

Why Evaluations Matter and how to Make Them Work

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Meaningful feedback on any project is essential for that project's continued success.

Understanding what works and what does not work can make a great difference in a project's outcome. Evaluations matter because they can show us the limits and the unintended side effects of projects. Part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sustainable Development Goals require evaluations. The United Nations have developed a series of targets, each with statistical indicators, to measure the attainment of the 17 SDGs. As of writing this blog post, there are ten years left for the World to achieve the SDGs.

Dr. Karen Mundy and Dr. Kerrie Proulx of the UNESCO Internal Service (IOS) Evaluation Office focused on enhancing evaluation data to strengthen the progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4, target 5 (Equality and Inclusion in Education). (Mundy, Karen, and Kerrie Proulx. 2019. "Making Evaluation Work for The Achievement Of SDG 4 Target 5: Equality And Inclusion In Education," pp. 1-9. (France: UNESCO). The study, supported by North America Aerospace Defense Command (Norad), The World Bank, and UNICEF, was created to support education evaluations and show how they can better support member states in achieving gender parity.

Examples:

Two interventions that were evaluated involved cash transfers and school feeding programs. Both interventions yielded positive results such as supplementing the income of poor households and improving student attendance. While the cash transfers effect on school attendance was a

clear success, the school feeding program had unintended effects. Though the feeding programs have aided children experience food insecurity, it had the adverse effect of overcrowding classrooms. As more students attended school, space in school buildings were often converted into storage rooms for the large quantities of food that the programs handled. Even more significantly, according to Dr. Mundy and Dr. Proulx, educational personnel found themselves sacrificing teaching time and energy as they spent the time for managing the food distribution. The report showed that the primary SDG (Quality Education) was in part undermined by the food initiative, providing the NGO community with a valuable lesson in the importance of effective evaluations.

The UNESCO report made four recommendations:

Address Evidence Gaps

Organizations should pool together resources and data to better address key gaps in evaluation evidence. Funding for evaluations should be focused on areas that lack qualitative data.

Contribute to stronger and more consistently available data.

International Organizations can support national capacity when collecting data. They can help strengthen national data agencies by joining forces

Strengthen evaluation methodologies.

Agencies can strengthen their evaluations by “) incorporating stronger and more consistent equity measures; ii) embedding experimental evaluations into the design level program; iii) creating stronger standards for the evaluation of system-wide reform programs in education, including the use of theory-based methodologies; and iv) investing in the collection of cost-effectiveness data”.

Make data evidence more useful to national stakeholders.

Those evaluating interventions should work closely with governments to identify key areas where there are gaps in data and promote learning from these evaluations. A closer relationship between member states and organizations who conduct evaluations could greatly increase the success of future interventions.

As the study indicates, these recommendations are only the start to strengthen intervention evaluations. Evaluations can highlight the adverse side effects of an intervention and shed light on its limitations. It is an important tool that should be in the arsenal of any NGO or intergovernmental organization looking to do good. The evaluation results help others understand the value of an NGO and its contributions to a defined problem on group of persons

Organizations should already have instruments in place to evaluate projects before, during and after their inceptions. Far too often we hear of interventions going wrong and that is to be expected. Some things do not go as smoothly as we would like. However, true failure arises from it is not learning from those mistakes. My suggestion to add to the UNESCO recommendations would be to create a database that would share information on all projects from different NGOs, and international organizations, not just those who succeed and those who fail spectacularly. If every project and intervention share of valuable information, it could be used by all organizations to strengthen goals. Instead of starting from the ground up or only using data collected from those specific organizations' previous interventions, one could learn where others failed, and where they succeeded. This could potentially not only save time and resources, but also ensure that an NGO's first idea is its best idea and help in successful implementation.