

Evaluating the Impact of Research Programmes - Potential challenges to more effective evaluation of research impact

Contents

Evaluating the Impact of Research Programmes - Potential challenges to more effective evaluation of research impact	1
Potential challenges to more effective evaluation of research impact.....	2
Complexity	2
Unintended or unidentified outcomes	2
Heterogeneity	2
Context is key: what works in what context?	3
Time-lags	4
Role of self-reporting	4
Data	4
Global capacity to carry out these sorts of evaluations	4
How to deal with failure and communicate it	5
The shift from project impact evaluation to country/domain impact.....	5
Verification and Triangulation	5

Potential challenges to more effective evaluation of research impact

The workshop identified a number of challenges for those trying to evaluate the impact of research.

Complexity

The pathway from research to policy and behaviour change is usually long, non-linear, and complex (see [Why and what? Motivations for evaluating impact and tools for framing the right question](#) for the spectrum of impacts). Evaluation designs and the framing of the research questions should reflect this.

Unintended or unidentified outcomes

The framing of impact, and the choice of evaluation methods will, to a greater or lesser extent, constrain the opportunity of the evaluation to uncover unintended or previously unidentified outcomes (both positive and negative). Choosing the right methodological mix that has enough openness of scope to do this, yet still provides rigour around the main hypothesised impacts is tricky, and can be time consuming and expensive.

Heterogeneity

Averages mask differences. Equity is often hidden by combining large volumes of data: we see overall improvement but can miss the poor getting poorer, or the fact that a program does not reach the most in need. This is a particular challenge of evaluation at the programme level (as opposed to a more micro focus).

Where feasible, evaluations should look at the impact of research programmes on different stakeholder groups. For example, an agriculture research programme might contribute to a rise in GDP. But, if the gains come through improvements in maize yield those regions or population groups that only grow millet might find themselves poorer and more marginalised.

Study of unexpected consequences - negative, positive, or positive deviance (uncommon but successful behaviours or strategies that enable some people to find

better solutions to a problem than their peers, despite facing similar challenges and having no extra resources or knowledge can identify useful lessons for the design of future programmes.

Missing this heterogeneity can be mitigated by good evaluation framing and design, but can be exacerbated by the lack of detailed data in some developing countries.

Context is key: what works in what context?

The importance of context is often emphasised in discussion of how evidence does, or does not, influence policy (or have other impacts). In applying this to research impact evaluation Fred Carden, keynote speaker at the workshop, separated ‘general context’ (identified contingencies exploited in the influence process):

1. Capacities of users to use evidence [and the kind of evidence that is likely to influence their decisions]
2. Nature of the organisation
3. Need or demand

from the ‘decision context’ (the space in which decision makers are operating):

1. Demand [relative to competing pressures]
2. Interest
3. Lack of interest

We know that the impact of research on policy is heavily non-linear, with serendipitous conditions, or particular moments when decision makers want new ideas (after shocks, scandals, changes of leadership etc.). In short, the ‘decision context’ varies much more over time than the ‘general context’, with windows of opportunity for influence opening and closing. This can affect the choice of the moment to evaluate a programme. For example, when large quantities of oil were found off Ghana in 2007, demand for, and interest in energy and environment related research rose, while the organisational and user capacities stayed broadly the same. Evaluating a relevant research programme before or after this point would likely have given different results. Evaluation methodologies for evaluating the impact of research programmes cannot control for these aspects of context, but must take them into account.

See Fred Carden’s talk [here](#).

Time-lags

Academic research is a slow process, and there can be a significant time lag (years or decades) between knowledge generation and impact, particularly through changes to public policy (see the example on the [Introduction page](#)). Funders of research will need to decide when is the most appropriate time to evaluate a research programme, and plan and budget accordingly. Real-time monitoring by the researchers or evaluators, using tools like impact diaries, can partially get around this challenge, but need to be planned, costed and embedded from the start. More than one round of data collection and analysis may be appropriate for an evaluation but, of course, escalates costs.

Role of self-reporting

A number of the methods profiled at the workshop and documented on the [Approaches and methods](#) page involved a degree of self-reporting. What techniques are available to validate (or correct or reject) information gathered in this way and to lessen the inherent biases in it?

Measurement distorts

Any indicators chosen as part of impact measurement (from citations of research papers to counting meetings with stakeholders) will likely influence the behaviour of those being measured.

Data

The data needed to trace and assess impacts – from that buried in documents, emails and online, to the reactions and subsequent behaviours of those who access research – is often not readily accessible. (Even when researchers help by documenting the processes through which their work reaches initial users, which is relatively rare). In developing countries where data collection can be limited, and storage inconsistent, compiling evidence of impact can be even harder. Even where the body of evidence is potentially accessible or could be created, it may be prohibitively costly to do so in a structured, methodical way to support inferential analysis.

Global capacity to carry out these sorts of evaluations

Impact evaluation of research programmes is generally labour intensive, specialist work, with a correspondingly modest number of organisations globally that have capacity to do it well. Workshop attendees who fund and manage research programmes across the global South noted they had struggled to find Southern-based organisations with the skills and capacity to do this sort of evaluation.

How to deal with failure and communicate it

Understanding why research, or the evaluation of research, doesn't deliver the intended impact is essential for improving programme design and therefore improving development outcomes. However, it can be a challenge to communicate 'failures' well, particularly in evaluations designed to assess value for (public) money. Research is potentially more at risk of a headline such as "£1m to find nothing" or "£10m spent – 'no impact'" than other development interventions with more tangible outputs (like mosquito nets or vaccinations).

The shift from project impact evaluation to country/domain impact

If improvements in use of evidence in development are to be sustainable, it is essential that the work reflects the issues, needs and perspectives of that country/domain. And achieving that goal goes much beyond the confines of one project or programme. IDRC are trialling recipient led evaluation to better embed evaluation in these issues, needs and perspectives. This focuses on outcomes, not processes, or even particularly the research activity itself. So, the 'recipient' could be a Ministry of Health, for example, who would lead the review of a programme in context of the health priorities of their country, rather than as a programme fitting the goals of the funding agency. Evaluation could ask "Is the research generating the knowledge we [the Ministry of Health] need to design, and implement policy?"

It is very tough to design an evaluation that recognises this broader context, but still evaluates an organisation against an outcome they are able to influence (see 'Important issues to consider in evaluating a research programme' PDF).

Verification and Triangulation

A growing number of methodological approaches (see the 'Approaches and methods' PDF) (newly developed or newly applied in international development) make it

possible to evaluate better than ever the impact of research programmes in international development.

In addition, multiple methods and sources of data can potentially reinforce each other (triangulation) to give a more confident assessment of impacts. This desire for rigour, however, needs to be balanced with the demands on time and resources required to evaluate the research.