

## Using qualitative methods to assess impact

---

Jean Ellis, NCVO Charities Evaluation Services associate

July 2015

### 1. Introduction

Voluntary sector organisations are being urged to provide more convincing evidence of their impact – and with good reason, given that funders and commissioners want to make sure they achieve maximum benefit through their investment, as do organisations themselves. However, new to the sector is that improved standards of evidence are sometimes presented as synonymous with using more ‘scientific’ methods of assessing outcomes and impact, specifically using comparison methods in order to reduce bias – that is, controlling for factors that could affect the result in any way. In particular, RCTs (randomised controlled trials, so called because participants are randomly allocated between the two groups, as in a clinical trial) have long been regarded by government bodies as the gold standard for assessing impact; they offer a way of reducing ‘bias’ to a minimum.<sup>1</sup> This means that they provide better internal validity than other methods, a greater level of ‘truth’ about cause and effect relationships, thus increasing confidence in the evidence that the programme or project is indeed the cause of the outcomes.

#### 1.1 What do we measure for impact?

Before discussing methodology, we must consider what we should be looking for when we assess ‘impact’. To a very large extent this will depend on what we mean by the term, as evaluation studies and literature highlight the number of different meanings the term is given. For NCVO Charities Evaluation Services (CES), our primary reference is to the end stage of a well-used framework for logic models and theories of change, which map out links across different levels of change:<sup>2</sup>



[Inspiring Impact](#) explains this interpretation:

*By ‘impact’ we mean the broad or longer-term effects of a project or organisation’s work. This can include effects on people who are direct users of a project or organisation’s work, effects on those who are not direct users,*

---

<sup>1</sup> Cupitt, S (May 2015) [Randomised controlled trials – gold standard or fool’s gold? The role of experimental methods in voluntary sector impact assessment](#), NCVO Charities Evaluation Services

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/Publications-Research/publications-free-downloads/you-project-outcomes-download>

*or effects on a wider field such as government policy.*  
Inspiring Impact: Are you leading for impact? (April 2013)

However, there is a distinct (but not mutually exclusive) definition of impact that has within it an inherent notion of causality; this requires credible evidence that specific outcomes, whether short term or longer term, have been caused by the intervention that is being evaluated and attributing cause between different outputs and actors, whether part of the intervention or external to it.

## **2. Do we need to prove causality?**

There is an argument that unless we look for the causes of outcomes and impacts, we are simply describing a series of coincidences, so convincing proof of what has caused change is important. In CES training we emphasise that we should not only look at what happened (simply presenting output and outcomes data), but examine how and why they happened. Indeed, as soon as we ask related questions, issues of causality are implicated as links between outputs, methods of delivery and perceived change – the effects – are established. Yet, only too often, organisations present data on outcome indicators as evidence of effectiveness without any convincing analysis to show the extent to which their intervention has brought about change.

CES is a key player in the drive to improve outcomes and impact reporting and encourages and supports greater rigour in applying evaluation methods and data analysis. For 25 years we have worked with organisations to plan and evaluate against a basic theory of change;<sup>3</sup> we are now working more and more with organisations to adopt a more developed theory of change methodology as a method of designing a project or programme and understanding how an organisation plans to achieve change.<sup>4</sup> We also believe that by mapping out links between process and results, more convincing conclusions can be drawn about how interventions achieve results.

However, we also recognise that impact evaluation is complex and can be expensive, while most voluntary organisations are small and badly resourced. In addition, projects and services, and their client groups, can pose challenges for impact evaluation. Participants can be difficult to track long term and individual or group factors which draw people to participate may also cause drop out or irregular participation from a project and even more so from a structured study.

In a new guide on impact evaluation, Stern makes this point about when a fully-fledged impact evaluation might be justified, and when identifying contribution to

---

<sup>3</sup> For step-by-step guidance and examples for CES' Planning Triangle © see: <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/tools-and-resources/planning-for-monitoring-evaluation/ces-planning-triangle>

<sup>4</sup> See CES' introductory guide: [Making Connections: Using a theory of change to develop planning and evaluation](#) (CES)

outcomes is more realistic than searching for evidence of attribution.<sup>5</sup> Voluntary sector organisations often work in a multi-agency environment and their services and other activities may overlap with other interventions. Intended impacts may be long-term, sometimes intangible and difficult to measure, whereas experimental designs are suited to interventions with identified ‘primary’ cause and effect and obvious results.<sup>6</sup>

Given these challenges, for many organisations it will be sufficient to have a systematic approach to assessing outcomes with reasonable explanations of context affecting change. Where it is necessary or reasonable to carry out an impact evaluation, it may be more appropriate for many organisations to improve the quality of their qualitative methods rather than reaching for experimental methods.

Qualitative approaches will still require rigour; for example, they will need baseline data and systematic internal monitoring against agreed indicators, and an evaluation design appropriate to the intervention and the evaluation questions. We encourage organisations to use a mixed methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data through a variety of methods such as surveys, interviews and participatory methods as well as routine monitoring. Triangulation is also important, obtaining different perspectives on change; questions that directly ask stakeholders the role of the project also go part of the way. However, these approaches can be more consciously and rigorously applied to provide more plausible evidence of causality.

### **3. How important is it to be absolutely certain of proof?**

There is a difference between saying that we should be looking for good evidence of causality and that we should be looking for *scientific* proof that a specific intervention caused a specific result. The first questions to ask when considering impact evaluation concern the kind of evidence that will be acceptable to stakeholders and what will be done with evaluation findings. Voluntary organisations should be clear about the resources they have available for implementing scientific methods, taking into account the scale of the project and the level of confidence that is required by stakeholders in any assessment of causal link. They should also consider whether the intervention will lend itself to a statistically controlled experiment.

Control groups show the changes brought about by an intervention over and above what would ordinarily have occurred – establishing a *counterfactual*. But these studies, particularly RCTs, require considerable resources; available studies of RCTs of social programmes (and there are few for voluntary organisations) show that it can

---

<sup>5</sup> Stern, E (May 2015) *Impact Evaluation*, Prepared for the Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief and the Department of International Development, pages 12-14.

<sup>6</sup> Stern, E (May 2015) *Impact Evaluation*, Prepared for the Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief and the Department of International Development, page 12.

be difficult to avoid drop-out in control groups sufficiently to maintain the validity of the control and the credibility of the study. We have also discussed how voluntary sector interventions may be non-standardised, which will make a comparison with an almost identical intervention difficult.<sup>7</sup>

Control group methodologies, both experimental and quasi-experimental, also have two main drawbacks. It is not possible to generalise from one study to a wider context – to draw conclusions that similar results will occur if the intervention is repeated in different conditions. Possibly more important, they may have limited usefulness for managing a project or programme as they cannot explain why results were achieved or varied for different target groups or individuals unless a process evaluation is carried out as part of the overall exercise. This is possible but will make the exercise more resource-heavy. In these circumstances, does ‘proof’ remain a criterion of primary importance? Qualitative approaches may provide sufficient credibility for many stakeholders.

#### **4. How do qualitative methods compare with scientific approaches?**

‘Scientific’ methods of assessing impact establish an alternative scenario statistically, showing what would have resulted without the project or programme; in this way they can identify the outcomes that can be attributed specifically to the programme or project.

Some evaluators put the case that this can also be done through qualitative methods, for example, establishing ‘what if’ either through examining a group that does not receive treatment (through means other than a controlled ‘experiment’) or through other methods, such as asking experts what would have happened in the absence of the intervention. A different point of view is that there is little benefit in attempting to control for variables, as is the case in experimental methods; rather that it’s more important to establish causal links through analysing the interactions between people, outputs and effects, following the chain of events and change.

Stern<sup>8</sup> recognises that where experimental designs are not possible, other designs and methods may not offer the same level of ‘proof’ but in the circumstance may be better able to show a causal connection. There are a number of different approaches and methods that can be used to make a more credible case for cause and attribution. Often these methods overlap, but they largely relate to two key principles

---

<sup>7</sup> See Cupitt, S (May 2015) [Randomised controlled trials – gold standard or fool’s gold? The role of experimental methods in voluntary sector impact assessment](#), NVCO Charities Evaluation Services

<sup>8</sup> Stern, E (May 2015) *Impact Evaluation*, Prepared for the Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief and the Department of International Development, page 12.

of causal evidence:<sup>9</sup>

1. Look for evidence for and against the suspected cause.
2. Look for evidence for and against other important possible causes.

## 5. Developing theory of change approaches to provide more rigorous evidence of causality

Many organisations are beginning to use a theory of change approach to planning projects and programmes and as a basis for assessment of outcomes, looking at evidence in relation to key *assumptions* about how change might happen, and also in relation to other key influencers on change – for example other factors in the external environment. Organisations already using a theory of change approach will have a head start in assessing impact, as clarifying the assumptions behind a theory will be a firm step towards building a case for cause and effect.

A term that can be associated with establishing causal links in this way is *modus operandi*, a methodology popularised by Scriven in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> It can be seen as similar to detective work or the process of investigating a crime.

*Each cause has a set of footprints, a short one if it's a proximate cause, a long one if it's a remote cause, but in general the modus operandi is a sequence of intermediate or concurrent events or a set of conditions, or a chain of events, that has to be present when the cause is effective.*

A further step that will provide organisations with greater evidence of causality can lie in approaches which form part of *contribution analysis*. This involves adding a further stage to the theory of change methodology, allowing existing evidence to be substantiated or challenged, and eliminating other possible causes.<sup>11</sup>

There are some key questions lying behind these steps, including the following:

- Which links in the theory of change story are strong and which are weak?
- How credible is the story overall?
- Do stakeholders agree with the story, given the available evidence?

## 6. Checking that results support causal attribution

There are a number of ways of checking the results to see if they support causal attribution; with enough resources, these can be done in combination. The three

---

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, EJ, 2005, *Evaluation Methodology basics: the nuts and bolts of sound evaluation*, Sage, Ca.

<sup>10</sup> Scriven, M (1976) Maximizing the power of causal investigations: The modus operandi method, *Evaluation studies review annual*, Vol. 1 (1976), pp. 101-118

<sup>11</sup> These key elements on contribution analysis are set out by Mayne, J *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect*, ILAC Brief 16  
[http://www.cgiar-ilac.org/files/ILAC\\_Brief16\\_Contribution\\_Analysis\\_0.pdf](http://www.cgiar-ilac.org/files/ILAC_Brief16_Contribution_Analysis_0.pdf)

main processes are:

- Gathering additional data
- More rigorous analysis
- Investigating possible alternative explanations.

## 6.1 Gathering additional data

Ways to gather additional data might include:

- *Asking key informants to attribute causality* (asking what was a trigger for specific actions or change, for example), providing evidence that links participation with observed changes.
- *Drawing on the previous experience of experts* and other stakeholders to determine what pattern of effects is typical for a similar initiative.
- *Considering alternative explanations* by looking at the processes and linking them to observed results.

## 6.2 More rigorous analysis

Overall, it will be helpful to check whether the results match what experts have predicted or what might be expected by practice elsewhere. Data analysis should also be able to reveal potential connections, such as:

- any link between results achieved and the extent of participation (for example, data showing participants attending activity sessions regularly for more than one year with more positive outcomes than those with irregular or short-term attendance)
- how overall outcomes have been affected by the positive or negative influence of individual participant characteristics external to the intervention (for example, young people in a drug and alcohol programme with strong family support achieving step changes more quickly than others).

The timing of change may also be important. Do changes relate to anticipated timelines for change? If outcomes have been achieved earlier, for example, this might be due to factors other than the intervention.

Case studies can be compared to check how results might be affected in the event of differences in project implementation or individual participation levels. Can elements of practice be linked to more positive or negative results? Different cases may be analysed to identify how different components of the programme might produce different specific outcomes.

## 6.3 Investigating possible alternative explanations

Another important part of the process is to investigate possible alternative explanations. This can be done in a number of different ways, some of which may

overlap:<sup>12</sup>

- Carrying out an overview of the different forces (such as employment opportunities, the family context or other service provision) that might be acting on a particular aspect of change – *a force field analysis*.
- Identifying and investigating alternative explanations to see if they can be ruled out. (For example, a homeless project may find that a hostel key worker has also provided support at a critical moment.)
- *Asking key informants* – experts and community members for example – to identify other possible explanations.
- *Ruling out technical explanations*: identifying and investigating possible ways that the results might reflect technical limitations in data collection and analysis rather than actual causal relationships.
- *Following up exceptions*: this involves treating data that doesn't fit the expected pattern (such as exceptionally positive change) as potentially important in offering clues to other causal factors and seeking to explain them.
- *Statistically controlling for extraneous variables*: This can be done in non-experimental design; external factors that might affect the outcome should be identified during evaluation design so that necessary data can be collected and controlled for when carrying out quantitative data analysis.

## 7. The case for using qualitative methods to assess impact

While experimental methods are widely accepted as providing credible 'proof' of outcomes produced by an intervention, studies have shown that control group methods can be complex and pose challenges for social programmes. Further, if funders are looking to maximise successful outcomes through replicating projects, even scientific counterfactual methods do not allow generalisations about how far outcomes might be reproduced if the intervention were transferred to another context and with other participants. The adoption of rigorous control group methodologies is to date limited in the voluntary sector and, pragmatically, organisations looking for more credible impact assessment should consider the value of applying other methods.

Increasing the rigour of qualitative methods of assessing impact – looking for more substantial evidence or for alternative explanations for outcomes – has the advantage of building on existing methodologies and can encourage evaluation as an integral part of work processes. It can also potentially develop greater participation and ownership of findings by participants and other stakeholders. More careful analysis of how the implementation of an intervention and differences in practice might affect outcomes positively or negatively can provide valuable information for managing projects and programmes, and for establishing good practice. Better information about the environment in which the intervention is

---

<sup>12</sup> There is more on these and other methods here: <http://betterevaluation.org/plan/understandcauses>

working should also be part of this approach, allowing decisions to be made about how to work to greater benefit with agencies which contribute to desired outcomes and how to counter barriers to positive change.

## 8. Further reading

Better Evaluation: Understand causes of outcomes and impacts, from (including a video from Jane Davidson) <http://betterevaluation.org/plan/understandcauses>

Hind, J (2010) *Additionality: A useful way to construct the counterfactual qualitatively*, Evaluation Journal of Australia, Vol.10, No. 1  
[http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/qualitative\\_approach\\_to\\_impact\\_evaluation.pdf](http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/qualitative_approach_to_impact_evaluation.pdf)

Interaction: Annex 7: *A Range of Quantitative, Qualitative and Theory-based Approaches for Defining the Counterfactual*  
<http://www.interaction.org/annex-7-range-quantitative-qualitative-and-theory-based-approaches-defining-counterfactual>

Mayne, J *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect*, ILAC Brief 16  
[http://www.cgjar-ilac.org/files/ILAC\\_Brief16\\_Contribution\\_Analysis\\_0.pdf](http://www.cgjar-ilac.org/files/ILAC_Brief16_Contribution_Analysis_0.pdf)

Mohr, LB (1999) 'The Qualitative Method of Impact Analysis', American Journal of Evaluation, 20 (1), 199k

Stern, E (May 2015) *Impact Evaluation*, Prepared for the Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief and the Department of International Development.