Your webinar entitled “Using Evaluation Synthesis and Meta-Analysis to Make the Most of Evaluation” stirred me[[1]](#footnote-1) to write something, but not really on the subject of the webinar – interesting though it was. My main thought was that these seem to be excellent techniques, but how good is the raw material that is being synthesised and meta-analysed?

From about 1984 to 2013 I did some 36 Project Completion Reports (PCRs), Implementation Completion Reports (ICRs) and even Implementation Completion and Results (ICR) reports. Out of these 36 the basic data available was only satisfactory on two occasions. For the rest the solution was to scratch around oneself, interview as many farmers as possible and try to recover whatever scraps of information had been collected during implementation. The normal budget for completion reports was 8 person weeks, normally two people, an economist and a technician (generally either an agronomist or an engineer). This allowed for 2 weeks for each member for field-work followed by 2 weeks report writing.

Why this very unsatisfactory performance? There seem to be many, including the following:

1. **Country culture.** Some countries are positively allergic to anything which might lead to a confrontational situation. For example, to say that a survey team to make harvest estimates was not fielded due to late release of government budget could not be included in the report because it implied criticism of the Finance Department. With this cultural background it makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a critical review of the project implementation experience. In situations where everyone knows that the project is not meeting its production objectives it also leads to massaging of the figures to show that the project “is not really so bad”. It also saps the morale of the staff involved who are regarded as lackeys of the financing agency with a low prestige job compared to other project staff and are often in fact in “punishment posts”, far below those involved in project infrastructure construction and contracts.
2. **Value judgements.** In most project situations what project managers are interested in is what they see as asset creation – completion of headworks, lining of canals, provision of vehicles – achievement of physical targets. Items such as research are of secondary priority. Staff training is tertiary priority and M&E comes somewhere below training. Consequently little emphasis is given to timeliness in establishing and equipping an M&E unit, little care given to finding good staff and funding is sometimes inadequate or late.
3. **Organisation arrangements.** In the majority of cases the funding agency gives such priority to M&E that Technical Assistance (TA) is funded to get activities off to a flying start. All too often this turns out to be the first chapter of an M&E disaster. Before this luminary is appointed nothing can be done. Sometimes his selection and appointment takes for ever. Sometimes he arrives gets ill, goes back home and a replacement has to be found. One of the first jobs that generally confronts the M&E unit is the famous Baseline Survey. This should, of course, have been done as a part of project preparation, but never was. As a result it sometimes happens that in years 3 or 4 of project implementation the M&E unit is still trying to complete a baseline survey.

Sometimes the situation is hardly better when the TA does arrive as scheduled. The TA wishes to do an excellent job so draws up a long list of information to be regularly collected which will provide a wonderful view of the impact of the project not only on agricultural production but on farm family life. All the information collected will be available on a project Management Information System created by the project with the help of TA. This is often another disaster waiting to happen. MIS is highly regarded by the funding agencies, but an unknown quantity as far as the project management is concerned and – similar to M&E - not given the priority it requires. There are also plenty of project specific problems such as lack of centralisation of project offices. The MIS is expected to link as many as 25 dispersed offices in the state or provincial capital through reliance on the public telephone system as well as the numerous offices in the project area. M&E staff are expected to input data collected into the MIS. This job is generally deputed to the lowest level staff in the M&E unit at field level. Generally, because the funding agency is anxious that the project should not add to the staff establishment, all the staff in the M&E unit are employed on a temporary basis. This latter has two great disadvantages. First such temporary staff spend a lot of time trying to get continuing contracts as staff in other parts of the project. Secondly it means that as soon as the project ends they disappear so that all knowledge of what they were doing and what information they collected is lost to the individuals doing the ICR.

In addition there are all the normal problems to be faced in trying to run offices in less than optimum conditions, such as fluctuating electricity supply, computer software and hardware problems and viruses. In a number of cases M&E units do start collecting information in regular six monthly surveys. Thanks to the ambitious list of data to be collected this is already a heavy challenge and no energy, time or funding remains available for undertaking any analysis of the data collected.

**Possible solutions**

1. **Better planning of the project identification, preparation and appraisal process to enable the baseline survey to be carried out at the earliest possible stage.** Both financing institutions and the government are always in a hurry to get disbursement started as soon as possible. Consequently, project preparation is under a time pressure and generally is based on data collected by a visiting mission with only a few days in the field. This is inadequate and means that all subsequent project planning is often based on poor quality or unreliable data.
2. **Who does what?** Monitoring needs to be a project management role and this need not present too many problems. Project managers need to have information on the rate of progress in implementation. The accuracy of such reporting can be regularly checked during the periodic supervision missions.
3. **Evaluation** in contrast is far more problematic. It is much better left to an external agency. There is no need for this to require an expatriate team. An ideal solution is to use a local university to undertake the baseline survey and collection of data to assess the project result at the point of implementation completion. These two tasks should be contracted out to the selected university. This arrangement has a number of advantages:
   1. It provides a higher degree of objectivity to evaluation than if the work was the responsibility of project management.
   2. It removes at least one of the headaches of project management and reduces management dispersion of effort.
   3. It provides funds to the university for fieldwork activities and for training staff and students in agricultural/rural development survey data collection and analysis.
   4. As well as being vital for project planning and final project review at implementation completion, this arrangement can have still wider benefits. Governments need to know what is the situation of rural communities, often in areas remote from the capital. What is happening to farm incomes? Are they increasing or falling? This type of surveys provide good quality data on the actual situation. There is no further need for arriving at development decisions based merely on a few anecdotes or highly suspect statistics.
4. **Conclusion.** Using a local university to undertake project evaluation is a cost-effective way to obtain good data for project evaluation and at the same time build competence of the university as an institution. It also has the side benefit of providing a window for government on the incomes of farm families in the project area. So far this approach has not been widely adopted but the benefits listed above should make it increasingly chosen for future project baseline surveys, evaluation during implementation, and final evaluation at implementation completion.

1. 25 years with the FAO Investment Centre followed by consultancies up to 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)