

Use of Policy Evaluation

Contact: andrew.ballingall@fife.gov.uk
coryn.barclay@fife.gov.uk

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This guide provides a brief overview of the use of policy evaluation – what it is, the types of evaluation available, and their main concepts

What is this about?

Good evaluation is vital to ensure that policies, programmes, projects and initiatives meet their intended objectives and purpose. We need to be able to establish if and why a policy works by applying appropriate research and appraisal methods. These in turn feed into the policy decision making process and hopefully lead to better decisions and ultimately better policy outcomes.

What is Policy Evaluation?

- Policy evaluation uses a range of research methods to investigate in a systematic way, the effectiveness of policies. This can include interventions, implementation, and the processes used to deliver policy outcomes.
- It is important in policy evaluation to use a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, experimental and non-experimental designs, descriptive and experiential methods, theory based approaches, and economic appraisal approaches.
- The reason for using a range of methods is to ensure a balanced view and reduce the shortcomings of using only one method.

Types of Policy Evaluation

There are two main types of policy evaluation – summative and formative evaluation.

- **Summative Evaluation** - (often referred to as **impact** evaluation) looks at the impact a policy, programme or other form of policy intervention has on specific outcomes for different groups. It seeks to gauge the effects of a policy with its planned outcome, or compared with some form of intervention, or even with doing nothing (sometimes referred to as counterfactual). For example, when introducing new technology into school classrooms, summative evaluation may look at whether this had an impact on improving pupils' exam results.

- **Formative Evaluation** (sometimes referred to as **process** evaluation) asks questions such as how, why and under what conditions does a policy intervention, e.g. a project, programme or initiative, work or not work? Formative evaluations are important in that they attempt to gauge the effectiveness of policies, projects or programmes' implementation. They seek to establish information on the contextual factors, processes and mechanisms that underpin a policy's success or failure, and to understand not only if a policy was successful or not, but why. For example, when introducing new technology equipment into school classrooms, formative evaluation may try to uncover whether the new equipment was used in accordance with its intended use.

Although the two approaches to evaluation differ in their purpose, they are often inter-related in their application. One evaluation theory known as the "**Theories of Change**" approach, suggests that deciding whether or not a policy has worked or on its effectiveness, usually involves investigating **how** it has worked, for **whom**, **why** it has worked, and under **what** conditions it has or has not worked. However, in order to ensure a clearer application of policy evaluation techniques, evaluating whether a policy has been effective (summative evaluation), and why it has been effective (formative evaluation) it is the usual convention to apply them separately.

- **Theory-based Evaluation** – These approaches usually apply to formative evaluations where the emphasis is more on finding ways to improve programme effectiveness than on simply judging impacts. These types of evaluations do not focus on whether a programme works or not (or how often it works), but on identifying where it works or does not work, and the reasons why it does not work. They attempt to analyse the logical or theoretical consequences of a policy, and can increase the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome.

Economic Appraisal and Evaluation

Economic appraisal usually takes place at the outset of policy making to determine which of various policy options is most likely to produce the desired outcomes and at what cost. Economic evaluation is undertaken after a given policy has been running for some time in order to determine whether the anticipated outcomes have been achieved. Economic appraisal and evaluation uses the analytical methods of economics to determine the cost, value and worth of a policy intervention. This includes estimating the value of alternative uses of a given resource. Types of economic analysis used in economic evaluation include:

- **Cost-analysis** – this compares the costs of different initiatives without considering the outcomes sought. Its major limitation is the lack of information on outcomes and about the relative effectiveness of different interventions, and serves little purpose in a robust policy evaluation.
- **Cost-effectiveness** – analysis compares the differential costs involved in achieving a given objective or outcome. It provides a measure of relative effectiveness of different interventions.
- **Cost-benefit analysis** – considers the differential benefits gained by a given cost of resources. It considers alternative uses of a given resource, or the opportunity cost of doing something compared with doing something else.
- **Cost utility analysis** – evaluates the utility of different outcomes for different users of a policy or service. It normally involves subjective appraisals and evaluations of outcomes using qualitative and quantitative information.

Is it always possible to evaluate a policy, programme or project?

Before deciding to evaluate a policy, programme or project it is always important to ask whether it is even possible to evaluate it. Some policies are so complicated that it will be impossible to meet the main requirements of evaluability. These requirements include that the interventions, and the target population, are clear and identifiable; that the outcomes are clear, specific and measurable; and that it is practical to implement an appropriate evaluation design.

Evaluability assessment provides a systematic approach to planning evaluation projects. It involves structured engagement with stakeholders to clarify intervention goals and how they are expected to be achieved, the development and evaluation of a logic model or theory of change, and provision of advice on whether an evaluation can be carried out at reasonable cost or further development work on the intervention should be completed first.

Achievement of policy goals

One of the most frequently asked questions in policy evaluation is 'have we achieved the goals set out for a policy, programme or project?' This is commonly known as "**Goals-based evaluation**". Before and after methods of evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods are often used to answer these types of questions. You can use comparisons with different sub-groups of a population, such as different areas, in order to see if there are any variations in achievement.

Goals-based evaluations do not always assume that the chosen goals are valid or indeed appropriate measures of effectiveness. Even when the goals of a policy, programme or project are achieved, it does not always mean that the policy has been responsible for this outcome. Other factors, sometimes other policies or projects, may have influenced the outcome.

In order to know whether a policy has been responsible for an expected outcome, some evaluation of the "**counterfactual**" is needed, in other words, what would have happened anyway, or because of other factors. The usual method of assessing the counterfactual of a policy is to conduct an experimental evaluation such as a randomised control trial.

A **randomised control trial** deals with the problem of other possible factors influencing an outcome by exposing an experimental group of people, and a non-experimental, or control group, of people to exactly the same factors except the policy under investigation. For example, in testing the effectiveness of new drugs on patients, two randomly selected groups are often chosen; one group is administered the drug and another group is given a placebo, and the results are monitored over time.

You can also use **Quasi-Experimental methods** such as controlled matched comparisons which, although similar to randomised control trials, don't assign individuals randomly to different experimental and control groups, but on the basis of characteristics like gender and age. Quasi-experimental approaches are often supported by statistical modelling techniques.

How do you evaluate unintended outcomes?

Policy-makers and evaluators are often interested in the “unintended” outcomes of a policy. These unintended outcomes may be positive or negative. “**Dark logic modelling**” is a specific technique that can be used to explore possible negative unintended effects which can be used to inform how an intervention is implemented such as to minimize unintended effects.

In order to determine the actual effects or outcomes of a policy, without always knowing what the intended goals might be usually involves a method known as “**Goals-free**” evaluation. Goals-free policy evaluation is of particular interest to government based social researchers as it allows them to establish the positive and negative outcomes of policies. Goals-free policy evaluation uses similar methods to goals-based evaluation, with more emphasis on qualitative methods of research such as, in-depth interviews, participant-observation, focus groups, etc.

Summary

Policy evaluation is a family of research methods that are used to investigate in a systematic way, the effectiveness of policies, programmes, projects and other types of social intervention. Their aim is to achieve improvement in the social, economic and everyday conditions of people’s lives.

Useful links/resources

Evaluation Support Scotland

<http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/>

UK Evaluation Society

<http://www.evaluation.org.uk/>

Evaluability Assessment

<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/WWS-Evaluability-Assessment-Working-paper-final-June-2015.pdf>

Magenta Book – HM Treasury guidance on designing evaluation

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

