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Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

Evaluation, evidence and knowledge translation

An increasing interest in evaluation

During the past three decades, there has been a tremendous theoretical and methodological development within the field of evaluation. In March 2005, the Paris Declaration signed by over 100 agencies and countries to improve the quality and impact of aid, provided great impetus to the application of evaluation to programmes and projects. An important motivator for the Declaration was the attention that donor nations were applying to the impact of aid in the countries, which receive it (managing for development results) as well as to the effectiveness of aid as a resource being delivered by them (mutual accountability). The growing interest in evaluation has led to a significant increase in the scope and nature of evaluation activity in India as well as the South Asia region.

While the definition of evaluation remains problematic, a useful definition by Rossi and Freeman defines evaluation as "the systematic application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualisation, design, implementation, and utility of ... programmes". Evaluative thinking is being clear and specific about what results are being sought and what means are used to achieve them. Evaluation prioritises the use of rigorous methods, and equally the use and adoption of evaluation findings. Nevertheless, programme evaluation has periodically been called into question as an original process whose primary function is the production of legitimate and justified judgments.

In response, Chen and Rossi developed a theory-based evaluation approach as an answer to evaluation approaches that had remained limited to before-after and input-output designs or that focused narrowly on methodological issues. Realist evaluation is among the most promising applications of theory-based evaluation. Building upon existing knowledge, it analyses why change occurs or why not, and in which conditions. It provides information that allows decision-makers to judge whether the lessons learnt could be applied elsewhere. It explains change by referring to the actors who change a situation under the influence of particular external events and considers structural and institutional features to exist independently of the actors and researchers. As a consequence of this ontological perspective, social layers are peeled in order to understand the root causes of the problem at hand. Realist evaluation is thus well suited to assessment of interventions in complex situations.

Potter identified three broad paradigms within programme evaluation. The first, and probably most common, is the positivist approach, in which evaluation can only occur where there are objective, observable and measurable aspects of a programme, requiring predominantly quantitative evidence. The positivist approach includes evaluation dimensions such as needs assessment, assessment of programme theory, assessment of programme process, impact assessment and efficiency assessment. The second paradigm is that of interpretative approaches, where it is argued that the evaluator develops an understanding of the perspective, experiences and expectations of all stakeholders. Contact with the programme is often over an extended period of time and observation, interviews and focus groups are commonly used. Finally, critical-emancipatory approaches to programme evaluation are largely based on action research for the purposes of social transformation. Because of its critical

focus on societal power structures and its emphasis on participation and empowerment, this approach often includes a greater degree of social activism on the part of the evaluator.

Knowledge translation

Carol H. Weiss was among the first writers to formally address the issue of utilisation of research in programmes, and her work on the meaning of 'research utilisation' is still relevant. The need for policy to be based upon sound evidence is an aphorism, yet the relationship between research and decision-making remains unclear. Research utilisation encompasses all the steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application to yield beneficial outcomes for society. On the one hand, it refers to the creation of new knowledge and thereby new solutions, and on the other to the application of old knowledge and testing its usefulness to get to desired solutions. In both the cases, evaluation of knowledge as well as knowledge translation becomes very important.

'Knowledge translation' is a relatively new term coined by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in 2000 which defines it as "the exchange, synthesis and ethically-sound application of knowledge - within a complex system of interactions among researchers and users - to accelerate the capture of the benefits of research … through improved health, more effective services and products, and a strengthened health care system". Essentially, knowledge translation is an interactive process based upon effective exchanges between researchers who create new knowledge and those who use it. The World Health Organisation has adapted this definition to "the synthesis, exchange, and application of knowledge by relevant stakeholders to accelerate the benefits of global and local innovation in strengthening health systems and improving people's health".

Evaluation of programmes is of particular interest to knowledge translation, since programmes represent the application of available knowledge to delivering technical solution(s) through an appropriate mechanism in response to a population need. A World Bank report (2004) states, "When conducted at the right time, and when they focus on key issues of concern to policy makers and managers, and when the results are presented in a user-friendly format, evaluations can provide a highly cost effective way to improve the performance and impact of development policies, programmes and projects. But evaluations that fail these criteria may produce no results even when they are methodologically sound".

Evaluating programmes in South Asia

A report by the Community of Evaluators has found that the South Asia region is slowly moving towards more sophisticated evaluation thinking. Increasingly, evaluation is being accepted as a mandatory process to ensure accountability and transparency.

One report by the organisation suggests that there are two main categories of evaluation currently seen in the region:

- Donor-mandated outcome evaluation: Most of the evaluations in the region currently fall in this category. These are undertaken to meet reporting requirements of donors.
- Impact/Evidence-based evaluation: There is an increase in the number of impact studies being conducted in South Asia, mostly because of the growing interest around the world to address poverty in the region through evidence-based policy making.

Project and programme evaluations are finally gaining greater recognition for the value they add to the quality of programmes. Yet there is limited reflection, convergence and research on evaluation taking place in the region. Interaction and exchange of regional evaluators with international evaluation experts is also limited. When compared to international trends, there are not many exchange groups, platforms and evaluation associations in South Asia. Evaluation feeds into knowledge management that in turn enables the project leadership team improve the quality of the programme.

Evaluation often takes the positivist approach of focussing on the aspects of technical solution, institutional arrangements and financial outlays. Such a focus of programmes and their evaluations is
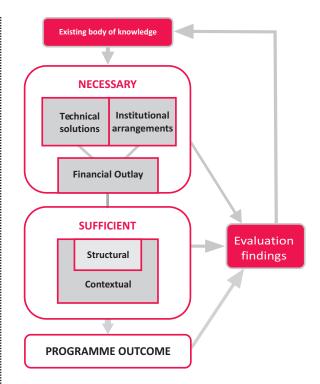
perfectly logical. However, since these aspects alone are not sufficient for development change to take place and the solution to be actualised, operational staff is doomed to serially discover new reasons why programmes do not work. Evaluation must address structural and contextual factors, in respect of both successful and unsuccessful programmes, to find a fuller understanding of why some programmes work and others don't. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions under which evidence deriving from evaluation is used in programme definition leading to the desired development outcomes?

Pathways of development impact

As an organisation that actively engages in evaluation, we feel that a framework that takes account of these considerations is essential to furthering the use of evidence into programme definition and eventually, development outcome.

For any programme to be delivered it must at the very least, use an existing body of knowledge to present a technical solution to an identified problem, define the institutional mechanisms and arrangements that will be used to deliver the solution, and identify the financial outlay to put the technical and institutional arrangements in place. However, the programme does not operate in a vacuum - solutions and delivery systems are subject to social norms and behaviours that more proximally (structural factors) or distally (contextual factors) relate to the solutions. Structural factors are intrinsic to the way societies and communities are structured and often play out as barriers to the implementation of technical/institutional solutions. Contextual factors, which are social factors distal to the programme and generally not expected to make any particular impact on it, sometimes have significant bearing on it. It is these factors that make the conditions both 'Necessary' and 'Sufficient' to the achievement of a development outcome.

Our logic model is quite simple and postulates that while technical solutions, institutional arrangements and financial allocations represent the 'Necessary' conditions for programme uptake, structural and contextual factors represent the 'Sufficient' conditions for why programmes work.

A Virtuous Cycle of Knowledge Translation

An example :: National AIDS Control Programme

Both Rossi and Chen's realist theory as well as Potter's interpretative approach provide a useful entry point to a discussion of the evaluative effort undertaken under India's AIDS programme. Both these approaches have extensively informed the evaluation paradigms in use today. However, what they cannot provide a basis for is the analysis of why some evaluative results 'take' and why the uptake of others were so delayed. There is inadequate synthesis so far, of what it takes for policy to be changed by evidence. The National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), being informed by so many interested players, provides an interesting discussion of the uptake of evidence into policy.

From our own inquiry into the programming for the prevention of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the NACP, a logical result appears to emerge. The early days of the programme's evaluation focussed mainly on assessment of the extent of the problem and the programme process. Various studies indicated the direction to a technical approach and institutional arrangements to deliver the programme. It became clear that the epidemic in India was concentrated among certain core high-risk groups and that the method to prevent the transmission was by avoidance of high risk sex. DFID's experiences with MSM work had an enormous impact on the programming of World Bank support,

which provided budgetary support to the government. An examination of the situation at the start and during much of the period of NACP II was a gathering of evidence in respect of the technical solutions to, and institutional arrangements for MSM programming. Linked to this was some effort on financial data to suggest appropriate levels of outlay for preventive activities in the NACP. Thus, much was known or becoming known about how to set up a programme.

Nevertheless, the place of MSM interventions within the programme remained tenuous. Structural factors operating at the time were contrary. There was widespread indifference to the situation of MSM, which were largely 'ghost' sub-groups for mainstream society. Stigma, discrimination and denial were prevalent. The wider heterosexual population and policy makers had remained in denial of HIV, attributing HIV to those 'with loose morals' vaguely interpreted to be female sex workers. This has been reported as one of the reasons why despite of high prevalence among the MSM population, there were few exclusive interventions for them. Most of the vulnerable were highly stigmatised and marginalised populations, difficult to reach and often outside the ambit of the law. Working with these communities was often difficult for implementing agencies, and challenges included police interference and lack of support from the legal system.

On the contextual front, many unexpected factors were being pushed to the forefront. A long forgotten section of the Indian Penal Code had become a significant barrier to meaningful interventions with the MSM community. Mid-2000 saw dramatic changes, in particular the challenge to Section 377 of the Code resulting in what might be termed a social movement. On the one hand, it helped to organise and mobilise the community to come forward and seek their rights as citizens of the country; and on the other to garner support from the general population. The remarkable changes in the structural and contextual factors led to better uptake of the evaluation findings in the third phase of the NACP.

Technical solutions and institutional arrangements that had been developed by the 1990s have taken some years to come into their own, primarily because the structural and contextual factors on which they had to come to pass were not yet ready for them. NACP has travelled a long way. In the current phase, the emphasis is on the saturation of the high-risk population with clear attention to MSM issues and interventions.

It is clear that as evaluation travels the road from being a research activity to a fully developed field, it must create replicable methods that meet rigorous standards. This is being borne out by our work of interpretative evaluation being undertaken of a number of programmes, and in different settings. Methods must test not only the outputs of programmes that fall within the scope of 'Necessary' conditions of change, but also be able to track and evaluate outcomes and the role that 'Sufficient' conditions have played in mediating those outcomes.

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