

REALIST EVALUATION



Realist evaluations are based on an assumption that projects and programmes work under certain conditions and are influenced by the way that different stakeholders respond to them. Realist evaluations attempt to answer questions such as what works, for whom, in which circumstances, and why. They are designed to improve understanding about how development interventions work in different contexts.

The realist evaluation approach was first developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) and has since been adapted in many different ways. Realist evaluations are based on a particular philosophy (realism). The designers of realist evaluations have developed some key assumptions, based on this philosophy. Some of these are set out in the box opposite (see Westhorp 2014).

Realist evaluations are based on the assumption that projects and programmes work under certain conditions, and are heavily influenced by the way that different stakeholders respond to them. Consequently, it is important for development practitioners and policy-makers to understand how and why projects and programmes work in different contexts. This means they will be better able to make decisions about which projects and programmes to run, and how to adapt them to different circumstances (Stern 2015).

A realist evaluation is therefore not just designed to assess whether a development intervention worked or not. It is designed to address questions such as the following.

- What works (or doesn't work)?
- For whom (and to what extent)?
- In which circumstances does it work?
- How and why does it work?

When to use realist evaluation

Realist evaluation is primarily designed to improve understanding about how and why different projects and programmes work in different contexts. It is heavily focused on causation – assessing which initiatives contribute to different results and how. Realist evaluation can therefore be seen as most appropriate in the following circumstances (ibid):

- when evaluating new initiatives, pilot or innovative projects or programmes, or any other intervention where there is evidence that the project or programme works, but it is not yet understood how, why or for whom.
- when evaluating development interventions that are intended to be expanded, replicated, scaled-up or mainstreamed (in effect, any intervention that may need to be adapted to new contexts); and

- when evaluating projects or programmes that have previously had mixed results, in order to better understand why results have been inconsistent.

Assumptions of Realist Evaluations

- Development interventions, such as programmes, attempt to address existing social problems in order to bring about some level of social change.
- They work by enabling different stakeholders to make different choices.
- Making different choices means there has to be a change in stakeholders' *reasonings* (e.g. values, beliefs, attitudes, the logic they apply to a situation) and/or the *resources* they have available (e.g. information, skills, money, support).
- The combination of reasoning and resources is what enables a programme to work. This is known as a programme *mechanism*.
- Programmes can work in different ways for different people. They can trigger different change mechanisms for different participants
- The *context* in which a programme operates - such as the socio-economic and political environment, organisational context, local history and culture - makes a big difference to the results. The attitudes and behaviours of programme staff and participants also have a big influence.
- Some factors in the context may enable or prevent particular mechanisms from being triggered. The interaction between the context and the mechanism is what generates the results (or not) of the programme. This is known as the *context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) hypothesis*.
- Because programmes work differently in different contexts they cannot simply be replicated from one location to another, with the aim of achieving the same results. Instead, programme developers need to thoroughly understand what works, for whom, in which circumstances, and how.
- The task of a realist evaluation is therefore to help provide the answers to these questions, and to learn more about which mechanisms are triggered by which programmes in which contexts.

How it works

Many of the steps taken in a realist evaluation are the same as in any other evaluation. However, there are some steps in a realist evaluation that are emphasised because of the nature or the approach. These are as follows (see Marchal et. al. 2015, Westhorp 2014).

- Many realist evaluations are intended to inform policy or programme development. It is often important, therefore, to engage with policy or programme decision-makers right from the start of the evaluation design process. This will hopefully both improve the quality and relevance of the evaluation, as well as making it more likely that the findings will be used. Engaging with decision-makers from the start will help evaluators to fully understand the policy or programme areas that decision-makers need to address. This in turn will lead to the development of the questions that need to be answered through the evaluation.
- The evaluation questions should reflect the principles of realist evaluation. They should not be simply concerned with whether or not something works. They should also address the key realist evaluation questions – what works, for whom and in which circumstances.
- All realist evaluations are theory-based evaluations. (Theory-based evaluations are covered in a separate paper in the M&E Universe). This means a realist evaluation will always be working with an explicit project, programme or policy theory. If one does not exist before the evaluation then it will need to be developed as part of the evaluation. The purpose of a realist evaluation is as much to test and refine the project / programme theory, as to determine the outcomes of the project or programme.
- As stated in the box on the previous page, realist evaluation operates from an assumption that the interaction between the context and the mechanism is what generates the results (or not) of a development intervention. Therefore, in realist evaluation theories are usually based on the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) hypothesis. In practice this often means theorising different outcomes to interventions in different contexts. This is as opposed to a normal project or programme theory which tends to assume that changes at one level lead to further changes at higher levels irrespective of the context.
- Realist evaluations require an in-depth understanding of how interventions work for different groups. It is therefore important that outcome (or impact) data is disaggregated according to different groups (e.g. men, women, youth, older people, different castes).
- Realist evaluations do not require any particular tools or methodologies to be used. However, because they seek to address what works for whom in which circumstances they are often based on multiple case studies or stories of change (see separate paper in M&E Universe). This enables richer exploration of comparisons between different groups and sub-groups.

- At the end of a realist evaluation, the findings should be used to refine the project, programme or policy theory. The new theory should ideally include a better understanding of how mechanisms and contexts combine to generate the required outcomes. This new theory can then be tested again in any subsequent realist evaluation covering the same kind of project or programme.
- Realist evaluation reports need to be developed in line with the realist nature of the evaluation. This means, among other things, describing theories in terms of context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) hypotheses; explicitly discussing disaggregated outcomes for different sub-groups; and presenting a refined project/programme/policy theory along with implications for decision-makers

Challenges

In theory, realist evaluations can be carried out in many different circumstances, and alongside other types of evaluation. In practice, however, the skills and knowledge required to undertake a realist evaluation are greater than for many other kinds of evaluation. Evaluators also need to engage with, and buy into, the underlying philosophy behind realist evaluations. Therefore, a realist evaluation should only be undertaken when there is a convincing case for carrying one out that justifies the larger investment. It is not something that is designed to be applied lightly or cheaply.

There are a few situations in which realist evaluations are unlikely to be the best approach (Westhorp 2014).

- A realist evaluation is not needed if an organisation already understands how, when and where a particular type of project or programme works. Realist evaluation is not particularly well suited for tried and trusted modes of delivery such as delivering nutrition programmes.
- Realist evaluations are not appropriate if different stakeholders are only interested in knowing whether or not a development intervention worked, and not how or why it worked. In such cases there are easier and cheaper alternatives.
- A realist evaluation is designed to look at differential effects (how an intervention affects different groups). It is not useful if stakeholders are only interested in average effects.
- If a realist evaluation is to be useful it requires good data on outcomes (or impact). This is because a realist evaluation seeks to generate better understanding of what works and what doesn't work in different circumstances. This means it is essential that the intended outcomes (or impact) of the intervention being evaluated are properly specified. It also means it is important that these outcomes (or impacts) have either been assessed beforehand, or can be assessed during the evaluation.

Further reading and resources

Two of the types of evaluation mentioned in this paper – theory-based evaluation and case-based evaluation – can be found by clicking on the links below.



Case-based evaluation



Theory-based evaluation

Much of this paper is derived from two sources. These are a 12-page introductory guide written by Westhorp (2014) and a shorter piece written by Marchal et. al. (2015) for the Better Evaluation website. Both of these are referenced below, and refer to many wider documents and case studies for those wishing to investigate realist evaluation more in-depth.

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

- Marchal, B; Van Belle, S and Westhorp, G (2015). *Realist Evaluation*. BetterEvaluation. Retrieved August 2017 from http://betterevaluation.org/en/approach/realist_evaluation.
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