



Online match-making event: Impact evaluation in SDG international cooperation programs

Introduction

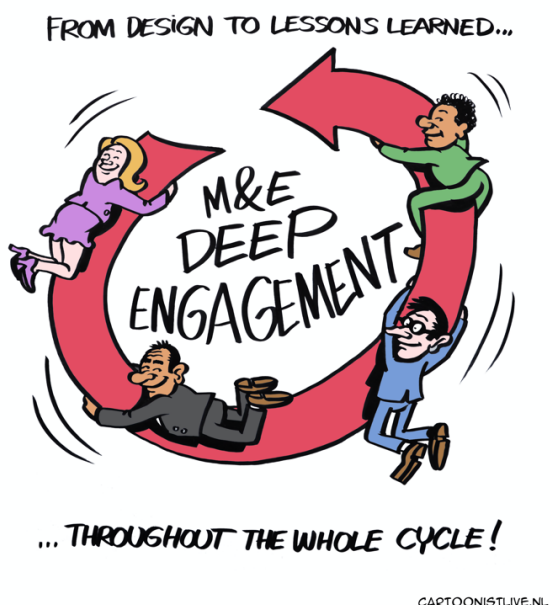
This match-making event took place on the 15th of July and was organised by UMC Utrecht and Share-Net Netherlands with support from NWA. The match-making event had three main aims:

- 1. Learning from current practices & state of the art expertise:** through pitches in which researchers and practitioners briefly shared state-of-the-art approaches and ideas regarding impact evaluation & learning.
- 2. Looking ahead – what does optimizing impact (evaluation) require?** Discussion of learned lessons and future directions to inform the newly funded Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Partnership Programs (2021-2026).
- 3. Match-making** Identifying ways in which future research and inter-actor research collaborations can support improvement of impact (evaluation) and facilitate learning.

This report provides an (visual) impression of the meeting through a selection of take-home messages from the plenary and the breakout sessions of the meeting, as a starting point for further conversation.

What does impact evaluation of the future look like within international corporation programs with the aim to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? An online matchmaking event on July 15th 2020 brought together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to discuss this question. This event was organized by the UMC Utrecht and Share-Net Netherlands, with support from NWO.

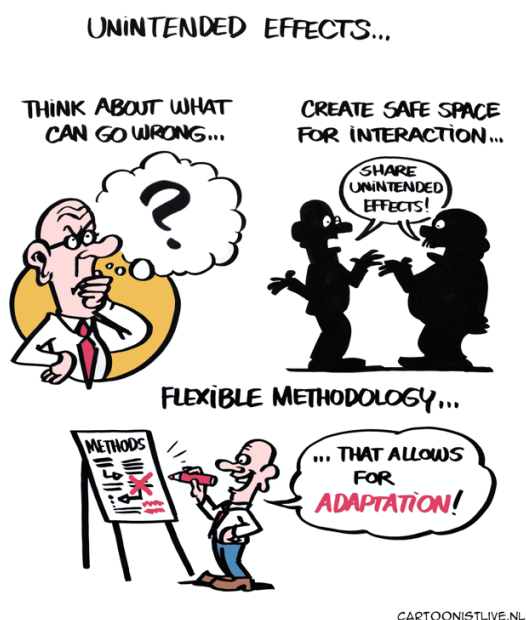
CONTRIBUTIONS BY SPEAKERS (PLENARY)



Bart Romijn, Director at Partos, emphasized the need to stretch our boundaries in order to innovate and optimize evaluation and learning practices. He identified various strategies to do this, including:

- I. Ensuring that those most affected are engaged throughout the whole cycle (*“deep engagement”*).
- II. Faster and more frequent evaluation loops to enable adaptation to uncertain and complex circumstances. This allows feedback and feedforward, and requires for example quarterly reviews rather than only midterm- and end-evaluations.
- III. Extend program evaluation timeframes in collaboration with academia. Social and systemic changes may require longer horizons. As such, rather than the current 3 to 5 year cycles, 10 to 15 years evaluations could be more meaningful.

Prof. dr. Dirk Jan Koch, Radboud University and Chief Science Officer Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), spoke about the need to include unintended effects - adverse as well as positive – in evaluations. While the OECD guidelines for evaluation research do stress the need to include these, in practice this is incorporated by only a small minority of evaluators. Recommendations as to what can be done include:



- I. Include an explicit and deliberate reflection of what can go wrong (possible unintended effects, alternative impact pathways) in the *Theory of Change (ToC)* process, project design and implementation; and capture this in flexible methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- II. Ensure to look beyond target groups and the timeframe of the project
- III. Create a safe space for interaction to share unintended effects between program staff and evaluators to avoid risk of penalization.

Dr. Bridget Pratt, Senior Research Fellow, University of Melbourne; KNAW visiting professor UMC Utrecht), discussed sharing of power with Southern partners during priority setting for SDG programs. Their engagement is an important mechanism to identify topics and questions to pursue, with the largest risk to have a *tokenistic* instead of a *meaningful* inclusion. What is necessary to share power and ensure presence with a voice and influence? Practical scientifically grounded guidance to do this is sparse. Over the past years Pratt has worked on a toolkit based on the *Justice for Global Health* Framework to fill this gap. The toolkit contains reflective questions to support the process, such as: is power sharing likely to happen? How will relationships be built between Northern and Southern partners? And how will southern partners/communities be supported to participate?



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Dr. Bregje de Kok, Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, shared a number of findings from a synthesis evaluation on the MoFA Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) subsidy frameworks 2011-2015. Recommendations in the report included:

- I. A shift from reporting mostly on outputs (i.e. events, meetings, activities) to reporting more on outcomes (i.e. behavioral change) and health impact.
- II. Acknowledge the challenges with outcomes impact measurements embedded in programs, due to funders requirements, programmatic designs and capacity, and evaluation design challenges (what methodology works best, how can you assess attrition or the impact for different target groups given the complexities?)
- III. Acknowledge the politically charged context in which SRHR projects operate, especially because this has consequences for reporting unintended effects.
- IV. Make more use of existing evidence in proposals & reports.

See [here](#) for the link to the synthesis evaluation report.



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Prof. dr. Joost de Laat, Centre for Global Challenges, Utrecht University, emphasized the need to regard evaluation not as a goal in itself, but rather as a means towards an end. While seemingly obvious, we actually need to be reminded of this because of the strong focus on results following accountability mechanisms of monitoring, evaluation that push the third 'MEL'-arm, 'learning', to backseat. This is unfortunate because the complexity and inherent need for adaptivity a system's change (transformation) within SDG programs requires learning questions to be answered. These questions include *What do you want to achieve? In what area do you aim to contribute to (systemic) change? What capacity is necessary to be built among stakeholders? Who are the locally relevant partners?* Questions part of the ToC approach, that should be regularly revisited.

Maaïke van Veen, senior program, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) coordinator Rutgers, shared key experiences from the Get Up Speak Out (GUSO) program funded within the current SDG cycle. She observed that 'impact' can be quite a buzz word. GUSO operationalized it as: *'working on a positive social change, relevant for the context, for which they work closely together with their partners'*. As a key stakeholder of GUSO are young people, their engagement is an aspect in their approach. To improve the integration of learning practices better in the future, working with learning agendas and learning trajectories is recommendable.

Casey Davison O'Brien, Senior M&E advisor, Frontline AIDS, discussed a number of methodological challenges for collecting evidence within the PITCH partnership, a global advocacy program around HIV response. Early in the program they recognized that they could not rely on traditional forms of evidence alone, and decided to work with the 'advocacy log methodology'. In this method, partners were asked to write and publish regular advocacy logs on an online platform. The log posts would then demonstrate anecdotally the contributions of PITCH to a specific goal. All the log entries together could be analyzed for the documentation of journeys of change (sequence of events leading to change in a specific area). Key challenges they observed in this approach: partners struggled to find the time to write the logs, and when they did the logs were not always used to support their learning.

BREAKOUT ROOMS (COMPILATION)

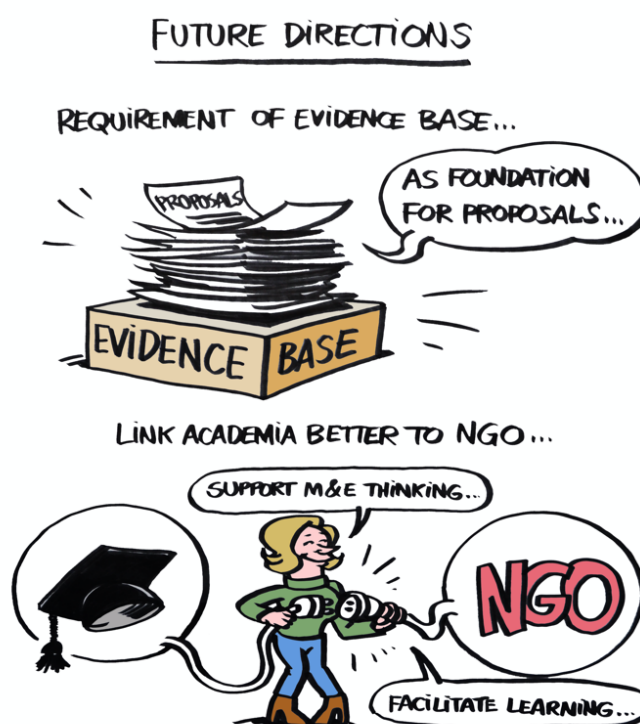
Lessons learned

From a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) perspective, it was emphasized that we need to find a 'happy compromise' between flexibility and structure to develop a workable M&E reporting system; and the lack of guidance/structure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the planning. It was suggested that more guidance and/or facilitation of these discussion could have been a useful addition.

- Reflections on the discussions about Southern ownership and space for learning, suggested that the dynamics to update thinking and/or approaches to MEL within an alliance is sometimes difficult. It takes time to build trust, create a foundation to reflect and act on new insights/learnings.
- Different donor expectations in adaptiveness within programs are a barrier to MEL and adaptation of programs as well. It was suggested that Dutch donors, which are a strong advocate of more dynamic MEL approaches, could play a role in this conversation with other donors too.
- The skills, capacity, and knowledge required for effective MEL are not always sufficiently recognized by different actors such as implementation partners and funders. This results for example in an underappreciation of long-term time frame of the programs to allow establishing solid foundations for southern ownership, diversity and learning.
- There is a need for better translation of research (findings) to practice and policy within programs and program evaluation approaches. Similarly, findings and needs from 'the field' should also better inform (academic) research focuses.
- Unintended effects of programs are difficult to capture.

Future directions

- Take into account the perspective of 'system change' needs, as this requires adaptivity and learning within real world complexity.



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- Strengthen the requirements to incorporate the existing evidence base (and/or documented gap) as foundation for proposals.
- Facilitate learning across partnerships by bringing together different partnership members in MEL. This should also include a better link between academia and NGOs to support M&E thinking & facilitate learning. Academic institutions should not only include Dutch and/or high-income countries, but also LMIC knowledge institutions.
- Strengthen the use of mixed methods research and the involvement of final beneficiaries in the program design, data collection, analysis and reporting. This should also include an explicit recognition of the value of the process (i.e. in (learning and adaptation) as much as the outcomes, given its role in adaptive SDG programming.
- Stimulate local ownership and participation, especially for specific target groups such as young people.
- Donors should expand their MEL horizon and expectations to allow systemic impact evaluation, learning and adaptive programming.

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- Participate in our working groups or CoPs, which is exclusive for members. These groups are crucial for agenda setting, organizing meetings and executing small research projects. For more information on the Share-Net Netherlands working groups and thematic groups please visit www.share-net.nl/working-groups.
- Be elected in one of our governing bodies, the Steering Committee of the Netherlands or the Board of Share-Net International. All members are invited to our annual business meeting.
- Be eligible for our yearly call for proposals for the Share-Net International Small Grants facility.

For more information about our work and how to get involved. Please contact our Share-Net Netherlands Coordinator, Meike Stieglis at M.Stieglis@kit.nl