

# SMART TOOLKIT

## FOR EVALUATING INFORMATION PROJECTS, PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Published by:

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ISBN: CTA 978 92 9081 427 6; KIT 978 94 6022 027 2

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*Cover design:* Anita Mangan, London, UK  
*Printer:* KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*Sources of tables, figures and diagrams:* Unless otherwise stated, these should be credited to the *Smart Toolkit*

*Citation:* CTA, KIT, IICD (2009) *Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services*, Second Edition, CTA/KIT/IICD, The Netherlands

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## FOREWORD

CTA, KIT and IICD are all involved in improving information products and services for developing countries. In a world so full of information, but with many questions unanswered, this is a challenging task. Monitoring and evaluation are an essential part of this task.

Of the many challenges faced by development agencies, two in particular relate to monitoring and evaluation. The first is to strengthen the learning capacity of the development sector itself. Lessons learned and best practices need to be shared in order to improve performance and avoid costly re-inventions of the wheel. Evaluation provides learning. The second challenge relates to transparency. 'Accountability' is guaranteed a slot on the agenda at most international development fora, not just 'vertical accountability', vis-à-vis policy-makers and donors, but also 'horizontal accountability' to the beneficiaries in the South and the taxpayers in donor countries. Again, there is a pivotal role here for evaluation.

Learning and accountability are two sides of the same coin, and good monitoring and evaluation tools should serve both of them. Development agencies need to learn from previous experience and to demonstrate the impact of their efforts. This is particularly true for information professionals in the development sector, with the ever-changing ICT environment posing a range of new opportunities and new challenges. Conversely, information is key to monitoring and evaluation. Without the relevant information, neither learning nor accountability would be possible. Good information and good evaluation are therefore interdependent.

In recent years, the emphasis in the evaluation debate has shifted. Initially, it was on output; then it moved to outcome and, more recently, to impact. There is a growing demand from both donors and the general public for feedback on the contribution of development activities towards improved livelihoods in developing countries. Measuring the impact of information products and services is particularly difficult. How can one demonstrate using verifiable indicators, for example, the contribution of information towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals? This book does not purport to have all the answers, but it will give information professionals insight into applying evaluation tools to information-focused activities and assessing the impact of those activities.

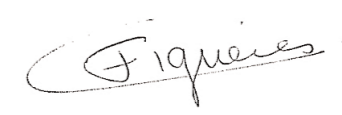
The first edition of the *Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services* was published in 2005, mainly for use in training and to generate feedback. The response was favourable and the edition remains in much demand, but the feedback indicated that there was room for improvement. CTA, KIT and IICD therefore set about producing a revised, updated and expanded edition of the *Smart Toolkit*, a highly participatory process involving many partners in the South. We hope that this second edition will give information professionals even greater insight into the tools they need to evaluate information projects, products and services for development.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This second edition of the *Smart Toolkit* has been an immense collaborative effort involving many people from development organisations throughout the ACP and EU. Although important to the management and effectiveness of information services, evaluation is often not seen as a mainstream activity. As such, we are grateful to the many writers and reviewers who have so willingly contributed their time to transforming the document into a valuable resource for individuals and organisations alike operating in the field of information.

Special thanks are due to our colleagues for their input in various capacities. We would also like to express our appreciation and thanks to the management of CTA, KIT and IICD for their unwavering support in facilitating our partnership and in the production of this revised edition of the *Smart Toolkit*.

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*Harry Heemskerk, KIT*  
*Riet Nigten, IICD*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

The response to the publication of the first edition of the *Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services*, in 2005, showed clearly that it met a great need among information practitioners for guidelines on the evaluation process and on appropriate evaluation tools. Suggestions on how to improve the first edition, emanating both from users in the field and from a workshop in Bonn, Germany convened especially to assess the toolkit, encouraged us to produce this revised and updated second edition.

The focus of this edition remains the same as that of the first edition – learning. The importance of evaluation in enhancing organisational learning is widely acknowledged in development literature. Without this learning, through well-planned and implemented evaluations, development organisations are unlikely to build the capacity to respond effectively to the changing needs of their target groups. They will, in other words, have little or no impact. Peter Senge, a leading proponent of organisational learning, wrote in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1994; see Annex 4):

Learning organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together.

There is increasing demand for information practitioners to evaluate their products and services themselves, for learning purposes as well as for accountability, and not rely on external evaluations, which are often little more than a rubber-stamping exercise. But in many cases they lack a firm grounding in evaluation – its place in the project cycle, who to involve in its planning and implementation, how to plan it, how and when to implement it, how and when to follow it up and, above all, how to learn from it. In *Evaluating Capacity Development*, Horton *et al.* (2003; see Annex 4), wrote of the benefits of project ‘self-evaluation’:

...people who are responsible for the organisation, management and operation and stakeholders with a strong knowledge and interest in the organisation, gain in-depth understanding of what works well and why and where improvements are needed. With this knowledge, they are extremely well prepared to address the necessary changes in practical ways.

The *Smart Toolkit* is therefore timely. It seeks to provide information practitioners with an insight into self-evaluating their products and services, with the view to improving learning and, ultimately, impact. It adds significantly to the limited body of literature on the evaluation of information, and should be seen as a work-in-progress, with its use in the field contributing further insights to be incorporated into subsequent editions.

## ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

The *Smart Toolkit* focuses on the evaluation of information projects, products and services from a learning perspective. It looks at evaluation within the context of the overall project cycle, from project planning and implementation to monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment, and then at the evaluation process itself, the tools involved and examples of their application. The theme running throughout the toolkit is:

*Participatory evaluation for learning and impact*

The emphasis is on internal evaluation – or ‘self-evaluation’ – rather than external evaluation. Internal evaluation contributes to organisational learning and represents a significant shift from traditional evaluation, which has tended to be donor-driven to meet the demand for accountability and compliance. If evaluation is to achieve its ultimate objectives of enhancing learning and demonstrating impact, it needs to be applied with confidence in a systematic and coherent way.

### Why ‘smart’?

In 2001, a group of information practitioners from various development agencies, led by CTA, KIT and IICD, began working together to produce a manual that would support self-evaluation by information practitioners. At their first meeting the word ‘smart’ was chosen to emphasise ‘best practice’ and as an oblique reference to the SMART indicators (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) common in evaluation literature.

### Who is the toolkit for?

The *Smart Toolkit* is aimed primarily at information practitioners in development organisations, particularly those working at grassroots level, who are involved in planning and managing information-related projects and generating new knowledge and key lessons from them. Many of these people would readily acknowledge that not only are they ‘non-experts’ in evaluation, but also that they lack the basics in how to evaluate information-related projects.

The field of information and communication management (ICM) has become central to much development thinking, boosted by the huge growth in information and communication technologies (ICTs) in recent years and the potential that ICTs have for development. But there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to identifying evaluation methods and tools that can be applied specifically and successfully to information-related projects. The toolkit seeks to fill this gap to some extent and to encourage practitioners to contribute to this effort.

The toolkit should also prove useful for development project managers in general, as well as for funding agencies and other stakeholders in the production and delivery of information products and services.

### Who should read this book, and why

- Are you managing an information project, product or service, such as a library, newsletter, rural radio, training workshop or website?
- Do you prepare information products and services for the wider public?
- Are you in the business of disseminating information?
- Are you an evaluator who has been challenged to evaluate information projects, products or services?
- Do you ever wonder what more you could be doing to meet the needs of your target groups, and whether or not you’re providing them with the ‘right’ information?
- Have you ever wondered:
  - why your researchers and scientists don’t have access to up-to-date credible information?
  - why many of the reports prepared by government ministries and research institutions never find their way to the libraries?
  - how you could get more people to use your information services?
  - why your website doesn’t provide the information it should?
  - why you can’t find the information when you need it?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to some of these questions, then this toolkit is for you.

### What is the toolkit for?

If you are new to the evaluation process, the toolkit is a good place to begin. It will help you to organise your thoughts and prompt you to seek the answers to such questions as:

- How is the information product/service performing?
- Are the right things being done?
- Why did that work?
- Why did that not work?
- How can I use these insights to improve the performance and impact of this and future projects?

The toolkit guides you step by step through the evaluation process – why evaluation is necessary, who to involve in it, how to plan it and how to follow it up – and describes the tools available for evaluating a range of information products/services. It warns you of pitfalls you might encounter on the journey, but also demonstrates that evaluation can be invigorating, empowering and, above all, essential to learning and impact.

We hope that the toolkit will:

- add to the body of knowledge on project evaluation, particularly in relation to information products/services
- build the capacity within development organisations for evaluating information products/services
- develop among information practitioners a culture of internal evaluation for information-related projects

## What does the toolkit contain?

The book starts with an overview in **Part 1** of the evaluation of information projects, products and services within the context of the project cycle and project management. It stresses two central tenets of evaluation – stakeholder participation and learning – and provides an outline of what evaluation involves and how it links with monitoring and impact assessment.

**Part 2** explains the evaluation process as it relates to information projects, products and services. It describes how to prepare the terms of reference for an evaluation, covering such aspects as deciding its scope, methodology, data sources and work plan. It then discusses how to design and implement an evaluation and how to communicate the evaluation findings and translate them into action.

In **Part 3**, we provide a range of tools that can be used in all stages of the evaluation process, from planning and implementing an information-related project to reporting and follow up. The ways in which the tools can be applied will depend on resources, the environment in which an evaluation is being conducted and the type of evaluation.

**Part 4** provides evaluation guidelines for nine information products and services – training course, newsletter, website, question-and-answer service, small library/resource centre, online community, rural radio, database and information dissemination service. For each product and service we look at its concept and objectives, data needs and stakeholder participation, evaluation focus and indicators, data collection and analysis, and the plan for communicating the evaluation findings.

The figure here shows the toolkit structure as an integrated whole, with some evaluation guidelines.

Since the idea of compiling this toolkit was first mooted in 2001, the process has been a highly participatory one. We would like to keep it that way, and to encourage all those using it to provide feedback so that we can continue to revise and update it. To that end, users are invited to contribute to the discussion on [www.smarttoolkit.net](http://www.smarttoolkit.net).

You will find in the Annexes some background to how this toolkit was compiled, who was involved in the compilation, an extensive list of information sources (publications and websites) on evaluation, and a glossary of terms.

**The Smart Toolkit – the context, process and tools of evaluation, as an integrated whole, with guidelines for evaluating selected information products and services**

