



Evaluation Guidance Note Series

UNIFEM Evaluation Unit

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Guidance Note on Management Structures and Reference Groups for Evaluations

1. What are reference groups for evaluation?

The main purpose of this guideline is to provide suggestions on how to define a management structure and establish reference groups for evaluations in order to ensure that they are consultative and participatory.

Why a management structure for evaluation?

In order to apply the principles of participation and consultation, transparency and accountability, evaluation processes should clearly define an organization and management structure and establish the roles and responsibilities of the key players. All evaluations should appoint an *evaluation manager* who will assume the day-to-day responsibility for managing the evaluation and serve as the central person to contact and coordinate all players. In addition, *key stakeholders* need to be identified and involved in the process, through the establishment of reference groups. Finally, there may be a *quality assurance mechanism* for assuring that the evaluation process and outputs are of the required quality.

What is a reference group for evaluation?

Evaluation reference groups are defined as participatory spaces established for the systematic involvement of relevant stakeholders in the evaluation process. The reference groups become consultative bodies that serve as sounding boards for feedback and decisions on the evaluation. Their creation allow stakeholders to express their information needs, to participate in the different stages of the evaluation process and to enhance learning and ownership of the evaluation findings. The participation of stakeholders will also enhance the credibility of evaluation findings and therefore their use.

Who is part of a reference group?

Reference groups are composed of the key stakeholders or groups of stakeholders involved in the intervention being evaluated, and are involved with the future use of the evaluation findings. On this basis, key stakeholders should be identified from the beginning of the evaluation process, at the Preparation stage, through a “**stakeholder’s analysis**”¹, and should be involved during the whole evaluation process until its completion and dissemination stage. Through the stakeholder analysis the interests, information needs and potential for participation should be identified.

The reference group can consist of stakeholders and interested parties such as programme managers, decision makers, partner organizations, civil society organizations, Government representatives, experts, international partners working in the country, donors and beneficiaries. The reference groups can include different stakeholders directly involved in the intervention (i.e. implementing partner, beneficiaries) or interested in the evaluation without direct involvement in implementation (i.e. UN sister agencies). In both cases, the evaluation manager will assess what is the relevance and feasibility of their implication throughout the evaluation process.

Categories of stakeholders who may be represented in the reference groups are:

¹ See Tool: [Stakeholder analysis with GE/ HR considerations and Tool: Stakeholder Checklist](#).

- **Governments and national counterparts.** This group includes direct decision making authority and is a key group to be considered in the evaluation in line with the principles of ownership and alignment. The evaluation must ensure that their needs and interests are analyzed as they play a key role in the initial identification of the evaluation objectives and their needs are a key element for the evaluation use.

- **Partners and other Civil Society Organizations, including women's organizations.** These stakeholders, be them implementing partners or broader partners, are critical as evaluation stakeholders; they have deep knowledge of the intervention context and they represent civil society interests and needs, thus enhancing accountability through the evaluation. Existing regional and country evaluation networks can also be included under this category as relevant stakeholders.

- **Beneficiaries.** The target population of the intervention should be fully consulted in the evaluation process and their interests and information needs identified and reflected. It is crucial to engage these stakeholders in an evaluation to ensure accountability and use.

- **Programme managers and decision makers.** In UNIFEM evaluations, managers and staff are key stakeholders, both as informants and as members of core reference groups. They have detailed knowledge of the intervention, its history and context, and therefore should be able to express their information needs. Their involvement is a critical factor for a useful evaluation. Programme managers and staff should commit to the principles of impartiality and independence of the evaluation judgment and facilitate evaluation processes that are transparent, participatory and not influenced by particular interests. In addition, decision makers about the programme (Heads of sections, Regional Programme Directors, Senior Management Team, etc) should be involved in the evaluation and fully informed throughout.

- **UN sister Agencies.** Whether they are implementation partners or not, involving UN agencies in the evaluation is important to enhance coordination, knowledge sharing and use of evaluations to improve the UN system work for gender equality.

- **Bilateral partners or donors.** Donor organizations are relevant stakeholders to be involved in evaluation processes. Their participation contributes to accountability, credibility and knowledge sharing, as well as to potential for advocacy and fund raising for gender equality and women's rights.

- **Other stakeholders:** There are other groups of interest who may not be directly involved in the intervention being evaluated, but who could be affected by the evaluation process. These may be gender experts, the academia, etc. It is important to identify them and if relevant for the purposes of the evaluation, keep them informed about the evaluation.

The participation of all stakeholders in the evaluation process can be challenging to manage, and may have cost and time implications. Therefore, it is recommended to undertake an adequate stakeholder's analysis to identify the priorities of participation to base the decision on who should participate and when on the relevance of that particular group to the purposes and use of the evaluation.

2. Process for establishing reference groups

Potential stakeholders for reference groups should be identified and involved as early as possible in the evaluation process. The evaluation manager should analyze their participation and develop a Terms of Reference for their clear involvement throughout. In order to identify the stakeholders involved in the intervention and to analyze how they should be involved in the evaluation, you can use the table below (a tool that form part of the process of the stakeholder's analysis). It will help you to map out all the relevant groups, to assess their relevance to the evaluation and estimate how difficult it is likely to engage them. The evaluation managers may need to pay particular attention to stakeholders who are very relevant to the evaluation but who are likely difficult to engage.

Type of stakeholders	Names of Potential Stakeholders	Relevance of Stakeholder Rate 1 (low) to 5 (high) ²	Difficulty of Engaging Rate 1 (low) to 5 (high) ³
Governments and national counterparts			
Partners, CSO's and women's organizations			
Beneficiaries			
Programme managers			
Decision makers			
Other UN Agencies			
Donors			
Others			

3. Types of reference groups

Based on the identification of the key stakeholder's and their relevance for the evaluation, there are different types of Referent Groups and each evaluation needs to identify the more appropriate for the purpose of the evaluation. Reference groups may be internal (i.e. UNIFEM management staff) or external (i.e. implementing partner), and they can be small for management purposes (i.e. composed of managers and decision makers on the intervention) or broad (i.e. representative of all the UNCT). The terminology for this type of participatory spaces also vary depending on the organization, for example, the core reference group may be named "evaluation management group" while a broader group of stakeholders may be called "extensive reference group".

In the context of UNIFEM, we identify the following types of reference groups for evaluation:

² Relevant: 1 = not very relevant at all; 5 = very relevant to the evaluation

³ Difficulty of Engaging: 1 = will be easy to engage; 5 = will be very difficult to engage

- **Management group:** this group, coordinated by the evaluation manager, is responsible for managing the day to day aspects of the evaluation process. This includes: lead the development of the TOR; manage the selection and recruitment of the evaluation team; manage the contractual arrangements, budget and personnel involved in the evaluation; provide support and coordination to the reference group; provide the evaluators with administrative support and required data; connect the evaluation team with the programme unit, senior management and other relevant stakeholders; review the interim reports and final reports to ensure its quality. For decentralized evaluations this group may be composed of: evaluation manager, programme manager/s, heads of relevant section. For corporate evaluations, this group is composed of Evaluation Adviser and evaluation manager.
- **Core reference group:** this group has a decision making responsibility regarding the different steps of the evaluation process. Key responsibilities are: determine the key objectives and scope of the evaluation; provide clear guidance to the management group on how the evaluation findings will be used; respond to the evaluation by preparing a management response and use the findings as appropriate; safeguard the independence of the evaluation; allocate adequate funding and human resources for the evaluation. This group may be composed of Head of office/section, RPD, Senior management team. If it is an individual evaluation, this group is usually internal; but if it consists of a joint evaluation, it will be composed of UNIFEM as well as partner institution representatives at this level.
- **Broad reference group:** the group who will be informed throughout the evaluation process for feedback on key steps, such as: comments to TOR, comments to inception report, comments to final report, dissemination of findings with key partners. This group may be composed of internal and/or external stakeholders such as project/programme coordinators, key Government and Civil Society partners, UN sister agencies, donors.

As noted above, reference groups will play an important role in all the different steps of the evaluation, with different level of involvement and decision making responsibilities in the whole evaluation process. Thus the main **functions** are summarized below:

- To facilitate the participation of the different stakeholders involved in the evaluation design, defining the objectives, the evaluation scope and the different information needs.
- To participate, provide feedback and approve the different evaluation documents.
- To provide inputs and to participate in the process of elaboration of Terms of Reference (ToR).
- To provide relevant information to the evaluation team.
- To supervise the quality of the evaluation process and to provide inputs to the different products delivered by the evaluation team.
- To disseminate evaluation results.

It is important to note that a Reference Group is different than an Advisory Group, which is usually composed of thematic experts to provide advice on key aspects of that issues. Advisory Groups can also be constituted for an evaluation

Five Tips for Managing Reference Groups

It can be a challenging process to constitute and actively manage a Reference Group for an evaluation. Below are five common challenges and tips on how to address them:

Challenge 1: Reference Group members may not be familiar with evaluation. **Tip:** *Spend some time in the beginning to educate them on what an evaluation is, why it is done and the evaluation process.*

Challenge 2: Reference Group members are not clear on their role in the evaluation and their responsibility to provide feedback. **Tip:** *Develop a clearly defined and agreed upon TOR for the Reference Group at the very beginning that defines roles and manages expectations.*

Challenge 3: Reference Group members do not have time to participate in meetings and/or provide feedback to evaluation products as agreed. **Tip:** *Allocate adequate time, being realistic as possible, for feedback and alert them about shifting deadlines as far in advance as possible.*

Challenge 4: Reference Group members can feel alienated and then become disengaged with the evaluation process. **Tip:** *Make sure that initial communications are set up well and that there is a two-way communication. Consider holding regular workshops/teleconferences if possible to facilitate communication and make them feel more connected to the process.*

Challenge 5: All Reference Group members' comments and feedback may not be reflected in the final report. **Tip:** *Provide them with a copy of UNIFEM evaluation policy and UNEG Norms & Standards and reiterate the need to ensure the independence of the evaluation, its rigour and integrity.*

Literature consulted:

- UNDP (2009), "Handbook on planning, monitoring and evaluating for development results".
- Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y Cooperación España (2007), "Manual de gestión de evaluaciones de la cooperación española; Aprender para mejorar".