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Reality Bites: Making realist evaluation useful in the real world
CDI Seminar

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A spotlight on realist evaluation at Itad

Over the past five years, Itad staff and associates have been applying realist evaluation to investigate the success of several multi-year, multi-country programmes.

Our work is pushing the frontier of the realist approach, given our focus on complex cross-sectoral interventions with a larger scale and scope than most published examples of realist evaluation to date. To help capture and share these lessons, we’ve formed a Realist Evaluation Learning Group, to digest what we’ve learned along the way with the wider evaluation and international development communities.

Learning Group members:
- From Itad: Meil Pfunon (Chair), Chris Barnett, Rachel Oger, Edward Hedley, Barbora Sladkova
- Itad associates: Isabel Vogel (Team Leader of the BCURE evaluation), Jennifer Leavy (Team Leader of the BRACED evaluation and Sefiani Qualitative and Quantitative and Case Study Expert, on the FoodTrade evaluation), Charles Michelson (Team Leader of the Compass evaluation), Edward Raydell (Consultant on the BRACED evaluation)

Overview

• What is realist evaluation and what makes it different from other approaches?
• What value does it add?
• What lessons have we learned about how to apply it?
The cases

- 4 Itad realist evaluations
- Conducted since 2013
- All DFID funded
- Evaluating large, multi-country programmes (from £13 million to £5.5 billion...)
- All exhibiting features of complexity, e.g:
  - Multiple, evolving and interacting components
  - Implementation across several contexts
  - Emergent outcomes that cannot be predicted in advance
What is realist evaluation, and what makes it different?
What is realist evaluation, and why use it?

- Theory based approach, developed by Pawson & Tilley (1997)
- Doesn’t ask ‘what works?’ but ‘how and why does this programme work or not work, for whom, and in what circumstances?’
- Useful to understand why programmes succeed or fail
- Insights can help guide decisions about rolling out or scaling up programmes, or trying out ideas elsewhere
What makes it different?

1. The realist understanding of programmes
2. The realist understanding of knowledge and evidence
3. The realist understanding of causality
What makes it different?

The realist understanding of programmes

1. Programmes are ‘theories in action’ (often incomplete, implicit, or unconscious)
   – So evaluation is a process of testing programme theories

2. Programmes are inherently complex – they work through introducing new ideas or resources into existing social systems.
   – ‘Complex interventions introduced into complex social systems’ (Pawson 2013)
   – This means that no intervention works the same for everyone, everywhere, at all times – it depends on the context
What makes it different?

The realist understanding of knowledge and evidence

1. Our theories can only ever be an **approximation** of reality!
   - Theory is developed and tested **iteratively**, to help get us closer to a good (enough) explanation of how and why outcomes occurred

2. Realist evaluation is **methodologically eclectic**
   - It draws on qualitative and quantitative data, and any tools and methods suitable to generate the type of data needed to test the theory
What makes it different?

The realist understanding of causality

1. Programme outcomes are caused by mechanisms, which are ‘triggered’ or ‘fire’ in certain contexts.
   - Mechanisms are not interventions, but the (often invisible) causal forces, powers, processes or interactions that lead to or inhibit change
Realist evaluation establishes a causal link between a programme and an outcome by developing and testing theories, in the form of context-mechanism-outcome configurations (CMOs)

In some evaluations we’ve found it helpful to add ‘intervention’ to the configuration, to make CIMOs

“In contexts where there are weak market linkages (C), sequencing resilience-building activities and providing information in a timely manner (I), and supporting people to apply new information (I), means participants can make informed decisions about how they invest resources provided by the programme (M) in ways that are more likely to lead to resilient outcomes (O)”
What value does it add?

1. Enhancing clarity, depth and portability
2. Grappling with context and complexity
3. Engaging with stakeholders
1. Enhancing clarity, depth and portability

The CMO configuration forces precision and depth – going deeper than a standard ToC to explain the ‘arrows’ underneath the ‘boxes’
1. Enhancing clarity, depth and portability

Evaluators are encouraged to draw on insights from wider theory and practice when developing CMOs

‘Deterrence’
1. Enhancing clarity, depth and portability

Evaluators are encouraged to draw on insights from wider theory and practice when developing CMOs.

‘Accompaniment’ mechanism

‘Where an external partner provides tailored, flexible and responsive support to a government institution through a process of reform, characterised by a high level of trust’
1. Enhancing clarity, depth and portability

As theories are developed, tested and refined, evaluators move ‘up and down the ladder of abstraction’, which helps develop generalizable insights that can be applied elsewhere.
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Figure 1 The ‘ladder of abstraction’

- Grand social science theories or very abstract hypotheses (e.g. ‘give the right people the right resources in the right circumstances’) – outside the realm of realist evaluation
- Whole ICF portfolio
- Middle-range theory
- 25 programmes
- Realist programme theory
- CIMOs
2. Grappling with context and complexity

CMO configuration forces you to home in on specific aspects of context, and link context to our explanations of how and why a programme works.
2. Grappling with context and complexity

CMOs also provide a framework to explore how change at one level of a system creates the conditions for change to occur at other levels.
3. Engaging with stakeholders

Co-creating theories in a collaborative way helps evaluators focus on priority issues, and develop operationally relevant recommendations.
3. Engaging with stakeholders

Realist evaluation is able to generate nuanced evidence that is practical and actionable, supporting learning and adaptation.

**Commissioners:** more abstract lessons about the types of interventions that work most effectively in different environments, to inform strategic decisions about what to fund in future.

**Implementers:** granular insights about why a specific intervention worked in a particular place, in order to adjust and improve day to day programming.
What lessons have we learned?

1. On working with theory
2. On working with context and complexity
3. On engaging stakeholders
Lessons on working with theory

1. Avoid developing detailed theories too soon
2. Don’t skimp on your literature review
3. Carefully balance formal theory with stakeholder theory
Lessons on working with context and complexity

1. Be explicit about drawing boundaries and setting priorities
2. Collect data on both ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ contextual factors
3. See CMOs as flexible framings, not rigid constructs
Lessons on working with stakeholders

1. Make time and develop tools to support orientation, capacity building and mentoring
2. Make theory practical (and timely!)
3. Keep the realist jargon ‘under the bonnet’ in reports

- Avoid CMOs!
- Ask ‘why’ five times
- Ask: ‘When might this NOT work and why?’
Summary

• Realist evaluation has enhanced the use and usefulness of our evaluations, generating actionable findings that have fed into learning and decision making
• BUT learning to ‘think like a realist’ takes time and effort!
• It helps to:
  1. Set boundaries early
  2. Keep it simple
  3. Build in enough time and resources for iteration and stakeholder engagement
  4. Engage stakeholders at the right time in the right ways

‘The final independent evaluation report sets out very clear lessons and recommendations for DFID to take forward in future programmes that promote evidence-informed policymaking... We agree with all six recommendations, which have collectively fed into five key principles for our future... programming in DFID.’ DFID (2018)

DFID management response to BCURE evaluation