Module 17

Evaluating Complex Programs

Complex Interventions and the Challenges of Evaluating Them
Module Objectives

By the end of the session you will:

1. Identify the three key elements of the trend towards more complex development interventions and evaluations to support them
2. Discern the differences between simple projects, complicated programs, and complex interventions
3. Identify the different evaluation strategies to evaluate simple projects, complicated programs and complex interventions
4. Recognize and address five main challenges associated with the evaluation of complex programs
5. Adopt alternative approaches for defining the counterfactual of complex interventions
6. Describe and apply alternative tools, methods, and approaches for evaluating complex interventions
The Move Towards More Complex Development Interventions
US commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (signing of the MDG declaration in 2000)

- Requires focus on national level outcomes
- Acknowledges the plurality of actors (e.g., countries and donors) contributing to national level outcomes
The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness

US commitment to the 2005 Paris Declaration principles

- Country ownership
- Alignment of support with national development goals
- Harmonization
- Managing for Results
- Mutual accountability

*OECD: Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development*
Donors move towards:

- Country programming and
- Assessing outcomes at the national not the project or program level
Key Implications (I)

What are the Implications of These Trends for International Development Evaluation?
Key Implications (II)

1. Reorienting evaluation focus from the activity/project/program level to the (i) country, (ii) sector, (iii) thematic, (iv) regional or global levels;

2. Determining how best to aggregate outcomes of interventions at the activity/project or country level to assess program-wide results or global results respectively;

3. Finding ways to assess the influence of program design, partnership approach and governance on overall results

4. Seeking replicability at a higher level and applicability at the system level
Three Main Levels of Program/Project Complexity
Do Size and Complexity Matter in Evaluation?

• The size and complexity of development interventions will have a major influence on the choice of the corresponding evaluation design

• We need to distinguish between:
  – “Simple” projects
  – “Complicated” programs and
  – Complex development interventions
From Simplex to Complex: Overview

- **Simple Projects**
  - "Blue print" producing standardized product
  - Relatively linear
  - Limited number of services
  - Time-bound
  - Defined and often small target population
  - Defined objectives

- **Complicated Programs**
  - May include a number of projects and wider scope
  - Often involves several blueprint approaches
  - Defined objectives but often broader and less precise and harder to measure
  - Often not time-bound
  - Context important
  - Multiple donors and agencies

- **Complex Interventions**
  - Country-led planning and evaluation
  - Non linear
  - Many components or services
  - Often covers whole country
  - Multiple and broad objectives
  - May provide budget support with no clear definition of scope or services
  - Multiple donors and agencies
  - Context is critical

Large, complex

Small, simple
Simple Project Example: A Polio Program

- Incidence of polio decreased in targeted communities
- Immunization Rate Increased
- Distribution of immunization Shots among Children <5 years in Target Communities as Scheduled
- Recruitment of Health Personnel and Procurement of Immunization Shots
Pretty straightforward, isn’t it?

However…

Most programs today tend to be more complicated than the polio vaccination intervention we just looked at.
Spend a few minutes looking at the theories of change you developed as part of your group case studies
Complex Interventions Examples (I)

- An entire USAID Country Assistance Strategy
- An entire Country-Led Poverty Reduction Strategy
- An entire Sector Program to which USAID contributes

Examples:
- Mali education sector reform
- Afghanistan transport sector program
Examples of Complex Interventions (II)

• Thematic and Cross-cutting Evaluations
  Examples:
  – USAID’s global decentralization and local governance programs
  – USAID’s gender mainstreaming

• Joint Evaluations

• Global Regional Partnership Programs
  Examples:
  – USAID Participation in the $1 billion UN and Partners Joint Food Security and Livelihoods Sector Program for Sudan
  – USAID and donor support for the Rwanda Vision 2020 Poverty Reduction Program
Quick Discussion

What are some others examples of USAID programs that could be classified as:

• Simple projects?
• Complicated programs?
• Complex interventions?
Complexity and Evaluation Challenges
The Special Challenges of Assessing Outcomes for Complex Interventions (I)

• Many complex programs do not have clearly defined activities
  – General budget and technical support that is integrated into broader government programs
  – Multiple activities
  – Target populations not clearly defined
  – Time-lines may not be clearly defined

• Multiple actors
  – Several national government agencies
  – National and international NGOs
  – Multiple donors
Lack of a baseline

• Often there is no baseline data

Lack of a credible counterfactual

• Very difficult to use a conventional comparison group
• Hard to identify an alternative counterfactual
• Even when evaluations include a counterfactual, the causes of observed changes may not be fully explained.
Alternative Evaluation Strategies to Address the Challenge of Attribution
Instead of opting for randomized assignment or statistical analyses (regression), the evidence of causality across a wide range of disciplines is based on the elimination of alternative explanations.

**Epidemiology**: what caused the outbreak of the avian flu or food poisoning?

**Journalistic and historical inquiry**: What precipitated the 2008-2009 recession?

**Forensic/Trace back approaches**: who committed the crime? (Sherlock Holmes, Law & Order, Modus Operandi)
Let’s Focus on the Modus Operandi (I)

Modus Operandi (MO) was conceptualized by evaluation theorist Michael Scriven (1976) as a way of inferring causality when experimental designs were impractical or inappropriate.

The MO approach, drawing from forensic science, turns the inquirer into a sort of detective. As a result, the inquirer/detective:

- observes some pattern (e.g., lower HIV incidence) and

- makes a list of possible causes (e.g., organization of a condom campaign, creation of Voluntary Counseling and Testing centers in the communities of interest, sensitization of religious leaders)
Let’s Focus on the Modus Operandi (II)

Evidence from the inquiry (HIV incidence dropped significantly in rural areas among protestant adults) is compared to the list of suspects (possible causes).

Those possible causes that do not fit the pattern of evidence (e.g., condom campaigns were organized only in urban areas only or sensitization programs were conducted exclusively among catholic leaders) can be eliminated from further consideration.

The one possible cause supported by the preponderance of the evidence and offering the simplest interpretation among competing possibilities (e.g., creation of VCT in rural settings) is preferred and considered the most likely to have contributed to the result.
Contribution Analysis – Beyond Attribution
Contribution Analysis: Key Steps

• Provide a well-articulated presentation of the context of the program and its general aims (identify the attribution problem and develop the cause-effect question that you would like to address through the evaluation – contribution mapping);

• Build a plausible program theory leading to the overall aims (The logic of the program has not been disproven, i.e. there is little or no contradictory evidence and the underlying assumptions appear to remain valid);

• Gather evidence and highlight the association (if any) between what the program has done and the outcomes observed; If necessary, gather additional evidence

• Point out that the main alternative explanations for the outcomes occurring (e.g., other related programs or external factors) have been ruled out or clearly have only had a limited influence.

Contribution Analysis

Otherwise said, Contribution Analysis focuses on:

- Gathering “multiple lines of evidence” on the validity and relevance of the causal links identified in the Results Chain,
- Assessing the impacts of external factors and
- Assembling the performance story
AusAID Fiji Case

1. You first reconstruct the Program Theory of Change

2. You highlight the program’s contributions (inputs)

3. You assess the Results achieved (measured change at various levels)

4. You verify any evidence about effects of the program’s contribution

5. Consider Alternative explanations – or other factors that contributed to the measured change

6. Review the performance story and establish the program’s contribution to the identified impact
Developmental Evaluation
# Developmental Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPTMENTAL EVALUATION</th>
<th>TRADITIONAL EVALUATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Focus</strong></td>
<td>Adaptive Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Goal</strong></td>
<td>Provide real-time feedback, Enhance Learning and Changing directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Goal</strong></td>
<td>Capture system dynamics and surface innovative strategies and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluator’s position vis-à-vis the program</strong></td>
<td>Embedded</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Occurrence</strong></td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of projects it is most suited</strong></td>
<td>Complex – Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Question</strong></td>
<td>Are we on the right track?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation Modality</strong></td>
<td>Constant feedback from a “critical friend” or supportive observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Activity Focus</strong></td>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis AND inform decision-making and facilitate learning</td>
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Review Questions

• What are the key differences among simple projects, complicated programs and complex interventions?

• What are the main challenges associated with the evaluation of complex programs?

• What is contribution analysis and how does it work?

• What is Developmental Evaluation’s added value?