

“How much? How? And Why?”

The Middle Path Evaluation Method

A practical tool to combine quantitative and qualitative data in impact evaluations

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Evidence Base Results Management in development today:

Evidence-based results management is one of the most pressing challenges to international development work today with most projects and programs still struggling to prove the impacts of their work.

As internal monitoring-systems usually shed insufficient light on the question of results, often external evaluators are hired to give additional insights on certain topics. While such studies can raise many relevant issues in a participatory way, their number of units of observation (villages, people etc.) is usually low, which raises doubts if findings are representative. Also is the breadth of topics covered typically quite limited. As they require the intensive involvement by often costly experts, such studies tend to be expensive as compared to the insights gained.

Alternatively do many projects resort to available statistics and self-collected quantitative information to prove the results of their work. While such sources of data are usually well representative, they fail to answer the questions of how and why change has happened or has failed to appear. Valuable lessons learnt can therefore rarely be drawn.

Taking the Middle Path

In the Middle Path Evaluation Method, the particular strengths of quantitative surveys and expert-led studies are combined. It features as an approach that not only provides “hard facts” (how much? how many?), but also enables to uncover procedures, opinions and background information (how? why?). Qualitative and quantitative information are thereby not separated into different tools, but co-exist within the same questionnaires. The approach therefore delivers in-depth information on a large number of cases! This is possible, as the Middle Path Evaluation Method enables the processing of large amounts of qualitative data. While such mixed method evaluations have been demanded in evaluation theory for some time, they have so far rarely been put into practice.

An evaluation using the Middle Path Evaluation Method can be conducted by one lead-consultant (who can apply the method) in cooperation with (local) junior consultants, e.g. recent university graduates. Technical specialists from the Project/Program give inputs to establish the results-chains and formulate the questionnaires. Trained (local) technical assistants set up the questionnaires and the database, clean and categorize qualitative information and produce charts. This allocation of tasks, combined with a simple but fully functional data-base modules (based on MS Excel) make the approach very cost-effective.

Past experiences have shown that the feedback to evaluations using the Middle Path Evaluation Method is very positive. Implementing actors receive detailed feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their work; managers and donors are enabled to report on the results of the whole range of executed interventions. Therefore the method is believed to have high potentials for wide-spread application.