REAL-TIME EVALUATION

A real-time evaluation (RTE) is designed to provide immediate (real time) feedback to those planning or implementing a project or programme, so that they can make improvements. This feedback is usually provided during the evaluation field work, rather than afterwards. RTEs are normally associated with emergency response or humanitarian interventions.

The primary objective of a real-time evaluation (RTE) is to provide immediate (real time) feedback to those planning and/or implementing a project or programme. Feedback is usually provided during the evaluation field work, rather than afterwards. The ultimate intention is to improve the project or programme concerned through generating learning and recommendations.

Real-time evaluations are normally associated with emergency response or humanitarian interventions. However, some people also use the term to refer to ongoing evaluations, carried out alongside development initiatives, which provide continuous and regular feedback, rather than feedback at a specific point in time.

As well as contributing to learning and improved performance, RTEs may also be used to demonstrate accountability to different stakeholders, including governments, donors, implementing partners and beneficiaries. RTEs may also – to some extent – make up for a lack of ongoing monitoring in a project or programme, because they enable adjustments to be made in a timely manner. This can be important in humanitarian interventions as monitoring is often lacking or slow to adapt to quickly changing realities (Polastro 2012). RTEs may therefore bridge the gap between monitoring and evaluation by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of an intervention on an ongoing basis.

RTEs can also be used to check compliance with different standards such as codes of conducts or agency policies. This is also important in humanitarian contexts as many agencies have adopted different standards such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standards, which are designed to strengthen accountability to those affected by crisis situations.

When to use real-time evaluation

RTEs are most effective when used during the early stages of a humanitarian response. This is because they can have the maximum influence as this stage. There are many circumstances in which RTEs might be triggered. Some of these are as follows (Cosgrave et.al. 2009, p12):

- during a new humanitarian response in a country in which an agency has little or no operational experience;
- where there is a sudden increase in the scale of a response (e.g. where there is a large influx of refugees into an existing camp);
- where there are changes in the nature of an intervention, such as transitioning from a development programme to a relief operation;
- when a project or programme is about to enter transition or a new phase;
- where there are concerns that issues such as protection or safeguarding are not being addressed properly;
- where monitoring data suggests there has been an unexplained deterioration in an area such as malnutrition or child mortality;
- when an agency needs to make decisions about whether or not to continue with an intervention, or whether to extend it; or
- where there are unresolved issues that require new research or other kinds of investigation.

Sometimes RTEs are discrete evaluations carried out at a specific point in time. Sometimes, however, they are carried out at regular intervals throughout an intervention, particularly if an agency is involved in a humanitarian setting over a long period.

RTEs are frequently carried out by individual agencies running a humanitarian response, often working through local partners. However, joint RTEs may also be carried out by multiple agencies. In these cases the RTE may look at the whole humanitarian system, including the overall direction, coordination and implementation of a disaster response (Polastro 2012).

If done as a joint exercise in a humanitarian setting, an RTE can be much more powerful, enabling a joint learning opportunity between different actors such as national governments, local authorities, affected populations, international and local NGOs, international donors and the military. It can also enable mutual accountability across the humanitarian system. However, joint RTEs are currently rare in the humanitarian community.

How it works

There are a few features of RTEs that may be different to those in more conventional evaluations. Some of these are as follows (see Cosgrave et al. 2009, Polastro 2012, Herson and Mitchell 2005).

- RTEs carried out by individual agencies are generally carried out over short time periods, such as 2-3 weeks. This is because the intention is to provide real-time feedback that can be actioned immediately. RTEs are often light-touch exercises that are carried out by an evaluation team of between one and four people – basically a small enough number to fit within one vehicle. The team may be internal, external or a combination. Because they are usually carried out in humanitarian interventions, RTEs tend to be more rapid, flexible and responsive than more traditional kinds of evaluation.
- In an RTE there is often no baseline, and no need (or time) to use complex methodologies of data collection and analysis. RTEs tend to rely on qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Surveys or questionnaires may be difficult to implement because of the short timescales. By contrast, observation may be more important in RTEs than in other kinds of evaluation.
- RTEs are generally participatory because they rely on interactions with multiple stakeholders, including intended beneficiaries. The purpose and methodology of an RTE is generally dictated by the circumstances, and is selected by the agency concerned. However, different stakeholders have a large role in defining how an intervention can be improved, and who needs to act to make sure the changes happen.
- During RTEs there is often a greater emphasis on process than on impact and sustainability. There is less focus on impact evaluation, and more on immediate lesson learning. Partly as a consequence, there is less obvious need to ensure that findings are *'rigorous'* – the need is more to generate findings quickly and cheaply in order to ensure that responses can be made in a timely manner. Again, this tends to make an RTE seem more like a monitoring exercise than an evaluation one, thereby blurring the boundaries between monitoring and evaluation.
- In an RTE an evaluation report may be less important than normal. Although important as a long-term record, and perhaps useful when collating lessons learned across many interventions, the primary focus of an RTE should be on the recommendations made (and decisions acted on) whilst the evaluation is actually in progress. There is always a risk that any final report will be out of date by the time it is published, as events during humanitarian responses can move very rapidly.

Challenges

There are a few challenges that are present in RTEs that may not be common across all evaluations. Some of these are described below (see Cosgrave et. al. 2009, Herson and Mitchell 2005, Polastro 2012).

- By their nature, RTEs need to be commissioned and scoped very quickly. They are often conducted during rapidly changing humanitarian crises, where agencies are attempting to begin or scale up activities.
- In an RTE there may be very little time available to formally consult with the intended beneficiaries. In particular it might be very difficult to develop any kind of random sample. It is therefore considered very important to informally interview intended beneficiaries, in order to balance the information received through key informant interviews.
- There is a risk that the evaluators may be seen as a nuisance to staff, who are often overworked and trying to work with people in severe need of assistance. This is especially the case if an RTE is initiated from an NGO headquarters or national office, rather than from the field. In these cases there is a risk that the RTE is seen primarily as an accountability exercise that gets in the way of operations, rather than helping to improve things.
- RTEs tend to be commissioned at short notice. It can therefore be hard to find suitably experienced evaluators, as experienced evaluators are often booked up months in advance.
- Funding can also be an issue. Unless an agency has a float of funds available for RTEs they will need to acquire the money from somewhere, often very quickly.

Perhaps the main challenge for an RTE is that it needs to be seen as contributing to improvements, rather than being a bureaucratic headache. The onus is on the evaluation to prove that it is contributing to enhanced performance. Otherwise, different stakeholders, with many urgent demands on their time, may resent the time spent contributing to the evaluation exercise.

Further reading and resources

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

The paper by Polastro (2012), referenced below, provides a useful brief overview of RTEs, including details of how they have been used in different disaster-related settings. The guide by Cosgrave et. al. (2009) provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for real-time evaluations.

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

- Cosgrave, J; Ramalingan, B and Beck T (2009). *Real-time evaluations of humanitarian action: An ALNAP Guide.* ODI, 2009.
- Herson, M and Mitchell, J (2005). "Real-Time Evaluation: Where does its value lie?" *Humanitarian Exchange,* 32, pp. 43-45.
- Polastro, R (2012). *Real Time Evaluations: Contributing to system-wide learning and accountability.* Retrieved from http://odihpn.org/magazine/real-time-evaluations-contributing-to-system-wide-learning-and-accountability.

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