

Looking Back, Learning and Moving Forward: The Benefits of Effective Evaluations



1 Introduction

The systematic evaluation of projects is an essential component of Misesan Cara's way of working, as set out in its Monitoring & Evaluation Policy:

“Misesan Cara is committed to good governance, accountability and transparency, development effectiveness, and delivery of tangible results. As demands for greater accountability and demonstrable results have increased, the need for regular reliable monitoring and trustworthy evaluation of funded projects is increasingly important.”

(Misesan Cara M&E Policy, 2019)

Misesan Cara expects member organisations to be responsible for evaluating their projects periodically and informing themselves about the results they are achieving. Members thus bear the primary responsibility for carrying out project evaluations and the greater part of Misesan Cara evaluation work annually is generated in this way.

To complement this body of work, and with a view to capturing learning and best practice, Misesan Cara commissions a number of thematic evaluations each year, more often than not involving projects across a number of different member organisations and countries.

This Learning Brief sets out some principles to be borne in mind by those responsible for evaluations, as well as some practical considerations. It is based on Misesan Cara's experience of commissioning and managing external evaluations on an annual basis over the past number of years, and on a 2018 meta-evaluation of 47 evaluations commissioned by Misesan Cara members in the period 2010 to 2018.¹

¹ See Misesan Cara Learning Brief 2018/06 Findings and Lessons from a Meta-Evaluation (<http://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/LB2018-06-Findings-and-Lessons-from-a-Meta-Evaluation.pdf>)

² The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) identified five criteria for the evaluation of development projects: relevance,

2 Misesan Cara's Approach to Evaluation

In Misesan Cara's practice, evaluations are opportunities to identify strengths and learn lessons. Rigorous standards are applied throughout the evaluation process in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for the communities with whom our members work.

Misesan Cara's standard practice is to commission multi-project evaluations, usually involving a mix of member organisations and countries, which cohere around a central theme chosen on the basis of the potential for learning. Misesan Cara commissions up to four such external thematic evaluations each year.

Some of these evaluations consider the five DAC Criteria of Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability.² In recent years, however, logistical and budgetary considerations have led to a preference for more focussed effectiveness reviews.³ Examples of recent evaluations include:

- Effectiveness review of six projects supporting the realisation of equal educational rights of migrants, refugees and/or internally displaced people; South Sudan, South Africa, Thailand, India, Lebanon
- Effectiveness review of ten projects supporting realisation of girls' equal education rights; Malawi, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin
- Effectiveness review of five projects focused on the transition from emergency to recovery and resilience; Kenya and South Sudan
- Full DAC criteria evaluation of six health projects in Kenya
- Impact assessment of capacity development initiatives with five members; Nigeria, Kenya and Zambia

Reports with conclusions and recommendations are produced for each individual project and are shared only with Misesan Cara and the relevant project team.

effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/49756382.pdf>)

³ See Misesan Cara Learning Brief LB2017-03: Using Effectiveness Reviews for Project Evaluation (<http://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/LB03-2017-Using-Effectiveness-Reviews-31May2017.pdf>)

In addition, the evaluator is commissioned to produce an overall thematic learning report, drawing together conclusions and recommendations for Misesan Cara and its wider membership. This report is shared with all members as a contribution to overall organisational learning.

Finally, to contribute to learning in the wider development community, the lessons learned from evaluations are summarised as part of an ongoing series of Learning Briefs, which are disseminated publicly through the Misesan Cara website.

3 Evaluation as a Learning Opportunity: Feedback from Members

Hosting an evaluation can be an onerous task for any project team. Misesan Cara endeavours to ensure that the effort involved is rewarded with affirmation of what is going well in a project as well as insights and advice on improvements. A comment from one project manager in Kenya is typical of the feedback received:

“The evaluation was beneficial to the project in many ways because it pointed out the gaps that needed to be addressed for the project to have lasting impact. It was also beneficial to the project team because they saw where to improve and the approaches to add on (to) what they already knew.”

That particular evaluation was examining the experience of projects accompanying communities in the transition from emergency relief to recovery and on to developing resilience. One of the recommendations related to how household vulnerability was assessed, and led to the project adopting a more detailed approach to targeting:

“It was recommended that we conduct in-depth vulnerability analysis of each village in the catchment area ... for identifying the most vulnerable persons/households. This we have done using PRA and Chief’s records of the vulnerabilities in the villages, including persons living with disabilities, the elderly without family support, single mothers, terminally ill, the bed-ridden, widows and child-headed households.” (Project Manager, Kenya)

In another case, an evaluation highlighted a particular topic (developing resilience to climatic events), and led to the member’s Missionary Development Officer (MDO)⁴ bringing the message to all projects, including those not evaluated:

Following from (the evaluation) I have been encouraging the various (project teams) to look at climate resilience more closely especially in outreach projects with vulnerable communities. This would include digging much deeper and exploring the risks related to climate change and coming up with workable plans to mitigate the effects of possible risks. (MDO, climate change resilience evaluation).

Conducting regular evaluations on a project can help to build on successes and develop better practice over the years, and it is sometimes advantageous to have the same consultant return for a subsequent evaluation. For example, in one instance in India, a women’s empowerment project was included as one of five in a Misesan Cara external evaluation. Following on from what was a positive experience, the project team invited the same consultant back for a detailed evaluation of their own project three years later. Both the project team and the consultant reported on the benefit of the return visit.

Going back for a second evaluation, it is so much easier to discuss key issues openly as trust has been built from the first visit and one already knows the project. And it is great to have the opportunity to see how the project develops over time. (Consultant)

Appointing the right evaluator can be crucial to the success of an evaluation. In the assessment of a project manager at a human rights project in Kenya:

The evaluation exercise and effectiveness report were very well received by the ... team. First of all, it was an affirming exercise. The evaluator was supportive, interested, patient and well informed. The results gave a very high score card to us which indicated that we are on the right track and are making an impact in bringing about change in the communities that we have opted to serve. The areas of weakness or worthy of improvement have been noted, considered and acted upon.

⁴ Each of Misesan Cara’s members appoints a Missionary Development Officer as a liaison between the Misesan Cara office in Ireland and in-country project teams.

In some instances, bringing a new pair of eyes to scrutinise a project can bring practical benefits. In the case of one school in Nigeria, visited as part of a 2017 evaluation, the evaluation team noted the potential of an unfinished building. In September 2019, this opened as boarding accommodation for 20 girls. On the same visit, it was suggested that the school's multi-purpose hall be hired out for external events in order to generate revenue, something that is now being done with positive results.

4 Checklist for an Effective Evaluation

Despite many potential benefits, an exercise that is poorly planned and badly managed will cause frustration and a loss of goodwill on the part of stakeholders. This section sets out an approach which can maximise the benefits to a project of a well-planned and well-managed evaluation.

a. Before the Beginning

The end-of-project evaluation should be anticipated and planned for at the time of initial project design. Indicators, monitoring systems and a schedule of reporting should be put in place to gather relevant data throughout the project cycle, so that a body of quantitative and qualitative data is available at the time of the evaluation to complement the information gathered during the exercise itself. Of critical importance is the description of the situation at the start of the project through the collection of baseline data early in the project period. This will enable the achievements of the project to be measured in due course.

b. The Beginning

Key considerations in preparing for an evaluation include:

- Ensure that the ownership of the evaluation and responsibility for its management are clearly assigned from the outset.
- Decide on the type of evaluation that is most appropriate. It can be a full DAC criteria evaluation (see Section 2) or it can be a more limited review focussed on one of the five criteria (e.g., an effectiveness review or an assessment of impact).
- Choose whether the evaluation will be carried out by an external evaluator or by someone associated with the project. There are advantages to both approaches. Benefits of internal evaluations include greater close-up knowledge of the workings of the

project being evaluated; greater trust and openness to evaluators without fear of judgement or external scrutiny; greater openness to self-examination and self-criticism; and less administrative burden and lower costs. Evaluations commissioned externally offer not just an independent viewpoint which is less likely to be influenced by close connection with the project, but often a degree of expertise in evaluation methods and approaches not available within the member organisation. The idea of forming an evaluation team consisting of external and internal members might also be considered.

- Schedule the evaluation for a time that ensures the best possible participation and outcomes. Consider the cycles relevant to the project in question, such as the school year, the agricultural year, the weather and seasonal migration patterns, so that key stakeholders are available to participate.
- Set up a process to identify a suitable evaluator. This could involve a public tendering process.
- Finalise clear Terms of Reference with the selected evaluator, including an agreed methodology, assessment framework and workplan. An explicit set of deliverables, an associated timeframe and clarity regarding budget, fees, expenses and a payment schedule are also essential.
- Set requirements for the final report, in terms of language, length, layout and content. In particular, all data presented in the report should be dated, with the source clearly cited.
- Compile all relevant project documentation (proposals, contracts, reports, previous evaluations) so that the evaluator is provided with an up-to-date picture of the project as the evaluation commences.
- Involve, to an appropriate degree, all relevant stakeholders in the planning of the evaluation, and ensure they are informed of the final schedule and workplan. If the project works with children, pay particular attention to their role as key stakeholders, and consider appropriate and meaningful ways they can be involved at every stage.
- Assess the overall suitability of the planned dates of planned field work and brief all actors.
- Have protocols and procedures in place to ensure no child or vulnerable adult is put at risk during the evaluation. Brief evaluation participants accordingly.

c. The Middle

The work of the evaluation will normally involve the following steps:

- **A desk review**, looking at all relevant project documentation
- **An inception report and meeting**: It is advisable, early in the evaluation process, to get a sense of the evaluator's perception of the project and the expectations of the evaluation. After the desk review, the evaluator should prepare a brief inception report and discuss this with the team managing the evaluation. This will afford an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings and ensure the evaluation remains focussed on the priorities identified in the Terms of Reference.
- **Fieldwork**: gathering information from stakeholders directly involved in or affected by project activities.
- **A final validation meeting**: A draft report, including conclusions and recommendations, should be prepared by the evaluator and shared with the evaluation management team. Any clarifications from either side can be acquired at this stage, and a final report produced.

d. The End

The final report should now be shared with all relevant stakeholders. The project management team should be required to produce a detailed response to the conclusions and to each of the recommendations. This can serve as a monitoring tool for the ongoing implementation of subsequent phases of the project, where relevant.

If stakeholders include children (or adults who are not in a position to read dense documentation) consider preparing an accessible or child-friendly report, and

how they can be meaningfully involved in discussing this and following up on recommendations.

e. After the End

An evaluation provides a learning opportunity for all stakeholders. This learning should be integrated into future phases of the project, or into other projects implemented by the same organisation, as appropriate. Lessons learned can also be disseminated more broadly throughout the organisation or with the wider development community, for example through the publication of a learning Brief.

If the project in question is a long-term initiative involving a series of multi-annual interventions, evaluations should be repeated on a regular basis, at least once every three years.

5 Conclusion

Evaluations can be viewed first and foremost as learning opportunities, based on a systematic scrutiny of project implementation and results. This learning can be available not only to the project team concerned, but to all those involved with the implementing agency. A well-planned, well-managed and well-executed evaluation can contribute to improved implementation and thus to enhanced outcomes for beneficiary communities.

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development movement made up of 91 member organisations working in over 50 countries. We work with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in developing countries. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities also allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Misean Cara and our members work collectively and individually through the missionary approach to development. This framework is based on five values: respect, justice, commitment, compassion and integrity. Together, these establish the basis for the approach of missionaries to good development practice.

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

1. Uphold the right to quality education
2. Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
3. Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
4. Uphold and advocate for human rights
5. Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy sees Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

Misean Cara Learning Briefs

This is one of a series of Learning Briefs produced by Misean Cara with a view to promoting learning and contributing to discourse within the development sector. The Briefs are based on monitoring, evaluation and research work done for Misean Cara. Previous issues cover topics such as education, health, project evaluation, women's empowerment and the response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. All Learning Briefs are available at www.miseancara.ie/public-resources.

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