M&E during COVID-19 series

Learning as we go

How the Pandemic is changing evaluation strategy and planning

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ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/ Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.

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Summary

This paper provides an overview of changes in evaluation strategy and approaches since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It draws on key informant interviews with heads of evaluation units and reflections from an M&E Skills-Building Workshop hosted by ALNAP in February 2021.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has disrupted humanitarian evaluation practice and has placed new demands on evaluation functions. Evaluation units have had to adapt their ways of working and rethink how best to serve their stakeholders. There has been a much greater emphasis on the use of learning-oriented approaches, particularly for evaluating the response to COVID-19 itself. The number of external independent evaluations has fallen. More than ever, the nature of the relationship between the evaluation function and programme staff has mattered, as have the interpersonal and facilitation skills of evaluators to support overstretched programme staff and senior management, and to ensure their buy-in. Creative solutions to communicate evaluation findings have also been important to ensure the uptake of findings and recommendations. Travel restrictions have led to a greater reliance on national consultants and evaluators, prompting a major shift to the use of remote digital methods for conducting evaluations.

How COVID-19 changed evaluation practice

The onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 rapidly changed the global humanitarian and development landscape. As humanitarian need and extreme poverty rose, humanitarian and development agencies rapidly adapted their programming and ways of working. Those working in the evaluation function of many organisations similarly had to change their ways of working, and rethink how to best serve their stakeholders – most immediately, agency staff, management and donors.

This paper offers a brief overview of how evaluation practice has changed since the Pandemic began, and outlines some of the common challenges, adaptations and opportunities that evaluation units have faced in delivering on their strategies and plans. It briefly describes the range of approaches that organisations are adopting to evaluate the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The paper ends with an exploration of possible longer-term implications for the future of humanitarian evaluation as a result of evaluation experience and adaptation since the start of the Pandemic. This paper is based on 15 key informant interviews with heads of evaluation functions; a review of relevant literature and materials; and discussions and exchanges from an ALNAP peer-to-peer learning workshop on 26 February 2021 with 26 participants from evaluation units across the humanitarian sector, including: UN agencies, NGOs, bilateral donor agencies, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement.

1. The overall picture is one of rapid adaptation

A rethinking of the role that evaluation functions could and should play in a global pandemic triggered the publication of new guidance material and resources, and new forms of evaluation leadership. There have been common patterns across the sector in terms of how evaluation of humanitarian action has adapted, with a much greater reliance on national evaluators. This section provides an overview of these shifts and trends.

How organisations have adapted their evaluation approach due to COVID-19

'What do we have to offer?' 'How should we adapt our evaluation approach?'

These two questions faced evaluation units and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) teams early in the Pandemic.[1] They were prompted by a concern not to overburden already stretched programme staff, who were making major adaptations to how they worked and what they did at all levels. These questions were also prompted by the totally altered working environment for evaluation managers and evaluators as international travel became almost impossible and local lockdowns severely limited direct access to affected populations.

Many agencies with larger and well-resourced evaluation offices rapidly produced guidance on adapting evaluation practice in the early weeks of the Pandemic.[2] Box 1 presents guiding principles that were common in much of the guidance produced.[3]

Existing evaluation platforms produced, commissioned and collated a range of resources to guide and support evaluation managers and evaluators through this unfamiliar landscape.[4] In June 2020 the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition was set up by and for the evaluation units of bilateral donor governments, multilateral institutions, regional development banks and partner countries. Hosted by the OECD-DAC Evaluation Network, the Coalition's aim is to 'provide credible evidence to inform international co-operation supporting non-clinical responses to and recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic in developing countries – helping to ensure that lessons are learned and that the global development community delivers on its promises' (OECD-DAC, 2021).

Box 1: Common principles in guidance on adapting evaluation practice during COVID-19

Guiding principles:
- **Adapt throughout the evaluation process**: be flexible, for instance, on objectives, scope and methods.
- **Proactively communicate and collaborate**: from headquarters to regional offices and implementing partners, and through evaluation networks, to assess needs, share experience and learn.
- **Do no harm and/or prioritise safety**: with a particular focus on the evaluand and evaluation team throughout the evaluation process.
- **Consider biases and ensure inclusivity**: especially if data is collected remotely, taking account of unequal access to communication technology.
- **Uphold minimum standards**: while it may not be possible to follow the same standards as pre-Pandemic, evaluation results must be 'good enough' in terms of relevance, credibility and timeliness.
- **Use lessons learned and anticipate future needs**: drawing on the wealth of evaluation experience in crises, recognising that the Pandemic will affect evaluands for a long time.
- **Ensure the utility of the evaluation**: assess the evaluand and organisational needs, and engage with stakeholders at all stages of the evaluation.

Two things are striking about this range of initiatives and resources. First, there is little distinction between evaluation of humanitarian action and of development. Instead, the shared quest to adapt and to learn during a global crisis with wide-ranging impact appears to have broken down barriers and opened up a collective space that is conducive for learning – for example, the European Support Service's 'Evaluation in Crisis' initiative. Development evaluators, in particular, have reached out to humanitarian evaluators to learn from their experience of real-time evaluation (RTE), and the ethics of, and approaches to evaluating in 'hard-to-reach' areas. Second, many of the initiatives have been driven by, and developed for multilateral institutions and governments, including the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition and the joint UN and donor evaluation plan inventory. There are fewer initiatives specifically targeting, or indeed engaging NGOs, although of course they have access to common platforms such as ALNAP and Better Evaluation. There are ongoing discussions within certain NGO forums, such as the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK. But few initiatives bring all humanitarian actors together in one platform.

Above all, this uncharted and radically different working environment has called for evaluation leadership. This is succinctly described by Michael Quinn Patton (2021) as:

> more than methodological knowledge and management excellence; it also requires astute political judgment to navigate organizational mazes; a commitment to and knowledge about how to build on existing evidence to further organizational buy-in and learning; interpersonal skills to establish and nurture the relationships critical to utilization-focused developmental evaluation; and the courage to stay the course when doubts and challenges arise as they inevitably do. For all these reasons and more, a critical factor in the success of developmental evaluation is leadership.

Some of these aspects of leadership are explored below.

Trends in evaluation practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- There has been **a considerable drop in the number of external evaluations** commissioned during 2020. Experience varies between agencies, from those that completed evaluations that were begun before the Pandemic but did not start any new ones, to those that attempted to maintain their planned evaluation schedule, postponing only a few that they judged not to be feasible – for example, country programme evaluations in highly politicised contexts where remote evaluation was not a safe option. A number of evaluations were cancelled altogether. Donors are said to have been flexible in reallocating programme resources and in permitting the rescheduling of external evaluations, with some exceptions where they were allocating large amounts of funding and required evaluative oversight.

- There has been **a significant shift to more learning-oriented approaches** as programme staff struggled to adapt to a completely new situation and to new ways of working. A receptive learning space opened up in some agencies, described by one key informant as 'less defensive' in the common struggle 'to get it right'. Learning-oriented approaches range from real-time reviews and real-time evaluations (RTEs), facilitated internally or by external consultants, to short papers that draw relevant learning from a synthesis of past evaluations, to establishing a learning log on a knowledge management platform.

"There has been a considerable drop in the number of external evaluations, a significant shift to more learning-oriented approaches and experimentation with more immediate and accessible ways of communicating evaluation findings."

- Associated with this, evaluation units have used and experimented with **more immediate and accessible ways of communicating evaluation findings and learning to users**, often in real time, shifting away from the traditional emphasis on weighty evaluation reports at the end of the evaluation process. Early in the Pandemic, 'non-traditional methods of disseminating' were encouraged by the OECD-DAC/UNDP guidelines.[5] Agencies have taken up the challenge (see below for examples).

- Above all, there has been a **seismic shift to remote and digital ways of working**, whether for data collection purposes as so much evaluation has been done remotely; or to provide support and capacity-building for decentralised evaluation functions; and/or to build a geographically disparate but global team of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff across an organisation. Managing remote evaluation and ways of working has brought new challenges and opportunities.

"The experience of greater reliance on national evaluators has highlighted areas of greater expertise and competence – for example, understanding and knowledge of the national/ local context, as well as areas where capability could be strengthened."

A shift in balance from international to national evaluators

With international evaluators unable to travel, there has been much greater reliance on national consultants/evaluators. In some cases they have taken the lead entirely; in other cases, national teams have been supported remotely by international evaluators, sometimes in a mentoring capacity. Overall, national consultants have been given greater responsibility and authority.

Recruitment of national consultants has been a challenge for some agencies, with high demand and therefore competition for hiring experienced national consultants. Whether this way of working has succeeded has depended, at least partly, on the respective agency's pre-COVID-19 contacts and network at country level, and prior experience of working with national consultants. Prompted by the Pandemic, some UN agencies have actively sought to extend their framework agreements to consultancy companies located in low- and middle-income countries in a drive to expand the diversity of evaluation providers.

National evaluators are often valued for their access to affected populations. Whether this has been possible during the Pandemic has depended upon local lockdowns and what has been judged as feasible and/or ethical. As with evaluations of humanitarian action in hard-to-reach conflict environments, following the 'Do No Harm' principle means ensuring that risk is not simply transferred from international to national evaluators who are expected to spend time in the field.

Photo credit: European Union/Mathias Eick

The experience of greater reliance on national evaluators has highlighted areas of greater expertise and competence – for example, understanding and knowledge of the national/local context, as well as areas where capability could be strengthened. Some workshop participants reported that national-level evaluators may not be as familiar as international evaluators with the range of evaluation methodologies, such as outcome harvesting; others noted challenges with report drafting, given that most reports are still required in English or French.

2. Common evaluation challenges, adaptations and opportunities during COVID-19

This section captures the common challenges, adaptations and opportunities that emerged in key informant interviews with heads of evaluation functions and during the workshop discussions. They relate to different stages in the evaluation process, starting with engagement and buy-in from evaluands and evaluation users, through the planning, implementation and finally dissemination stages, and in managing global teams and staff well-being.

Engaging evaluands and end-users: relationships and communication

Evaluation units' experience of engaging evaluands and end-users during the Pandemic has varied widely. Some, especially in larger agencies, experienced 'push-back' from overstretched programme staff who felt that they could not engage in evaluation activity, and/or questioned the feasibility of data collection. Others, often NGOs, had a more positive experience, especially where the evaluation function could tap into what one workshop participant described as 'a natural demand for learning and reflection' across the respective organisation and across country offices.

Perhaps more than ever before, the nature of the relationship between the evaluation function and programme staff has mattered. This, in turn, depends upon the nature of the relationship pre-Pandemic and how the evaluation function was viewed – as listening and supportive or as more 'distant' or 'imposing'. During the Pandemic, a key question has been: do programme staff feel heard by their evaluation colleagues in terms of the pressures they are, and have been, under? Do they feel supported by the evaluation function, and has there been dialogue about how any evaluative activity can best serve their learning needs and improved programming? One workshop participant described this as working with 'trust, truth and transparency':[6] building trust with evaluation users, ensuring transparency in the evaluation process, and thus creating a shared narrative around the truth of the findings.

Regular and open communication has been key to building a constructive relationship between the evaluation function and programme staff. This was the case from the early stages of the evaluation process to ensure buy-in, during the evaluation process[7] to ensure ownership, and at the end to ensure the credibility and uptake of findings and recommendations.

The nature of the relationship between the evaluators, especially if externally recruited, and programme staff and evaluation users was also identified as being critically important. A number of evaluation units have paid more attention to interpersonal communication and facilitation skills when recruiting evaluators in the past year, often referred to as the 'soft skills' of evaluation, as well as 'hard' methodological and technical evaluation skills.

Planning for evaluation

- The shift and appetite for more learning-oriented evaluations has opened up space for **'developmental evaluation'**, with its distinguishing characteristic of 'contributing to something that is being developed' with a high degree of flexibility and adaptation, and a focus on emergence (Patton, 2021).[8] This, in turn, demands more systemic thinking in the evaluation approach. Sometimes this appears to have been implicit in the type of learning approach that different agencies have adopted. Sometimes it is explicit, as in the case of the World Food Programme's (WFP) developmental evaluation of its COVID-19 response.

- Despite the use of technology for remote data collection, **limited direct access to beneficiaries** has been a particular challenge for planning more accountability-oriented (and therefore independent) evaluations. These are the types of evaluation most likely to have been cancelled or postponed. Adaptations have included embedding evaluation questions into end-line surveys.

- There have been **attempts to lighten the evaluation load** on country offices, and especially to lighten the evaluation process. In some cases this has meant not holding country offices to evaluation standards expected pre-Pandemic.

- At the same time, some evaluation units report a **lengthening of the evaluation process**, planned or unplanned. For example, it may take longer to complete all interviews remotely, and more time has been spent on documentation review. One agency describes how it is streamlining its evaluation activity, taking a 'modular' approach. Instead of commissioning separate thematic evaluations, it is 'piggybacking' evaluation questions on a particular theme onto a number of ongoing country programme evaluations; the thematic findings will then be synthesised. This is intended to lighten the evaluation load on country offices.

Above all, faced with numerous constraints, the story is of greater flexibility and creativity as evaluation units have adapted. Heads of evaluation functions describe the challenges of working in such an uncertain environment, while some have experienced it as an exciting time of adaptation and innovation.

Implementation

- The **major shift from in-person fieldwork to remote data collection** has triggered innovation and experimentation as well as ethical and methodological challenges. These are explored in ALNAP's paper on 'Getting remote M&E right: Ethics, challenges and gaps'. Many evaluation units were able to build on existing experience of using digital technology in humanitarian evaluations carried out in 'hard-to-reach' areas. They also learned from programme and monitoring staff in conflict environments like Syria. Staff and NGOs on the ground usually have the strongest sense of what is feasible and culturally appropriate. Some key informants on the front line sounded notes of caution, including about the cultural challenge of communicating remotely with external stakeholders such as local government officers; and the sense of 'abandonment' felt by some communities when all communication switched to digital. Heads of evaluation are concerned about the bias inherent in remote data collection as groups without access to technology are excluded, especially if the bias is not recognised or understood. Not only does this affect the quality of the evaluation, it can tilt the balance away from the voices of the affected population to the voices of agency staff.

- Nevertheless, greater reliance on digital technology and less international travel have brought **cost savings** for some. In one case this meant the evaluation could cover a larger sample of countries, albeit remotely.

- **Reviewing secondary sources and documentation** has assumed much greater importance. The World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) refers to evaluators increasingly as 'reviewers and synthesisers of existing knowledge' (World Bank, 2020). Some have welcomed this as forcing evaluation teams to be more rigorous and diligent in searching for and using existing data sources and programme documentation. This may imply a longer inception phase. It may also mean greater attention to, and investment in programme monitoring, and in communication channels for ensuring accountability to affected populations on an ongoing basis so that data is available for the evaluation. In evaluations pre-COVID-19, the documentation review phase would often be cut short in the rush to start fieldwork, with the risk of duplicating what had already been collected and was already known.

- On the one hand, the challenges of evaluating during the Pandemic have **encouraged creativity**, from evaluation teams as well as managers. On the other, it is now much **harder to verify and triangulate findings**, or to begin to address the 'counterfactual' – for example, by reaching non-beneficiary households or communities.[9] In these circumstances, evaluation teams may need to invest more time in 'collective sense-making' processes with stakeholders and key informants, to ensure that evidence is validated, and any partiality and bias are flagged.

Communication of findings, dissemination and use

Discussions and debates on evaluation utilisation have long focused on how to communicate more effectively with evaluation users. This has been thrown into sharp focus during the Pandemic as programme staff struggled to adapt to different and often remote ways of working in uncharted territory, often spending large amounts of time in front of their computer screens. In this context, what have been the most effective ways of disseminating findings to ensure that they are taken up and acted upon?

- **Reliance on digital dissemination of evaluation findings** has enabled evaluation units to reach much larger numbers of evaluation users who are currently confined to their desks, and at lower cost, by eliminating travel. Yet this can still be done interactively: for example, where users are invited to validate the findings, to help evaluation teams develop their recommendations through online workshops, and to engage in the management response in larger numbers and from different locations. One key informant described this as 'democratising access'.

- But evaluation users being confined to their desks does not mean that they have a lot more time. In fact, many are under huge pressure, balancing professional and personal lives, especially if working from home. This has encouraged **more varied and sometimes creative ways of sharing and communicating findings**, for example:

  - producing shorter user-friendly 'lessons-learned' documents – in the case of one agency a one-page poster summarising key learning;

  - sharing key findings throughout the evaluation process rather than waiting until the end – in one case through daily blogs by the evaluator;

  - making greater use of webinars, short videos, infographics and podcasts;

  - in one agency, embedding an evaluation staff member in programme management meetings to share evaluative evidence and learning on an 'as-needed' basis.

- This has encouraged more thought to be given to **creative dissemination strategies**, often over longer periods of time to reach a wide range of evaluation users. The overall pattern appears to have been more frequent but shorter communication, with a greater emphasis on verbal means of communicating.

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"During the Pandemic, there has been more time dedicated to strategic approaches for dissemination evaluation findings, which have been effectively shared through digital channels and in more creative ways."

Team-building and staff well-being

- **Remote working and more frequent communication** between staff in geographically disparate locations has facilitated team-building of M&E staff in some organisations, often to their surprise: 'we have really built a global team without any travel'. It has also facilitated remote mentoring of, and advisory support to decentralised M&E teams and staff. But the limitations of working in an entirely virtual world have also become apparent in terms of relationship-building and the human dynamic that can be lost through entirely digital communication.

- Remote working and restricted travel have also led to a **disconnect, between those at headquarters or in regional offices, and those closer to the realities on the ground**. In the words of one evaluation director, 'we are in a virtual reality, through Zoom. And the real world is out there. How do we bridge the two?'.

- The **psychosocial well-being of staff** has been a concern throughout the Pandemic. This often focuses on isolation, uncertainty, being overwhelmed, and/or juggling family and work while staff operate from home. Heads of evaluation units may feel a particular responsibility to keep their teams motivated. Those closest to the field underline another source of stress: MEAL[10] staff witnessing trauma and distress as households struggle to cope with the impact of the Pandemic as resources to support them fall short.

3. Approaches to evaluating the response to COVID-19

Most heads of evaluation functions realised the role they needed to play immediately, to inform and influence the response to the Pandemic as it evolved. Waiting till the Pandemic was over would be too late; much experience and learning would have been lost (Patton, 2021).

Early on, there was thus an emphasis on learning reviews and approaches. Many of these were pioneered by NGOs in the first six months of the Pandemic (see Box 2). Some agencies chose an external evaluator for neutrality and independence, sometimes a consultant familiar with the organisation and known to staff. Other agencies chose staff members to carry out the review – usually staff who had not been directly involved in implementation – because they understood the organisation, and to promote the acceptance of a real-time learning review carried out by a known and respected colleague. This also ensured that the staff involved fully benefitted from being part of the exercise and the learning it generated. But this could also be hampered by the lack of time and availability of staff members of an appropriate calibre and experience to engage in such a learning review.

The process of carrying out the review is key to promoting learning, as described in the examples in Box 2. One UN agency carried out an internal adaptive management review, both at headquarters and regional levels, designed to be as consultative and participatory as possible with staff. Another agency consciously shifted the emphasis in their review to facilitating staff learning, away from making recommendations.

By late 2020/early 2021, a number of organisations had started to plan for or commission evaluations of their COVID-19 response, usually as **a single-agency and often RTE**. Examples include the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) which is commissioning an evaluation between February and June 2021; the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which is planning a dedicated evaluation of its COVID-19 response in 2021; and WFP which launched an evaluation in January 2021, following a developmental approach (Patton, 2021).

Box 2: Examples of NGO learning exercises

A few months into the Pandemic, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) carried out a learning-oriented review of their global COVID-19 response plan, and of the support and guidance provided by headquarters to regional offices. This was facilitated by an external evaluator working remotely, through remote interviews and an online survey tool. A carefully selected Steering Committee was appointed to facilitate staff buy-in, overseen by the Deputy Secretary-General. The findings generated a management response.

From March to September 2020, the Stockholm Evaluation Unit of MSF engaged in a 'document and reflect' exercise on the response to COVID-19 in Belgium. One of the aims was to 'document' interventions as they were being implemented, thus conceptualising the response in real time and creating a logical framework retrospectively. The second part of the exercise facilitated, collected and organised reflection among those involved in the response, identifying what worked well or less well, roughly following an 'After Action Review' format.

War Child commissioned two consultants to carry out a real-time review of their COVID-19 response in July/August 2020. The consultants' findings and analysis were shared on an ongoing basis with War Child staff through regular blogs. The final report was considered by senior leadership, generating a management response and action plan.

Oxfam carried out a real-time review of its COVID-19 response in June/July 2020, with an 11-person interdisciplinary team of staff members from across the confederation. There were five country case studies. The findings were disseminated through a report (translated into different languages), infographics and thematic webinars. This triggered a number of thematic management responses.

Another common approach is **mainstreaming evaluation questions**, often on preparedness and responsiveness to COVID-19, into existing evaluations, such as country programme evaluations. If appropriate, these can feed into a later synthesis. This approach has been adopted by some UN agency evaluation units, including those of WFP, UNHCR and FAO.

Simultaneously a number of **joint evaluations** are planned, using different models:

1. A UN-led inter-agency and system-wide humanitarian evaluation (UN/IAHE) that will include the Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

2. Thematic evaluations carried out jointly under the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition – for example, an evaluation of the international protection of refugees, focusing on the international community's wider response to refugee protection during the Pandemic, for which a specific management group consisting of UNHCR, Finland, Uganda, Colombia and ALNAP has been set up.

3. The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition has proposed a set of common strategic evaluation questions for its members to consider and adopt. The aim is to develop a comprehensive and coherent evidence base that can be more readily synthesised. These proposed questions look at the relationship between the national government's response and the international community.

The possibility of a 'system-wide' joint development–humanitarian evaluation in 2021 has been floated in the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition – however, the coalition does not include NGOs, many of whom are on the front line of the response. However, at the time of writing this idea does not seem to have gained traction. Instead there is greater interest in synthesising evaluation findings across particular themes.

The different approaches described above are not mutually exclusive: a single agency may have carried out its own internal learning review, commissioned an external evaluation, be mainstreaming COVID-19 questions into its ongoing evaluations, and be contributing to a multi-agency synthesis of findings.

Issues emerging

1. To what extent, and how should national governments be engaged in these humanitarian evaluations, given the centrality of the national response to the Pandemic? How is this mode of working changing common humanitarian practices?

2. Should evaluations distinguish between the humanitarian and development dimensions of the response to the Pandemic? For example, should there be a separate set of humanitarian-specific strategic evaluation questions, or is it appropriate to have a combined humanitarian-development set of questions? Should there be a synthesis of evaluation findings that relate specifically to the humanitarian response?

3. How should duplication be avoided between different coordination forums, yet also ensure there are adequate platforms for sharing evaluation approaches and findings on the COVID-19 response across the humanitarian system, in particular between NGOs and other actors?

4. In many cases, programme goals, implementation protocols and even target populations may have changed during the Pandemic. Evaluations must similarly change and adapt, looking for and moving with programme adaptation. In the words of Quinn Patton, 'we are all developmental evaluators now'. Can organisations with more standardised and set ways of evaluating tolerate such a dynamic and adaptive approach? (Patton, 2021)

4. Learning and implications for evaluation practice beyond the Pandemic

The need to navigate the uncharted territory of pandemic response may have **accelerated an existing trend towards more learning-oriented evaluation practice**. Varied and creative approaches, often designed at short notice in response to a felt need among programme staff to learn fast and to adapt, have demonstrated what is possible.[11] Similarly challenged is the conventional evaluation practice of waiting until the process is almost complete before revealing fully formed findings, conclusions and recommendations. Can evaluation findings be shared sooner, as part of the evaluation process, to inform and engage evaluation users, drawing them into the learning process? In the immediate, and perhaps longer-term, future **what is the place for independent accountability-oriented evaluations**? Are we witnessing a temporary shift away from this type of evaluation? Or are we seeing a more permanent shift in the way that they are carried out (for instance, with greater involvement of staff, and more focus on learning processes), towards more developmental evaluations? What does this mean for the independence of evaluative activity?

The **greater use of national evaluators** is an opportunity to accelerate efforts to strengthen evaluation capacity and capability in humanitarian response settings. One key informant noted that it 'has broken the reliance on international consultants'. It also raises important questions about the longer-term goal of how the roles of international and national evaluators should be rethought, based on complementarity.[12] Acknowledging and addressing inherent power dynamics (associated with the drive to localise) is key to ensuring that national evaluators feel empowered to deliver critical and sometimes controversial findings. The greater deployment of national evaluators has given a boost to the long-standing aim of investing in national evaluation capacity development. What does the experience of working with national evaluators through the Pandemic tell us about the priority areas for building individual and systemic capability?

"The need to navigate the uncharted territory of Pandemic response may have accelerated an existing trend towards more learning-oriented evaluation practice."

Experience of working remotely during the Pandemic has shown how **it is possible for global teams to function well across geographically disparate locations**. What are the longer-term implications for the location of evaluation units and MEAL staff, for example in terms of shifting the centre of gravity away from headquarters towards regional or country offices?

During the Pandemic evaluators have had to find ways of working with overstretched programme staff, with the aim of learning and improving the agency's response. This has highlighted the **importance of the soft skills of evaluating,** especially relationship-building and facilitation skills to ensure evaluation activity is useful and promotes utilisation. Although this is not a new insight,[13] what have we learned to ensure that the soft skills of evaluating are given more attention?

The longer-term funding environment is uncertain, with some organisations already experiencing major cuts. What are the implications for the evaluation function? How can organisations demonstrate their utility and relevance, and strengthen the uptake of recommendations to improve humanitarian action? How can they ensure that they use scarce resources efficiently and effectively?

Endnotes

1. According to key informant interviews.

2. These were principally the evaluation units of UN agencies, the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), many of which produced guidance in April 2020.

3. These are drawn from a synthesis of guidelines, produced by the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services.

4. These include: Better Evaluation, on adapting evaluation in the time of COVID-19; the European Support Service for the European Commission through its 'Evaluation in Crisis' initiative; ALNAP's COVID-19 Response Portal which provides guidelines, tools, papers and lessons learned which are relevant to responding to the Pandemic; and the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), providing multimedia resources for its members on evaluation during COVID-19.

5. These talked of the importance of speed 'in bringing evaluative knowledge to bear on shared learning and joint actions...(as) imperative'. See Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP and the OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation (2020): 9.

6. Drawing on Robert Chambers.

7. One workshop participant described how they endeavoured to provide feedback to show how inputs from programme staff, for example on the Terms of Reference, had been heard and were being used.

8. As described by Quinn Patton, the leading proponent of, and author on 'Developmental Evaluation', currently advising WFP in its evaluation of its COVID-19 response, in his blog.

9. Better Evaluation has encouraged evaluators to use the theory of change to navigate uncertainty, as a compass rather than a map. See Better Evaluation (2020).

10. Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning.

11. Importantly, this shift addresses a growing concern that traditional M&E systems have focused too heavily on donor accountability, and have not been sufficiently oriented to encouraging reflection and learning at programme level that would support adaptive management and improved programming. See Ramalingam et al. (2019) and Dillon (2019).

12. See, for example, Barbelet (2019).

13. See Sandison (2006).

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