

Evaluation Matters: Assessment Of The ECA Evaluation Division



BACKGROUND ON THE ASSESSMENT

In the **2019 Comprehensive Annual Report**, the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) recommended an assessment of ECA's Evaluation Division. The Evaluation Division has been at the forefront of the Department of State's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts since its inception in 1999. The Division conducts its work through four mutually supportive lines of effort: monitoring, evaluation, learning, and capacity-building. This assessment was conducted to review the Evaluation Division's methodologies, instruments, resources, and procedures across these four lines of effort with the ultimate goal of improving practices to better assess ECA programming and facilitate data-driven decision-making.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Key findings and conclusions from the assessment include:

- » **Improved leadership.** Respondents noted a positive development with recent staffing and management changes and expressed overall excitement and praise for the new Evaluation Division staff. Several interviewees commented on the technical strength of the new staff, as well as the Division's flexibility, and communicative and collaborative nature.
- » **Confusion on the role of the Evaluation Division.** There were differences in understanding of the Evaluation Division's role and function, which resulted in some perceived evaluation quality concerns. In addition, inefficiencies in the process, timing, and nature of engagement were expressed across all stakeholder types.
- » **Robust theories of change (TOC) and systems thinking approaches needed.** The review of Evaluation Division evaluations revealed that few included a clearly developed TOC linking programmatic activities to intended public diplomacy outcomes. While "best practices in measuring the impact of public diplomacy programs remain weakly defined", TOC and systems thinking approaches should be considered for evaluations of programs with complex causal pathways and long time horizons.
- » **Monitoring Data for ECA (MODE) Framework implementation.** The MODE Framework addresses a number of monitoring best practices, such as: providing greater standardization, increasing focus on outcome (versus output) indicators, and focusing on a small number of core indicators. However, some stakeholders were unaware of the process and timeframe for the MODE Framework's implementation across the Bureau.

THE ASSESSMENT

Why: As recommended by the ACPD 2019 Comprehensive Annual Report, this assessment was conducted to review the Evaluation Division's procedures across its four lines of effort. This utilization-focused assessment had two aims:

1. **Review the Evaluation Division's current approach to M&E, including its methodologies, instruments, and resources.**
2. **Identify best practices from other public diplomacy entities, the academic community, and the private sector that the Evaluation Division could realistically adopt.**

What: The assessment addressed the following four questions:

- » Continued on next page.



Evaluation Division
BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

Contact Us: ECAevaluation@state.gov

THE EVALUATION

» Continued from previous page.

1. How do ECA Evaluation Division resources and structure allow ECA to fulfill its M&E responsibilities?
2. When designing and conducting evaluations, is the Evaluation Division using appropriate evaluation methods for assessment public diplomacy programming?
3. To what extent is the Evaluation Division's monitoring framework structured to provide timely and useful data to inform ECA programming?
4. How does the Evaluation Division ensure efficient and effective deployment of information?

Who: The Evaluation Division contracted EnCompass, LLC to conduct the assessment

When: July – November 2020

How: EnCompass, LLC conducted a qualitative examination of best practices in public diplomacy evaluation and the Evaluation Division's existing practices, approaches, and resources; this centered around a thorough literature review, document review, and qualitative data collection from more than 60 individuals.

How Much: \$163,680

- » **The Evaluation Division as a learning partner.** The Evaluation Division has taken steps towards establishing itself as a learning partner through its M&E capacity-building efforts of both internal and external stakeholders. However, there are a number of institutional barriers hampering the Division's efforts to further build ECA's reputation as a strong learning partner, such as M&E illiteracy and being unfamiliar with the need for a learning agenda.

INTEGRATING RECOMMENDATIONS

The Evaluation Division has already made adjustments to its overarching procedures and practices stemming from this evaluation's findings:

- » **Improved communication.** The Evaluation Division has created a number of additional resources for stakeholders. These include: (1) a revised Products and Services document that reflects all of offerings of the Evaluation Division, (2) a resources document that organizes Evaluation Division resources by topic for ease of use amongst ECA staff, (3) short documents for each stakeholder type (ECA Program Officers, implementing partner staff, Embassy staff, and external evaluation firms supporting the evaluation) that outline the evaluation process and each actor's role and responsibility to support the evaluation, and (4) an Evaluation Seminar focused specifically on the Evaluation Division's roles and responsibilities, as well as its four lines of effort.
- » **MODE Framework Planning.** More detailed information in the form of one-page resource documents have been created and disseminated through a number of channels, including Evaluation Seminar and Evaluation Community of Practice meetings, emails to the entire Bureau, and meetings with individual ECA offices. The Evaluation Division will continue these efforts and will expand to include implementing partner informational sessions once Bureau-wide rollout of the MODE Framework has commenced.
- » **Focus on increased capacity of Evaluation Division staff.** The Evaluation Division has also sought to increase its own capacity to better understand the public diplomacy evaluation best practices identified in the report. A hybrid evaluation that is being planned that will incorporate complexity-aware evaluation approaches – which will assist in better understanding the context of ECA programs and including this in evaluation reports. The Evaluation Division plans to continue to expand its internal capacity-building work throughout fiscal year 2021 evaluations and beyond.
- » **Strengthening ECA's learning culture.** As learning is a core Evaluation Division line of effort, an additional staff member is being hired to focus on further building ECA's learning culture through strengthening the link between M&E, learning, strategic planning, and program design.