



i-eval THINK Piece, No. 1

Lessons Learned

Utilizing lessons learned from project evaluations in
policy decision making

Dr. Ralph Maurer

Lessons Learned

Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

Prepared by Dr. Ralf Maurer

March 2012

The responsibility for opinions expressed in this study rests solely with the author, and the publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office of the opinions expressed here.

This study has been prepared by an external consultant and has not been subjected to professional editing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Background and context: Evaluation lessons for ILO policy development	3
	Scope and Methodology.....	4
2	Findings and conclusions on learning lessons for policy making	5
	Demand for policy lessons.....	5
	Generating and sharing policy lessons learned	7
	Lessons on national policy performance	8
	Lessons on ILO policy performance	9
3	'Lessons Learned' agenda for the Evaluation Unit	10
4	Recommendations for changes in guidance instruments	12
	Guidance Notes	14
	Checklists	15
5	Policy lessons learned for the ILO Information Gateway	16
	ANNEX 1- Terms of Reference	18
	Annex 2 - FRAMING OF LESSONS LEARNED.....	20

1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: EVALUATION LESSONS FOR ILO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In an increasingly difficult global economic environment, the drive for greater aid effectiveness has become a major concern for the international development community. Like many other development agencies, the ILO is under pressure to demonstrate stronger results orientation and to report on the evidence that its interventions produce impact. The rollout of a comprehensive results-based knowledge strategy is a key element of ILO's response. In the context of its Strategic Policy Framework 2010–15, the organization is committed to strengthening evidence-based analysis to support the Decent Work Agenda; reinforcing approaches to and structures for knowledge exchange; and improving dissemination of ILO knowledge. Particular attention is given to enhancing institutionalized systems to ensure that information and data are collected, analyzed, stored, shared and disseminated in cost-effective ways that enhance the organization's long-term capacity to provide services to constituents.

Growing emphasis on monitoring and evaluation is reflective of this trend. The M&E system is a primary institutional channel for organizational learning that is to improve policy processes and outcomes in the countries served by the ILO. Within this dynamic system, the experience derived from past projects, programs and policies is meant to inform future project, program and policy decisions.¹ Yet, according to the independent assessment of ILO's evaluation function in 2010², evaluation does not yet systematically inform policy and planning. This includes resource allocation, notably in the context of preparing the biennial program and budget or medium-term strategic policy framework.

Over the past few years, the ILO has deployed a number of initiatives to reinforce its evaluation function with a view to support more systematic institutional learning. Evaluation knowledge sharing has significantly improved with the implementation of the *i-Track* evaluation database³ providing internet-based access to key evaluation information. Annual Evaluation Reports have become a major instrument for synthesizing and sharing analytical knowledge from project and country program evaluations.

Despite the availability of this technology, progress in disseminating evaluation knowledge has not produced a quantum leap in terms of institutional uptake of evaluation experience. There is a general

¹ ILO. (2010). Independent External Evaluation of the ILO Evaluation Function, p. 27. An effective organization can and does take advantage of tremendous knowledge generated by its evaluation products for improving organizational processes and outcomes.

² Ibid, p.23.

³ *i-Track* is EVAL's "intranet-based multi-lingual information management system for facilitating online file storage." (Storing and sharing evaluation reports and materials). The system also makes available a large number of guidance documents and external information resources and links.

perception that lessons generated by evaluations are not yet adequately incorporated into program and policy decisions of the organization. While drawing lessons is now a standard feature of all evaluation reports, it is uncertain to what degree those lessons are actually applied.

A second concern is the thrust of lessons: project and country program evaluations produce predominantly lessons on implementation issues for program managers and less on substantive policy concerns that are of interest to policy makers.⁴ This casts some doubt on institutional learning and poses a dilemma for the ILO as a policy-oriented organization.

Finally and of notable importance, evaluation lessons do not reliably have the qualities that would facilitate their further utilization.

This is where the present study comes in: It attempts to provide an answer to the question “how can evaluations in the ILO better bring out information about what works for whom, in which situation, in promoting policy reform” (TOR, see Annex 1). It is to be seen in the context of the ILO evaluation strategy 2011-2015⁵ which aims at enhancing the relevance and usefulness of evaluation to constituents and to improving the use of evaluation by ILO constituents and management for governance.⁶

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This study explores the extent to which greater policy learning can be achieved from project and country program evaluations.⁷ It then discusses possible measures available to the Evaluation Unit to improve the uptake of policy lessons, including revising related policies and guidance on producing lessons and post-production analysis and framing of policy lessons learned. Finally, it assesses the

⁴ In this respect, a 2010 study reviewed lessons learned from recently completed projects finding that many relate to project design and implementation issues. Similarly, a meta-analysis done in 2010 of lessons learned in regard to DWCPs noted that there were very few lessons to be learned on policy issues.

⁵ ILO. Governing Body. (2011). Results-based strategies 2011–15: Evaluation strategy – Strengthening the use of evaluations. This strategy seeks to reinforce the integration of evaluation into the policy decisions process by reinforcing the functions of Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC) and making effective use of high-level strategic evaluations.

⁶ Ibid. By 2015, annual evaluation reporting based on analysis of evaluation reports would be used in developing the new SPF and program budget.

⁷ In turn, high-level strategic policy and thematic evaluations are not targeted by the study inasmuch as they are already geared towards producing recommendations and policy lessons learned for governance-level strategic and programming decisions.

related potential for integrating lessons learned into the “policy track” of the ILO-wide knowledge management system and notably the ILO Information Gateway.

The study adopts a simple “demand-supply” framework to explore the reasons why lessons learned do not influence policy decisions in a more significant manner. Short of undertaking a full-scale client-side analysis,⁸ the paper develops a set of standards that policy lessons emerging from evaluation have to meet in order to be learned. The assessment subsequently turns to the supply side to determine the factors that cause evaluations to generate only an insignificant amount of policy lessons learned. It reviews the production process of lessons learned based on a small sample of project and DWCP evaluations and investigates how the toolset supporting decentralized evaluations can be enhanced to meet the demand for evaluation lessons learned for the policy level.

2 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS ON LEARNING LESSONS FOR POLICY MAKING

DEMAND FOR POLICY LESSONS

‘Lessons learned’ from evaluations translate past experience into relevant information / knowledge for better decision-making and thus contribute to improved program or project performance, outcome, or impact.

“They can highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of interventions to improve quality of delivery; contribute to sharing innovative responses to potential challenges; and/or allow practitioners to reuse lessons from previous experience into the design of future projects. They also contribute to learning and knowledge sharing among stakeholders by helping them to better understand the design, monitoring and evaluation of a given intervention, and to identify where collaboration and coordination need to be strengthened.”⁹

⁸ The study did not have the opportunity to interview policy and program planners.

⁹ ILO, Evaluation Unit (2012). Policy Guidelines for Results-Based Evaluation Principles, Rationale, Planning and Managing for Evaluations. p. 45.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

A systematic approach to collecting, compiling and analyzing evaluation results to identify lessons learned and best practices would facilitate sharing of experience, improvement of current practices, and promote organizational learning.¹⁰

Lessons learned are “[g]eneralizations based on evaluation experiences with projects, programs, or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons learned highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact.” (Source: OECD-DAC, 2002, Glossary) “Lessons learned can reveal “good practices” that suggest how and why different strategies work in different situations—valuable information that needs to be documented.” (UNDP ME Handbook 2002)

A persistent demand exists for successful policies and the type of situational knowledge that enables policies to be successful. This is true both for the countries implementing policies and for the ILO and its internal policies designed to facilitate country policy implementation and adjustment.

Inasmuch as national policy-makers are interested in rational policy design, they will look for evidence of policy successes that they can replicate or policy failures that they can avoid. For example, Country X has a policy of providing “health care protection to working women and men in formal enterprises” (policy outcome). It relies on private insurance schemes financed by employer and worker contributions to achieve this outcome. Its experience in implementing such a system, the quality of coverage, the conditions that prevent or support effective functioning of the scheme, institutional requirements and obstacles holds valuable lessons not only for the country itself, but also for other countries targeting a similar policy outcome.

As a repository of global norms and information on labor and employment, the ILO is solicited by its member countries to provide information on *what works for whom in which situation*. Similarly, the ILO itself requires substantially more knowledge regarding the success of national policy processes in order to determine whether its advocacy and institutional capacity building efforts are supporting the right policies. Lessons from national policy are therefore a valuable input into enhancing the relevance

¹⁰ ILO (2010). Op. cit. p. 37. Each ILO evaluation report should contain a section on lessons learned which summarizes knowledge or understanding gained from experience related to the ILO intervention under evaluation. Since 2009, lessons learned are integrated into the project design process, including quality criteria that call for evidence of the use of lessons learned in the design of new projects as part of the appraisal process.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

of ILO's policy work. Note that this level is concerned with national policy implementation and policy outcomes (changes in development conditions).

The next level concerns change outcomes, that is, institutional capacity building and policy reform through the ILO's program and non-program-based interventions. It is in the ILO's interest to learn from its own experience and to determine whether its support is indeed appropriate and properly implemented. In the context of the above example, the ILO could be involved in carrying out a comparative study on financing private health care protection schemes to inform Country X's policy intervention.

Whether individual projects or composite programs, two types of lessons learned can be identified in the intervention:¹¹

- One type relates to **HOW** project or program activities are performed, that is, the *efficiency* of the process. In the example, the question would be whether the study itself is well done. By identifying shortcomings in the implementation of an intervention, they help managers to improve the way of working or managing activities.
- The other is concerned with the rationale, the **WHY**, of the project or program; the *relevance* of its objectives/outcome to a situation; the suitability of the approaches and strategies; the role of the ILO and its partners; and the mix and added value of the services (policy advice, advocacy, research, standard setting). In the context of the intervention for Country X, the question here is whether the study was the most appropriate action, under a given set of circumstances, to support the country's policy. In pinpointing mismatches between the project/program and the broader economic, political and social environment it is operating in, these lessons can provide valuable knowledge for designing ILO policies aimed at national policy change.

GENERATING AND SHARING POLICY LESSONS LEARNED

As desirable as they may be, good lessons are notoriously difficult to attain. Lessons learned are meant to be significant, to have a relevance to a wider context, and to be generalized and replicable. Regularly, they turn out to be poorly formulated, insignificant, invalid and not replicable. Processes and tools designed to promote their dissemination and uptake are often weak with the result that lessons learned are often shelved or ignored.¹² (Guidance Note 3 on Evaluation Lessons Learned, March 2012).

¹¹ ILO (2012) Op. cit.

¹² For example, efforts to compile lessons learned and disseminate them through the Annual Evaluation Report, "top lessons learned" in AER 2009-2010, did not receive much attention at the policy level and have been discontinued.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

One in two lessons identified in evaluation reports fails to qualify as a lesson because it does not meet the defining characteristics.¹³ A lesson should *"succinctly specify the context from which it is derived, establish its relevance beyond that context (where it will be applied and by whom) and suggest some prescription or action. Although lessons are derived from a specific situation, they are intended to have wider relevance. However, lessons are often regarded as one-off findings that lack supporting information from other sources. Lessons that are supported by 'triangulated' evidence command greater credibility among their potential users; ..."*¹⁴

Program planners and policy makers all too frequently find it difficult to appropriate, that is to learn, those lessons because they are not adequately articulated with respect to the necessary context, conditions and application domains. With the bulk of lessons derived from project and country program evaluations focused on implementation issues, there is a dearth of lessons to inform substantive policy making. Boosting the institutional system for producing and ultimately learning policy lessons is therefore an urgent task for the ILO.

LESSONS ON NATIONAL POLICY PERFORMANCE

Project and country program evaluations are not geared to extracting lessons with regard to national policies. They are commonly centered on effectiveness and efficiency concerns as the bulk of their fact-finding is on project and program achievements and management. On rare occasions, they may dwell on the relevance of change outcomes related to upgrading institutional capacity for national policy implementation or to supporting a policy shift. However, they are not conceived to examine the experience with national policy outcomes per se and, in particular, whether the latter have been properly selected, are adequately aligned, and responsive to dynamic economic and social environment so as to have the desired impact.

Strategic policy and thematic evaluations are more closely focused on policy-level issues and produce the bulk of lessons for the policy level. Performed generally on a regional or even global rather than individual country basis, these evaluations focus, by design, on the strategies/policies of the ILO and other development partners aimed at building policy implementation capacities and/or bringing about policy change in the countries. While those assessments examine the contribution of ILO interventions to national policy processes and outcomes, they do not evaluate national policy performance per se. Their focus is on the change outcome not on the broader outcomes of national policies. The lessons they hold are valuable mostly to framing and implementing related ILO intervention policies and strategies.

¹³ Based on EVAL guidelines prescribing the correct content and format for lessons learned.

¹⁴ UNEP (2007) Lessons Learned from Evaluation - A Platform for Sharing Knowledge. Special Study Paper Number 2.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

The types of lessons that would inform national policies are to be obtained primarily from evaluations of a country's policies; hence, by assessing the quality/relevance of policies (policy assumptions), the results of policy (effectiveness) and the factors affecting those policies. Since these evaluations are politically sensitive, they are usually undertaken by the countries themselves, ideally with participation of the social partners. Nevertheless, the ILO as an impartial adviser can and should encourage this type of evaluation and provide the necessary technical support.

LESSONS ON ILO POLICY PERFORMANCE

Learning from program and project experience is essential to improving the ILO's performance and results by adjusting its policies and approaches. Strategy policy and thematic evaluations are specifically designed to produce lessons for ILO policy improvement. However, they are conducted infrequently. Project and country program evaluations provide a rich soil for learning from experience since they are commissioned in far greater number. Yet, their lessons turn first and foremost to implementation issues; very few deal with policy-level concerns (usually projects that target the policy level more closely). As a result, the evaluation lessons are infrequently used to inform senior management policy and program decisions.¹⁵

Project-level evaluations do not set out to determine whether policy supported by a project is right or wrong. Rather their primary objective is to assess the results and implementation for project/program managers who, as principal evaluation clients, will use the evaluation to account for the results and learn how to improve implementation. Moreover, those evaluations are managed by ILO staff and not particularly by technical specialists or policy experts. It would therefore seem judicious to adjust expectations as to what lessons can be learned from the project evaluations.

Notwithstanding their weak policy emphasis, independent project evaluations have some potential to become more productive in terms of their policy content. One option to ensure that project evaluations generate more policy-oriented lessons would be to combine them with sub-studies focusing on the national policy level.¹⁶ Alternatively, evaluators could be encouraged to place more emphasis on the policy rationale of the project by validating the underlying 'theory of change'¹⁷ and the assumptions on which the project is built and, thereby establishing relevance of institutional roles and approaches. This latter trajectory involves couching project evaluations in the mold of outcome evaluations.

¹⁵ More generally, the paucity of lessons learned, as recorded by a recent meta analysis of DWCP evaluations (2011), would also contribute to this seeming indifference: Only three of fourteen high-level reports actually contained lessons learned.

¹⁶ This approach has been pursued in an IPEC project in Nepal.

¹⁷ 'Theory of change' is a model of how policy influencing activities are envisaged to result in desired changes in policy.

3 'LESSONS LEARNED' AGENDA FOR THE EVALUATION UNIT

Within ILO's decentralized evaluation function, the Evaluation Unit plays a central role when it comes to generating lessons for program and policy design. To ensure the standard and quality of evaluations, and hence those of evaluation lessons, the Evaluation Unit issues policy guidelines, evaluation guidance notes, checklists and templates to guide and support the multitude of evaluation efforts.¹⁸ It also serves as a knowledge hub compiling and analyzing evaluation results. This includes the *i-Track* data base with its lessons learned data set and search function; the Annual Evaluation Report containing synthetic analysis of evaluation results at project and country program levels; as well as further knowledge products such as meta analyses and lessons learned summaries. In addition, the Evaluation Unit directly manages higher-level strategic and thematic evaluations.

To confirm the approach to the framing of lessons learned proposed in this section, a case study was undertaken to demonstrate how existing lessons learned could be improved in practice, see Annex 2.

Various types of evaluations inform policy decision-making and learning within the ILO Strategic Policy Framework: Strategy evaluations, thematic evaluations, country program evaluations and project evaluations. Amongst them strategy evaluations, and to a lesser degree thematic evaluations, are designed to feed directly into the Program and Budget decision-making by senior management, the ILO governing body and ILO donors. Country program and project evaluations are designed to be used by regional managers to improve the implementation of project and programs and to establish accountability with donors.

In line with the specific targets of the results-based strategy for the evaluation function, the Evaluation Unit has taken additional steps to expand the use of evaluation information. Since 2011, performance information in the Annual Evaluation Report is based on an analysis of evaluation reports. To that effect, the EVAL undertook a meta-analysis of DWCPs as well as project-level evaluations in order to derive lessons for future ILO programming. This was a step up from previous years where EVAL had compiled top lessons learned from project evaluations.

However, it proved to be difficult to distill a great number of lessons that could be learned for other projects and programs, thus to support organizational learning and improve future policy and program decisions.¹⁹ Many lessons remained confined to a specific place and time and those lessons mostly

¹⁸ ILO (2010) op. cit. Pp. 14-15. The extent of use of the guidance documents is not clear, but may not be as great as would be hoped...

¹⁹ ILO. (2011) A meta analysis of lessons learned and good practices arising from nine Decent Work Country Program evaluations, p. ix. "The meta-analysis did not find many specific lessons or guidance regarding Decent Work policies and programs that have proven to be effective in achieving their outcomes."

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

relate to process rather than substantive issues.²⁰ There was considerable variation between the DWCPs regarding the issues addressed, how they were addressed and how they were documented in the evaluation reports. Such variation made it difficult to derive the findings and lessons learned from the evaluations. A common evaluation framework to enable this to be done would have been beneficial.²¹ The meta-analysis of projects (2011) echoed those findings while attesting to a potential for lessons learned and advocating for the continued system of meta-analyses.

Making evaluations more useful remains a continuing concern for the ILO. This entails a staged agenda for the Evaluation Unit, which is strategically positioned to facilitate the learning of lessons.

The first task is to require evaluations to identify lessons-grade findings that meet the informational standards for replication to related decision-making situations. To be usable, lessons must describe situations where positive or negative effects are linked to causal factors, as well as the conditions under which the causality holds. To be more credible, lessons must be aggregated into a meaningful decision matrix, notably by cross-referencing with lessons from other sources, including appropriate counterfactual. Finally, there is a need to explore ways to make the dissemination and uptake of lessons more effective.

At this time, the usability of lessons is limited to some degree by the way lessons are framed. “*A concise statement of one or two sentences, followed by explanatory text if necessary*”²² may not be enough to bring about the logical structure that is necessary for lessons to be replicable. In addition to establishing a clear link between causal factor and effects, lessons must come with precise contextual information to be able to guide future program and policy planning decisions.²³ The guidance material produced by the Evaluation Unit should be adjusted to better capture the essence of lessons.

A cursory review of evaluation lessons from *i-Track* indicates that lessons commonly fall short of establishing a clear relationship between cause and effect - the latter can be positive or negative - and fail to describe the necessary conditions (contextual information) for the causal relationship to apply. In some cases, recommendations are mistaken as lessons as was found in an earlier EVAL report on the top 12 lessons learned from project evaluations in 2009.

²⁰ ILO (2011) op.cit. p. 30.

²¹ Ibid. p. 31.

²² ILO, Evaluation Unit. (2012) *Guidelines*, see Checklist 5: *Preparing the evaluation report*.

²³ OECD (2006). Outline of the principles of Impact Evaluation, International Workshop on Impact Evaluation for Development, p.6. [Impact] Evaluations are usually of specific interventions in a specific context. It is not necessarily the case that the findings can be generalized to the same intervention in different contexts. A theory-based approach helps understand the context in which the intervention did or didn't work, and so help generalize as to other contexts in which the same findings may be expected.

There is also a continuing need for meta-analysis of projects and country program evaluations. However, this analysis should not be limited to examining an annual crop of evaluations, but rather attempt to harvest evaluations across a larger basket of projects over a number of years. Evaluation lessons should be appropriately clustered to provide policy makers and planners with a more detailed experience roadmap for improved program performance. A shift in evaluation approach from simple project to outcome evaluation is necessary to reinforce the focus on policy and with a view to increasing integration with the Program and Budget process for the future (see below).

Even so, quality evaluation lessons may not get the attention they deserve and will not be reflected in policy making and programming if they are not effectively communicated to their intended audience.

"Relying on passive dissemination approaches, e.g. by simple dissemination of evaluation reports, is a common but not very effective method of promoting their uptake. As a result, many lessons are destined to be archived in underutilized databases or to languish, unheeded, in evaluation reports. Greater emphasis on enhancing the credibility and building the 'ownership' of lessons is required."²⁴

Additional measures may have to be targeted to potential users of lessons to promote their uptake. This could involve periodic discussions with program and policy departments whose aim is to determine the significance and explicability of evaluation lessons, which cannot be established by the Evaluation Unit alone. More detailed knowledge of potential user decision processes would be required to identify effective dissemination strategies, but these are well beyond the scope of the study.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES IN GUIDANCE INSTRUMENTS

Improving the policy nexus of projects comes down to making a link to the national policy framework more explicit, notably by outlining the 'theory of change' on which projects are anchored. Projects must be designed with reference to national policy outcomes,²⁵ and in particular, their contribution to the reinforcing capacity for policy implementation or alternatively to promoting policy change. This will, in turn, allow evaluations to confirm or refute the assumptions as to the conditions for success embedded in the theory of change and, based on those findings, identify lessons that are valuable beyond the particular project.

²⁴ UNEP (2007). Op.cit.

²⁵ Outcomes are significant changes (policies, knowledge, skills, behaviours or practices) that are intended to occur as a result of actions taken by constituents with the Office's support, whether independently or in collaboration with other partners.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

Greater use of outcome-oriented evaluations at the program and project levels is to be encouraged as this type of evaluation involves a more strategic focus and hence holds greater potential for lessons to be learned for the policy level.

Outcome evaluations are expected to pay close attention to: *broad-based linkages with development; partnerships across agencies; analysis of the external local, regional and global environment in the analysis of success; and the comparative value of [the ILO] and significance in development.* They recognize the role of partners in the attainment of those outcomes and provide critical information for the purpose of enhancing development effectiveness and assisting decision and policy making beyond a particular project or initiative.²⁶

In the context of outcome evaluations, expanding the discussion on the relevance of projects or programs is particularly prone to generating findings that have a bearing on the policy level. The findings typically relate to:

- the relevance of the targeted outcome to the national context (including factors affecting it);
- the value-added role of the ILO towards achieving the outcome;
- the appropriateness of the intervention approach / the ILO's service mix (normative role, advocacy, management); and
- the validity of partnership arrangements.

Traditional project evaluations are unlikely to yield much in terms of policy information, but are usefully deployed to review implementation arrangements, administrative structures and the achievement of outputs to improve the performance of projects. They could be enriched by an outcome component, though this would likely require more time and a different set of more strategic level expert skills.

For many guidance instruments, giving adequate weight to the relevance dimension of a project or program would help to improve their policy content. In order to achieve this, there should be explicit reference to lessons learned that are derived from findings on relevance.

²⁶ Based on UNDP (2009) Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results, Chapter 5.

GUIDANCE NOTES

Guidance Note 3 - Lessons Learned

Current guidance on lessons learned is comprehensive and sufficiently generic to apply also to policy lessons.²⁷

In the section on 'collecting lessons learned', the guidance note relates lessons to either administrative aspects or the technical context of interventions. To bring policy into closer focus, it might be more appropriate to make reference to managerial and substantive policy aspects of interventions. Moreover, in light of what has been said, it may be worthwhile to commit program or project evaluations to including at least one lesson learned on relevance and hence the substantive policy dimension of the intervention.

In elaborating lessons, the criteria for quality lessons learned, or better yet the section on "Reusing Lessons Learned", should be treated as integral elements of the Lessons Learned description, notably by spelling out:

- *Rationale*: Gives the prospective user a justification by stating how this lesson was learned. The focus is on three aspects: What happened? Why did it happen? Why is it important?
- *Preconditions*: They refer to the specified conditions in which the application of a lesson learned could be considered as appropriate.
- *Lesson suggestion*: It refers specifically to what has been learned through the experience, and therefore is appropriate to be repeated or avoided in future contexts.
- *Applicable task*: It describes the task to which a lesson learned could be applied. Depending on the context, a lesson learned may be applied to an activity, a decision or an organizational process.

Storing Lessons Learned: The above has implications on the way lessons learned are stored in the *i-Track* evaluation database. Rather than having just a single Lessons Learned text field, lessons need to be stored as a matrix linking positive or negative effects to causal factors (making for an implicit prescription) and conditions that need to be in place for the prescription to apply. Over time, this has

²⁷ At times, however, the document appears unnecessarily involved. In particular, the introduction of concepts such as single and double loop learning in the introductory section on the 'types of lessons learned' does not add any particular value to the discussion relative to the familiar evaluation concepts of relevance and efficiency. Some simplification may therefore be in order.

the potential to evolve into an experience map / expert system that can guide decision making. A lessons matrix will also provide an effective tool for corroborating evaluation lessons.²⁸

Guidance Note 15 - Management Follow-up for Independent Project Evaluations: Parallel to discussion on recommendations, there should be paragraphs on 'Role of lessons learned in evaluations', 'Quality of lessons learned and quality of follow-up', and 'Workflow for Generating Quality Lessons Learned in Reports'. This would help to streamline the process of elaborating lessons learned.

CHECKLISTS

Checklist - Rating Terms of Reference should include reference to a policy-reform outcome, as far as possible. For example, in the 'Background Section' row that reads, "The TOR adequately describes how the intervention fits into strategic frameworks and how it is linked to the work of other partners at the country/regional level." One might add, "... and identifies related policy reform outcome(s)". Similarly, under 'Evaluation Scope' ... "The TOR specifies issues that the evaluation should focus on in particular detail (e.g. gender equality, exit strategy, etc.)," "relevance to policy reform outcome" could be added.

The **Checklist 4 for Validating Methodologies** should mention in 'Understanding the Project Background' – 'Described Purposes and Procedures' end of row 5: ... and to inform policy formulation.

The **Checklist 5 on Preparing the Evaluation Report** (same for **Checklist 6 - Rating the Quality of the Evaluation Report**) would gain from adding 'with reference to policy reform outcome' in Section 5 – Body of the Report- Description of project objectives ... In the same section 'Findings related to the relevance, strategic fit, ...' could be broken down as shown above. Section 6

²⁸ UNEP (2007). op.cit. p. 11. "Some lessons are formulated in a very specific manner whilst others are of a much more general nature. The level of detail or abstraction of a lesson affects its potential 'application domain'. Whilst generic lessons have, by definition, a potentially broader 'domain of application', there is generally less precision in their implied prescription, thus generic lessons increase the need for adaptation to a specific context. In contrast, more specific lessons generally provide greater detail in terms of context and prescription: They have a narrower 'domain of potential application', but require less adaptation to facilitate their application in a similar context."

on Lessons Learned would need to be reformulated²⁹ to reflect the more detailed information requirements for Lessons Learned, as far as outlining effects, causal factors and necessary conditions is concerned. The text should also mirror the proposed changes for Guidance Note 3: Lessons Learned.

5 POLICY LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE ILO INFORMATION GATEWAY

To improve knowledge management and enhance the contribution to evidence-based policy analysis, the ILO is rolling out an organization-wide integrated policy information system with three main pillars, the *ILO Information Gateway*, *Research and Publications*, and *Decent Work Country Program experience*.

The *ILO Information Gateway* initiative is aimed, in particular, at linking statistical, legal and policy indicators for labor and employment. It is designed to be a one-stop shop for countries with information on labor-related policies, legal and statistical information on a country-by-country basis. Towards this end, the system will link various databases (existing and yet to be developed) under a common classification system involving eight descriptors across the range of relevant policy areas.

1. Main objectives
2. Legal framework and relevant ratified ILO standards (conventions and recommendations)
3. Institutional set up
4. Resources allocated or level of benefits
5. Monitoring indicators, evaluation mechanism, results
6. Coverage beneficiaries (youth, women, migrants, sectors, regions etc.)
7. ILO/social partners involvement
8. Additional information

²⁹ The current checklist that needs reformulation says: The format for presenting Lessons Learned should be a concise statement of one or two sentences, followed by explanatory text if necessary. The consultant should list any positive or negative insights gained through the life of the project that had substantial impact on operations, achievement of outcomes, or impact on sustainability. These can be aimed at the administrative aspects of the project or the technical context of the intervention. These should highlight strengths and weaknesses and provide decision-makers with relevant information to help them avoid common mistakes and promote a more enabling environment.

Lessons Learned: Utilizing lessons learned from ILO project evaluations in policy decision making

The Information Gateway is, above all, about information on national policy implementation, thus allowing users to compare policy information across countries. Information is meant to be solely of a descriptive nature leaving analysis to its users. Hence, the system is not expected to provide any type of analytical information of the sort generated by evaluations.

Lessons on country policy performance are not likely to emerge from evaluations of ILO interventions that tend to focus on policy reform and capacity building for policy implementation. ILO country program and project evaluations are not concerned with assessing and learning on national policy implementation. Even higher-level ILO strategic policy and thematic evaluations with their explicit policy lens will not easily provide the sort of analytical information that would provide a learning plane matching those of national policy descriptors. In practice, analytical information to match the descriptive information of the Information Gateway comes from applied policy research and, where available, country-level policy evaluations (see discussion above).

A connection between the *Information Gateway* on national policy systems and the ILO evaluation system is formally established through Descriptor No. 7 above, *ILO / Social Partner Involvement*, which explores the involvement of the ILO and social partners in a particular national policy. This information set is expected to provide access to development program and project data and, further, to related monitoring and evaluation information, hence a probable link to the *i-Track* knowledge base.

Discussions on the interface between evaluation data and the *Information Gateway* have thus far focused on identifying sets of compatible indicators. There is an agreed set of legal and statistical indicators, but policy indicators have not yet been determined. In defining indicators used to qualify national policy performance, care should be taken to ensure that policy lessons emerging from interventions could be identified by a matching coding system. This would allow users of the top-level system to directly access lessons learned from related policy reform and institutional-capacity building interventions in the *i-Track* evaluation database.

ANNEX 1- TERMS OF REFERENCE

Lessons Learned Study Project

The independent external evaluation of the ILO's evaluation function that was reported in GB.309/PFA/5/5 (2010) found improved institutional learning and knowledge sharing but concluded that the full potential of institutional learning from the evaluations has not yet been realized. Significant strides have since been made, particularly regarding the latter.

Evaluation reports have become more easily accessible over the Internet. Not only that, but lessons learned have been extracted from the reports and reside in a searchable database that is part of EVAL's *i-Track* system.

The Regions have begun to do their own analyses of lessons learned. For example, the RO for LAC coordinated a study to extract, classify and summarize the recommendations and lessons learned from evaluations conducted in the region over the past five years

This AER (in full and year) contains an up-date of a study that was originally launched in 2010, in which high-level DWCP evaluations were analyzed in order to draw out lessons learned and identify good practices. This AER also contains a synthesis of findings on ILO performance drawn from 59 independent evaluation reports.

It is EVAL's belief that fuller realization may be achieved by applying lessons learned from ILO project evaluations to the policy information contained in the nascent ILO Information Gateway (a recent Office –wide initiative to improve knowledge management in the organization and enhance its contribution to evidence-based policy advise).

This shift would require EVAL to conduct additional analysis of learned that is different from what has been done in the past. Future analyses would require the use of a policy lens to facilitate application to information in the Gateway.

The classification system that EVAL would use to analyze policy lessons learned should align as much as possible with the policy descriptors that are being developed by the Information Gateway Work Planning Group. The matrix contained in the Annex is a current draft circulating in the context of discussions of the policy track of the envisaged information gateway.

Question

Specialized agencies, such as the ILO, face a particular challenge in demonstrating impact as they are not only involved in service delivery, where results are easier to measure, but focus heavily on institutional capacity-building and policy reform, which are less easily measured. The question that the study would seek to answer is how can evaluations in the ILO better bring out information about what works for whom in which situation in promoting policy reform? Answering this question would have the twin advantage of facilitating ILO's task to report on results of its policy work and contributing to the knowledge basis of policies that work.

Activities

In order to answer the above question, the consultant under the supervision of EVAL, would have responsibility for conducting an analysis of relevant documents and conducting selected interviews, writing a brief report with suggestions on how EVAL should reframe its policy guidelines, evaluation guidance notes, checklists (e.g. TOR checklist) and templates to produce lessons learned that can be rolled-up into the policy track of the ILO's Information Gateway.

Outputs

- One inception report in which the consultant proposes a detailed methodology and an outline for the principal report.
- One brief report suggesting how EVAL should reframe its policy and tools to produce lessons learned that can be rolled-up into the policy track of the ILO's Information Gateway.

ANNEX 2 - FRAMING OF LESSONS LEARNED

To confirm the approach to the framing of lessons learned, proposed in Section 3 of the study, a case study was undertaken to demonstrate how existing lessons learned could be improved in practice.

The initial approach was to use one of the top lessons identified in the October 2010 AER. It turned out that those lessons were actually composites of conclusions drawn from multiple projects. This made it exceedingly difficult, if at all possible, to decompose the lesson with a view to determine "causal factors" and "conditions under which the causality holds" (Lessons learned study, p.8). It was decided to apply the outlined approach to a 'random'³⁰ project evaluation instead. This approach had its own challenges.

The most prominent project lesson in the chosen example was far too general to be of much value to other interventions: "Careful attention should be paid to ... striking the right balance between project objectives, technical and financial resources, timeframe, and the formulation of appropriate performance indicators is essential in any project design." The negative effect appeared to be the impossibility to achieve the project objective without extending, refinancing and revising the project. Further lessons contained in the report could not be easily traced to "situations where positive or negative effects are linked to causal factors, as well as the conditions under which the causality holds".

Extracting lessons from the project evaluation requires in-depth knowledge of project circumstances that is not easily accessible by simply reading a report. Evaluators are in a very unique position to extract lessons from the project experience. However, they need to be guided towards framing lessons (form and type of lessons) that will maximize learning value of the project experience.

To this end, evaluators need to be given time and resources to extract the lessons. To keep their attention, the number of lessons in evaluation reports should probably be limited to no more than three. The TOR for evaluators should make specific reference to the significance and logic of lessons as laid out in this study. If available, evaluators should be provided with validated lessons from similar projects that may guide them.

Form of lesson

The TOR should encourage evaluators to present evaluation lessons in a way that explicitly identifies the constitutive cause-effect relationship alongside a description of the general/particular conditions under which the lesson applies.

³⁰ In practice, EVAL was requested to propose a couple of project evaluations from which the following project was selected at random: *ENSURING THAT WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE TEXTILE AND APPAREL SECTOR IN CAMBODIA COMPLY WITH INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED CORE LABOUR STANDARDS AND THE CAMBODIAN LABOUR LAW* (CMB/05/M50/USA, CMB/02/M51/USA, CMB/00/M51/CMB, CMB/00/M52/CMB), Final Evaluation (Covering the period February 2003 – December 2005), October 2007.

Logging of evaluation lessons into the *i-Track* database should follow the matrix format:

LESSON Conditions (degree of specificity)	Free-form text	Positive/negative effect	Causal factor

The database should be able to aggregate the lessons into a meaningful decision matrix, notably by cross-referencing with lessons from other sources, including the appropriate counterfactual.

Type of lesson

The learning value of lessons that apply under very general conditions for related project interventions is typically less than that of lessons for which particular conditions need to hold. Their value is notably constrained by the fact that, in all likelihood, similar lessons have previously been drawn. In turn, lessons that hold under fairly ordinary conditions can be applied to a much larger range of projects. Hence, it is of some importance to identify lessons with the appropriate degree of specificity (refer to chart below).

