

# EVALUATION SYNTHESIS

## Guidance Note

The purpose of this note is to provide a general understanding of what the Development Evaluation Unit of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs means by evaluation synthesis, particularly for external service providers. These general guidelines may be modified case by case. The guidance will be updated as needed.

### EVALUATION SYNTHESIS

#### *Definition:*

By “evaluation synthesis” we mean a knowledge product that

1. consolidates and aggregates evidence analytically based on evaluation reports,
2. maintains objectivity on the selected questions or issues,
3. combines qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding and new knowledge,
4. focusses on existing evidence
5. does not produce recommendations.

The aim is to increase the use and applicability of evaluation results. Evaluation syntheses aim to bring together the vast and scattered bodies of relevant evaluative evidence in support of organizational learning.

Evaluation syntheses apply transparent and reproducible methods to aggregate evidence and to identify broader patterns across sources. Although based on robust and systematic approaches, a synthesis does not produce recommendations but aims to consolidate information analytically and objectively on the selected questions, OECD DAC criteria, themes or issues such as identifying causal mechanisms, facilitating or hindering factors, conclusions, best practices or lessons learnt. Ideally, syntheses combine qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic based on the synthesis questions. Synthesis is more than a desk review on a topic, and it is not the same as a summary. We also make a distinction between syntheses and meta-evaluations and meta-analyses<sup>1</sup>. Typically, syntheses commissioned by us do not involve collecting primary data.

Syntheses may be applied to synthesise evidence from one evaluation, across multiple evaluations or to extrapolate findings more generally<sup>i</sup>. Syntheses and the resulting outputs should be systematic, rigorous and analytical, evidence-based, transparent and accessible. Although emphasis is on aggregate levels, due attention should be placed on contextualised and nuanced analysis. Evidence that does not converge with the broader patterns should be included and openly reported in the analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Meta-evaluations evaluate the technical quality of evaluations. Meta-analysis in our context refers to the rigorous analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple sources, beyond evaluation reports and including primary data collection. Unlike syntheses, both also produce recommendations.

In addition to serving as stand-alone knowledge products, evaluation syntheses can be useful, for instance, in informing the planning and scoping phase for a broader evaluation assignment as well as in feeding into the desk review results during the implementation phase of an evaluation.

The task involves, among others, locating the evidence, assessing its quality and relevance (and against other inclusion/exclusion criteria), extracting the relevant information and findings patterns, comparing and cross-checking the information, and synthesizing it to produce new knowledge. There are different methods that can be applied.<sup>ii</sup> AI-enabled tools may be applied in line with the broader AI policies and guidelines, keeping human in the centre of the knowledge extraction and generation process.

## PROCESS

After the definition of the scope and focus on the assignment in the Terms of Reference, the analytical process includes the following types of steps:

1. identification of the minimum quality standards for the universe of evidence, contextual parameters and the sample size
2. developing the review protocols and draft tools, including the search strategy, inclusion criteria, evaluating the evidence, and quality assurance procedures during synthesis
3. testing and finalizing the tools
4. screening, codifying and extracting evidence systematically
5. analysing, comparing, triangulating the collected evidence against the key questions
6. writing the knowledge products, including knowledge on the key questions, limitations and any evidence gaps <sup>iii</sup>

## DELIVERABLES

The deliverables may vary in each assignment, but the usual deliverables include the following items.

- **Inception report** that consists of the plan for conducting the synthesis (1.-3. above).
- **Draft synthesis report**
- **Final synthesis report and 1-2 pager brief**
- **Presentation** on key findings

The ideal final report includes the following elements:

1. Summary (purpose of the synthesis, questions or topics, methodology, answers to synthesis questions or topics) – 2 pages
2. Introduction – 1 page
3. Context – 2 pages
4. Approach and methodology, with reference to more detailed annex – 1 page
5. Description of the evidence (criteria, characteristics, quality, gaps) – 2 pages
6. Findings (sub-chapters organized along the questions or the topics) – appr. 20-30 pages or as agreed  
Findings on SQ1...

- Findings on SQ2...
- Findings on SQ3...
- 7. Conclusions (answers to synthesis questions or topics; other evidence-based conclusions)
- 8. References
- 9. Annexes
  - Detailed methodology (re: steps 1-5: approach, criteria, process and steps, tools, triangulation, validation etc.)
  - Populated evidence matrices
  - Analytical framework
  - Tools and templates
  - Codebooks
  - Databases included in the search
  - Lists of included evaluations and documents
  - Other

The final report will be published, unless decided otherwise by EVA-11.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of syntheses assignments typically has the following characteristics. The duration is shorter than for other assignments, typically spanning 3-6 months. The team implementing the assignment should have adequate methodological experience and competence. The minimum number of team members is two, consisting of a team leader and another expert to allow for triangulation and cross-validation.

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<sup>i</sup> UNEG Evaluation Synthesis Guidance (2025) [https://www.unevaluation.org/uneq\\_publications/uneq-evaluation-synthesis-guidance](https://www.unevaluation.org/uneq_publications/uneq-evaluation-synthesis-guidance)

<sup>ii</sup> BetterEvaluation: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/frameworks-guides/rainbow-framework/synthesise>

<sup>iii</sup> FAO OED Guidance Note on Evaluation Syntheses:  
<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/1fbd34e1-804d-4dd6-a27c-c54dd562e0da/content>  
*Are We Getting There? A synthesis of UN system evaluations of SDG*

[https://unevaluation.org/member\\_publications/are-we-getting-there-synthesis-un-system-evaluations-sdg-5-s](https://unevaluation.org/member_publications/are-we-getting-there-synthesis-un-system-evaluations-sdg-5-s)  
Machine Learning in Evaluative Synthesis  
[https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/methods\\_paper-machine\\_learning.pdf](https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/methods_paper-machine_learning.pdf)

Synthesis of Evaluative Evidence on the Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine:  
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/synthesis-evaluative-evidence-humanitarian-crisis-ukraine>