

Contribution analysis

A new approach to evaluation in international development

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This article examines AusAID's shift to contribution analysis and a system of outcome-based monitoring and evaluating. It looks at the method of contribution analysis, its implementation in the Fiji Education Sector Program, an assessment of its use, and the challenges faced in the application of contribution analysis.

Introduction

Over the past decade pressure has grown on international donors to demonstrate the effectiveness of publicly funded aid initiatives. Indeed, recent media coverage of the extensive delays in tsunami reconstruction efforts (Khadem 2006) and IMF (International Monetary Fund) reports that suggest 'there is little evidence that aid boosts growth' (Colebatch 2005) have led many to question if aid works or makes a difference at all. In such an environment it is perhaps not surprising that in Australia, and elsewhere, government and a sceptical public have become less interested in reports on the effectiveness of program implementation, and the tallying of outputs, and instead now demand to know about program impact.

However, while international debates on aid effectiveness are increasingly placing greater emphasis on proving 'results' (van den Berg 2005, p. 27), sector realities make this a far from easy task. Many development assistance projects are delivered over relatively short time frames, within which donors can often only measure success in terms of progress towards end outcomes, rather than identify a causal chain or link between a program and its desired results. Furthermore, in the event that results are revealed to have occurred, difficult questions emerge regarding the degree to which a funded project can actually lay claim to having caused outcomes rather than some other program (Mayne 2001) or any number of societal changes occurring within the same time period.

To address these issues, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) has looked to new ways to measure the performance of development assistance programs. In Fiji, an adapted version of 'contribution analysis', a performance measurement approach developed within the Office of the Canadian Auditor General (Mayne 1999), has been introduced across three recently implemented programs as a possible way forward. Rather than attempt to definitively link a program's contribution to desired results, contribution analysis alternatively seeks to provide plausible evidence that can reduce uncertainty regarding the 'difference' a program is making to observed outcomes (Mayne 2001). Additionally, contribution analysis recognises that it takes time for results

to occur, and so does not attempt to prove an impact before impacts can realistically be achieved.

Contribution analysis was introduced into the AusAID-funded Fiji Education Sector Program (FESP) in 2005. This article provides an overview of what contribution analysis is; it then outlines how this approach was implemented with the FESP, and concludes by describing the initial challenges and benefits of this innovative approach to the evaluation of international development assistance.

The aid and development context

The need to demonstrate results

Before presenting an outline of contribution analysis, it is important to first set the scene and briefly consider the background and forces that have led to the implementation of this strategy with several AusAID-funded programs. As noted above, during the 1990s there emerged a growing demand for publicly funded international development agencies to focus on the impact of programs. To facilitate this, various forms of accountability were integrated into management and evaluation strategies (CIDA 2002; Nagao 2006). At the core of these developments was the recognition that monitoring and evaluation strategies needed to extend beyond describing inputs, implementation efficiencies and outputs, to also reporting actual outcomes. As this focus took hold the importance of reporting intermediate outcomes to provide early indications of progress, or to enable corrective action, also became widely accepted.

Australia followed this international trend. Reflecting new federal government requirements, and recommendations made by the Development Assistance Committee (van Doorn & Litjens 2002), the Australian Agency for International Development moved towards a system of outcomes monitoring and reporting. These developments were reinforced by the *White Paper on the Australian Government's Overseas Aid Program*, which emphasised the need for a greater focus on performance outcomes, and the implementation of better strategies for assessing the impact of aid efforts (AusAID 2006).

The problem of attribution

However, reporting results and 'proving' attribution are two different things. Attribution involves drawing causal links and explanatory conclusions between observed changes and specific interventions (Iverson 2003). At a product or output level these links can be relatively easy to establish. At higher levels (program, agency, sectoral or national outcomes), or in complex systems, this becomes much more difficult. Determining whether an outcome was caused by a program, partner government programs, other donor activities, or societal change is difficult to do and expensive. In practice, many evaluations identify whether an outcome has been achieved and if it was, assume the program can take credit for this. However,

demonstrating the contribution of a program to outcomes is crucial if the value of the program is to be demonstrated and to enable decisions to be made about its future direction (Mayne 2001). Contribution analysis, as proposed by Mayne (1999), provides an approach to monitoring and evaluation that addresses these challenges, and is well suited to development programs where data is likely to reflect 'progress toward results', rather than a definitive statement of final outcomes.

Overview of contribution analysis

The concept of contribution analysis

The term 'contribution analysis' is widely used in the financial assessment of business activities and products, and to a lesser extent in other fields such as media campaign analysis, medicine and ecology. In these areas, contribution analysis quantifies the contribution made by specific resources, events or actions towards final outcomes. For the most part, there is an assumption that clear attribution of input to outcome can be established.

This is significantly different to Mayne's (1999) conceptualisation of the term 'contribution analysis' developed for use in evaluating the performance of public sector programs.¹ In this context, contribution analysis was proposed as a series of steps which, according to Mayne, could be 'used to address attribution through performance measurement' (Mayne 1999, p. 6). Mayne suggested that by following steps that included:

- the development of a results chain, and
- the assessment of alternative explanations for outcomes

it would be possible to produce a plausible 'performance story'² outlining the degree to which results could be attributed to a program. For Mayne, this process would also generate an enhanced understanding of whether elements of a program were likely to achieve intended results.

Confronting the issue of attribution

Unlike other uses of the term contribution analysis, there is no expectation in Mayne's approach that causality can be firmly established, or that assessing a program's contribution to outcomes should be conducted solely through quantitative methods. Mayne's (2001) broader approach to contribution analysis seeks to achieve what Hendricks calls a 'plausible association' whereby a 'reasonable person, knowing what has occurred in the program and that the intended outcomes actually occurred, agrees that the program contributed to those outcomes' (cited in Mayne 2001, p. 8). To uncover what has occurred in a program, and its contribution to outcomes, Mayne suggests in addition to formal data sets that evaluators undertake literature reviews, case studies, field visits and focus groups with experts 'knowledgeable about the program area' (Mayne 2001, p. 19).

For Mayne, attribution is to be faced, but also understood as elusive and best approached with the aim of ‘reducing uncertainty’. As Iverson (2003) has noted, contribution analysis accepts that in order to create a ‘credible picture of attribution’ (Mayne 2001, p. 21) complexity is recognised, multiple influences acknowledged and mixed methods used to ‘gain (an) understanding of what programs work, what parts of which programs work, why they worked, and in what contexts’ (Iverson 2003, p. 61).

The six steps of contribution analysis

In his first major explanation of contribution analysis, written as a discussion paper for the Canadian Office of Auditor General (Mayne 1999), Mayne initially identified nine elements within contribution analysis. He subsequently consolidated these into six steps in a later article published in the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* (Mayne 2001, pp. 9–16). Figure 1 provides an abridged summary of the six steps Mayne currently proposes for contribution analysis.

This model of contribution analysis was, as noted earlier, originally developed with Canadian

public sector programs in mind. A search of all major evaluation journals suggests its use has been limited to this context, as very few articles refer to this approach. However, a simple Google search of the World Wide Web points to widespread dissemination of Mayne’s ideas on contribution analysis where it is mentioned on websites dedicated to institutional learning and change, research and evaluation communities, humanitarian policy groups, and the World Bank. Australia, through AusAID programs in Fiji, appears to be among the first bilateral or multilateral donors to use contribution analysis in development assistance programs.

Using contribution analysis in Fiji

In 2004, AusAID began to investigate mechanisms that could provide better ways of determining the contribution of the Australian development assistance program to Fiji’s National Strategic Development Plan. The objective was to enable AusAID to more clearly demonstrate to stakeholders the value of the program (AusAID 2004a). Discussions to explore this issue commenced

FIGURE 1: THE SIX STEPS OF CONTRIBUTION ANALYSIS (MAYNE 2001, P. 9)

<p>Step 1</p>	<p>Develop a program logic that details how a program is intended to work. The program logic should provide a plausible association between the activities of the program and intended outcomes. Some components of the program logic will be understood or accepted while others will be less so and require clarification.</p>
<p>Step 2</p>	<p>The results chain (produced from step 1) will provide an indication of the intended results (outputs, intermediate and end outcomes) that can be measured. Existing evidence for the occurrence of these results is identified. Additionally, assess the links in the results chain. Some will be supported by strong evidence while others will be weak and require additional data or information.</p>
<p>Step 3</p>	<p>Assess alternative explanations. In addition to assessing evidence linking a program to results, consideration must be given to the influence of external factors (e.g. other programs). Evidence or logical argument might suggest that some have only a small influence while others may have a more significant influence on the intended results.</p>
<p>Step 4</p>	<p>Use this information to create a performance story of why it is reasonable to assume that the actions of the program have contributed to the observed outcomes. Questions that should be considered at this point include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How credible is the story? ■ Do reasonable people agree with the story? ■ Does the pattern of observed results validate the results chain? ■ Where are the main weaknesses in the story? <p>The identification of limitations will point to where additional data or information are necessary.</p>
<p>Step 5</p>	<p>Seek out additional evidence to improve the program’s performance story. This can involve information on both the extent of occurrence of specific results in the results chain and the strength of certain links in the chain.</p>
<p>Step 6</p>	<p>Revise and strengthen the performance story. This involves using new evidence to build a more credible story, that is, one that a reasonable person will be more likely to agree with. It will probably not be foolproof, but will be stronger and more credible.</p>

with a workshop of relevant stakeholders in Fiji. Participants included representatives from AusAID, the Fiji Department of National Planning, three Fiji-based AusAID programs (in education, health, law and justice sectors), and three relevant Government of Fiji Ministries. After considering a range of approaches that might demonstrate AusAID's contribution to Fijian capacity development (AusAID 2004b), it was agreed that contribution analysis would be used as a framework for performance measurement with each program.

A further meeting, in 2005, established that contribution analysis would occur at two levels. At a 'higher level', AusAID would evaluate the contribution of AusAID's country strategy to Fiji's overall strategic objectives. At a 'lower level', each program would use contribution analysis to determine the contribution of program activities to specific sector objectives. It was also agreed that using contribution analysis was to be viewed as a learning process, and as such, each program could develop and adopt an approach to contribution analysis that best met each of the three sectors' needs. The lessons learnt would then be shared and an effective approach (or approaches) to contribution analysis developed. The next section describes how contribution analysis was implemented with the Fiji Education Sector Program (FESP).

Case example: using contribution analysis with the Fiji Education Sector Program

An important belief underpinning the implementation of contribution analysis with the FESP was that this new method was not to be viewed as a distinct monitoring or evaluation tool. Rather, it was to be seen as an approach to analysing evidence obtained from a variety of monitoring and evaluation techniques that were already in place. This meant that FESP's monitoring and evaluation framework did not significantly change when contribution analysis was introduced. The focus was instead on clarifying the results chains (i.e. program logic) and assessing alternative explanations for outcomes, to establish a picture of the program's contribution to outcomes.

Step 1: Develop the results chain (the program logic)

The first step in this process was to review the logic underlying the FESP that had been documented in a program logical framework matrix. The links between each level in the hierarchy of this matrix were analysed and clarified. The links between the FESP, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the national objectives articulated in the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) were then refined and more clearly defined. Performance indicators were revised in the logical framework matrix to reflect the Ministry's targets. A graphical representation of these links was also developed and is presented in Figure 2.

Preparation for Steps 2 to 4

As previously noted, contribution analysis recognises that in 'most cases what we are doing is measuring with the aim of reducing uncertainty about the contribution made, not proving the contribution made' (Mayne 2001, p. 21). With this change in emphasis, the FESP team members became more comfortable in monitoring results and in establishing stretch targets (ambitious goals that are established to encourage innovation and performance improvement). Consequently, whereas the previous focus had only extended to an output level, now the assessment of evidence for results also took place at a higher level of the results chain, that is, outcomes and impacts.

The responsibility for monitoring and evaluating achievements at each level identified within the program logic were also clearly established. The team member supporting a specific area of the FESP was responsible at program output and intermediate outcomes level, and the Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser at objective and outcomes level. The Terms of Reference provided to Advisers were restructured to clearly reflect the relevant results chain and included indicators, for each level, to initiate early thinking about alternative explanations for achievement of outcomes.

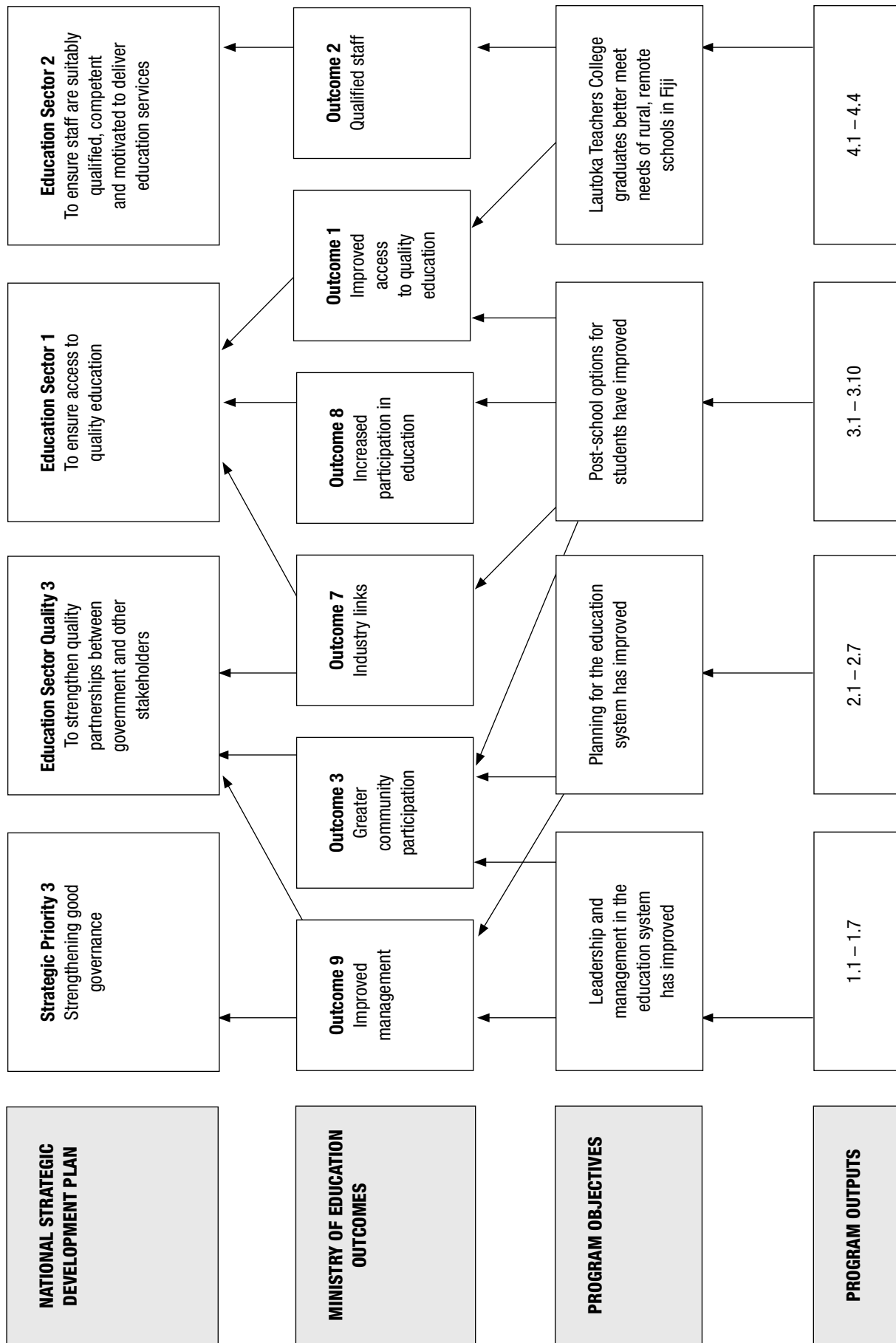
Each team member made several visits to support the Ministry implement the program. During their first input, each team member was required to develop a plan for monitoring and evaluating the achievement of the indicators specified in their Terms of Reference (this had also been standard practice prior to introduction of contribution analysis). They also identified potential alternative explanations for the achievement of outcomes and gathered evidence to demonstrate or discount these.

Implementation of Steps 2 to 6

At the completion of each input, each team member assessed the evidence and alternative explanations and updated their performance story. As its name suggests, a performance story provides a description of a program's achievements and details of how these were achieved (Dart & Mayne 2004, p. 306). An extract from a performance story is presented in Figure 3. The updated performance story then fed into a team member's next input, resulting in (and promoting) a monitoring and evaluation cycle.³

Next, the Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser reviewed each team member's performance story. During this review, the need for additional evidence was identified by the team member and also by the Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser. This additional information was then collected by the team member during subsequent inputs. With these activities completed, the Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser prepared a performance story at the Ministry of Education outcomes level (the second level in Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: PROGRAM LOGIC FOR THE FESP



It is important to recognise that the approach taken with the FESP did not result in additional monitoring and evaluation than would have normally occurred. It has resulted, however, in a different way of thinking, analysis and dissemination of monitoring and evaluation results.

Assessing the value of contribution analysis

While it is still early days in AusAID’s use of contribution analysis, this approach has already produced some exciting results with four significant benefits emerging from its implementation with the FESP. These include:

1 The use of higher order outcome indicators

An important outcome has been the acceptance of higher performance indicators that measure results outside the FESP’s immediate control. In general, like most public sector managers, managers of international development activities prefer to include indicators at a level over which they have direct control. Thus most indicators for the FESP were previously reported at an output level. However, contribution analysis accepts that a range of different forces are likely to contribute to, or influence, observed outcomes. AusAID’s recognition of this has made program managers more comfortable in monitoring against

FIGURE 3: EXTRACT FROM A PERFORMANCE STORY FOR FESP

<p>Rationale: Introduction of work to support monitoring standards in schools was introduced in February 2005 through the AusAID-funded ICT ... The introduction of a school review model is planned as part of the Leadership and Management (L&M) courses to be offered to the Eastern and Western (E&W) Divisions during 2006.</p>		
RESULTS CHAIN	2006 EXPECTATIONS	ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS
<p>Output 1.3 Relevant MoE personnel successfully train other MoE officers, school principals and head teachers in L&M.</p>	<p>2005: Draft School Review Framework and model of school review was developed through consultation and workshop program. Field testing led to further refinements and testing. A draft policy and guidelines for standards monitoring was developed.</p> <p>Expected key products:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ School Review module. ■ 12 MoE officers trained as trainers in the E&W Divisions to deliver the new School Review module. ■ The School Review module was delivered to 70 per cent of school principals and head teachers in the E&W Divisions. <p>2006 achievements at the completion of input 1 of 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The training module for incorporating the school review process was developed as scheduled. ■ A plan was developed for the delivery of training to 34 MoE officers as L&M trainers. ■ A plan was developed to deliver the module to school principals and head teachers in the W&E Divisions. 	<p>Discussion with the Manager of Training, Public Service Commission (PSC), identified that the concept of standards is new to Fiji. MoE through FESP is leading the way setting and monitoring standards in the public sector.</p> <p>Standards monitoring is not covered in PSC or University of South Pacific training.</p> <p>Benefits gained at a few schools (e.g. John Wesley College) may be partially due to other quality assurance and continuous improvement measures introduced.</p>
<p>Target group</p>	<p>Divisional and District officers, principals and head teachers (2004 E&W, 2005 North and Central, 2006 E&W Division)</p>	
<p>Immediate outcomes Leadership and management in the education system have improved.</p>	<p>Performance measures (stretch):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 80 per cent of trainers demonstrate acceptable trainer-training skills ■ 70 per cent of school principals, head teachers and school managers demonstrate enhanced skills in reviewing standards in schools. <p>Achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Monitoring and evaluation to collect evidence to validate performance measures approved by MoE and M&E Adviser. <p>Lessons learnt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Implementation needs to be more clearly articulated and documented. The key messages during implementation need to be ... 	

FIGURE 3: EXTRACT FROM A PERFORMANCE STORY FOR FESP (CONTINUED)

RESULTS CHAIN	2006 EXPECTATIONS	ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS
<p>Intermediate outcomes MoE Objective 9 (Improved management through ...)</p>	<p>Performance measures (stretch):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A process for reviewing school performance implemented by 2007. <p>Achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A school review process and implementation timetable have been developed and awareness-raising workshops begun. <p>Lessons learnt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sufficient time for reflection and consolidation of ideas is required to implement change in a productive manner. 	<p>School leaders upgrading qualifications is unlikely to account for the improvement, as less than 5 per cent upgraded their qualifications this year. Those who have, identified the FESP training as a major factor.</p> <p>Systems have been streamlined (with FESP support). However, surveys of training participants indicated that they felt the training had shown them how to manage more effectively.</p>
<p>End outcomes NSDP Strategic Priority: strengthening good governance</p>	<p>Performance measures (stretch):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A process for reviewing school performance refined for 2007. ■ Increased submission of audited financial accounts from school managers. ■ Improved management and accountability of education institutions. <p>Achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Evidence to validate performance measures will be collected during and after L&M training and school-monitoring implementation. ■ Proposed report to CEO by the end of 2006 on achievement made in relation to school reviews, especially in terms of strengthening quality partnerships between government and all other stakeholders along with improved governance. ■ Awareness raising and planning to achieve these performance measures has commenced. <p>Lessons learnt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There is an ongoing need for awareness raising in terms of the potential of Standards Monitoring in Schools Policy Framework to achieve this end outcome. Good planning will achieve this. ■ Building the links between the Standards Monitoring in Schools Policy Framework and other system initiatives must expand. 	<p>Activities by NGOs and other programs in this area are limited. Managers of other projects indicate that they believe their contribution to these areas is extremely limited.</p> <p>Focus groups will be conducted on why these changes occurred.</p>

indicators for higher order outcomes. The new indicators subsequently provide information on progress towards and contribution to outcomes, enabling donors to better meet their accountability requirements without seeking to demonstrate impact before this is possible.

2 The promotion of donor harmonisation

A second major benefit associated with the use of contribution analysis has been a greater emphasis on donor ‘harmonisation’. When planning an activity, potential alternative explanations to account for anticipated changes are now identified. This has increased awareness of other donor and agency activities, encouraging greater coordination of programs. The complementarity of support has increased, duplication of effort reduced, and in a number of cases, joint implementation of subprograms has been established.

3 Improved program logic

Another valuable outcome to emerge from using contribution analysis with the Fiji Education Sector Program has been greater clarity of the FESP program logic. By revising the results chain and incorporating this into each team members’ Terms of Reference, the links between the activities a team member supports, Ministry objectives, and national objectives, is now clear. Furthermore, this has enabled team members to maintain a better focus on the higher order outcomes to which their support is contributing.

4 An increased focus on, and resourcing of, monitoring and evaluation

Contribution analysis has also ‘contributed’ to an important unintended outcome, a heightened awareness and commitment to quality monitoring

and evaluation activities. The implementation of contribution analysis has been accompanied by vigorous discussion between AusAID, the partner agencies, and programs in each sector to determine the best ways to introduce this approach. Furthermore, the level of resources (both time and financial) given to monitoring and evaluation has also been increased. Provided that the monitoring and evaluation activities remain of a high quality it is likely these events will enhance the overall quality of evaluations of the FESP. It is also hoped that the more accessible reporting of monitoring and evaluation results (i.e. the creation of performance stories) will improve discussions of the results produced by the FESP.

Challenges associated with contribution analysis

The most significant issues encountered in the use of contribution analysis in Fiji relate to the way it has been applied rather than the approach itself. In essence, there have been a number of misconceptions in its use. These include that contribution analysis:

- *Is a different form of monitoring and evaluation, and can therefore replace existing monitoring and evaluation techniques.* Contribution analysis serves a specific purpose, and in its application on the FESP was used as a means of analysis rather than a different monitoring or evaluation tool. Other evaluation and monitoring efforts are still required.
- *Must use focus groups.* While focus groups are one technique that can be used in contribution analysis—as with any data collection method—they may not be appropriate in all cases.
- *Must use the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach.* MSC has been successfully introduced (in some form) with the three programs in Fiji and has produced some excellent results. However, as with focus groups, it is also only one approach and is not appropriate in all cases.
- *Validates the anecdotal.* Anecdotes and informal stories regarding program performance do indeed serve useful illustrative purposes, but as Mayne cautions, they are ‘most persuasive ... when illustrating a concrete case to complement other evidence that has been collected’ (Mayne 2001, p. 20).

Several other broader considerations, although not specifically associated with the FESP, should also be kept in mind when using contribution analysis. Firstly, as Nagao (2006) has noted, a focus on results has the risk of distracting attention from important issues regarding sustainability. While contribution analysis may prove useful in showing a program has contributed to outcomes, it must be complemented by other activities that monitor sustainability to establish just how firmly cemented and widely disseminated results are (Nagao 2006, p.

30). Another issue is raised by van den Berg (2005) who queries the possible short-sightedness of the growing focus on results evaluation. van den Berg observes that showing results have occurred, and have been caused by a program, is one thing, but reminds us that it may not necessarily follow that these are the results that recipients need. Whereas the FESP’s objectives were established by those affected by the program, that is, Fijians, the fissure between objectives and needs is a perennial issue associated with many programs. van den Berg subsequently proposes that:

evaluations [must also] focus on relevance as an ex post judgement on whether the project, programme or policy managed to solve the problem(s) for which it was established, rather than whether it is in line with the ex ante decisions on which activities would be financed, as is currently the practice in many evaluations’ (van den Berg 2005, p. 28).

A final and more pragmatic consideration relates to existing reporting requirements. While donors are moving towards monitoring outcomes, many donors still require monitoring and evaluation to ‘occur at outputs, activity and inputs level, providing information on inputs/outputs ... [keeping] track of project implementation efficiency ... [and providing] information on progress towards planned outputs in physical and financial terms’ (AusAID 2000). This is also reflected in the contractor evaluation responsibilities identified for the FESP (AusAID 2004b, p. 4). However, contribution analysis is not designed to provide information at this level and it appears that it does not specifically consider efficiency. Those designing evaluations must recognise that other approaches will need to be used to supplement contribution analysis so that the full spectrum of evaluation information required by donors is provided.

Conclusion

Contribution analysis has been successfully introduced into the Fiji Education Sector Program to evaluate FESP’s contribution to the Fiji Ministry of Education achieving important national education priorities. At this level it has already produced benefits owing to both the method itself, and the way in which it was implemented. To date the most notable benefits have been improvements to the existing FESP program logic, monitoring against performance indicators that better demonstrate progress towards outcomes, donor harmonisation and increased support for monitoring and evaluation activities. The practical challenges faced so far primarily reflect misunderstandings about evaluation, in particular the need to use a range of methods to gather evidence to enable triangulation of findings. The limitations of contribution analysis

in regard to monitoring inputs and the efficiency of project implementation have also not been well documented.

Nevertheless, in the Fijian context, contribution analysis is proving to be a valuable approach for the evaluation of international development assistance, and it is anticipated that as the use of contribution analysis develops further so to its efficacy for the FESP will grow.

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Notes

- 1 John Mayne first suggested that contribution analysis be used with public sector programs when with the Office of Auditor General of Canada.
- 2 Briefly, a performance story is a description of a program's achievements and provides details about how these were accomplished (Dart & Mayne 2004, p. 306).
- 3 The format for the team member's Terms of Reference was revised to reflect the format used for the performance story.

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