

IMPACT EVALUATION FOR IMPROVING DEVELOPMENT (IE4ID): RETHINKING, RESHAPING AND REFORMING

March 2009

Impact evaluation is one of many significant contributors to improving development - increasing effectiveness, empowerment, equity, poverty alleviation, efficiency, legitimacy and sustainability. But if done badly, or inappropriately, impact evaluation can: waste scarce resources, reinforce inequalities, promote wider adoption of unsuitable practices and undermine good practices. Development in the 21st century is increasingly affected by global systems, strategies and policies. Impact evaluation must address these realities.

The action agenda proposed for IE4ID in this document involves three parts. First, it describes how we need to **rethink** impact evaluation by focusing specifically on the nature of development, and how impact evaluation processes and findings can and should contribute to better development. Second, it describes how we need to **reshape** IE4ID, using different methods and strategies to rigorously conduct and support use of impact evaluation. Finally, it identifies essential steps to fundamentally **reform** the enabling environment of impact evaluation for improving development. International cooperation will be required between commissioners and practitioners for IE4ID to occur in this way.

RETHINKING IMPACT EVALUATION

1. Impact evaluation can and should contribute to improved development

Improving the quality of information is important, but it is not sufficient for impact evaluation to make significant contributions. Impact evaluation of development should be deliberately undertaken for development.

- **Plan to meet the needs of the intended users of the impact evaluation** – This requires involving intended users in the process of evaluation to ensure it meets their needs. Potential users of IE4ID are more diverse than donors and governments.
- **Manage the impact of the impact evaluation itself** – The process of conducting an impact evaluation can have positive and negative effects, which must be actively managed.
- **Evaluate impact evaluation in terms of its contribution to improved development** – Follow the evaluation standards so that quality balances both technical merit and utility.



MAKE A
DIFFERENCE

2. Impact evaluation can and should suit the nature of development

Development initiatives in the 21st century are often interrelated, complicated and complex.

- **Match methods to the need** – Problem analysis, goals and development initiatives should not be adjusted to match prevailing evaluation methods. The dog (development) should wag the tail (impact evaluation).
- **Engage the full range of stakeholders in the development process** - including governments and donor agencies along with increasingly important actors such as traditional authorities, civil society organizations, private sector firms, partnerships and networks. What is understood by “development” and “improved development” must be addressed openly by the full range of stakeholders.
- **Prioritize citizens as primary constituents** – as central partners in the development process, as intended users of evaluation findings, as those who lead processes to hold governments and other organizations to account, as well as providers of evidence about results.
- **Integrate an assessment of global dynamics** – Impact evaluation must recognize that global systems, strategies and policies powerfully shape development in the 21st century.



WAG
THE
TAIL

RESHAPING IMPACT EVALUATION

3. Impact evaluation can and should be embedded within robust systems of monitoring, assessment and learning

Evaluations must be embedded in transparent and effective systems for impact planning, assessment and learning that include all relevant stakeholders, including primary constituents.

- **Integrate impact evaluation within robust systems of monitoring and evaluation** – in order to create synergies between real time adaptation and improvements with longer-term assessment of results.
- **Include effective support for knowledge uptake and translation** - through more appropriate reporting and through active support for the users of impact evaluation to adapt knowledge to different situations and time.



CLOSE
THE
LOOPS

4. Impact evaluation can and should produce a comprehensive picture

Evaluation must provide balanced assessments.

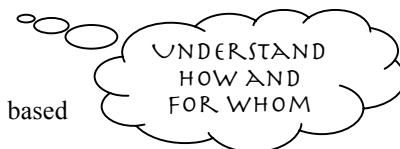
- **Include intended and unintended, positive and negative impacts.**
- **Assess livelihoods, rights, equity, gender, justice and sustainability as well as income and health.**
- **Assess the distribution of benefits and costs of initiatives** – Evaluation should report impacts on the most disadvantaged, across various groups as well as average impacts.
- **Address legitimacy, efficiency and sustainability as well as effectiveness.**
- **Evaluate beyond the boundaries of the initiative** – know how global systems, strategies and policies actually affect local actions and vice versa.



5. Impact evaluation can and should explain how and why impacts occur

Impact evaluation needs to assist knowledge translation about what works, under what conditions, how and why, and hence how success might be achieved in other places and times.

- **Articulate an explicit theory of change** – Rigorous impact evaluation should be based on, and further elaborate theories of change.
- **Investigate causal mechanisms and the contexts in which they operate** – Data collection and analysis need to investigate how context enables or prevents the causal mechanisms that produce impacts.



6. Impact evaluation can and should draw from methodological developments in the natural and social sciences

Efforts to improve the rigour and utility of impact evaluation are hampered by conceptualisations of science that are inaccurate and outdated.

- **Conduct impact evaluation rigorously** - according to the highest standards of scientific endeavour, drawing appropriately from a broad range of approaches, mixed methods and tools to suit the particular evaluation – being informed by methodological innovations (including dramatic improvements in approaches for causal analysis in the social and natural sciences) and insights from trans-, multi- and interdisciplinary collaboration.



REFORMING IMPACT EVALUATION

7. Rethinking and reshaping impact evaluation requires fundamental reform

This paper is a call to action to those who want to make impact evaluation relevant, credible, and useful for improved development. To those who want to make a difference, to those who want to bring about change, we extend an invitation to become involved.



The changes in the 21st century call for those who govern, commission and manage impact evaluations to conceptualize a broader definition of development. To achieve this they, at the very least, need to:

1. Address the current asymmetries and inequities of north-south evaluation.
2. Strengthen the evaluation architecture and standards among networks and key players.
3. Resource impact evaluation as one element of a robust system for monitoring and evaluation.
4. Adopt a broader range of reporting techniques for a broader set of impact evaluation users.

Those practicing impact evaluation need, at the very least, need to:

1. Develop and adapt rigorous approaches and mixed methods for impact evaluation.
2. Evaluate the global systems, strategies and policies that impact development.
3. Build a diverse and inclusive network to share findings and learning about impact evaluation.
4. Increase the evaluative capacity of all development practitioners including suppliers and users of impact evaluation.

Let us not forget that we are privileged to work in a field where our evaluation findings and processes can change lives for the better. This is not to be taken lightly or be lost in irrelevant squabbles. There is much to do, let's get to work.

Written by: David Bonbright & Keystone Accountability ❖ Fred Carden & Sarah Earl, IDRC ❖
Sanjeev Khagram, iScale ❖ Nancy MacPherson, Rockefeller Foundation ❖
Zenda Ofir, Evalnet ❖ Patricia Rogers, CIRCLE/RMIT
With financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation

First presented during the Perspectives on Impact Evaluation Conference in Cairo, Egypt March 29th – April 2nd, 2009