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.

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.

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.