



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: 2 February 2017

Addressed to	M&E Units in Government Departments; Government programme managers who are undertaking evaluations; and Service Providers conducting evaluations in the national, provincial and departmental evaluation plans.
Purpose	The purpose of this guideline is to give practical guidance on how to develop actionable recommendations.
Policy reference	National Evaluation Policy Framework; DPME Evaluation Guideline 2.2.8: Communication of Evaluation Results and DPME Guideline 2.2.6: How to develop an Improvement Plan to address evaluation recommendations
Contact person for this guideline	Jabu Mathe, Evaluation and Research Unit (ERU) E-mail: jabu@dpme.gov.za Tel: 012 312 0158

1. Introduction

A key challenge in South Africa has always been that where evaluations are done, they are often not used. Failure to use evaluations defeats the main purpose of undertaking them. Against this background, when DPME and partners drafted the National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF), they sought to design a national evaluation system (NES) that is utilisation focused, seeking to build from a demand-driven system. Great efforts have been made since the approval of the NEPF in 2011 to ensure use of evaluations. Key amongst these is departmental ownership of evaluations to maximise the likelihood that evaluations are used to improve performance and decision-making. Another key initiative in 2012 was the development of a set of government evaluation standards with an intention of supporting the use of evaluations, through setting benchmarks of evaluation quality. Our belief and understanding is that the credibility and potential use of the evaluation is predicated on its quality.

A critical component of the national evaluation system supporting evaluation use is the improvement plan. 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 improvement plan is informed by the set of evaluation recommendations. 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. This Guideline provides practical guidance on content and process issues around actionable recommendations.

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 keeping 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).

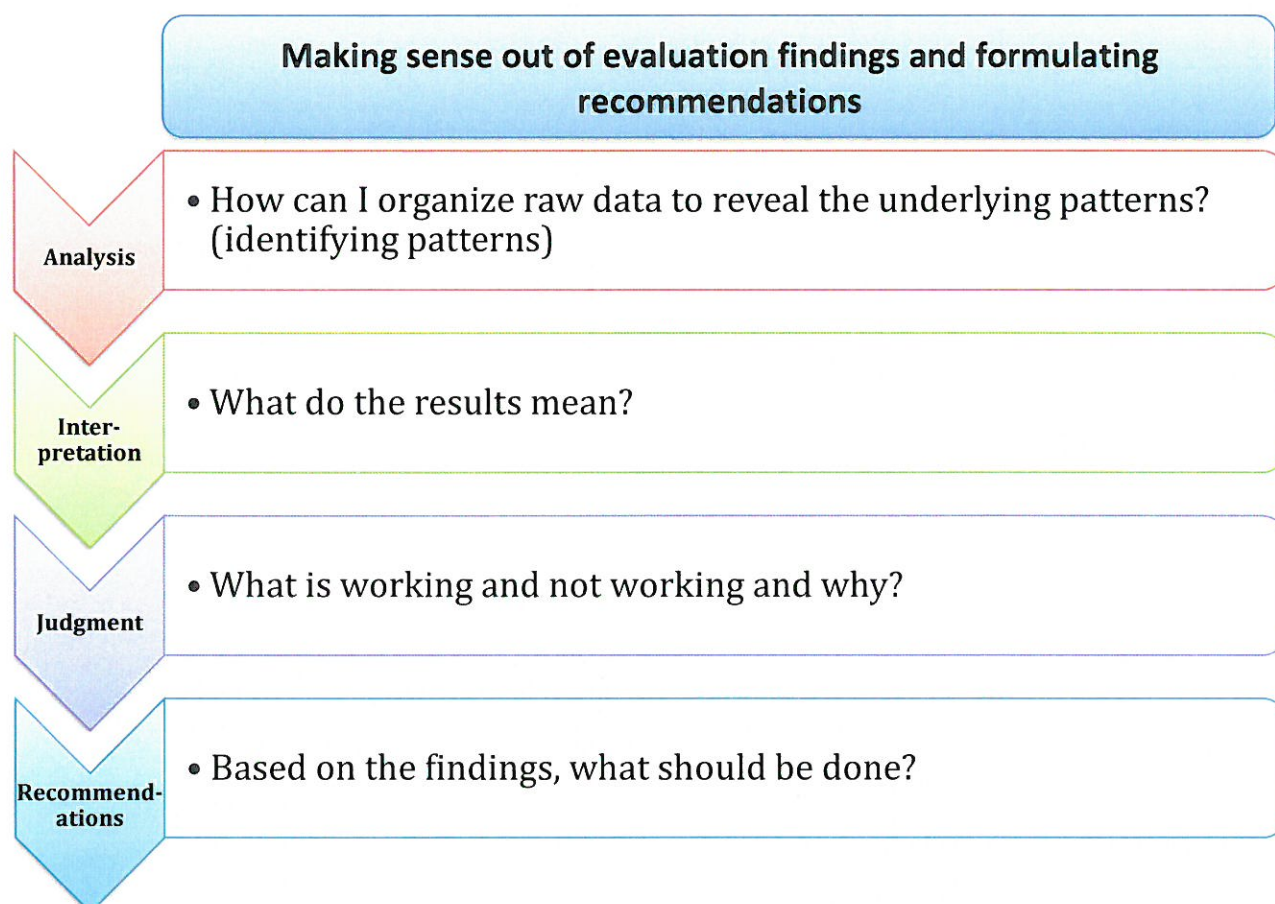


Figure 1: Four distinct processes involved in making sense out of evaluation findings and formulating recommendations

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.
- **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 ¹in 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 take into account the legislation implications and should be consistent with the law.

¹ All key role players within the sector

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 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 take action on the recommendation, for example:

R 3.4 The THRIP management and executive should create links with similar programmes internationally and learn from their experiences.

R6 The dti 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:

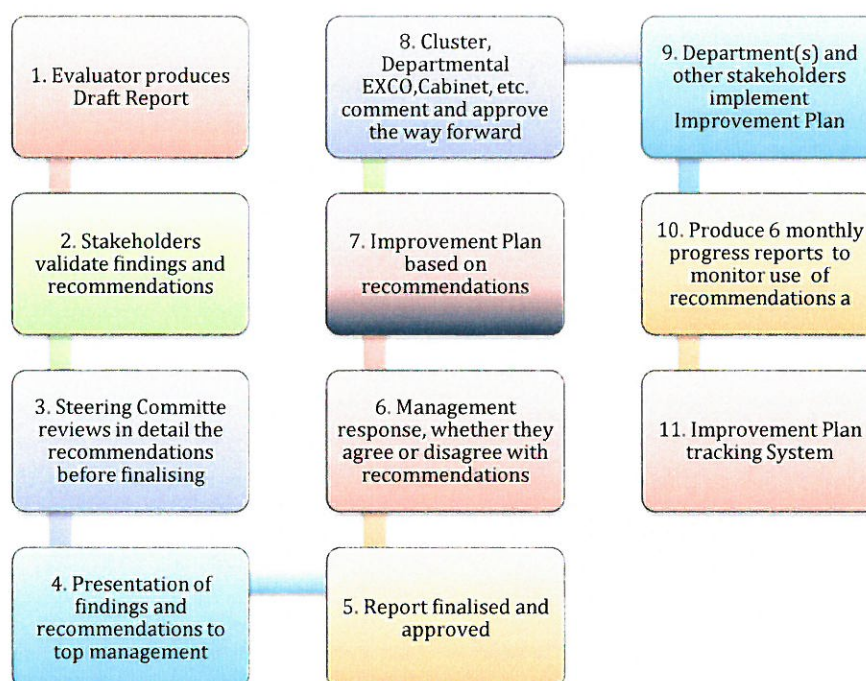
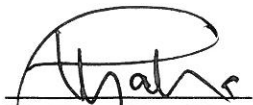


Figure 2: Refining the recommendations, incorporating them in the improvement plan and operationalising them

- 5.1 The evaluator produces a draft report with findings and recommendations which goes to the steering committee.
- 5.2 It 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 Steering committee comments on the 2nd draft report and refines the recommendations.
- 5.5 The evaluator refines the report and submits the Final Draft Reports. The Steering committee meets to approve the report.
- 5.6 Approved report is presented at top management of a department for noting.
- 5.7 A letter is written to the DG of the department 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 Improvement plan is developed by custodian department and stakeholders based on the recommendations that were accepted/ agreed by top management of a custodian department. This must happen within 4 months of approval of the report. The final version must be signed off by the DG of the custodian department. Refer to the DPME website for a DPME Guideline 2.2.6 on How to produce an Improvement Plan.
- 5.10 If the evaluation is in the NEP/PEP it is submitted through relevant cluster to Cabinet/ provincial EXCO for noting and final approval. An evaluation in the DEP is presented to executive/top management of a department.
- 5.11 The department and other stakeholders implement the improvement plan.
- 5.12 The M&E Unit 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 will be implemented.
- 5.14 The status reports of the improvement plan are then tracked on the DPME's Management Information System (MIS).

Signed:



Mr Tshediso Matona
Acting Director-General
Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

Date: 14/2/2017

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.

Annexure 1

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

13 February 2015

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	Jabu Mathe, DPME
	2.12	Overview of the evaluation – background & purpose	Lebo Masolane, DPME
	3.	Background Section	
9.30	3.1	Presentation on Introduction, Context and Methodology	Service Provider (PDG)
9.45	3.2	Discussion	All
	4	Evaluation findings and recommendations	
10.00	4.1	Presentation of evaluation findings and recommendations	PDG
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	Khanyisile Cele, DPME
	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

		<p>Group 2 Efficiency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .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 <p>🚩 Are the recommendations (p.131 -136) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?</p> <p>Group 3 Effectiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <p>🚩 Are the recommendations (p.131 -136) clear, feasible, implementable & relevant?</p>	
13.00		Lunch	
13.30		Continue	
	6	Report back (15 min per Group, including discussion)	Lungiswa Zibi, DPME (Facilitator)
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

The group session is where we do the detailed work to validate and enrich the findings. Groups are being 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 take action on the recommendation. Eg. The			
9. Categorise or classify recommendations per theme.			