Using Effectiveness Reviews for Project Evaluation

Lessons from Applying the Methodology in Practice During 2015 & 2016

misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland

Introduction

With over 280 projects in more than 65 countries, coupled with a strong commitment to accountability and learning, staff in Misean Cara's Learning & Development Team are always on the look-out for a cost-effective way to do monitoring and evaluation.

Confronted with a similar dilemma in 2010, Oxfam UK opted to do effectiveness reviews, in essence evaluations focusing on just one of the five OECD-DAC criteria. To date, Oxfam UK has published on its website[1] the results of 93 evaluations conducted using this methodology.

In 2015, Misean Cara decided to take a leaf out of Oxfam's book, and commissioned Peter Mayers and a team of four other reviewers from Coffey International (UK) to conduct effectiveness reviews of 15 projects in four thematic areas (education, health, livelihoods and human rights) across six countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The exercise was repeated in 2016 for a further 11 projects in two thematic areas (health and education), with the work being done on this occasion by Mike Williams.

This Learning Brief describes the methodology employed and relates the experience of using it, from the perspectives of consultants, the project teams, Missionary Development Officers[2] and Misean Cara staff.

Sharing the Experience 25th May 2017

The methodology was the subject of a Learning Event organised by Misean Cara in Dublin in May 2017. The event brought together representatives of 15 development organisations, representatives of Misean Cara Member Organisations, Misean Cara staff and independent development consultants to hear presentations by each of the

the two consultants who had used the methodology in 2015 and 2016. The fifty-strong attendance also heard feedback from a number of the projects that were reviewed. The presentations were well received; participants at the event endorsed the approach and were highly appreciative of the opportunity to share experiences and to hear about a light but effective way of doing project evaluation.

Effectiveness Review Frameworks 2015

In 2015, Misean Cara invited tenders for the assessment, within a three- to four-month timeframe, of the effectiveness of each of 15 selected projects with reference to:

- the extent to which intended results indicated in original applications had been achieved;
- the alignment to each project's intervention logic;
- the effectiveness with which each project was contributing to meaningful long-term impact in the lives of intended beneficiaries; and
- the specific contribution of the project intervention to lasting positive change when other external factors were taken into account.

Seven criteria were identified as the basis for these effectiveness reviews:
   i.   relevance of the project to the context and to beneficiary needs;
   ii.   delivery of results against original plans;
   iii. linkages to other actors;
   iv.   quality of planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning;
   v.   alignment to intervention logic;
   vi.   evidence of meaningful change for beneficiaries; and
   vii. specific contribution to long-term change and impact.

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[1] http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/search?i=1;q=*;q1=publications;q2=effectiveness+reviews;x1=page_type;x2=series;sort=publication_date

[2] Each of Misean Cara's 90 Member Organisations appoints a Missionary Development Officer who is the principal point of contact between Misean Cara project staff and the Member Organisation project teams in the field.

These seven criteria were applied to all projects, regardless of the thematic area. The sixth criterion, focusing on change in the lives of beneficiaries (i.e., project effectiveness), was further divided into a number of sub-criteria related explicitly to one or other of the thematic areas. For education projects, for example, the sub-criteria sought evidence that:

   i. the projects supported demonstrated improved enrolment, attendance and graduation rates;
   ii. the projects were successful in changing attitudes and behaviours concerning the provision of education to marginalised students and to those with disabilities;
   iii. project beneficiaries had managed to transition from non-formal to mainstream education; and
   iv. households and teaching institutions were increasingly self-sufficient, so that education could continue.

These sub-criteria varied for each of the other three thematic areas (health, livelihoods and human rights), so that the evaluations yielded both sector-specific information and observations that applied to all projects in a generic sense.

2016

For the 2016 work, this overall approach was also adopted. Three key assessment criteria were identified:

   i. **The effectiveness of Project Design and Planning** (including checking for SMART objectives, project logic and rationale, risk management; assessing the quality of targeting; analysing how the project is resourced);
   ii. **Effectiveness of the Project Implementation Process** (including participation of the local community and beneficiaries; assessing how the project aligns with the original proposal; looking at how effective links are maintained with other project stakeholders, including government services); and

   iii. **Effectiveness of Project Delivery** (checking against stated objectives; assessing why and how adjustments were made from the original proposal; looking for practical evidence of impact on people's lives; looking specifically for evidence of reaching vulnerable groups).

The assessment of the impact on people's lives was further broken down into a set of criteria specific to each thematic area. Under health, for example, the following were taken as indications of effective health outcomes:

   i. improved attitudes and behaviours in relation to health;
   ii. reduced incidence/prevalence of disease;
   iii. reduced stigma (related to HIV & AIDS);
   iv. better quality of life/better health status;
   v. reduced mortality rates;
   vi. increased resilience; and
   vii. better health services.

Depending on the intended scope of the review, and the particular thematic area involved, the above list could be expanded or reduced as required.

Sr. Geraldine Henry from the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul presents some insights from the DREAM Project in Kenya that was part of a Misean Cara Effectiveness Review in 2015 at the Learning Event on the 25th May 2017. Photo Misean Cara.

"Excellent workshop. Great initiative."
Participant in May 2017 Learning Event.

Setting up an Effectiveness Review Framework

From the foregoing examples, it's clear that effectiveness reviews can allow for a high.

Assessment criteria are not standard across projects, thematic areas or location, and the identification of criteria and sub-criteria allows for a progressive concentration down to project level detail, the only constraint being that the focus remain on an assessment of effectiveness. A step-by-step guide to developing an effectiveness review framework might run as follows[3]:

1. Decide if an effectiveness review will work for you (consider cost, point in project or programme cycle, logistics, etc.)

2. Working with the consultant and/or the project team, identify both (a) the assessment criteria and (b) what an effective project might look like, choosing from (for example):

   a. *Project planning & design*
      i. initial research, including needs analysis;
      ii. targeting;
      iii. setting of SMART objectives;
      iv. alignment to national or other policy frameworks;
      v. assessment of risk; and
      vi. budgeting and resourcing plan.

   b. *Project implementation*
      i. involvement of local community, and especially intended beneficiaries;
      ii. linkages with key stakeholders, including government services, other local and international NGOs;
      iii. leveraging of additional resources through networking;
      iv. ensuring inclusion of vulnerable groups;

"Opportunities for networking very positive, especially with participants from member organisations and NGOs. Lots of food for thought and stimulating ideas."
Participant in May 2017 Learning Event.

      v. gathering of gender-disaggregated data; and
      vi. checking project activities against original proposal.

   c. *Project delivery*
      i. assessment of project against stated objectives;
      ii. reaching vulnerable groups;
      iii. bringing meaningful change to the lives of intended beneficiaries; and
      iv. assessment of project effectiveness against specific thematic criteria
         - quality of service delivered
         - changes in attitudes and behaviours
         - sustainability of project outputs.

The above listing is not exhaustive, and other points may be added as desired. The efficiency of the methodology, however, depends on adhering strictly to an effectiveness focus, and not introducing other parameters that will broaden the scope of the review. It is also prudent not to overload the analysis with excessive lists of criteria and sub-criteria. Stay focussed! See Annex 1 for an example of a blank framework template.

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[3] It is assumed that, as with any evaluation, normal best practice and procedures will apply, including discussion and finalisation of Terms of Reference, sharing of relevant documentation, early and frequent contact with project teams in-country, preparation of an Inception Report, debriefing of project teams on-site, validation of findings with relevant personnel, etc. These steps are not covered in this document.

Rating	Description
G	**Green** – Strong. The project is performing well. Limited improvements are necessary.
GA	**Green-Amber** – Good. Some improvements required, but the project is generally performing well.
AR	**Amber-Red** – Weak. Significant improvements essential in order to meet original targets.
R	**Red** – Very weak. Immediate and major change needed.

The Rating System

There is even more room for flexibility in the choice of a rating system. In early effectiveness reviews by Oxfam UK, different rating methods (low/medium/high, statistical comparison) were used to assess project performance against criteria. In 2015, based on Coffey's advice, Misean Cara adopted the four-point traffic light system first developed in 2011 by the UK Independent Commission on Aid Impact. This system was also used in 2016 by Mike Williams.

The advantage of this system is that it provides a straightforward, accessible and visual method of recording an assessment of performance against any criterion, baseline or benchmark, and opens the way for a discussion between the evaluator and the project team. Critics of this particular *four-point* system point out the lack of an Amber-only option, forcing the evaluator to go above or below a median line. Supporters are of the view that the evaluator cannot opt for a middle-ground response.

Again, in the words of Peter Mayers, the system avoids the "false precision of numbers" in that it requires the use of a symbol accompanied by a

What About the Other DAC Criteria?

The efficiency of the Effectiveness Review Framework approach is that it narrows the focus of inquiry during the evaluation process. By definition, there will be areas that will not receive as high a level of scrutiny as might be the case in a more broad-ranging evaluation. The experience of the consultants in Misean Cara's evaluations was that other criteria such as efficiency, relevance and sustainability came up in discussion or observation during site visits, so it was not the case that these topics were ignored during the process. However, as noted earlier, the success of this methodology and its ability to offer both veracity and agility is dependent on staying focussed.

Participants exchanging views following presentations on Misean Cara's use of the effectiveness review methodology in practice at the Learning Event on the 25th May 2017. Photo Misean Cara.

What happened in practice

In 2015 and 2016, up to two days were spent visiting each project, meeting staff and visiting project sites to observe the work done or being done, and interviewing a number of beneficiaries. At first glance this may seem too short a period, but it did benefit from significant advance preparation by all concerned. In addition, in the words of Mike Williams, "because the methodology was so focused it is amazing just how much information can be captured in two days".

At the end of the visit, a draft report and project ratings were shared with the project team, for the purpose of validating the findings. The following table is a sample of the rating of one project in 2016. See Annex 2 for an example showing a number of projects. Each of the ratings was accompanied by a rationale from the consultant, and the final, validated version of the report included extensive text to accompany the visual presentation of the rating.

"Found it very interesting and informative. Welcome the simplicity of the overall result, notwithstanding complexities behind it."
Participant in May 2017 Learning Event.

"The traffic light system worked best to rate the different attributes of projects rather than numbers," noted Peter Mayers from Coffey speaking at the Misean Cara Learning Event on the 25th May 2017.

Assessment Criteria						Overall Project Rating
1.	2.	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	
Quality of Project Design	Quality of Project Implement-ation	Quality of Project Delivery				
		Level of Achievement against Original Objectives	Level of Achievement taking account of all Factors	Practical Evidence of Change for Beneficiaries	Specific Benefits for Marginalised / Vulnerable Groups	
G A	G	G A	G A	G	G	G A

The Daughters of Charity HIV & AIDS DREAM project in Nairobi, Kenya was one of the projects visited in 2015. Members of the project team appreciated the non-threatening approach of the consultant, and were reassured by the fact that it was very much an evaluation with a narrow focus. The approach was less *"What's wrong with this project?"* and more *"What's going well, and what can we improve on?"* Staff felt the atmosphere was more inquisitive than interrogative. The short and accessible reports were also appreciated. There was a suggestion from the project team that a methodology such as this could be used in between, and to complement, more traditional evaluations.

Conclusion

Misean Cara is pleased with the results achieved by using this methodology, with Seamus O'Leary, the organisation's Learning & Development Manager, saying "Effectiveness Reviews provide a quick, cost-effective yet rigorous way of evaluating project performance, without over-burdening either project staff or M&E budgets!" More Misean Cara projects will be evaluated in 2017 using this methodology.

Acknowledgements

Misean Cara would like to thank the project staff at all 26 projects that were visited over the course of the two years for their unfailing commitment, courtesy and cooperation; the Missionary Development Officers from the Member Organisations involved, for their enthusiastic support of the initiative; Peter Mayers and Mike Williams, for their painstaking work in the preparation and execution of the project review visits, and the writing of comprehensive reports; and everyone who attended the Learning Event in Dublin in May 2017. This document is a distillation of the experiences, thoughts and discussions along the way.

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development movement made up of 90 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:

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

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

Annex 1: Example of a Framework Template (2016 version)

Project Title:		Location:		Contract Date:	
Member (MO):		Project Code:		Funding Amount:	

Performance Against Effectiveness Framework - Section A

No.	Key Assessment Criteria	Sub- Criteria	Rating	Explanatory Notes for Rating	Data Sources		
					Primary Research (field)	Desk Reviews	Other Sources
1.	Quality of **Project Design and Planning**	1.1 Clarity and relevance of Project **Objectives** (SMART) to the nature of the intervention and the local context, and clarity of **project logic / rationale** including consideration of **risks** and assumptions.					
		1.2 Clarity on selection of **target groups** (including consideration of gender issues, most vulnerable groups and cultural issues) and their involvement in project design.					
		1.3 Evidence of appropriate **resourcing** (relevant to the scale and nature of the intervention) including (a) budgeting, (b) technical and non-technical personnel, and (c) relevant equipment, materials / infrastructure.					
2.	Quality of **Project Implementation Process**	2.1 Evidence of community / beneficiary **participation** in project implementation.			.		
		2.2 Evidence of implementation of the project in line with the **original proposal** / logic, **or adjustment** and management of changes / risks, where required.					
		2.3 Evidence of appropriate **linkages** with other actors e.g. govt. or other agency plans (where relevant).					
3.	Quality of **Project Delivery**	3.1 Overall **level of achievement against original objectives**					
		3.2 Overall **level of achievement when taking account of all relevant factors**.					
		3.3 Practical evidence of **meaningful change / benefits** for beneficiaries in relation to the Education Effectiveness Outcomes.					
		3.4 Evidence of specific benefits for **women / girls and vulnerable** groups (PWD, OVCs, HIV affected etc.)					
OVERALL RATING AND CONCLUSION							

Section B: Other Issues

4.   **Evidence of an effective project Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) System.**

5.   **Identification of how faith-based / missionary approach contributed to or inhibited effectiveness.**

6.   **Identification of how mentoring / QSI support from Misean Cara contributed to or inhibited effectiveness.**

7.   **Recommendations**

Explanatory Note

i.   The framework is constructed on the basis of the key assessment criteria described on Page 2 for the 2016 reviews. Criteria and sub-criteria noted in the framework above are for illustration purposes only.

ii.   For Key Criteria 1 and 2, a number of sub-criteria were identified as a basis for enquiry and discussion, but only one overall rating was applied to each grouping.

iii.   For Key Criterion 3, the sub-criteria were deemed to be of such importance in the review of effectiveness that each was given a separate rating.

iv.   The setting of key and sub-criteria is entirely at the discretion of the organisation and the evaluation team. In this particular Misean Cara example, an initial list of 22 criteria was drawn up. These were then grouped under various headings and edited down in order to arrive at a workable model.

v.   Section A of the template contains the headings under which a project was assessed. Section B addresses other areas which were discussed with the project team, but were not rated. Again, as with the selection of criteria, the choice of these headings is left to the organisation and the evaluation team.

vi.   For layout purposes, the "Sub-Criteria" column has been widened and the "Explanatory Notes for Rating" column has been narrowed. In practice, the reverse would be the case.

Annex 2: Taking the Portfolio View

Project No.	Assessment Criteria						Overall Project Rating
	1.	2.	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	
			Quality of Project Delivery				
	Quality of Project Design	Quality of Project Implementation	Level of Achievement against Original Objectives	Level of Achievement taking account of all Factors	Practical Evidence of Change for Beneficiaries	Specific Benefits for Marginalised / Vulnerable Groups	
1.	GA	G	GA	GA	G	G	GA
2.	GA	G	AR	GA	G	G	GA
3.	GA	G	GA	G	G	G	G
4.	G	G	GA	GA	G	G	G
5.	G	G	GA	G	GA	G	G

This example shows ratings for five different projects visited during one round of effectiveness reviews. Reading the table *horizontally* gives the view of an individual project. Of interest at an organisational level, e.g., for a portfolio manager, might be the *vertical* reading, taking a column at a time. In this table, then, the manager can see that there is little to worry about concerning quality of project implementation, evidence of change for beneficiaries or specific benefits for marginalised groups. On the other hand, some attention might be required in relation to the quality of project design and the level of achievement against original objectives.