

IDEAS Conference 2022

Breaking the Cycle: Donor Involvement, Evaluation, Accountability

Presented by:

[Catalystas Consulting](#)

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About Catalystas and the Speakers

Catalystas Consulting is an intersectional feminist consulting collective working in the field of international development and cooperation. Founded in 2018, Catalystas is based in the Netherlands and operates globally as a team of regional and thematic experts. Catalystas provides technical assistance, advisory services, and capacity building to nonprofits and NGOs, government and public sector entities, and the private sector. In all of our work, we bring gendered perspectives, intersectional approaches, and inclusive methods, specializing in education, security, social justice, environmentalism, and economic development. To date we have worked in over 45 countries and with clients including donors, multinational institutions, DFIs, NGOs, accelerators and incubators, startups and businesses, as well as activist networks and civil rights organizations.

Beatrice Maneshi, 31, is an Iranian-American development practitioner with 10+ years of experience focused on gender, security, and economic development primarily in the Middle East and Africa.

Aviva Stein, 29, is an American with 7 years of experience focused on the nexus of gender, education, security, and diplomacy, predominantly in the MENA region.

The speakers founded Catalystas Consulting together, where they have jointly undertaken over 20 evaluations to date, through which they have collected data and trends on evaluation life cycles. This presentation is based on a draft article that the team seeks to publish in early 2023.



Evaluations by definition

According to the OECD's DAC Network on Development Evaluation, one of the foremost actors in setting global evaluation criteria and standards,

“Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

*An evaluation should **provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors.** Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program.”*



The role of Evaluations

- An external evaluation is a tool that can be wielded by different actors for different aims. They can also serve different purposes when targeted to wide, public audiences, limited but external circles, or only internal members involved in whatever program is being evaluated.
- When initiated by an implementing organization, such as an NGO, external evaluations are generally used to prove organizations are doing something right, or otherwise learn how to do it better. In large part this is due to the fact that public external evaluation commissioned by an implementing organization as THE main tool tool for promotion, securing additional funding, and for showcasing successes, and moving forward strategic or programmatic objectives at the sectoral level.
- When Donors commission an external evaluation, the objective is often in part to understand whether their funding efforts have produced results, with one of the ultimate goals of determining whether this has been a worthwhile return on investment, and whether such investment should be continued or halted. In addition donors commission evaluations to demonstrate their returns on investment to upstream regulators.

The role of Evaluation Cont.

- Evaluations are arguably one of the most profoundly insightful and objective means of understanding the true utility, impact, ethics, and sustainability of programming
- Only a final report in the form of a final evaluation can provide an objective and independent observation and reflection of the program itself
- Evaluations deal in large part with qualitative concepts and issues and therefore have a higher degree of subjectivity, making evaluators with sound training and expertise in methodology, subject matter, and objectivity essential
- Subjectivity increases the vulnerability of evaluations when it comes to external influence, pressure, manipulation, and bias - should the evaluators role not be kept protected and impartial.

What Evaluation Cycles Often Look Like Now?

Non-participatory evaluation processes

- Heavy pressure from donors on implementers to:
 - “Check the boxes”
 - Produce impacts or lose funding
 - Do it fast, and do it sustainably
 - Implement with limited help and communication
- Disconnects between NGO M&E teams/senior staff and implementing teams:
 - Proposals and projects designed by consultants and professional writers - overpromising and building without capacity in mind
 - Lack of funding or time to train staff
- Evaluation focus designed by NGOs alone - dictated to the evaluators with no room for adjustment
- Lack of donor participation throughout evaluation
- Lack of direct contact between donor and evaluator
- Lack of feedback from donor to evaluator
- Lack of mechanism for connecting donor to local actors (implementers, beneficiaries, nor key stakeholders)

The pressure on evaluators

- Development evaluations often deal with long term, intangible change processes
- Evaluators feel the pressure from all sides to produce proof of positive results:
 - Donor agencies are pushed by their elected officials who must prove that taxpayer dollars/euros are not being wasted
 - NGOs feel pressure to secure future funding by showing realized impacts and sustainable outcomes
 - Beneficiaries and local partners fear losing international support and only share the “good parts”
- Lack of honest and open communication between donors and implementing organizations, informed by the realities of long term development processes, prevents effective engagement and puts evaluators in a difficult position: the bearer of bad news
- Evaluators:
 - experience backlash from NGOs and local actors for reporting honestly when programs are less than 100% successful
 - are reduced to being only data collectors with no opportunity for engagement around learning and improvement with donors
 - are pressured to misrepresent findings in order to make programming look better to donors

A 2013 study found that out of 2,500 evaluators surveyed, over 42% noted having encountered misrepresentation pressure. And of those who had, 70% reported they had faced it on numerous occasions.

The Impacts of Misrepresentation and the Current Cycle

Consequential Hindrances:

- Lack of accountability for the implementing organization
- Lack of accountability to beneficiaries and communities engaged
- Lack of ability for implementing NGO to learn and adapt programming
- Lack of ability for donor to learn and adapt strategy
- Overall lack of ability among the development community to build a scientifically backed basis of evidence to customize reality-centered learning
- Lack of ability to ensure DO NO HARM principles
- Lack of impact, effectiveness, and sustainability

Direct Consequences:

- Problems remain unsolved / additional harm is done
- Trust in development sector diminishes/breaks
- Cycles of development dependency emerge
- New challenges emerge as a result of poor interventions
- Millions of taxpayer dollars/euros wasted
- Colonialist, patriarchal, and other traditional structures of oppression are reinforced and continued
- Burnout among development staff and evaluators
- Efficacy of evaluators compromised
- Costs of whistle-blowing rise

What Evaluations Should Look Like?

Participatory, involved, and transparent

- Inclusive and accountable - upward and downward
- Donors share frameworks of their own M&E systems with NGOs and evaluators, informing M&E processes and evaluation cycles
- Donors are involved in project cycles in a meaningful way
 - AVOID over burdening NGOs with extra reporting requirements
- Evaluation budgets are set aside outside of project budgets
- Donors are involved in writing TORs and throughout the evaluator selection process
- Create space for participatory processes led by evaluators to design - or redesign - evaluations, informed by NGO and donor frameworks and M&E mechanisms
- Clear communication with project stakeholders and beneficiaries around what an evaluation represents, that negative outcomes are not fatal, and what should be expected from the evaluation process
- Consistent engagement through evaluation process with all relevant stakeholders
- Clear and direct pathways of communication with evaluators, including a confidential feedback mechanism
- Establish and implement Zero Tolerance Policy toward pressuring evaluators
- Establish and implement policies on assessment of evaluator bias and conflict resolution mechanisms

What's needed to make this happen

1. Parliamentarians request and receive data-backed information from development agencies on what is and is not working
2. Longer project cycles that hold as a core value the scientific method
3. More DONOR staff and more time allocated for involvement in the ENTIRE M&E cycle:
 - a. Project design
 - b. Evaluation structure
 - c. Consistent meetings with local implementers
 - d. Site visits/input structures for local actors/beneficiaries
4. Donor participation in ENTIRE External Evaluation Cycle:
 - a. Selecting evaluators
 - b. Clearly communicating and upholding the expectation of unbiased evaluation results
 - c. Leading structured evaluations to inform not only individual projects, but wider strategic portfolios/frameworks
5. Clear communication from DONORS to IMPLEMENTERS that “negative” results will not mean an automatic loss of funding
6. Clear mechanisms for inclusion, transparency, and participation - including beneficiaries - in both project and evaluation cycles
 - a. Inclusion must also address engagement of government and local authorities



Questions

1. How can we ensure the objectivity of evaluators?
2. In the meantime, what can Donors do right now (in non-participatory evaluation processes) to ensure effectiveness?
3. How can Donor agencies inform/lobby their parliaments/governments/funding decision makers?
4. What can evaluators do now to resist pressure?