



LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NOTE

Reflections from a Workshop on 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money'

Background

This document discusses the outcomes of a workshop held in Melbourne on July 26, 2013: 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' as part of a larger initiative known as the 'Big Push Forward'^{1,2}. It presents these discussions amidst some of the current debates around results and evidence in policy and practice and in connection to the principles of ACFID Code of Conduct. As a result, this note has been prepared primarily for ACFID members.

More than 70 representatives from Australian non-governmental organisations (ANGOs), universities, the consultancy sector and the Australian aid program participated in the workshop, the second such event to be held in Australia. The first Australian workshop on The Big Push Forward initiative was held in Melbourne in October 2011, hosted by Oxfam Australia.

Introduction

In 2012, the Australian aid program committed to achieving 'the fundamental purpose of...help[ing] people overcome poverty' through: '...using systems, methods and partners that are effective in achieving results and efficient in delivering value for money [and that utilise] concrete evidence of what works best on the ground to produce results' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012: 1, 2 & 3). The Australian aid program's desire to achieve results, provide value for money and deliver work based on 'concrete evidence' is consistent with an international trend towards aid effectiveness, borne—in part—from widespread and increasing scrutiny around effectiveness in development programming. Such arguments are, hardly new and have a long tradition of debate among theorists around what they saw as a lack of effective change in the lives of those most in need, despite an ever-increasing number, and growth in the size of development agencies³.

Explicit international recognition of the need for ways to improve effectiveness in international development came in 2005, with *The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* and, later, *The Accra Agenda for Action* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). In the years since, the development sector has become progressively more focused on 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'evidence', 'value for money', and 'results'.

Throughout the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop participants expressed agreement on the importance of achieving and demonstrating results. However, as this Note will show, the issue of what results count, and how results are demonstrated, is a complex one:

¹ This note has been prepared by Gillian Fletcher, La Trobe University. The workshop was co-hosted with support from: ACFID; the Australian National University (ANU); and La Trobe University's Institute for Human Security and the Australian Centre for Sex, Health and Society. The contents and opinions expressed in this Note however, are those of the author'.

² The Big Push Forward is an informal international network of practitioners seeking to advance conceptual and methodological discussions around how development aid can support of a fairer and more equitable world. Previous Big Push Forward events include one in Australia and an international conference held at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University in Brighton, UK – 'The Politics of Evidence'. For more information about the Big Push Forward, see <http://bigpushforward.net/>.

³ While estimates fluctuate of the number of organisations operating as development agencies around the world, Rogerson et al. have pointed out that "despite persistent criticism [of international development] from different points in the ideological spectrum ... no major aid institution has been closed in 50 years, whereas many have been created". Rogerson A, Hewitt A and Wadenburg D. (2004) *The International Aid System 2005-2010: Forces For And Against Change*. London, England: Overseas Development Institute.

1. Internationally, and within Australia, there is no agreement on what counts as 'effective', 'efficient', 'evidence', 'value for money', or 'results';
2. This disagreement is largely the result of debates around which forms of knowledge (and associated methods for gathering this knowledge) should be prioritised in determining effectiveness, and why;
3. Attention to the values and principles behind development practice tend to get lost in a false dichotomy between forms of knowledge (explained below);
4. The increasing focus on results and evidence has had both positive, and negative, effects on development practice, in particular for Australian NGOs;
 - The positive effects are a result of more attention being paid to outcomes, and to monitoring, evaluation and learning;
 - The negative effects are a result of different views on what counts as 'effective', 'efficient', 'evidence', 'value for money', or 'results' and, in particular, whether or not these definitions are explicitly linked to principles of development practice;
5. Overall, participants felt that the negative effects outweigh the positive.

In the 'false dichotomy between forms of knowledge', referred to in point 3 above, two extremes tend to exist. On the one hand, there is belief in methods such as randomised controlled trials as 'the gold standard' because they seek measurable, comparable data that is considered objective and, on the other hand, there is the belief that development is a socially mediated process that means different things to different people in different contexts and therefore can only be subjectively assessed. This Learning Note seeks to move the debate away from a focus on opposing views and beliefs in relation to these debates and towards a concern with what type of knowledge (and associated methods) is 'most fit for purpose' when considering an intervention's aim and the principles of development practice that the intervention (or the organisation behind the intervention) support.

Section One will present an overview of some of the experiences of the focus on results (as discussed during the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop).

Section Two will briefly review international and national principles of international development practice, and offer case studies that demonstrate ways in which value for money and a results based approach are being discussed in relation to these principles.

Section Three will present practical considerations for Australian aid and development practitioners and organisations as they seek to operationalise the ACFID *Code of Conduct*, assess, and demonstrate, evidence-based effectiveness, efficiency, and value for money.

A note on terminology: measurement vs. assessment

In the section above, I use the term 'assess' rather than 'measure'. This is a conscious statement of inclusion. By referring to assessment, it allows for a conceptualisation of results that is not just numerical. Intentionally or otherwise, reference to *measurement* can constrain us to thinking about results in terms of those that can be expressed numerically.

The OECD-DAC's *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management* (OECD-DAC, [2002] 2010: 22) is consistent in referring to assessment, rather than measurement. For example, evaluation is defined as 'An assessment ... of a planned, on-going, or completed development intervention'. This definition is explicitly cited in the Australian aid program's Evaluation Policy: 2012-2015 (AusAID, 2012a). This same policy calls for evidence that is 'valid, reliable and reasonable...[and] robust' (AusAID, 2012a: 10); but not simply *measurable* evidence.

Section One: Experiences of the increasing focus on results

At the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop held in Melbourne, Australia in July 2013, development practitioners took part in a series of interactive sessions intended to provide food for thought, a safe space and structure for discussion of their experiences of a results based focus and approach to development. A large part of the day was given to group discussion of the benefits, challenges, positive and negative effects of the results focus as experienced by practitioners and those working with the Australian aid program; and to the discussion of possible strategies for enhancing the positives and reducing the negatives.

Participants emphasised that their experiences of an increasing focus on results were in shades of grey, not black and white. On the whole, however, participants had had more negative experiences than positive ones. And the negative ones were most directly related to what people experienced as a disconnect between debates about what counts as evidence of results, and the principles of development practice (such as those defined in ACFID's Code of Conduct and elsewhere; see below).

Overall, participants discussed **positive** experiences with demonstrating results including that increasingly, time and funding is being prioritised for monitoring and evaluation in programme cycles. Similarly, many acknowledged that showing evidence and results is helpful for Government and our own organisations to demonstrate program impacts and garnering public support for aid and development. Greater scrutiny of development work, resulting in the need to be clearer about what will be done and why, was also welcomed by many.

Group work sessions discussing the **benefits** of the current focus on results spoke about how this can:

- Improve the quality of our work by lifting or encouraging self-scrutiny and reflecting on evidence behind our work;
- Forces agencies to be explicit about what we believe is important to achieve e.g., outputs (number of school rooms) vs. outcomes (educated kids);
- Increases commitment to and greater investment in evaluation/research;
- Can bring about better documentation;
- Increases agency credibility and capacity to engage and learn at national, regional and international levels; and
- Can bring tangible concepts that enable communities to engage directly with decision-makers.

Conversely, many participants felt that opportunities and room for learning and sharing valuable lessons were narrowing with monitoring and evaluation frameworks that prioritised aggregated data. Further, there was a strong sense that prioritising such data often brought an inability to capture, value and interpret unanticipated (but valuable) outcomes.

Group work sessions identified a number of **challenges** emerging from an emphasis on results:

- Aggregation and categorizing of results if often prioritised over holistic development;
- Often discussions that push for results remain driven in a culturally biased/top-down way;
- Program process is often missing resulting in a loss of nuance and complexity;
- Experiences and the individual stories behind them, are often quantified and obscured in data;
- Value for money evaluations are often conducted through accountants, which can lead to a poor accompanying assessment of the quality of outcomes. As a result, what is valued was not debated;

- Comparing results from different contexts can result in a simplistic analysis of uncontextualised data;
- Issues of power and barriers to inclusion, in particular a better understanding of gender, is left out of data, other than in terms of numbers of women who participate at any given moment; and
- If you measure programs against pre-set objectives without allowing for or monitoring changes in context, you can lose visibility of unintended outcomes and even successes.

While this Note focuses on the Australian experience as observed during 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop in Melbourne, it is interesting to note that participants in the 'Politics of Evidence' workshop held in Brighton, UK in April 2013 reported very similar experiences⁴.

Section Two: Principles of development practice

Most involved in sectors looking at complex issues of institutional and social change, such as development, know that it is not a perfect enterprise. Questions of what type of knowledge is prioritised within international development work and, consequently, whose knowledge counts, is central to discussing results, as:

Hard evidence, rigorous data, conclusive proof, value for money, evidence-based policy are tantalising terms promising clarity about what works and what should be funded in international development. Yet behind these terms lie definitional tussles, vested interests and contested world views ... certain ways of knowing and assessing impact are considered more legitimate than others⁵.

Despite disagreement about methods for assessment and understanding the complexity that surround development principles, we can find agreement relating to what those key principles should be. These are principles relating to the 'what, how, why, who, where, when', of development work.

When the UN Charter was published in 1948, Purpose Three was:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. (UN, 1948: 1)

Respect, rights, freedom, equity, non-discrimination -more than 60 years have passed, yet these four principles continue to underpin a great deal of international development discourse and practice. Indeed, these principles have been further refined to include concepts of community participation and working with the poorest and most vulnerable people.

Chambers et al. (2001: 2) saw this refinement in terms of organisations across the world describing and considering their work through a "new language that implies shifts in control and in the distribution of power". Key terms within this 'new language' include: empowerment, accountability, ownership, partnership, participation, and transparency. Further, they noted, there was an emphasis on the poor as development's 'primary stakeholders'.

Further progress was made on March 22, 2002, when heads of government from across the world (including Australia) signed up to the *Monterrey Consensus*, a document that defined the principles of

⁴ 'The Politics of Evidence Conference Report', Available at: <http://bigpushforward.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/BPF-PoE-conference-report.pdf>

⁵ 'About the Big Push Forward', Available at: <http://bigpushforward.net/about>



international development work as “principles of justice, equity, democracy, participation, transparency, accountability and inclusion” (UN, 2003: 6).

These principles built on the *Millennium Declaration* identification of “principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level” and of a shared international commitment to “all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs” (UN General Assembly, 2000: 1). Similar iterations of principles have appeared in international documents such as reports from High Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness and, in Australia, as part of the ACFID Code of Conduct (2010).

The ACFID *Code* is a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice outlining values and principles developed for the purpose of facilitating reflection, dialogue, learning, and improved development practice by member agencies.

Amongst the principles and obligations of the *Code* is the commitment for signatories to ‘include the perspectives of those affected’, and to:

Ensure that their aid and development activities are clearly aligned with the vision, purpose and values of their organisation and that these are clearly communicated in their relationships with all stakeholders’ (Australian Council For International Development, 2010: 15 & 9).

The values and principles of the Code emphasise a ‘quality approach’ to understanding process, country and community context and showing results both to stakeholders and donors. Of course, these principles are hardly unproblematic as there is no consensus on meaning, nor clear answer on how best to translate these terms into practice. But, as the *Code* is both a document about compliance and iterative learning, documents such as the Code can both set baseline standards that require the inclusion and recognition of rights and participation while simultaneously fuelling ongoing discussions of how to best translate values and principles into practice.

For example, in relation to the principle of ‘participation’, Cornwall (2003: 1327) has argued that there are four modes of participation in an international development intervention:

1. ‘Functional’—where people are viewed as ‘objects’ and involved in an intervention to ‘secure compliance, minimize dissent, lend legitimacy’
2. ‘Instrumental’—where participants are viewed as instruments to ‘make projects or interventions run more efficiently’
3. ‘Consultative’—where participants are viewed as actors, who enable interventions to ‘get in tune with public views and values, to garner good ideas, to defuse opposition, to enhance responsiveness’ *and*
4. ‘Transformative’—where people are viewed as agents, and involved in an intervention in order to ‘build political capabilities, critical consciousness and confidence; to enable to demand rights; to enhance accountability.

Debate continues as to the best way that such concepts or principles can be either implemented or assessed, but despite this, there remains broad agreement on the importance of reflecting on these principles of development practice; and, therefore, on the importance of being able to assess related changes. As noted in a report published by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP):

... people and organizations with ... diverse ideologies can all agree that participation is ‘a good thing’, to such an extent that it has become part of the development mainstream. (de campos Guimarães, 2009: 4).

Amidst such debates about results, evidence and value for money, there are some emerging examples of how value for money, results and evidence are presently being discussed in terms of assessing social change and development.

Case Study One: Christian Aid and Value for Money (VfM)

In 2012, Christian Aid took the significant step of clearly articulating its own understanding of value for money, based in large part on a core principle of Christian Aid's work; working with those who are most marginalised and excluded from power and access to resources. The organisation stated:

Christian Aid's approach to VfM is about achieving the best results we can with the money and resources we have. In defining the 'best' results, we are concerned with scale (numbers of people benefiting), depth (intensity and sustainability of change) and inclusion (in other words, a change has greater impact if it benefits people who are more excluded and marginalised) ...

[Our] approach is weighted towards effectiveness (the results achieved for a given investment) and equity (who is included/who benefits from these results), rather than economy (the total cost of an activity) or efficiency (the cost per 'unit' of activity) ... We explicitly recognise the trade-offs involved in our work—reaching more marginalised people tends to mean a higher per capita cost—and factor these into our assessment of VfM (Christian Aid, 2012: 1, emphasis in the original).

In a six-page document explaining its stand on value for money, Christian Aid cites the work of the UK's Independent Commission on Aid Impact, which proposed equity as a vital fourth 'E' in value for money equations. Previously, value for money had been spoken about largely in terms of the three Es' of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. (Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2011)

Case Study Two: Exploring the limitations of VfM

In 2012, AusAID commissioned an independent review of its Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Fund, 2009-11. The Fund was a \$32.5 million sectoral program managed by the AusAID Infrastructure Water Policy Section (IWP) and implemented by 11 civil society organisations (CSOs), who undertook work in 21 countries in Asia, Pacific and Africa. One of the stated purposes of the review was to 'describe the 'value for money' (VfM) delivered by the Fund' (AusAID, 2012b: iii).

The Fund's three-person Monitoring Review Panel (MRP) undertook the review, and produced a VfM background paper that outlined the origins of the VfM concept, the complexity of defining VfM and, in particular, the challenge of defining 'value'.

The background paper states "VfM is problematic to determine because value cannot be unambiguously measured and attributed; it has a time dimension; and it is subjectively determined by the array of individual stakeholders associated with an intervention" (Crawford et al., 2012b: 4). This paper served to underpin the MRP's assessment of VfM in the Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Fund. Having undertaken analyses of cost-benefits, expected outcomes within allocated time and resources, equity, and cost per beneficiary, the Panel was explicit in identifying "flaws in VfM approaches as applied to the social change processes that underlie any development initiative".

The MRP concluded by stating that one of the key recommendations of the overall review was for a future Fund to focus more on promotion of an enabling environment and less on direct service delivery. "If this thinking is to be taken up," the Panel stated, "a similar cost per beneficiary analysis would become even less meaningful" and recommended that "on balance, VfM assessment adds little to good practice program evaluation when it takes a 'results-based' approach" (AusAID, 2012b: 40).

As discussed in Section 1 of this Note and during the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop in Melbourne, participants felt that there is a tension between addressing principles of development practice, and focusing on results. The two case studies outlined above present different ways of responding to that tension and identifying the limitations inherent in an overemphasis on results; further ideas emerging from the workshop are provided in the section that follows.

Section Three: Finding a way forward?

During the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop, when asked to brainstorm ways in which the positive effects of a focus on results can be enhanced, and the negative effects reduced, participants were broadly in agreement with a statement made during the exercise on identifying positives and benefits of a results-based approach:

- Who defines the results is all important. The closer to the target group the desired results are defined, the more constructive the 'data'.

There is a clear relation between such a statement and the principles of development practice noted above —such as 'ownership', 'inclusion', and 'participation'. However participants stressed that even if an intervention's desired results are identified at community level, the donor still has to accept this definition and accept assessment against this definition.

Those who participated in the workshop felt that an organisation's success in working with and presenting the diversity of results and perspectives emerging through their work depended on:

- how the organisation understood and applied development principles of practice;
- the size of the organisation involved (in terms of its ability to negotiate); and
- its relationship with donors.

When asked to identify a few 'big ideas' that might help to bring a results-based approach and the principles of development practice closer, the following proposals emerged:

- **Make a stand** by proactively defining what the terms effectiveness, efficiency, value for money, evidence, and results mean to your organisation, in relation to your organisation's values and international development principles of practice. This means asking questions such as:
 - In relation to effectiveness:
Does your organisation place value on *accountability to participants* (Code of Conduct program principle B.1.1)? If so, what would participants and partners define as an effective outcome, from a given intervention?
 - In relation to efficiency:
Does your organisation seek to work with the most vulnerable and marginalised people (Code of Conduct Program Principles B1.1 and B.3.2)?
Is your organisation committed to addressing gender inequity (Code of Conduct Principle B.1.4)?
If so, how will you define 'efficiency'? What happens when the economically efficient action is to work in urban centres, but the most marginalised and vulnerable people live outside of those centres, and are more difficult to reach? What happens when the most time-efficient option is for ANGO staff to establish, and manage, women's self-help groups, but the most effective approach in terms of women's empowerment is to work alongside the women and support them to work on their own timescale?
 - In relation to value for money:

How will you define an intervention's 'value' in terms of the principles of your organisation, and the opinions of the people with whom you work?

- In relation to evidence:
Do you speak about *measuring* evidence, or *assessing* it? Or both? Is there an explicit (or implicit) hierarchy of types of knowledge, and ways of gathering knowledge, in your organisation? If so, has it ever been articulated, and if not, why not? Does this hierarchy 'fit' with your commitments under the Code, e.g., accountability to participants; understanding culture; involving participants 'to the maximum extent possible' in interventions; 'prioritising ... needs and rights with specific reference to gender, age, disability and other identified vulnerabilities'?
- In relation to results:
See all of the above! How do 'results' get defined, by whom, and why are they defined in that way?
- **Use existing literature** to support rationales for these organisational definitions. For example if your organization wishes to make the case for assessment (not just measurement) of intended and unintended outputs, outcomes and impact of interventions, consider referencing the *Code of Conduct*, the Australian aid program's *Evaluation Policy* (which calls for mixed methods); and the OECD-DAC *Glossary*. A wide range of other materials related to assessment of evidence and so on can be found via resources The Big Push Forward we
- **Take a sector-wide, published stand on re-framing definitions** of 'evidence', 'results', and 'value'. This could be explored through a sector-wide paper exploring a common position in relation to 'what counts', for example by developing a *State of the Sector* report that presents a clear statement on ANGOs' shared purpose and principles, regardless of the diversity that exists in terms of sectors and contexts in which organisations work. Key to any such publication would be the inclusion of 'voices from the field', plus non-traditional sources and forms of information.
- **Create space** at the start of a program design and in the planning process for different stakeholders to articulate, listen to and understand interpretations of key terms relevant to the programs ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- **Undertake cross-sectoral, collaborative research** that explores different methods and frameworks useful for understanding complex systems of change.
- **Continue conversations and encourage forums for critical reflection** among academics, practitioners, consultants etc. to raise key questions related to: new or existing challenges of monitoring and evaluation, embracing complexity; examples in process and methods for gathering evidence and embracing the unexpected.

Each of these themes for action can correlate to the ACFID *Code of Conduct* Program Principles and, perhaps most strikingly, to the principle of accountability to primary stakeholders: "Signatory organisations will ensure that their purpose and processes are shaped by stakeholders and that their work is open to review and comment by partners and participants alike. In all instances those directly affected by aid and development activities are considered the primary stakeholders and their views afforded the highest priority" (ACFID, 2010: 8).

Conclusion

The words 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'evidence', 'value for money', and 'results' are widely used, but with an overemphasis on the easy to measure results of these terms, can come a risk of disconnecting the outcomes of programs from greater learning about complexity and principles of development practice. Similarly, this risks implying that there is no contestation around their meaning, or the ways in which such matters should be assessed (not simply measured).

Yet these terms are subject to interpretations that relate to the forms of knowledge we value, and the associated ways and methods for gathering information. They are also terms that can be easily disconnected from assessment against, and learning in relation to, development principles. Hence, value for money has routinely been assessed in relation without reference to equity, despite the centrality of this as a stated principle of development practice.

It is easier to get lost in false dichotomies such as 'qualitative data versus quantitative' than to look for a common ground from which to move forward. ACFID's Code of Conduct offers a vision of what that common ground could be but, as has been proposed in this Note, and as was discussed during the 'Results, Evidence and Value for Money' workshop, there is more work we can do to help bring these common ground principles to life within practice.

Helpful Resources

ACFID Discussion Papers

- *ACFID and 'Value for Money'*, by Dr Thomas W.D. Davis, (2012): <http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources-publications/files/acfid-and-value-for-money>
- *Promoting Voice and Choice: Exploring Innovations in Australian NGO Accountability for Development Effectiveness*, by Chris Roche (2009): <http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources-publications/publications/acfid-research-in-development-series/promoting-voice-and-choice>

BetterEvaluation

- Source of evaluation resources <http://betterevaluation.org>

Big Push Forward

- www.bigpushforward.net
- *Uncovering the Politics of Evidence and Results: A Framing paper for Development Practitioners*, by Rosalind Eyben, (2013): <http://bigpushforward.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Uncovering-the-Politics-of-Evidence-and-Results-by-Rosalind-Eyben.pdf>

Other

- *Critical Readings on Assessing and Learning for Social Change: A Review*. Irene Guijt (2008): <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/Db21.pdf>
- *ICAI's Approach to Effectiveness and Value for Money*: <http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/ICAI-Approach-to-Effectiveness-and-VFM.pdf>

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