

VSO Policy on External Evaluation of Programmes¹

Policy statement

VSO undertakes timely and independent evaluation of the relevance, performance and effectiveness of our programmes that inform our future programme and policy development and help us to be more accountable for the resources with which we have been entrusted to carry out our work. All external evaluations will be published and made accessible to members of the public and donors.

What is a programme evaluation?

“A programme evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both the recipients (VSO) and donors. Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program.”²

There are many types of evaluation that can be used to assess a programme’s effectiveness such as process evaluations, participatory evaluations and impact evaluations. The most appropriate type of evaluation in any given situation will depend on the context of the programme³, the objectives of the evaluation and the resources available. There should be a focus on participatory methods that involve beneficiaries. A description of different types of programme evaluations together with a summary of when and how they may be used can be found in the guidance and resources that accompany this policy.

Why do we do programme evaluations?

¹ This policy has been based on Oxfam GB’s Programme Evaluation Policy 2009, as a model of good practice

² Definition from the OECD DAC network on development evaluation

³ A programme in VSO’s context can be organised either around a theme or geographical area within a country or potentially can cover an entire country or be organised on a regional basis.

Programme evaluations provide us with **independent**⁴ and **rigorous** analyses of the effectiveness and Value For Money⁵ of our programmes at a particular point in time. They help us to learn about what does and doesn't work in making an impact on poverty and enable us to communicate with and be accountable to our wide range of stakeholders (eg. partners, donors and members of the public). Programme evaluations complement our ongoing regular **internal** monitoring and review activities (such as Annual Programme Reviews) and therefore form a vital part of the VSO Planning and Review system which drives programme learning and enables greater accountability. Part of our ongoing programme work is to build the capacity of both partners and VSO in Monitoring and Evaluation and any external evaluation is expected to contribute to this.

Who is responsible for programme evaluations?

Programme Managers are responsible for setting up and coordinating evaluations of their programmes. Country and/or Regional Directors are responsible for ensuring that evaluations are carried out, used and shared in accordance with this policy.

The Planning and Review Team within the Policy Group is responsible for providing advice to programmes regarding thinking through programme evaluations as well as monitoring the quality of evaluations and drawing out the learning from programme evaluations in terms of process.

When do we do programme evaluations?

Programme evaluations can be costly, and so it is important that we carefully consider when we carry them out in order to make the most of our investment to improve our accountability and learning.

Programme evaluations should be carried out when there is a strong rationale for doing so and it is clear how the findings will be used to **improve the quality** of our programmes or when required by an external Donor. For example, a programme evaluation may be undertaken to learn what did or didn't work before developing a new programme strategy, or be undertaken of a new, innovative programme to inform decisions about whether or not to scale-up work in this area or be undertaken for a particular project at the end of the funding period.

However, to ensure that we are accountable for all the resources with which we have been entrusted, VSO will:

Carry out an external evaluation, at least once every 5 years of:

⁴ It is envisaged that all external programme evaluations will be led by an independent evaluator, not from VSO or a current partner organisation.

⁵ Two elements are covered in VSO's Value For Money analysis, a) well-evidenced impact (results - outcomes) at scale, with transparency and b) Internal cost efficiency including management of financial risk

- all programmes⁶ (irrespective of funding source - restricted or unrestricted)
- all corporate international advocacy initiatives (for example Valuing Teachers)
- any other high profile, complex or risky programmes or new themes where there is significant learning potential.

Ideally the best timing of an external evaluation is to complete it prior to any internal reviews so the findings can be analysed and acted upon.

How do we do programme evaluations?

(i) Plan and budget for them

Forward planning and sufficient resources are critical to ensuring the quality of a programme evaluation. All new Programme Plans will include a Monitoring and Evaluation plan that provides details of: outcome and impact level indicators; plans for a baseline survey and timings of Annual Internal Monitoring Reviews. They should also include timings of an **evaluation**. The time and money required to carry out this should be calculated and included in the appropriate budget. Most external Donors are happy to fund an evaluation.

(ii) Involve the right people

The Planning and Review Team in the Policy Group is accountable for compliance with this policy, and supports Programme Managers and Country Directors to design and run good quality evaluations. Writing an Evaluation Terms of Reference should be coordinated by the Programme Manager, but in consultation with the Country Director and the Planning and Review Team. Key questions to be answered in an evaluation and the evaluation process will be agreed by a range of stakeholders; donors, management staff, programme staff, programme beneficiaries (where possible) and the Policy Group. Ensuring the Terms Of Reference reflects these is the job of the relevant Programme Manager.

To help ensure the objectivity and therefore the credibility of the results of programme evaluations, all fieldwork and the writing of the evaluation report should be led by the independent consultant evaluator who is unconnected with the programme. However, programme evaluations are most likely to be relevant and practical if the programme team has also been part of the evaluation and feels ownership of the process and the findings. So the VSO programme team (Country Director, Programme Manager, Programme Support Staff etc) should be involved from the beginning, from the identifying of key questions, inputting into the Terms Of Reference through to discussion of the findings and jointly identifying lessons learnt, recommendations and action points after the consultant has conducted the research. The VSO part of the process should be led by the Programme Manager.

⁶ This would mean at a minimum every country programme would be evaluated once every 5 years. This policy covers programmes in developing countries as well as programmes in developed countries such as those run in UK and Canada, for example, Diaspora and Public Engagement programmes.

(iii) Focus on important issues

Programme evaluations should not try to cover everything, but should instead focus on a few carefully identified research questions. These will vary from programme to programme. However, at a minimum, all programme evaluations should include an assessment of the **relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, impact and sustainability**⁷ of programmes. In particular:

- **Relevance:** programme relevance to context and fulfilment of objectives
- **Effectiveness and Efficiency:** Value for money - considering internal cost efficiency in addition to well -evidenced impact (effectiveness)
- **Impact:** the programme's **results** in terms of outcomes and impact (intended and unintended and VSO's contribution to results realised), with a specific focus on results for gender equality
- **Sustainability** – are the benefits likely to be sustained
- **Lessons learnt** – to inform future programme development

How do we respond to programme evaluation findings?

One of the most important parts of any evaluation is responding to its findings.

At a minimum, we:

- Use findings and recommendations from all evaluations to inform future programme development through the revision of programme plans as part of the VSO Planning and Review Cycle and through feeding into VSO corporate decision-making.
- Ensure a management response to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation is written by the appropriate line manager, with clear actions to be undertaken. In most cases this will be done by the Regional Director and the implementation of follow-up actions should be monitored by the Country Director and reported on through the appropriate reporting channels.

How do we share the findings of programme evaluations?

To make the most of the lessons coming out of a programme evaluation, each evaluation should have a clear strategy for communicating its results to the full range of stakeholders including partners and beneficiaries.

(i) Internally within VSO

All evaluations and management responses will be shared with the Policy Group and all other stakeholders, unless they include content of a sensitive nature.

(ii) Partners and programme beneficiaries

All evaluation findings will be communicated to partners including national governments and onwards to programme beneficiaries in an appropriate manner through the Programme Office, (as agreed with those stakeholders in the design stage of the evaluation).

⁷ Informed by DAC criteria/standards for evaluating development cooperation, in line with the commitments of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness

(iii) Donors

Evaluation reports will be sent to the programme donor/s, in accordance with donor requirements.

(iv) VSO supporters and the public

In accordance with the “Aid Transparency Guarantee”⁸, all programme evaluations will be made available to the public on the VSO website and the website of key allies and networks. Exceptions will be made where evaluations deal with issues of a sensitive nature and/or pose a risk to our staff or partners.

Summary of minimum standards

When do we do external final programme evaluations?	At least once every 5 years of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• all programmes whether restricted or unrestricted funded• all corporate international advocacy initiatives• any other high profile, complex or risky programmes or new themes where there is significant learning potential.
How do we do programme evaluations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plans and resources required to be planned for in all programme plans and budgets• Evaluation methodologies are discussed with the Planning and Review Team advisers• All final evaluations are led by independent external evaluators. However programme staff and partners play a strong role in all evaluations.• Evaluations cover: assessment of the programme’s outcomes or impact, Value For Money and VSO ’s contribution.
How do we respond to programme evaluation findings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All evaluation recommendations are discussed, action points are agreed and learning informs future programme development and plans.• Management response is written and managers ensure that action points are followed up.
How do we share the findings of programme evaluations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All evaluations and management responses are shared within VSO• Findings from evaluations are published on our website as well as actively shared with partners, programme beneficiaries and donors.

Issued by Planning and Review Team, Policy Group
VSO, October 2010

⁸ This initiative has been introduced by the UK government in June 2010 and aims to make aid fully transparent to citizens in both the UK and recipient countries.