

Community Use of Evaluation – Concept Note

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What is the concept?

In the era of inclusive development, participation and genuine partnerships with local stakeholders should be the cornerstone of all interventions, yet no one within the sector could, hand on heart, state that this is the norm. This, more often than not, is not malicious, but is more as a result of competing priorities within organisations and the wider ecosystem, however the result at best creates a significant power imbalance, and at worst is at example of neo-colonialism at its finest.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning as crucial parts of the development process are all often victims of this phenomenon, with a significant lack of “meaningful”¹ engagement with communities built into the systems they create. The evaluation regularly extracts information from the communities it wishes to serve, yet in the rush to fulfil numerous reporting requirements, it rarely returns this information wealth to these communities. Data, and the knowledge that comes from it, is stockpiled out of reach from those who could use it to advocate for themselves, to become more resilient, or to hold the aid sector accountable.

What if local stakeholders had access to the data and the resultant learnings – and the understanding of how to use it? Would they make better decisions about the services that are accessible to them, and use the information to support their own communities more broadly?

Why is it important?

While there are a number of pressing issues surrounding ethics in MEL and wider research, we see this as an important, and to a certain extent, easy step that the sector can take to ensure more equilibrium and equality within our work.

There are a number of factors we believe are important to consider when looking at knowledge sharing within evaluation.

1. Human Rights – Who owns evaluation data?
The European (and UK) General Data

Protection Regulation (GDPR) present an approach in which an individual retains ownership and the right to their own data. And while they give their permission to organisations to use this information to evidence the effects of programming, this knowledge should be returned to its owner for them to understand how their data is being used.

2. Power Dynamics – How can outside organisations be held to account if the communities in which they work do not have access to the same information and knowledge, to understand what is happening on their doorstep?

This reeks of a neo-colonial approach to development, wherein people have things done to them, under the assumption that they should welcome

any support offered, rather than both parties being equal members of a partnership.

3. Furthering Impact – Who knows more about their community than the people who live in it?

Despite this being a widely acknowledged factor in programme design and delivery, for some reason when it comes to evaluation, understanding the data and learning, communities are side-lined. Not allowing communities the chance to input in more strategic ways and allow them to utilise and build off evidence collected, limits the amount of impact the programme itself can be achieving, but also limits the way in which this knowledge can be used in other ways within the community.

Why isn't it already happening?

We are aware that the reasoning why this might be happening might vary dependent on context, geography, thematic area and funder, we also think that there are some systemic issues behind this problem.

In 2019 we did some research through the Pelican platform and found that 85% of evaluation and development professionals thought this was a significant issue – amongst them, 62% thought it was very significant.

¹ What we/communities define as meaningful is a paper in itself.

When polled as to why this wasn't already happening, the top three reasons were:

- Lack of time;
- Resistance from implementing organisation to being held to account by communities; and
- Competing priorities pushing it down the agenda.

Following this was:

- Lack of expertise and resource on how to do it effectively

While this was a small sample, it re-enforced our own experiences and that of our peers. We will continue to have these discussions to further our understanding of some of the systemic issues why this is happening.

Who are we?

In early 2019 a group of MEL experts in London came together to discuss the challenges in this area and to share resources. Surprisingly, what we found as we discussed the subject of sharing data, was that the issue was more systemic and entrenched than we had anticipated. As such we decided to try and address the problem at its roots to encourage the sector to shift accountability standards and focus on engaging communities in data and knowledge.

The next steps is to widen the discussion to bring in a wider variety of people, including funders and communities representatives, as well as MEL professionals from the south.

What are some of the barriers?

We have brainstormed some of the barriers we anticipate in pushing for change across the international development sector:

1. Data ownership uncertainties – there is a significant lack of clarity across the industry about data ownership, sharing and how to manage data across numerous jurisdictions. The majority of organisations do not have the capacity to have specialist staff working on this, so tend to revert to a defensive position, sharing as little data as possible for fear of breaching laws.
2. Stakeholder interests - while there are many stakeholders within even the smallest programme, typically the most important one ends up being the funder, even if this is not explicitly acknowledged. They may limit the amount of budget allowed for MEL, dictate some aspect of the MEL framework and

approach or set timelines for final reporting that does not allow for meaningful community engagement within evaluations.

3. Protecting confidentiality and ensuring protection of sensitive identifiable data. This will need to be addressed in a systematic way, within legal and ethical standards, but not avoiding sharing for fear.
4. Community engagement – communities are not homogenous, singular entities; they are complex social, economic and political structures, with constantly moving parts, mired in history and their own context. This often can cause significant barriers in community engagement, as the time, and therefore resource, necessary to effectively consult and collaborate with the relevant parts means that many organisations shy away from even attempting to do this with their evaluation findings.
5. Cultural change for the sector – the reality is that this would necessitate a significant shift in the industry, affecting a massive range of aspects of development from budgets and timelines to funding cycles and skillsets of staff. The way in which the evaluation sector is set up focuses on academic rigour, jargon and complex analysis. Translating this into accessible products will require real commitment from organisations, the space to do so from their funders, and staff who are skilled communicators and community workers.

What are our next steps?

1. We are sharing this two-pager within our networks, soliciting feedback, seeking people who share our passion and collecting stakeholder contacts.
2. We want to have very honest conversations with a wide range of people about this concept, building our own understanding and the subsequent case for support.
3. We envisage next steps a working group, working on collecting and sharing best practice and advocating for change at all levels of the ecosystem.

If you have any questions or comments about anything contained in this brief please contact:

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We would love to be challenged, pointed in the direction of additional resources, people we should be speaking to etc so please do get in touch!