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Trends in development evaluation and implications for knowledge management

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This paper identifies trends in development evaluation that emerged during the last decade such as the use of randomized control trials, the renewed emphasis on complexity, the creation of national, regional and global evaluation networks and associations, the increasing diffusion of ICTs in monitoring and evaluation practice and the interest in using evaluation to inform scaling-up decisions. The paper considers opportunities and risks associated with these trends, proposing ways to deal with them, including a key role for knowledge management.

Keywords: knowledge management, future of KM, learning, RCT, complexity, evaluation, diffusion, ICT.

Introduction

This paper identifies major trends in development evaluation exploring their implications for the future. Rather than speculating about future scenarios, which in a context of high uncertainty may prove to be wide off the mark, it follows the Druckerian approach to the future[1] which considers important trends that already emerged and elaborates on how to address the challenges that they generate. The development evaluation trends that will be taken into account are the following: the use of randomized control trials, a renewed emphasis on the importance of complexity, the creation of national, regional and global evaluation networks and associations, the increasing diffusion of ICTs in monitoring and evaluation practice and the interest in using evaluation to inform scaling-up decisions. It should be noted that these trends have been triggered by different forces and involve different actors, so they are so far rather unconnected.

The paper also discusses links between development evaluation and knowledge management. It concludes with a consideration of the opportunities and risks associated with the identified trends, proposing ways to deal with them, including a key role for knowledge management.

[1] See below footnote 2

Important trends

Rather than suggesting future trends not anchored in current realities, the approach followed in this paper is to consider important trends that already emerged and which are likely to continue and expand in the future[2].

Increased use of randomized control trials (RCTs)

Despite critiques to the use of RCTs in development evaluation, mainly from professional evaluators, and the judgement that RCTs are a bubble doomed to burst (Picciotto,2012), the trend to use RCTs in development evaluation is consolidating both on the demand and the supply side. International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, as well as the Gates Foundation, among others, are supporting and providing funds to conduct RCTs, and very active organizations with highly competent professionals, such as 3ie and the MIT JPAL are conducting RCTs. Furthermore, JPAL has also been implementing a worldwide training program focused on RCTs.

In addition, leading economic journals such as the American Economic Review, are publishing articles reporting on results of RCTs. This is a further incentive to allocate resources to this approach, and even though there have been some studies showing the limitations of RCTs and the need for a broader approach (Stern et.al., 2012), as well as a critique by eminent economists (Deaton, 2010), there is a widespread consensus among policy makers (although not among evaluators) that RCTs are "the" scientific approach to evaluation, the "gold standard" in evaluation. This shows the influence on policy makers of the funding organizations and of the increasing number of professionals trained in conducting RCTs as a key evaluation tool. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that RCTs should be used in conjunction with other approaches, particularly to provide explanations for the observed results.

Renewed emphasis on the importance of complexity

Development evaluation almost started with the evaluation of integrated rural development projects in the 1970's. These were projects with sometimes up to 20 interrelated components, that were perceived as complicated and complex. Development evaluators tried to grapple with this complexity. Partly as a result of these evaluations, projects were simplified, drastically reducing the number of components and the complexity of the interventions.

In the XXI century complexity again became an important issue, with the intensification of globalization, the development of complex adaptive systems, growing connectivity and the substantial reduction in transaction costs, Implications of a complexity approach to aid are

[2] This is an approach usually attributed to Peter Drucker. One is reminded of T.S.Eliot's "Burnt Norton":
Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past

well presented in Ramalingam (2013), and applications of this approach to development evaluation are provided in Bamberger et.al (2015) and Befani et.al. (2015).

Growing interest in using evaluations to inform scaling-up decisions

Governments and international organizations are particularly interested in scaling-up interventions that had success at the local level. With an expanding population in the developing world, the pressure to scale-up is likely to increase. Furthermore, the enhanced availability of knowledge on "what works" generated by development evaluations will provide opportunities to identify promising development interventions that could be scaled-up. But there should be an awareness that what worked in a specific context may not worked in a different context, and, "scale" is a key element of the context. Knowing that a microfinance project targeting 3000 households worked very well in Kenya, does not guarantee that it will also be successful even in the same country if the target population will be 60000 households; for example, there may be a shortage of management capabilities to deal with such an expanded target group, or any other "diseconomy of scale". Knowledge generated by evaluations can be used for scaling-up, but used with care, being aware that success at small scale does not guarantee success when scaling-up. Evaluations will also be needed during the process of scaling-up to assess results at a higher scale of operations[3].

Creation of evaluation networks and associations[4]

Since the late 90's evaluation networks and associations have emerged in all regions (Feinstein & Beck, 2006). They have been playing a role in evaluation knowledge sharing and have facilitated evaluation capacity development. Although most of these evaluation associations are based in capital cities, the spread of internet connectivity (see next paragraph) and the implementation of development interventions in areas far away from capitals may be leading to an expansion of these evaluation networks and associations to include evaluators and policy makers working at the subnational (including the municipal) level[5].

Increasing diffusion of ICTs in development and in monitoring and evaluation practice

Among the trends identified as having the potential to redefine how global development occurs, there are two of particular relevance for development evaluation: (i) the spread of Internet connectivity and digital literacy; and (ii) the harnessing of data to better serve the poor and to generate new knowledge. The former is creating opportunities for many more people both to access and to provide information, thus facilitating the dissemination of knowledge as well as the bottom-up flow of information, which can be used for participatory and real-time evaluation. The latter, making use of "big data" tools, allows the transformation of data into information and knowledge (Dervis, 2015)

[3] For a discussion on scaling-up and evaluations see Feinstein (2015a)
[4] The type of use of big data that may be mainstreamed in coming years is illustrated by Lemieux (2015)
[5] On the "the burgeoning network of national, regional and global evaluation associations", see Picciotto (2014).

Links between development evaluation and KM

Evaluation generates knowledge, but without specific actions there is a risk that this knowledge will not be used. This will become an even bigger problem, as information and knowledge continues to expand with the adoption of ICTS. Steps should be taken to ensure that knowledge is shared and managed so as to facilitate its appropriate use for learning and accountability of projects, programs and/or policies. Evaluation without KM may just result in an accumulation of unused knowledge, whereas KM without evaluation could lead to the dissemination of unvalidated knowledge concerning development interventions. With new technologies, particularly ICTs, KM can facilitate the use of development evaluation results, both for accountability and learning.

In other words, evaluation without KM may become evaluation without influence (due to lack of use), whereas KM without evaluation could misguide development practice by sharing unvalidated knowledge (including knowledge validated in a specific context and shared without any adaptation for its use in a different context).

KM applications are emerging and their availability most likely will increase exponentially. This is creating opportunities for capturing and sharing knowledge at an increasing rate, with the associated risk of use of knowledge not validated for the context of application.

To clarify the issue of applying in a specific context knowledge generated by evaluations in a different context, a Boolean table is a useful tool. Even though "context" has several dimensions, including time, location, scale, culture, institutions, ecology, etc.(in fact, the relevant dimensions are "context specific"), for the sake of argument and clarity of presentation it is worthwhile to focus on three general dimensions that most likely will be relevant for different types of development interventions: time (when the development intervention was implemented?), location (where the implementation took place?) and scale (at which scale the intervention was implemented?). Combining the 3 dimensions there will be 8 situations, which are described below in table 1[6].

The table represents same or different contexts with numbers 0 or 1 (a binary table, which could be extended to consider fuzzy cases with numbers between 0 and 1). And for each situation described in terms of the triplet time, location and scale, the last column indicates the results associated with the situation. For example, if in the tribal areas of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh a rural development project was implemented between years 2002-2006, with a target population of 3000 persons from the tribal areas, and let us assume that an evaluation showed that 2700 of these persons were able to move out of poverty due to the activities implemented by the project.

[6] Note that the number of "situations" is equal to 2^a, where ^{a} is the number of dimensions. Thus with 4 dimensions it would be 16, and with 5 it would be 32. To capture the essence of the argument 3 dimensions are enough, and the argument would be stronger the higher the number of dimensions that are considered.

Does it make sense to use the knowledge generated by that evaluation to the same population of Andhra Pradesh ten years after the implementation of that project? Or to tribal areas in some other state of India, or of other countries? Or to a population of 30,000 in the state of Andhra Pradesh?

To frame the issue in more abstract terms, using Table 1, does it make sense to generalize the results verified in a situation (a), for specific time, location and scale {0,0,0}, to other situations where either time, location or scale differs (shown in the table with 1s, rather than 0s)? Under which conditions or assumptions such a generalization is warranted?

Table 1:Boolean table showing different situations in terms of time, location and scale

SITUATION	TIME	LOCATION	SCALE	RESULTS
a	0	0	0	R0
b	0	0	1	?
c	0	1	0	?
d	0	1	1	?
e	1	0	0	?
f	1	0	1	?
g	1	1	0	?

For the sake of simplification, 'context' in this presentation has been defined in terms of time, location and scale, and as indicated above the argument would become stronger if additional dimensions of context are considered. Are there context-free results? Universal 'best practices'? Or are results context-dependent? Experience shows that the latter is the case, and that the more heterogeneous the contexts, the less generalizable the results (the lower their external validity). There is indeed a risk of unwarranted generalizations.

It should be noted that in principle replication at different locations contributes to increase the generalizability of results (their external validity, EV), if similar results are obtained in different contexts. But there is no guarantee that in a new context the same results will hold as in the contexts in which the trials were already made (this is indicated in table 1 with interrogation marks). However, experience in a specific context may provide some guidance, or at least a starting point for the design of interventions in a different context. Nevertheless, contrary to a widely held view, implicit in the frequent reference to "what works", it is always important to take into account the context. Actually, the knowledge generated by evaluations is not about "what works" but on "what worked" in a specific context (or set of contexts), and it should not be taken for granted that this knowledge about the past, and in specific circumstances, will apply in the present, particularly if the circumstances have changed. These issues, exploring their philosophical and methodological implications, are well discussed in Cartwright and Hardie (2012) and Pawson (2006).

What must be taken into account is that neither success nor failure in a specific context is

sufficient evidence of success or failure in a different context. Thus,

I. If an intervention worked well or was successful in a specific context that does not mean that it will also work well in a different context (either at a different scale, or in a different place or in another period). For example, a microfinance intervention may be successful in an area where there is a high level of social capital but fail in a context where social capital is low.

II. If an intervention failed in a specific context this does not mean that it will fail in another context. For example, if there are economies of scale, a pilot that failed at a low scale may succeed at a higher scale (at which, say, the construction of rural roads may be justified, facilitating access to remote areas)

Knowledge management can and should play a critical role in codifying the results, linking them to the characteristics of the context (time, place, scale)[7], and in making the results accessible to policy makers, researchers and civil society. Ways in which this can be done are shown in Dalkir (2011),Patton (2008) and Feinstein (2002). The new technologies that are becoming increasingly available, as well as new apps, should facilitate this process, thus enhancing the contribution of development evaluation to development effectiveness.

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[7] An important challenge for KM is to identify characteristics of the three dimensions that may enhance the development value of the knowledge shared. For example, an important aspect is the agro-ecological area of implementation of the interventions, such as “high mountainous areas”. And, as indicated in this articlet, these characteristics are context-specific.

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