



Do we really care about unintended outcomes? An analysis of evaluation theory and practice



Sumera Jabeen

The University of Melbourne, Graduate School of Education, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘unintended outcomes’ has a long history. Contributions to the topic have appeared under the guise of various disciplinary lenses, including programme evaluation. There is now solid consensus among the international evaluation community regarding the need to consider side effects as a key aspect in any evaluative study. However, this concern often equates to nothing more than false piety. In this article, shortcomings of existing theoretical developments to evaluate unintended outcomes are identified. Current evaluation practices in international development are then analysed to demonstrate ways in which unintended outcomes remain peripheral. Reasons for neglect are discussed and the need for a stronger re-focusing on unintended effects of development interventions is advocated.

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1. Introduction

In programme evaluation, unintended outcomes refer to the effects of an intervention other than those it aimed to achieve. Such effects could be positive – producing additional benefits, negative – causing harm to those involved directly or indirectly, or neutral. Some of them can be predicted prior to implementation, while others are simply unforeseeable (Merton, 1936; Morell, 2010). Unintended outcomes are generally viewed as a consequence of error or ignorance and imply lack of control. Therefore, policy-makers tend to deny their existence or ignore them. Better planning based on relevant knowledge is assumed to help eliminate unintended results (McDaniel, Jordan, & Fleeman, 2003; Merton, 1936).

However, unintended effects of social development programmes do not always occur due to error or ignorance. Interventions are subsystems in a larger system, involving human beings, and operating in socially, economically and politically dynamic environments, where they interact with other subsystems as well as a larger system. These complex interactions produce effects, which are not often part of initial programme intentions or could be entirely unforeseeable. Thus, unintended outcomes can be considered as inherent to any deliberate attempt to bring about change (Meyers, 1981).

Unintended outcomes are particularly significant in the case of international aid for development programmes in developing countries. This is because the major purpose of development aid is to combat poverty, thereby improving the situation of disadvantaged people. However, despite enormous efforts to improve the conditions of the poor, nearly 1.2 billion people in the developing world are still living below US\$1.25 a day (United Nations, 2013) and the effectiveness of aid is constantly under scrutiny (Fengler and Kharas, 2010; Schafer, Haslam, & Beaudet, 2009).

Simultaneously, well-intended development policies and programmes sometimes worsen the conditions of beneficiaries. For example, studies show that women’s impoverishment increased as a result of participation in micro-credit programmes in Bolivia (Brett, 2006), and income disparities and unemployment have increased due to neo-liberal policies in Latin America in the 1980s (Portes and Landolt, 2000). These and other similar unintended consequences of interventions directly contradict the core idea of development aid—to improve the situation of the poor in developing countries.

This state of affairs necessitates learning more about how to maximise benefits for targets of aid – the poor in developing countries – without doing harm. Focusing evaluations to understand unintended effects can be a source to achieve this purpose. Hence, the need for learning about unintended effects in evaluation can be technical as well as ethical (Morell, 2010), and is consistent with the core objectives of evaluation—accountability, knowledge development and improvement (Chelimsky, 1997; OECD, 1991).

From a technical standpoint, unintended outcomes may provide insights into why a programme resulted in extra

E-mail addresses: sumerajabeen_01@yahoo.com, sumerajabeen.sj@gmail.com (S. Jabeen).

benefits or caused damage in a certain context. Such an understanding can help (a): planning more efficient and effective interventions by capitalising on positive unintended effects; (b) altering the programme strategy of an ongoing or future intervention to avoid negative effects. Further, knowledge of such effects can assist stakeholders to understand limitations of the current logics of interventions and may also generate a new perspective upon dealing with social problems (Mariussen, Daniele, & Bowie, 2010), thus helping progress the field of social programmes.

From an ethical standpoint, learning about unintended effects through evaluation is important for two reasons. Firstly, international aid for development was founded on the ‘moral obligation’ of developed nations to assist less developed countries to grow and lessen the plight of their people (Riddell, 2007). Therefore, aid providers have an ethical obligation to ensure that interventions do not cause harm to any segment of population being served (Schafer et al., 2009). Secondly, those who suffer from the negative effects of development interventions – the poor in developing countries – are generally not in a position to hold implementers accountable for the harm caused. Therefore, evaluating unintended effects may safeguard the interests of the most vulnerable.

These technical and ethical reasons demand that evaluators look beyond the officially-stated goals and explore those results that programme planners and administrators have not envisaged. However, are such effects of interventions being considered in evaluation, particularly in international development? Has the evaluation theory been developed sufficiently to facilitate those who are interested in examining unintended outcomes? What can be the plausible reasons for certain practices in evaluation with regards to study of unintended effects? To answer these questions, this article examines the current state of evaluation theory and practice. Evaluation theories and approaches addressing the phenomenon of unintended outcomes are reviewed, particularly for their utility for international development evaluation. An understanding of evaluation practices regarding the study of unintended effects is developed by undertaking a systematic analysis of evaluation guidelines and reports of a number of aid providers. Then, a discussion of plausible causes for the neglect of the phenomenon of unintended effects in evaluation is presented. The article concludes suggesting the need for future research on unintended outcomes in evaluation.

2. Unintended outcomes and programme evaluation

Those working in the field of evaluation have long acknowledged that social development programmes may produce unintended effects (Morell, 2010; Patton, 2010; Scriven, 1973). One manifestation of this acknowledgement of unintended effects in the discipline of evaluation is American Evaluation Association’s guiding principle of ‘responsibilities for general and public welfare’ that emphasises on taking into account the side effects (Shadish, Newman, Scheirer, & Wye, 1995).

The first significant account of recognition of unintended outcomes in evaluation is Suchman’s (1967) consideration of ‘differential effects’. While acknowledging the complex nature of social phenomenon and interrelationship of the components in social life, he believed, it is not possible that a programme lead to a single change but a series of changes result from a single intervention. These changes, he asserted, may affect participants differently under different circumstances. He acknowledged that ‘unintended’ or ‘unanticipated’ effects could be ‘desirable’ or ‘undesirable’ (that is, positive and negative) but he was more concerned with harmful negative effects of the programme (Suchman, 1967). While he believed that studying differential effects can provide a better understanding about reasons for

success or failure of an intervention, he did not expound and produce a methodology for evaluating differential effects.

Afterwards, numerous evaluation theorists had attended to the phenomenon to varying extent. Contributors can be grouped into three categories. First group comprises of those who have paid attention to defining and categorising unintended effects and includes: Morell (2005, 2010); Sherrill (1984) and Sieber (1981). The second group consists of those who proposed ways to evaluate unintended outcomes with or without providing any classification of unintended effects and Chen (1990); Funnell and Rogers (2011); Hummelbrunner (2006); Morell (2005); Patton (2010); Scriven (1972); Sherrill (1984); Tilley (2004) and Weiss (1998) are the prominent contributors. The third group is of those who made only a passing reference and suggested to focus such outcomes in evaluation and includes: Love (1991); Mark and Henry (2006); Mathison (2005); Owen (2006); Robson (2000); Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004); Stufflebeam, Madaus, and Kellaghan (2000) and Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer (2010). Contributions in the first two categories are discussed in the following section.

2.1. Theories and approaches to evaluate unintended outcomes

The following models and approaches in evaluation and international development evaluation, contribute to the study of unintended outcomes to varying extents and are reviewed in this section:

- i Social impact assessment
- ii Goal-free evaluation
- iii Sieber’s framework to evaluate unintended effects
- iv Sherrill’s two-step approach
- v Theory-based evaluation
- vi Developmental evaluation
- vii Agile evaluation

2.1.1. Social impact assessment

Social Impact Assessment (SIA)¹ is a methodology for ex-ante evaluation (Becker, 2001). It branched out from Environmental Impact Assessment in the 1960s and emerged as a distinct approach in the 1970s. SIA is defined as a process of “analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions . . . and any social change process invoked by those interventions” (Vanclay, 2003b, p. 5).

SIA is particularly concerned with the consequences of development, predominantly borne by communities. The basic objective of SIA is to maximise benefits and minimise the negative impacts of development interventions by estimating the likely effects of a programme (Vanclay, 2003a). This is a highly participatory approach and its general principles include: involving stakeholders; identifying data sources and collecting data; focusing the assessment on all impacts related to all groups; analysing impact equity; providing feedback to planners; and establishing mitigation strategies with a monitoring plan.

Despite the detailed delineation of the principles and processes, the approach has its own limitations with regard to the study of unintended outcomes. For example:

- Being an ex-ante evaluation approach, SIA deals with ‘foreseeable’ outcomes only. Therefore, foreseeable but unforeseen and unforeseeable effects remain unattended.

¹ For further discussion and details on SIA methodology please see: (Barrow (2000); Becker and Vanclay (2003); Freudenburg (1986)) and Vanclay and Esteves (2011).

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