**Course: Diploma in Monitoring and Evaluation, 2018**

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**Assignment 3**

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**Questions:**

1. **Why is choosing the right question important in Monitoring and Evaluation?**
2. **Using Archival data has its own bottlenecks. Name five and how to overcome them**
3. **Why is research important component in monitoring and evaluation? Give and explain four.**

*It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.”*

 Eugene Ionesco, Romanian- French Playwright

The process of Monitoring and Evaluation in itself begins with posing the question; what are we evaluating? The development of the purpose and process of the evaluation in its goal, activities, outcomes and outputs is best mapped out, by posing the right questions in the right forum to the relevant groups.

As the purpose of any development project is to bring impact and change to a particular group or community, an appropriate and opportune question would be; does this intervention provide the greatest value to the identified community? Drafting the right questions is fundemental to guiding the intervention, and clearly drawing out what the change will look like.

In contextualizing the intervention vis-à-vis the problem or challenge the project aims to address, practitioners should seek to draft the questions that aid in developing a holistic design of a program. This requires widening the scope of inclusion and bringing to the table the opinions of not only various stakeholders; community members and beneficiaries, but those groups indirectly impacted by the intervention, providing useful comparative data that can possibly help other projects and programs in the future.

In the research and planning phase, there is room to put forward a broad range of questions – that may deal with the larger conditions (economic, social or political for example) or causal factors (lack of awareness, poverty, etc). This information serves as a reference for program design

The opportunity and space for questions to interrogate the evidence provided as justification for an intervention, allows project leaders to assess whether the issue is general or specific to the community. Is the challenge unique to a community or are the lessons learnt sharable and beneficial to other practitioners in the various fields of development? What can be learnt from others who have implemented similar interventions? What has been the impact of on participants etc?

Asking these questions not only provides an opportunity to examine other similar material developed and build on it, but can also identify gaps in research and information existing in the particular field, hence allowing the program to develop unique and innovative data.

In refining the intervention through questions that look into the scope of the project, a practitioner can cast a wide net in identifying who the change will impact and who needs to be included, informed and activated for the change to occur. This exercise will inform the project design as to whom needs to be the focus of the intervention. The desired change will require both, direct and indirect reinforcement from groups revolving around the group most affected by the issue. These groups could be the implementers of the program, families of the beneficiaries.

It is important to clearly define the parameters of what the program is looking to achieve, as well as determining what the indicators of success look like to achieve the desired change. The right questions can help us visualize success.

As a relation can be identified between the efforts of the intervention and their effects, the right questions can help us identify the unintended outcomes that may help us in the future expand our intervention, or share that information with organisations working in that field. For example, in creating awareness programs for parents on the benefits of primary education to children in remote rural areas of Ethiopia where children work in the fields, are parents and community members less likely to accept seeing children work during schooling hours? Will these programs eventually contribute to community members frowning upon child labour?.

The right questions will create clarity on what realistically can be achieved. Given for example the resources and funds, the access to qualified staff and remoteness of villages, would it be realistic to expect 50 per cent of the families to commit to keeping their children in school?

Moreover, the questions help the program designer pinpoint where the change is needed. The questions prove distinctly valuable when they are able to bring to light the unexpected benefits. For example, in improving the WASH facilities in the school and creating segregated toilets, one can ask how did segregated bathrooms improve attendance? In fact, the number of girls who would be absent from school during their menstrual cycle dropped.

These questions help guide future plans and help create an educated dialogue.

Focus achieved through questions drafted for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation help define the parameters of the data needed; gathered, analyzed and recorded.

Choosing the questions should be a consultative process rather than instructive. When an intervention is designed to benefit a community, it must take into account their culture, needs, requirements, setting. It is therefore imperative that this a participatory approach, as it not only ensures the intervention responds to their needs, but also allows for an opportunity to learn from them. Moreover, this interaction with beneficiaries helps identify other groups that the program may have not been aware of who are affected by the issue. This information and inclusivity of such wide variety of stakeholders helps develop a comprehensive intervention that takes into account cultural, social, economic components necessary to establish context.

As an evaluator will most definitely interact with beneficiaries and program implementers, such administrators and staff members, it is important that his/her approach establishes the trust needed to fulfill an effective participatory evaluation. These groups need to be made to feel comfortable enough to share their experience and knowledge within an overarching context of collaboration intended to improve process and emphasize strengths.

How are the questions selected?

What information is needed to guide your process? What behavioral changes are needed and what are the desired outcomes within the community? In order to draft the needed questions, the problem must be described carefully stating its significance within the community, the conditions within which the problem exists; its present condition inclusive of its positive and negative components. The description of the problem should elaborate on the change required to remedy it as well as the needed changes in the conditions.

In order to draw a clear and realistic picture, the consequences of the change in the condition must be fully elaborated on, to provide a proper measure of the impact. For example, if the intervention is looking into creating a dam in area that is considered a natural reserve, it is important to ask extensive questions that help evaluate the worthiness of the project in terms of the number of households who would otherwise be deprived of electricity or the natural habitats destroyed. Will the works irreparably affect the habitats or is there enough data to suggest that the wildlife will adapt within say, a 5-10 period to its new surroundings?

It is important to identify the groups whose behavior will require change or adapting. These can vary from the beneficiaries themselves, for example inhabitants of the villages surrounding the dam, or environmentalists who will require specific advocacy measures that assure them that the best environmental practices will be implemented and environmental expertise will required for integral decision-making. How will transparency be ensured and the media kept informed?

In conclusion, asking the right questions throughout the process is essential to help identify what change exactly do we want to see and how do we want to see it done for us to monitor its progress and eventually evaluate its efficiency.

**Question 2:**

Archival data by definition is material not directly available to users on a computer system, but rather in long term storage or record keeping facilities of organizations. Primarily used for research, reporting and as references. Archival material can be found in public record facilities belonging to government agencies, think-tanks, research and study centers, health organizations, universities and academic institutions, businesses etc.

With such data available, researchers have easier and faster access to information than having to undergo the laborious task of collecting data themselves. As many studies conducted by larger agencies are funded, the data is more likely to have been processed and reviewed by various data and statistics experts.

More importantly, archival data could very much shed little on aspects that one might have not considered and highlight interesting relationships that trigger a more innovative approach for the intervention. Interestingly, archival material, can back our own work with a historic timeline and content that allows for reflection and comparison.

Archival data has its bottlenecks. Below are five examples and how each can be overcome:

1. As a large portion of archival data belongs to governmental agencies, they may be reluctant to share them. However, many countries have introduced the right to access to information laws, permitting citizens to access public records and documents
2. As mentioned previously, many studies are carried out and funded by private organisations for their own purposes. The data of course can be biased and reflect the point of views and interests of these agencies, therefore neutrality is compromised. It is important to be mindful of these impartialities when assessing the reliability of the data.
3. Administrative data used by universities and in the health sector has strict confidentiality restrictions. However, as the data needed will not look into or need individual identification records, but aims to obtain collective results and quantitative data, this hurdle can be overcome.
4. In selecting working with archival material, one should seek data that has been matches one’s own, and in doing so, facilitates the comparison between the data. The substance Abuse and Mental Services Administration in Maryland, stated that that rules for recordkeeping differ, making trend analysis difficult or invalid and therefore time must be spent to understand how the records were compiled to assess their validity.
5. Suppression of statistics, which deal with relatively small numbers or data pools, suppresses rates specifically for the consideration of the protection of the privacy of individuals who could become more easily identifiable through the data. This affects the reliability of the data which may give an inaccurate measure. This can be overcome, by combining the data from multiple years instead. In its disclaimer and for the sake of transparency, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention for example, assigns a relative standard error (RSE) measure greater than or equal to 30%; flagging the data as unstable It also highlights that in cases of data on cancer, the cells are suppressed for protection of confidentiality.

The *Department of Health Agency Standards for Reporting Data with Small Numbers,* tackles the issue by clarifying its scope on working with small numbers and its process of data aggregation as a measure of accuracy countering data suppression.

**Question 3**

In its definition according to the American sociologist Earl Robert Babbie, “Research is a systematic inquiry to describe, explain, predict and control the observed phenomenon. Research involves inductive and deductive methods.”

It is precisely through observation that we are able to look at our intervention, assess its impact and explore ways of improving its performance in line with our goals. It is through data collected and analyzed through research that we are able to propose solutions to issues and introduce innovative methods of addressing them.

Research provides us with information that sets the premise for our engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries to come up with improved project designs, address concerns etc.

Evaluations occur for the purpose of refining the intervention. When an intervention doesn’t go according to plan, we have the option of adopting a different approach or dropping the project altogether, but research equips us with the knowledge required to improve the intervention. Furthermore, when a project is backed with credible and substantial research, it is establishing the organization as a credible, serious and wanting to succeed.

In examining the outcomes and applying the “But Why?” method to the evaluation research, we can look at each phase of the process and critically examine its proceedings to identify where the intervention needs work.

Research helps us make better judgment calls on how long before we see the intended results, such as a change in behavior for example. As Funders and donors tend to make random requests, our evaluation research can provide them with the scientific proof and flag behavior or any indication that a particular aspect of the program requires adjustment.

Evaluation research celebrates progress, it does so by allowing a thorough examination of the process to identify, mitigate and correct problems, ticking along what did work according to plan. If the intervention did not go according to plan, then through the “But, why?” methodology, a project implementer is able to examine, working backwards from outcomes to process, what went wrong. This knowledge is crucial to any future growth and scalability plans.

In conclusion, plenty of information in the development sector as others, is incremental. It is through guiding processes and tools on how to best utilize these varied and diverse sources against a scientific process that improves the chances of an intervention’s success.

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