

How to sabotage an independent evaluation: 8 steps for undermining learning and accountability in humanitarian and development work

Published on August 1, 2016



Steven A. Zyck

Like many managers and staff of international humanitarian and development organizations, you may be concerned that an evaluation is going to turn up some of the shortcomings and challenges facing your work—perhaps the ways in which you failed to meet objectives or adequately involve the local community. Or perhaps some of your staff have even engaged in corruption. This could cost your agency or non-governmental organization (NGO) funding and could have repercussions for your career and reputation.

Never fear—there’s a solution. You too can, like so many before you, sabotage that independent monitoring or evaluation process by following these simple steps.

First, when developing your project budget, be sure to include a bare minimum amount of funding for the independent evaluations of your work. In doing so you get to ensure that your evaluation will be cursory in nature, include minimal field work, and will uncover few if any faults. After all, a one-week evaluation mission can’t learn very much. If applicants are worried that they may not have enough funding to hire a local translator, research assistant, or team of enumerators to conduct surveys, offer to have your staff fill these roles and put a rosy spin on everything.

Second, ensure that you and your organization hire the evaluators rather than leaving it to your donor. This way you can also hire your old university classmate, your former co-worker, or your best friend to conduct the evaluation and give you a clean bill of health. If you don’t know any evaluators with solid credentials and malleable ethics, don’t worry—most major humanitarian and development agencies have relations with “independent” evaluators who constantly work with your organization and who wouldn’t do anything (i.e., provide honest feedback on challenges and failures) to risk that lucrative relationship. You can always make sure they win the contract for the evaluation by barely advertising the evaluation opportunity or by including eligibility requirements tailored to your preferred evaluator.

Third, craft terms of reference (TORs) for the evaluation that include at least 20 core questions and even more subsidiary questions and objectives. In doing so you can help to ensure that the evaluator spends less time looking at the effectiveness and impact of your work and more time exploring how it contributed to resilience, conflict sensitivity, governance, civil society capacity building, and the local private sector...even if these issues are relatively unimportant in relation to the core of your project or program.

Fourth—and particularly if you aren’t already guaranteed a positive evaluation—provide the evaluator with several hundred documents related to the project. These may include copies of internal training materials, publicity materials, and more—all in several languages. Even give them old draft files—the more the merrier! And be sure the files are poorly organized and labelled cryptically so that the evaluator won’t find the one or two documents with the most pertinent information.

Fifth, tell your staff and partners to be welcoming, kind, and transparent with the evaluator since the evaluation comprises a crucial opportunity for accountability and learning. Also be sure to inform them that

their job security is on the line in the event that the evaluation uncovers problems or shortcomings. They'll get the message.

Sixth, ensure that staff and grateful beneficiaries are on hand to charm the evaluator. When arriving at a project site, be sure that local officials, civil society figures, and, above all, children are on hand to sing songs and express their undying gratitude for the implementing agency's work. These individuals should of course be forewarned that funding to their area will be cut or withdrawn if the evaluation uncovers problems or challenges.

Seventh, in the event that the draft evaluation report includes any critical feedback, demand every ounce of documentation underlying that point—and order that the point be removed or watered down if not substantiated by the sorts of hard data the evaluation team was not permitted to collect. If the point is based on comments from beneficiaries themselves, inform the evaluator that poor people tend to lie and note some variation of the following: “many of our beneficiaries feel that complaining will lead to greater levels of assistance, so you've got to take everything they say with a grain of salt”.

Eighth and lastly, in the event that the final (or near final) evaluation report includes critical points regarding your organization and its work, you have only two options. Either decry the evaluation process and the methodology employed by the evaluators—which runs the risk of making you appear defensive and fearful of criticism—or, alternatively, push the evaluation team to lengthen the report and include so many tables, charts, figures, and annexes that anyone who opens the file will be scared off by the fact that it is 140 pages long. All you need to do is browbeat the evaluator into writing a bland and semi-positive executive summary, which is the only thing anyone will read.

As a researcher and evaluator, I have seen each of these methods employed on numerous occasions. In one case the staff of a particular agency went so far as to re-write, without the evaluation team's approval, the executive summary of an evaluation we had conducted of a historically large and costly humanitarian response. These sorts of corrupt behaviours should no longer be permitted to undermine the most basic form of learning and accountability, and those that practice them should be removed from their jobs.

Donors must commission evaluations directly and require that a minimum amount of funding goes to these processes. Donors or a vetting agency of some sort must ensure that evaluators have few prior relationships with those they are evaluating, and they should take steps to limit the number of evaluations any one consultant can do for any particular organization in a given time period. TORs for evaluations should be focused rather than overly broad—though flexible enough to change when evaluators encounter issues that merit further enquiry. Again, donors should be permitted to identify issues for in-depth attention during evaluations.

Furthermore, basic ethical standards should be imposed to discourage the “wining and dining” of evaluation teams. Evaluators should be able to go directly to donors if the implementing organization is being uncooperative or is not providing information or appears to be choreographing field visits or telling evaluators where they can and cannot go. Only then can evaluations genuinely fulfil their promise and contribute to better aid for those affected by poverty, war, and disasters.

Steven A. Zyck

Independent Researcher and Policy Adviser

Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute (UK)

Senior Fellow, Centre for Security Governance (Canada)

Faculty Associate, Center for Conflict & Humanitarian Studies, Doha Institute (Qatar)

Editor Emeritus, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*