CES Guide to

Evaluation

CES

Contents

The 'CES Guide to' series will attempt to lift the lid on some of the approaches we use for the work we do with agencies, service providers and government departments.

CES regularly carries out evaluations for our partners, examining the effectiveness of policies, projects or services to inform future developments or improvements. In this 'Guide To Evaluation' we will look at the reasons why you should evaluate and when, different types of evaluations and common challenges to be aware of.

What is an evaluation?

Our definition of 'evaluation' is:

'A planned **investigation** of an **intervention**, according to specific questions of interest. It is carried out in a systematic and robust way, using reliable social scientific methods, to determine an intervention's value, merit or worth.'

An evaluation is an investigation

It examines or studies an aspect or aspects of an intervention in detail. In CES' work, an intervention usually refers to a service, project, programme or policy. Essentially, an intervention can be anything people do to try change a problem or situation.

The aspects of the intervention to be examined or studied depends on the specific questions of interest. Evaluation questions should be specific and clearly direct the evaluator towards the information you want to find out. It is often useful to consult with key evaluation stakeholders for feedback and revise your evaluation questions if required.

Why carry out an evaluation?

There are a range of reasons why you might wish to evaluate an intervention, service, policy, or practice. Evaluations can be used to:

ASSESS & IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PUBLIC FUNDING

SUPPORT DECISION MAKING & PLANNING

DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

BUILD ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

IMPROVE QUALITY

When should you evaluate?

- In our experience, it is useful to think about how you will monitor and evaluate an intervention **before** it is implemented, to ensure systems can be put in place to collect the data you will need to measure change and evidence your outcomes from the start.

How is an evaluation carried out?

- Evaluators will do a lot of planning and preparation at the beginning to decide which methods will help them to answer the evaluation questions, at what stage they should be carried out, and with whom.

- This allows the evaluation to be carried out in a **systematic** and **robust** way, **using reliable social scientific methods**. They want to provide trustworthy answers to the evaluation questions and following a structured, pre-planned approach with methods that are suitable to the evaluation questions will help them to do that.

How do you choose which type of evaluation you need?

Decisions on the specific form and scope of an evaluation will depend on:

1. Its purpose(s) and audience
2. Capacity and resource availability
3. The nature and scope of the 'intervention' being evaluated
4. The complexity of the context within which the intervention takes place
5. The stage of project implementation.

What are some of the different types of evaluation?

Process Evaluations	**&**	**Outcome Evaluations**
Formative Evaluations	**&**	**Summative Evaluations**
Retrospective Evaluations	**&**	**Prospective Evaluations**
Pragmatic Evaluations	**&**	**Theory-Based Evaluations**

A **process evaluation** can be used to better **understand** the factors affecting implementation, develop and improve implementation, and in some cases, can be used to inform decision making and planning for scaling up of an intervention.

Outcome evaluations look at questions about the **effects** and **effectiveness** of an intervention, to establish if (and sometimes by how much) it made a difference for the recipients or 'beneficiaries' of the intervention.

Formative evaluations are intended to help improve the design, implementation, and outcomes of an **ongoing** intervention. The lessons learnt through formative evaluations can also be used to improve future interventions.

A **summative evaluation** is intended to assess the impacts, effects and overall merit or worth of a **completed** intervention, but not usually to improve its implementation. Summative evaluations are sometimes used to help decide whether the intervention should be continued and/or replicated in other settings or on a larger scale.

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Pragmatic Evaluations	&	Theory-Based Evaluations

Retrospective evaluation is an evaluation that looks back in time and usually takes place at the end of an intervention. The questions are typically framed in the past tense.

Prospective evaluation is an evaluation that is looking at the present, and the evaluation moves forward in time with the intervention being evaluated, using questions framed in the present tense

Pragmatic evaluations try to apply the best evaluation method for each evaluation question, that can be feasibly conducted within the real-world constraints of time and resources, and which provides practical knowledge for stakeholders.
They can be helpful when there are well-defined evaluation questions that can be answered without the need for theory, and when there is limited time and budget to conduct an evaluation.

Theory-based evaluations place emphasis on developing a theory of how and why an intervention is intended to work and produce outcome. They help develop questions about 'how, when and for whom' an initiative works and for questions about 'if' an intervention works - especially when experimental methods are not feasible or appropriate.

A **Realist Evaluation** approach is a type of theory-based evaluation that looks at the many different factors at play in determining the success of an intervention or policy, and asks *"What works, in what circumstances, and for whom"*. A **Theory of Change or** programme theory is used in a realist approach to focus the evaluation on the key questions of whether the intervention works, in what circumstances and for whom. It is a way of **defining long term goals** and ways to achieve them.

The challenges and constraints of evaluations

BUDGET CONSTRAINTS

Conducting robust evaluations that produce **trustworthy** findings can be resource intensive. Sometimes the budget might be too small to apply the 'best' evaluation designs and methods, but the evaluator still needs to produce findings that are meaningful and trustworthy.

Ways to reduce the cost of an evaluation include:

- **Simplify** the evaluation design.
- **Clarify** the commissioner's budget and information needs, and prioritise.
- Look for reliable **secondary data.**
- **Reduce** the sample size.
- Reduce **costs** of data collection and analysis.
- Incorporate new information **technology.**

The challenges and constraints of evaluations

TIME CONSTRAINTS

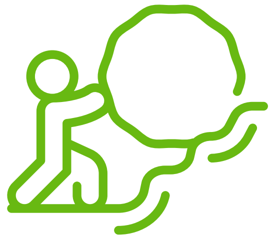
Time constraints are about conducting the evaluation within its agreed timeframe, or when its timing is not ideal.

Three common time constraints are:

- The evaluation **timeframe is too short** to measure the outcomes of interest (e.g. an evaluation is 12 months long, but the intervention could take up to 5 years to produce certain outcomes).
- The evaluation is **commissioned too late** to collect baseline data that will allow a reliable comparison before and after an intervention.
- The evaluation **timeframe is very short for the amount of data** collection and analysis requested.

Some of the strategies for managing time restraints include:

- **Simplify** the evaluation design.
- **Clarify** the commissioner's deadlines and information needs and prioritise.
- Look for reliable **secondary data.**
- **Reduce** the sample size.
- Use more **time-efficient** data collection and analysis methods and technology.
- **Hire more** evaluation team staff.
- Specify the short, medium and long-term outcomes the intervention is intended to achieve, to help **set realistic timelines** and **prioritise** what to measure.



The challenges and constraints of evaluations

DATA CONSTRAINTS

Data constraints are about **conducting an evaluation** when **critical information** needed to address the evaluation questions is **missing**, **difficult to collect**, or of **poor quality**. For example:

- A **lack of baseline data** in evaluations which have been commissioned at the end of an intervention.
- Working with **small, incomplete** or potentially **biased samples**.
- Trying to encourage the participation of **difficult-to-reach groups** in an evaluation.

Some of the strategies to reduce data constraints include:

- **Reconstruct** baseline data.
- **Adapt methods** to facilitate data collection from difficult-to-reach groups (e.g. using participant observation and interviews instead of focus groups).
- Use **mixed-methods** (e.g. if the most appropriate evaluation design or method is not feasible, collect data from a variety of sources and triangulate to strengthen your conclusions).
- For intervention designers and decision-makers to consider **evaluation** right from the **very beginning** so that baseline data can be gathered.

It is important to **be transparent** when describing your findings and conclusions. Data constraints will almost always weaken the certainty of your findings. As evaluators, it's important to **be clear** about the limitations of the evaluation and express an appropriate level of caution about the certainty of your findings.

The challenges and constraints of evaluations

POLITICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Political and organisational constraints **almost always are present** in different ways and to different extents. These are not necessarily bad things, though they can sometimes have a negative influence. They can also be seen as a positive indicator of the importance of an evaluation to stakeholders.

Some political and organisational constraints include:

- Attempts to **intentionally obstruct** an evaluation.
- Attempts to **undermine** the independence of an evaluation.
- **Resistance** by certain stakeholder groups to participating in the evaluation.

Managing political and organisational constraints effectively requires **good teamwork** and **communication**. At the beginning of the evaluation, it can help to **clearly define evaluation boundaries** and collaboratively conduct stakeholder analyses. This can help to clarify where the evaluation **must retain absolute independence** and where it can accommodate stakeholder input and preferences.

The challenges and constraints of evaluations

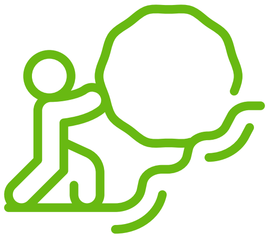
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Ethics are an **essential part** of our considerations and practice in every evaluation we do at CES. Ethics are about **how we should**, and do, **conduct an evaluation**.

As experienced researchers, all our evaluations follow certain ethical principles:

- Do no harm
- Informed consent
- Voluntary participation
- Confidentiality and anonymity

When working on sensitive topics or with vulnerable populations, there may also be additional guidelines to follow.



The challenges and constraints of evaluations

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS CONSTRAINTS

There is such an abundance of evaluation types, designs, methods and approaches that no evaluator can be skilled in everything. When designing an evaluation, evaluators should ask themselves ***'what kind of evaluation do we have the knowledge and skills to conduct?'***.

Want to talk to CES about a project?

Book a call with the team **here.**

CES works with government departments and service providers to design, implement and evaluate public policies and services.

CES is an all island not-for-profit organisation.

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