Number 03 May 2013

Centre for Development Impact
PRACTICE PAPER
Innovation and learning in impact evaluation

Implementing Development Evaluations under Severe Resource Constraints

Abstract Most agency evaluations are very short both on resources and in duration, with no proper opportunity to assess impact in a valid manner. The methodology for these evaluations is based on interviews, a review of available programme literature and possibly a quick visit to one (often unrepresentative and usually successful) programme site. This means that the results of the evaluations are heavily dependent on the experience and judgement of the evaluator, the opinions received, and level of support from the commissioner. This CDI Practice Paper by Richard Longhurst reviews how to make the best of such a situation, drawing on lessons learned from techniques of better resourced evaluations and other techniques that have been used. A simple framework can relate the type of evaluation to the resources available and enable better planning and use of evaluations across an organisation.

1 Introduction: evaluations, methods and resources

Evaluation methodology is coming under greater scrutiny. There is much debate over the assessment of impact, as well as the methods that are needed to provide credible, valid and useful findings and encourage learning (for most recent examples see Stern *et al.* 2012 and White and Phillips 2012). Such methods can be expensive and require long time-scales. While the total funds devoted to evaluating development programmes and projects have increased, there is little debate over linking resources with results. After all, the available budget, expertise and capacity are key factors in determining methods used, leading to inevitable compromises in terms of methods, coverage and validity. There can be an important trade-off between resources available and the quality of the process and findings.

Agency staff face these dilemmas every day (perhaps without fully realising it), as they struggle to work with constrained budgets and resources. Trade-off decisions are made as the process evolves. Evaluation managers and implementers have implicit knowledge which informs their day-to-day decisions as to how they allocate their evaluation resources. It would be very helpful if this hard-won experience could be made more explicit and available to a wider audience, including the new generation of evaluation researchers. To put this into a practical context, the following conversation is likely to sound very familiar to practitioners:

> Manager B to Director A: *'We have to carry out an evaluation of programme/project XYZ before we can ask for more funding ... and learn from what we have done* (though frankly this is not said as often as it should be). *What we are going to do is get an independent consultant, ask them to read all the relevant documents and talk to key people here in HQ and send out some questionnaires; then they will go out to the field for a few site visits, talk to a few people in the government, also a few other funders; they will then do a draft report, hold a workshop, come back here, finalise everything with our comments and then we will be done. It would be a surprise if they found anything wrong with it.'*
>
> Director A to Manager B: *'Fine, go ahead but keep me in the loop if there are any problems. Make sure they come and talk to me early in their work.'*

Despite the considerable attention devoted to impact evaluation, the large majority of agency evaluations are carried out along the lines caricatured above, with scarce resources, without baselines or control groups, with limited quantitative investigation and rather haphazard and subjective analysis. The structuring of face-to-face interviews is often based in part on protocol: including people chosen to make the evaluation look credible, rather than for their knowledge of the issues. The quality and usefulness of the resulting evaluations depend on the experience and judgement of the evaluators and the support they get from evaluation managers.

2 Linkages between gathering data and evaluation resources

There has been some published research on the resources required for collection of information in development settings generally and for evaluation specifically. For the latter, the most notable is the pioneering work on Real World Evaluations – RWE (Bamberger *et al.* 2012) – of which more is said in later sections of this CDI Practice Paper. In addition, over the last 15 years there have been efforts to encourage 'mixed methods' in evaluation (Greene *et al.* 2001, Ton 2012), as well as a recognition that evaluations need to better recognise the practical conditions of programming (Wadsworth 1997, Thomas *et al.* 1998).

The qualitative–quantitative (Q2squared) work has also been promising (Kanbur 2001, Kanbur and Shaffer 2007) although many researchers have found it difficult to embrace methods outside their professional areas. In addition, earlier work at IDS highlighted the value of rapid methods for gathering information from rural people (Chambers 1981, Longhurst 1981). One outcome of this work was the movement toward participatory research methods (Chambers 1992), and more recently participatory statistics (e.g. Holland 2013).

Following the promotion of rapid appraisals, there were assessments of the validity of information obtained compared with 'slow' surveys (Chung *et al.* 1997, Maxwell 1998, Morris *et al.* 1999, Christiaensen *et al.* 2000). Conclusions are largely site-specific: complementarities of methods did provide a greater range of insights and permitted triangulation to a greater degree, so improving validity and usefulness of the results to primary stakeholders. But extra costs were incurred with the greater need for teamwork, and survey staff often found the mixing of methods to be difficult. Different methods created different social dynamics between research teams and their respondents.

RWE techniques have much to offer evaluators whatever their resource availability. These evaluation approaches were developed to respond to the need to work within budget, time and data constraints while also ensuring maximum possible methodological rigour. In their earlier form, RWEs were characterised as 'shoestring' evaluations (Bamberger *et al.* 2004), which was unfortunate given the negative connotations. Some of the RWE techniques can be validated from the perspective of more intensive techniques, notably retrospective baselines (see critique by Ravallion 2012).

The latest version of RWE proposes a seven step approach (Bamberger *et al.* 2012: 5).

i Planning and scoping the evaluation.
ii Addressing budget constraints.
iii Addressing time constraints.
iv Addressing data constraints.
v Addressing political influences.
vi Strengthening the evaluation design and the validity of the conclusions.
vii Helping clients use the evaluation.

Elements to these seven steps include (*inter alia*): defining information needs and the programme theory model, identifying constraints and selecting the design that addresses needs within the constraints (step i above); rationalising data needs, identifying secondary data and reducing sample size (step ii); commissioning preparatory studies, hiring resource persons and assessing project records (step iii); reconstructing baseline data and comparison groups and using multiple methods (step iv); accommodating pressures on design and addressing stakeholder methodological preferences (step v); identifying threats to the validity of the various methods – quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods (step vi); and ensuring active participation of stakeholders at the scoping phase and setting up evaluation systems (step vii).

Although the RWE book by Bamberger *et al.* (2012) was a milestone, it does not directly address evaluations at the lower end of resource availability. As the typical practitioner quotation on page 1 of this CDI Practice Paper indicates, the many routine agency development evaluations carried out are neither impact evaluations nor even the 'shoestring'/RWE evaluations. What is needed is a categorisation that ranks evaluation approaches and situations by resources required. A simple but useful typology was presented at a meeting of the American Evaluation Association in 2002, in a workshop on 'Impact Evaluations when Time and Money are Limited' (Rugh and Bamberger 2002). It provides a powerful means to assess evaluation and resource availability at all levels.

Impact evaluations and impact assessments concentrate at the levels of 4 and 5 (see Table 1), on the assumption that they can counter problems of bias with *inter alia* counterfactuals, control groups, baselines and random sampling. Many of this type of impact evaluation are actually research projects and get published as such. It is because

Table 1 **Levels of evaluation studies on the basis of resources available**

Level 5	Thorough research leading to in-depth analysis
Level 4	Good sampling and data collection methods used to gather data, which is representative of target population
Level 3	A rapid survey is conducted on a convenient sample of participants
Level 2	A fairly good mix of people are asked their perspectives about the project
Level 1	A few people are asked their perspectives about the project
Level 0	Decision-makers' impressions based on anecdotes, brief encounters; mostly intuition

Source: Rugh and Bamberger (2002).

they can pass a stringent peer review system that they have been dubbed a 'gold standard'. As such, recent debates about methods and rigour were focused primarily at this top end (levels 4 and 5). Techniques involve randomised control trials, quasi-experimental designs; principles require developing a counterfactual through collecting information on baselines and control groups. These involve a lot of resources. 'Shoestring'/RWEs tend to align themselves more with level 4 and elements of level 3.

This CDI Practice Paper focuses on levels 2 and 3 where the large majority of evaluations are carried out. Levels 0 and 1 suggest 'coffee machine' evaluations based on subjective estimations and experiences discussed briefly where people congregate. They may even be carried out in order to exclude some groups from having their say. This is not to say that they have no value, but that their role in an evaluation and learning structure should be fully recognised.

3 The volume of resources used at levels 0 to 3

It helps to clarify what levels 0 to 3 evaluations would comprise in terms of available resources.

Level 3 is 'A rapid survey is conducted on a convenient sample of participants'. Most managers find that, at this level, a project, thematic or programme evaluation is normally accorded: (i) a research assistant (approximately 30 days to research a background issues paper, to collect documents and contact points of stakeholders and help in the management of the evaluation) – though some may regard this a luxury; (ii) external evaluator(s), involving about 25–30 days, though often trimmed (due to tight budgets) to less than the work requires; and (iii) the highly elastic variable of management time (approximately 15–30 days). In addition, there are funds for travel (if a programme evaluation) to some 'representative' case study areas, or (if a project evaluation) to the project site, as well as for holding short stakeholder workshops. Often the evaluators visit programme components which are regarded as successful, close to an urban centre, or at least where programme participants are able to provide feedback. It is the manager's number of days that will increase if there are problems with the evaluation, and so this is the resource that needs to be protected by careful planning. Methods used with these resources at level 3 normally cover five areas: (i) interviews with relevant departmental staff; (ii) literature and report review; (iii) minimal analysis of quantitative data; (iv) interviews in case study locations; and (v) email questionnaires and telephone interviews. These short time spans for an evaluation lead to interviews being 'protocol-driven', as mentioned earlier. If no travel is involved then the evaluator resource can be as short as 20 days, becoming close to a level 2 evaluation.

A level 2 evaluation ('A fairly good mix of people are asked about their perspectives about the project') could be taken as investigations at the headquarters only, but with a few telephone interviews to the field. The development of Skype and mobile phone technology has had a positive impact on the reach of evaluations in low-income countries. A level 1 investigation ('A few people are asked their perspectives about the project') may be undertaken without the evaluator moving from home base. Here telephone interviews or a video conference call to a focus group may be the method. Finally, with a level 0 evaluation ('Decision-makers' impressions based on anecdotes, brief encounters; mostly intuition'), no effort is made to achieve any sort of representativeness from information sources, but only to rely on conventional wisdom, 'gossip around the coffee machine', and a closed decision-making process.

Level 3 through to level 0 indicates a gradient in terms of resources and in credibility of method (although the notion of 'optimal ignorance' – what is it we don't need to know – is relevant, as more information does not necessarily make it a better evaluation at these low levels). In terms of findings, levels 0 and 1 techniques can sometimes arrive at the same conclusion as evaluations conducted with more resources, as respondents' gut feelings about a programme may be more revealing than structured investigation. But credibility will be lacking.

The discussion up to this point should not ignore debates on the 'definitions' of an evaluation, although this can quickly become sterile. In this regard, DFID's draft Evaluation Policy is useful as it distinguishes between

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'reviews', 'evaluations' and 'impact evaluations'. Very broadly, 'reviews' are similar in concept to levels 1 and 2, 'evaluations' to level 3, and 'impact evaluations' to levels 4 and 5. This draft policy provides comparisons between these three types in terms of purpose, level of rigour, design and methods, all of which have implications for the resources required.

Some may contest as to whether levels 2 and 3 should be called evaluations at all, since they are not likely to meet the standards and principles of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC-OECD): they may not be independent, transparent, robust or 'ethical' (see DFID 2012).

The DFID proposals may prove to be a nomenclature game-changer in the long run as the term 'evaluation' becomes more closely identified with 'impact evaluation', where some sort of counterfactual is required.

4 Key questions

The concern revolves around how to allocate resources across the range of methods to achieve specific objectives and results. Some specific questions that relate to level of resources are:

- How can the agency learn from resource-intensive evaluations (at levels 4 and 5) to improve the quality of evaluations at levels 2 and 3?
- Does the agency have the right balance of its evaluation methods? For example, does the current enthusiasm for 'impact evaluations' (mostly at levels 4 and 5) reduce resources devoted to evaluations at levels 2 and 3, and if so, with what effect?
- Could there be better exploitation of complementarities between what is done at the higher resource levels and the lower levels, for example piggy-backing or nesting one on/within the other?
- As a speculation, are the more charged political and important decisions made on the basis of levels 0 and 1 to avoid a more formal review of evidence, and can they be used to reallocate resources elsewhere to better effect? If not, which decisions should be made at this level and what are the criteria for this?

These suggest some general questions that managers should ask at the beginning of an evaluation when trying to juggle resources and methodology with maximum accuracy and credibility across the range of their work. Most of these questions are 'answered' or resolved implicitly as evaluations proceed and as a manager makes decisions based on experience. They include:

- Given objectives on performance information on the one hand and constraints on resources (time, money, expertise) on the other, which combinations of techniques and activities will be optimal? Minimum levels of accuracy, participation and credibility have to be established.
- Are there other criteria that should be used to assess the resources to be devoted to an evaluation? There may be a trade-off between, accountability 'independence' and internal learning – which might be the need to fit into planning cycles and the sensitivity of the topic.
- Could the use of stakeholders who are strong in evaluation culture and are being self-analytical along the lines of the evaluation, reduce the level of allocated resources?
- How can evaluations at various levels be interconnected and overlapped to better use resources? Can techniques serve dual purposes?

There is a need to lay out in advance these methodology 'audit' questions. A simple tool for this would be to take each evaluation question to be answered, along with the techniques to be used and a rough estimate of the resources required. The resulting questions, resources and instruments matrix (question, instrument, method, resources needed) is reviewed by all stakeholders. It maps out in advance the expected allocation of resources to each evaluation question and is then converted in the final report as a statement of methodology, so lending more transparency to the process.

5 Improving evaluations at low resource levels

This section discusses ways to integrate and improve the role of evaluations with low level resources. Some ways are methodological, and others are strategic.

Methodological improvements

There are some specific methodological improvements that can allow the evaluator to cut corners without significant loss of validity. For the low resource evaluation manager these could include variants on purposive sampling, albeit subjective, efficient use of focus groups and key informants, and quick ethnology procedures. In the current climate of strong calls for counterfactuals there are means to retrospectively reconstruct baselines

and assign control groups, scoping, and so generating a low-resource baseline and counterfactual (Bamberger *et al.* 2012). The key point is the need to integrate all tools around critical questions and the resources those tools will require, and to make this explicit up-front for the evaluation. This approach can be used to make a level 2–3 evaluation more transparent.

A second methodological idea is to carry out a part of the investigation with accuracy and make sensible assumptions about other areas (forming a 'data core'). Evaluation managers have reported (Longhurst 2003) that 'trimming' is not the best approach when facing constraints. Rather, there is a need to rethink the whole strategy, focusing on reliable data cores and the linkages between data. Better to focus on a data core, knowing, for example, 25 per cent of the picture with good certainty rather than 100 per cent with haziness. One criterion could be on the basis of the ease with which the information registers in the minds of the respondents. This has been a long-standing suggestion in rural village studies research (Lipton and Moore 1972): whether information (in the mind of the respondent) reflects continuous or non-continuous processes (e.g. crops that are harvested all at once compared to crops harvested from time to time), and whether an event is registered or non-registered in the minds of the respondent (e.g. payments to hired labour compared to the unpaid input of family members). This suggests a focus on 'events' in evaluation questioning and using these as organising foci to draw out opinions on subjects.

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A third methodological idea is to learn lessons from Real Time Evaluations (RTEs), practised in the humanitarian sector, and pioneered by the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit of UNHCR (Jamal and Crisp 2002, Cosgrave *et al.* 2009). RTEs are carried out using field visits and headquarters meetings, some with telephone interviews with field-based staff. Key characteristics of RTEs are:

- they take place during implementation of the response to a crisis;
- the time frame is short, perhaps a few days: they may be repeated and be seen as an ongoing evaluation;
- emphasis is on process rather than seeking results;
- secondary information is used;
- they are normally carried out by headquarters and local staff; and
- they provide opportunities for staff, particularly junior staff, to express their concerns.

Unlike many evaluations, the products can be more easily integrated within the programme cycle. Clearly, the context for an RTE is the urgency of the problem and a need to make swift course corrections, and the context of an emergency makes them useful. RTEs are also a means of closing the widening gap between monitoring and evaluation. These appear to be level 2 evaluations but have proved very useful strategically given the context in which they are applied. RTEs could fit into non-humanitarian situations by using their strength in learning and in making immediate corrections to the programming cycle: they can be problem- or issue-oriented or if an 'emergency' breaks out in a project, for example when expenditure is moving slowly. RTEs can be specially 'billed' in advance as a means of trying to address key issues and they can be used to strengthen monitoring.

Evaluations as part of a strategic framework

These methodological suggestions should fit within a strategic framework based on evaluations and the resources needed to carry them out. Some elements of this framework are obvious and generally used: (i) an evaluation manual that focuses on the deployment of resources and the results they generate; (ii) a clear evaluation strategy of what types of evaluations are carried out, when and how they fit the needs of the organisation, as well as how they relate to each other; and (iii) a real effort to ensure monitoring information is being properly collected. Less common is (iv) the 'questions, resources and instruments matrix' proposed in the previous section which, if implemented, is likely to spark much internal debate. Finally, rather obviously, but not always found, is (v) better programme and project design means more efficient use of evaluation resources. Many evaluation issues (such as those that reflected levels of compliance rather than impact and changes in behaviour) may not require a higher level resource methodology. Many of these issues return to 'optimal ignorance'.

Improving evaluability

The focus on resources emphasises the importance of evaluability, a cost-effective process that ensures evaluation criteria are properly included at the project or programme design stage. This requires that objectives and indicators be clearly set for all levels, that the programme is logically conceived, that risks and assumptions are identified, and that the monitoring systems are in place for effective project execution and evaluation. In short, it requires that a theory of change has been properly carried out, leading to all stakeholders being involved in how a programme intervention is expected to play out and perform. Bamberger *et al.* (2012) and many others stress the importance of developing a programme theory. More resources devoted up-front lessens the pressure on

evaluation resources at the end. An evaluability approach also ensures that monitoring information properly feeds into evaluation.

The planning stage is very important for effective use of scarce evaluation resources. The greatest concern expressed by many evaluation managers relates to their relationships both within and outside of their own organisations, as well as the timing and nature of the information that their evaluations produce (Longhurst (2003). Moving resources up-front is a more efficient means to resource evaluations, get reluctant elements on board, and involve junior staff who may be more enthusiastic. An evaluation should be roughly half complete by the time the external consultants start their field work. There is a clear need to identify in advance what information is expected to be missing and set out a strategy to collect it or not.

More consideration could be given to realign information collected in other parts of that organisation, such as monitoring information, audit information, research, quality assurance, and financial data, as well as back to office reports and the encouragement of histories. The question is how this can be collected and organised in such a way as to not incur high transaction costs.

Improving the complementarities between evaluations

Finally, evaluations and similar information gathering must be linked, and be part of a long-term strategy. For example, level 2 to 3 evaluations could be used to build up a database in addition to providing a list of 'lessons learned'. These more frequent, resource-light evaluations could feed into more occasional, resource-heavy level 4 to 5 evaluations which will be limited to every three years or so. Evaluations can provide time series information on the development of an institution or programme of work or have standing items in the Terms of Reference (e.g. gender) that also lay the foundation for thematic evaluations. Complementarities between evaluations in similar organisations should be exploited: in the spirit of the Paris Declaration, approaches should be harmonised if possible, although initially transaction costs will be high. It is possible for evaluators to combine and agree that they will cover similar areas if the chance arises. This type of strategy should be linked to ensuring that there is a comprehensive theory of change for the programmes involved (White and Phillips 2012). Many important decisions are made on the basis of levels 0 to 1, so evaluators should be taking note (and learning from) how these work. Recognition of their importance could be factored into the methodology audit.

6 Summary

Much attention is now being paid to methods as a way of improving evaluation outcomes. The surge of attention on impact evaluations is welcome in many ways, but these are expensive on resources. Therefore a parallel debate is needed to examine the resources required to support alternative methods and achieve other outcomes. This CDI Practice Paper starts from the perspective of a practitioner working with very limited resources, suggesting some simple approaches that will open up the 'methods and resources' debate and perhaps in the future provide improvements in the way evaluation resources are allocated.

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Centre for Development Impact (CDI)

The Centre is a collaboration between IDS (www.ids.ac.uk) and ITAD (www.itad.com).

The Centre aims to contribute to innovation and excellence in the areas of impact assessment, evaluation and learning in development. The Centre's work is presently focused on:

(1) Exploring a broader range of evaluation designs and methods, and approaches to causal inference.
(2) Designing appropriate ways to assess the impact of complex interventions in challenging contexts.
(3) Better understanding the political dynamics and other factors in the evaluation process, including the use of evaluation evidence.

This CDI Practice Paper was written by **Richard Longhurst** and developed under the Policy Anticipation, Response and Evaluation programme, funded by DFID. Richard Longhurst is a development economist and Research Associate at IDS. He has worked as an evaluation manager and evaluator for several multilateral development organisations.

AG Level 2 Output ID: 301

Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
T +44 (0) 1273 915637 **F** +44 (0) 1273 621202 **E** ids@ids.ac.uk **W** www.ids.ac.uk