

Promoting International Collaboration in Evaluation through Better Common Understanding

Hans Lundgren, Head, Results and Evaluation Team,
Development Co-operation Directorate, the OECD

In this brief contribution, I will relate some experiences from my work with promoting a common understanding in the field of development evaluation. Without a shared understanding of key terms and concepts, communication is difficult and there is reduced scope for international collaboration.

We live within our language borders. Learning another language is certainly a big challenge for most of us but opens up new opportunities. It provides access to a deeper understanding of other cultures and to new intellectual horizons. Languages differ widely in terms of structure and grammatical rules. Often, vocabulary is more varied for certain terms. For instance, in my mother tongue Swedish, a number of different expressions exist for various types of snow - this is apparently even more refined in the Inuit language of Greenland.

In our efforts to understand scientific, human and social realities, we have developed models and terminology in every domain imaginable. Evaluation is not different – despite being a relatively young discipline, it has already developed a huge amount of models and concepts. Some of these constructed concepts are not always easy to understand.

In some of my earliest exposure to evaluation in the development field in the 1990s during evaluation workshops we organised in Asia, Africa and Latin America, I observed that participants had difficulty in communicating with each other. They did not use the same terms or meant totally different things with them.

This was compounded by the fact that the development agencies providing the ODA financing had often also elaborated their own definitions. We started out, together with the World Bank and other partners, to develop a common vocabulary. In the scoping phase, we found that many evaluation terms had quite varied definitions, elaborated in-house in a well-meaning attempt to clarify internally. Collectively, however, this became somewhat of a conceptual jungle. For instance, we found more than 20 definitions of the

term impact. During a participatory process extending over more than two years, we managed to reach agreement in 2002 on a set of key terms in development evaluation and results based management.^{*1} The original was produced in English, Spanish and by a parallel working group in French. The glossary has since been translated and adapted into a number of languages, so far at 17, including Kiswahili. The process of adaptation is important as it is not always possible to translate, but a new term may need to be developed or an existing one elaborated upon, and national or regional evaluation expertise is needed for this. The specialised vocabulary needs to fit into the national language in order to be used.

We have since continued to develop common norms and standards to support international collaboration in evaluation. For instance, the more recent DAC Evaluation Quality Standards,^{*2} agreed to among all major development agencies, have now been published in Arabic, English, French, German, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese. The interest in these technical documents is surprisingly high, for instance the Arabic version was downloaded 14,000 times within only two months after its release. This is another sign that evaluation is on the rise in many countries and that people would like to know more about the results of development programmes – be they financed by international development partners or governments. The rapid increase in the number of evaluation associations and societies across the world is also very good news – provided that evaluations produced will be of good quality and effectively used to inform public sector accountability, decision-making and learning.



*1 Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-based Management
(English) <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/2754804.pdf>

(Japanese) <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/kaikaku/hyoka/pdfs/yogo.pdf>

*2 Quality Standards for Development Evaluation

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/qualitystandards.pdf>