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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

UTILIZING CLUSTER EVALUATION APPROACH TO MEASURE THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF MULTIPLE IDENTICAL PROJECTS WITH MINIMUM RESOURCES

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Abstract

Evaluation is an emerging approach of study with concomitant growth of the development sector to respond to crises and fill development gaps. The scope of the evaluation is to measure accountability and provide evidence-based suggestions to improve the results of operations. Evaluation studies are technical, time-consuming, and require financial resources. Hence the goal of the development sector is to cover vulnerabilities. Therefore, the review exercises have a secondary position due to limited funds versus needs. The situation of having limited resources could not cause compromising evaluation practice. Therefore, the cluster evaluation approach may support in this regard. The cluster evaluation approach provides an opportunity to study a group of projects together to see collective impact. The cluster evaluation approach is better when used to study identical operations or results in a location. However, defining identical operations, developing the collective theory of change, and utilizing the cluster evaluation approach are contextual. This paper is written based on practical experience of utilizing a cluster evaluation approach to conduct an emergency response evaluation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Cluster Evaluation, Development Sector, Minimum Resources.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is a retrospective study of project results that has the potential to contribute to the prospective strategic growth of an organization. Evaluations are conducted by utilizing tools of social research, particularly from applied social research. Applied social research provides an opportunity to measure the impact of treatment or operation (Bickman & Rog, 1998). Under the umbrella of applied social research the closely relevant approach of social research to evaluation is operational research. Operational research aims to study the results of an operation or project (Kulej, 2011).

However, evaluation is a separate of field of study that is growing in the fields while taking some tools and methods from social research. Evaluation is an abductive approach of study (Rozalis, 2003). The deductive approach of research starts with theory and tries testing it on the ground and the inductive approach of study begins from the fields and helps in developing generalized concepts or theory. The abductive approach to study falls in between, it starts with theory, but it relies on field findings, and it has the potential to change the theory based on evidence (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Social research studies often follow either deductive or inductive approaches to review. However, a few qualitative approaches to social research have the potential to follow an abductive review approach.

(Dubois and Gadde, 2002) case study approach could also be used by applying the abductive approach of review. As stated by (Baxter & Jack, 2008) case study is a qualitative research method to describe the inter-subjective nature of social phenomena. Case study research also supports solving problems. As defined by (Flyvbjerg, 2006) problem-oriented nature of social research is its strength.

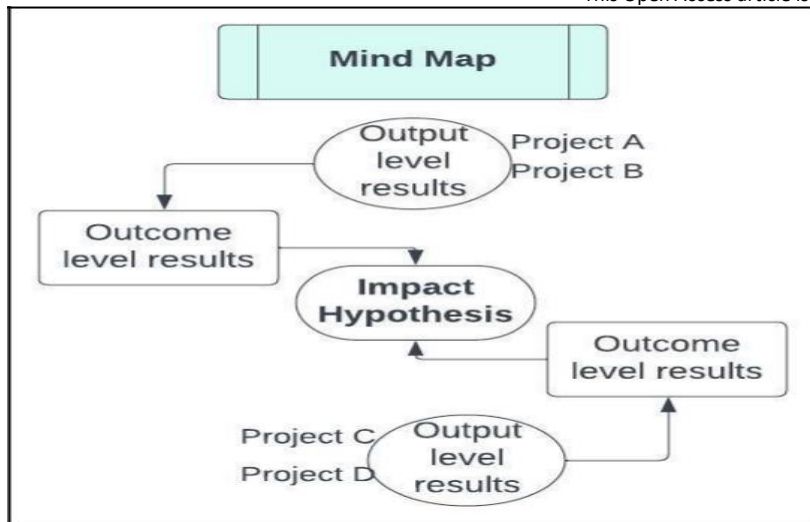
The case study method of social research is a technical medium that links monitoring and evaluation studies with social research through an abductive approach of review. That technical bridge has paved the way for evaluation studies to adopt methods and tools from social research and utilize them for own growth. Though relying on different tools and methods of social research evaluation has its own abductive agenda. That is to solve field problems of operations and support in optimizing results. Evaluations start with following project result theory, but they rely on field findings and have the potential to change project result theory based on evidence.

Despite having vital utility potential, on a few occasions, the evaluation studies are forgone due to limited funding availability and that affects overall results of the development sector. Hence the development agenda has fixed results if observed against Sustain Development Goals. Similarly, the emergency responses in various locations have an identical goal that best fits in that context. Therefore, there is a possibility to study the collective results of different projects against their common goal or impact agenda. Cluster evaluation is an approach that could help in studying collective results or impacts of identical projects in either development or emergency contexts. Cluster evaluation aims to examine the related activities or projects together (IFRC, 2011).

The clustering of projects could be done based on their identical result chains. It is theoretically possible that different projects when applied to achieve an SDG or an emergency response, may share result chains. The cluster evaluation approach could be used for impact or outcome level evaluations and OECD/DAC evaluation framework (OECD/DAC, 2021) can be applied considering the scope of review. The cluster approach to evaluation can be applied under impact evaluations. As defined (IFRC, 2011) impact evaluation aims to measure the ultimate impact of a project. Therefore, the ultimate impact of identical projects in a context could be measured by using a cluster evaluation approach to impact evaluation.

After utilizing a cluster evaluation approach, to study the collective impact of an emergency response in Sri Lanka. It was evident that the cluster evaluation approach could be used in harmony with impact evaluation. The impact is the scope of an evaluation and cluster evaluation is an approach, therefore both can be used concomitantly. The important phase for a cluster evaluation is to develop a collective theory of change and define the results chains of different projects as pathways. Designing a theory of change for a cluster evaluation is not an amalgamation of different project theories into one. Rather to design a response-level theory of change based on evaluators' understanding of how collective impact would be produced by identical projects under study. Before developing a theory of change practitioners may develop a mind of results and measurement depending on the complexity of uniform impact. Figure 1 depicts the mind map for a response with two thematic areas contributing to a single point of impact. Established on thematic areas and number of project, outcome and output level results may increase. Adding the cluster of outcome and output level results to an impact hypothesis is directly proportional to the number of thematic areas and projects contributing to uniform impact. The cluster evaluation approach provides an opportunity to study multiple projects with similar impact agenda. It saves resources to an organization while providing the required retrospective evidence for prospective strategic growth.

Figure 1: Sample Mind Map



CONCLUSION

Established on the scope of the evaluation study and its potential to optimize the results, it is considered a rapidly growing field of study in the development sector. Hence the evaluation studies are compromised due to a dearth of resources. The cluster evaluation approach could help study the collective impact of identical projects on a location within minimum resources.

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