planning, monitoring & evaluation

Department:
Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DPME Evaluation Guideline 2.2.17

How to develop actionable recommendations

Created: 12 May 2016
Revised: February 2021

Addressed to	1. M&E Units in all Government Institutions (National Departments, Provincial Departments, State-Owned Enterprises and Municipalities); 2. Government programme managers who are undertaking evaluations; 3. Service Providers conducting evaluations in all Government Institutions.
Purpose	The purpose of this guideline is to give practical guidance on how to develop actionable recommendations.
Policy reference	1. National Evaluation Policy Framework 2019; 2. DPME Evaluation Guideline 2.2.8: Communication of Evaluation Results; 3. DPME Guideline 2.2.6: How to develop an Improvement Plan to address evaluation recommendations
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1. Introduction

This Guideline provides practical guidance on content and process issues around developing actionable recommendations.

A critical component of the National Evaluation System (NES) is supporting evaluation use. This is done through the development of recommendations in the evaluation report which are implemented through the improvement plan mechanism. The improvement plan is informed by the set of evaluation recommendations, which are developed recommendations by an independent evaluator.

Developed by the custodian departments and stakeholders, the improvement plan outlines strategies for improvement, based on recommendations by an independent evaluator and specifies improvement objectives, outputs, activities, time frames and responsible individuals. The likelihood of implementation of the improvement plan or by implication, the use of the evaluation, hinges largely on the quality of evaluation recommendations and the process for developing them.

The evaluation of the NES undertaken in 2016/17 indicated effective use of evaluation results in government being one of the biggest challenges. Although great progress has been made in entrenching evaluations in government, there have been missed opportunities for using evaluations strategically to support planning, policymaking and budgeting processes.

The review of the National Evaluation Policy Framework 2019 (NEPF), sought to re-design and re-focus the NES to enhance evaluation utilisation, seeking to build from a demand-driven system. Key amongst these is encouraging departmental ownership of evaluations to maximise the likelihood that evaluations are used to improve performance and decision-making. Another key initiative emanating from the NEPF 2019 is the proposed utilisation of evaluation findings and recommendations as a source of evidence to support budgeting processes by National/ Provincial Departments, Municipalities and State-Owned Entities additionally, the NEPF 2019 recommends embedding the improvement plans in the Annual Performance Plans (APPs) of the responsible Government institution.

2. Strong evidence-based findings are needed for strong recommendations

Recommendations may undermine an evaluation's credibility if they are not supported by enough evidence, or are not in line with stakeholders' values, hence the validation exercise by stakeholders is critical before the recommendations are finalised. As shown in **figure 1** below, recommendations are the fourth distinct process preceded by three other processes, namely: analysis, which involves describing findings by identifying the patterns, interpreting findings (what they mean/implications) and judgments (adding values to analysis and interpretation).
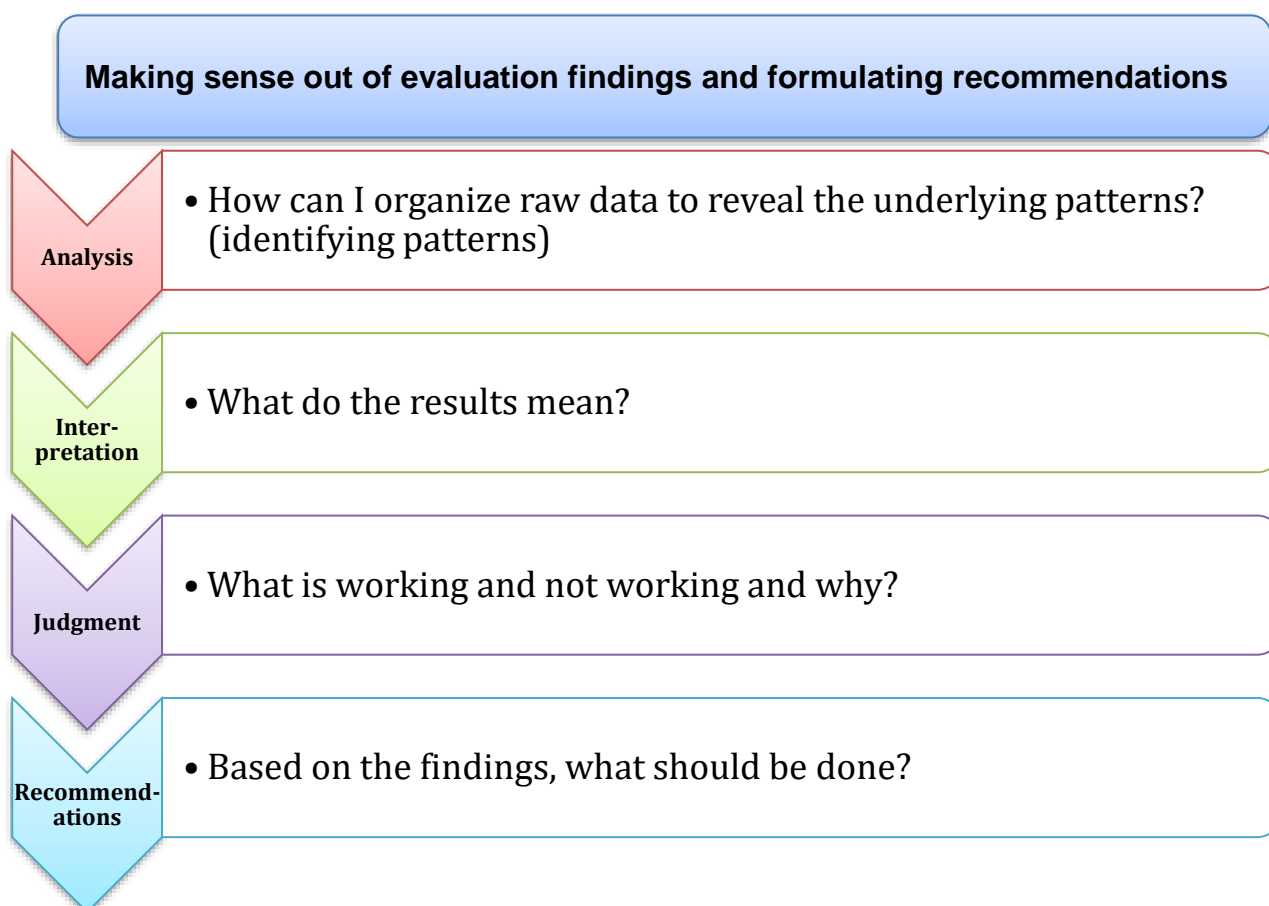

Figure 1: Four distinct processes involved in making sense out of evaluation findings and formulating recommendations

The four distinct processes can be summarized as follows:

1. ***Analysis*** (identification of patterns). Useful findings involve organizing raw data into a form that reveals basic patterns the factual findings as revealed in actual data will be presented in a user-friendly fashion.

2. ***Interpretation*:** this entails determining meaning and implications of data based on deduction or inference.

3. ***Judgment*:** Values are added to analysis and interpretation. Determining merit or worth means resolving to what extent the intervention is working or not working and how it can be strengthened. Is the theory of change working or not?

4. ***Recommendations:*** The final step adds action to analysis, interpretation and judgment. It answers the question: What should be done?

Besides the four distinct processes, throughout the evaluation process, it is critical to involve the target audience (the intervention owners and stakeholders) to ensure the ownership of the evaluation and the utilization of recommendations.

Action Points:
- Identify your target audience beforehand: the primary intended users of the evaluation must be clearly identified and they should be included in the steering committee. The evaluator must personally engage them at the beginning of the evaluation process to ensure that their primary intended uses can be identified (Patton et al, 2009).
- Ensure that intended uses of the evaluation (by the primary users) guide all other decisions that are made e.g. TOR development, instrument design etc.
- Organise a validation workshop once the draft report has been produced to give intended users an opportunity to validate the findings and recommendations.
- Present emerging results from evaluation to senior management prior to the final report. The steering committee should plan this as draft reports are received.
- Be aware how policies are made, remember that government policy actors are interested in making decisions that are practical, cost-effective and socially acceptable.
- See section 5 for detail.

3. Why some recommendations are not used?

There are several factors that programme owners and evaluators should be aware of in which may result in recommendations not being implemented/ used. Below are some examples.

- ***Not practical*:** Recommendations need to be sensible, useful and specific. They need to address the needs of the intended users. The evaluator needs to be cautious about how the recommendations are developed and presented. In other instances, the evaluator may fail to identify key issues and interpret the findings in a critical manner which results in proposing unusable recommendations.

- **Evaluation process taking too long.** As a result of delays, evaluation findings are not effectively utilised in decision-making. Some of the reasons for the delays that have been cited include protracted procurement processes, unavailability of data to conduct impact evaluations, contestations around evaluation findings, and quality assurance concerns as a result of the poor technical quality of some evaluation products.
- **Already done:** Timing is important in ensuring usability of the recommendations - from the initiation, implementation and completion stage of the evaluation. If the evaluation takes place when most of the proposed recommendations have been implemented through policy amendment or change, it makes the evaluation findings and recommendations useless and means a waste of resources.
- **Lack of stakeholder involvement[1] in the evaluation process:** The strength of the recommendation is determined by a consideration of values and preferences, and resource implications (WHO, 2012). It is unlikely that there will be resistance if key stakeholders are involved throughout the evaluation process.
- **Not key priority:** The strength of some recommendations may be weak in the sense that it may not be a key priority for the programme.
- **Budget constraints:** The budget factor may hinder the usability of a recommendation. An example would be a recommendation that proposes that the budget of the programme be doubled to increase programme reach, this may be a good proposal but may not be feasible especially in tough economic climates.
- **Political implications:** certain recommendations may have negative political implications and may therefore not be enforceable.
- **Legislation:** The recommendation needs to consider the legislation implications and should be consistent with the law.

4. Characteristics of actionable recommendations

There are some characteristics which actionable recommendations have in common, which may include the following:

4.1.   Relevant to the key evaluation questions and purpose of the evaluation.

4.2.   Based on the evidence and conclusions, logically related to the key findings.

4.3.   Developed in an iterative manner in consultation with stakeholders. Broader stakeholder engagement is vital in developing useable recommendations. This can be done through a stakeholder workshop to discuss the draft evaluation report. The purpose is to validate findings and recommendations, whether they are technically sound, clear, feasible, implementable and relevant. This also allows the stakeholders the opportunity to participate in developing the recommendations and thereby owning and using them. See **Annexure 1**, for an example of a programme for a validation workshop.

4.4.   Actionable, feasible and reflect an understanding of potential constraints to implementation. Paying due attention to resource allocation, financing, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Refer to section 3 above for issues that should be taken into consideration to ensure that recommendations are implementable.

4.5.   Clearly stated in simple, straightforward language using an active voice (e.g. the Department of X should do Y) and written in a prescriptive manner to guide implementation. See Box 1 below for examples of these recommendations extracted from Report on the evaluations of

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[1] All key role players within the sector

Support Programme for Industrial Innovation (SPII) and Technology for Human Resources and Industry Programme (THRIP).

4.6.   Recommendations should neither be so broad, winding nor so detailed that they it is not clear what is required and what needs to happen. Box 1 below provides examples of long, detailed and winding recommendations from evaluations of SPII and THRIP. Box 1 also shows how the recommendations were transformed to be stronger.

4.7.   Relatively few in number, from 6 - 10 per evaluation and numbered (e.g. Recommendation 1, Recommendation 2 or R1, R2 etc.)

4.8.   If possible, identify the responsible role player(s) that is supposed to act on the recommendation, for example:

    R 3.4   The <u>THRIP management and executive</u> should create links with similar programmes internationally and learn from their experiences**.**

    R6   <u>The Department of Trade and Industry (**DTI**)</u> should engage with the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in

        order to resolve the challenge of intellectual property ownership

4.9.   Categorise or classify recommendations per theme.

See **annexure 2**, a checklist that summarises the above characteristics.

Box 1

Example 1:
Example of a broad and winding recommendation from a Report on Implementation Evaluation of the Support Programme for Industrial Innovation (SPII) (Draft Report version dated 13 December 2013, page and R3)

As with any grant-based programme that addresses market failure, there is a concern that it could create a market distortion. Thus, SPII should not try to stimulate innovation where innovation does not already take place naturally, both geographically and sectorally. SPII should act as a temporary innovation catalyst, providing limited duration incentives to encourage investment in innovation which would not have otherwise happened.

Example 2:
Example of a short, simple and practical recommendation from a Report on Implementation Evaluation of SPII (Final Report version dated 11 June 2014)

R3: SPII needs to continue to contribute to the stimulation of the innovation landscape by stimulating innovation in products/services and in geographical areas where opportunities are the greatest.

Example 3:
Example of a broad and winding recommendation from THRIP Evaluation (Draft Report version dated 22 July 2014)

1. From the evidence presented, (relevance, benchmarking and impacts) it becomes apparent that THRIP is a valid and important element of the South African government's portfolio of innovation support measures. Following international best practice, it offers considerable value for money and has not yet reached the stage where it is running into diminishing returns. It is recommended that THRIP should be retained and its available funding should be increased according to industrial absorptive capacity and needs. A doubling of the programme's funding should be the first objective over the intermediate term.

Example 4:
Example of short, simple and practical recommendation from THRIP Evaluation (Final Report version dated 24 March 2015)

Recommendation 1:

The DTI should retain THRIP and enhance the government's financial support. A doubling of the Programme's funding should be the first objective over the intermediate term.

5. Summary of the National Evaluation System processes to operationalise evaluation recommendations

 Figure 2 below summarises the key processes in terms of the National Evaluation System for operationalising the recommendations:

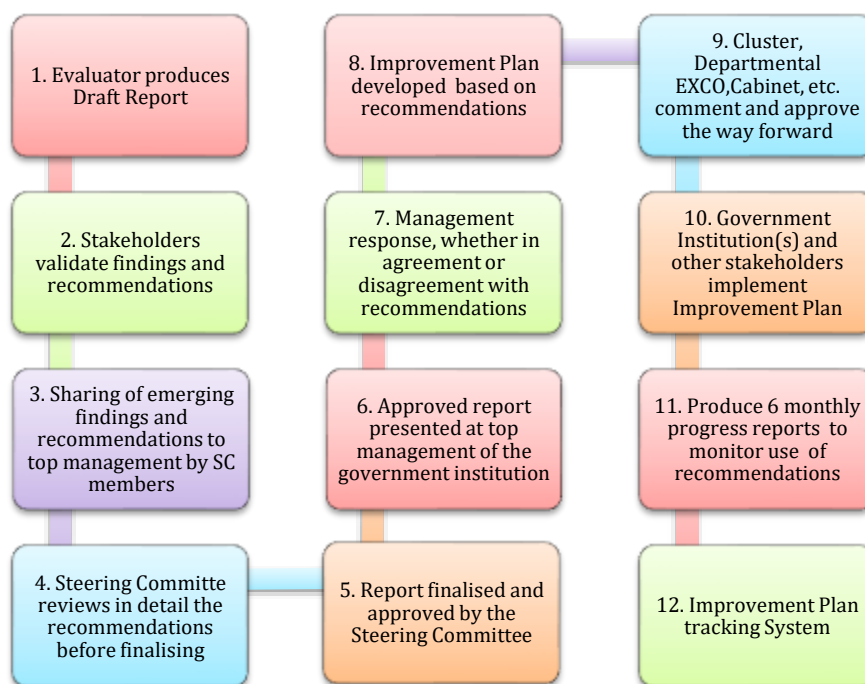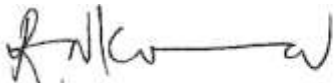|		
1. Evaluator produces Draft Report	8. Improvement Plan developed based on recommendations	9. Cluster, Departmental EXCO, Cabinet, etc. comment and approve the way forward
2. Stakeholders validate findings and recommendations	7. Management response, whether in agreement or disagreement with recommendations	10. Government Institution(s) and other stakeholders implement Improvement Plan
3. Sharing of emerging findings and recommendations to top management by SC members	6. Approved report presented at top management of the government institution	11. Produce 6 monthly progress reports to monitor use of recommendations
4. Steering Committe reviews in detail the recommendations before finalising	5. Report finalised and approved by the Steering Committee	12. Improvement Plan tracking System

Figure 2: Refining the recommendations, incorporating them in the improvement plan and operationalising them

5.1   The evaluator produces a draft report with findings and recommendations which goes to the steering committee (SC).

5.2   The report is circulated to stakeholders and a consultative stakeholder workshop is organised to comment and validate the main findings and recommendations.

5.3   Emerging findings and recommendations are shared with top management by departmental representatives in the steering committee.

5.4   The stakeholders' comments are incorporated into the second draft report. The SC comments on the 2nd draft report and refines the recommendations.

5.5   The evaluator refines the report and submits the final draft report. The SC meets to approve the report.

5.6   Approved report is presented at top management of the government institution for noting.

5.7   A letter is written to the Institution Head (i.e. Director-General, Head of Department, Municipal Manager, Chief Executive Officer) requesting a management response and informing about the process for the improvement plan.

5.8   Top management provides management response (within 30 days of receipt of the letter). For example, evaluators may come up with some recommendations that are not feasible, or

departments may not agree with the recommendations. Refer to DPME website for a DPME Guideline 2.2.5 on How to Develop a Management Response.

5.9   An Improvement Plan (IP) is developed by custodian institution and stakeholders based on the recommendations that were accepted/ agreed by top management of a custodian institution. This must happen within 4 months of approval of the report. The final version must be signed off by the Institution Head. Refer to the DPME Guideline 2.2.6 on How to produce an Improvement Plan available on DPME website.

5.10   If the evaluation is in the NEP/PEP it is submitted through relevant cluster to Cabinet/ provincial EXCO for noting. An evaluation in the DEP is presented to executive/top management of a department.

5.11   The institution and other stakeholders embed the improvement plan in their APP(s) and implement the improvement plan.

5.12   The M&E Unit / DPME monitors the implementation of the IP every six months and writes to the custodian department or section one month before the progress report is due requesting the progress report.

5.13   The programme managers submit progress reports against the improvement plan detailing how strategies in the improvement plan have been be implemented.

Signed:

Mr Robert Nkuna
Director-General
Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
Date: 19/05/2021

6. References

1. Patton, M.Q. and Horton, D (2009). Utilization-Focused Evaluation for Agricultural Innovation. International Labor Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) Brief No. 22. ILAC, Bioversity, Rome.

2. DPME (2013). Evaluation Guideline 2.2.8: Communication of Evaluation Results. 28 March 2013

3. World Health Organization (2012). Handbook for Guideline Development. 2012. Accessed: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/75146/1/9789241548441_eng.pdf

4. DPME (2015). Summary Evaluation Report on the Implementation and Impact Assessment of the Technology and Human Resources for Industry Programme (THRIP), 16 March 2015

5. DPME (2014) Summary Evaluation Report on the Implementation and Impact Evaluation of the Support Programme for Industrial Innovation, 11 June 2014.

<u>Annexure 1</u>

Stakeholder Workshop to comment on the Draft Report on Implementation Evaluation of MPAT

Date: 13 February
Time: 08:30 – 15:30
Venue: CSIR International convention Centre, 627 Meiring Naude Rd, Brummeria, Pretoria

Objectives
By end of the workshop participants have validated the findings and recommendations of the Implementation Evaluation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT)

Programme Director: Mr Henk Serfontein, DPME

Programme

Time	Item	Item	Responsible
08.30		**Coffee and registration**	
09.00	**1**	**Welcome and process**	**Chair: Mr Henk Serfontein, DPME**
	1.1	Objectives and flow of the day	Chair
	1.2	Introductions	Chair
09.15	**2**	**Overview of the evaluation**	
	2.1	Overview of the evaluation – process & update	
	2.12	Overview of the evaluation – background &purpose	
	3.	**Background Section**	
9.30	3.1	Presentation on Introduction, Context and Methodology	Service Provider
9.45	3.2	Discussion	All
	4	**Evaluation findings and recommendations**	
10.00	4.1	Presentation of evaluation findings and recommendations	Service Provider
10.15	4.2	Discussion	All
10.30		**Coffee**	
10.45	**5**	**Group work on findings and recommendations**	Chair facilitates
	5.1	Introduction to the group task	
	5.2	Groups work on sections of the report: **Group 1 Relevance:** .1 Undertaking self-assessment .2 KPAs and Standards .3 Reasons for undertaking in MPAT .4 Participation rates .5 Other tools and related processes .6 Synthesis ⚜ Are the recommendations (p.131 -136) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?	All

		Group 2 Efficiency:
		
		    .1 MPAT tools and resources
		    .2 Assessment reports
		    .3 Internal audit review
		    .4 Moderation
		    .5 Challenges and final scores
		    .6 Developing the improvement plan
		    .7 Synthesis
		
		➕ Are the recommendations (p.131 -136) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?
		
		Group 3 Effectiveness:
		
		    1. Improvements in standard ratings
		    2. Accuracy of MPAT scores
		    3. Usefulness
		    4. Learning
		    5. Perspectives on management performance results
		    6. Correlation Analyses
		    7. Synthesis
		
		➕ Are the recommendations (p.131 -136) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?	

13.00		**Lunch**	
13.30		Continue	
	6	**Report back** (15 min per Group, including discussion)	
14.00	6.1	Groups report back on the main issues emerging and cross-cutting issues	
15.00		Quick tea break	
15.20		Discussion on cross-cutting issues	Chair
15.30	**7**	**Way forward and closing**	Chair

Group Task

Background

During the group session detailed work is done to validate and enrich the findings. Groups are allocated different elements of the report to look at:

1. Undertaking self-assessment
2. KPAs and Standards
3. Reasons for undertaking in MPAT
4. Participation rates
5. Other tools and related processes
6. MPAT tools and resources
7. Assessment reports
8. Internal audit review
9. Moderation
10. Challenges and final scores
11. Developing the improvement plan
12. Improvements in standard ratings
13. Accuracy of MPAT scores
14. Usefulness
15. Learning
16. Perspectives on management performance results
17. Correlation Analyses

All 3 groups need to answer the following question:

➕ Are the recommendations (p. 51 -52) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?

You will have been allocated one of these topics.

Objective

The group has validated and enriched the findings and recommendations for one or two sections of the report.

Process

1. Someone will have been allocated the role of facilitator, and someone to take detailed notes.
2. Select someone to do the report back
3. Each group will be given some sections of the report.
4. A resource person presents the findings and recommendations of these sections (15 mins)
5. Have a general discussion on the picture emerging (15 mins)
6. Go through the findings and recommendations one by one asking:
   - Does the finding make sense?
   - Is the recommendation appropriate to the finding – is it realistic and will it make a difference?
   - The rapporteur should capture major issues, the secretariat should make detailed changes.
7. Draw out what seem to be the major comments to report back on:
   - Overall do you agree with the thrust of this part of the report?
   - What are major changes to the findings/recommendations you would like to see (if any)?
   - Any cross-cutting issues which need to be discussed in plenary?

Resources
- Appropriate section of the report

Annexure 2

Checklist: Characteristics of actionable recommendations

Characteristic	Meet requirement		Comments
	Yes	**No**	
1. Relevant to the key evaluation questions and purpose of the evaluation.			
2. Based on the evidence and conclusions, logically related to the key findings and appropriate for what has been learned.			
3. Technically sound, clear, feasible, implementable and relevant.			
4. Actionable, feasible and reflect an understanding of potential constraints to implementation. paying due attention to resource allocation, financing, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation			
5. Clearly stated in simple, straightforward language using an active voice (e.g. the Department of X should do Y) and written in a prescriptive manner to guide implementation.			
6. Not broad, winding or so detailed that it is not clear what is required and what needs to happen.			
7. Relatively few in number, from 6 - 10 per evaluation and numbered (e.g. Recommendation1 or R1, R1.1, etc).			
8. If possible, identify the responsible role player(s) that is supposed to act on the recommendation.			
9. Categorise or classify recommendations per theme.			