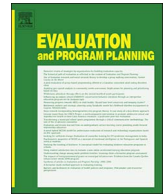




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Introduction to the special issue ‘unintended effects of international cooperation’

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ABSTRACT

The ‘Evaluation and Program Planning’ journal has contributed to the launch of an academic discussion of unintended effects of international cooperation, notably by publishing in 2016 articles by Bamberger, Tarsilla, & Hesse-Biber and by Jabeen. This special issue aims to take up the academic challenges as laid down by those authors, by providing among others a clear typology and applying it, by outlining various methodological options and testing them, and elaborating on suggestions on how to deal with the barriers that prevent unintended effects being taken into account. This special issue makes clear that it is possible to reduce the share of unforeseen effects of international cooperation. Turning the spotlight on unintended effects that can be anticipated, and aiming to make progress on uncovering those that are particularly difficult to detect and debunking those that are exaggerated is the task that lies ahead of us.

1. Introduction

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stipulates in its evaluation guidelines that evaluation of development programs should be concerned with both intended and unintended results. However, a meta-evaluation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) evaluations shows that only in 15% of the cases were unintended effects taken into consideration (Hageboeck, Frumkin, & Monschein, 2013). An assessment of the evaluations of the Norwegian aid agency, NORAD, showed that in one of three NORAD evaluations, there was no mention of unintended effects, even if this was explicitly mentioned in the terms of reference (ToR). When the ToR didn’t mention side effects, only one out of four researched them. In general, unintended effects were dealt with in a superficial manner (Norad, 2014). Hence, the first analysis indicates that the OECD guidelines for evaluations are not followed systematically in this respect by its members. This special issue aims to provide insight into whether and why this is problematic, and especially into what can be done about this.

The ‘Evaluation and Program Planning’ journal has contributed to the launch of an academic discussion of unintended effects of international cooperation, notably by publishing in 2016 two articles: ‘Why so many “rigorous” evaluations fail to identify unintended consequences of development programs. How mixed methods can contribute’ (Bamberger, Tarsilla, & Hesse-Biber, 2016) and ‘Do we really care about unintended outcomes? An analysis of evaluation theory and practice’

(Jabeen, 2016). This last ground-breaking article contributed to putting the issue on the agenda, and highlighted key issues for further research. The article discusses the inconsistent usage of typologies of unintended effects, identifies the shortcomings of existing methodologies, and highlights various barriers to a more careful consideration of unintended effects. This special issue aims to take up the academic challenges as laid down by Jabeen, by providing amongst others a clear typology and applying it, by outlining various methodological options and testing them, and elaborating on suggestions on how to deal with the barriers that prevent unintended effects being taken into account.

This special issue is part of an ongoing research initiative which consists of four parts. Firstly, a systematic literature review took place to analyze the existing level of academic knowledge on this topic, as well as to indicate contradictions and gaps in the literature. Secondly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and Radboud University launched a call for papers and organized a two-day international academic policy crossover conference in The Hague in January 2017. Twenty-one papers were presented and debated during that conference, of which 14 were published as working papers on the conference website. As a third step, the best papers were selected and improved during an intensive peer-review process and presented in this special issue. This special issue forms the start of the ‘community of practice’ – the fourth step. The aim of this community of practice is to bring academics, professionals and practitioners together to strengthen methodologies for mapping and analyzing unintended effects, as well as to facilitate their roll-out. Those interested in participating in this

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community of practice are kindly invited to contact the editors of this special issue.

2. Taking stock of the existing thinking on unintended effects of international cooperation

As part of the preparation for this research initiative a systematic literature was executed, which focused both on the drivers of the unintended effects, as well as on the frequency of observed unintended effects. The full methodology and findings are accessible online at the conference website

2.1. The definition of unintended effects

The term ‘unintended consequences’ was first coined by the sociological functionalist school. In this school of thought, an unintended consequence refers to a particular effect of purposive action, which is different from what was wanted at the moment of carrying out the act and the want of which was the reason of carrying it out (Baert, 1991). The authors in this special issue follow this definition. The word ‘unintended’ is currently interchangeably used with ‘unanticipated’. However, the original work of Merton, which started the debate on these consequences, deliberately used the word ‘unanticipated’ and some argue we ought to go back to it. Zwart (2015) argues we ought to use the term unanticipated as there are as well unintended anticipated effects, which we would risk lumping together with the unintended unanticipated effects if we use the term unintended consequences. He shows the example of certain medicines: the doctor knows that prescribing a certain medicine can have unintended consequences, but can still decide to go ahead regardless, because the intended effects outweigh the potential unintended consequences. Hence, even though the doctor foresees the potential unwanted consequences, she presses ahead: the consequence was unintended, but anticipated. Most scholars use these days use the term ‘unintended’; in this special issue, it is understood that this comprises both foreseen (anticipated) and unforeseen (unanticipated) effects.

The word ‘consequence’ can be, and is, used interchangeably with the words ‘effects’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘impact’. Traditionally the term ‘consequence’ is used. However, this appears to have a negative connotation (e.g. ‘if you do this, you will face the consequences’). As ‘consequences’ can also be positive and we wish to underscore the need to both look for positive and negative unintended effects, the more neutral word of ‘effects’ is used here.

The term ‘international cooperation’ refers to all those forms of international cooperation that exist between the economically richer and the more disadvantaged nations. It is important to note that in this review, this comprises much more than the traditional foreign aid (e.g., the actual transfer of money, goods or services from the Global North to the Global South as measured in ‘OfficialDevelopment Aid’); it also covers other domains such as international judicial initiatives (such as the international criminal court), and peacekeeping missions, and international cooperation in the ‘War on Terror’ and the ‘War on Drugs’.

2.2. The drivers of unintended effects

With respect to the origins of unintended effects broadly two schools of thought were detected: one claiming that they largely stem from human mistakes when planning interventions and a second school arguing that reality is so inherently complex that unintended effects are bound to occur, no matter how well thought-through external interventions are.

Sociologist Merton is considered to be the founding father of the academic literature on the unintended consequences (of purposive action) and an adherent of the first school of thought (Merton, 1936). He proposes five factors contributing to unintended consequences: four of which are related to human intelligence failures. He argues that

unintended consequences are due to:

1. ignorance;
2. erroneous ideas;
3. imperious immediacy of interest (a certain myopic focus on the objectives to be obtained);
4. value driven decisions which work in the short term, but not in the long term;
5. self-defeating prophecies.

Only the fifth factor relates to way the world works: the purposive social action influences the actual world to such a degree that initial causal interferences are no longer accurate. This last argument is referred to as a self-defeating prophecy; the fear of some consequence, which drives people to find solutions before the problem occurs, thus the non-occurrence of the problem is not anticipated. In sum, Merton was of the opinion that unintended consequences could largely be avoided if planners would only think in an objective and well-informed way. In this school of thought unintended effects were largely seen as something negative, whereas in the complexity school of thinking, to which we will now turn, these effects were approached in a neutral way, as they could be positive or negative.

With the arrival of the complexity and systems-thinkers half a century later, the theoretical understanding of the frequency and the origins of unintended consequences shifted. They argue that there are a multitude of interconnections, non-linearities, multi-dimensionalities and unpredictabilities that interact with external interventions. These complexities render it difficult to understand the potential ambiguous effects of external interventions in integrated systems (Brusset, Coning, & Hughes, 2016). As one of the key authors on complexity in the social sciences writes: “Outcomes are determined not by single causes but by multiple causes, and these causes may, and usually do, interact in a non-additive fashion...It may be greater or less, because factors can reinforce or cancel out each other in non-linear ways. It should be noted that interactions are not confined to the second order; we can have higher order interactions and interactions among interactions” (Byrne, 1998, p. 20).

As complexity theory has gained ground in social sciences, it has moved researchers and social sciences to take unintended effects more seriously. Merton argued that unintended effects would be hard to measure, as many social planners would afterwards declare that the effects were intended right from the start. However, evaluation specialists have been aiming to detect unintended effects, and have made some headway. Morell (2010) presents seven risks factors contributing to the prevalence of unintended effects as a result of external interventions:

1. tightness and richness of linkages between the program and the external environment;
2. size of the program relative to the boundaries of the system in which it lives;
3. stability of the environment of implementation and results of the program;
4. time elapsed between a/the program and intended results;
5. robustness of an external intervention over time and place;
6. level of innovation in a program, and finally;
7. level of knowledge present about the context (Morell, 2010, p. 25 & 45).

It is interesting to contrast the risk factors of Morell to those of Merton. Where 4 out of Merton’s 5 risk factors were related to the level of knowledge of the social planner, this is the other way around for Morell; 6 out of 7 factors are related to the intrinsic characteristics of the social action, and only one relates to the knowledge of the intervener.

Both theories share the view that there are a large number of

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