Making Evaluations Work Harder for International Development

Clore Social Leadership Programme

Written by Michael Cooke,
as part of the Clore Social Leadership Programme
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About Bond

Bond is the UK membership body for over 450 organisations working in international development, ranging from large agencies with a world-wide presence, to community and specialist organisations. We work to influence governments and policymakers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and effectiveness, and provide opportunities to exchange information, knowledge and expertise. **www.bond.org.uk**

About the Clore Social Leadership Programme

This research report is published as part of Michael Cooke's Clore Social Fellowship. As part of the Clore Social Leadership Programme, each Fellow is required to undertake a piece of practice-based research. The purpose of this research is to help develop Fellows' skills as critical users of research, and to help develop the evidence base for the sector as a whole. The research focus, methodology and output are chosen by the Fellow. **www.cloresocialleadership.org.uk**

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My thinking about the issues of evidence production, publication and use in charities has been greatly enhanced by the conversations I have had with Caroline Fiennes, director of Giving Evidence, who has been exploring similar issues in the mental health sector.

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Executive summary

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in international development programmes can promote learning, transparency and accountability. Knowing which interventions are effective, and in what contexts, is crucial for the design of effective programmes. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) invest significantly in MEL (accounting for between 8% and 35% of expenditure, according to one study), but outputs rarely make it into the public domain where they could more easily be used to improve the international development programmes of the future.

This study was prompted by a finding of the Bond/NIDOS Transparency Reviews, in which most organisations scored very poorly in terms of the publication of evaluations on their own websites. It has aimed to explore, through semi-structured qualitative interviews, why some organisations publish their evaluations and others do not, and identify key enablers of and barriers to publication.

Individuals from twelve organisations who had taken part in the first two cohort studies of the Transparency Review process were interviewed (nine Bond members and three NIDOS members). The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

According to study participants, the main reasons for not publishing evaluations included:

- Simply not having considered the issue
- Concerns about the quality of work undertaken by evaluation consultants
- Under-resourcing of evaluations (driven, in part, by NGOs' own desire to maximise spending on service delivery)
- Practical challenges around getting evaluations published on their websites
- Scepticism about whether evaluations published on their websites would be read and used

On the other hand, NGO evaluations were more likely to be published if there was:

- An organisational ethos of openness, learning and transparency
- A desire to build organisational reputation
- A funder requirement to publish

A number of suggestions for how the sector could improve its practice around the publication and use of evaluation evidence emerged from the interviews. The three key points were:

1. If Bond were to develop a directory of hubs/portals that already exist to gather evidence about particular subjects in international development, this could both facilitate the greater use of evidence by NGOs (because they would know where to go for relevant evidence), and help promote the publication of evaluations (because if NGOs publish to a hub or portal that they themselves use, they might have greater confidence that others will actually read it).
2. Having funders separate evaluation budgets from programme budgets in the bidding process would help to ensure that evaluations were adequately resourced, by eliminating the need for NGOs to make trade-offs between spending on evaluation and service delivery.
3. Maintaining networks, such as Bond groups and DFID groups for organisations holding Programme Partnership Arrangement (PPA) grants, will help encourage learning and evidence use. Many participants said that they sourced knowledge and recommendations for what evidence to look at from their networks.

Introduction

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) is a major part of many development programmes, and many organisations and individuals work hard to deliver high-quality MEL.

A recent study[1] of six non-governmental organisations (NGOs) found that between 8% and 35% of their overall expenditure is spent on MEL, once hidden costs such as server maintenance and staff time are fully taken into account. The outputs of MEL activity have the potential to be used in a number of ways, including:

- **Learning** – improving the way that programmes are delivered within an organisation and across the sector
- **Transparency** – being open about what has happened in development programmes, and what they have achieved
- **Accountability** – enabling stakeholders to influence the direction of future work by NGOs

What matters most, of course, is that programmes deliver as much benefit as possible to beneficiaries. Transparency, accountability and learning can all contribute to this.

"…from a beneficiary perspective … if you're genuinely trying to bring about change in the lives of people, you really need to know how effective your interventions are, so M&E is really important in that context."
Participant 9, large NGO

1. Bond (2014) Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. Available at https://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/publications/Investing_in_MEL.pdf

Publication of evaluations

Many NGO evaluations can provide transferable learning and insights that have relevance for other programmes within the organisation as well as for the wider sector. Developing the ideas set out by Caroline Fiennes[2], in order for evaluations to be used to improve programmes in the wider sector, a number of things have to happen:

1. Programmes need to be evaluated
2. The evaluations need to be published or otherwise made available
3. Other organisations need to be able to find the published evaluation
4. The evaluation has to be useful – that is, to have the potential to guide future programme design
5. As well as being potentially useful, it has to actually be used

The process can break down on any of these counts, but one thing that is certain is that if evaluations remain unpublished, it is very difficult for them to deliver transparency, accountability and learning benefits for the sector. This is not a problem unique to the international development sector. For example, Giving Evidence have investigated similar issues in the mental health sector, research that has informed the thinking set out in this report.[3]

Bond and NIDOS[4] work to support their members to improve their MEL and transparency. Since 2014, they have carried out two Transparency Reviews[5], examining the websites of 97 NGOs and assessing their openness to making information public across a range of indicators. A key finding from the first and second cohorts of NGOs who undertook the process was that most organisations scored very low on the publication of evaluations.

A priority recommendation of the review process was for NGOs to systematically publish evaluations of completed work in order to improve accountability, learning and trust.[6]

Purpose of this study

Understanding transparency in relation to evaluations through the lens of what is published on NGO websites is undoubtedly a useful way to understand practice across a large number of organisations. However, it cannot tell us why some organisations publish evaluations of their programmes, while others do not. Without understanding this in depth, it is difficult to identify ways in which the sector can address the issues that are preventing more evaluations from being published.

This study has sought to explore the enablers of and barriers to the publication of evaluations through qualitative interviews with key informants in a range of NGOs. It has also sought to examine how NGOs use evaluation findings and other evidence in the design of their programmes to better understand how evaluations fit into the "evidence system"[7] in international development.

The study aimed to address five main research questions:

1. What are enablers of evaluation publishing?
2. What are the barriers to publishing evaluations?
3. How do NGOs use learning from their own evaluations?
4. How do NGOs use external evidence in programme design?
5. What do NGOs think the sector could do to improve its evaluation practice?

2. Giving Evidence (2015) Enabling Make Better Decisions: Meta-Research to the Rescue! http://giving-evidence.com/2015/01/23/research-agenda/

3. This research is due out in early 2016 and will be published at Giving-Evidence.com

4. NIDOS is the membership network of international development organisations in Scotland

5. Bond (2014) Bond/NIDOS Transparency Review 2014. Available at https://www.bond.org.uk/strengthen/bond-and-nidos-transparency-review-2014

6. Evaluations can, of course, be shared for learning purposes by means other than public websites (eg via email or restricted-access websites), but this research focused mainly on publically available evidence because of Bond's interest in both transparency and learning.

7. Shepherd, J (2007) The production and management of evidence for public service reform, Evidence and Policy, 3(2), pp 231-251

Method

A sample of 20 organisations was selected from among the 97 members of Bond and NIDOS who had taken part in the first two cohorts of the Transparency Review process. The sample was designed to ensure a spread of organisational sizes and scores on the Transparency Review indicator concerning the publication of evaluations.

Of the 20 organisations invited to participate, 12 interviews were completed: 10 by phone/Skype and two in person. The main reasons for being unable to participate in the study given by those who declined the invitation were: the pressure of other work; staff vacancies in the teams most relevant to MEL; and the relevant staff member to interview being away on leave (particularly in smaller organisations where MEL responsibility sat with one person). It is also worth noting that the timescale for completing the interviews – that is, within two weeks of the initial invitation email being sent – was very short.

Organisations took part on the understanding that individual responses would not be attributed to their organisation. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were all conducted by the author. The interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide (see Appendix), which was used flexibly to explore the areas of most interest and relevance to each participant in the time available. With the express permission of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before analysis.

Transcripts were coded based on a combination of research questions and specific interview questions, and then analysed thematically, using the principles of the Framework approach[8] to qualitative research. As a first step, each interview transcript was coded into themes, pulling verbatim quotes into an analysis grid. For each interview, the responses relating to each theme were then summarised into key points. Once this process had been completed for all 12 interviews, common findings across interviews were identified. Unless explicitly stated as a point mentioned by only one participant, all findings below were reported by multiple participants.

8. Ritchie, J & Lewis, J (2003) Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers

Findings and observations

Participant characteristics

Nine of the participating organisations were Bond members, and three were NIDOS members.

The 12 organisations varied greatly in their size. In the expenditure classification used by Bond, five were “small” (up to £0.5m expenditure per annum), four were “medium” (£0.5m to £5m) and three were “large” (over £5m). The eight non-participating organisations were spread across a similar range of sizes – three were small, three medium and two large.

There was also considerable variation in the organisational roles of interviewees, including CEOs, programme staff, staff who managed relationships with funders, and MEL specialists. In the smaller organisations, the interviewees often had multiple roles.

Enablers of evaluation publication

The analysis identified a number of key factors which encouraged participating NGOs to publish their evaluations.

Firstly, organisations that place explicit importance on openness, learning (for themselves and others) and transparency may see the publication of evaluations as an expression of their commitment to these values. This was mentioned in some way by over half of those interviewed.

> “My view on that is if you are a learning organisation then you are very open about problems and challenges and weaknesses.”
>
> *Participant 10, medium-sized NGO*

Secondly, some participants, particularly from small and medium-sized NGOs looking to expand, stated that publishing evaluations is an important part of building the reputation of their organisation. They perceived that publishing evaluations brought them reputational benefits with both funders (for example as a stepping stone to securing institutional funding), and potential delivery partners.

> “That can be useful in not just attracting funds but the people that we may need to work with in order to get projects that actually happen as well.”
>
> *Participant 7, medium-sized NGO*

> “…it is building your reputation as an organisation that can receive and deal well with large grants.”
>
> *Participant 1, medium-sized NGO*

> “…we are very small so I don’t know how many people go to our website, but it’s true that like foundations for example, that we’re applying for this project, they might go and if they see the reports they would say, ‘Oh, okay, it’s serious, they are analysing their work’.”
>
> *Participant 12, small NGO*

A number of interviewees also highlighted that a funder requirement to publish evaluations was an enabler of evaluations being published.

> “There are certain things that we are required to publish, and of course, we publish those.”
>
> *Participant 9, large NGO*

Barriers to evaluation publication

A range of barriers were identified by participants, but one barrier was notable by its absence. None of the interviewees said that they had withheld publication of an evaluation because the findings were negative. Publication bias, sometimes known as the "file drawer effect" is the systematic under-publication of negative findings, and is a well-known and pervasive problem in a range of scientific fields, including medicine.[9] According to one participant, evaluations containing negative findings that were at odds with more general organisational communications about positive impact could be a barrier to publishing evaluations in general.

However, the fact that participants in this research did not mention withholding specific publications because of negative findings certainly does not mean that publication bias does not exist in international development. It does, however, suggest that it was not an issue of primary concern for the individuals interviewed. It may also reflect the fact that the methods used in many international development evaluations make it difficult for an unequivocally negative finding to emerge in the same way that it can in, for example, a randomised controlled trial or using another experimental method.

A few participants, particularly those in smaller NGOs without specialist MEL staff, stated that their organisation had simply never considered the question of whether or not to publish evaluations. By default, documents remained internal. The Transparency Review process was mentioned as a useful prompt for considering the question.

"It wasn't a deliberate decision not to publish it – I don't know, it didn't occur to us that it would be a particularly interesting thing to publish. In fact that sounds bizarre, but it was only really when this transparency review was done by NIDOS and Bond and they focused in on that kind of thing and we suddenly thought, 'Yes, why didn't we publish that?'"
Participant 4, small NGO

"No [we don't publish], and I don't know why. When I saw your email I was like, 'Yes, it's true, we haven't done it, but why, I don't know.' Because the centre I was talking about in [Asian country] that we fund, it's been three years that we have many reports that we publish to donors, to the [European country] office, to the team in the field, but not on our website and I think I just didn't think of doing it."
Participant 12, small NGO

Observation: Explicitly considering the issue of evaluation publication is a precursor to evaluations being published. A number of organisations fall at this hurdle, and prompts to consider the issue could lead to more evaluations being published. The Bond/NIDOS Transparency Review is one example of a prompt, but Bond and NIDOS have a number of other touchpoints with their members that they could use to prompt them to consider the issue.

9. See, for example, the All Trials campaign in medicine: http://www.alltrials.net/find-out-more/why-this-matters/

Concerns about the quality of work undertaken by evaluation consultants was cited by around a quarter of interviewees as a barrier to publishing evaluations. Participants were not concerned about publishing the findings per se – in fact, any mention of withholding publication of evaluations because they had negative findings was notable by its absence. The concern was rather that the quality of work produced by external consultants – for example, in terms of writing style or the rigour of the evaluation – was not of a publishable standard.

"There were some that we did a while ago that we didn't feel were high enough quality. Not about not wanting to share the results, but just didn't feel they were done well enough to be valid – we didn't share those."
Participant 1, medium-sized NGO

A number of other issues raised by interviewees were linked to the issue of the quality of work undertaken by consultants. This included a lack of experience in commissioning evaluations.

"I think a lot of the problem is, when you put a budget in three years ahead of when you plan to do one, you never know how much money you're going to need. This is only the second or third I've commissioned."
Participant 3, small NGO

Since these interviews were conducted, Bond has published tips on developing evaluation terms of reference.[10]

Three different NGOs mentioned that they are exploring the use of internal programme staff, rather than dedicated MEL personnel, to undertake "peer" evaluations. This offers a potential alternative means of resourcing evaluations, particularly in situations where it is difficult to find high-quality evaluation consultants.

"One of the things we've been exploring more is actually using resources from within our own programmes globally. So for example, if we have a good health technical advisor working in Latin America … we've actually commissioned them to do the evaluations."
Participant 6, large NGO

The issue of how evaluations are funded was also raised in the interviews. One respondent made the point that it was often the NGO's own desire to spend as much as possible on programme delivery that led to low evaluation budgets being submitted as part of funding bids.

"I'm tempted to say a lack of resources [is the biggest problem facing MEL], but I think that's a factor of a bigger problem … feeling like resources should go behind face-to-face work with beneficiaries, and not quite understanding the usefulness of evaluations. Seeing it as something you need to do to please a donor, rather than something that ultimately helps us to get better at what we do."
Participant 1, medium-sized NGO

10. Bond tips: evaluation terms of reference. Available at: https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/bond-tips-evaluation-terms-reference

This is certainly consistent with the findings of the *Investing in MEL* report, which highlights that in 10 of the 90 funding bids examined, Comic Relief increased the MEL budget beyond that submitted by the NGO because they deemed the initial amount budgeted to be insufficient. Indeed, the participant quoted above also spoke positively about a funder taking a more active role in the design of monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

> "One donor has offered support upfront to help design a monitoring and evaluation framework, to ensure that monitoring and evaluation are linked together, and that there is a clear learning agenda. And has put money behind that, and has said here's a person to help you do that at the [second stage] application stage. I think that's really healthy to ensure in place at the beginning … it also helps to ensure that it's well resourced."
> *Participant 1, medium-sized NGO*

Observation: Having separate processes for allocating service delivery funding and allocating evaluation funding would reduce the understandable incentive to focus resources on frontline delivery. This could lead to better resourced evaluations that are more likely to be published, and to be useful to those who read them. Options for funders include: allocating a fixed percentage of programme costs or minimum budget to evaluation; having a separate evaluation funding pot that NGOs can bid to use; and working with NGOs to agree evaluation plans and resourcing once programme funds have been awarded.

A number of practical barriers to the publication of evaluations also emerged. For example, previously published documents were not always migrated when organisations changed their websites. Smaller NGOs also mentioned how difficult it could be to get communications colleagues whose priorities were often elsewhere (for example, promoting fundraising events) to make time to post evaluations on their websites.

A few participants explained that they were not convinced that evaluations posted online would be read, and that this acted as a disincentive to publishing them. They believed the length and technical nature of evaluations affected the likelihood that they would be read and acted upon:

> "They're quite long, complex documents that involve specialist staff. I don't think they're the right communication tools for talking about our impact."
> *Participant 9, large NGO*

> "…some of these documents can be really long and quite turgid…"
> *Participant 4, small NGO*

Even organisations who do publish their evaluations were concerned about the extent to which they would actually be used by the international development community.

"How useful are evaluations per se to people without being summarised down or brought into some contextual learning process? So, you know, we put them online because we should. You know, people are interested, they should be there and they should be available, but I don't know whether they per se alone encourage wider sectoral learning."
Participant 6, large NGO

When asked where they sourced useful evidence when designing their own interventions, participants rarely mentioned individual evaluations published on NGO websites. Instead, they highlighted evidence sources where a degree of synthesis and distillation of evidence had already been done. Interestingly, systematic reviews summarising the findings of randomised controlled trials were not specifically mentioned, despite the existence of hubs such as the 3ie impact evaluation database.

The sources mentioned included:

- Internal communities of practice in a large NGO
- Papers produced by the Overseas Development Institute, the Institute for Development Studies, and the World Health Organisation
- The policy and practice pages of large NGOs (for example, Water Aid and Oxfam)
- Sector-specific portals and knowledge hubs such as the India WASH Forum, India Water Portal and SOURCE (maintained by Handicap International)
- Papers synthesising the findings of multiple published evaluations

"There have been programme elements that have come from other people's evidence, quite broadly. Possibly not evaluations, but things that have resulted from other projects that have been evaluated. For example, manuals or guidelines or research papers"
Participant 1, medium-sized NGO

The motivation to publish evaluations and the ways in which NGOs draw in evidence when making their own programming decisions appear to be linked. If an NGO never comes across evaluation studies at its "go to" sources for evidence relevant to programming, there is much less reason for that NGO to think its peers will find, read and use evaluation outputs published on its own website. In short, the NGO has less motivation to publish evaluations that it thinks will not be used.

Observation: There may be an opportunity for Bond to promote evidence use and evaluation publication at the same time. Many sectors have one or more portals/hubs that are both a source of highly relevant evidence to the sector, and a place to publish resources where they can reliably expect them to be read by interested parties. Bond could develop a directory of these portals/hubs and encourage their use as both a means of enabling more evidence-informed programmes, and a platform for evaluation publication.

A number of interviewees reported not having enough time to read research papers, particularly when application deadlines for funding proposals were tight.

"I don't have the time to chug through the entirety of research pieces… What will happen with me is that I'm linked in through a number of networks. That will be the Bond UK Water Network, for example, or, as I say, networks in India, and specifically on water and sanitation."
Participant 11, small NGO

Participants also highlighted the importance of peer networks for finding relevant evidence.

"Well they may be published but you might not be able to find them because you don't know you are looking for them."
Participant 10, medium-sized NGO

"I think on the emergency and disaster risk reduction, we may actually be doing more sharing of our learning and things because there's quite a good network, partly through the PPA[11] and the resilience [learning] group that was formed in that."
Participant 6, large NGO

Observation: The Bond and DFID PPA learning/working groups were highly valued by many interviewees as a means of fostering learning across organisations. Bond and DFID can help enable programming informed by evidence by continuing to support these groups.

11. DFID and its NGO partners receiving strategic, flexible funding – Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPAs) – have a PPA Learning Partnership with various thematic learning groups.

Dissemination of evaluation findings

The Bond/NIDOS Transparency Review process focused on organisations' openness through their websites – that is, their online transparency. Analysis of the responses in this study highlighted that the findings of NGOs' evaluations were disseminated through various channels, not just their websites. Dissemination channels mentioned included:

- Learning papers and thematic summaries
- Presentations, including at conferences and to local networks
- End-of-project workshops
- Distribution to other NGOs, including via networks such as Bond and DFID groups
- Sharing with subject-specific networks, such as the Gender and Development Network or the Cash Learning Partnership

"The DFID PPA learning groups are very effective in terms of organisational learning around topics of interest to the agencies. Yes, absolutely, conferences as well, but the PPA learning groups and the Bond groups are really important sector-wide means of tapping in from and contributing to in terms of learning."

Participant 6, large NGO

According to some participants, converting evaluation findings into more user-friendly reporting formats was an important step towards enabling learning beyond the project itself.

"We are working on two learning papers. So, rather than having the whole report online, or the executive summary, to have something that looks at a wider context, or looks at maybe some other external documents or learning from other organisations that might be of value for people working on girls' education projects in Tanzania."

Participant 8, medium-sized NGO

"So it is a sort of two-stage process. So I don't necessarily see evaluations as the sort of end of a process, I think they feed into the production of other materials where we can share our learning externally."

Participant 10, medium-sized NGO

Observation: Publishing full evaluations on websites demonstrates transparency. A more effective tactic for increasing uptake of and learning from evaluation findings is to make summarised and synthesised versions available, and communicating them proactively through more targeted means.

How evaluations are used by Bond and NIDOS members

One way for evaluations to inform improved programmes is for NGOs to make use of their own evaluations. Participants highlighted a range of ways in which evaluations feed into organisational learning, including:

- An annual accountability report consolidating lessons learned from evaluations
- Internal communities of practice focusing on specific programming themes
- A learning reflection week, focusing on lessons learned throughout the year
- Informing future approaches to measuring outputs and outcomes
- Improving the design of projects to make them easier to evaluate
- Externally published management responses to enhance internal accountability
- Using evaluation findings to inform how an intervention might translate into another country or context

One NGO had a particularly strong focus on considering the scope for organisational learning, and indeed sector-wide learning, from the very earliest point in the project design process.

> "So it is about really thinking through the development and planning stage. What is the learning potential here? What would the processes be to extract that potential? And how would we want to then package it and share it back and outwards within the sector? And then really build it in to projects and get it funded that way."
> *Participant 10, medium-sized NGO*

Observation: Many NGOs have well-established mechanisms to increase the likelihood that their own evaluations will influence their own future programmes. This is an area which Bond and NIDOS could explore further with their members to establish whether it would be useful to share these approaches, either through future research or through the various mechanisms already in place that enable members to connect and share practice.

Conclusion

For evaluation findings to have an impact on international development programmes, they have to be made readily available to the people making programming decisions, they have to be read, the reader has to find them useful and, ultimately, they have to use the findings to inform future programmes. This process can fall down at any stage, and each stage merits research.

This study focused on the driving forces behind the choices that NGOs make about publishing evaluations. If evaluations remain internal documents, the range of people (and therefore programming decisions) that they can influence is much more limited.

According to study participants, the main reasons for not publishing evaluations included:

- Simply not having considered the issue
- Concerns about the quality of work undertaken by evaluation consultants
- Under-resourcing of evaluations (driven, in part, by NGOs' own desire to maximise spending on service delivery)
- Practical challenges around getting evaluations published on their websites
- Scepticism about whether evaluations published on their websites would be read and used

On the other hand, NGO evaluations were more likely to be published if there was:

- An organisational ethos of openness, learning and transparency
- A desire to build organisational reputation
- A funder requirement to publish

When NGOs spoke about how they used evidence to inform their own programmes, the evidence sources they mentioned were often specialist knowledge hubs, such as the India Water Portal, or policy and practice guidance documents from large NGOs and funders. In all these cases, there has been some form of sifting or synthesis of knowledge to make it more useful to the intended readership. Given that organisations seldom use individual evaluations to inform their own programming decisions, it is perhaps not surprising that they have doubts about the extent to which publishing individual evaluations will influence programming decisions in the sector more widely.

This finding is certainly consistent with previous research into the "units of knowledge" that are most useful to "knowledge consumers". A paper by Grimshaw and colleagues[12] suggests that individual studies are not an appropriate unit of knowledge for a professional or policymaking audience, because individual studies rarely provide sufficient evidence for practice and policy changes. They suggest that results of individual studies need to be interpreted within the context of other evidence before that knowledge is transferred to policymakers and development professionals. In other words, evidence syntheses (including systematic reviews) are the most appropriate "units of knowledge" for these audiences.

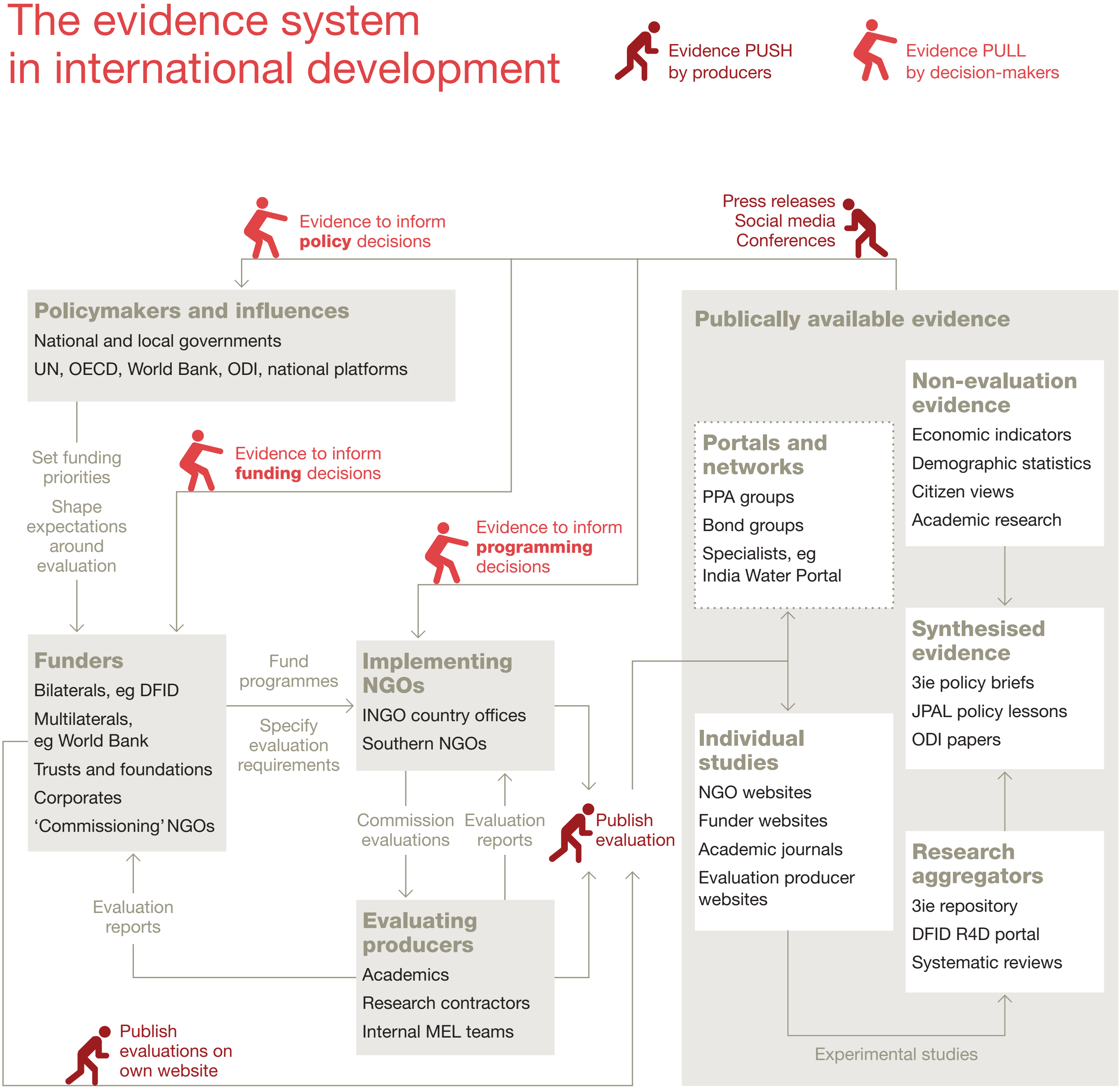
The "push/pull" model[13] is a useful framework for considering how knowledge flows around the international development evidence system, and the part that evaluation publication plays in that system. The diagram below sets out how knowledge producers (such as those writing evaluations) "push" knowledge out into the sector (for example, by publishing it on their websites), and how knowledge users (such as funders, policymakers and NGOs delivering programmes on the ground) "pull" information into their decisions.

The findings of this research suggest that the likelihood of evaluation evidence being pushed out into the sector through the publication of evaluations is linked to the extent to which the NGOs commissioning the evaluations think it will be used by others. It may be possible to foster a virtuous circle whereby evaluation evidence is pulled into programming decisions, motivating NGOs to push their own evidence out into the sector. This could be achieved by promoting evidence portals/hubs where useful evaluations can be found, and NGOs can be confident that the evaluations they publish there will actually be used.

12. Grimshaw, J M, Eccles, M P, Lavis, J N, Hill, S J & Squires J E (2012) Knowledge translation of research findings. Impementation Science 7:50

13. Lavis, J N, Lomas, J, Hamid, M & Sewankambo, N K (2006) Assessing country-level efforts to link research to action. Bulletin of the World Health Organisation 84: 620-628

The evidence system in international development



Appendix: Topic guide

Introduction

Who I am

Overview of the project (Transparency Review, DFID CSPR)

Purpose of the interview

How long it will take (~45 mins)

Don't have to answer any questions you don't want to

You can stop the interview/withdraw from the study at any time

How it will be recorded

How it will be used

Anonymity (organisation named only with explicit consent)

Check happy to be recorded and with how their contribution will be used

Any questions?

1. Warm-up (5 mins)

1.1 Tell me a bit about your role in the organisation

- How long you've been with the organisation?
- Where were you working before you came to [organisation]?

1.2 What are your organisation's major projects and programmes?

- Balance of direct service delivery vs partner delivery?
- Services vs advocacy vs capacity building etc?

1.3 How would you describe the current state of evaluation and research in the international development sector?

- What is going well?
- What are the biggest challenges?

2. Monitoring and evaluation in the organisation (5 mins)

2.1 Where do functions like monitoring and evaluation sit in your organisation's structure?

2.2 What is your organisation's general approach to evaluating projects?

- Does every project have an evaluation?
- [if no] What are the factors that influence whether or not a project is evaluated?
- Has this changed over time?

2.3 Who does the evaluations?

- What is the balance between internally and externally commissioned evaluations?

2.4 What sort of evaluations do you do?

- Process evaluations
- Impact evaluations
- Economic evaluations

3. Publication of evaluations

3.1 Does your organisation publish its evaluations, ie put them somewhere that is publically findable?

- None, some, all?
- Were you surprised by your score in the Transparency Review?

3.2 [if not none] Why do you publish the evaluations that you publish?

- Funding requirement
- Everyone else does it
- Commitment to transparency
- Support communications about the organisation's work
- Enable sector to learn
- Make future fundraising easier

3.3 [if not all] Why do you keep some evaluations as internal documents?

- Research not high-quality enough
- Not of interest to others
- Don't know where to publish it
- Too expensive/time consuming
- Fear of bad publicity
- Commercial confidentiality (secret sauce)

3.4 Publication channels

- Where are evaluations published?
  — Website
  — Academic journals
  — Annual report
- Are they disseminated via other routes?
  — Networks
  — Seminars/webinars
  — Conference presentations

4. Use of evaluations

4.1 What have you learned from the findings of the evaluations you have done so far?

4.2 How have you used the findings of your evaluations?

- In programme development (eg decisions to stop/adjust/change programme or to the design of new programme) – probe for specific examples
- In reporting to funders
- In fundraising bids
- In developing organisational strategy

4.3 [if published] Do you think other organisations have benefitted from your evaluations?

- Who do you think reads them?
- Are you aware of the findings influencing the projects/strategies of others

5. How could the sector improve?

5.1 How could the international development sector improve the evidence available to NGOs?

- Actions for NGOs
- Actions for funders
- Actions for networks
- Actions for policymakers

5.2 What would be the one thing you would say to funders to improve evaluations?

5.3 What are the key barriers to change?

- Funding
- Conflicting agendas
- Reputational risk

If you had a big funding pot to improve the evidence base for international development organisations, what would you use it to do?

6. Using the evaluations that others produce (time permitting)

6.1 Does your organisation use the evaluations that other organisations publish?

6.2 Whose work do you use?

- Academics
- Delivery organisations
- Networks (JPAL, IPA, ODI etc)

6.3 How do you access it?

- Websites/Google searches
- Searching academic databases
- Via internal research team
- Via academic partners
- Newsletters
- Conferences/seminars/webinars

6.4 What do you use it for?

- Programme design
- Funding bids
- Advocacy
- Strategy development

6.5 What sorts of research/evaluation are most useful to your organisation?

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

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