TIP SHEET:

REAL TIME EVALUATION

Last updated July 2018

What is an RTE?

Real Time Evaluations (RTEs) are used to assess processes in a rapidly changing context, particularly in the humanitarian sector, identify options for improving program performance, and promote learning and adaptive management. The information about the processes and their effectiveness is collected at critical early stages of a response. Organizations can opt for "Joint RTEs" which are typically implemented in cooperation with other relevant response organizations supporting the same relief efforts. While this can be useful to coordinate efforts and identify gaps in the overall response, they can take significant time and resources to complete.

PREPARING FOR AN RTE: STEPS FOR PROGRAM MANAGERS

1. *Budget for evaluation*
2. *Identify a key point of contact to engage with the evaluator/evaluation team*
3. *Draft terms of reference*
4. *Select evaluator(s)*
5. *Share documents with the evaluation team*
6. *Review evaluation plan to ensure coherence with program activities*

Why would we implement an RTE?

RTEs utilize the rigor of an evaluation, are implemented closely with program stakeholders, and in a shorter timeline to provide fast, relevant feedback to response teams. The program team can use results to make critical changes to program processes that may have otherwise been overlooked in the heat of the response. Effective, quick dissemination of results to program teams and relevant stakeholders is key to a successful RTE. Evaluation results feed directly into program decision-making and can identify and work to reduce potential risk in long-term program operations. Additionally, results can be timed for inclusion in donor reporting and future programs.

Carving out the time and resources for an RTE allows the program and country teams to get evaluation-level substantive information without burdening the response team with additional tasks. Additionally, the evaluators are able to review processes from a broad, external perspective to analyze critical issues as the response team tackles more immediate response needs.

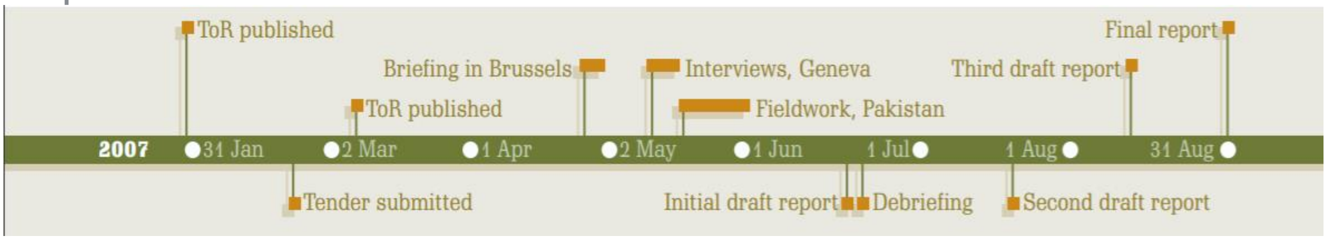
How do you plan for an RTE?

TIMELINE

The length of time allotted for an RTE is dependent on the evaluation's focus as well as resources allocated. An RTE, from drafting the TOR to submitting or presenting the final report, can last up to eight months.

MERCY CORPS

Sample Timeline[1]



To effectively plan for and implement an RTE, it is important to begin as soon as possible in order to allot enough time for staffing and thoughtful evaluation design. It is recommended that RTEs be conducted in the early stages of a response so critical program decisions are informed by evidence, however, RTE activities should not start so early that they conflict with the assessment and initial planning. The most important factor for successful RTE implementation is demand from the program field team, as RTE results are intended to facilitate evidence-based field decision-making. A program manager or director may wish to coordinate an RTE in response to one or more of the following triggering events[2]:

- ☐ New response in a context where the agency has no previous or recent activity
- ☐ Concern that cross-cutting issues (ex. gender, protection) are not addressed in the heat of operations
- ☐ Sudden shift in the nature of a program (ex. shift from a development program to a large relief operation following a natural disaster)
- ☐ Unresolved issues under discussion in an agency that may benefit from research
- ☐ Sudden increase in program scale (population served or resources committed)
- ☐ Warning signs from project monitoring (ex. unexplained sudden increases in indicators like malnutrition or child mortality)
- ☐ Upcoming agency decisions on program direction (e.g. geographical expansion, sectoral extension, curtailment or phasing out).
- ☐ The introduction of new response approaches

In order to facilitate a timely planning and implementation phase, it is important to be prepared with preliminary tools and activities ready. These preparedness indicators include:

Roster of potential evaluators	Buy-in from senior management
Capacity within the evaluation team to manage an RTE	Understanding from field managers of the advantages of RTEs and RTEs embedded in agency policy
Standard terms of reference that can be quickly adjusted	Standard follow-up processes for RTEs

At the outset, program staff should develop a briefing packet for the evaluation team that includes key operational documents relevant to the evaluation (e.g. situation updates and reports.) An evaluation plan (inception plan) should be developed by the evaluation team in conjunction with field and HQ staff to create a dialogue around the evaluation, assess feasibility, and facilitate planning.

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[1] Source: ALNAP Guide: Real-time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action

[2] Adapted from ALNAP's RTE Guide

In addition to travel and evaluation activities, time should be allocated for the evaluation team to provide their report, or a draft of the report with initial recommendations, to the program team before they leave. Presentation to the program team is critical for providing immediate recommendations and receiving feedback about potential issues that were overlooked by the evaluation team. Timelines should also include follow-up presentations with relevant stakeholders in the field and at HQ to share findings and recommendations.

BUDGET

Budgeting for RTEs varies from other humanitarian evaluations due to three components: length of the evaluation, dissemination, and contingencies. As the evaluation team must prepare and present their reports before leaving the field, the budget should account for more in-country travel and expenses. Effective use of findings is linked to effective dissemination to key stakeholders in the field and HQ. Often, presentations are a more effective dissemination method than reports. Therefore, the budget should allow evaluators the time and resources to travel to key stakeholders to present results. As RTEs are generally conducted near the beginning of the response when conditions are variable, the budget should include expenses associated with changing evaluation sites and processes.

STAFFING (INTERNAL VS EXTERNAL)

Evaluation teams can range from one experienced evaluator to a team of 4. Evaluators external to the team could provide a new, unbiased perspective. However, internal individuals familiar with the region or program may be better equipped with the background information needed to quickly mobilize the evaluation. Implementers, including IRC and CRS, use RTEs as an opportunity for learning across programs and countries. The evaluation team is typically comprised of an internal and external evaluator, as well as a team member who supported a similar relief effort in the past.

Resources

The ALNAP RTE guide, which was used to develop this guidance, provides a comprehensive deep dive as well as examples and tools for developing documents necessary for successful RTE implementation.