

Pelican Initiative: Platform for Evidence-based Learning & Communication for Social Change

Discussion on Learning from Ex-Post Sustained Impact Evaluations February 2016

Looking at what we can learn from some post-project sustained impact evaluations for current design may interest some here. Lessons on: 1) How we do it matters, and 2) Expect unexpected results.

Great lessons from @CatholicRelief @mercycorps @Federation @LuthWorldRelief @PactWorld evaluations: <https://lnkd.in/e9vEET4>

Enjoy!

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Jindra Cekan /ova, PhD
Valuing Voices: Sustainable Solutions for Excellent Impact
CEKAN CONSULTING LLC
President/ Catalyst

I want to give my strong support to Jindra's excellent advocacy for this important matter. Please read her blog posts on the issue (links below). From the beginning of my development evaluation experience more than a decade ago I have been aware of the need for a much more nuanced understanding and assessment of "sustainability" – one that has a much more systematic and stronger focus on evaluating the sustainability of the positive impacts and ideas generated through development initiatives. One spends only a very short time in the field as evaluator before this realisation dawns. We need to recognise this also in how we commission evaluations.

I firmly believe – as I have noted over the years and also recently at 3ie and relevant meetings at the 2015 NEC/IDEAS conference in Bangkok – that we cannot claim to have had success in development interventions if the outcomes and/or impacts are not durable, or at least have a chance to sustain or endure (the terms I use to avoid confusion with other aspects of "sustainable development").

Linked to this are many important issues. One of the most significant is that unintended negative consequences and impacts can easily neutralise positive impacts (and hence obstruct their sustainability) yet we seldom search in an appropriate manner for these when we evaluate.

We know enough to be able to predict at least to some extent whether under specific circumstances enough has been done to give impacts a chance to sustain. There are some basic "rules". And as Jindra says, in order to enhance our understanding, build knowledge and to claim true "success", we need to go back after a substantial period to see if this has indeed been achieved. This adds to this important knowledge base.

I am currently immersed in writing about this matter, and hope to provide some blog posts in support of Jindra's work. I trust we can build a larger wave of interest in this issue. It will be great to hear from

others who are interested so that we can join forces in promoting, researching and innovating in practice around this important aspect of development.

Zenda

Prof Zenda Ofir
International Evaluation Specialist
Honorary Professor, School of Public Leadership, University of Stellenbosch

On 17/02/2016, at 6:33 PM, Zenda Ofir wrote:

*I firmly believe – as I have noted over the years and also recently at 3ie and relevant meetings at the 2015 NEC/IDEAS conference in Bangkok – that **we cannot claim to have had success in development interventions if the outcomes and/or impacts are not durable, or at least have a chance to sustain or endure** (the terms I use to avoid confusion with other aspects of “sustainable development”).*

I want to suggest this is a too narrow a definition of sustainability.

Some years ago, Patricia Rogers and I undertook an evaluation of the sustainability of a major program that funded many hundreds of individual projects. In an associated literature search we found that most evaluations and discussions on sustainability focused on the sustenance of the original activities. However we found two other ways of understanding sustainability.

One was precisely the one you have mentioned - the sustainability of output and outcomes even if the individual activity ceased operating. In other words for the output and outcome to be sustained, it was not necessary for the specific project to be sustained, for instance it had become pretty much incorporated into business as usual rather than as a separate intervention. In some ways you could consider this as sustaining the capacity to produce the outputs and outcomes, rather than sustaining outputs and outcomes.

The second was that even if the activity ceased, and even if the specific capacities or output or outcomes were not sustained, the idea that underpinned the original activity was sustained. So in this particular example the idea of including some of the local indigenous peoples in community projects was sustained when the playgroup or village fair that was the original activity had long since disappeared.

Cheers

Bob

BOB WILLIAMS
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The report Bob referred to - Sustainability of Services for Young Children and Their Families: What Works? - can be accessed [here](#). It builds on some previous work on sustainability done as part of their

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy - an [issues paper](#) and a [tracking study](#) following up 100 funded projects after funding ended.

Patricia Rogers

Thanks for this useful reminder, Bob. I have over the years regarded your and Patricia's paper (2008 I believe?) as one of the more useful contributions on the topic. I have been studying over the years many of the evaluations that have passed my desk or captured in grey or black literature. Even when evaluators address "sustainability" as one of the DAC criteria, its treatment can be remarkably superficial.

But I did not aim here to provide a definition of sustainability. Doing so properly is a much more complicated matter that reminds me of the days around 2007/8 when we were all grappling with the NONIE impact evaluation guidance and the many different definitions of "impact" and "impact evaluation" that were floating around (still so, unsurprisingly).

Instead, I aimed to make the point here that I have been highly critical of claims of successful interventions or development by measuring "impact" only (i.e., all positive "impact evaluations" or "impact assessments") when done in the absence of a complementary emphasis on:

- (i) understanding whether the intervention was designed and implemented (and closed out/exited, if relevant) in a manner that enhances the chance that its positive impacts (and ideas or other benefits, for that matter, but esp. the glorious "impacts") would sustain (We know a bit from literature, and can derive quite a bit from experience); and
- (ii) some follow-up to understand whether impacts actually sustained – in whatever form, implicit or explicit. Frankly, in my view, only then can "success" be claimed, and that is what we actually want to claim – not "impact".

This is why it is currently one of my main professional foci.

Zenda

Prof Zenda Ofir
International Evaluation Specialist
Honorary Professor, School of Public Leadership, University of Stellenbosch

Dear all,

I do not see any contradiction between Zenda and Bob's views. Outcomes/impacts can consist of many different types of durable, direct or indirect long term consequences, including ideas, processes, practices and institutions in different sectors of society.

With kind regards

Fanie Cloete

Emeritus, Extraordinary & Adjunct Professor respectively at the Department of Public Management & Governance

University of Johannesburg, School of Public Leadership, Stellenbosch University & Department of Public Management, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Dear Zenda,

I am interested in discovering who else is learning from all this work. It would be great to see how many people from different disciplines are pulled into what we are doing. If its the same people with access to the same networks, I doubt if there is any learning happening. On the other hand, while practitioners are 'learning', there isn't much positive change on the ground or in policy circles. Communities are not waiting to be impacted but continue to explore their own options.

Regards,

Charles Dhewa

This is a very useful discussion. IPE Triple Line are currently involved in examining all that remains of a major intervention than ended in 2011 to support small holder coffee farmers in East Africa. One aspect of our investigation is examining if farmers are continuing with best farming practices taught to them during the project, whether their yeilds have continued to increase as a result, whether they continue to get higher incomes for better quality coffee and what impact this is having on families and communities. This is a robust approach to evaluating sustainability which donors could do well to follow. All too often funded interventions end, the impact is often fully realised outside the project time frame – particularly on empowerment and accountability programmes and there evaluations miss some of the most important results which are realised down the line.

A second equally worrying example is where donors assume that inputs that require funds will somehow be sustainable in and of themselves at project end. This particularly applies to community water handpumps, latrines ambulance services, and new schools.

Juliette Seibold

IPE Triple Line

This is a very useful and interesting discussion. Within a rapidly changing development context, how to make organisations sustainable – financially and in terms of their structure, efficacy, legitimacy, and ability to operate freely – is indeed a major topic of debate.

At INTRAC we have been exploring this topic with a focus on civil society sustainability. We organised a

conference back in November 2014 attended by practitioners, CSOs, foundations, social enterprises, private sector representatives and development agencies. Since then, we have organised or joined different roundtables and workshops.

We have produced a few publications related to the topic aimed at sharing the learning within the sector and encourage debate:

- A [blog series](#) exploring the different dimensions of sustainability
- [Key lessons](#) learned from the conference
- Our latest issue of [ONTRAC](#) focuses on the value of post-closure evaluation in relation to sustainability and shares examples from different practitioners

Also Valuing Voices recently shared an [insightful summary](#) of USAID's first post-closure evaluation, focusing on exit strategies and sustainability: <http://valuingvoices.com/learning-about-sustainability-and-exit-strategies-from-usaids-food-assistance-projects/>

Thought you might find them useful.

Cheers

Arantxa Mandiola Lopez

Dear Jindra and Pelican friends,

Greetings! This is of great interest to me. When I was working with UNAIDS, my work included screening funding proposals and monitoring projects. What concerned me was that why activities to some extent did not continue after the project ended. That is when I came across and went on to document Constellation's SALT approach of fostering community ownership and subsequent sustainable change.

As facilitator of evaluation, I have not come across many cases of sustainability as well as not many evaluations on the subject. This topic is close to my heart and am very much interested in this discussion. Can we do something together?

Warm wishes,
Rituu

Rituu B Nanda
Institute of Social Studies Trust