

Top Tips for Impact Evaluation



International development is complex; it involves multiple stakeholders with different interests, goals and capacities. Within this pandemonium, there is a need to demonstrate the impact of what we do and how our interventions changed the lives of those we intend to serve. This is why impact evaluation has rapidly become a pivotal practice in the sector. Credible and appropriate impact evaluation can significantly improve the effectiveness of development, and there is no denying that the huge growth of interest – in commissioning, conducting and using impact evaluation to inform programming – is more than just a passing fad.

Designing and implementing developmental, formative, and summative evaluations is essential and valuable, however, there are a number of common pitfalls, which have cropped up in observing this growing trend. Here are our top tips that will save you time, energy and money.



Start with an evaluability assessment



Before starting the evaluation process, you must ask yourself: Do we really need an impact evaluation for what we are trying to find out? Assess if it is actually feasible and useful to do an evaluation. Then ask yourself: What is it exactly that we want to find out? Different people involved in your initiative – for example donors, project staff and intended beneficiaries – may find different aspects interesting and useful.

Evaluability assessments will help answering these questions, help prioritise differences and find a liveable compromise. You will inevitably have to make trade-offs – which is never easy. An evaluability assessment helps you to do this in a transparent way.



Consider 'impact' in the planning phase with a Theory of Change



If we want to measure the real change caused by our intervention, it helps a great deal to already map out a Theory of Change (ToC) in the project-planning phase.

A ToC explains how the project activities contribute to a chain of results that in turn lead to impacts. During project planning, a ToC can be a useful tool particularly for identifying assumptions about the plausibility of the overall intervention logic, and to develop a shared understanding of the intervention among all the different stakeholders.



**Ask the right
(dose of)
evaluation
questions**



Writing well thought-out and relevant questions is the real secret to a meaningful evaluation. Keep in mind: only specific questions will generate specific answers. It is (really) adding by subtracting: the fewer questions asked, the more information can be gathered about each question.

Define five to seven key evaluation questions on the nature of impacts (e.g. *“Did the impacts reach all intended beneficiaries?”*), the influence of other factors (e.g. *“What helped or hindered the project to achieve these impacts?”*), and how the intervention works (e.g. *“What were the particular features that made a difference?”*).



**Timing is
important**



Finding the right timing is not so easy, after all, if evaluating an intervention too soon there might be insufficient evidence of impact; if done too late, it can be too late to influence decisions about the future direction of the intervention and take actions.

As a ground rule, impact evaluations should be undertaken when there is both a clear need and intent to use the findings for learning. We therefore find impact evaluations most useful at the end of innovative interventions and pilot programs that are likely to be scaled-up or replicated in other areas. Ideally, as you plan the impact evaluation from the beginning of the project, you will get a feeling of when is the best timing for scheduling such an assessment.



**Do it yourself –
Participatory
Impact
Assessments as
motivational
tool**



While the dominant trend is still to engage external evaluators for doing impact evaluations, we also observe a growing dynamic towards participatory impact approaches. These typically involve program staff, community members and development partners and are much more than just involving them in data collection.

‘Participatory’ means that the stakeholders are in the front seat – they negotiate the purpose, develop the key evaluation questions, design the evaluation and follow it through on the results. And our experience shows: with good guidance, it can be a real motivational tool for those involved - in keeping with the motto: *“Be the change you want to see”* (M. Gandhi)



Talk to us

Want to know more? Or would you like to discuss or share your experiences? Contact us via training@mzninternational.com

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