

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government plans to spend approximately \$35 billion on foreign assistance in 2017. Evaluation is an essential tool for U.S. agencies to assess and improve the results of their programs. Government-wide guidance emphasizes the importance of evaluation, and the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 requires the President to establish guidelines for conducting evaluations. However, evaluations can be challenging to conduct. GAO has previously reported on challenges in the design, implementation, and dissemination of the evaluations of individual foreign assistance programs.

GAO was asked to review foreign aid evaluations across multiple agencies. This report examines the (1) quality, (2) cost, and (3) dissemination of foreign aid program evaluations. GAO assessed a representative sample of 173 fiscal year 2015 evaluations for programs at the six agencies providing the largest amounts of U.S. foreign aid—USAID, State, MCC, HHS’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service, and DOD’s Global Train and Equip program—against leading evaluation quality criteria; analyzed cost and contract documents; and reviewed agency websites and dissemination procedures.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that each of the six agencies develop a plan to improve the quality of its evaluations and that HHS, MCC, State, and USDA improve their procedures and planning for disseminating evaluation reports.

The agencies concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-17-316](#). For more information, contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-6991 or [farbj@gao.gov](mailto:farbj@gao.gov).

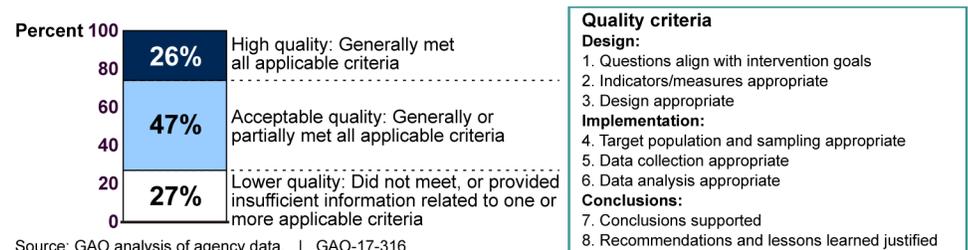
## FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

# Agencies Can Improve the Quality and Dissemination of Program Evaluations

## What GAO Found

An estimated 73 percent of evaluations completed in fiscal year 2015 by the six U.S. agencies GAO reviewed generally or partially addressed all of the quality criteria GAO identified for evaluation design, implementation, and conclusions (see fig.). Agencies met some elements of the criteria more often than others. For example, approximately 90 percent of all evaluations addressed questions that are generally aligned with program goals and were thus able to provide useful information about program results. About 40 percent of evaluations did not use generally appropriate sampling, data collection, or analysis methods. Although implementing evaluations overseas poses significant methodological challenges, GAO identified opportunities for each agency to improve evaluation quality and thereby strengthen its ability to manage aid funds more effectively based on results.

**Estimated Percentage of Foreign Assistance Evaluations Meeting Evaluation Quality Criteria**



Source: GAO analysis of agency data. | GAO-17-316

Note: The confidence intervals for our estimates of the quality of agency evaluations according to these categories did not exceed  $\pm 8$  percent.

Evaluation costs ranged widely and were sometimes difficult to determine, but the majority of evaluations GAO examined cost less than \$200,000. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) evaluations had a median cost of about \$269,000, while median costs for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Department of State (State) ranged from about \$88,000 to about \$178,000. GAO was unable to identify the specific costs for the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) evaluations. High-quality evaluations tend to be more costly, but some well-designed lower-cost evaluations also met all quality criteria. Other factors related to evaluation costs include the evaluation’s choice of methodology, its duration, and its location.

Agencies generally posted and distributed evaluations for the use of internal and external stakeholders. However, shortfalls in some agency efforts may limit the evaluations’ usefulness.

- **Public posting.** USDA has not developed procedures for reviewing and preparing its evaluations for public posting, but the other agencies posted nonsensitive reports on a public website.
- **Timeliness.** Some HHS reports and more than half of MCC reports were posted a year or more after completion.
- **Dissemination planning.** State does not currently have a policy requiring a plan that identifies potential users and the means of dissemination.