



Helpdesk Research Report

Methodologies for measuring influence

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Question

Review evaluations of measuring influence focusing on advocacy, lobbying, negotiation and knowledge uptake. What are the methodologies used in these evaluations and what are their strengths and weaknesses?

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1. Overview

Rigorous methodologies for evaluating influence in “hard to measure” activities such as advocacy, lobbying, negotiation and knowledge uptake are still not well developed. There is a body of literature focusing on measuring influence, but evaluation efforts have been characterized as merely attempts, or even missteps (Reisman et al, 2007). While there are examples of practical evaluations, and tools for carrying them out, there are problems with robustness, reliability and replicability. Most studies stress that using multiple approaches is best (see Kabeer 2001).

Jones (2011) has mapped the typology of influencing activities and tools for monitoring and evaluating them as follows:

Table 1: Typology of influencing activities and the tools for M&E

(adapted from Jones, 2011)

<i>Types of Influencing</i>	<i>Where to influence (channels)</i>	<i>Outcomes (what to measure)</i>	<i>How to measure (tools)</i>
Evidence and advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National and international policy discourses/debates ▪ Formal and informal meetings 	Outputs	Evaluating research reports, policy briefs and websites
		Uptake and use	Logs; new areas for citation analysis; user surveys
		Influence	RAPID outcome assessment; episode studies; most significant change
Public campaigns and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public and political debates ▪ Public meetings, speeches, presentations ▪ Television, newspapers, radio and other media 	Target audience attitudes, behaviours	Surveys, focus groups, direct responses
		Media attention	Media tracking logs, media assessment
		Media framing and influence	Framing analysis, coverage
Lobbying and negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal meetings ▪ Semi-formal and informal channels ▪ Membership and participation in boards and committees 	Actors; relationships; policy processes and institutions	Recording meetings; tracking people; interviewing key informants; probing influence

Methods used to evaluate influence can be grouped into three types: theory-based, case-based, and participatory methods. Some evaluations use a combination of methods, and many evaluation reports do not fully detail the method used.

The evaluation methods described below were chosen because of their inclusion in DFID’s draft *How-to Note: Evaluating Influence* (November 2012).

2. Theory-based methods

General Elimination Method

This method entails systematically identifying and then ruling out alternative causal explanations of observed results. This method is used frequently but is not often named explicitly. The strength of the method is that it does not require randomised control trials (RCTs) to establish causation, and involves no sophisticated experimental design, statistics or risk analysis. Despite considerable systematic effort, it does add rigour to an evaluation’s methodology and can reach a high level of confidence. This is especially useful in situations when RCTs may be unethical. The weakness of the method is it requires consistent and lengthy systematic effort to find all probable causes and explore their link to impact (Scriven, 2008).

One example of the use of this method can be seen in Patton's (2008) evaluation of an American campaign to influence a Supreme Court decision. The evaluation team used evidence gained from reviewing hundreds of documents and interviews with 45 people involved with the campaign. Competing explanations in the form of alternative narratives explaining the interrelationships and results were considered; saturation, triangulation, and redundancy were used to decide whether sufficient evidence was available; choices were narrowed to the simplest explanations; and more weight was placed on more direct connections.

Contribution analysis

Contribution analysis starts from a theory of change and builds up evidence to demonstrate the contribution made by the activity towards observed outcomes. It infers a contribution if a robust theory of change has been developed, the activities planned have been carried out, the chain of expected results has occurred, and other influences can either be shown to have been minimal or their influence is known and has been taken into account (White and Phillips 2012, p. 42). Contribution analysis is not used for assessing outputs or outcomes; its value is in assessing the contribution that an intervention has made an outcome, without requiring an experimental approach (BetterEvaluation n.d.).

Contribution analysis requires a robust theory of change and extensive evidence covering both the initiative under evaluation and other factors that might have influenced the outcomes, and is best used where there is little or no scope for varying how the programme is implemented. It cannot offer definitive proof of attribution of impact, but it does provide reasonable confidence (Mayne 2008; BetterEvaluation n.d.).

In an evaluation of a family planning programme in Bangladesh operated by Marie Stopes International, the evaluation team mapped the theory of change and tested each causal link that led to the claimed impact of increase use of family planning methods. The team found plausible causal links of MSI's influence on family planning policies. Contribution analysis provided a clear methodology to evaluate the organisation's theory of change and to test their hypothesis and the strength of their contribution. However, contribution analysis did not allow for a cooperative understanding of the work: it created disincentives for an organisation to work and collaborate with others as it was difficult to demonstrate one's own contribution in a partnership, and did not allow for acknowledgement of external influences such as a shift in public policy to enable the outputs of the organisation's efforts (Bradford and Tsui 2012).

Process Tracing

"Process tracing is a data analysis method for identifying, validating, and testing causal mechanisms within case studies... a robust technique to test theories of causality in action by examining the intervening steps" (Reilly 2010, p. 734). The method requires a clear theory of change with a series of steps that are predicted to take place in the process. It is well-suited to studying decision-making processes and can capture emergent processes because it traces events over time, and it permits the study of complex causal relationships and provides a strong basis for inferring cause (Reilly 2010, p. 735). It also helps answer questions about mechanisms, helps control researcher bias and reconcile different theoretical schools (Checkel 2005, p. 14-16).

Challenges in using this method include selecting a starting point for the tracing process, which can be contentious; a risk of losing sight of the impact of larger social forces by paying too much attention to fine

details; extensive data requirements with potential issues of validity and reliability; and an inherent clash of assumptions between the qualitative data which form the basis of the analysis and the positivist nature of the tracing process; it does not tend to produce generalizable results; it often relies on proxy indicators that may be questionable; and it is time-intensive (Reilly 2010, p. 734-735; Checkel 2005, p. 14-16).

The “Raising Poor and Marginalised Voices in Liberia” project is part of Oxfam’s global programme to promote the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels through increase voice and influence and more effective institutional accountability. The evaluation involved selecting sites where the project was mature and using document review, media analysis, field observations, interviews, and focus group discussions to investigate where outcomes were the result of programming as well as looking for unintended consequences. The study team found that data collection was not difficult, though the evaluation would have benefited from deeper data collection through ethnography or long-term observation if resources would have permitted (Oxfam 2012).

3. Case-based methods

Single and multiple case studies

A case study is a detailed and intensive examination of a specific unit of analysis – a community, an organisation, a family, an event, or even an individual person (Bryman 2008). Case study analysis is suited to situations where a programme is unique or highly innovative, when the project involves implementing an existing programme in a new setting, when investigating why outcomes in certain situations deviate from the norm, or when the environment is complex or turbulent (Balbach 1999). It is also recommended when quantitative data are scarce or unavailable, and when the objective of the evaluation is learning why and how an intervention works, and not just assessing outcomes (EuropeAid 2005).

Case studies can provide rich details, are often easier for non-specialists to understand than other evaluation methods, and contribute to developing a deep understanding of situations, actors, and their motivations (EuropeAid 2005). They are also flexible and can avoid the problem of being locked into preconceived ideas about the programme being evaluated (Balbach 1999).

However, case study evaluations are time-consuming and may not be generalisable to larger programmes or other contexts, although multiple case studies can be used to counter the latter concern (Balbach 1999; EuropeAid 2005). It can be difficult to select and define the cases to be examined, the approach can be expensive, and it relies on individual evaluators’ subjective judgement (EuropeAid 2005).

Social network analysis

Social network analysis (SNA) is a body of methods developed for analysing social networks and particularly the structure of relationships between actors (Davies 2009). It is a useful and versatile approach for modelling policy networks, advocacy coalitions, value chains, business clusters, and other networks where the interactions among actors are the focus of interest. SNA may not be applicable to all types of advocacy and influencing initiatives, or all types of outputs or impacts, but is appropriate for evaluating initiatives where the objective is to build or strengthen networks (Giuliani and Pietrobelli 2011, p. 17).

Obtaining complete network data can be difficult, particularly as non-respondents can severely distort data, and ethical issues may arise as some respondents may not wish to reveal relationships or be named. As well, networks may be difficult to isolate and organisations that do not participate directly in networks may still experience effects arising from them (Giuliani and Pietrobelli 2011, p. 18, 34-35).

An evaluation of Sexual Policy Watch (SPW), a global forum within the fields of sexual reproductive rights, using social network analysis, enabled representation of a complex but ordered network. Prior to the SNA exercise, it was difficult to evaluate SPW's work rigorously. This method demonstrated SPW's effects in exerting an influence and it demonstrated the impact of their advocacy (Drew et al. 2011).

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is the linguistic analysis of communication to investigate people's expressed beliefs and opinions, the messages they seek to convey and the strategies they use in communicating them, and in the case of critical discourse analysis, the power relationships that are revealed through the use of language (Bryman 2008, pp. 499-509).

Discourse analysis is a powerful tool for exploring the way that issues are framed and discussed, and is often used as a tool for policy analysis, for understanding the contexts that projects operate within, and as a component of political economy analysis. However, it requires specialised skills and appears to be rarely used as a methodology for evaluating projects that aim to influence policy.

4. Participatory methods

Developmental Evaluation

"Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development"; evaluators become part of the project team to help provide feedback, generate learning and support strategic decisions (Patton 2006). The "focus is on adaptive learning rather than accountability" (Dozois et al. 2010, p. 14). The method is used to support innovation within a context of uncertainty and complexity, and when working on early stage social innovations. It is best suited for organisations in which innovation, exploration, and enquiry are core values; there is the possibility of iteratively generating, testing, and selecting options; risk-taking is permissible; there is a high degree of uncertainty about the path forward; and there are resources available for exploration (Gamble 2008, pp. 54-56). Rather than measuring success against predetermined goals, developmental evaluation provides feedback, generates learning, supports changes in direction, develops measures and monitoring mechanisms as goals emerge and evolve (Gamble 2008, p. 62).

Some challenges for developmental evaluation include: managing the power dynamics that often arise within innovative development processes; balancing rigour and accountability against the exploratory and emergent nature of innovation; the close relationship between the evaluators and the subject of the evaluation may raise questions about credibility; additional forms of evaluation may be needed at other stages of a project; results may be ambiguous and uncertain; the process can produce overwhelming amounts of information; the long-term nature of the process may be difficult to sustain; and there is a risk of putting too much attention on process and losing the focus on results (Gamble 2008, pp. 54-56).

Spheres of Influence Approach

Although not an evaluation methodology in its own right, *spheres of influence* is a strategic planning concept that can help organise planning and evaluation. An organisation or programme's interactions with the world around it are grouped into three "spheres": a sphere of control which includes inputs, activities, and outputs that the organisation has direct control over; a sphere of direct influence that the organisation interacts with directly and where short-term outcomes take place; and a sphere of indirect influence where long-term outcomes ultimately take place. Identifying these spheres of activity can help in setting appropriate indicators and objectives within each sphere (Montague 2000; Montague et al. 2011).

Impact Planning Assessment and Learning

Impact Planning Assessment and Learning (IPAL) is an approach developed by the non-profit organisation Keystone Accountability to plan, monitor, evaluate, and communicate in a way that is sensitive to complex social change processes. IPAL involves a clearly articulated theory of change including a vision of success and its preconditions, a correlated set of short-term process and long-term outcome indicators possibly with a few high-level "dashboard" indicators for an overview, a clear strategy, a data collection and monitoring system with an emphasis on learning from and with constituents, and strong dialogue, learning, and reporting components. (Keystone Accountability, n.d.) IPAL is similar to outcome mapping, with an emphasis on "constituency voice" (participation by beneficiaries and local partners) and on public reporting to enhance legitimacy and impact (Kirytopoulou 2009).

Most Significant Change

Most Significant Change is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation that involves collecting stories of significant changes which have occurred in the field, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of stakeholders or staff (Davies and Dart 2005, p. 8). The strength of the approach is the focus on anecdotal stories which can be extremely powerful in demonstrating impact.

The method has been found to be a good means of identifying unexpected changes and a good way to identify and discuss organisational values. It is participatory and requires no special skills, it encourages and builds staff capacity for analysis as well as data collection, it delivers a rich picture of what is happening, and it can be used to monitor and evaluate initiatives that do not have predefined outcomes. It is well-suited to situations that are complex with diverse and emergent outcomes particularly having to do with social change, and is suitable for use in large organisations. It works best where there is an organisational culture that supports discussion of failure and experimenting with new approaches, and where there are suitable champions and support from management (Davies and Dart 2005, p. 12).

The MSC approach is not the best choice for capturing expected changes or desired messages, conducting an evaluation of a completed program, evaluating for accountability purposes, understanding the average experience of participants, or completing an evaluation quickly and cheaply (Davies and Dart 2005, p. 13). Challenges in using the method include eliciting good stories, problems documenting them, the difficulty of identifying changes, the challenge of assessing significance and dealing with subjectivity and the feeling of competition associated with the selection process, and the amount of time the process requires (Davies and Dart 2005, pp. 46-53).

In 2008, IOD PARC carried out an evaluation of the African Development Bank's decentralisation strategy and process using the MSC approach. The study team found that participants easily grasped the idea and

that no special skills were needed to apply the technique, but that “Willingness to adapt the approach to changing circumstances proved invaluable given the uncertainty of testing a methodology in new ground.” Issues arising during the study included concerns about confidentiality and difficulty getting sufficient time from the respondents and programme staff to participate both in the interviews and in selecting the most significant story. They also noted that an organisational culture that encourages open criticism is important for this process to work well. (Espasa et al. 2010)

Outcome Mapping

Outcome mapping is a methodology for planning, monitoring, and evaluating projects that measures results by the changes in behaviour, actions and relationships of the individuals, groups or organisations that the initiative is working with and seeking to influence, called “boundary partners” (Smutylo 2005 in Jones and Hearn 2009, p. 1).

Outcome mapping is particularly appropriate to assessing research communication, policy influence and research uptake (Research to Action 2012; Jones and Hearn 2009, p. 2), where projects are working in partnership and building capacity, when an understanding of social factors is important, and in complex situations (Jones and Hearn 2009, pp. 2-3). The approach incorporates monitoring and evaluation at the initial planning stage of a project, engages the project team in the design of the monitoring framework and evaluation plan, and promotes self-assessment (Research to Action 2012).

Weaknesses and challenges include that it is time-intensive, requires considerable learning on the part of project teams, requires new mindsets such as a willingness for self-evaluation, and requires a high degree of cooperation and trust (Jones and Hearn 2009).

A workshop conducted in 2011 by IIRR and IDRC brought together people working on a number of projects to share experiences in using the outcome mapping approach in various contexts. The results of the workshop suggested that outcome mapping worked well when project teams and their boundary partners worked closely together to articulate the project and its outcomes and had a clearly shared vision; where outcomes and progress markers for boundary partners were clear; and strategy matrices were developed. However, it appeared that aspirations were not always followed through, as challenges occurred in implementing organisational change, in monitoring progress and performance, and in obtaining external evidence of behaviour change (as opposed to self-evaluation). Workshop participants noted that outcome mapping was expensive and time-consuming both for initial training and for ongoing review and monitoring. (IIRR 2012)

SenseMaker

SenseMaker is commercial software and an approach to interview analysis in which people are asked to tell a story about a situation, and then to interpret their own story by answering a series of questions by selecting points on a three-axis coordinate system. This supports combining the qualitative stories with quantitative indicators derived from the self-assessment, and is proposed as an improvement over other interview coding methods because the respondents themselves, not the interviewers, provide the coding and interpretation. (Stamford 2012) The technique is being used by DFID in Girl Hub.

Social Return on Investment

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for incorporating social, environmental, and economic value into decision-making by using monetary values to represent all relevant factors and calculating an overall cost-benefit ratio (Nicholls et al. 2009, p. 8).

SROI is useful because it explicitly incorporates hard-to-measure forms of non-financial value and places a strong emphasis on involving stakeholders and including their subjective views (Arvidson et al. 2010). However, there are many challenges to be overcome in implementing the SROI approach (Arvidson et al. 2010):

- The need for good monitoring systems to collect the extensive data required
- Judgement and discretion are needed, requiring a theory of change and assumptions which can be subjective
- The result may focus on impact at the expense of understanding processes
- Difficulty satisfying multiple objectives, including prioritising quantitative versus qualitative measures, or organisational principles versus project goals
- Quantifying the value of social benefits in monetary terms can be controversial
- Valuing inputs can also be difficult, for example setting a price on volunteering
- Attributing change to the activities undertaken is problematic
- Comparison of ratios between organisations is not possible due to variations in approaches
- High cost of conducting SROI assessments.

As an example, in 2010, Aids Alliance carried out an SROI assessment of the *Chaha* (meaning “wish” or “hope”) child-centred community-based care and support initiative in India. The study team noted constraints that included limited time, difficulty identifying data sources, difficulty in having stakeholders express their experiences as outcomes within the framework of the methodology, high variation in the subjective values expressed by stakeholders, inability to include the value of some indirect outcomes, difficulty mixing NGO and beneficiary consultations, difficulty estimating the counterfactual (what would have happened in the absence of the intervention), and inability to include some stakeholders. The team concluded that the SROI approach and results were useful, particularly because of the engagement of stakeholders, and that the approach should be used more widely (Biswas et al., 2010).

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Key websites

- BetterEvaluation: <http://betterevaluation.org>
- ODI RAPID – Research in Policy Development: <http://www.odi.org.uk/programmes/rapid>
- 3ie: <http://www.3ieimpact.org>
- EuropeAid: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/evaluation/index_en.htm

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