

EVIDENCE REPORT

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Policy Anticipation, Response and Evaluation

Inclusion, Ethics and Evaluation: Panel Discussion

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Policy Anticipation, Response and Evaluation theme.

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INCLUSION, ETHICS AND EVALUATION: PANEL DISCUSSION

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1 Introduction

This panel discussion is supported by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS') Department for International Development (DFID) Accountable Grant, with a view to continue a dialogue around the use and application of ethics in impact evaluation (Barnett and Munslow 2014; Munslow and Barnett 2015; Munslow and Hale 2015). The event was hosted by the Centre for Development Impact (CDI), a joint initiative between IDS, Itad and the University of East Anglia. It builds on previous research conducted by the CDI to open up debate on ethics within the field of impact evaluation.

CDI's working assumption is that all practice – whether evaluations or development interventions – is underpinned by particular value systems. In recent years, the field of impact evaluation within international development has become largely driven by methodology and empiricism. To some extent, this has meant that it has lost touch with the 'value' dimension of evaluation, with values being primarily understood in relation to rigour: 'the scientific generation of facts or truths which are assumed to be self-evident and universally valid' (Munslow and Barnett 2015: 3).

Preliminary work by the CDI looks at the conduct of evaluators, which is presumed to be guided by moral and ethical principles and guidelines. But who these moral principles relate to and whether they go far enough is subject to increasing debate (Groves 2016; Camfield 2014; Barnett and Munslow 2014; Simons 2006). Does current practice urge evaluators to consider the inherent complexity of different situations, practices and beliefs? Are evaluators properly incorporating diverse – and underprivileged – perspectives in evaluation?

The panel discussion makes a modest contribution to these questions by considering the issue of inclusion in evaluation; specifically, in which contexts is inclusion more or less possible? The panel is structured around the perspectives of five diverse actors in the field of evaluation research: Rob D. van den Berg, Leslie Groves, Laura Camfield, Chris Barnett and John Gaventa. The speakers asked us to consider: what is ethics, where do evaluators draw their ethical principles from, and what are the challenges moving forwards?

The full panel discussion is available online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K-tP2bPr5U

2 Guest speakers

Chair of the meeting: Rob D. van den Berg (President of the International Development Evaluation Association, Visiting Professor at King's College London, and CDI Visiting Fellow), who discussed recent work to review evaluation guidelines and identify ethics issues that emerge.

Leslie Groves (independent consultant), who talked about a piece of work that she has been commissioned to do with DFID on ethics in evaluation and research.

Laura Camfield (Fellow at the University of East Anglia and a member of the CDI), who talked from the perspective of an evaluator and a researcher.

Chris Barnett (Director of the CDI), who talked from the perspective of an evaluation practitioner.

John Gaventa (Director of Research at IDS), who talked from the perspective of a participatory researcher, having done much work on evaluation.

3 Attendees

Table 3.1 Panel discussion attendees

Name	Affiliation
Kate Bingley	Head of Performance and Learning, Christian Aid
Kirsty Bridger	Researcher Development Co-ordinator, University of Sussex
Robert Chambers	Research Associate, IDS
John Gaventa	Director of Research, IDS
Penny Hawkins	Head of Evaluation, DFID
Hannah Hudson	Programme Officer, IDS
Richard Longhurst	Consultant and Research Fellow, IDS
Alison Mathie	Associate Director, Research and Publications, Codey International Institute
Rosie McGee	Research Fellow, IDS
Tamlyn Munslow	Research Officer, IDS and member of the CDI
Jim Sumberg	Research Fellow, IDS and member of the CDI Board

4 Discussion

4.1 Rob D. van den Berg – ‘Ethical guidelines in evaluation’

As Director of Evaluation at the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in Washington DC, Rob van den Berg established an evaluation policy and ethics guidance for evaluation in the GEF in 2007 (Global Environment Facility Evaluation Office 2007). The United Nations Evaluation Group established guidelines a year later. More recently, in a CDI scoping study, 31 evaluation guidelines were reviewed, and it was found that many organisations do not have specific ethics guidance regarding their evaluations. There was also limited guidance from the professional associations: in 2015, only 3 per cent of the national associations had adopted guidelines, although some guidance, such as the principles of the American Evaluation Association, remains highly influential and is recognised by many associations. Some guidance seems to have been predominantly inspired by clinical research, where there is huge concern for protecting human subjects from harm. Guidance on broader dimensions – such as social inclusion and other societal-level issues – was less well covered. Van den Berg concluded that the emerging picture is scattered and more needs to be done in practice.

Key points:

1. Guidance is not universally adopted and not sufficiently discussed.
2. Ethics has not been well established within evaluation and we do not fully understand how ethics is applied.
3. Evaluation asks ‘what works’ and has been awarded a major role in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, as a tool for governments and organisations to support learning and evidence. But, moving forwards, whose responsibility is ethics?

4.2 Leslie Groves – ‘Review of ethics principles and guidance in evaluation and research’

Leslie Groves shared the findings from a piece of research conducted for DFID,¹ reviewing principles and guidance on ethics in evaluation and research. Her research was based on a review of ethics guidelines, protocols, policies and practice documents across sectors. The research was conducted as a first step towards revising DFID’s existing ethical principles and guidelines. She prompted participants to ask: How, in practice, do we check that ethics is respected throughout the evaluation and research cycle? How do we hold those responsible for ethics accountable?

Key points:

1. There is a lack of shared understanding around what ethics means. The principle of ‘do no harm’ is too low a bar given that international development is a sector striving to be of benefit to society.
2. There has been a failure to systematically assess ethics across the research and evaluation process. Whose responsibility is it to ensure ethical practice? There is an assumption that we can trust review boards, but is this sometimes more about image than scrutiny of practice? How do people manage these tensions after the review board and in the field?

¹ <https://ethicsinevaluationandresearch.wordpress.com/2016/02/03/ethics-are-not-relevant-to-my-work-time-to-put-ethics-front-and-centre-of-our-evaluation-and-research-work/>.

3. When we think about 'inclusion', is it a principle, standard, value or competency? Does the principle of 'do no harm' lead us to exclude some groups over others? Where does the responsibility lie?

4.3 Chris Barnett – 'Perspective from an evaluation practitioner'

Chris Barnett shared reflections from his experience in leading large, multi-stakeholder evaluations. He discussed complex structural issues between the evaluator and commissioner, including how the different interests, organisational incentives and information asymmetries often distort the evaluation process. For instance, whereas within the evaluation cycle attention is usually given to ethics and inclusion early on, there is often an evaporation of responsibility in reality, such as in terms of feedback to respondents, sharing data and findings, and forms of redress and deliberation. He outlined that for complex programmes operating in dynamic settings, there is a challenging balance to be made between empirical certainty and value-based judgements. This is particularly the case when the current drive towards methodology and rigour does not necessarily lead to increased certainty through evidence, and thus there is greater reliance on some form of (value-based) judgements. He concluded by noting that to address this challenge there is a trade-off to be had between rigour (i.e. evaluators achieving certainty through evidence) and inclusion (i.e. evaluators legitimising voice and different perspectives which might lead to change).

Key points:

1. **Ethical vacuum:** Does evaluation fit within the project and policy cycle (and subject to ethics of development), or is it a form of research (and under the ethics of protecting the subject)? Does it too often fall awkwardly between the two?
2. **Balance between empirical evidence and value judgements:** How should we weigh-up different forms of evidence and make value judgements? Who is included (and not included) in this process? How can we consider (value-based) judgements in a much more systematic way?
3. **Ethical trade-offs in practice:** More often than not, evaluation evidence is produced without wider public involvement. Is there a trade-off for evaluators between the ethics of 'doing no harm' (e.g. protection of the subject) versus allowing people to speak 'truth to power' (enabling inclusion and voice; duty to society)?

4.4 Laura Camfield – 'Inclusion, rigour and ethics: [Evaluation] acquaints a man with strange bedfellows'

Inclusion sounds as though it should be ethical: including country partners, including and appropriately acknowledging members of your team, including neglected voices. But bearing in mind pressures on resources, what do we *exclude* in order to include this and do we lose anything by moving from large-scale quantitative to smaller-scale qualitative and mixed methods in evaluation? As evaluators practicing inclusion, how do we both engage and maintain critical distance? Anthropologists often need to spend at least a year in a setting to be sure they understand what's going on – why do we think we can generate a similar understanding of power dynamics in days or weeks? In prioritising inclusion within evaluation, are we in fact bringing all the problems identified by participatory researchers to a new setting?

Key points:

1. Can we create the space for different forms of dialogue? All forms of participation involve risks such as wasting time and exacerbating tensions at the community level. Is inclusion genuine and generated by the desire to hear other people's views?
2. Certain methodological choices exclude people. What is the role of verification or 'member checking' at the community and individual levels?
3. Where does rigour fit into all of this? Inclusion can be part of qualitative understandings of rigour, such as Lincoln and Guba's principle of authenticity. Are these rejected in favour of other principles that resonate more with quantitative notions of rigour, such as transferability, credibility and dependability?

4.5 John Gaventa – 'The role of inclusion in evaluation'

From his perspective as a participatory researcher, having done much work on evaluation, John Gaventa reflected on larger questions about knowledge and power. He maintained that these types of questions cannot easily be answered by looking at the guidelines. They are fundamental questions about knowledge and power, including how one respects the knowledge of those often left out of formal knowledge processes. Gaventa turned the debate around and asked: What are the ethics of non-inclusion? What is the ethical justification for exclusion? Building on longstanding themes at IDS, including the work of Robert Chambers, he also asked: Whose knowledge counts? Whose reality counts? Who counts reality? Whose voices count in the measurement of success? Who has the ethical right to judge or determine success and failure of policies and programmes that affect other people's lives? If in fact evaluation is going to gain more power and more influence, for example with donors, then who has the right and legitimacy to influence these decisions?

Key points:

1. **Knowledge for whom?** Are evaluators accountable to commissioners or do they have moral ethics towards those whose lives are affected? Participation and inclusion of whom? Who are the key stakeholders? Between and amongst stakeholders.
2. **Ethics for knowledge vs ethics for action:** How can I use the knowledge for action? How will knowledge be reported on? In what format?
3. **Ethics of protection vs ethics of inclusion:** Confidentiality or recognition and voice? How do evaluators and researchers create safe spaces?

5 Concluding remarks

The role of guidance should not be underestimated as it serves a strategic purpose and leads to discussion of ethical issues and perspectives amongst peers. But, do principles and guidelines necessarily lead to better and more ethical evaluation? A more systematic approach is needed to understand system-wide changes; an approach that is linked to the broader discussion of ethics in development.

Questions for further research include:

1. Does the existence of principles and guidelines necessarily mean use? Whose values are included in the principles?
2. Should we instead be focusing on creating the space for different forms of dialogue? Or methodologies that are grounded in philosophical principles of equity and reciprocity?
3. If evaluation is a tool for decision-making, then what should the contractual relationship with decision makers look like? How can evaluators control how findings are utilised by decision makers?

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