IMARK

Module
Investing in Information for Development

Evaluating an Information Project

Lesson 4: From Questions to Results

Learner Notes

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This lesson is part of the IMARK Module on "Investing in Information for Development". The Module contains six units. The unit on "Evaluating an Information Project" comprises four lessons:

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Lesson 4: From Questions to Results

This course is available in self-paced e-learning format on CD-ROM and the Internet (www.imarkgroup.org).

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify the specific impacts that you want to measure;
- be aware of the assumptions involved in measuring change;
- define the most appropriate indicators for your selected impacts;
- be aware of several methods for collecting data.

Introduction

The Logic Model has provided an intellectual basis for your evaluation. Each of the "if-then" links identified has helped define what to measure.

Now, there are two important sets of questions:

- Are all potential impacts of your project equally important? Do you want to try to measure all of them?
- If any given impact contains the word "more" – for example, "more awareness", "more knowledge" or "more skill" – how can you best measure such a change?

Setting priorities

Let's take the first set of questions first: Which impacts are most important to your stakeholders? And do you want to try to measure all of them?

A systematic **priority-setting** process will help avoid the following two common mistakes:

1. Taking “the easy way out”

Some impacts will be more difficult to measure than others. But an evaluation that focuses only on the easy ones is likely to come to superficial conclusions. The challenge for a good Evaluation Management Committee (EMC) will be to develop creative means of investigating hard-to-measure impacts.

2. Collecting too much data

If an EMC does not set priorities, it is likely to collect too much data on too many potential impacts. If that happens, the temptation will be to choose the best and/or easiest data for analysis and reporting, regardless of the importance of the impacts they supposedly measure.

Here is a useful method to avoid this mistake:

Call another EMC meeting. The objective of this meeting will be to have all EMC members agree on **which intended impacts are most important** for the evaluation to measure.

You can use the "card technique": ask each member of the EMC to write down specific questions that (s)he thinks the evaluation should focus on (one question per card). Then gather up the cards, pin or tape them to a large board in the front of the meeting room and lead a discussion in which members try to group them. The goal will be to **build consensus around a limited number of questions.**

As a means of keeping this discussion focused, raise four supplementary issues (for each of the questions on the cards).

- Who is the information for?
- How will this intended user actually use it?
- How will you collect it?
- What resources will you need to collect it?

The objective of this part of the process is to be sure that each question is really needed, that the answers will be useful, and that the data are collectible. If one or more of these conditions is not met, it may be better to exclude that question from the evaluation.

Measuring change

Now let's take the second set of questions: If any given impact contains the word "more" – for example, "more awareness", "more knowledge" or "more skill" – how can you best measure such a change?

The following statement is an ideal: "we need both *before* and *after* data if the evaluation is going to measure change". Unfortunately, most information projects lack this "before" data (sometimes called "baseline" or "benchmark" data). Often, nowhere in the planning process for the project has anyone thought to collect information on the attitudes, knowledge, skills or behaviour that might be relevant for evaluation later.

In such a situation, what should or can the EMC do?

The best approach is to look very carefully at any question that contains the word **"more".** If the question does contain the word "more", how do we propose to measure the change that that word implies? Do we really have questions (indicators) to measure such a change? And are our questions (indicators) valid, reliable and convincing?

Here is an example of a question that could work:

> "Can you remember a specific recommendation on fertilizer applications from the issue(s) you read? If so, please give details."

However, even with such a question, a problem may arise in data collection and interpretation. Interviewers and/or analysts will have to be trained to recognize a valid response from an invalid one.

Here are three questions with an analysis of how useful they would be for measuring **impact:**

1. *"Have you read at least one issue of the newsletter in the past year?"*

   This question is a good measure of OUTPUT, but not of IMPACT. A high score will indicate that the management of the newsletter is doing something right. The newsletter is being distributed well and is reaching its target audience.
   But that's all: we can't tell if it is having any effect on farmer attitudes or behaviour.

2. *"Did you find that the issue(s) you read increased your knowledge about fertilizer applications in rice?"*

   This question is a weak measure of IMPACT. Most farmers will find it too easy to say "yes" (without being specific). In addition, there are no details about the extent of the "increase". Did the farmer move from knowing nothing to knowing just a bit more, or did (s)he move from knowing a lot to knowing a lot, lot more?

3. *"Did that recommendation have any effect on your actual farming behaviour? If so, please give details."*

   This question is a good measure of IMPACT, but with a major methodological problem. Even if a farmer reports that (s)he has adopted new fertilizer practices, how can we know that this change has come about as a result of having read the newsletter? Many other explanations could also be possible (information from other sources, lower fertilizer prices, etc.). This problem is often described as one of "attribution"; that is, what effects can be attributed to what causes?

The biggest challenge in deciding on questions (data) is to balance what you would **like** to collect with what you **can** collect. If you and your EMC are operating under time or financial constraints, you may choose questions that are easy to ask but that do not measure what you really want to measure.

On the other hand, if you have few constraints, you may choose questions that are ambitious but that will generate data that are difficult to analyse. Therefore, here are four "rules" for your EMC regarding question selection:

Make sure at the beginning that:

- you've done a systematic analysis of all your questions;
- you know what types of data they're likely to generate;
- you're aware of any potential limitations in these data; and
- you've already thought about how they should be interpreted.

If you decide to focus mainly on **outputs**, perhaps because you can't agree on how to measure impacts, make clear that the outputs on which you will collect data are **prerequisites for the achievement of harder-to-measure impacts** (which might be measured later).

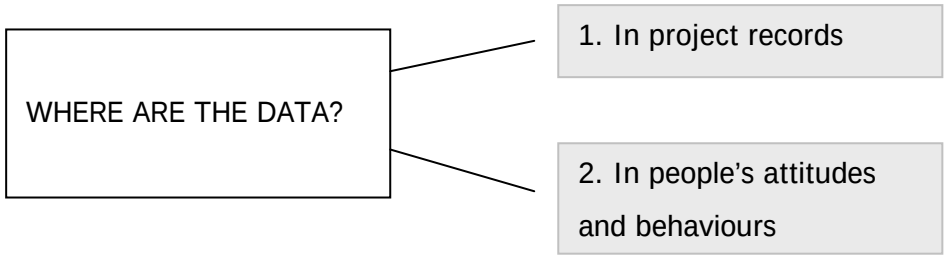
Data collection

Suppose you have organized another EMC meeting where you have used the "card technique" to come to agreement on questions to be asked and data to be collected.
Now the issue is how to collect these data.

To start, there are three important questions to consider:

1. **Where** are these data?
2. **How** can we best collect them?
3. **What** resources do we need?

As you can see, these three questions are inter-related. How to collect data depends on where they are. And what resources will be needed depends on the collection methods.
In other words – **content determines location, location determines method, and method determines resources.**



Let's start with "**project records**".

Some of the data that could be found in project records are:

- data on funds spent;
- number of person-days gone into the project;
- number of copies produced;
- number of requests for hard copies; and
- number of "hits" on the web site.

Usually, such data are easy to collect, since they should already be in files or databases. They are factual, probably reasonably objective, and it should not cost much to collect them (although to have access to some of them, you might need special permission).

However, these data are usually helpful in an output evaluation. If your evaluation goes further, and wants to measure impact, this kind of data will probably not be enough.

This brings us to the second category: **"in people's attitudes and behaviours"**.

Often an impact evaluation must take into consideration attitudes and knowledge of people. Suppose your EMC has developed a list of questions to find out about farmer knowledge.

How are you going to ask these questions?

The most common ways are questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. In both cases, it is possible to use both open-ended questions or/and fixed-response questions. Open-ended questions may generate more interesting data, but require a higher organizational capacity to be analysed.

Here are some questions to consider when deciding whether to use interviews instead of questionnaires:

- We will probably get a **higher response** rate from interviews. But how high a response rate do we really need?
- Interviews will be **more expensive and time-consuming**. But will the benefits that we gain from face-to-face contacts outweigh the costs?
- During interviews, we'll be able to **ask follow-up questions**. But do we have the organizational capacity to analyse these data once we have collected them?

Whichever technique you use, you'll have to decide about **respondents**:

- Whom should you interview?
- To whom should you send questionnaires?
- What proportion of stakeholders should you interview or send questionnaires to?

As in the case of the EMC, you should try to identify and include all important stakeholders. It is important to realise that organizations or people that are left out may question the results of the evaluation later.

Analysing results

After you collect your data, you will have to analyse them.

Unfortunately, evaluation planners often do not pay enough attention to this phase, and don't do enough preparation. But this phase is extremely important and should be carefully planned. Here are the different steps of data analysis:

1. **From data collection to organization**
    - After the data have been collected, who is to be responsible for organizing and managing them?
      Is the appropriate technology in place?

   What procedures have been agreed on to check and clean up raw data as they come in from the field?
    - Who will be responsible for data entry?
    - What plans have been made to draw up preliminary formats for reporting results?

   Also, it is important to notice that:
    - There are several different and distinct jobs to be done.
    - Just because PCs will be involved does not mean that IT specialists should run the entire process.
    - The same people should probably not take the lead in doing all the jobs.

2. **From organization to analysis and conclusions**
    - Now that you have the data together – with responses to each question organized and each statistic is in its proper place, how will you analyse all these different pieces of data?
    - Who will be responsible for analysing the data?

3. **From analysis to a report and publication**
    - Who will be responsible for preparing a report outline and first draft?
    - Is there a plan for publishing the report and for disseminating it to appropriate audiences?

Each of these phases represents a process. And each process requires planning, resources, and clearly defined responsibilities and procedures. Each process must also produce outputs. After all, an evaluation is a project in itself, which has to be planned and managed.

It would be best to think about evaluation -- the identification of stakeholders, outcomes and evaluation questions – right at the beginning of the project. This will help make evaluation easier and more effective.

Summary

When planning an evaluation, an important issue is **setting priorities**. The questions are: Are all potential impacts of your project equally important? Do you want to try to measure all of them? It will be important to agree on which intended impacts are most important for the evaluation to measure, and to build consensus around a limited number of questions.

Another important issue will be how to **measure change.** It is important to: a) conduct a systematic analysis of all your questions; b) know what types of data they're likely to generate; c) be aware of any potential limitations in these data; and d) think about how they should be interpreted.

The next issue will be how to **collect data**. The questions are: Where are these data? How are we going to collect them? What resources will we need?

And the final issue will be how to **analyse the data.** The analysis is conducted in three stages: a) from data collection to organization; b) from organization to analysis and conclusions; and c) from data analysis to a report and publication.