The effectiveness of measuring influence

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Question

Review a selection of evaluations of projects that sought to influence policy or opinion using advocacy, lobbying, negotiation and/or knowledge uptake. Note if they were able to evaluate the projects effectively, whether problems arose in conducting the evaluations, and what lessons can be learnt.

Contents

1. Overview

The methods for evaluating influencing programmes[1] are not well developed, and carrying out such evaluations is considered challenging. Projects often use multiple approaches to influencing, which demand different approaches to evaluation, and strong evaluations often use multiple methodologies to triangulate their findings. While there are many publicly available evaluations, the methodologies are often not clearly stated and are rarely critiqued. As a result, there is little evidence about the effectiveness of evaluation techniques to measure influence.

There is an adequate body of literature discussing theoretical approaches to evaluating influencing work, however there is debate about whether the tools can in practice adequately assess influencing projects. There is a small but growing sample of critical evaluations found within academic peer reviewed journals.

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[1] Defined for the purposes of this report to include programmes whose main purpose is to use advocacy, lobbying, negotiation, or knowledge uptake to influence policy or opinion

Key findings

- There are four main types of influencing (evidence and advice, advocacy and campaigning, lobbying and negotiating, and soft power) which each require a different method of evaluation. Evaluators must therefore use multiple methods to critically analyse and triangulate findings.

- A large body of research states that the tools available for measuring influence do not allow for rigour, nor do they allow for replicable findings. There is difficulty in comparing findings across organisations.

- A preference for quantitative metrics tends to lead to a focus on activities and outputs and to attempts to quantify qualitative information – methods which, it is argued, do not robustly document impact (Coe & Majot, 2013).

- Some experts argue that the present tools are adequate but that methods are not rigorously applied.

- Organisations that have found a process to measure their influencing work tend to focus their monitoring and learning on success stories, having a clear theory of change and finding anecdotal evidence to assess contribution.

- There are few examples of evaluations that reflect on the effectiveness of the review. Most discussions of the effectiveness of evaluations are found in peer reviewed literature.

2. Approaches to evaluating influence

For the purposes of this report, influencing is defined as work that is used to politically motivate an institution or organisation's decisions in a certain direction. While advocacy, lobbying, negotiation and knowledge uptake are some forms of influencing, Jones (2011) and Davies (2011b) have categorised influencing activities as follows:

Table 1: Typology of influencing activities and the tools for M&E
(adapted from Jones 2011 and Davies 2011b)

Types of Influencing	Where to influence (channels)	Outcomes (what to measure)	How to measure (tools)
Evidence and advice	▪ 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	▪ 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	▪ 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
Soft Power	▪ Informal meetings ▪ Collaborative group setting	Influence of decision making	Interviews, probing influence

NGOs may use multiple forms of influence to achieve their goals. As a result, it is recommended that multiple approaches should be used to evaluate programmes (Kabeer, 2001).

There are many guides on how to measure influence (Jones, 2011; Start & Hovland, 2004; Unicef, 2012); however there is debate over the effectiveness of such guidance. Some authors (Reisman et al, 2007; Hudson, 2000; Coe & Schlangen, 2011; Chapman & Wameyo, 2001, Henry, 2002) argue that finding evidence to evaluate influence as a form of accountability is highly problematic. Others say that it is possible to evaluate influence, but that not enough rigour has been applied to methodologies (personal communication with experts).

Many authors note that methods for evaluating advocacy are not well developed. It is argued that the area is nascent and NGOs' attempts have been more like missteps than firm landings (Reisman et al, 2007; Hudson, 2002). Many NGOs struggle with evaluating advocacy in a robust, rigorous and replicable manner. Evaluations tend to focus on activities, inputs, or outputs and less on outcomes or impacts. The leading organisations that evaluate advocacy do so by dealing with data systematically in a qualitative way to map out complex processes and multi-dimensions (Hudson, 2000).

There are six main problems in evaluating advocacy (Chapman & Wameyo, 2001):

1) **Causal relationships**: Linking advocacy initiatives and outcomes is complex.
2) **Subjective gains**: There are varied opinions of significance of gains. Further political goals can often shift depending on the circumstances.
3) **Multiple approaches**: Influencing can be part of many approaches including lobbying, advocacy, or campaigning. It may be difficult to assess which approaches lead to impact.
4) **Long horizons**: Influencing work is long term. Change can be slow and incremental.
5) **Changing circumstances**: As a result of a fluid environment, it is rarely repeated or replicated and as a result, there is rarely an accumulation of knowledge.
6) **Conflictual process**: Influencing often means engaging in a process that may have political consequences.

On the other hand, experts argue that it is possible to measure influence (personal communication). The tools may be imperfect but it is important to use the tools imperfectly than not measure at all. As Gary Henry argues, "We should not be daunted by methodological challenges of evaluating campaigns. We have to push ahead; we have to try some new things. We have to put data collection strategies into the field even if they are imperfect, try them and work on their development" (Henry, 2002).

One example of the imperfect nature of measuring influence is the tension between quantitative metrics and the need for more meaningful analysis. There have been two implications of the preference for quantifiable metrics:

a) M&E that focuses on what is inherently quantifiable (activities and outputs)

b) The attempt to quantify qualitative information (rating scores).

These methods fail to robustly document impact. The first method does not link the activities and outputs to contribution of impact. The second method usually relies on subjective assessments, which may not always be considered rigorous (Coe & Majot, 2013).

As a result, NGOs often feel pressured by donor agencies to use an imperfect methodology, and therefore do not trust that the results give an accurate picture of their work. Some experts confirm that they are not sympathetic to quantification of influence, but would rather promote the robust nature of qualitative evaluative methods such as vignettes or behavioural games (personal communication).

3. Evaluations noting effectiveness of methodology

For this report, a large selection of evaluations were reviewed, and websites such as JPAL, 3ie, DIME-WB and R4D were consulted. Fewer than half of the evaluations examined described the methodologies they used, and it is rare that an evaluation comments on the effectiveness of the methodology. Most of the literature commenting on the effectiveness of evaluations has been in academic journals. The first three case studies illustrate evaluations of influencing activities that critique the methodology. The last two case studies illustrate evaluations that focus on capacity development, which uses similar evaluation methods and involves similar challenges to influencing.

DFID Research Programme Consortia (RPC)

A team from ODI reviewed the impact of research communication in DFID Research Programme Consortia in 2008. Few of these programmes maintained continuous processes of impact reviews although a few carried out mid-term and end-of-project reviews. The evaluators noted little differentiation between monitoring outputs, uptake and impact and little knowledge of how to monitor and evaluate partnerships or networks. Methods that RPCs use to monitor their impact include the Most Significant Change method, success stories, case studies, outcome mapping, and process documentation (Hovland et al., 2008).

All RPCs monitored their activities and outputs (such as the number of reports written, meetings and presentations that they engaged in) as part of their M&E, but recognised higher level reflection about policy impact was missing. The Effective Health Care RPC responded by creating an "impact file" where they collected evidence of third party advocacy and other evidence of RPC influence on country policy agendas, but despite the collection of evidence of impact it was "difficult to measure" (Hovland, et al., 2008, p. 23).

The authors of the evaluation noted gaps and challenges in relation to M&E:

▪ Little knowledge of M&E methods to review impact pathways;

▪ Little differentiation between outputs, uptake and impact;

▪ Challenges of attribution, including political sensitivity; and

- Little knowledge about how to evaluate partnerships or networks.

Many RPCs left higher-level learning on policy impact to the mid-term and end-of-programme reviews. Some of the RPCs use the following methods to qualitatively assess their work, though how well the methods worked or the challenges encountered in using them were not documented:

- Most Significant Change – Citizenship DRC

- Success stories and case studies – Effective Health Care , TARGETS

- Stories of Change – EfA

- Outcome Mapping – Citizenship DRC, IPPG, RECOUP

The evaluators gave the following recommendations to the RPCs:

- Focus on assessing the *contribution to change* rather than direct attribution. Policy objective and impacts may often take a long time after the RPC intervention has taken place thus making it difficult to attribute change.

- Use the Network Functions Approach or Social Network Analysis (SNA). Most of RPCs' work is the development of research partnerships. RPCs should consider M&E methods that monitor the progress of developing strong networks.

As the M&E challenges experienced by RPCs are diverse, the evaluation team suggested:

- Clear standards for RPCs' M&E that communicate the minimum standards related to M&E processes and tools expected of a large programme

- Support enabling RPCs to learn from other programmes. Such support could include clear guidelines and tools, a community of practice for M&E of research communication, and capacity development so that the latest M&E knowledge and best practices can be incorporated into the planning process.

- Periodic review of M&E frameworks and outputs to ensure the minimum standards are enforced.

Ibis

Ibis is a large Danish NGO with a focus on advocacy in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. Their partners are mainly indigenous organisations in the Andean highlands and the Amazon rainforest. Ibis' advocacy plan is the main part of their work. With a reduction of funding, advocacy has become a larger portion of their programme and there has been a stronger emphasis on monitoring their work.

Ringsing and Leeuwis (2008) studied the monitoring and learning challenges of the organisation. Through the actor-oriented perspectives method in development sociology, Ringsing and Leeuwis used the case study approach when evaluating Ibis. The authors documented three challenges to monitoring Ibis' advocacy work through the logical framework approach:

1. "Advocacy is a long-term process with changing objectives" (p. 420). For example, one advocacy process involving engaging with UN bodies took six years. Long durations make the use of predefined time-bound indicators impractical, and make it "difficult to isolate the impact of a particular organization, activity or project" (Ringsing & Leeuwis, 2008; p.420).

2. Project focused monitoring does not allow for unforeseen and unexpected opportunities. During one period of engagement with a Bolivian NGO, a 30 day march was held, which was not part of the original project plans but which was in line with the original project objectives.

3. Conventional project-focused monitoring has difficulty capturing internal negotiations as predefined indicators tend to capture results defined at the outset of the project. Ibis was appointed the focal point in a new NGO network, but the elaborate network created disagreements within the same network. In conventional project-focused monitoring, it can be difficult to capture results on which disagreements exist where pre-defined indicators tend to assume results have been generally agreed.

Ringsing and Leeuwis witnessed through the evaluation process that Ibis staff had developed an informal internal monitoring routine, labelled policy dialogue, which was flexible, process oriented and context sensitive. Duplication occurred: staff members were maintaining two disconnected monitoring systems, one for indicators requested by donors and an internal informal system.

Voluntary Ozone Action Programme

Henry (2002) conducted an evaluation of the Voluntary Ozone Action Programme, a campaign conducted by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in the United States. The campaign was focused on improving the air quality in the city of Atlanta by reducing behaviour which contributes to ground level ozone. Henry faced challenges in finding techniques that would reliably estimate the change of behaviour in reduction of driving: "our tools and methodology in this arena are vastly deficient" (Henry, 2002).

The evaluation team designed rolling sample surveys that took daily independent surveys to measure attitudes and behaviours. A daily measure was able to track the day to day shift in public opinion and behaviours to enable the evaluator to create natural experiments when campaign events or media coverage took place. Treatment was defined as days when campaign events took place compared with the counterfactuals of days when no campaign events took place.

Evaluation of capacity development initiatives by Belgian NGOs

In 2008, the Belgian Special Evaluation Office commissioned a large scale evaluation of capacity development support within NGO partnerships. This included 21 Belgian organisations, with 31 partnerships operating in six countries (Huyse, et al, 2012).

The evaluation team used three methodologies: the 5-Capabilities Model, the Ripple model, and the Most Significant Change method. Combining these three methods, the team built an "Enhanced Evaluation Framework" which has now been adopted by eight of the 21 organisations, and an OECD-DAC concept note (2011) mentioned the tool as an approach for measuring knowledge uptake.

The evaluation team noted a lack of existing evaluations of capacity development. They also noted that monitoring and evaluation efforts often met "serious methodological and practical challenges" (Huyse, et al, 2012, p. 130). Specifically, conventional evaluation approaches were taking a closed-system view of impact change, therefore underestimating the influence. The closed system approach resulted in the following problems:

▪ Lack of recognition of the politics of capacity development (values and power dynamics)

▪ Failure to capture delayed effects

▪ Difficulty with attribution because of the multiple stakeholders (Huyse, et al, 2012, p. 132).

The team remarked that previous studies that have mapped and analysed NGO practices in capacity development have advocated for "more in-depth knowledge and research on the topic to bridge the gap between what is known to be working and what NGOs are actually doing on the ground" (Huyse, et al., 2012, p. 130). This was also affirmed by an OECD-DAC (2011) report which concluded that the assessment and evaluation of capacity development beyond deliverables was a significant methodological challenge. It was noted that the different frameworks and concepts require evaluators to be especially conversant with the field.

Aids Alliance, *Chaha*

In 2010, Aids Alliance carried out a Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment of the *Chaha* (meaning "wish" or "hope") child-centred community-based care and support initiative in India. The programme focuses on capacity development of NGOs and community based organisations. *Chaha* works through its outreach workers to provide access to healthcare and improve health seeking behaviour.

The researchers acknowledged SROI's challenges, that "there is an absence of standards and robust method of auditing an organisation claims to the values it creates" (Biswas, et al., 2010, p. 3). Also, 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. However, the evaluators noted that decision making should only use SROI as one of the many sources of results and should be viewed alongside qualitative reports of outcomes (Biswas et al., 2010).

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Key websites

- Aspen Institute Advocacy Planning and Evaluation Programme –
  http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/apep

- Evaluation Exchange: Periodical on Emerging strategies in Evaluation. Harvard Family Research Project – http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange

- MandE NEWS, Advocacy and Campaigning –
  http://mande.co.uk/tag/advocacy-and-campaigning/

- Innovation Network – http://www.innonet.org/

- Centre for Evaluation Innovation – http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/

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