Closing learning and feedback gaps in evaluations: How to extend the ownership of an evaluation's findings to project participants

A tremendous amount of learning and knowledge results from routine or one-off monitoring and evaluation activities, which modern methods and technology have rendered increasingly robust. Yet, critical gaps remain in terms of who benefits from evaluation knowledge and who is ultimately accountable for disseminating evaluation findings. This article draws on experience with a development project in rural Pakistan to explore the challenges and opportunities that come from using participatory methods–in this case, a validation workshop–to bridge gaps in evaluation learning and feedback. It argues that despite efforts to make development evaluations more participatory, there is little evidence to show that the ownership of evaluation findings is shared appropriately with project beneficiaries to close the learning gap. Resources are usually provided to present an evaluation's findings to policymakers and decision-makers, but not necessarily to present them to the people and communities that benefitted from the intervention. Limiting the dissemination of evaluation findings and recommendations in this way prevents practitioners from closing the evaluation learning gap.

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Key Messages

▌ Activities like validation workshops allow evaluation findings to be validated, thus avoiding potential bias or false statements.

▌ Validation workshops that include the members of local communities empower communities, improve community members' ownership of the key findings, and build trust with implementing partners.

▌ Validation workshops with project beneficiaries in intervention areas allow the stakeholders to better understand the findings and more importantly, close the evaluation learning gap.

Introduction

The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of humanitarian aid has advanced significantly over the years, moving away from traditional evaluation methods to new methods and technology, like using drones for data collection. But the key questions of who benefits from an evaluation's findings and who is accountable for disseminating evaluation findings, remain unanswered. This article draws on the evaluation of a project in rural Pakistan to explore participatory methods to close the evaluation learning gap.

The context

Umerkot is one of the most underdeveloped districts in the south of Pakistan. Some 83% of Umerkot's population lives in rural areas and 70% of people are Hindu (most belong to scheduled castes[1]) and Christians who are highly neglected, disadvantaged, and lack access to basic services (Hassnain, 2018). Most people are subsistence farmers whose principal livelihoods consist of daily agricultural labour, rearing livestock, and brickmaking. Because of poor crop yields and climate insecurity, many farmers are indebted for life to feudal landlords. This relationship persists from generation to generation. People have no reliable alternative livelihood and lack sufficient coping mechanisms. Women in Umerkot are the most affected: the area's traditional gender-related norms and behaviours deprive them of access to resources and expose them to discrimination. For instance, without the permission of a male member of her household, a woman ought not to interact with a man, not even to access health care (if it is available).

The intervention under evaluation

From 2015 to 2018, with financial support from the United Kingdom's budget for foreign aid, Y Care International[2] and Community World Service Asia[3] worked in partnership to promote gender equity and improve the financial resilience among disadvantaged young women in Umerkot. The project focused on improving the embroidery skills learned by these women over generations. Because of the cultural gender norms that limited women's social mobility, the women had no access to markets to sell their embroidery products. To overcome this challenge, the project partnered with the Indus Valley ▶▶

Figure 1: The Evaluation Team with the Participants of the Validation Workshop in Umerkot, Sindh, Pakistan

▶ <u>Schools of Arts</u>,[4] a national academic institution, and with the <u>Textile Institute of Pakistan</u>[5] to train women in business practices and connect them to urban markets and designers.

The project targeted 700 rural women from 22 villages with the assumption that engaging them in different activities would increase their household income and reduce extreme poverty, food insecurity, and improve gender equity. Overall, the intervention aimed at strengthening women's voices in household and community decision-making and improving women's overall well-being (Hassnain 2018).

Complexity and the evaluation findings

Although a thorough theory of change and log frame had been developed during the project's design phase, the evaluation found that the context in which the project was implemented was complex and dy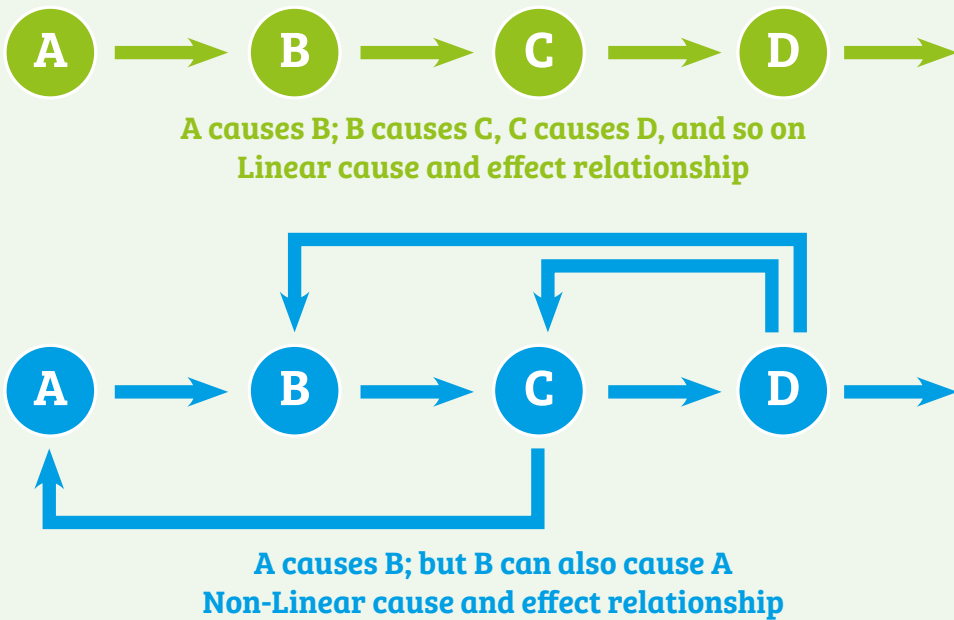namic, and it was difficult to establish the intervention's causal effects. In contexts like this, causality tends to be messy, multilevel, multidirectional, and unpredictable.

This observation on the part of the evaluators is consistent with the discussions in *The Book of Why: The New Science of Cause and Effect* by Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie (2018). In the book, the authors state that in a non-linear model, the relationship between cause and effect is not clear. Non-linearity was present in the Umerkot intervention (Figure 2).

The intervention's monitoring reports observed that the project's plans and strategies did not work as anticipated. Some activities led to outcomes, but others did not. In complex situations like this, outcomes can emerge in the most unexpected places (ALNAP, 2018). Two examples show how this was true in Umerkot:

1. **Girls' enrolment in school** increased significantly in Umerkot because of the project. This finding was verified in project monitoring activities that ▶▶

Figure 2: "Correlation Does not Imply Causation": Coachcolville (2020)

A causes B; B causes C, C causes D, and so on
Linear cause and effect relationship

A causes B; but B can also cause A
Non-Linear cause and effect relationship

▶ used the outcome harvesting approach.[6] In their monthly reports, gender activists told the project team what had changed, and the monitoring team confirmed the activists' information. The gender activists considered girls' education as one of two priorities when developing their action plans.

The project had not gauged the state of girls' education in the baseline report as increased education was not yet an outcome. By the end of the project, however, 223 girls out of a total of 340 children had enrolled in school because of the project's support.

2. **In Umerkot, feudal lords hold supreme power.** Involvement in the project activities meant that women had less time to perform their usual labour, such as picking cotton in the fields. In the beginning, the landlords were unhappy with this change, and they ordered their staff to tell the community's men to bring the women back to work in the fields. The project team had not anticipated this challenge, but the st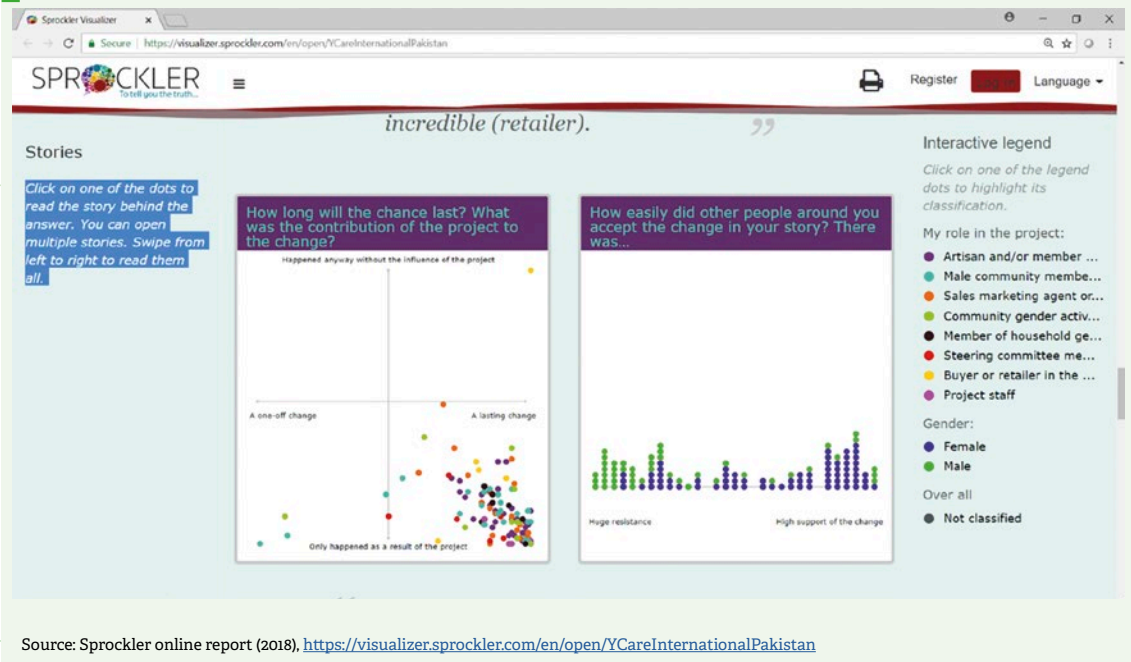eering committee intervened, spoke to the landlords and their families, provided substitute labourers, and promised that women would still be able to spend time working on the land. Nevertheless, it was clear that the project activities went against cultural norms. Subsequently, the landlords, as well as people in neighbouring villages, teased male beneficiaries about "their" women being out of their control.

Figure 3 depicts an outcome of the evaluation that used Sprockler,[7] a story-based data collection tool. The figure makes it clear that men in Umerkot faced more resistance to change than their female counterparts, for whom the intervention had been designed.[8] This finding motivated the evaluation team to ask the community why men faced more criticism about project activities than women.

Closing gaps in learning and feedback

Many evaluation wrap-up meetings take place in capital cities, where they target public figures/leaders and ▶▶

Figure 3: The Evaluation Team with the Participants of the Validation Workshop in Umerkot, Sindh, Pakistan

Source: Sprockler online report (2018), https://visualizer.sprockler.com/en/open/YCareInternationalPakistan

▶ decision-makers. The author's experience is that evaluation exercises seldom close their learning and feedback loop with a project's beneficiaries–this, although it should be the beneficiaries' right to learn what information evaluators gathered during their time together and what came of that information. Project beneficiaries include the local people, often members of poor and vulnerable communities, and the organizations with which they collaborate. The evaluation's beneficiaries, who are often also the evaluation's respondents, are usually the people and organizations who may have benefitted (or not) from an intervention and who may support scaling up the evaluation's learnings for a deeper and long-lasting impact on the ground, by becoming change agents within their communities rather than remaining merely the recipients of aid.

Close the learning and feedback loop with a project's beneficiaries increases transparency, improves accessibility, and contributes to the global knowledge base available to others. The target groups for dissemination should be agreed upon at the beginning of the process and should respect the confidentiality and safety of all those who participate in an evaluation and furnish responses for it (Hassnain et al., 2021).

Sharing the outcomes of an evaluation can be difficult when the results are perceived as negative or when the results question strategies or approaches to which practitioners are strongly committed. Stakeholders may resist questioning the effectiveness of their approach. They can be made more receptive if evaluators stress the evaluation's learning aspects and engage stakeholders early in the evaluation process (OECD 2012).

As noted, the findings shown in Figure 3 revealed that male beneficiaries faced more resistance to change than female beneficiaries. The evaluation team made a special effort to confirm those findings with the community and make sense of the data. More precisely, the team conducted a validation workshop with frontline project staff and a selection of community members (project participants from eight villages in two locations in Umerkot) who had been involved in the evaluation process. ▶▶

Figure 4: A Woman in Rural Pakistan Points to her Response to an Evaluation Question

Photo: Hur Hassnain

Note: The small color-coded dots in the graph represent individuals and their most significant change stories.

▶ The main purpose of the workshop was to close the feedback and learning gap by allowing project beneficiaries to provide feedback on the project's initial results. It also helped project staff to understand the importance of M&E, and it generated solid evidence of project results that could be used in subsequent evaluation activities. This was especially important since stakeholders had the ambition to scale up the project activities so that the project's socio-economic achievements could help neighbouring communities. In short, besides validating the evaluation's findings and closing the learning loop, the exercise allowed the community, local partner organizations, and local staff members to better understand participatory M&E and to build their capacity in that regard.

During the validation workshop, community members learned which project activities worked and which did not. They also learned about improvements that could be made in future. The beneficiaries were grateful for the opportunity to take part in the final stages of the evaluation and to learn more about the evaluation's findings. One participant remarked, "This validation workshop was special since it was the first time after a survey that the evaluation team shared the results with us."

The workshop also taught the evaluation team several important lessons and gave them insights that can easily apply to other contexts. These lessons and insights are discussed here.

Planning a validation workshop: It is important to plan and design a validation workshop ahead of time. The evaluation team should begin by preparing the workshop's agenda. The team can then gather the tools necessary to conduct the workshop, organize the sessions according to the evaluation's principal questions, and adapt the sessions to participants' differences and needs (their different culture, their different language, etc.). To encourage participants to take part, the workshop can use energizers, ice-breakers, and team-building techniques. Note-takers and workshop facilitators should be appointed in advance. ▶▶

▶ **Budgeting for validation workshops in communities:** It is important to budget for workshops sufficiently. Without enough funds, it is impossible to organize an evaluation workshop in the field. While a large budget is not necessary, the costs of travel and logistics must be covered. A validation workshop is much more useful to beneficiaries than a long evaluation report. Reports are not always useful because they are not usually translated into local languages. Furthermore, reports often explain evaluation findings in technical language, and they seldom reach the project's target groups. In general, therefore, financial resources for validation workshops should be part of an evaluation's budget, and dissemination activities for the project beneficiaries should be part of the evaluation's terms of reference. To the extent possible, independent national evaluators who were on the evaluation team should present the findings and recommendations to the populations consulted, the national authorities, and other stakeholders in the country. Other stakeholders may also be involved (IAHE 2014).

Selecting evaluation results to present: People in remote and poor rural villages are busy. An evaluation team benefits from selecting the evaluation's most relevant findings and presenting them concisely. For example, the team might convert data collected during the evaluation into user-friendly graphs and design simple questions to make the findings easier for the public to understand. During the validation workshop in Umerkot, the evaluation team observed that workshop participations had fun and were more engaged because the team had made the final presentation more interactive than previous presentations.

Identifying a venue: Choosing a suitable venue for a validation workshop is not always easy. Factors to consider when deciding where to host the workshop include the availability of transport from neighbouring areas, the availability of meeting space, and the interest and willingness of community leaders to take part. The safety of all workshop participants must be the highest priority, and the location in which the venue is situated must be selected accordingly.

Involving women, young people, and the poorest people: The evaluation team encouraged women, young people, and the poorest members of the community to participate in the workshop so that "no one is left behind." As a result, we found that more women participated than men and were active in the discussion on ways forward.

Being sensitive to gender issues, cultural norms, and conflict: The evaluation team that conducts the validation workshop should be aware of the community's gender and cultural norms and should be sensitive to conflict. By no means must any personal information about a respondent be revealed to another respondent. For that reason, a strict ethical protocol should be developed and discussed when the workshops are being designed. No accountability measure supersedes the safety and security of the people engaged in an evaluation.

Making an effort to use local languages: Validation workshops can be organized in the local language to overcome language barriers and engage everyone in the discussion. In Umerkot, the validation workshop was conducted in Sindhi, the language spoken by the local people.

Using appropriate evaluation methods and technologies:[9] Depending on the context, certain evaluation methods and techniques are more appropriate than others. For example, the project evaluation in Umerkot used outcome harvesting[10] and Sprockler.[11] The facilitators of the validation workshop discussed the outcomes thus harvested with the project's beneficiaries. Using Sprockler produced immediate, ready-to-use infographics that could easily be shared. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, Sprockler shows data in the form of graphs. The small colour-coded dots represent individuals and their most significant change story. ▶▶

▶ **Exploring impact causalities with beneficiaries (exploring what worked and what did not):** During a validation workshop, project participants can be asked to comment on the evaluation's findings to elucidate the project's impacts and their direction. For instance, in Umerkot, women from non-Muslim communities (who were usually poorer than women from Muslim communities) said that the project changed how they were perceived in the community: they had more resources, had more control over those resources, and were more mobile. This allowed them to better access markets and productive resources. Some women were also viewed as role models in their village. The validation workshop provided an opportunity to share lessons learned from the project with the wider community, including community members who did not project beneficiaries. In the case of economic resilience, for example, it benefited those who were not doing well to see why others were improving their livelihoods.

Conclusion

This article draws two main lessons. First, holding a validation workshop with project beneficiaries in intervention areas allows an evaluation team and evaluation commissioners to better understand an evaluation's findings and more importantly, close the evaluation learning gap. Second, allowing beneficiaries to provide feedback on a project's initial results and key findings empowers communities and builds trust with implementing partners.

Using participatory methods during an evaluation's data collection phase is essential to including community voices. It is no less important to engage the community during the final phases of the evaluation process. Exercises like validation workshops allow the evaluation's findings to be validated appropriately and can avoid potential bias or false statements being repeated in the evaluation reports. Most importantly, validation workshops can improve project beneficiaries' understanding of the findings and better inform their decisions going forward. Furthermore, the evidence produced in workshops and similar activities can shape future development interventions and produce a better, deeper impact on the ground. This underlines the importance of setting up solid M&E systems and using the vast amount of knowledge and evidence generated by M&E. **eVALU**

Endnotes

1. In India, "scheduled castes" refers to groups of people officially designated by the government as among the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups in the country.

2. www.ycareinternational.org

3. www.communityworldservice.asia

4. IVS (indusvalley.edu.pk)

5. TIP: Textile Institute of Pakistan - Karachi (Sindh) admission 2021–2022

6. https://outcomeharvesting.net/the-essence/

7. www.Sprockler.com

8. The small colour-coded dots in Figure 3 represent individuals and their most significant change stories.

9. See the ALNAP resource on strengthening the quality of evidence: https://www.alnap.org/help-library/%20strengthening-the-quality%20of-evidence-in-humanitarian%20evaluations

10. Outcome Harvesting enables evaluators, grant makers, and managers to identify, formulate, verify, and make sense of outcomes. See: www.outcomeharvesting.net

11. Sprockler is a story-based mobile data collection tool. See www.sprockler.com.

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Author's profile

Hur Hassnain is an organizational development expert and a specialist in program evaluation. He is the founder of the Pakistan Evaluation Association and a member of the Board of Directors of the International Evaluation Academy.

Hur is the lead author of *Evaluation in Contexts of Fragility, Conflict and Violence*, published in 2021. The book presents an interesting argument: that if evaluations are not designed with caution and sensitivity, the evaluations–like development aid–can unintentionally exacerbate tensions and negatively affect people and institutions.

Hur has 18 years of experience working in various thematic areas, including gender equality, climate change, renewable energy, agriculture, and women's economic empowerment. He has lived and worked in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. He has produced evaluations for bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and the private sector. Hur enjoys writing poetry. In 2006, he published a collection of poems in Urdu.