

HOW-TO-BRIEF

The “How to” series of briefs is for the use of Pilar 1 project managers (and future managers of R&I projects), to guide them with tips on possible ways forward for upgrading their five core capacities to manage for impacts.

WHAT IS UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION? (C1. CAPACITY FOR REAL-TIME MEL)

About this brief:

Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) is a decision-making framework that allows projects to take ownership of evaluation. UFE is a tool for designing or updating a monitoring, evaluation and learning plan (MEL). “Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37).

Keywords: utilization-focused evaluation, UFE, monitoring, learning, decision-making, collaborative evaluation

THE RELEVANCE

- In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention to how people might apply evaluation findings and experiences.
- In designing a utilization-focused evaluation attention is constantly placed on the intended use by intended users.
- UFE can include a wide variety of evaluation methods within an overall participatory paradigm. Decision-making, in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation, is an important part of the process.
- As important is the fact that intended users will likely utilize an evaluation in which they have ownership.
- UFE belongs to a push in the evaluation field for evaluations that get utilized. As simple as this notion may sound, its application is mired in organizational and management challenges.

1. BASICS OF UFE (WHAT)

- Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that no evaluation should start unless primary USERS have been identified, and they have determined the expected USES.
- UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method, or theory. It is a guiding framework, as opposed to a methodology.
- UFE follows a set of well-defined steps that ensure rigor and relevance.
- Users take ownership over the evaluation purposes, the selection of methods, the analysis and the utilization of findings.
- In UFE, the evaluation professional plays the role of a facilitator, not of external judge.

2. PRINCIPLES (HOW)

- Utilization-focused evaluation is a decision-making framework.
- Attention is paid to readiness from the beginning.
- Training is demand-driven and provided through just-in-time mentoring.
- Course correction of project strategy is expected and planned.
- Utilization is the focus from initial project design to completion.
- A collaborative, learning and reflective process is embedded.
- Participation and shared ownership are fundamental.
- The process builds individual and organizational capacity.
- Complexity and evolving contexts are addressed.

3. JUST IN TIME MENTORING (LEARNING)

The best way to learn UFE is through practice. Just-in-time mentoring is about supporting partners to apply UFE at their own pace and according to their schedule. It allows for a learning partnership between the LIFT mentor and the project team to make decisions in evaluation design at the times when the project is ready to act on them.

“Action research and learning from experience ensures that the partner confronts the design challenges head-on; the facilitators create the conditions for this discussion process to be safe. It is often frustrating, but as the saying goes, “no pain - no gain”.” (Ramírez et al. 2022: 23)

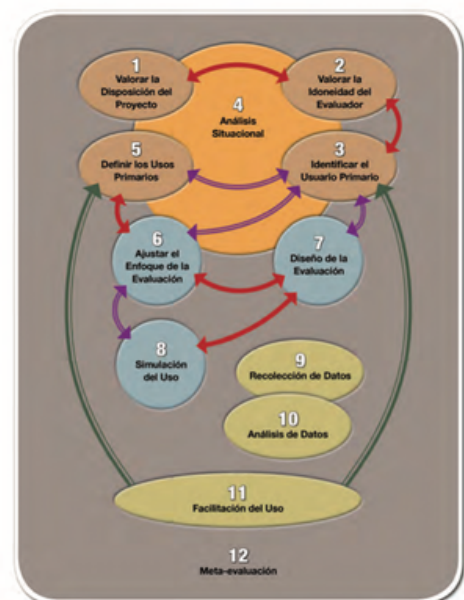
4. STEPS OF UFE (HOW)

While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).

The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing evaluators’ readiness; identifying primary intended users’ identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and it needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others.

Focusing on the evaluation takes place through the definition of **key evaluation questions**; which in turn guide the design of the evaluation. ‘Simulation’ is about test-driving plausible data sets to double-check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when it appears that some questions may not still be as strategic as they first appeared.

A unique aspect of UFE is Step 11: facilitation of use, which ensures the findings and evaluation processes are fed back to the users. The closing step 12 captures the experience through a meta-evaluation.



1. In a 2012 book on UFE by Michael Quinn Patton, five additional steps were added; see the Recommended readings and websites.

5. UNIQUENESS OF THE STEPS (HOW)

- In UFE, the definition of primary users is open to different stakeholders: they may be the funders of a project, or its implementers, or even its beneficiaries. This decision may be delicate and it calls for a review of readiness at the very start of the process.
- While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).
- The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing evaluators' readiness; identifying primary intended users' identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and it needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others.
- Focusing on the evaluation takes place through the definition of key evaluation questions; which in turn guide the design of the evaluation. 'Simulation' is about test-driving plausible data sets to double-check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when it appears that some questions may not still be as strategic as they first appeared.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIPS

- Confirm a commitment by funders and major stakeholders to explore the approach (in our case Utilization-focused Evaluation) through an action-research process.
- Clarify expectations early on with regard to the role of UFE relative to other possible evaluation and accountability needs. Is UFE a replacement or a complement to other evaluation needs?
- Work as a team, with mentors who are able to troubleshoot, and with support from other members who can backstop as questions arise.
- Create an environment of trust where learning from mistakes is embraced.
- Acknowledge that the process takes time and that the 'aha moments' will come once the approach is implemented.
- Make use of the training modules and feel free to adapt them to each circumstance.
- Ensure that there are funds and dedicated time to complete all the steps of UFE, especially the last one that calls for a reflection on the overall implementation of the approach; this is the point at which much learning happens.
- Carry out a mid-term self-reflection to course-correct and also to celebrate progress.

RESOURCES

- [The Better Evaluation website includes a section on UFE](#)
- [Designing evaluation and communication for impact and adaptive management \(DECI-AM\)](#)
- Patton, M.Q. 2021. Utilization-focused evaluation, 5th. edition. Sage.
- Patton, M.Q. 2008. Utilization-focused evaluation, 4th. edition. Sage.
- [Ramírez, R.; Brodhead, D. & Quarry, W. 2022. Capacity development in evaluation and communication: Prompts for practitioners. Ottawa: DECI-4.](#)
- [Ramírez, R.; Brodhead, D. & Quarry, W. 2013. Utilization-focused evaluation: A primer for evaluators. Penang: Southbound.](#)

AUTORS

Ricardo Ramirez, DeSIRA LIFT.