and degree of change of the participants in the evaluation the extent to which the objectives set in the beginning were met some ideas about where future projects might be directed.

However, ending with the conclusion that "more projects are needed" is of little value unless we can offer some concrete suggestions about the nature of future projects and unless we can provide arguments for why they are needed. We should review the particular strengths and weaknesses of our own project as demonstrated by the evaluation outcomes and suggest ways in which those shortcomings might be avoided in future projects. Any comments and suggestions offered should be supported by findings. This section is not an appropriate space for making declarations.

The outline of the full programme outline and the list of participants can be among the most common appendices to evaluation reports. In addition to these, it is relevant to include some photos or other materials which can transmit the "taste" of the activity to the readers. It is also a good idea to append any bibliographic references consulted in the preparation of the evaluation report. Some evaluation reports also include the raw data from the evaluation conducted in the appendices

Official report can also be the starting point for reporting in creative formats.

1. Choose a report format

Next, decide on a format that will meet your audience's needs. You could use:

- a visual format
- a spoken format
- a written format.

Visual formats include infographics, illustrations and photographs, which are good for communicating a lot of information in a small space. Some visual formats can also be included in written reports, summaries, blogs or presentations. Read section 3 for more.

Spoken formats such as presentations, podcasts and videos can be highly engaging and interactive ways to communicate your findings. They can also provide opportunities to hear the voice of your beneficiaries or evaluation participants. Read section 4 for more.

Written formats include shorter or more action-oriented formats of the traditional evaluation report.

2. Use a visual format

Infographics

Infographics are increasingly popular ways to communicate information visually. They usually contain headline figures, charts, brief explanations and simple illustrations to help the viewer understand the data.

Infographics can be easily shared online, which makes them very powerful for communicating to external audiences. As they generally only contain key facts and figures, they are less helpful for audiences that need to know how to use the data to improve..

Tips for infographics

- Try a simple online tools.
- It's very easy to mislead using infographics. Be careful to communicate your data clearly and transparently.

Illustrations and cartoons

Illustrations include icons, words and numbers alongside pictures. They can be static or animated, and may be used alongside written formats or on their own to communicate key messages. Like infographics, illustrations can be widely shared. They may also contain a bit more detail and nuance.

Cartoons can add humour to an evaluation report. They can illustrate salient points or be used to reinforce recommendations.

Tips for illustrations and cartoons

- Unlike infographics, illustrations are usually hand-drawn and need some skill – do you work with someone who will do justice to your evaluation findings? Or do you need to outsource?
- They say a picture tells a thousand words, but you might still need the words to explain the picture, especially if you use cultural references that might not be accessible to everyone.
- Not everyone will find these reporting methods credible – choose your audience carefully.
- Consider using illustrations drawn by your evaluation participants, with their consent.

Data dashboards

A dashboard is an interactive visual format which updates automatically as the data updates. Dashboards are useful for presenting dynamic, real-time data. They're great for decision makers who want to see what's on track and what isn't, as well as for staff working on projects. They're not so helpful for understanding why something is working or not working – you'll need other ways to present this kind of data.

You may need specific software to produce dashboards.

Tips for dashboards

- Dashboards take time and resources to keep up to date. Make sure that having one will help you make better decisions before you invest.
- Consult with the people who will be using the dashboard to make sure that it meets their needs.
- Keep it concise. Resist the temptation to overcomplicate as this may confuse your users.

Posters

Posters are often used to present research at conferences, but are also helpful for communicating evaluation findings. Key quotations or headline statistics can be put up for staff or beneficiaries to notice and reflect on.

Tips for posters

- Posters can be produced quickly and with limited resources, although you may want to invest in professional printing for larger posters.
- Ideally, posters can be 'read' within 30 seconds – so keep text simple and brief.
- Eventually posters become part of the furniture and people stop noticing them, so it can be helpful to change them periodically.

Photographs

A few well-chosen photographs can help to illustrate the human stories behind the numbers in your evaluation report or presentation and make your report more memorable.

If you have access to a lot of photographs, you could consider having an exhibition to communicate your evaluation findings to a wider audience.

Tips for photographs

- Remember to get consent from participants when using photographs they have taken or that feature them.
- Think about how you are representing your participants and whether you might be unintentionally contributing to stereotypes or marginalisation.

Think about your captions and how you refer to the photograph in text.

3 Use a spoken format

Presentations

A good presentation brings data to life. You might discuss your findings with your presentation audience, encouraging them to think about the implications for their own work.

Tips for presentations

- A presentation doesn't have to mean PowerPoint or Prezi slides. You can use videos, flip charts and posters too.
- Think about how much you want to interact with your audience and what questions you want to ask them, as well as what they might want to ask of you.
- Video or audio-record your presentation to play over your slides so people who were not present can watch.
- You can do presentations via a webinar to reach larger or more geographically distant audiences.

Podcasts

You can record a podcast of your key findings for people to download and listen to in their own time. Podcasts are very popular ways to communicate detailed information. Bear in mind that they can be resource intensive to produce well.

Tips for podcasts

- Try having multiple voices in your podcast to keep interest. A Q&A format can be useful.
- Use a fairly loose script so it sounds natural rather than over-rehearsed.
- Remember to remain impartial. There may be a temptation to stay upbeat and to under-report negative findings.
- It can be helpful to open your podcast with an engaging case study.
- There are free apps for recording, but make time to test out the sound quality beforehand and to edit the podcast afterwards.

Videos

Videos can be as simple as an audio recording over slides, or can include filmed clips from your evaluation participants and your activities. Participants could record their own video for you to use in a final edited version. You could also use illustrations or cartoons in your videos.

Videos work really well for public engagement and communicating your findings to a wider audience, including beneficiaries (if they access the internet). Videos are an emotionally engaging way to communicate, and tend to focus on stories more than numbers.

Tips for videos

- As with podcasts, remember to allow time for practising, recording and editing, and make sure you stay impartial.
- You can embed shorter videos into presentations or online written reports. If you do, remember that the video may be watched out of context.

Music, spoken word or even interpretive dance

These formats may work particularly well for communicating to some external audiences or for livening up meetings. They are better for communicating stories than numbers.

Interpretive dance takes a bit of courage but there is the potential for it to reach audiences that would otherwise not be interested in your work.

Spoken word or performance poetry is often used for persuasion, to illuminate a personal story or to make a political argument. You could have spoken word case studies as part of a presentation or video.

4. Use a written format

Summary reports

Most reports have an executive summary that you can read on its own. Summaries include key findings and recommendations. They are usually very short (fewer than five pages) and may include visual aids such as charts.

Summary reports are good for audiences that don't need all the detail, for example busy senior managers or trustees. They can also be useful for external audiences.

Tips for summary reports

- Tailor it to your audience – an executive summary is usually written for decision-makers, but you may want different summaries for other audiences such as volunteers.
- Write it as a stand-alone document that can be read by people who haven't read the main report.
- Provide links to the detail so people can delve deeper if they want to.

Blogs or newsletters

Blogs and newsletters provide an opportunity for a more personal style of communication than a summary report. They can highlight and summarise key findings or recommendations, or talk about what you learned about the process of carrying out an evaluation. They can be written for internal or external audiences.

Tips for blogs

- Blogs usually focus on a particular angle, rather than trying to summarise all your findings.
- Blogs have a short shelf life – they are contemporary or topical but aren't usually kept for a long period.
- Try using social media or email to promote your blog.
- You could use a 'top five' format to communicate the most important findings or recommendations.

Postcards

Use postcards to communicate key findings, or to invite people to events to comment on the findings. Postcards are a great way of summarising headline findings in an accessible way and getting your message out to many stakeholders at once, but can be costly to print and distribute. They may also be useful for communicating with beneficiaries and volunteers, especially if they are less familiar with digital formats.

Tips for postcards

- Postcards can be text-only or simplified infographics.
- You can distribute postcards in many ways, from posting them out to service users, to having a stack for people to collect, to handing them out at conferences and events.

Easy Read formats

Easy Read formats are for people who find reading difficult. They use plain English and short sentences. They also include pictures for main ideas.

Remember that Easy Reads might not be the best way to reach people with learning difficulties. They may prefer podcasts or videos instead.

You also can combine different methods and kinds of reporting to adapt it to the needs of your project.