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Ethical implications of resource-limited evaluations: Lessons from an INGO in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

The emphasis on demonstrable program results in international development work has produced countless evaluation guidelines and numerous scholars have championed specific, ethical-based evaluation approaches to guide international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). Yet few studies have examined the ethical implications of current evaluation practices among INGOs or the resulting effects on INGO-funded programs. This article focuses on one among a growing population of young, U.S.-based INGOs whose evaluation practices reflect limitations of time, methodological expertise and funding. Drawing on existing principles of ethical evaluations, the author explores the circumstances and potential implications of one evaluation performed by an INGO in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and concludes that an ethically defensible evaluation exceeds the capacity of this young INGO. Four propositions are forwarded to highlight the tensions between currently accepted evaluation guidelines and INGO realities. Finally, to help under-resourced INGOs minimize the potential ethical implications for their programs, the article recommends that they prioritize their limited resources to: (1) build local capacity and decentralize evaluation tasks and responsibilities; (2) share program agendas and solicit feedback on implementation from evaluands; (3) share field impressions with local and expert stakeholders; and, (4) translate communications into local dialects to facilitate discussion about structuring future programs and their evaluation.

1. Introduction

It is relatively straightforward to argue in favor of cross-border assistance provided by Northern international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) (Riddell, 2007; Singer, 2010). While there is little doubt about the merits of a *few* providing assistance to the multitude of the world's poor, the dilemma around how best to deliver and then evaluate the effectiveness of such assistance is far more nuanced. Should a Northern INGO's program to provide economic opportunities to needy women in the global South be evaluated solely on its ability to disburse funds or must it also be assessed on its efforts to undertake a systematic analysis of how beneficiaries may maintain the economic gains they realize? How open must INGOs be about their own uncertainties and failures? Similarly vexing questions should concern INGOs and all those with a stake in their performance.

INGOs explicitly acknowledge that values such as empowerment (e.g., Action Aid International; Kiva; One Acre Fund; Pact), individual advancement (e.g., Africare; Family Health International; World Resources Institute), community well-being (e.g., Christian Relief Services; Haitian Health Foundation, Inc.; Eurasia Foundation Inc.) and moral, spiritual, even religious sensibility (e.g., Convoy of Hope; World Vision) underpin their missions. Evaluation is recognized as a critical means for testing these claims and thus informing organizational learning, management and decision-making (Benjamin, 2008; Ebrahim, 2003; Grasso, 2010). A focus on ethics, the article argues, can render evaluation practice more realistic and accessible, especially for young, resource-challenged INGOs that are under new pressures to demonstrate accountability to a wide variety of stakeholders, including donors, beneficiaries, staffs and their partners. What remains unclear is what principles or criteria an INGO should use to order these multiple claims. As Brown and Moore (2010) recount, INGOs can utilize many different types of judgments in settling these claims, namely, legal and regulatory (enforced largely by donors and courts), prudential (based on consequences), ethical or moral, or strategic (based on balancing legal, prudential and ethical claims).

Abbreviations: INGO, international nongovernmental organization; NGO, nongovernmental organization.

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This article makes a case for the use of ethical guidelines as one means to help young, resource-limited INGOs organize and evaluate their interventions amidst multiple, often competing, sets of accountability demands.

What type of evaluation is ethical (if any) may be hard to determine. What is ethical according to Rachels (2003, 19) may be either a matter of opinion or defined by context. For Rachels (2003), the most crucial consideration in a discussion of ethics is not the decision itself but the reasons and principles forwarded to support it. Hendricks and Bamberger (2010) bring a similar understanding to the notion of ethics in development evaluation when they observe that there are no absolutes, i.e., no good or bad, when applying ethical measures to development evaluation. Yet, drawing on a host of different guidelines, they (2010) conclude that ethical evaluations must realize four values:

- provide information about the effects of programming;
- identify potential harms;
- promote equity; and,
- provide a voice to all stakeholders.

Building on these values, this article attempts to answer two questions: (1) what ethical challenges do evaluators encounter in evaluating programs funded by young U.S.-based INGOs? and (2) what ethical implications do such evaluations have on the programs these INGOs fund?

International charities based in the United States have grown in both number and importance in the 21st century (Reid & Kerlin, 2003). According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2014), the number of 501(c)(3) public charities focusing on international, foreign affairs and national security work has ballooned from 7,508 in May 2000, to 16,818 in December 2013. Within this set of public charities are several subsets of organizations, including those dedicated to advocacy, cultural exchange, emergency relief and development. The largest two subsets pursue international relief and development.

This article pertains to a young U.S.-based public charity that identifies itself as an international development organization and is primarily financed by unrestricted funds.[1] As a young organization, with fewer established routines or structures (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999), its lack of institutionalization offers an opportunity to examine how it may learn from errors and interpret, integrate and organize future evaluation practices to reflect ethical principles. Moral theorizing that is attuned to the actual constraints of INGO evaluations can, the author argues, provide a sounder basis for decision-making than generally articulated rules for ethical conduct. Broad-based guidelines for conducting evaluation, such as those supplied by the International Development Evaluation Association (2012), the American Evaluation Association (2004), the United States Agency for International Development (2011), the United Nations Evaluation Group (2008), African Evaluation Association (2006/2007) and others, are useful but need to be considered in relation to exactly how young INGOs go about evaluating the effectiveness of their work.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Evaluation in international development

INGOs are often required to complete an evaluation of their work for donors, regulators, the general public and media. The results of these evaluations can influence program design, determine future funding and ultimately affect the communities where the INGOs work. Recent initiatives like the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)[2] and the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness[3] reflect the heightened attention on demonstrable results. Scholars of civil society have devised numerous frameworks for how to approach and conduct evaluations. Existing scholarly literature on the use of evaluation in international development focuses on five dominant frameworks. Each framework generates a somewhat different picture of the ethics driving the evaluation (i.e., how evaluators make decisions about good and bad and what falls within the moral duties and obligations of an evaluation). These frameworks, their associated contributors and the key values underlying each framework are summarized in Table 1.

The most prevalent and widely documented is the *logical framework analysis* (LFA). It and its many derivatives recommend prioritizing and outlining program objectives, intended outcomes and the causal relationships between them (Bennett, 1979; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Jackson, 1997; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999; Rockwell & Bennett, 2004; USAID, 1979). If rigidly focused on quantification (i.e., product rather than process data), LFA can be an inadequate tool for monitoring complex development interventions (Fine, Thayer, & Coghlan, 2000). Ebrahim (2005, 86) analyzes the use of LFA among Southern NGO grantees and finds that the resulting efforts better meet the account-seeking needs of international donors than the learning and decision-making needs of Southern NGOs. The ethics of such an approach are shaped by the upward accountability demands of donors which, if left unchallenged, could lead Southern clients (and INGOs) to select the most "appropriate" action based on what fits donors' expectations.

In contrast to LFA's emphasis on observable and measurable performance data for funders, the *expressive accountability framework*[4] and its many derivatives incorporate data not easily articulated but rather perceived and expressed through NGO and community members (Chambers, 1994, 1997; Cousins & Earl, 1995; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Fetterman, 1994; Mertens, 2007; Uphoff, 1991). This framework privileges learning and growth, particularly for Southern clients, by relying on process data collected through field visits, participatory rural appraisals, discussions with field workers, community needs assessment, and training and evaluation (Christensen & Ebrahim, 2006; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Cousins & Earl, 1995; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; Smillie & Hailey, 2001). This framework troubles those who see participatory methods as imposing, not overcoming, power relations and romanticizing local knowledge while ignoring divisions within a community (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Leurs, 1996; Wallace & Chapman, 2004).

A third set of evaluation methods is labeled *calculated impact framework*, comprising cost-benefit analysis and a host of other techniques developed by grantmaking foundations and venture philanthropists (see Table 1). Collectively, these methods borrow concepts from the business world—such as costs and benefits, internal rate of return, expected return—to monitor social and financial returns for funders. They focus on what to measure, how to monetize costs and benefits and whether resulting outcomes may be attributed to the amount of funds that support the program (Acumen Fund, 2014; Weinstein, 2009; William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2008). "A key challenge in such quantification and attribution," according to Ebrahim and Rangan (2010, 8), "lies in addressing the thorny issue of causality." Since program outcomes can be caused by factors unrelated to the program, attribution is

[1] Young public charities (0-5 years old) are likely to be small-staffed and financed by minimal unrestricted contributions from members and other individuals (Avina, 1993). The author recognizes that evaluation challenges for INGOs receiving funds from such sources as foundations and governments may be different.

[2] http://www.3ieimpact.org/en/.

[3] http://www.mfdr.org/Sourcebook/1stEdition/2-1Paris.pdf.

[4] This is a term borrowed from Knutsen and Brower (2010).