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The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks

"Adapting to Real-World Constraints: Managing Common Challenges in the Evaluation Process"

Mathias Kjaer, Evaluation Specialist at Social Impact

Part 1: Overview

About the Speaker:

Mr. Kjaer is an Evaluation Specialist at Social Impact (SI). He has managed several of SI's priority contracts including SI's evaluation of USAID's implementation of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness; a Democracy and Governance Assessment for USAID/Georgia to inform its next five-year strategic plan; a final performance evaluation of USAID/Georgia Judicial Administration and Management Reform project; a summative evaluation for The Carter Center on the effectiveness of an Irish Aid Block Grant to support peace, elections, and human rights programming; and is currently managing a major two-year contract with USAID/CMM to evaluate its People-to-People Reconciliation portfolio and pilot test its use of Developmental Evaluation methodology. Previously, Mr. Kjaer served as SI's Business Development Manager where he was involved in over 80 proposals with USAID, MCC, DFID, AusAID, and other major international donors. He holds an MA in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University and BA-Honors from McGill University.

Presenter Remarks:

Mathias began by saying that this talk would not focus on a specific method or approach, but would rather address a topic that is common to all designs and approaches. That commonality across approaches is that the field of DM&E is ultimately a social science and, "that we are not operating in a clean laboratory." When working in DM&E there are going to be things you cannot foresee or control, and therefore when you get to the field, you have to adapt.

Mathias worked as an evaluator on the USAID/Philippines Growth with Equity in Mindanao III Program (GEM 3) Project in Mindanao. GEM 3 was a 5-year (2008 to 2012), $99m program in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and other conflict-affected areas. GEM 3 was the largest and most diverse program within a larger 18 year, $203 million program. Despite the incredible amount of time and money allocated to the GEM programs, *no external evaluation had been conducted* until the arrival of Social Impact (SI).

SI was asked to evaluate only GEM 3, but they were requested to consider the long history of the entire program. *For a more detailed description of the project, please refer to the Powerpoint or Video related to this talk.*

Three challenges SI experienced during their work on GEM 3 are elaborated on in this talk. Those three challenges were:

1. Number of Evaluation Questions
2. Contingency Planning
3. Reconciling conflicting data

Number of Evaluation Questions

Choosing evaluation questions is a common challenge for both commissioners and evaluators. You want both breadth and depth, but with finite resources and time, the challenge is to balance what is possible and what can actually be answered.

The process of narrowing down evaluation questions therefore, is very important. The questions will help dictate the design and direction that the evaluation will follow.

Tips for Refining Questions

1. Focus on primary questions: SI recommends three to five primary questions. Sub questions are fine as long as they directly help answer the primary question.
2. Prioritize and rank: Prioritization and rank of the evaluation questions should be decided in the early planning stage.
3. Questions need to be realistic and answerable.
4. Choose questions that reflect needs and interests of intended users: Recommended strategies and exercises for this stage include:
    a. Look to Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE), developed by Michael Quinn Patton.
    b. Performing a data simulation exercise will help you hone in on your primary questions.
5. Don’t use questions which contain two or more questions in one.
6. Avoid Yes/No questions: Yes/No questions can often be answered by looking at the data.

Contingency Plans

Significant challenges arose during the GEM 3 program; a typhoon led to mass flooding, Mindanao experienced an earthquake, target sites became inaccessible due to conflict, asking sensitive questions was sometimes more delicate than anticipated. In order to address unexpected challenges, it is always important to develop a contingency plan.

Tips for Contingency Plans

1. Plan for known challenges: There are events and circumstances that are unforeseen, but there are many known events that you can plan for if you take the time to learn about the area and the cultural environment e.g. national holidays, particular religious events, school calendar (if applicable), seasons etc. .

2. Remember that participants are human: Some aspects of participation are culturally relative. It is important to remain flexible when dealing with different understandings of things such as punctuality and openness to questioning.
3. Have alternative sites: If you are unable to access a target site, have a comparable alternate site you are able to switch to.
4. Work with local staff: When working with local evaluators, be aware of the risks to them. Even though local staff can often go places expats cannot, don't put your local staff in danger.
5. Utilize secondary sources of data: If you cannot access an intended set of data, see what already exists. There is a growing resource of secondary sources, tap into that.

Reconciling Conflicting Data

Different evaluators will receive different data, and they may even interpret the same data in different ways. In GEM 3, some of the major challenges to honest data collection included but not limited to the presence of military escorts and their effect on interviewee responses, the presence of cameramen and their effect on interviewee responses, and the desire of interviewees to give answers that pleased the evaluators in an attempt to secure future funding. It is very important to be aware of interview dynamics and how they are affecting your data.

Tips on Conflicting Data

1. Introductions and Confidentiality: Put thought and effort into clear and positive introductions that assure interviewees of the confidentiality of their responses.
2. Sequencing of questions: Put sensitive questions towards the end so that they are asked after there is an established report with participants.
3. Varied phrasing: Ask the same question slightly differently, and then look for consistent responses.
4. Work with local evaluators: Local evaluators bring cultural sensitivity and awareness.
5. Triangulation of response data.
6. Randomized Response Technique. (*please refer to attached documents on this talk's NPE page*)

Part 2: Question & Answer

Melanie Kawano-Chiu (moderator): Follow up on sensitive questions, how do you incorporate "do no harm" principles into your work?

Mathias: Our questions are considered extensively during the planning stage, and are considered for how they comply with "do no harm". SI has an Internal Institutional Review Board which looks at sampling strategies and reviews lines of inquiry dealing with sensitive questions and vulnerable groups. The key for adhering to "do no harm" and conveying that to participants is to focus on good introductions. In our introductions we emphasize that answers are voluntary and confidential, and that identifying information is removed from answers before they are analyzed.

Baranaye Diana Marcus (attendee): I am part of a project in the Niger Delta region, and during administration of evaluation surveys, we encountered a problem with translators adding to or removing from a response. How can an evaluator reduce this constraint?

Mathias: When first recruiting/onboarding translators, emphasize the importance of direct translation. The translator should never be responsible for independent clarification questions. SI has their team leader spends at least a day training translators on importance of this. We also invite our translators to “sundowners”, or our daily debriefs. It is during this time that translators may add in their alternative interpretations of what we head, based on their knowledge of local dialect and communication styles.

Debbie Ball (attendee): Do you have any specific tips or tools for designing good questions and testing them?

Mathias: Consult as many stakeholders as you can to create a comprehensive list of questions, then reduce that list to what specifically answers your key questions.

Abelardo Rodriguez (attendee): You conducted 900 surveys, how do you balancing weighing qualitative and quantitative results?

Mathias: To combine qualitative and quantitative design, we used parallel analysis, which meant we took each data type (focus group discussions surveys, etc.) and compared those results across data types and triangulated the data.

Some FGDs began with an anonymous questionnaire, we then used those answers to inform the direction of that FGD; after the FGD we would go back and compare the anonymous answers from the beginning to the responses recorded during the FGD discussion, and see if there was a difference between anonymous and public answers.

Isabella Jean (attendee): How many of your questions are deliberately meant to invite peoples’ analysis of the program outcomes? For example, do you strive to ask less "What/When/Who" questions, and more of "Why”?

Mathias: When we are conducting interviews, we are inviting participant analyses. Interviews are about feelings and forecasts.

A key portion is planning for which questions to ask which audience, and which participants will be able to answer different questions and provide different data. There is a misconception that evaluation is just fieldwork. The planning process is so important. Allocation of effort should be 1/3 planning and design, 1/3 fieldwork and 1/3, analysis.

Debbie Trent (attendee): Can you speak to the challenges of managing an eleven member team?

Mathias: Trying to write a report in one voice will eleven authors was very difficult. We had a program manager and two local logistician coordinators. Local coordinators and facilitators are vital to success. Local coordinators are key to the direction of the evaluation and access to participants. We found the midterm check in very useful to systematically go over questions and check that there is general agreement about what evaluators are hearing.

If you have any follow-up questions, please post them on the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum here.