

A large, abstract graphic consisting of several overlapping, flowing wavy lines in various shades of blue and grey, sweeping across the page from the left side towards the right.

Risk analysis and guidance for the management and conduct of evaluations during international and national level COVID-19 crisis and restrictions

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Overview of the guidance note

1. The COVID-19 crisis is affecting health, limiting work capacity and requiring all individuals and organizations to modify their normal workflows and approaches. In response to this exceptional international situation, the FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) has developed a contingency plan to ensure appropriate decisions are made regarding if, when and how to conduct evaluations. The purpose of this note is to provide guidance and criteria to make decisions, based on an analysis of risks, the criticality and importance of individual evaluations, and possible options for alternative ways to conduct them. The Office of Evaluation strives to ensure a continuation of good quality evaluative work while ensuring duty of care principles are applied and respecting and sustaining international efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 and respond to the pandemic.
2. The note is structured around the following sections:
 1. **Analysis of risks:** An analysis of risks to the people involved in evaluation processes; the quality and timeliness of the work; and the Organization.
 2. **Evaluation options for on-going and planned evaluations:** A series of options for evaluations, based on considerations of their criticality (intended as relative importance of the evaluation) with respect to the exposure and potential consequence of different types of risks.
 3. **Risks and criticality matrix for identifying the best option for evaluation conduct:** A matrix to support decision-making on conduct on the basis of risk exposure and criticality of the evaluation.

In addition, an annotated resource bibliography for remote methods has been prepared as a separate OED document.

1. Analysis of risks

Definition of risks

1. The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) *Norms and Standards for Evaluation* (2016) recommends that a 'do no harm' approach is considered and respected in evaluation conduct:

Avoidance of harm

2. Evaluations can have a negative effect on their objects or those who participate in them. Therefore evaluators shall seek to: minimize risks to, and burdens on, those participating in the evaluation; and seek to maximize the benefits and reduce any unnecessary harms that might occur from negative or critical evaluation, without compromising the integrity of the evaluation.

3. For the purpose of supporting decision-making on evaluation conduct, risks should be categorized on a scale of:
 - i. Low
 - ii. Medium
 - iii. High
4. The exposure to risks according to the scale above, should be determined by assessing the severity of the impact (should the risk event take place) in relation to the likelihood of the risk materializing.

Risk exposure = severity of impact x likelihood of the risk

5. Prior to examining decisions that need to be taken and alternatives, it is important to identify risks associated to the conduct and delivery of evaluations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as those linked to the necessary adjustments that are or will be made to evaluation plans, conduct and approaches. The risks are several, of different natures and timeframes (short, medium and long-term). Therefore, the list below is not considered complete but includes the main risks identified so far. Firstly, in adapting the conduct of evaluations there is a degree of experiment and learning-by-doing, therefore new risks will likely emerge. Secondly, there are uncertainties and unexpected events to which new adaptations and risks assessments will be needed. The current guidance note attempts to identify the most significant risks on which to base decisions on workflows and continuity. The main risks identified are the following:

Health-related risks

- i. Risk of exposure to infection and spreading of disease of OED staff and long-term consultants.
- ii. Risk of exposure to infection and spreading of disease by international short-term evaluation consultants.
- iii. Risk of exposure to infection and spreading of disease of short-term national consultants (inside individual countries) or of exposing them to risks associated with the growing reports of attributing contagion to aid workers in developing countries.¹
- iv. Risk of spreading COVID-19 to counterparts, partner organizations, FAO staff in decentralized offices, vulnerable populations and beneficiaries' communities during evaluation conduct and field-work.

Reputational risks for Evaluation: quality, ethics, timeliness

6. These are various risks associated to the adaptations made on the conduct of evaluation. These necessary adaptations may not meet *UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation* and/or may not fully comply with guidelines for the conduct of evaluations including the *UNEG Code of Conduct* and *Ethical*

Guidelines (2008). While the uncertainties and complexity of the current context may force to rely on a "good enough" evaluation approach, it is important to identify potential risks which may affect the quality, the ethics, the timeliness and eventually the reputation of evaluation:

- i. Risks of carrying out and delivering evaluation products and reports of lower rigor and robustness for on-going work, due to limited access to information and data; lack of proper contextualization; bias due to less interaction among evaluators and stakeholders; less impartial, unsubstantiated conclusions; and therefore misleading recommendations.
- ii. Risks of overloading FAO's colleagues and counterparts in a period when they are constrained in the re-organization of their work and delivery modalities for projects and programs on the ground.
- iii. The risk of undermining the value-added of evaluation, damaging the work ethics and professionalism of evaluators and creating long-term damage to evaluation as a profession.

Risks to the Organization's effectiveness

- i. Risk of damaging projects and programs due for an evaluation where obtaining funding is subsidiary to external independent evaluations (program and project evaluations) if evaluation is cancelled.

Financial risks

- i. Risks of financial exposure or poor use of resources based on uncertain and shifting evaluation planning.
- ii. Risks of exposure to contractual obligations when force-majeure circumstances will not allow normal completion of work.

¹ The New Humanitarian online webinar discussion: How will COVID-19 impact crisis zones? 19th March 2020. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/03/19/coronavirus-crisis-zones-online-conversation>

2. Evaluation options for on-going and planned evaluations

7. It is important to analyse the current limitations according to the following categories:
 - i. Type of evaluation
 - ii. Assessment of their criticality
 - iii. Options for conduct based on a risk analysis

Types of evaluations and use/criticality

8. It is important to recap the main purposes and uses of evaluations by type, in order to analyse their criticality. The question to ask is: what would be the consequences in terms of governance, strategy formulation, programme/project design and funding, if this evaluation were cancelled, postponed or carried out through remote methods?
 - i. Evaluations for governing bodies are conducted to inform the member countries and senior management on strategic positioning and results. They are used to make decisions on governance and strategic directions and areas of work to prioritize, deprioritize and improve. These decisions usually impact the next PWB cycle.
 - ii. Country-programme evaluations are primarily conducted to inform governments and FAO country office staff on strategic positioning and results of FAO at the national level. They are used to inform the next cycle of design of Country Programming Frameworks (CPFs) and their implementation. They are also used by resource partners to gain a more precise picture of FAO's effectiveness at country level. Furthermore, with the implementation of the UN Reform, country-programme evaluations are also expected to inform the formulation of the UN Cooperation Frameworks, for example the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), and in particular, FAO's contribution within it. There is a set calendar for the roll-out of UNSDCF which has already started in some countries.
 - iii. Project and programme evaluations (mid-term and final) are primarily used to identify course correction for on-going and second phase of projects. In many

cases, they are used by donors to inform decisions on future funding cycles as well as accountability to their internal or public governance requirements. The timing of these evaluations is therefore linked to the project cycle and decision-making processes for a possible next phase.

- iv. Joint and inter-agency evaluations provide lessons and accountability on the added value of partnership or system-wide projects and action. They are used to strengthen collaboration and convergence around shared development objectives and implementation. The nature of such evaluations is such that they do not lead to immediate actions and are often part of broader and planned discussions among participating agencies.

Options for evaluation conduct

9. Based on a review of the on-going restrictions in terms of travel, an assessment of the future likelihood of these restrictions being lifted or lightened (and when), a thorough risk analysis and an assessment of the criticality of the specific evaluation, each evaluation manager should select one of the following options:
 - i. **Cancel the evaluation:** This option should be chosen if the restrictions are rigid, the risk exposure is high, the criticality is low.
 - ii. **Postpone the evaluation until the restrictions are lifted and the situation 'normalizes':** This option should be chosen if the risks are high but the criticality in terms of timeframes is low. This may be the best option in case the timeframes of project end dates and/or CPF cycles are postponed or extended, as a result of the COVID-19 related restrictions or there is an indication by the Programme Committee.
 - iii. **Conduct the evaluation in remote modality:** This modality should be chosen if the risks in terms of health are high, those in terms of quality are manageable and the criticality is high.

iv. **Use a remote modality but change the evaluation to a review:** This is indicated if the exposure of risks in terms of quality and bias are high and the decisions that need to be taken on the basis of the recommendations are significant but there is a need to provide some evidence and information on the evaluation.

v. **Conduct the evaluation in a mixed modality,** with a phase one in remote, plus a second part face-to-face at a later date: This option should be considered when the risks are medium and the criticality is high, especially for those evaluations that have a strong field-result component (impact assessments, surveys etc.).

10. Team coordinators and evaluation managers will be requested to select an option and record it in a dedicated divisional matrix that should be periodically updated, if the options selected change. It is advisable to develop a short narrative addendum for all the

evaluations in the 2020-21 work-plan, providing a short explanation on the risk analysis, the criticality and option selected, as well as a trail on consultations with FAO and external stakeholders (mainly donors) for selecting the preferred option.

11. In terms of overall **evaluation planning and governance**, OED will analyse the aggregate risks, limitations and options across evaluations and submit this for information to FAO stakeholders, the Evaluation Committee, governing bodies and donors. While initial discussions can take place informally, it is important for each evaluation to document the process and options/decisions in writing and through email correspondence, to avoid future critiques and misunderstandings. The limitations and options plan will have to be used pro-actively as a management tool throughout the evaluation conduct. Any shifts between options to the evaluation conduct, or changes to limitations and restrictions, will have to be documented throughout the process.

3. Risks and criticality matrix for identifying the best option for evaluation conduct

12. This table is intended to support decision-making on options for single evaluations. The suggested options are indicative and the analysis should be conducted based on an accurate analysis of the exposure of risks by type and the various factors determining the criticality of the evaluation.

Criticality of evaluation	High	Option 3, 4 or 5	Option 3 or 5	Option 3 or 4
	Medium	Option 3 or 5	Option 4	Option 4
	Low	Option 1 or 2	Option 2 or 4	Option 1
		Low	Medium	High
Exposure to risks (disaggregated by different types of risks)				

Source: Adapted from the Risk Matrix (p.3) of the "Implications of COVID-19 on evaluations in the ILO" (ILO, 2020)

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