



TECHNICAL NOTE

Evaluative Case Studies

Monitoring and Evaluation Series

This Note provides guidance on using case studies in USAID evaluations.

Technical Notes are published by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning and provide key concepts and approaches to USAID staff and partners related to the Program Cycle.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluative case studies can be used as a valuable method or complement to other methods for evaluating USAID development projects and activities. This Technical Note provides practical information to assist evaluation managers and development practitioners to manage evaluations employing case studies, including guidelines for identifying when a case study has been conducted well and used effectively.

DEFINITION

According to the widely-used U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) definition:

“Case study as an evaluation method is a means of learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained through extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context”.

This definition involves three key elements of interest for USAID evaluations. First, evaluative case studies involve in-depth description and analysis of a **particular instance or aspect** of a program, project, or other development activity. It is this focus on the particular that separates case studies from other methods, which usually try to understand what happened with many, if not all, of the people or sites involved. Second, the aim of case studies is an **in-depth** understanding of the particular case or cases being studied. In other words, a case study is not a quick site visit and brief report of impressions, but requires enough time on the ground, observing, talking to people, and collecting other data to gain a detailed picture of the project being evaluated. Third, this understanding must take account of the case **as a whole** and its surrounding context, not just specific, selected pieces of the case. The objective is to understand at a deep level what is happening in a particular place and why.

RATIONALE

Case study is a frequently used evaluation method in international development. Its appeal for both managers and evaluators includes:

1. *Flexibility of use:* Case studies can be used in a variety of forms, and in a variety of settings. For example, a case study might be undertaken to illustrate the benefits of a national environmental protection project or to investigate how local cultural beliefs affected the impact of a community immunization program.
2. *Efficiency:* Compared with many other evaluation methods, case studies can be relatively low-cost. Travel to project sites is necessary, but a case study does not require the same amount of preparation time as a large-scale survey, for example and can be completed relatively quickly.
3. *Dealing with multiple interventions:* Many development projects involve combinations of several component interventions. Case studies can be used to investigate and describe how a set of interventions works together (or not) to effect changes.
4. *Addressing context:* Where a project or activity was implemented can matter just as much as *how* it was implemented. Case studies examine a project or activity in relation to its surrounding context.

DECIDING TO USE AN EVALUATIVE CASE STUDY

Whether the case study is an appropriate method for a given evaluation depends on the main evaluation questions of interest. The evaluative case study is best used when the major questions are “how” or “why” questions. For example, the questions might ask how a complex intervention has been implemented; why the intervention has achieved or not achieved its intended (or unintended) effects; or why the effects are not larger or smaller. On the other hand, if the evaluation questions aim to answer “how many” or “to what extent” questions, and need to answer these questions about the whole population involved in the program, then the evaluative case study will likely be unable to answer these questions by itself. A case study would not be the best evaluation method to answer questions such as “How many farmers were trained?” or “To what extent are farmers implementing the techniques on which they were trained?” If the question is “Why do farmers choose to use the techniques promoted by the training?”, then it may be useful to include an evaluative case study as part of the evaluation design.

Time and cost considerations also may affect the decision to adopt the case study method. Case studies often can be designed faster, and at lower cost, than other methods, such as surveys or other forms of data collection. This decision will depend on the specific circumstances of the evaluation, of course, but if the questions are amenable to case study, it frequently is the lowest-cost, most timely option.

NOT AN EVALUATIVE CASE STUDY

Teaching case study: Used widely today in law, medicine, and education, as well as other fields, the intent of the teaching case study is to establish a framework for debate and discussion among students. A case is presented that illustrates a particular problem and need for a decision on a course of action. Students discuss possible courses of action and make a recommendation that may be compared to the actual decision. These types of case studies help to teach a concept, not evaluate a project or program.

Site visit: Site visits are associated with the evaluative case study method, but a “fly-through” site visit is not an evaluative case study. While there is no set rule about how long one has to be at a site for it to be a case study, it must be long enough to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding.

USE THE CASE STUDY METHOD WHEN:

- The evaluation question is a “how” or “why” question.
- The evaluation focuses on an ongoing intervention or one recently completed.
- There is sufficient time on-site for in-depth data collection.
- There is no need for a statistically representative sample of a larger population.
- The intervention is complex and cannot be clearly separated from the context in which it is embedded

CONSIDER OTHER EVALUATION METHODS WHEN YOU:

- Are focused on “how many,” or “to what extent” questions
- Are doing a retrospective evaluation of an intervention that ended a considerable time ago
- Do not have much time for on-site data collection
- Need to generalize findings statistically from a sample to a population
- Can isolate the variables of interest

DETERMINING THE TYPE OF CASE STUDY

The following paragraphs describe the four main types of case studies. The type of case study used for a given evaluation will depend on the key questions to be addressed.

- **The illustrative case study:** This type of case study is descriptive in character and usually is intended to add realism and provide in-depth examples to supplement information gathered through other evaluation methods such as the survey method. The illustrative case study may describe a typical case, best cases, largest cases or the like. It might ask a question such as how a large urban secondary school is implementing the national school reform program.
- **The exploratory case study:** Also descriptive in nature, this type of case study is used to identify issues for later broader investigation. They are often done as part of mixed-methods evaluations particularly to inform the content of a large-scale survey when little is known about a project’s implementation. Exploratory case studies might pose questions such as: “What issues or challenges have surfaced in the program’s implementation in highly rural areas?”
- **The critical instance case study:** Again, descriptive in nature, this type of case study examines in detail an instance that is unusual or unique. It might ask a question such as, “Why are HIV/AIDS rates falling in a particular country when rates in neighboring countries are rising?”
- **The explanatory case study:** There are two types of explanatory case studies. The first focuses on program implementation. This type of case study investigates how a program operates, either at one or multiple sites. A program implementation case study might ask questions such as, “In early implementation of the voucher program, what program aspects are working well or less well and why?” The second type of explanatory case study focuses on program effects. This type of case study examines the outcomes and impacts—both positive and negative and planned and unplanned—of an intervention and seeks to provide explanations by making causal inferences about the reasons for success or failure. A program effects case study might ask questions such as: “How has a women’s microenterprise project increased the economic wellbeing of participants in the three selected villages?” or “Why does an inner-city school, serving the children of low-income families, have the highest science achievement scores of all schools in the province?” Explanatory case studies may include multiple sites, but their findings are not generalizable. (See below, Generalizing from Evaluative Case Studies.)

DETERMINING THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis refers to the entity at the center of each case study, and choosing the unit of analysis is an important step in the evaluative case study process and requires careful consideration. At its most fundamental, choosing the unit of analysis means deciding whether each case study will focus on an individual (a student, an entrepreneur), a small group (a family, a team), a community (a village, a nation), or some other category. Case studies may also be done on events or entities other than individuals, such as decisions, organizations, or critical incidents. A clearly defined unit of analysis will also include geographic and time boundaries. For example, an evaluation manager may decide to include only cases of people living with HIV/AIDS currently participating in a health program in a particular province, or may choose the unit of analysis to be refugee families displaced by a drought that has gone on for the past two years, though they may be currently living in a number of different places.

In any case, the evaluation questions will always guide the choice of the unit of analysis; the evaluation manager should make sure that the information collected based on the unit of analysis will enable the evaluator to answer the evaluation questions posed. It is also possible that the evaluator and evaluation manager may decide to modify the unit of analysis during the process of the evaluation, based on their evolving understanding of the situation or changing realities on the ground. When making these decisions, they should always keep in mind how the data will be analyzed. For example, cross-case analysis requires that the units of analysis are consistent across cases. If part of the purpose of the evaluation is to respond to prior research, the evaluation manager may choose a unit of analysis corresponding to the unit of analysis used in this existing literature.

Clearly outlining the unit of analysis and the reasons for choosing it strengthens the systematic and purposeful nature of the evaluative case study, as well as its overall transparency. At the same time, it also contributes to a key strength of the evaluative case study, its ability to capture both characteristics of the unit itself and also the context in which it exists. In other words, though it is crucial to have a clearly defined unit of analysis, this clear definition does not invite or compel the evaluator to take the unit of analysis out of its context and ignore important factors that emerge through the course of the data collection process (but that may not have been explicitly included in its initial definition). In fact, it is only by clearly delineating the boundaries between the unit of analysis and its context that the evaluator can begin to identify and place the various factors acting within and on the unit of analysis.

CASE STUDY SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

There are many different ways to select cases for an evaluative case study. Some of the most common are outlined below, but there are others, and the final decision will always depend on the purpose of the evaluation, as well as the budget and the time available.

SINGLE ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

If the purpose of the evaluative case study is illustrative, even one case study might be sufficient. With survey data on the physical condition of a nation's rural health clinics, for example, an evaluation team could identify the characteristics of the typical clinic and then conduct a single illustrative case study of a typical clinic, the one which best meets those characteristics.

THREE MYTHS ABOUT CASE STUDIES

Case studies take a long time.

While case studies as an evaluation method are not rapid appraisals, they may take only weeks rather than months or years. A case study of the nature and extent of implementation of state-wide school reform in one school, for example, may be accomplished in a few weeks. The key is whether the requirements of the case study definition—a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the intervention in the school, taken as a whole and in its context—have been met. A rapid appraisal methodology would not likely be compatible with case study methodology.

Case studies only use qualitative methods.

It is true that qualitative methods are predominant in case study evaluations, as evaluative case studies seek to obtain understanding through “extensive description,” but quantitative methods also can be used. Many case study evaluations use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Case studies cannot be used to generalize or make causal inferences.

Evaluative case studies should not be used to make statistical generalizations from a case to a population of interest, but they can modify a generalization, including those related to causal inferences, by refuting it (it only takes one case) or by providing more detail about it. They also can add positively to a body of evidence supporting a theory behind an intervention. (See below GENERALIZING FROM EVALUATIVE CASE STUDIES.)

BRACKETING

In contrast, if the purpose of the evaluation is to better understand the conditions under which a project works or fails, the evaluator might select extremes cases, a strategy sometimes called bracketing. For example, if the initial results from survey data or background research showed that some entrepreneurs benefited greatly from an economic growth project, while some did not seem to benefit at all or were actually harmed by the project activities, the evaluator might choose to conduct case studies of one or two of the most successful participants, as well as one or two of the least successful participants. This sampling strategy likely would provide both managers and evaluator with a better understanding of the success factors and why it was sometimes effective and sometimes ineffective, than a single illustrative case.

EXISTING GROUPS

Often, groups will already exist within the context of the evaluation, and the evaluator may have good reason to believe that these groups have experienced the project differently. In these cases, it often is important to capture the different experiences of the various groups, and the evaluator may choose one or more cases from within each group. At the level of the individual, these groups could be based on sex, age, or ethnicity, to name a few of the most common groupings. The evaluator, therefore, might choose to do one illustrative case study of an adult male beneficiary and contrast it to one of an adult female beneficiary; one of a child, one of a middle-aged adult, and one of an older adult; or one of a person from each ethnic group. Alternatively, if a project was conducted in five different provinces, and the evaluator suspects that the project was implemented differently in different provinces (due to different levels of support from the provincial government, for instance), then she might design the evaluation to include a case study in each province, in order to try to capture and understand those differences.

TYOLOGY

Frequently for multi-site evaluative case studies, sites are selected based on typologies. To explain how this might work, imagine a project that promotes new legislation on providing in-school support to children with disabilities. The evaluator may determine that the wealth and the degree of urbanization of the area where a school is located have important influences on the success of programs in a given school. By analyzing all of the schools in the country based on these two characteristics, it becomes clear that there are three main “types” of schools affected by the project: wealthy urban schools, poor urban schools, and poor rural schools. The evaluator then may choose to do one case study of each of these three different school types. In reality, many more factors are likely to be considered, including size, ethnic makeup, and past

student performance, resulting in more, and more specific, school types.

PURPOSIVE RANDOM SAMPLING

Random sampling can be used to select cases for an evaluative case study, but it is important to recognize that using random sampling does not mean that the cases selected are statistically representative, or generalizable to the total population. Random sampling can, however, help reduce the possibility of bias in the selection once other purposive selection techniques no longer offer guidance. For example, if the evaluator has used existing groups or typologies to narrow down the groups from which the case study will be chosen, random selection could then be used to make the final choice. This final step helps prevent the evaluator, or another stakeholder, from inappropriately choosing the case study for unstated reasons, introducing bias.

CONDUCTING THE EVALUATIVE CASE STUDY: USING KEY CASE STUDY PRINCIPLES

There are several key practices that characterize and guide an evaluative case study that make it valuable as an evaluation approach. Some of most important are briefly explained below.

THICK DESCRIPTIONS

The goal of an evaluative case study is to obtain as full an understanding as possible, and this understanding is gained by extensive description and analysis. Through rich, extensive, sometimes called “thick” description, the case study evaluator tries to give the reader a sense of what the experience of being at the site would convey.

ASSERTIONS

At the beginning of the case study, the evaluator will develop assertions related to the evaluation questions which then help guide the direction of the evaluation moving forward. These assertions will be based at first on any background data collected, or on the first parts of the case study. The evaluator will then seek more information to refute or support these assertions, and as new information is obtained, support, modify, discard, or replace the original assertions, depending on the new information.

PROGRESSIVE FOCUSING

Throughout this process of refining key assertions, the evaluator must continually adjust the focus of the evaluation. Progressive focusing does not mean the key evaluation questions are changed completely, but the evaluator may choose to modify some of the data collection instruments, or add additional data sources, to obtain all of the information needed for a complete, in-depth understanding of the issues involved. In many cases these adjustments will mean delving more deeply into topics that the evaluator already knows are important to answer the evaluation questions. In other cases, the results from one interview or observation, for instance, may reveal new, unanticipated information. This new information may raise additional questions that the evaluator must answer in order to completely understand the project and comprehensively answer the evaluation questions. Both the evaluator and the evaluation manager recognize that a certain degree of flexibility is necessary as the case study progresses, to allow for these kinds of modifications.

USING APPROPRIATE DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND PROCEDURES FOR CASE STUDIES

Evaluators can use the full range of data collection methods to construct a case study, including desk reviews of secondary data and existing literature, surveys, focus group interviews (see Technical Note on Focus Group Interviews), semi-structured interviews, direct and participant observation, photos and drawings and case histories. Using a combination of these methods helps to capture a rich and comprehensive picture of the project being evaluated. At the same time, the evaluator must carefully consider what type of data collection methods are best suited to capture the data necessary, and will often have to balance these needs against constraints of time, resources and access to data.

RECORDING AND ORGANIZING DATA

During the data collection stage, case studies produce a large amount of different kinds of data. In order to store and organize these data, the evaluation team must create a database. The exact format will depend on the different kinds of data contained in it, but it should be able to store and categorize all of the data collected in an easily searchable way. If possible, the evaluator should enter the data into the database as soon as possible after they are collected and make backup copies of the database whenever new data are entered. Adhering to this protocol will help reduce the risk of data loss, and also will make it easier for the data collectors to remember all of the important details that they otherwise might forget. The evaluation team also should conduct regular quality assurance checks to make sure that the data are being entered correctly and consistently. The Evaluation SOW should include a requirement that data be organized into a database that can be shared with USAID upon completion of the evaluation, along with the protocols needed to extract information from that database.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

All those responsible for planning and carrying out evaluations of development projects constantly must be aware of the potential risks to the people involved. Because case studies often are intensely personal and hands-on exercises, protecting the privacy and the rights of those involved is particularly relevant and important. Evaluators have the obligation to think through the ethics of the situation and make sure that the necessary steps are taken to respect privacy and do no harm. Evaluation managers should include an explanation of the procedures an evaluator will use to protect human subjects as part of the evaluation proposal.

ANALYZING CASE STUDY DATA

Data analysis actually begins during the data collection stage of an evaluative case study, as the evaluator goes through the continuous process of developing assertions and progressively focusing on relevant issues. Once data collection ends and the more formal data analysis begins, several key processes are likely to be involved.

CODING

Coding involves labeling or categorizing passages or parts of text (or pictures or videos, etc.) so that the data can be readily retrieved, searched, compared and contrasted. For example, during an evaluation of an agricultural project that promotes the adoption of improved farming techniques, evaluators conducting case studies may identify the availability of extension workers as a major issue in the context of the evaluation. While coding, they would label and track every instance when an informant or other data source raises the issue of the availability of extension workers. Using this database of coded data, they could then more easily identify what proportion of stakeholders raised this issue, which kinds of informants or sources raised it, and how many times, on average, these groups raised it, for example. If the database is relatively small, some evaluators may choose to code their qualitative data without the assistance of a software program. However, often the sheer volume of data involved becomes too large to rely on an evaluator, or even a team of evaluators, reading separate documents, highlighting passages, and tracking and tallying all of the references by hand. In these cases, there are a number of computer software packages (Atlas ti, Ethnograph, NVivo, to name only a few) that can help code this type of data automatically. Even with the assistance of a software program, coding and analyzing the type and amount of data that case studies often produce can take a significant amount of time, and the evaluation manager should allow for this time when constructing the SOW. Coding the data also requires an intimate knowledge of the project, the population and the context, and so the evaluators usually code the data themselves. The evaluation manager should know in advance if the evaluation team will use software to analyze the data and how data records will be transferred to USAID.

TRIANGULATION

Because case studies often incorporate data from multiple sources and multiple methods of data collection, evaluators are able to compare and contrast the findings based on these different sources and methods. This process is called triangulation, and it can help to reduce potential bias and increase confidence in the evaluation's overall findings and conclusions. If, for example, data are collected from semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and analysis of existing records and all three sources provide similar characterizations of the project being evaluated, there is less likelihood that the findings are due to chance, evaluator bias, or other unexplained factors. On the other hand, if different sources and methods lead to contradictory findings, then the evaluator must carefully consider what may have led to these findings, and may wish to reexamine the data collected, or even return to the field to collect additional data. In either case, triangulation helps to construct a more complete, more reliable picture of the project. Triangulation can happen not just among different methods and among different sources; evaluators also can triangulate results among different data collectors. If a team of enumerators helps to conduct a mini-survey, or multiple moderators are used to facilitate a series of focus group interviews, then the evaluator should also compare the responses that one data collector received with the responses that the other data collectors received, to check for any systematic differences, which could indicate some form of bias.

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

When an evaluation includes multiple studies of similar cases (individuals, groups, locations, etc.), evaluators will conduct two different stages of analysis. First, they will analyze each case individually to understand it as a separate entity, as described above. After that, they will conduct a cross-case analysis, comparing and contrasting the results from the different cases. This process is similar to triangulation and also yields similar benefits: greater confidence in findings and the minimization of potential bias. The difference is that while triangulation can happen within a single case study, cross-case analysis requires more than one comparable case study within a single evaluation.

GENERALIZING FROM EVALUATIVE CASE STUDIES

As described above, evaluators cannot use case studies to make generalizations about an entire population based on a statistically representative sample, as they can with surveys. However, case studies still can help to advance or refute general ideas about how a project is working or not working. For example, imagine that the evaluators of the agricultural project mentioned above wish to answer the question of whether farmers will be more likely to employ improved farming practices if access to an extension worker is increased. By designing a study including four case studies focusing on communities with no access to an extension worker, four case studies of communities where there was limited access to an extension worker, and four case studies of communities where there was complete access to an extension worker, they could then conduct a cross-case analysis of the twelve cases. If the farmers in the communities with complete access to an extension worker overwhelmingly adopted the improved farming practices, but the farmers in the communities with limited or no access to extension workers generally did not adopt these same practices, then the evaluator could present these results as support for the assertion that greater access to extension workers led to greater adoption of improved farming techniques. On the other hand, if the farmers with less access to an extension worker are just as likely, or more likely, to adopt the farming techniques as those with complete access, these findings would refute the assertion that greater access is necessary for greater adoption.

This type of evidence is fundamentally different from evidence obtained through a large-scale, statistically representative survey, and it may not, by itself, fulfill the needs of many evaluations. At the same time, a high-quality case study produces systematically collected, thoughtfully targeted data, and therefore the results of an evaluative case study represent more than just a haphazard collection of uninformed opinions. The evaluators in this case also must be conscious of factors other than access to an extension worker that may influence the

farmers' choice to adopt the farming practices, such as geography and type of crops grown, gender, class, or ethnicity. As this example illustrates, however, explanatory case studies can contribute to the process of supporting or refuting assertions.

POTENTIAL FOR BIAS

As with all kinds of evaluation methods, evaluative case studies are vulnerable to a number of types of bias.

- **Evaluator bias:** Given the evaluator's central role throughout the process of designing and conducting a case study, any bias this person may possess has the potential to influence the results, whether it is unconscious or intended. Bias may be introduced, for example, when initial assertions are formulated, when collecting the data, or when interpreting the results. An evaluator using a case study only to substantiate a preconceived position is an example of evaluator bias.
- **Selection bias:** The results of an evaluative case study are dependent upon the set of cases chosen for inclusion in the study. In most cases, evaluators choose cases based on which they believe will provide the most valuable, relevant data for the evaluation. If either the evaluator or another stakeholder chooses the cases based on any other criteria, this action may lead to biased results. To guard against this bias, evaluators should provide a clear justification for case selection, and may also employ techniques such as purposive random selection, described above, to further limit the influence or appearance of selection bias.
- **Alternative explanations:** Evaluators must also be careful to account for alternative explanations of observed phenomena. This is addressed in evaluative case studies through the process of assessing and revising assertions, as described above.

It is important to remember that these and other types of bias are a potential concern for all evaluation methods, and it is the responsibility of all professional evaluators and evaluation managers to recognize and limit their influence. By systematically collecting data and carefully documenting the analysis and rationales for all decisions made, the evaluator can help make the entire evaluative case study process more transparent and its conclusions more reliable.

REPORTING FINDINGS

The evaluation manager and evaluators should have a plan for how the results, including raw data, summaries, findings, conclusions and recommendations, will be reported and shared at the conclusion of the case study. Given the wide range and depth of case study data, clearly and succinctly presenting all of the data can be challenging. The box below provides four general strategies for organizing and presenting case study findings.

WAYS TO PRESENT CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Natural history: This type of report presents a chronological presentation of the case, similar to a narrative story.

Critical incident: The report is built around a single incident that captures the evaluative message of the report.

Thematic: These reports are organized around the key themes that have emerged from the case study, sometimes based on the key evaluation questions.

Within and between: Reports on multiple case studies should contain both the individual case study summaries ("within") and the results of the cross-case analysis ("between"). Sometimes the cross-case analysis will be included in the main body of the report, while the individual case study summaries are included as annexes.

TABLE I: CASE STUDY QUALITY CHECKLIST

For evaluation managers conducting a review of an evaluation draft report employing case study methods: These case study checklist criteria should be checked in addition to broader evaluation quality criteria.

Questions	Yes or No?
Is the rationale clearly presented for use of the evaluation case study method?	
Is it clear which type of case study has been conducted?	
Is the unit of analysis clear?	
Is the justification clear for the number of case studies conducted?	
Is the rationale provided for the selection of the specific case(s) or site(s)?	
Is the context in which the intervention is embedded described?	
Are data collection methods within the case study clearly described?	
If a multisite case study is undertaken, is there clear explanation of the within site analyses and cross-site analysis?	
If an explanatory case study is undertaken, are alternative rival explanations for findings identified and examined?	

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used as samples or templates, or provide more information on the topics reports and on evaluation in general. Some other resources exist but are out-of-date with current USAID guidance. Where information differs, the USAID Evaluation Policy and the USAID ADS (Automated Directives System) 200 series take precedence over that in other resources.

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