4 The Self-Assessment Process III: Feedback and Follow-Up

Feedback and follow-up activities constitute the final phase of the self-assessment process. Providing feedback is understood as presenting the self-assessment results to target groups within the institution (see below). The follow-up process, in turn, is the subsequent step following the feedback. It implies moving along the management cycle (see above). The aim of follow-up procedures is to figure out how results and recommendations from the self-assessment feed into adjustments of the Transformational Gender Action Plan as well as of policies, structures, and processes. Evaluators can initiate follow-up procedures but are not in charge of guaranteeing for the implementation of recommendations from the self-assessment process.

4.1 Feedback

Rationale for feedback

The rationale for providing feedback is rooted in the goals of the self-assessment. The feedback procedure aims at providing the ground for an adjustment of the Transformational Gender Action Plan and/or its implementation process with the aim of optimizing it. Obviously, the presentation of the self-assessment results is a precondition for follow-up procedures to integrate suggested changes. In addition, the feedback procedure can pursue less explicit goals. It can benefit the legitimation of existent gender equality structures and initiatives, and it can fulfil the goal of raising awareness of gender inequalities and the need for (further) initiatives to combat these inequalities more broadly.

Target groups of feedback

The identification of the target groups of the feedback should also correspond to the goal(s) of the self-assessment.

It is to be considered that the selection of the target group influences the self-assessment process. That is because, generally speaking, the bigger the target group of the feedback the less likely it is that respondents/interviewees answer openly, given that the respondents are informed about the feedback and follow-up procedures in advance, which is highly recommended due to transparency reasons. It can be expected that, even if anonymity is guaranteed, some respondents may adjust their answers if they know that the self-assessment results will be presented to e.g. a broader public or funding authorities. In this case, respondents may be less critical of internal processes etc. out of a sense of responsibility of their own institution, for example.

A distinction can be made between direct and indirect target groups of feedback. Direct target groups can be defined as all actors who are in charge of the design, implementation and/or modification of the evaluated Transformational Gender Action Plan. This group is likely to include senior management at institutional and/or subordinate level(s) and gender equality actors within the institution. In any case, feedback is to be provided to the person or entity that commissioned the self-assessment.

In contrast to these direct target groups that should receive comprehensive feedback on the self-assessment results, indirect target groups may be included as long as this serves the goal(s) of the self-assessment. These indirect target groups can include administration staff (e.g. the HR officer), certain other groups of staff or even all staff, students and funding authorities, amongst others.

The feedback methods and the type of feedback can differ between the two types of target groups. To give an example, it may prove useful to provide feedback to funding authorities after having taken into account reactions to feedback within the institution, and to put emphasis on aspects of particular relevance to these authorities.

Example from the INTEGER project

The direct target group of the feedback identified by the evaluators are the managers of the Transformational Gender Action Plans (TGAPs) and the implementation teams, on the one hand, and the top-level decision-makers within the partner institutions, on the other hand. Both groups received oral feedback on the preliminary
evaluation results; this feedback took place during a seminar that brought together the implementation teams of all three implementing partner institutions, and a meeting targeting the leaders of each institution.

Printed versions of the evaluation reports were provided to the local project coordinators and TGAP managers as well as the official 'owner' of the TGAP, i.e. the person who is ultimately responsible of the project and the TGAP (e.g. the President of the institution or the Dean of the pilot faculty). In addition, the evaluators sent pdf versions of the reports to the local project coordinators so that they could circulate them for example among the implementation teams and participants of the 'review seminars'. Thus, the project coordinators are free to share the report with any actor they wish.

Feedback methods

Feedback can be provided at different points in time and by means of written and/or oral methods.

A first feedback can be provided via a de-briefing directly after the collection of qualitative data on site. Such a brief presentation of general impressions is best targeted at the person(s) responsible of (the implementation of) the evaluated Transformational Gender Action Plan. It should be clearly communicated that this feedback is based on first impressions and that these may be subject to adjustments in the course of the structured analysis. The main aim of this early feedback is to satisfy curiosity and tension related to the self-assessment results that are usually keenly awaited.

The most prominent, very useful feedback method is to provide a report pointing out the self-assessment concept, the self-assessment methods and the results of the analysis, including recommendations for adjustments of the gender equality plan and its implementation (see the INTEGER Self-Assessment Toolkit for a Self-Assessment Report template). It is recommended to attach an executive summary to the report in order to put an emphasis on the most relevant results and to make it more likely that e.g. key decision-makers with limited availabilities who are not very committed to the topic of gender equality are informed about the main issues.

The quality of the report benefits from including a feedback loop for the correction of mistakes. A person responsible of (the implementation of) the evaluated gender action plan or possibly another actor with relevant expertise is to be asked to point out evident mistakes that can then be corrected by the evaluators. When communicating this request it is to be underlined that any comments that go beyond the correction of mistakes, e.g. requests to modify the recommendations, are not taken into account.

The final self-assessment report can be circulated among the target groups electronically or in printed form. It is recommended to make an electronic version available anyway in order to allow for further circulation of the results, if desired.

In order to provide the person(s) responsible of (the implementation of) the gender action plan with the possibility to react to the self-assessment results, it has proven useful to invite them to issue a statement on the final report and to attach it when distributing the report in the follow-up phase.

An oral presentation of the self-assessment results can be very fruitful as it increases the visibility of the results among key target groups and creates space for direct questions and first discussions. The results can be presented to all relevant target groups in a joint meeting or workshop, or presentations can be adjusted to the specific interests of certain target groups and are thus to be held to different target groups separately. It may be useful to tailor the presentations to key decision-makers (providing a summary of the results with an emphasis on the needs for action), on the one hand, and persons in charge of the implementation of the gender action plan (presenting a more detailed version), on the other hand.

The oral presentation(s) can take place after or before the written report is circulated among the target group, or may replace a written report altogether. However, the latter is not recommended, as only a written report provides space for a detailed and comprehensive presentation of methods, results and recommendations, and is more likely to reach the entire target group.

The presentation of the results may take place in the framework of a workshop that includes a first discussion on the follow-up, i.e. on how to modify the gender action plan and/or the implementation process based on the self-assessment results.

Based on the experiences gathered within the INTEGER project it is recommended to combine written and oral feedback for the benefits of both forms mentioned above, and to include a de-briefing directly after the site
visit. The latter has proven to contribute to strengthening the role of the evaluator as a ‘critical friend’ (cf. Introduction [link]).

Example from the INTEGER project

Within the INTEGER project, the lead evaluator conducted a short de-briefing to the local programme coordinators directly after the evaluation visit without opening up a space for discussion.

Before finalizing the evaluation reports, preliminary evaluation results were presented orally towards all project partners and the teams involved in the implementation of the Transformational Gender Action Plans during a session of about 90 minutes length. Additionally, the lead evaluator presented a less detailed overview of evaluation results to key decision-makers and official TGAP owners in the framework of the INTEGER partnership group meeting.

Both occasions provided the opportunity for questions and remarks, yet, due to time restrictions only to a limited extent. Anyway, the fact that the audience had not read the reports made it difficult for them to provide a comprehensive feedback on the results.

An evaluation report for each institution was provided in English, and a brief executive summary of the report was attached in English (Trinity College Dublin), French (CNRS) and Lithuanian (Šiauliai University). Having received the finalized reports the local project coordinators were invited to issue a statement on the report which they did. The evaluation reports and these statements provided the basis for discussions on the follow-up among the local project team, decision-makers and external experts.

References


Reactions to feedback

Reactions to presentations of the self-assessment results can differ between actors and can range from constructive reactions over low interest to defensive demeanor. It is to be underlined that the objective of the self-assessment and the feedback is not to please the target groups. Techniques to influence the reactions to the feedback do not aim at putting the results in a more positive light but to reach the target groups adequately and thus to increase the chances that the feedback is taken into account. In the following, some techniques that may impact reactions to feedback are briefly presented.

In general, involving the target group, i.e. key actors, in the self-assessment process from an early stage tends to increase the acceptance of the self-assessment as a whole and the self-assessment results in particular. Grounding the self-assessment in a sound conceptual and methodological framework and explaining this framework to the target audience further increases the credibility of the evaluators and possibly the acceptance of the results. In written and oral presentations of self-assessment results it is important to communicate both positive and negative feedback; it is recommended to start with positive aspects. Furthermore, it is useful to consider some other communication techniques like figuring out how to ‘speak the audience’s language’, i.e. choosing presentation styles that the audience is familiar with.

Example from the INTEGER project

It required a thorough communication of the objectives of the evaluation to the project partners in advance and to the implementation teams during the evaluation visit to convince them of the fact that the evaluation aims at supporting their activities, and that pointing out certain room for improvement does not automatically imply criticism of their work.
The evaluators were satisfied with the great interest in the evaluation results and recommendations shown not only by the project partners but also by a variety of actors involved in the implementation of the Transformational Gender Action Plans.

4.2 Follow-Up

As explained above, the follow-up to the self-assessment constitutes the next step on the management cycle, initiating the modification of strategies, structures and practices on the basis of the self-assessment results. A recommended method is to hold a workshop or various workshops convening key decision-makers and gender equality practitioners within the institution and to initiate discussions on how to modify the Transformational Gender Action Plan and/or the implementation process based on the self-assessment results. These workshops or the follow-up process in general may be supported by external experts (see the section on ‘Quality Assurance of Self-Assessments’ below). Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to disseminate the self-assessment results among indirect target groups (e.g. funding authorities) as well in order to influence political processes.

The next step to follow is the actual implementation of recommendations from the self-assessment or, in a broader sense, adjustments drawing on self-assessment results. It is important for the evaluators to see and communicate clearly that this process is not covered by the self-assessment mandate. It is the decision-makers within the institution who are responsible for strategy development.

The follow-up may also include a retrospective quality assessment of the self-assessment in view of implications for future self-assessments. A final reflection on the self-assessment process is recommended for quality management reasons, and it is highly recommended to document this assessment in order to be able to resort to these lessons learnt in the run-up to future self-assessments.

Example from the INTEGER project

Following the presentation of the preliminary evaluation results to the project partners and the members of the implementation teams from the three implementing institutions, these members of the target group and the evaluators split into working groups for discussions on further steps to be taken in the implementation of the Transformational Gender Action Plans. Yet, as this session brought together members of all partner institutions, specific recommendations could not be addressed in detail. However, the participants benefitted from this exchange of experience and ideas.

The implementing partners were in charge of organising specific follow-up seminars ('review seminars') during which the evaluation reports were discussed in detail among the actors involved in the implementation of the Transformational Gender Action Plans, key decision-makers in the institution and external experts.

The evaluation team conducted a retrospective reflection on the evaluation itself directly after each evaluation round, and more comprehensively in the process of preparing these guidelines.

References