

Evaluation for What?

- Rethinking Evaluation Use for Development Cooperation in Times of COVID-19



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The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the landscape of international development cooperation, compelling immediate adjustments in every aspect of aid delivery activities. Not an exception is development evaluation, which has gained unprecedented attention during the last two decades, being considered as a critical tool to assure accountability and assist better decision-making. At the beginning of the global health crisis, most of the development organizations, including UN agencies, development banks, INGOs and research institutes, responded by postponing or cancelling their evaluation missions. As the situation has been prolonged, however, they now face a test to devise a longer-term solution. The pandemic has raised a very fundamental question on the role of evaluation in development cooperation.

In fact, the international evaluation community has aptly responded to the crisis by sharing information and initiating discussions on how to manage evaluations during the pandemic. Multilateral development organizations have issued several guidelines on how to conduct evaluations during

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COVID-19,¹ while evaluation scholars and practitioners have held a series of online conferences. They have identified challenges in conducting evaluations under the crisis, and suggested alternative approaches to data collection and analysis, such as the use of SMS- or smartphone-based surveys, social media, geospatial technologies, etc. There has been a call for ways of “adapting,” “transforming,” or even “repositioning” evaluations for development. What is rarely mentioned, however, is for what use we should keep conducting evaluations in the time of pandemic.

“Evaluation use” has been at the center of evaluation debates for more than 50 years. People perceive the concept differently: academically oriented evaluators emphasize methodological rigor and its contribution to social science, whereas client-centered evaluators focus more on serving stakeholder needs and assisting program decisions.² While the former lean to the “findings use” side, “process use” is an important aspect to the latter as they believe learning occurs during the evaluation process. Although still disputable are the issues on who the intended users are, what the intended use would be, or how much are actually utilized, there is little question of the importance of evaluation use as most evaluations declare the “utilization of evaluation results” as their primary purpose, especially in development evaluation.

The purpose of development evaluation, according to the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), is “to provide credible and useful information enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors.”³ In other words, “credible and useful” information is prerequisite for achieving evaluation objectives—evaluation use—which enables better decision-making with lessons learned. Can evaluations during COVID-19 produce as credible and useful information as pre-pandemic ones? What would be the value of an evaluation if its credibility is at risk? Would this also threaten its usefulness?

The challenges of conducting evaluation under the pandemic circumstances are generally identified from three perspectives. The first is concerned with methodologies. The methods that had been believed essential in any program evaluations are not as easily applied as before the pandemic. Field visits are restricted, making it unfeasible to observe the changes on-site, to interview stakeholders face to face, or to conduct beneficiary surveys. Much of the interac-

¹ For example, see UNDP’s Evaluation Guidelines webpage. <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/guideline/covid19.shtml>

² Michael Q. Patton, the founding father of “Utilization-Focused Evaluation,” argues that it is the responsibility of evaluators to achieve “intended uses (evaluations goals)” by “intended users”.

³ OECD DAC (2002), Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management, p. 21.

tion with stakeholders is carried out virtually at best, if not through email or phone communication. Evaluators have limited opportunities to inquire responsively and to find out and correct any possible biases. Building rapport with stakeholders, which is especially important in sensitive issues, is hardly feasible with remote interviews. Even with travel restrictions being eased, global development agencies are reluctant to return to the old practice. Without qualified local evaluation consultants, on-site data collection remains difficult, and rigorous data analysis could be compromised as evaluators come to rely heavily on desk reviews and secondary data with limited contextual understandings. Even when hiring local consultants for data collection, validation of the information collected is another task.

Secondly, COVID-19 and the consequent social disruptions in developing countries have required a reconceptualization of evaluation frameworks. Evaluations in the field of international development generally apply the OECD DAC guidelines, which suggest examination of the contextual relevance of intervention and the achievement of intended results. Most development interventions may have been affected by the pandemic, probably with different impacts on different beneficiary groups, the magnitudes of which are unknown. The assumptions, based on which a so-called theory of change or intervention logic was built, may not be relevant since the pandemic occurred, and measuring changes the intervention had initially intended to achieve is no longer meaningful. Therefore, evaluation design and plans should be reassessed with realistic options beyond the limited methods described above.

The final and most critical challenge is from an ethical perspective. As the “do no harm” principle is the first consideration in development activities, safety should be the priority in conducting evaluations in times of pandemic. There is also the risk of putting unnecessary burden on local public sectors in the evaluation process of requesting local involvement. Above all, it is important to think about the resources involved when conducting evaluations. It may not be justified to invest scarce resources in methodologically rigorous evaluations of finished programs while taking the challenges identified above, when lives are at risks and people are suffering from a shortage of basic goods and services. Evaluation is an essential process in development cooperation, but the priority might not be as high as life-saving activities in the time of pandemic.

The challenges described above increase the uncertainty in achieving evaluation objectives, converging to the question of what the worth is of conducting evaluations under COVID-19. In other words, what would be the utility of evaluations for development cooperation in times of pandemic?

For a year or so, development agencies have made efforts to operate evaluation functions dealing with these challenges.⁴ Most of them have adapted evaluation methods with remote interviewing, intensive involvement of local expertise, and/or new analysis methods, including text-mining and geospatial impact assessment. Some perceive that the quality of evaluations conducted during COVID-19 is not as good as before, since data collection and bias control are difficult and consequently the confidence in validity of evidence is limited.

Others argue that what matters is not evaluation quality but new perspectives in assessing what evaluations can do. They claim that conducting evaluations with non-traditional methods could yield different aspects of the programs from other angles. It is true that to utilize national evaluation consultants in most of the activities to be done locally can create values by reflecting local views and further empowering them. An evaluation would be useful if it provides better understanding of what the impact of the pandemic was and how the intervention could have responded to mitigate the negative impacts from local perspectives, rather than trying to describe the changes the intervention made or whether the interventions were successful from an outsider's viewpoint.

Evaluation is not only the last step of program cycle but also a starting point of feedback loop. In the time of COVID-19, evaluation can play more of a role as the starting point to keep development cooperation activities informed about the various impacts of pandemic on the local society. The potential users of evaluations may no longer expect rigorous evidence on whether a program designed and implemented before the pandemic has been successful or not, as they understand the methodological, conceptual, and ethical challenges evaluators face during the pandemic. The objectives of evaluations should be more to produce useful information, which may not be achieved applying the conventional evaluation framework widely used in the field of development cooperation. It is time to think outside of the box and take flexible approaches on who would be the users of development evaluation and what information they want. **KIEP**

⁴ For example, evaluators from DEVAL, USAID, and the World Bank presented their experience at an online conference. <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/event/innovating-evaluation-multilateral-and-bilateral-agencies>