

# Use of synthesis and meta-analysis in development evaluation

## Session Notes

30 October 2019  
15:30 – 16:30 CET

Recording Link:

<https://fao.adobeconnect.com/ps4e9jtzgo7n/>



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

## ABOUT THIS WEBINAR

This webinar presented the experience of different UN agencies and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) in using synthesis and meta-analysis in evaluation.

It was an initiative of the Interest Group on methodologies of the UNEG (United Nations Evaluation Group) and at the same time a follow up to a recent online discussion hosted on the EvalForward Community of Practice.

Participants from both the UNEG group and the EvalForward Community of Practice were invited to discuss how to improve the quality and use of synthesis in development evaluations and learn about their potential application in different development interventions.

## AGENDA

<b>Welcome</b>	
<b>Poll n.1:</b> <i>Have you ever done evaluation synthesis or meta-analysis?</i>	Catherine Foulkrod Facilitator
<b>Introduction to the topic of evaluation synthesis</b>	Andrew Fyfe
<b>Applications of synthesis in development evaluation</b>	Carlos Tarazona
<b>Using evidence synthesis to inform evaluations</b>	Mark Engelbert
<b>Q&amp;A from participants</b>	Andrew Fyfe
<b>Closing and next steps</b>	
<b>Poll n.2:</b> <i>How useful was this webinar?</i>	Catherine Foulkrod Facilitator

## Warm-Up: Entry Poll

Have you ever done evaluation syntheses or meta-analysis?

View Votes

Edit

End Poll

Have you ever done evaluation syntheses or meta-analysis?

- |   |   |     |     |
|---|---|-----|-----|
| <input type="radio"/> I have never done evaluation syntheses or meta-analysis                   |  | 40% | (8) |
| <input type="radio"/> I have a little experience of doing evaluation syntheses or meta-analysis |  | 35% | (7) |
| <input type="radio"/> I have experience of doing evaluation syntheses or meta-analysis          |  | 25% | (5) |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/> No Vote  |   |     |     |

Broadcast Results

## Introductions

### FAO production team:

- Paula Carretero Zafra, Webinar Coordinator (FAO)
- Catherine Foulkrod, Capacity Development Specialist (FAO)
- Luca Furio, Communication Assistant (FAO)
- Renata Mirulla, Community of Practice Facilitator (EvalForward)
- Davide Zaccaretti, Digital Media Support (FAO)

### Presenters:

- Mark Engelbert, 3ie International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
- Andrew Fyfe, Director, Head of Evaluation Unit, UNCDF
- Carlos Tarazona, Senior Evaluation Officer, FAO

## Q&A Session

**1. How can we make progress in organizing this universe better? Synthesis as an objective is straightforward - but then it becomes more complicated with overlapping terms and concepts.**

Mark: Establishing one's objectives early on in the process and thinking of what we are about to achieve with a particular synthesis project adds a lot of value to the process. Syntheses can be used for different purposes and depend on things like resources and time available as well as when a decision needs to be made on something that would be usefully informed by synthesis. There are ways of approaching synthesis very quickly versus more slowly and methodically and the best syntheses usually pull together qualitative and quantitative data.

While it is possible to categorize reviews based on whether they are large or small, or whether they contain mostly quantitative or qualitative data, I would suggest using the purpose of the review to organize this universe. That is, the purpose and what the synthesis is trying to achieve and the questions it aims to answer would be the way to segment different types and approaches to synthesis

**2. How "validated final reports" can be considered a good source of evidence? They can be very biased, any system to assess and rate them?**

Carlos: Development banks' evaluation offices have the mandate to rate the terminal reports of each project funded by the bank. The "validated final reports" in this case are reports that the office of evaluation have reviewed carefully. What they use is not so much the content of the reports but the ratings themselves.

**3. Could Carlos explain a bit more the validation process in the iterative and participatory approach he has mentioned?**

Carlos: In FAO we don't use ratings and one concern is raised by synthesis's users is that (past) recommendations may have already been addressed and the evaluations that are part of the synthesis may no longer be relevant because the issues highlighted have been already solved.

To address these challenges we have introduced a participatory approach in developing the synthesis and looking at the evidence available and if it is still relevant.

**4. Is the strength of the evidence taken into account or are studies that don't meet certain quality thresholds excluded from analysis?**

Mark: In a systematic review you are ideally establishing some criteria for the quality of the evidence and excluding evidence that does not meet them. For those things that meet those minimum standards you can do various types of critical appraisals or risk of bias assessments where you look at different facets of the way the study was conducted and then do a sort of segmentation dividing results from high quality studies from the larger universe that may give a different picture. This segmentation can be done with quantitative meta-analyses or in a qualitatively or narrative way.

**5. Mark, the evidence maps with the bubbles (<https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/evidence-gap-maps>) take me to a report, but if I am a busy manager, I am not going to read the full report to find myself the paragraph that is useful to improve my programme, I would need something more concrete, short and easy to apply. How are you solving this in the data visualization? Any ideas anybody?**

Mark: We are exploring ways of representing information and filling the gap between the map and the full report it links at.

For systematic reviews we did something more digestible for the individual studies but need to follow up on the impact evaluations as well.

**6. Is there an indication about the amount of demand for and uptake of this approach to evaluation?**

Carlos: I have the impression that global / regional audiences may have more interest in synthesis and systematic reviews because they are the most affected by information overload and yet they have to make decisions that will affect the life of many people so they are increasingly interested in synthesis. This approach also fits in well with the SDGs context and approach. If we go further down to subnational level there is the perception that primary data is more useful as they still need to monitor more closely the situation.

Mark: to me it looks like there is a lot of demand but it may also be because of the mandate of 3ie and the type of audience I get to liaise with. However, it looks like the world is coming to recognize the importance of synthesis and demanding and taking it up more and more.

**7. How to deal with conflicting data and heterogeneity?**

Mark: The broader challenge is setting the quality threshold on what can be synthesized and what not. There are technical and qualitative approaches to heterogeneity.

**8. Isn't the main problem the lack of good field data to show the pre and post project result?**

Carlos: In the global south the main issue is not having enough evidence to synthesize and when you have it may not be available or accessible.

**Exit Poll**

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**How useful was this webinar?** ☰

**How useful was this webinar?**

<input type="radio"/> Not useful	<div style="width: 0%; background-color: #ccc; height: 10px;"></div>	0%	(0)
<input type="radio"/> Useful	<div style="width: 59.0%; background-color: #0070c0; height: 10px;"></div>	59.0...	(13)
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Very useful	<div style="width: 40.9%; background-color: #0070c0; height: 10px;"></div>	40.9...	(9)
<input type="radio"/> No Vote			

Broadcast Results

**Any comments?** ☰

**Question**

Do you have any comments or suggestions?

## *USEFUL LINKS AND SUPPORT RESOURCES*

- Synthesize data from one or more evaluations, BetterEvaluation brief  
<https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Synthesize%20-%20Compact.pdf>
- FAO evaluation reports and management responses: [www.fao.org/evaluation](http://www.fao.org/evaluation)
- IFAD Annual Report on Results and Impact of IFAD operations (ARRI):  
<https://www.ifad.org/it/web/ioe/arri>
- 3ie's evidence maps: <https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/evidence-gap-maps>
- 3ie systematic review repository: <https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/systematic-review-repository>
- Campbell Collaboration Library: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/18911803>
- Cochrane Library: <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/>
- EvalForward summary of the online discussion on synthesis and meta-analysis:  
<https://www.evalforward.org/blog/evalforward-community-using-synthesis-and-meta-analysis-development-evaluation>

## *CONTACTS*

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