Developing rubrics as part of an evaluative approach to assessing value for money

***NT AES Professional Learning Seminar*, presented by Nea Harrison, Pandanus Evaluation**

The session will guide participants through the process of setting criteria and standards to guide program evaluation and value for money assessment. We will briefly look at how rubrics have been used for evaluating complex social programs, and how they can be used with or without economic approaches to assess value for money. We will then work through the process of developing a rubric.

What is Value for Money assessment?

Frameworks for assessing Value for Money (VfM) emphasize the importance of using limited funds as effectively as possible to achieve change for poor or marginalised people and to demonstrate value to investors.

VfM is often assessed using the criteria of economy (less cost, while bearing in mind quality), efficiency (achieving outputs for inputs, while bearing in mind quality), effectiveness (achieving program outcomes, while bearing in mind equity), and equity (ensuring that benefits are distributed equally).[1] DFAT has developed eight VfM Principles using this criteria to guide decision making and maximise the impact of its investments.[2]

There are a range of VfM approaches. Cost Benefit Analysis and Social Return on Investment monetise outcomes; Cost Effectiveness and Cost Utility Analysis compare alternative programs; and Basic Efficiency Resource Analysis and Rank Correlation of Cost vs Impact compare a number of programs.

VfM approaches used by social development programs often focus on more qualitative measures and generally include the development a VfM assessment rubric that aligns with the program's Theory of Change. An evaluation specific approach, using criteria and standards, is compatible with the Four Es (Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Equity), and provides a way to synthesize mixed methods evidence which may include economic, quantitative and qualitative data.[3]

What is a rubric?

A rubric is a monitoring and evaluation tool that clearly sets out criteria and standards for assessing different levels of performance. It provides an evaluative description of what good, excellent (etc) quality; value or performance would look like in practice. It allows for interpretation of qualitative, quantitative and mixed method data. Rubrics provide way to synthesize evidence into an overall evaluative judgement about a project overall or components of a program or project.

In my experience, developing a rubric is best done as a collaborative activity with key stakeholders. It involves key stakeholders who know a lot about the context and required

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1 Fleming (2013)
2 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Retrieved 2017)
3 King (2016, pp 59-60)

outcomes of a project setting standards – or definitions of what should constitute 'excellent', satisfactory', or 'unsatisfactory' performance.
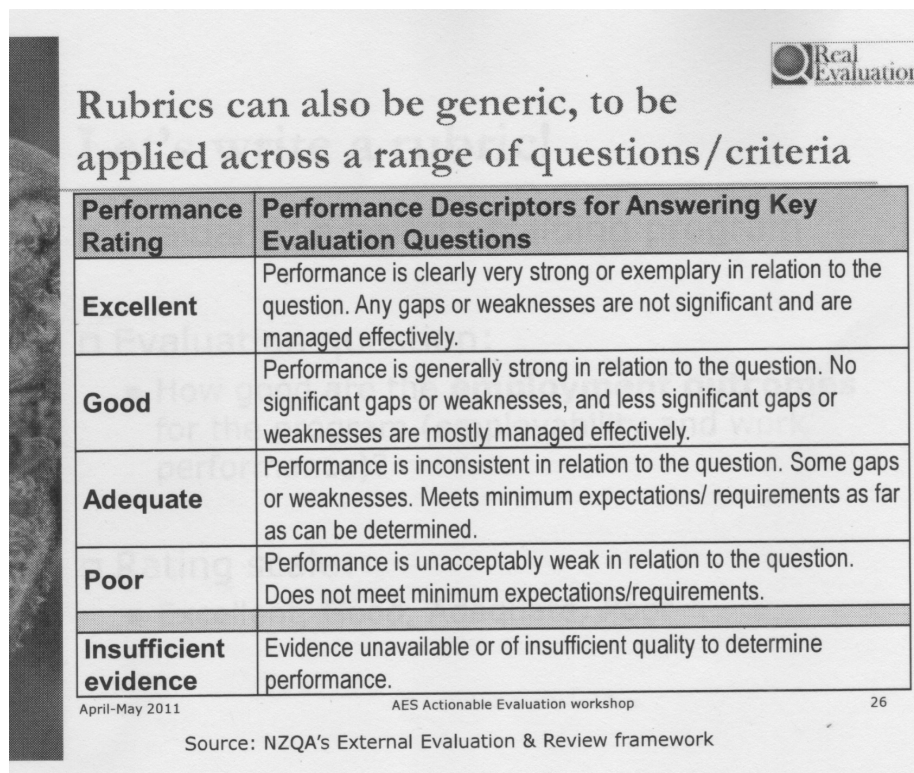
Process for developing a rubric

- Get the right people in the room
- Clearly define your criteria (evaluation questions, aspects of focus)
- Decide how many levels you want and the appropriate labels for them
- Brainstorm what distinguishes 'Excellent' (Best practice or highly effective) from 'Poor' (or ineffective / unacceptable performance)
- Draw boundaries - decide what is out and what is in
- Work through each of the levels

How many levels?

- Depends on the purpose of the rubric. Too few and it is hard to show improvements, too many and it becomes too difficult to distinguish between levels. Levels can be labelled to suit the project.

Some examples of rubrics

Rubrics can also be generic, to be applied across a range of questions/criteria

Performance Rating	Performance Descriptors for Answering Key Evaluation Questions
Excellent	Performance is clearly very strong or exemplary in relation to the question. Any gaps or weaknesses are not significant and are managed effectively.
Good	Performance is generally strong in relation to the question. No significant gaps or weaknesses, and less significant gaps or weaknesses are mostly managed effectively.
Adequate	Performance is inconsistent in relation to the question. Some gaps or weaknesses. Meets minimum expectations/ requirements as far as can be determined.
Poor	Performance is unacceptably weak in relation to the question. Does not meet minimum expectations/requirements.
Insufficient evidence	Evidence unavailable or of insufficient quality to determine performance.

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Source: NZQA's External Evaluation & Review framework

This example of a generic rubric is provided Jane Davidson in her Real Evaluation Blog.

Rubric developed for the Palmerston Tiwi Islands Communities for Children Program

The following example is part of a rubric developed for the Palmerston / Tiwi Islands Communities for Children Program in Australia. The rubric was developed to clarify quality in relation to the key Program outcomes identified in the program logic. It was organised under the key evaluation questions set for the Program. The rubric guided assessment and evaluation activities over the 6-year life of the Program. The rubric was beneficial for helping key stakeholders clearly articulate expected (but usually fuzzy) outcomes such as quality community engagement, community acceptance and ownership, cultural appropriateness, partnership, governance and participation actually involved. It clearly outlined expectations of funded partners and projects.

EXCELLENT (Best practice)	GOOD (Expected)	JUST ADEQUATE (Needs improving)	UNACCEPTABLE
Effectiveness			
How effective were Community Partners in encouraging children and families from target groups to participate?			
Activity is accessed by a wide range of people from different groups in the community especially hard to engage groups High level of attendance by all participants Activity involves and welcomes all members of the family (particularly husbands and children) Parents and children actively participating in the Activity High level of enjoyment expressed by participants Participants take ownership of the Activity though helping organise or conduct activities Service agreement KPIs are exceeded	Activity is accessed by people from different groups in the community especially hard to engage groups Good attendance levels with more than 80% of participants attending regularly (80% of time) Parents and children actively participating in the Activity High level of satisfaction expressed by participants (more than 80%)_ Participants find the Activity useful Service agreement KPIs are met	Activity is accessed by people from some groups in the community including hard to engage groups Average attendance levels with 80% of participants attending regularly (80% of time) (50%) of Parents and children actively participating in the Activity Moderate level of satisfaction expressed by participants (more than 70%) Service agreement KPIs are met	Activity is accessed by people from only one or two groups in the community No access by hard to engage groups Poor attendance Very few participants attend regularly Participants who are attending are not actively engaged in the Activity Low levels of satisfaction expressed by more than 30 % of participants Service agreement KPIs are not met
How effective were the partnerships created?			
Partnerships between Community Partners / and or other services have been established and partnership processes documented in formal agreements Community Partners are working in partnership with community in line with documented processes and or agreements Partnerships contribute to significantly improved service delivery Partnership contribute to significantly better access to services for participants	Partnerships between Community Partners / and or other services have been established and partnership processes documented Community Partners are working in partnership with community in line with documented processes Partnerships contribute to service delivery Partnerships support families to navigate the service sector effectively clearly improved	Community Partners communicate and liaise with other services Some partnerships are evident between CPs and limited number of other organisations Partnerships contribute to better access for participants	No partnerships are established or low levels of partnership between services

A rubric developed to guide Value for Money assessment

A Value for Money (VfM) rubric and rating scale was developed to guide the 2017 evaluation of the CARE International in PNG Coffee Industry Support Project (CISP). To answer the question "to what extent does CISP demonstrate value for money. The evaluation rubric was developed collaboratively by the Papua New Guinea Australian High Commission Counsellor – Gender and Sports, the CARE Program Director, and the evaluation team during the planning phase of the evaluation. The development of the rubric was guided by the question, 'For each of the dimensions of efficiency, effectiveness, economy, and ethics, what would demonstrate good value for money?'

The answers to this question became the rubric 'Components.' The rubric 'Dimensions' match the DFAT Value for money four Es. The 'Domains' group the Components under key headings that include the DFAT principles. Components were drawn from CISP's monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework and the *Pacific Women* draft VfM rubric. All of the CISP evaluation questions were clearly incorporated into the CISP VfM rubric. The rubric included a rating scale to provide a final score for each Dimension.

Excerpt from the Coffee Industry Support Project evaluation rubric

Dimension	Domain	Components			Score		
	Components and domains are rated 1, 2 or 3	High Level (3) Very strong performance without gaps or weaknesses	Satisfactory (2) Acceptable performance with no significant gaps or weaknesses	Poor (1) Performance is unacceptably weak with significant gaps	Component	Domain	Dimension
Dimensions are rated 1-6		6 - satisfies criteria in all domains 5 - satisfies criteria in almost all domains	4 - on balance satisfies criteria; does not fail in any major domain 3 - on balance satisfies criteria but marginal in at least one major domain	2-does not satisfy criteria in several major domains 1-does not satisfy criteria in any domain			
Economy	Financial Management	Cost conscious principles are embedded in all aspects of program management and delivery **	Adequate principles of cost consciousness evident	Inadequate cost consciousness principles practiced			
		High levels of competition practiced in procurement**	Competition principles appropriately applied in procurement	Inadequate competition practiced in procurement			
		The Project uses international expertise in the most cost effective way with evidence of appropriate skills transfer	The Project uses international expertise in a cost effective way	The Project is over reliant on international expertise without evidence of skills transfer			
		High degree of proportionality in the balance of investments**	Adequate degree of proportionality	Low degree of proportionality			
		Financial management system ensures accurate budget, management and reporting	Financial system used to monitor costs and aggregate budget in timely manner	Financial system does not allow for timely monitoring of costs and forecasting			
Efficiency	Project Model	The Project is underpinned by a strong theory of change, community consultation, and informed by global learning	The Project is underpinned by a sound theory of change with some evidence of use of global learning	The Project is not underpinned by sound theory of change			
	Program management systems	Strong risk management system in place that is regularly reviewed and updated as necessary	Processes are in place to manage risks and respond to challenges	Limited or no evidence of risk management plans or timely identification and or response to risks			
		The Project effectively employs the necessary number of staff with the right skills to meet the requirements of the Project design	The Project has an adequate number of staff with the right skills to meet the requirements of the Project design	The Project does not have adequate number of staff with the necessary skills to meet the requirements of the Project design			

References and links

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CARE International in PNG Coffee Industry Support Project Mid-term Evaluation Report, (2017) https://pacificwomen.org/resources/png-coffee-industry-support-project-mid-term-evaluation-report-management-response/

BetterEvaluation website provides useful bools and resources on rubrics and value for money frameworks. https://www.betterevaluation.org