

Can visual tools help evaluators communicate and engage better?

Summary of the EvalForward discussion

JULY 2023

Harriet Matsuert raised a discussion on EvalForward aimed at sharing experiences and practices in using visual tools in evaluation.

This document provides a summary of key points emerged under each of the four questions proposed. The full exchange is available at: <https://www.evalforward.org/discussions/visual-tools>

Questions

1. What are your thoughts and experiences of using visual tools in evaluations?
2. What kind of evaluation/stage of evaluation do you feel is most suitable for using visual tools?
3. Any other insights or concerns about using visual tools?
4. Do you have links or resources on using visual tools to share?



1. What are your thoughts and experiences of using visual tools in evaluations?

Participants highlighted that there are many positive outcomes of utilization of visual tools in evaluation processes, as they contribute to:

- Increase understanding.
- Increase engagement (story-telling methods).
- Improve communication.
- Enhance collaboration (common language and framework).
- Increase impact (findings are more accessible and memorable), leading to better decision making and improved outcomes.
- Overcome literacy and language barriers.
- Clarify complex information.
- Promote meaningful discussions.

In my experience, just about anything works better than reports: cartoons, graphs, infographics, theatre, music, multimedia, etc. (yes, I tried them all and they were welcomed by all sorts of stakeholders, including donors). Evaluators should not just think “report”. They should think about the best combination of different ways of communicating. (Silva Ferretti)

Using visuals tools during the evaluation process enables a more compelling story to be told after the evaluation has been completed. (Nicola Theunissen)

I have noted that the visual tools – the language with universal clarity - help to communicate (during evaluation and after evaluation) easily as the tools address language barriers with multiple cultural and literacy levels among the groups. (Ram Khanal)

Visual tools and approaches shared by participants include:

- **Cartoons**, for sharing evaluation findings but also for facilitating meetings.
- **GIS**, used as a data visualization tool to plan evaluations, contribute as evidence, and communicate our findings to the stakeholders.
- **Graphic summaries** of meetings/discussions.
- **Infographics** to present this data in a more accessible format.
- **Landsat images** to learn about specific land management features and discuss images with communities.
- **Participatory image development** in validation meetings.
- **Social-Resource maps, Venn diagrams, mobility /historical maps and community score cards** used in participatory evaluations.
- **Social network analysis (SNA)** - useful way of capturing and visualising what is happening with partners, information flows etc. as well as a visualization tool to identify and prioritize stakeholders for Key Informant Interviews.
- **Visuals** to illustrate Theories of Change.
- **Whiteboard animations** and **videos** to present highlights from evaluation findings.

2. What kind of evaluation / stage of evaluation do you feel is most suitable for using visual tools?

According to participants, use of visual tools is not just about communicating the “result” of an evaluation, but an integral part of the evaluation process.

Visuals are suited for use in different stages of the evaluation:

- Planning and design (visualising the theory of change)
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Validation (local and national level)
- Communicating findings to stakeholders

There is a renewed interest in visualisation to communicate not only the evaluation, but also the process (Harvey Garcia)

3. Any other insights or concerns about using visual tools?

Concerns and thoughts raised about using visual tools include the following:

- Importance of choosing the right visual tool for the purpose.
- Importance of ensuring that the visual tools are accessible to all stakeholders.
- Concerns about illiterate who may not understand fancy charts or graphs.
- Visual tools also have limitations, as they cannot replace the need for clear and concise written text.
- It would be difficult to share the results of an evaluation exclusively with visual tools.
- Translating evaluation information into visual language requires niche skills that could be context-specific and culturally sensitive.
- Understanding the audience’s specific information needs and cultural context is critical.
- We need to be as careful in selecting and editing our visual tools as we are with our written material.
- Visuals can’t be improvised. There is a grammar and a style to be learned. You need to use the right tool for the right purpose. Some visualisation tools might not be suitable for people who are not literate or might not be culturally appropriate. Some may not be appropriate and might even be harmful if we are not careful.
- Creating a visual as an add-on at the end of the evaluation is often not helpful.
- Some evaluators / practitioners may not be sure about how to use visual tools.
- Do evaluators have the skills and resources they need? What training/tools could be provided to enable them to use visual tools?
- Importance of taking the time to learn the language, ask for feedback and be humble.
- Very important (and not often done) is creating feedback loops and understanding learning styles in order to then build the style of communication able to offer impact.
- Artificial Intelligence may be able to create visual summaries of our reports in the future.
- Need for indicators.

Maybe we are not using visual tools because we are motivated by donor requirements rather than stakeholder needs (Musa Sanoë).

WFP conducted an evaluation stakeholder survey to find out communication preferences. Results include:

- On the question of how evidence can be better channeled, packaged and presented to be useful – 31% of audiences indicated shorter reports with simpler language, 28% highlighted scope, with more relevant questions and findings, 17% highlighted processes, 10% accessibility and channeling, 9% variety with more tailored products and 5% indicated timeliness
- Shorter evaluation products such as summary evaluation reports had a much higher usefulness rating than full evaluation reports – 81% compared to 58%
- Products like briefs and infographics had a higher usefulness rating among directors and senior management
- Although it's clear from the findings that there is a need for shorter text, when asked about the preferred format for receiving evaluation information the majority of the audience still indicated reading (74%) – followed by oral (65%), video (56%) and then audio (39%)

4. Do you have any links or resources to share?

Links to available guidance and references shared by participants:

NetMap

Tool box for participatory social network analysis: <https://netmap.wordpress.com/about/>

GIS

Article about the experience of UNDP in using GIS to evaluate a country programme:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/10LeQeCEC8ee2Kn6FTGAbLau7cEphknQ/view>

EvaluVision

<https://www.evaluvision.org/>

EvalForward blog: <https://www.evalforward.org/index.php/blog/visual-thinking>

Guide book: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/evaluvision-how-visual-thinking-improves-evaluation-use-and-influence>

Video about using participatory image development in validation meetings
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OS9neGPHr4>

Using Visual Tools in meetings

The Graphic Facilitator's Guide – Brandy Agerbeck www.loosetooth.com

Visual Meetings – David Sibbet (2010) <https://davidsibbet.com>

Whiteboard animation software

[Videoscribe](#) easy to use with great online technical support.

Creative communications for evaluation dissemination

<https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/creative-communications-evaluation-dissemination>

Contact a Visual practitioner

The [International Forum of Visual Practitioners](#) has a network of practitioners working on every continent. Visit <https://ifvp.org> to find a practitioner near you.

Online training in data visualization and evaluation

<https://lovingvisuals.com/>.

Examples of visual tools used and shared by participants:

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Used by FAO as a visualization tool to identify and prioritize stakeholders for Key Informant Interviews and to assess the positioning of FAO: <https://www.fao.org/3/i8564en/I8564EN.pdf>.

CGIAR blog with an example of how SNA would be presented visually: <https://iaes.cgiar.org/evaluation/news/alone-we-can-do-so-little-together-we-can-do-so-much>

Use of visuals in evaluation reports

- JICA uses of pictorials in most evaluation reports – example here https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/english/our_work/evaluation/reports/2021/iu2gj8000000ompj-att/glance_2021.pdf
- Visuals used in the development of a series of documents as part of the Annual Report 2020: <https://www.unfpa.org/featured-publication/2020FGMAR>
- Use of visuals to illustrate the theory of change: example of UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Program on the elimination of female genital mutilation <https://www.evalforward.org/sites/default/files/files/Discussions/Theory%20of%20change%20-%20Draft%20Mockup%201.pdf>

Whiteboard animations and videos

- <https://www.harrietmatsaert.com/case-studies/sharing-research-and-evaluation-findings>
- <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/O33rOoVylSk>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8S3BeOtpn9k&t=245s>

Infographics

This one visualises a case study from the FAO SDG 14 evaluation: <https://www.harrietmatsaert.com/case-studies/explaining-a-process-or-idea>

Visual highlights of evaluation reports

<https://www.fao.org/3/cc4302en/cc4302en.pdf>

Participatory image creation

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/taketani_i-had-the-pleasure-of-working-with-world-activity-7057159432530493440-lbJ-/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

It's high time we get trained / skilled and create a pipeline of experts and practitioners who can communicate in other languages and mediums. (Aparajita Suman)