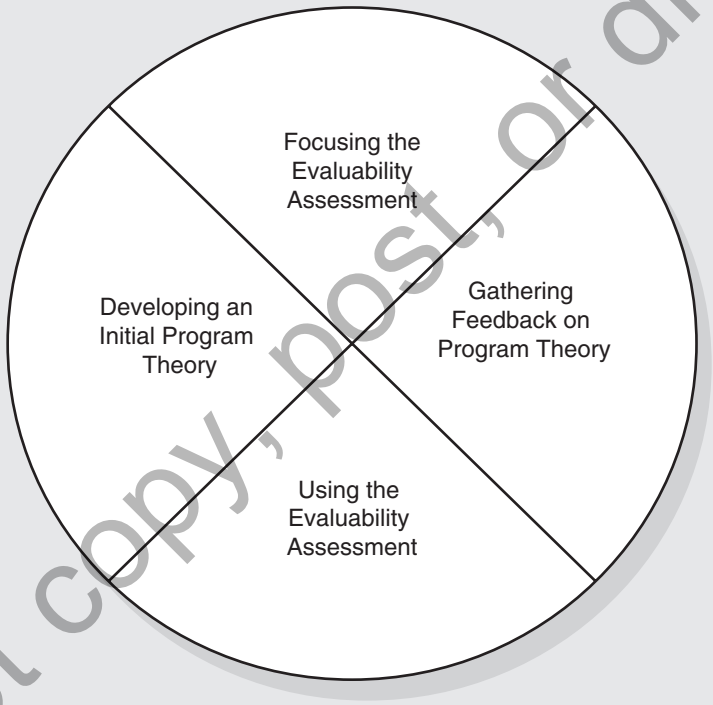
3

Introducing Our Evaluability Assessment Model



In this chapter, we introduce our four-component EA model, which is based on historical models and current EA and evaluation theory and practice, and incorporates the essential elements of EA previously identified in Chapter 1. The components of the model are (1) focusing the EA, (2) developing an initial program theory, (3) gathering feedback on program theory, and (4) using the EA. The following sections provide the rationale for our EA model and an overview of each component of the model. In addition, standards of quality EA are discussed.

Rationale for Our Evaluability Assessment Model

Our EA model is different from historical EA models in a few key ways. First, our EA model is comprised of components instead of steps. In practice, EA is not a linear set of discrete, sequential steps. Some components may overlap in practice; others will be revisited as needed. The graphic representation of the model highlights the work of each component and the relationship between and among components:

- **Focusing the EA** starts out big (top of graphic) and funnels smaller as the purpose of the EA is identified, scope and boundaries are negotiated, and so forth.
- **Focusing the EA** is directly related to **using the EA**. One considers EA use when making decisions about EA focus, such as decisions about selecting an evaluator and type and level of stakeholder involvement.
- **Developing an initial program theory** starts out big (left side of graphic) and narrows as one takes in all available information and synthesizes it into an **initial program theory model**.
- **Developing an initial program theory** has a direct relationship with **gathering feedback on program theory**. **Developing an initial program theory** feeds into **gathering feedback on program theory** and, in practice, the two components often overlap.
- **Gathering feedback on program theory** starts with the **initial program theory model** and expands to take in feedback from stakeholders, observation, and other data collection.
- Information and data from **developing an initial program theory** and **gathering feedback on program theory** come together to develop EA results. Results are disseminated and used as indicated by the expanding funnel of the **using the EA** component of the model.

Additionally, our EA model is organized and presented in a simplified manner compared to historical EA models. For example, Wholey's (1979) EA model included eight-steps, Rutman's (1980) model included six-steps, and M. F. Smith's (1989) model included 10-steps. Our EA model of four components is intended to be more user-friendly, while maintaining the essential elements of EA. Finally, our EA model incorporates current theory and practice in EA and program evaluation. For example, as mentioned, our model is not intended to be a linear sequence of discrete steps, but it takes into account the nature of how EA is conducted in practice. Our EA model is described more fully in Chapters 4 – 7, with each chapter focusing on one component of the model. Below is an overview of each component.

Overview of Evaluability Assessment Model Components

Focusing the Evaluability Assessment

It is critical that focusing the EA is done with EA use in mind. As previously mentioned, there is a direct relationship between focusing the EA and using the EA. Being intentional about use, both process use and findings use, in the early stages of the EA process is necessary for making sure the EA is effective and results are used for decision making.

An initial step of conducting an EA is identifying its purpose, as well as its scope and boundaries. The primary purpose of any EA is to assess the evaluability of a program and/or program components. Many EAs have additional purposes as well, such as assessing the feasibility and appropriateness of designs for further evaluation, understanding stakeholder awareness of and interest in a program, understanding program context, increasing stakeholder participation in program development and evaluation, identifying issues to be addressed through technical assistance, formative evaluation, implementation monitoring, and evaluation capacity building.

To clearly identify the purpose(s) of an EA, its scope and boundaries must also be determined. Because most programs are complex, specifying the program and/or program components that will be assessed and identifying the practical considerations that bound the scope of the EA are crucial. Once the purpose of the EA is clearly identified and agreed upon, all EA activities are determined and implemented to serve that purpose.

Another key aspect of focusing the EA is determining the type and level of stakeholder involvement that will occur. This may be done as part of, or in addition to, identifying the purpose, scope, and boundaries of the EA. A defining characteristic of EA is gathering data from stakeholders about their perspectives of the program and its implementation. Ideally, stakeholders are also involved in planning and conducting the EA. Thus, stakeholder involvement in EA includes stakeholders as data sources, as interview or survey participants for example; it should also include stakeholders as active participants providing support to the EA process.

Other aspects of focusing the EA include selecting an EA evaluator, securing commitment through formal agreements, and ensuring the respect for and protection of EA participants. Further, establishing procedures for effective communication and good interpersonal skills and strategies for facilitating collaboration and teamwork are part of focusing the EA. Details about these aspects and greater detail about identifying the purpose, scope, and boundaries of an EA and determining the type and level of stakeholder involvement are provided in Chapter 4.

Common Outcomes of Focusing the Evaluability Assessment

- An EA evaluator selected
- A formal agreement for the EA work
- Purpose(s) of the EA identified
- Scope and boundaries of the EA determined
- Procedures for protection of EA participants identified
- Type and level of stakeholder involvement determined
- Procedures for communication established
- Effective collaboration and teamwork facilitated

Developing an Initial Program Theory

Developing an initial program theory involves clearly articulating the logic of how a program is intended to work. This includes developing or clarifying program outcomes and the program activities intended to cause those outcomes, often depicted as a program logic model. It may also include a more thorough description of the program's theory as, for example, a theory of change model that is complete with program inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and indicators of outcome achievement. The model would also include linkages between activities, outputs, and outcomes delineated to capture not only how the program is carried out, but how change occurs. Other approaches to describing a program theory include systems maps, emergent models, and program frameworks.

In conducting an EA, it is possible that a program theory has already been developed. In such cases, existing program theory will be revisited and clarified through the EA process. In cases where no program theory has been developed, it will be a necessary product of the EA. There are two decision areas for consideration when developing an initial program theory. First, what degree of practitioner logic and research logic is needed to develop the program theory model? Second, what type(s) of transactions should the program theory model represent—simple, complicated, or complex? Responses to these questions ensure that the initial program theory model appropriately represents the program given purpose(s), scope, and boundaries of the EA. These decision areas will be explained in full in Chapter 5.

In addition to addressing the two questions above, an initial step in developing or clarifying a program theory is identifying and gathering program documents including, for example, grant proposals, legislative documents, flyers and brochures, websites, evaluation reports, annual reports, meeting minutes, and research literature. As program documents are collected, document review begins. Document review can range from an unstructured or semistructured process to a structured, systematic review.

Common Outcomes of Developing an Initial Program Theory

- Results of document review and stakeholder input
- An initial program theory model

Involving stakeholders such as key program personnel and/or an EA work group can be beneficial in developing or clarifying program theory. Their understanding of program history, operations, and intentions can prove invaluable to document analysis and interpretation. The results of document analysis provide the information needed to articulate a program's theory and present it graphically as a program theory model. Chapter 5 provides information about options for representing a program theory, how to conduct document review, and how to use the results of document review and stakeholder input to articulate an initial program theory.

Gathering Feedback on Program Theory

As previously mentioned, developing an initial program theory is directly related to gathering feedback on program theory, and in practice, there is often some overlap of these two components of the EA model. Development of an initial program theory is used as a starting point for collecting data on the alignment of the program in theory, or conceptually, with program reality, and the potential of the program as perceived and implemented to work as intended (i.e., to impact the identified outcomes). Results of the analysis of these feedback data provide information needed to determine a program's evaluability, to make related recommendations for further evaluation, and to increase program plausibility. Depending on the purpose(s) of the EA, they may provide additional information for formative evaluation, implementation monitoring, understanding program context, and so forth.

In order to answer the overarching EA question of whether or not a program is evaluable, more specific questions, EA questions, are developed during this component of EA. As with evaluation questions for other approaches to evaluation, EA questions are the questions the EA results will answer. EA questions generally fall into one or more of five categories: (1) program perspectives, (2) program context, (3) program implementation, (4) research logic, and (5) methodological scoping.

That is, data collected when gathering feedback on program theory will address questions that fall into one or more of the five categories. Questions should be developed with these categories in mind, giving relative weight to categories given EA purpose(s), scope, and boundaries.

Likewise, data collection methods should be chosen given EA questions and the purpose(s), scope, and boundaries of the EA, including decisions made about the level of stakeholder involvement. Gathering feedback on program theory always involves gathering data from stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the program and its implementation. This is often done through stakeholder interviews, individual or focus group (Trevisan, 2007). Observations are also commonly used for EA. Additional data collection methods well suited to the purposes of EA include surveys; archival data; rating scale instruments, checklists, and rubrics; and literature review.

Common Outcomes of Gathering Feedback on Program Theory

- Results of data collection and analysis
- Answers to EA questions
- Initial EA findings and recommendations

As feedback data on program theory are gathered, data analysis begins. Results of data analysis are summarized, EA questions are addressed, and EA findings and recommendations are developed. Chapter 6 details aspects of gathering feedback on program theory, including how to develop EA questions and identify appropriate data collection methods, and how to pull the results of data analysis together.

Using the Evaluability Assessment

No EA is complete until it has been used. The final step in conducting an EA is using it—through decision making and/or action planning. Because the primary purpose of an EA is to assess the evaluability of a program and/or program components, a key decision to be made is whether or not to move forward with further evaluation. If yes, the results of the EA can be used to forward an evaluation plan, including, for example, identifying areas of focus for evaluation, appropriate evaluation approaches and data collection methods, and resources needed. If it is decided that a program is not ready for further evaluation, the results of the EA can be used to determine strategies to facilitate evaluability, such as adjusting program outcomes, modifying the program, implementation monitoring, or providing technical assistance to facilitate improved implementation in specific areas.

As previously mentioned, using the EA is directly related to focusing the EA; thus, the EA should be used to address the purpose or purposes for which it was intended. In addition to decisions about further evaluation, program modification, implementation monitoring, and technical assistance, EA can be used to better understand program culture, context, complexity, and evolution; to facilitate stakeholder involvement and empowerment; to facilitate organizational learning and evaluation capacity building; to identify promising practices; to facilitate social change; and to facilitate evaluation use. More information about the types of decisions that can be supported by EA and options for EA use are provided in Chapter 7, along with guidelines for communicating and reporting EA findings.

Common Outcomes of Using the Evaluability Assessment

- EA findings and recommendations
- EA reports, presentations, and/or other mechanisms for disseminating findings and recommendations

Evaluability Assessment and Quality Evaluation

In introducing our EA model, it is important to also discuss standards of quality evaluation and how they can be applied to the conduct of EA. A quality evaluation is one that meets accepted standards of the field, guiding evaluation practice toward quality evaluation. There are two documents that capture professional expectations of evaluators and evaluation. The first is known as the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (American Evaluation Association, 2004). These principles include systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honesty, respect for people, and responsibilities for general and public welfare. These principles are not prescriptive, but are to be applied flexibly depending on the context in which an evaluator is working. The second document is known as *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, Caruthers, 2011). This is the third version of standards that the evaluation field has developed, refined, and made available. The current set of standards reflects close to 50 years of evaluation practice. The development of these standards underwent rigorous procedures required to achieve approval by the American National Standards Institute or ANSI. There are 30 standards organized by five attributes of quality evaluation: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and evaluation accountability. Yarbrough et al. (2011) state, "These standards are not 'laws' but are voluntary, consensus statements developed with extensive stakeholder input and then discussed, revised, and approved" (p. xx).

The essential elements of EA that are incorporated in our EA model align well with both the guiding principles and the standards. The conduct of EA facilitates their achievement. We think that the number, organization, and specificity of the standards have illustrative and pedagogical value for judging quality EA work. Therefore, it is these standards that we use to gauge quality in the context of EA use in this book. Each component of our four-component EA model is presented in a separate chapter (Chapters 4–7). In each of these chapters, the relevant standards are highlighted and discussed. We illustrate the relevance for each standard and how EA can meet these standards to achieve quality evaluation work. Table3.1 provides a description for each of the five standards attributes.

Table 3.1 The Program Evaluation Standards Attributes

Utility 8 standards	Use, usefulness, influence, and misuse
Feasibility 4 standards	The effects of contexts, cultures, costs, politics, power, available resources, and other factors of evaluation
Propriety 7 standards	The moral, ethical, and legal concerns related to evaluation quality
Accuracy 8 standards	Increasing the accuracy of findings and conclusions
Evaluation accountability 3 standards	Encompassing attribute of evaluation quality based on balancing utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy

Source: The Program Evaluation Standards Attributes, Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. xxvii.

Chapter Summary

Our EA model differs from historical EA models in a few key ways:

- It includes four components that incorporate the essential elements of EA: (1) focusing the EA, (2) developing an initial program theory, (3) gathering feedback on program theory, and (4) using the EA.
- The model is presented graphically as a circle to emphasize that EA is not a linear sequence of discrete, isolated steps; but is comprised of related components that sometimes overlap and are revisited as needed during the EA process.
- It incorporates current EA and program evaluation theory and practice.

When conducting EA, standards of quality evaluation such as the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and *The Program Evaluation Standards* provide guidance for conducting quality EA and serve as a means to assess EA quality.

The purpose of Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 is to provide the nuts and bolts of implementing our EA model. Each chapter highlights a component of the model and includes the information, decision areas, and procedures needed to implement the component, how the component addresses *The Program Evaluation Standards*, case examples of how others have implemented the component, and a checklist of considerations related to the component. Detail about additional considerations when conducting EA is provided in Chapter 8.