

IPDET 2012 Lunchtime presentation

Unanticipated consequences of
development interventions:
*a blind spot for evaluation theory
and practice*

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1. Development programs almost never work out as planned

- The outcomes of most programs are unpredictable
 - Programs propose simple, linear solutions to complex problems
 - Even when programs go smoothly and are implemented as planned – **human behavior is difficult to predict**
- Programs operate in complex systems with constantly changing economic, political, security, natural environmental and socio-cultural environments
- Program planners have much less control than they often think

2. So why are evaluators still surprised when programs have unanticipated outcomes?

- Unanticipated outcomes still catch planners and evaluators off guard even though experience has shown that very few programs work out exactly as planned
- Many unanticipated outcomes, including serious negative consequences, are not even detected by many evaluations

Some serious negative outcomes not captured by the evaluation

- **A food-for-work program in Central America:**
 - Many women were forbidden by their husbands from participating in the project
 - Some women were seriously beaten by their husbands for attending meetings
- **A slum upgrading project in South East Asia:**
 - Prior to the official start of the project many slum dwellers were forced (sometimes at gunpoint) to sell their houses at a very low price to people with political contacts
- **A road construction project in East Africa:**
 - Prior to the first supervision mission the government destroyed a number of houses to avoid paying compensation to the families as specified in the loan agreement

3. Why are evaluations unable to detect these unanticipated outcomes?

- Funders only want evaluators to look at whether their programs achieve their intended outcomes/ goals
 - Don't rock the boat
- Real-world evaluation constraints:
 - Budget, time, data constraints
 - Political and organizational constraints

Many evaluation designs make it difficult to identify unanticipated outcomes

- Many theories of change and logic models only explain and assess how a program is expected to achieve its objectives
 - They say very little about other things that might happen
- Results frameworks only monitor intended outcomes
- Conventional quantitative evaluation designs only assess whether observed changes can be attributed to the program intervention

evaluation designs make it difficult to identify
unanticipated outcomes [continued]

- Structured surveys collect information relevant to program objectives but rarely provide an opportunity for respondents to talk about other things on their mind
- Difficult to find/interview vulnerable groups and those who do not benefit
- Focus groups often only cover people involved in the project

Many unanticipated events occur outside the vision field of the evaluation

- Many key events occur before the evaluation begins (e.g. people are forced to sell land or houses at bargain prices)
- Other events occur when the evaluator is not there (at night, during the rainy season, in the privacy of the household)
- Many critical events occur after the evaluation has ended
- Many quantitative evaluations have no contact with the program between the application of the survey instruments (pre-test and post-test)

unanticipated events outside the
vision field of the evaluation [continued]

- Evaluators often ignore context
- Budget constraints mean that the poorest and most vulnerable groups who live far from the village center, often cannot be interviewed

4. Why should we worry?

- Unanticipated events:
 - Seriously reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of programs
 - Important lessons are not learned
 - The vulnerable and voiceless tend to be the most affected
 - Some groups or communities can be significantly worse off as a result of development interventions

5. What can be done?

This section draws on and expands the framework presented in:

Jonathan Morell **“Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty: Anticipating Surprise and Responding to the Inevitable”**

Guilford 2010

What can be done?

Understanding the nature of the unexpected

- **Types of surprise**
 - Surprises we anticipate and address
 - Surprises that could be planned for and detected
 - Surprises that cannot be anticipated
- **The probability and magnitude of surprise is related to:**
 - The level of innovation in the program [**uncharted territory**]
 - The nature of the intervention
 - Fidelity to the design protocol
 - Robustness of the program in different settings
 - Level of understanding of the program context
 - Time between the intervention and the estimation of outcomes

What can be done?

Ways to foresee and address unanticipated outcomes

- Use of theory-based evaluation
 - With focus on mechanisms, linkages and testing assumptions
- Systematic use of past experience
 - Participatory consultations with affected populations
- Break the evaluation down into shorter segments
- Adapt forecasting methods used by planners
- Broader definition of the role of monitoring

What can be done?

Agile evaluation

- Always have a “Plan B” [see next slide]
- Flexibility in terms of data collection
- Flexible designs that can be rapidly adapted to changing circumstances
- Dynamic monitoring
- Unpacking the program into separate, but closely linked, components
 - Each of which is easier to evaluate
- Constant review of the program theory and the underlying assumptions

“Plan B”

Planning for the unexpected

What to do when:

- the program begins before the baseline study has been conducted?
- the comparison groups vanish?
- the program is restructured?
- Essential data is not available?
 - It may be intentionally withheld

“Eyes wide open” evaluation

Knowing what is really happening on the ground

- Find out about critical events that took place **before** the evaluation/ program officially began
- Develop diverse sources inside and outside the program to make sure you know **what everyone else in the country knows**
- Check who you are getting information from and **who you are not meeting**
 - **Know who participates in focus groups**
- Develop creative ways to get information on, and about, **non-beneficiaries and groups who are worse off**