CASE-BASED EVALUATION

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Case-based evaluations focus on the systematic generation and analysis of cases (sometimes known as case studies or stories of change). Cases may be based around any unit of analysis, such as people, communities, projects, programmes, institutions, policies or events. Most case-based evaluations include both the analyses of individual cases, and analysis across multiple cases.

Case-based evaluations focus on the systematic generation and analysis of cases, otherwise known as case studies or, sometimes, stories of change. Some case-based evaluations focus entirely on case analysis. Others include case analysis as a major component.

Cases may be based around any unit of analysis, such as people, communities, projects, programmes, institutions, policies or events. Generally, case analysis can be divided into two major components.

- **Within-case analysis** looks at an individual case in detail, and results in the development of a single case study or story of change. A case study or story of change often includes descriptions of what changed, how the change came about, the contribution of a development intervention, wider contributions and lessons learned.
- **Cross-case analysis** is designed to assess change or draw lessons across multiple cases. This is usually done by generating a number of case studies or stories of change with the same, or similar, headings or questions. The cross-case analysis is then based around these headings or questions.

Most case-based evaluations are a combination of within-case and cross-case analysis.

When to use case-based evaluation

Case-based evaluations can be used in any type of work (e.g. service delivery, capacity development, policy influencing) and in any sector of work (e.g. health, education, governance). They may be used in many different circumstances, including the following.

- Case-based evaluations are often used in circumstances where there are too few cases overall to conduct quantitative analysis. For example, if a programme seeks to improve the livelihoods of 1,000 farmers then it is possible to generate statistically significant quantitative findings. However, if a programme seeks to influence a few government policies, or help develop the capacity of a small number of community-based organisations, it may not be possible to undertake quantitative analysis. In these circumstances a case-based evaluation can be used as an alternative.
- Case-based evaluations are often appropriate when evaluating complex interventions (Stern et. al. 2012). In complex interventions it may be very hard to find simple indicators that can provide evidence for desired changes, and the focus is often on unexpected and/or negative changes. Case-based evaluations can cope with complex change, as they do not rely on pre-defined indicators.
- Case-based evaluations are often used when the emphasis is on causal analysis. This means when there is a need to understand why certain changes happened, and what was the role of an intervention or set of interventions. Sometimes, multiple cases conforming to specific conditions or characteristics can be analysed to draw generalised conclusions.

However, case-based evaluations are not always the best approach if the need is to generate universal findings – that is findings that may be applicable in many different situations. For example, a set of cases designed to examine how community based organisations influence local government practices in a specific locality may generate conclusions that could apply elsewhere within that locality. But the conclusions may not be relevant for other localities. This is because case studies tend to focus on change and contribution to change within a specific context. Outside of that context, any findings may not be valid.

How it works

There are many ways of implementing a case-based evaluation, and there is no set methodology. However, a case-based evaluation would normally cover some or all of the following processes.

The selection of cases: In some circumstances, case studies can be generated on all relevant cases. For example, if a programme sought to influence five government policies across five countries then a case-based evaluation would normally choose to look at all five cases. But if there are too many cases to follow-up in depth then some type of sampling is required. There are many different methods of sampling, and these are covered in a separate paper in the M&E Universe. Most case-based sampling is based on purposeful sampling, which means choosing the most information-rich cases in order to answer key questions.

The generation of cases: Case studies can be generated through many different tools and methods, such as individual or group interviews, focus-group discussions, observation, surveys, direct measurement and the use of secondary sources. Sometimes, case studies can be developed through participatory methods, for example getting beneficiaries to develop their own case studies based on their own experiences. Most case-based evaluations also include processes for verifying cases; for example by checking facts or talking to a range of different stakeholders.

Within-case analysis: Sometimes also known as in-case analysis, within-case analysis seeks to generate findings and conclusions from an individual case. This may result in lessons learned or recommendations. It may also result in an assessment of what has changed and why, and how this was influenced by a development intervention or set of interventions. Sometimes this analysis is intuitive. At other times more complex methodologies, such as process tracing or contribution analysis, can be used to help generate conclusions and findings.

Cross-case analysis: Cross-case analysis is concerned with generating findings, lessons and conclusions across multiple cases. There are many ways of doing this. Some are mostly intuitive. For example, evaluators may simply identify common patterns or differences across the cases. However, there are also more formal methodologies that can be used to assist with cross-case analysis.

The communication of cases: Cases are normally presented as written case studies, although audio-visual case studies may also be generated in some cases. The quality and usefulness of any analysis of multiple cases is highly dependent on the quality and accuracy of the individual case studies. Therefore, it is important that these case studies are properly developed and communicated. This also helps to ensure that others can replicate the cross-analysis if necessary, to see whether they reach similar conclusions.

Methodologies used for cross-case analysis

A range of different methodologies can be used for cross-case analysis within case-based evaluations. Two of the most widely used amongst CSOs are the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique and outcome harvesting. Both methods generate multiple cases that can be analysed using standard methodologies.

Another methodology is called Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). QCA is specifically designed to analyse change across multiple cases, and uses computer software to help identify different sets of conditions that bring about change in different circumstances. If used within a case-based evaluation, QCA provides a step-by-step approach from the selection of cases through to the eventual cross-case analysis.

Tracer studies (or longitudinal studies) can also be used as a basis for case-based evaluation. In a tracer study a number of cases are followed over time. Analysis may be across cases and/or over time. Again, if used within a case-based evaluation the whole approach of the evaluation would largely be dictated by the methodology.

Further reading and resources

Many papers in the M&E Universe deal with the generation and analysis of case studies or stories of change. These include papers on sampling, case studies and stories of change, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), tracer studies, Most Significant Change (MSC), outcome harvesting, process tracing and contribution analysis. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

- Sampling
- Case studies and stories of change
- Qualitative comparative analysis
- Tracer studies
- Most significant change
- Outcome harvesting
- Process tracing
- Contribution analysis

The Better Evaluation website (www.betterevaluation.org) contains the largest set of resources in the world covering evaluation in the social development sector. The site offers step-by-step guidance for those managing or implementing evaluations. Experienced evaluators, or those with an interest in evaluation, are recommended to go to that site and search through the different materials.

References

- Stern, E; Stame, N; Mayne, J; Forss, K; Davies, R and Befani, B (2012). *Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations: Report of a study commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID)*. Working paper 38, April 2012.

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