



Mette Jacobsgaard

is a lawyer and social scientist who has worked with development aid for 28 years especially in Africa and Asia. She has used AI in her practice as a consultant and trainer since 1994.

Contact: 101572.622@compuserve.com



Irene Nørlund

has worked in social change in developing countries for three decades, specializing in NGOs and community development; livelihoods, nutrition and health and organizations and participatory methods. She has trained NGOs in Mongolia in AI analysis. She is presently working in Research & Development at Metropolitan University College, Copenhagen.

Contact: inorlund@mail.dk



Embedded (E)Valuation

ABSTRACT

Mette, in collaboration with Irene, explores the development of embedded evaluation, particularly in evaluating the work of NGOs with street children

'Aid thinking is lazy thinking: limited numbers of weak evaluations contribute to a lack of consensus around the simplest of questions - what works?' Abhijit Banerjee, MIT¹

Evaluation based on the traditional rules of (social) science is increasingly at odds with the complexity and volatility found in our contemporary world. The prevailing paradigm of (social) science is both expert and problem-solving based. Most reviews and evaluations of development aid projects and programmes are made against plans based on a logical framework analysis made for the project or programme, sometimes several years before the evaluation, by 'experts' external to the project and the culture in which the project will be taking place. Evaluation against set plans, assumptions, problem analyses and dreamt-up indicators developed by 'experts' often fail, or produce disappointing results, which are elaborately documented in reports left on a shelf to collect dust.

In 1995, Dr Charles Elliott of Cambridge University and I were tasked with the job of evaluating the work of an NGO in Ghana. Operating in an extremely volatile field – street children – their greatest fear was to be evaluated against plans which became irrelevant as soon as they were made. Although the ultimate objective of the NGO's work may have been to get the children off the street into a 'normal' life, they also knew that the success rate was extremely small. One of the reasons, they believed, was that they simply did not know enough about what attracted the children to the street and kept them there. In addition to knowing something about their past performance, the NGO wanted first and foremost to learn: they wanted their staff to learn, they wanted their donors to learn, and they wanted to learn from their clients, the children in the street. On that basis,

¹ ODI Background Note (Dec.2007) *Aid Effectiveness: The Role of Qualitative Research Impact Evaluation.*

With embedded evaluation, the 'expert' becomes a facilitator, assisting the stakeholders.

together with Jane Magruder Watkins, we developed the concept of 'embedded evaluation'.²

Taking responsibility

With embedded evaluation, the 'expert' becomes a facilitator, assisting the client together with a number of stakeholders, including in this case, the street children, to look at what has worked well in the project and what changes could be made to enhance the performance. Whereas the original objectives for the organisation and project may guide the questions asked, the questions themselves are open to allow new and unexpected information that could take the project in a different direction. Instead of ticking boxes against a list of expected outcomes, the information that comes from 'tell me a story of' brings a richness and – importantly – a context which gives valuable clues as to how the project could 'do more of' – or even change direction. Embedded evaluation is a process of self-evaluation. Through the use of AI the project actions are valued and therefore the stakeholders, including those who lead the project are much more likely to take on board the learning from the evaluation. As the focus of AI is on what works well and what can be changed to make it even better, the stakeholders and especially the implementers of the project are in a better position to be open and take responsibility for past as well as future actions.

Who are the stakeholders?

Much of the success of an embedded evaluation is determined by initial decisions about purpose, goals, focus, process and stakeholders. The purpose, goals and focus are usually dictated by the terms of reference given by the client, i.e. a donor agency. However, arriving at the best framework is often an iterative process. It is not always obvious who should be involved from the stakeholder group and even less so from the wider stakeholder group.

Stakeholders are any person, group or institution with an interest in, or which has information about or has contact with the individual, team or service, product, project or program. Any person or group that has the capacity (irrespective of their organizational status) to influence the outcome of the evaluation is essentially a stakeholder.

Variation in evaluation

In this brief article we do not have the space and time to cover the many variations in evaluation, some of which are qualitative.³ At the same time, it is our experience that evaluations of aid projects and programmes usually operate with one or a team of professional evaluators who carry out the entire evaluation. They give direction and maintain control of the evaluation and its conclusions and recommendations. Embedded evaluation usually involves facilitation by an experienced AI practitioner, who facilitates a process through which a number of stakeholders take responsibility and become the evaluation team. Thus, in brief, embedded evaluation is headed by a team of stakeholders supported by an experienced AI facilitator, whereas many other evaluation methods are usually

² The effects of this work are described by Fr Patrick Shanahan in his articles starting on page 39 of this issue.

³ Michael Quinn Patton is one of the foremost scholars working with presentation of qualitative research and evaluation and the multiple approaches that have developed since the 1980s and 90s. (*Qualitative Evaluation Methods* (1980); *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 2nd Ed. (1990); *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, 1st Ed. (1978); 4th Ed. (2008). All published by Sage Publications.)

We made positive assumptions about the lives that the children led in the street, and were rewarded with a wealth of information

Embedded evaluation allows recipients of aid to evaluate the delivery of aid

headed by a team of external professionals with little or no direct stake in the outcome of the evaluation. Embedded evaluation further allows the stakeholders, and especially the recipients of the aid, to evaluate the delivery of aid that is after all meant to support them.

This presents a shift in paradigm: in many evaluations, the goals are to provide an objective assessment of the project or programme. Stakeholders have an inherent stake in the assessment and are therefore not seen as being objective. Even in most qualitative evaluations where the stakeholders' assessment is included, it is the task of the evaluator to ensure the objectivity in the final evaluation.

And back to the NGO in Ghana

We first trained the staff of the NGO to enable them to go into the street and ask their clients to tell stories, based on questions such as:

- Tell me what you really like about being here in the street.
- Tell me the story of a time when you found it most exciting to live in the street.
- Tell me a story about how your life has changed since you came into contact with the NGO.

We made positive assumptions about the lives that the children lead in the street and were rewarded with a wealth of information which surprised even the NGO staff, most of whom were local social workers. The NGO received feedback about the impact they had on the lives of the children, set in the context of their daily and real-lived lives. They also received a wealth of information about the lives of the children, especially what attracted them to the street.

Had we asked the children to rate the service of the NGO on a scale from one to five, we would have had information about whether the children found the service good, satisfactory or bad, with no clue about the real reasons behind the answers. Closed questions and questionnaires with quantitative questions such as 'how many training sessions have you attended' merely give you a number.

Instead, by asking the children to tell stories and by making positive assumptions about them as human beings with a choice, they volunteered extra information about the NGO: what they liked and what they wish could change.

Including the staff of the NGO as active participants in the evaluation as well as the children enabled them to enter into an ongoing dialogue about the project, the lives of the children and the changes that could be made, both from the NGO's side and the children's. Valuing what the NGO was there to do, and in particular valuing what they had accomplished as well as what still needed to be done and changed, based on their own judgement of possibilities empowered them as well as embedded the outcome of the evaluation.

Making the choice to use embedded evaluation means making the choice to go beyond traditional data collection, analysis and judgment of merit and worth. Embedded evaluation generates shared meaning amongst the involved parties as well as energy to move forward on the basis of a shared understanding of what works well. It is my experience that people are much more likely to

Embedded evaluation generates shared meaning.

Stakeholders not only identify problems but find their own solutions

suggest changes – including drastic changes – to the way things operate, if they know that they have the ability to perform well. It should be noted that embedded evaluation using AI does not negate problems and needs for change. The stakeholders not only identify the problems but find their own solutions to them, thus embedding the outcome of the evaluation. As the purpose of most evaluations is to take stock, make changes and adopt those changes, I find embedded evaluation an ideal way to proceed.

In fact – Appreciative Inquiry is (e)valuation.

References

Banerjee, A. V. et al. (2007) Making Aid Work. Cambridge, MA: Boston Review Book, MIT Press.