IMPACT EVALUATION

Impact evaluations aim to assess whether the predicted changes brought about through a project or programme have happened or not. Many cover unexpected or negative change as well. Most impact evaluations also try to assess the contribution of a development intervention to any changes identified. They usually follow a rigorous and accepted research methodology.

There is no single, agreed definition of ***impact evaluation***. The term means different things to different people. At one end of the scale, some people define an impact evaluation as any evaluation that seeks to assess change (outcomes or impact), rather than focusing only on activities and process. At the other end of the scale, some people only include evaluations that use complex, statistical methods, such as randomised control trials (RCTs).

The meaning of impact evaluation differs depending on how impact is defined. For example, some define impact narrowly, only including long-term changes in the lives of targeted beneficiaries. Others use wider definitions that also include changes in areas such as policies or capacities. However, there is generally broad agreement that an impact evaluation involves a few features that distinguishes it from other kinds of evaluation. Although other kinds of evaluation may cover one or more of the features in the list below, an impact evaluation would normally be expected to cover all of them (Stern 2015, Perrin 2012, Rogers 2012, ActionAid 2016).

- Impact evaluations seek to assess the changes brought about by a project or programme, rather than focusing on activities and outputs only;
- They aim to assess predicted change, although many cover unexpected or negative change as well;
- They attempt to assess the contribution of a development intervention (or set of interventions) to any identified change; and
- They usually follow a rigorous and accepted research methodology to identify change and contribution.

Impact evaluations can be carried out on any kind of work, including service delivery, capacity development, mobilisation and policy influencing, and any sector of work from health through to governance. An impact evaluation can be applied at any level of work from small projects through to complex programmes covering multiple organisations, sectors and geographic locations.

When to use impact evaluation

An impact evaluation can be carried out for the same reasons as any other kind of evaluation – e.g. to improve projects and programmes, demonstrate accountability, and contribute to wider learning. However, impact evaluations have the potential to provide more certainty about any findings, because they are more rigorous in their approach. On the other hand, they also tend to be more costly than other kinds of evaluation, and may take longer to plan and implement. Therefore the costs and benefits of carrying out an impact evaluation always need to be carefully weighed up.

CSOs are most likely to use impact evaluations in the following situations.

- Where there is significant pressure on a project or programme to demonstrate that it is effective and/or represents good value for money. This is especially the case if there is a possibility of funding or support being reduced or withdrawn in the absence of robust evidence of change.
- Where rigorous evidence of change is required in order to make decisions about whether or not to enter a new phase. Some projects or programmes are divided into different phases, and an impact evaluation may be required at the end of one phase before another begins. This is both to decide whether or not to proceed with the new phase, and/or how to revise the project or programme in the new phase.
- Where decisions need to be made about whether and/or how to adapt, scale-up, mainstream or replicate pilot or innovation projects or programmes. Impact evaluations are used in these circumstances because more certainty is required about the changes brought about through these kinds of intervention.
- Where an organisation supports many similar projects and programmes, and wishes to invest significant resources in finding out whether and why these are effective. For example, if an organisation supports a similar model of mobilising target populations in many different communities it may be worth designing and implementing an impact evaluation in one or two communities in order to generate lessons. These lessons could then benefit all of the projects or programmes following similar models.

Ultimately, an impact evaluation should be undertaken when there is a clear need for the findings and a clear plan for how to use those findings, and when it is judged that the extra costs are matched by the potential benefits. An

impact evaluation should not be undertaken when the purposes could be served by quicker or cheaper alternatives. Impact evaluations should therefore be reserved for interventions where they are most likely to be useful (Rogers 2012).

In all of the situations described above, timing is critical. If an impact evaluation is done too soon enough time may not have elapsed for impact to emerge. If too late the evaluation may not actually serve the purpose for which it was intended.

Sometimes the need to undertake an impact evaluation is clear from the beginning of a project or programme, in which case the timing can be clarified from the start. But in other cases the need may emerge over the course of a project or programme. It is important to note, however, that deciding to carry out an impact evaluation part way through a project or programme may restrict the options available. This is because some of the methodologies commonly used for impact evaluations require specific types of baseline data to be collected or targeted beneficiaries to be chosen at random. This is not usually possible to do midway through a project or programme.

Different approaches

There is no single method or approach that can be used for all impact evaluations. The most common methodologies can be roughly categorised into four types (see Stern 2015). It is important to note, however, that there are often large areas of overlap between these four types. In addition, many impact evaluations include more than one of the types.

- Some methods are based on **statistical analysis**. These typically collect information on a key outcome or impact (e.g. crop yields, household assets, girls' attendance at school) and a range of possible influencing factors. Estimates of impact can be generated through comparing the association between the intervention and the outcome/impact. An example would be comparing the association between the number of training courses attended by farmers with overall changes in crop yields. If it could be shown that farmers who had attended the most training courses had the highest increase in crop yields (on average) it would be possible the estimate the impact of the project or programme, provided all other factors were equal.
- **Experimental** methods compare performance in a group of individuals or organisations receiving support with performance in a group not receiving support, or receiving a different kind of support. In experimental methods, these are known as comparison or control groups. Impact is measured by calculating the difference in performance between those receiving support and the control or comparison groups. Experimental methods usually rely on large surveys, and can be very expensive.
- Many **theory-based** methods rely on developing a theory of change for an intervention, and then looking for evidence at each stage of the theory to try and develop a plausible (believable) case that explains how effects have come about. Some theory-based methods, such as process tracing and contribution analysis, also involve the development and testing of alternative theories of change. Theory-based methods may be applied to an individual case (such as a policy change) or multiples cases (such as changes in organisations receiving capacity development support).
- Some **case-based methods**, such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), rely on examining combinations of causes that lead to a change or set of changes across multiple cases. Case-based methods tend to rely on an assumption that there are many different potential pathways to change.

Under certain conditions, there are other types of methodology that could meet the criteria for an impact evaluation.

- Many CSOs collect large amounts of quantitative and qualitative information from targeted beneficiaries during baselines, and then repeat the exercise later on. The aim is to establish change by comparing the information collected at the two different points in time. If there is no control or comparison group there is always a risk that any estimated change is due to other factors instead of the project or programme being evaluated, which leaves findings open to criticism. However, in some cases it is possible to argue that any change was almost certainly brought about through the intervention concerned. For example, if testing changes in long-held views on social issues such as people living with HIV&AIDS, following a series of awareness raising campaigns, it might be possible to argue that any change was almost certainly the result of the campaigns.
- Many CSOs facilitate evaluations using participatory methodologies designed to assess change from the point of view of communities, or different groups within those communities. The critical thing here would be to assess the approaches and methodologies used, and to come to a conclusion about how robust those approaches were. A properly planned and designed participatory evaluation, meeting high research standards, would almost certainly count as an impact evaluation. A rushed or rapid evaluation with minimal involvement of different community members would not.
- Likewise, some CSO evaluations are based around participatory methodologies such as the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique or outcome harvesting. Again, if the methodologies are applied fully and properly the evaluations could be counted as impact evaluations. For example, if MSC was applied during an evaluation as a proper methodology, including in-depth work with communities to generate, validate, select and communicate stories of change in a transparent way, this could be called an impact

evaluation. But if only one or two meetings were held with random communities to generate a few 'change' stories this would not be classed as an impact evaluation.

It is important to note that in many cases – depending on the definition – impact evaluations may not seek to assess impact at all. Rather, they may seek to assess changes (outcomes) that may eventually lead to impact at some time in the future. This is why many impact evaluations are based around Theories of Change that predict both how intermediary changes (outcomes) result from a project or programme activities, and how they are intended to contribute to long-term or sustainable change (impacts) in the future.

Challenges

As already stated, a properly implemented impact evaluation will often be costly – both in terms of money and time spent – and may require specialist expertise. This is often a challenge for CSOs that do not have large budgets to carry out evaluation work. This is why it is so important to carefully assess when it is appropriate to carry out an impact evaluation.

Another key challenge, as stated previously, is that many methodologies used in impact evaluations need to be decided from the start of a project or programme, especially if they rely on baseline surveys or randomisation. This can be difficult in more complex interventions where goals and objectives evolve over time. In such cases it may be more appropriate to use theory- or case-based methodologies that do not require extensive baselines.

Finally, even if a formal impact evaluation methodology is adopted, there is still be a need to ensure that regular monitoring information is collected over the course of a project or programme. This helps to supplement evaluation findings as well as shedding light on unexpected or negative changes that were not predicted at the start of a project or programme. The adoption of a complex impact evaluation does not remove the need for effective monitoring throughout a project or programme. If anything it makes it more important.

Further reading and resources

Other relevant papers in this section of the M&E Universe can be found by clicking on the links below.

- Evaluation
- Types of evaluation
- Impact assessment
- Case-based evaluation
- Participatory evaluation
- Theory-based evaluation

The publication by Stern (2015) below was written especially for BOND and is a simplified version of a longer report commissioned by DFID. It provides a useful, up-to-date overview of impact evaluation, and was specifically written for CSOs.

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

- ActionAid (2016). *How to… Select a Methodological Approach for the Evaluation.* Evaluation Technical Briefing Note, #7. ActionAid, UK.
- Rogers, P (2012). *Introduction to Impact Evaluation.* Impact Evaluation Notes no. 1. InterAction, March 2012.
- Perrin, B (2012). *Linking Monitoring and Evaluation to Impact Evaluation.* Impact Evaluation Notes no. 2. InterAction, April 2012.
- Stern, E (2015). *Impact Evaluation: A guide for commissioners and managers.* BOND, May 2015.

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