Good Practice Note: Progress Reporting

Release 2 – November 2018

Purpose

This note aims to assist DFAT staff and its implementing partners to strengthen DFAT progress reporting.

Introduction

A good progress report is focused on primary audience (i.e. DFAT) information needs, tells about program results, and is based on sound evidence and findings. Progress reports are utilised for the following:

1. To provide evidence of results across each of the programs. Key results are then included in higher-level reporting by Australian development program in Timor-Leste.[1]
2. To communicate achievements and challenges.
3. To identify issues or risks as they emerge, and outline strategies/actions to address these in a timely way.
4. To fulfil contractual requirements.

Preparing for progress reports

Activities and resources that can contribute to improved progress reporting include:

Learning Dialogues: A Learning Dialogue is a participatory process to bring together key stakeholders such as the Embassy and Implementing Partners (IPs) to make sense of monitoring and evaluation data through an engaging exercise to incorporate multiple perspectives. The output of the Learning Dialogue is a completed evidence matrix. See M&E House Good Practice Note on Learning Dialogues for more details.

Evidence Matrix: An evidence matrix is a template for IPs to map monitoring and evaluation data against key evaluation questions and sub-questions. It is a helpful tool to organise data from multiple sources, reflect on what it means, and consider what needs to be done differently. Evidence is collated before the Learning Dialogue, then Findings (so what?) and Responses (what now?) are developed during the Learning Dialogue. A completed evidence matrix is used to develop the progress report.

Pre-submission meetings between the implementing partner and the DFAT Activity Manager and/or Counsellor can contribute to improved quality of reports. Pre-submission meetings may include discussion on the proposed content of the report, clarification for any aspects of reporting, and any recommendations from the previous reporting period. M&E House may be invited to pre-submission meetings to provide feedback on previous progress reports.

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[1] Higher level reporting includes Performance Assessment Framework (PAF), Aid Quality Check (AQC) process and the Aid Program Performance Report (APPR).

Principles on the content of progress reports

The **DFAT Monitoring and Evaluation Standards** include standards for Progress Reports (Standard 3). They are useful to guide the content of reports. The following provide key principles for good quality reporting:

Focus on outcomes. High quality progress reports move beyond describing activities, and instead focus on reporting progress towards end-of-program outcomes. Descriptions of activities can be annexed.

Conclusion first. Ideally, start with a clear and succinct conclusion as to the extent to which that the program is on track to achieve its end-of-program outcomes. Then provide an evidence-based explanation to substantiate this conclusion. Where practical include examples to illustrate these findings.

Backed by evidence. The text should 'weave' **evidence** together to tell a compelling story of progress towards the end-of program outcomes. Evidence drawn from different types monitoring can be 'woven' together to substantiate the report conclusion(s) regarding progress. Examples of different sources of evidence include output monitoring, evaluations or reviews, quotes, partner reports, adviser reports and outcome-level information from monitoring systems. To maintain page limits, evidence can be linked to footnotes or endnotes. Programs can report both 'what you did' and 'what changed', but should aim for **lean reporting** focusing on main activities only.

Stories of significant change. SSCs can be a powerful tool to provide tangible examples, and clear links between program activities and outcomes, including changes for women, men, girls and boys. The SSC narrative can be used to explain: what was the issue, what the program did to address the issue, and what change occurred. Narratives can be brought to life by providing photos and/or quotes, and presented in story boxes in the progress report.

Lean and efficient - short, succinct and highly readable. The substance of the report should be succinct, well written and use simple English. The report should be **no longer than 30 pages (excluding annexes)**. Shorter reports are more likely to be read by a wider audience. In addition, a **two-page executive summary** is required, which can be used as a stand-alone communication piece to an audience beyond the usual recipients of the report. If applicable, a one-page infographic is highly valuable. Avoid the use of development or program-specific jargon - use **simple language, short sentences and active voice**.

Visualisation. It is good practice to include clear, accessible graphs and other figures to visually demonstrate findings. Use a descriptive sentence with a clear takeaway message that encapsulates the graph's finding or the "so what?" See some great tips here[2].

AQC criteria. The report should incorporate AQC criteria**,** this can be undertaken through the use of text boxes at appropriate places in the report, or as a summary as an annex. Reporting against the AQC criteria should include evidence and where possible use a maximum of 300 words for each criterion. Refer to the section on AQC criteria below.

Challenges, failure and reframing. Programs should be frank about describing challenges and failures encountered during the reporting period, explain how they were overcome (where relevant) and lessons learned. As part of the risks and safeguards management requirements, the risk management matrix should be reviewed, with changes documented, including highlighting any new risk management strategies to address emerging program risks.

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[2] http://stephanieevergreen.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/DataVizChecklist_May2014.pdf

Review of progress reports

DFAT will provide **consolidated comments** on the progress report submitted.[3] These comments will consist of (a) changes which are necessary for the report to be finalised and (b) comments, suggestions and observations which are required to be addressed in the next report. DFAT can ask M&E House to review the submitted progress report against Standard 3 of the DFAT M&E Standards. Reports need not be rewritten unless there are factual errors or the report doesn't meet basic quality standards. M&E House can support Implementing Partners by reviewing draft progress reports prior to final submission to DFAT.

Suggested format for progress reports

1.   Executive summary (2 pages)

This section provides a precis of the whole report. This should be **a stand-alone communication piece** that can be distributed to a broad audience inside and outside DFAT. It should include a brief description of the program with sufficient context that an unfamiliar reader can understand the main points. It should include the value of the program and the timeframe. It should summarise progress towards outcomes including any notable examples and end with any lessons learned and changes to the program as a result of learning. This section should also include management responses or recommendations raised in this report.

2.   Operating context (1 - 2 pages)

This section provides a description and analysis of relevant aspects of the program's operating context and/or key risks, including opportunities that have emerged and aspects of the context which are relevant to understanding the program's ability to achieve its outcomes.

3.   Analysis of progress toward outcomes (not more than 20 pages)

This section should make reference to, and report progress towards, the end-of-program outcomes or key evaluation questions. All findings should be substantiated with credible evidence. This can include examples of impact in the form of qualitative data (e.g. a narrative, short case study or SSC) and/or quantitative data illustrating progress towards outcomes. Please make reference to the source of the evidence with footnotes. It can be a good idea to include one section per end-of-program outcome or key evaluation question, with sub-sections for each evaluation sub-question. The evidence matrix can be used as a structure for this section of the progress report.

4.   Learning and adaptation (2 pages)

This section outlines the key factors that have assisted progress towards outcomes as well as the challenges to program implementation and what has been learned from these. A management response to areas raised in this report can be summarised here. This section can also include actions/status of the management response from the previous report.

5.   Annexes

AQC criteria

Note: Some AQC criteria may best fit within specific sections of the report. The table below provides guidance on reporting against the AQC criteria:

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[3] The DFAT Activity Manager will advise the implementing partner of the expected time taken to provide comments on the report (e.g. 3-4 weeks).

Criteria	Key points to note
Effectiveness	Provide an overall assessment on the extent to which the program is on track to achieve expected outcomes and note any evidence around beneficiary satisfaction. Include links to other sections/annexes of the report as applicable. Effectiveness is reported under section of report 'analysis of progress towards outcome'.
Efficiency	Provide evidence and analysis to support the overall assessment on the extent to which the investment makes appropriate use of time and resources to achieve outcomes. This can include if on track to achieve milestones and note any new efficiencies that have been made as a result of fine-tuning the program. This can be reported under Annexure – Activity Implementation.
Sustainability	Provide a brief assessment of the extent to which the program approach is working to ensure a lasting legacy of the results (e.g. assessment of the level of ownership; working through or enhancing local systems and structures and building capacity.)
Inclusion	Summarise the extent to which the investment has included people with disabilities or/and other marginalized groups.
Gender equality	Summarise the evidence and make an assessment about the extent to which gender equality has been furthered through this program. Are there specific outcomes that support women and girls to be more empowered? (e.g. any gender analysis conducted and used to inform programming; gender risks analysed and mediated; progress against gender objectives).
Relevance	Provide a brief assessment about the extent to which the program remains relevant to the changing context and the agenda of both GoA and GoTL.
M&E	Provide an assessment on the extent to which the M&E system is generating credible information that is being used.
Innovation and Private sector	Provide any examples of engagement with the private sector (including the number of organizations and/or businesses and link this to the PAF indicator if relevant) and examples of innovative programming.
Climate Change	If relevant, provide any examples of management of climate and disaster risk and any integration of climate or disaster action, including supporting emissions reductions.

Activity implementation

Please provide a brief description of key outputs and activities. This can be in table form. Where possible, provide quantitative data on key outputs and activities e.g. reach of activities, the number of outputs, or the number of beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries. Please provide an assessment of progress in implementing the workplan. This can be in graphic or table form. Where there are significant delays, please provide a brief explanation for this, and indicate what plans have been put in place for managing it (if not already covered in the body of the report).

Program expenditure

Alongside the financial report (a summary table), which presents actual expenditure against the budget, this section includes a brief analysis of any issues that have impacted on the program's budget or expenditure, including an explanation for any variance in planned versus actual expenditure and a brief assessment of the implications of this.

Risk management matrix

It is good practice to attach an updated risk management matrix, covering updates during the reporting period.