The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks
“Are Evaluations Ever Read, Ever Used?”

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Part One: Overview

Bob Berg gave a talk on the appropriate use, presentation and dissemination of evaluations and their role in the collection and use of objective information to inform programs and policy. Following are some suggestions he offered on evaluation utilization:

1. Identify clearly the stakeholders for the evaluation. Process evaluations normally focus on project management. Summative and ex-post evaluations normally aim for program management and in major learning evaluations at policy makers. Normally the intended beneficiaries are not identified as stakeholders to be involved in scope questions and this is a mistake. If NO senior core official has questions about her or his program, then do not do a summative or impact evaluation.

2. Ask stakeholders what their questions are, and then analyze the decision making context in which your report will be submitted. For example, are key program design decisions going to be made in which your evaluation evidence would be of possible use, and if so negotiate your scope and study design to have your results available for that decision process…if possible.

3. Involve local experts and institutions in conducting evaluations. They can more easily involve local stakeholders, they often need to be fostered to be recognized as valuable, they are cheaper, and development requires us to end our monopoly on evaluation studies by very substantially shifting evaluations of donor assisted programs to local sources of study.

4. Be brave and don’t do useless analyses. MIT’s Judith Tendler who is so brilliant her initial academic appointment was as a fully tenured professor, tied the World Bank in knots for 18 months as she refused to do an ex post benefit cost analysis since all the benefits had gone to the top 1/10th of 1% in Honduras. Her view was who cares how big the benefits were since none of the benefits reached the intended beneficiaries.

Another way of being brave is to say: this we know for sure has been helpful and this we know for sure has not been helpful, and these other issues we can’t yet tell from the evidence. Admitting what you don’t know will bring belief about what you say you do know.
5. Bring in wider literature. Tom Dichter’s report brilliantly cited lots of academic and donor research and this added to the gravitas of the report.

6. Even if you have only one case study, give an indication as to whether the case is typical (i.e., if this is a typical problem why haven’t you sponsoring organizations solved it by now) or this is a rarer finding and may tell us something new. Knowledge Management systems now give us a lot of relevant literature to draw upon in addressing this and the previous point.

7. Write briefly and clearly. The Social Impact study of CMM is so acronym laden that it is hard for a layman to read. If an evaluation is intended for executives an executive summary should be one page. The whole report should be 15 pages and you can have an infinite number of appendices. If you think 15 pages is too short, ask your top executive how long she or he will take to read an evaluation report of interest to them…then figure two minutes a page.

8. Take extra steps to be sure relevant people learn from the report. The local stakeholders should be consulted on key initial findings while the team is finishing the first draft in the field. Be proactive and follow up with learning briefings with relevant funders and leaders if the report says something of importance.

9. Finally, you as a group should compare experiences in promoting utilization—learning from your best and worst cases. Eventually you should run an informal MOOC to discuss evaluation and evaluation findings with a global audience.

Part Two: Question-Answer Section

Participants in the Thursday Talk posed many great questions. The following includes the questions posed, and a summary of the answers. For Bob’s full responses, please listen to the recording.

1. Balancing evaluation needs: What are your thoughts on balancing the needs of extensive literature reviews, engaging local stakeholders and managing budgetary needs while conducting evaluations?

Bob Berg: With the help of knowledge management systems, literature reviews can be conducted faster. Sponsors understand these needs if you write them into the scope of evaluation. Involving local stakeholders is a part of the developmental process in evaluation. It is important to foster local management and involvement, proofing out initial findings with local teams.
2. **Being brave and asking relevant questions:** Can you elaborate on two of the points you mentioned in your presentation: 1) Asking relevant questions, and 2) Admitting what you do know and do not know.

**Bob Berg:** Be brave, don’t do anything that’s silly, if it does not show up in your report it will not be noticed. But people have to be accountable for what they write. The evaluations that we did had enormous resonance on the Capitol Hill. When someone is finally being candid they do get credibility.

3. **Influencing programming constantly:** Evaluation is often seen as a distinct process leading to a report. How can we build in ongoing feedback loops to influence programming constantly, rather than even mid-term or summative evaluations? Or do they serve different purposes?

**Bob Berg:** There are three important kinds of evaluations:

1) Mid-term evaluations: This kind of evaluation can foster a lot of participation, and reinforce sponsor commitment to getting it right, and help them make mid-course corrections.

2) Towards-the-end-of-project evaluations: These take place six months or so before the project ends. They offer lead time to amend projects.

3) Summative evaluations: These serve the purpose of engaging local authorities and wider learning. Here is a metaphor—if you wanted to see how a department of a university working on conflict resolution is doing, the evaluation is useful for the Dean. But if you want to go higher and see how that relates to other programs in the country, and the influence at a higher educational level, it is necessary to do a university wide evaluation.

4. **Knowledge management systems:** Tell us your thoughts on using knowledge management information systems.

**Bob Berg:** Some organizations, such as USAID have invested more in these systems and it helps. When some officials ask me, ‘how are we doing on such and such project?’ I say ‘compared to what?’ It depends on the relative base on which to measure as the world does not have equal opportunities everywhere. One of our best evaluations was on water supply projects in Tanzania. We were one of twenty-two donors. When the national government looked at our study it changed the national policy to the Dutch system because it was doable. However at the OECD Development Assistance Committee, it was tough having donors share examples across the board (for example: engineering projects or pastoral community projects). It is helpful to have comparative information to make policy recommendations.

5. **Sharing findings using new media:** Can you discuss a bit further your thoughts of sharing evaluation findings through new media such as YouTube videos? Do you
know if this increases usability and what are the key elements that should be included in videos that share evaluation findings so that the findings are perceived as credible as a report?

**Bob Berg:** I am still learning about technology. Yesterday, at the roundtable on film, media and peacebuilding (*Under the Radar: Harnessing Film and Media to Elevate Awareness of Peacebuilding*) held at the Alliance for Peacebuilding, Jamil Simon from Spectrum Media made a great presentation on media and the challenges to making presentations on peacebuilding. Messages from evaluations should get into the academic life and the new media is an important facilitator. People learn so much from direct reports, or interviews with someone who was affected.

6. **Establishing professional credibility versus accessibility of evaluations:** Can you speak a little to the tension that evaluators may face between establishing professional credibility (speaking the evaluator lingo, talking at length about the methodology etc.) versus making the evaluation learnings accessible to the end user?

**Bob Berg:** We are taught in higher education that length is important. However there are other ways, such as making use of appendices in keeping the length short. Reports should be readable, with a 15 page length, if you want top executives to spend time reading them.

7. **Meta evaluations to summarize lessons:** What about producing a two-page "meta evaluation" summarizing lessons from multiple evaluations—would that have influence on decision makers?

**Bob Berg:** That is what Tom Dichter did for the Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development. I also think it is important to include main lessons of a meta-analysis, and to include what works and what does not work. Another tactic is to organize a conference on meta-analysis to get serious attention, in order to get it on a wide web distribution. There has to be multiplicity of strategies for marketing responses for readability.

*Watch the recording* [here](#) *(audio only) to listen to Bob’s full talk.*

**Part 3: Wrap Up**

The resources and studies mentioned in the talk can be accessed through the following links:

- *Using Science as Evidence in Public Policy,* Committee on the Use of Social Science in Public Policy, National Research Council
- **USAID Forward Progress Report 2013**

  [https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/content/Detail.aspx?ctID=ODVhZjk4NWQtM2YyMj00YjRmLTkxNjtjZTcxMjM2NDBmY2Uy&rID=MzQ1OTUw](https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/content/Detail.aspx?ctID=ODVhZjk4NWQtM2YyMj00YjRmLTkxNjtjZTcxMjM2NDBmY2Uy&rID=MzQ1OTUw)