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IMPACT EVALUATION IN OED

FAO Office of Evaluation (OED)

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1. Introduction

Overall, there has been a high level of interest in impact evaluations across OED stakeholders, including resource partners, FAO personnel and government counterparts. Impact evaluations are already conducted in various parts of the Organization through various programmes on social protection and resilience. At the same time, the impact evaluation stock-taking paper (FAO, 2019a) showed that OED needs a consistent approach to impact evaluation, few have been done in the recent years and the quality of work has considerably varied.

The purpose of this note is to clarify OED's role relative to other impact evaluation initiatives within FAO; and outline OED's approach on impact evaluations to enhance and strengthen its work and ensure consistency. In particular this note aims to provide an agreed definition of impact evaluations; define OED approach, principles and considerations for engaging in impact evaluation and define OED's capacity and arrangements (including for quality assurance) to fulfil this role. This note draws upon the stock-taking paper commissioned by OED (FAO, 2019a) and more generally on existing literature on impact evaluation and other organizational approaches adopted within the UN system.

2. Definitions of impact and impact evaluations

2.1 Impact

Impact has previously been defined as "the positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended" (OECD-DAC, 2002). The definition has been recognized by the UNEG guidance note on impact evaluations¹ and has been used across the board in research articles and by other organizations (DFID, 2012; UNICEF, 2014; UNDP, 2019). However, it is broad and includes both outcomes and impacts as labelled within the results chain.

More recently, OECD-DAC revised its definition of impact to "the extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects" (OECD-DAC, 2019). The definition distinguishes impact from the 'effectiveness' criteria that is supposed to focus on the immediate results (primary and direct). FAO-OED uses this revised definition, while emphasizing that the focus is on higher-level effects that are significant and potentially transformative in affecting people's wellbeing and livelihoods.

2.2 Impact evaluation

In the past, organizations have defined impact evaluation depending on their context, evaluand and methodological focus. A common element of all definitions has been attribution² or causality between

1 UNEG, 2013.

2 Note: includes contribution and not to be confused with sole attribution, for further information – UNEG, 2013; https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/doc/05102016/prep_impact_evaluation.pdf.

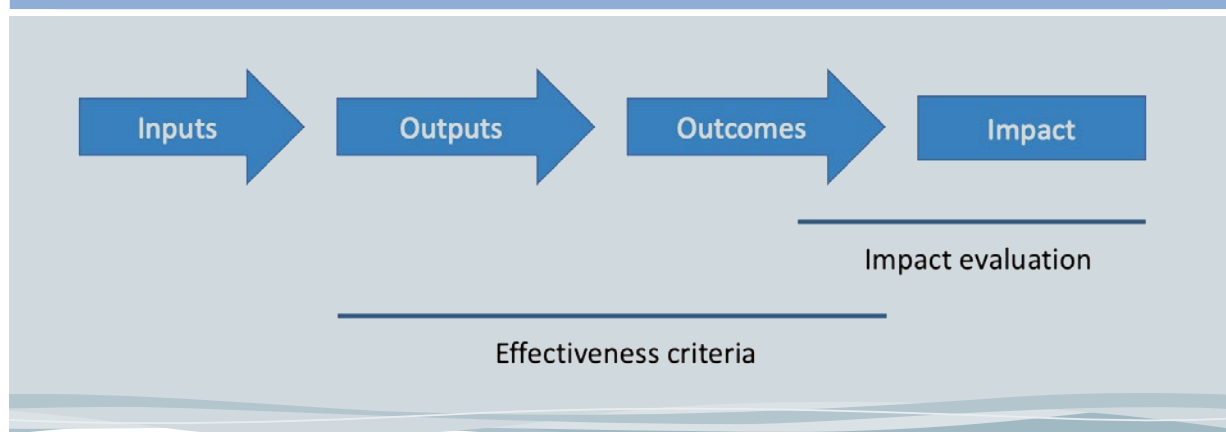
the intervention and outcomes, often through the development of a credible counterfactual. Some definitions specify the context based on their area of work. For example, IFAD states the effect on the 'lives of rural people' and DFID for the 'final beneficiaries', while others like the World Bank consider 'outcomes of interest' (DFID, 2012; IFAD, 2015).

Even though most definitions do not identify a methodological approach, some restrict the definition to focus on quantitative methods. These specify experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies that do not recognise qualitative or mixed methods approaches to impact evaluations.³ For example, ADB focuses on measuring effects attributable to a specific intervention and the statistical significance of those effects, and FAO-OCB at experimental and non-experimental econometric methods (ADB, 2017; FAO-UNDP, 2018). Such definitions often limit the analysis to selected variables of interest that might not cover comprehensively the impact of an intervention.

With consideration to the FAO context, OED defines impact evaluation as *a study dedicated to assessing significant changes triggered by FAO intervention(s) on people's well-being and livelihoods as well as on their environment through a systematic evaluation of overall higher-level effects, including positive and negative, intended and unintended. Depending on factors such as the accountability structure, impact timeframe and measurability, higher-level immediate and intermediary outcomes may be measured as a proxy for impact. In such cases the study will also assess the potential for eventual impact.*

The OED definition emphasizes the importance of establishing causality and does not lean towards a specific methodological approach. It might, however, in some cases overlap with components assessed under the 'effectiveness' criteria. For example, it may assess uptake, adoption or influence, to the extent that these require a dedicated study and are directly linked to people's well-being and livelihoods.

Figure 1. Positioning of impact evaluations within a results chain



3 More details on methodologies covered in Appendix 1.

3. Role of OED in the conduct of impact evaluations and the scope of its work

FAO's work includes a wide range of activities, from large scale interventions in emergencies to activities providing an enabling environment for policy development and pilot projects for future scale-up. As outlined in its strategic framework, its core functions are facilitating and supporting countries through normative work, promoting policy dialogue, capacity development, facilitating partnerships and knowledge dissemination (FAO, 2021). It includes as well direct support to communities and households, in particular through its emergency and resilience work. In this context, OED is the primary division responsible for the conduct of evaluations with the dual purpose of providing accountability on results, in particular on outcomes and impact of FAO's work, and to contribute to corporate learning, feeding lessons into a robust feedback loop.⁴

As specified in the Charter for OED presented to the 103rd Session of the Programme Committee, through impact evaluations it seeks to identify and measure long-term changes induced by FAO interventions. Its evaluations cover work implemented by FAO but are not positioned to test programme innovations or directly address policy questions, which are better suited for teams implementing such activities. Further, the evaluations are underpinned by its primary principles of independence and impartiality among others. Both these aspects distinguish its role on impact evaluations from other FAO divisions that conduct impact evaluations. OED will also complement and draw upon studies carried out by other FAO divisions to the extent that they meet OED objectives. To achieve this and ensure a consistent approach to impact evaluations, OED's role involves continuously enhancing and strengthening its capacity in conducting impact evaluations, with an aim to also support joint impact evaluations of multi-agency interventions. Where possible, OED can also provide guidance to FAO divisions on planning for impact evaluations targeted at particular project components.

In terms of its scope, the focus of OED impact evaluations is at the thematic/programmatic level, covering areas with substantial volume of FAO work that also support organizational learning, rather than at individual projects. This is important given the nature of FAO's core functions, where in general it is difficult to attribute impact to a single intervention/project. Geographically the evaluations are aimed to cover countries where FAO has a large portfolio of work. The overall intent is to determine whether the organization has contributed to change and impact in a meaningful line of causality.

4. OED principles of engagement on impact evaluation

In addition to the primary principles⁵ of independence, impartiality, credibility, transparency and usefulness that underpin evaluation at FAO, OED engagement on impact evaluation also adhere to the following:

- I. **Value added.** Impact evaluations are often costly, especially if direct data collection is involved. It is important to consider the usefulness of the study and its implications on organizational learning. Further, it is critical to review studies conducted on similar topics so far within FAO or by its partners. OED will not conduct impact evaluations on topics covered in the past by other FAO divisions or its partners unless there is a specific need for it. A detailed list of topics/areas covered through recent impact evaluations by other FAO division will be compiled by OED.
- II. **Tailored approach and methodology.** Given the diverse FAO context, OED impact evaluations need to adapt to multiple factors, including the evaluand and its context, the key evaluation questions asked⁶, impact timeframe, and to where the accountability for FAO lies along the

4 More details on OED role can be found in PC/103/5.

5 More details on FAO evaluation principles can be found in PC/103/5.

6 Refer to Appendix 1, Figure 3 for more details on the evaluation questions.

impact pathways. Based on FAO's core functions, evaluands can broadly be categorized as i) policy support, ii) capacity development and iii) direct support to communities/households. Each of these categories along with the above-mentioned factors lend to different impact evaluation methodologies and define the extent to which impact can be measured. For example, in the case of policy support FAO's accountability might be limited to policy influence, uptake and adoption within the impact pathways, whereas for capacity development the extent of impact might include intermediary outcomes of productivity or income levels, depending on the intervention.⁷ The analysis in the case of capacity development would further depend on the outcomes of interest within the three FAO capacity development dimensions (individuals, organizations, and enabling environment). In all cases, however, the focus of impact evaluations is on higher level effects and, where impact is not directly measured, the study will include an analysis of the potential for impact. In the case of direct support to communities/households, an impact evaluation will cover changes that the interventions aim to achieve and that relate to the well-being and livelihoods of the targeted households. In such cases, a more quantitative approach might be more applicable depending on the availability of datasets. Therefore, recognizing that a range of interventions do not lend to experimental or semi-experimental methodologies and the current debates around the strengths and weaknesses of methodological approaches, in principle, OED promotes the use of a mixed methods approach. This is also consistent with the UNEG guidance note on impact evaluations (UNEG 2013). More details on the various methodological approaches and design choices can be found in Appendix 1.

III. Feasibility. The approach adopted for an impact evaluation would need to be consistent with cost considerations, particularly since specific approaches might be extremely costly and may require extensive data collection. It would also need to take into account data availability, whether already existing data sets can be used or if tailored datasets can be developed. Further, the intervention cycle would need to be considered and if baseline data collection can be built into the design of the intervention. Additionally, given the context, questions on sole attribution might not be possible to answer and 'contribution' to results might form an important feature of the impact evaluation. Therefore, an overall evaluability assessment would be important while planning for an impact evaluation. Key considerations, similar to other OED evaluations would include assessing its usefulness to stakeholders and any ethical issues.

5. OED working arrangements for impact evaluations

OED programme of Impact Evaluations will be defined as part of the development of OED Rolling Evaluation Work plan and adjusted on an annual basis. As mentioned above, an impact evaluation is often conducted in the framework of a broader thematic or programmatic evaluation. Impact evaluations therefore cut across the work of all OED teams. Given the human resource capacities required for impact evaluations, in most cases, OED may outsource its conduct to specialized institutes.

With a view of strengthening OED's work on impact evaluation, OED has recently appointed a focal point on impact evaluation. The role of the focal point, in consultation with the team leader in-charge, is to identify and coordinate planning of impact evaluations across teams and facilitate regular exchange of knowledge and experience on impact evaluations across teams. The focal point will also provide support and methodological advice on individual impact evaluations, organize quality assurance, and update the repository of OED/FAO impact evaluations. The role also involves representing OED in the FAO Task Force on impact evaluations and liaising with Rome Based Agencies on impact evaluations.

OED will also soon be establishing a roster of consultants/institutes specialized on impact evaluations and will create and impact evaluation webpage on its website.

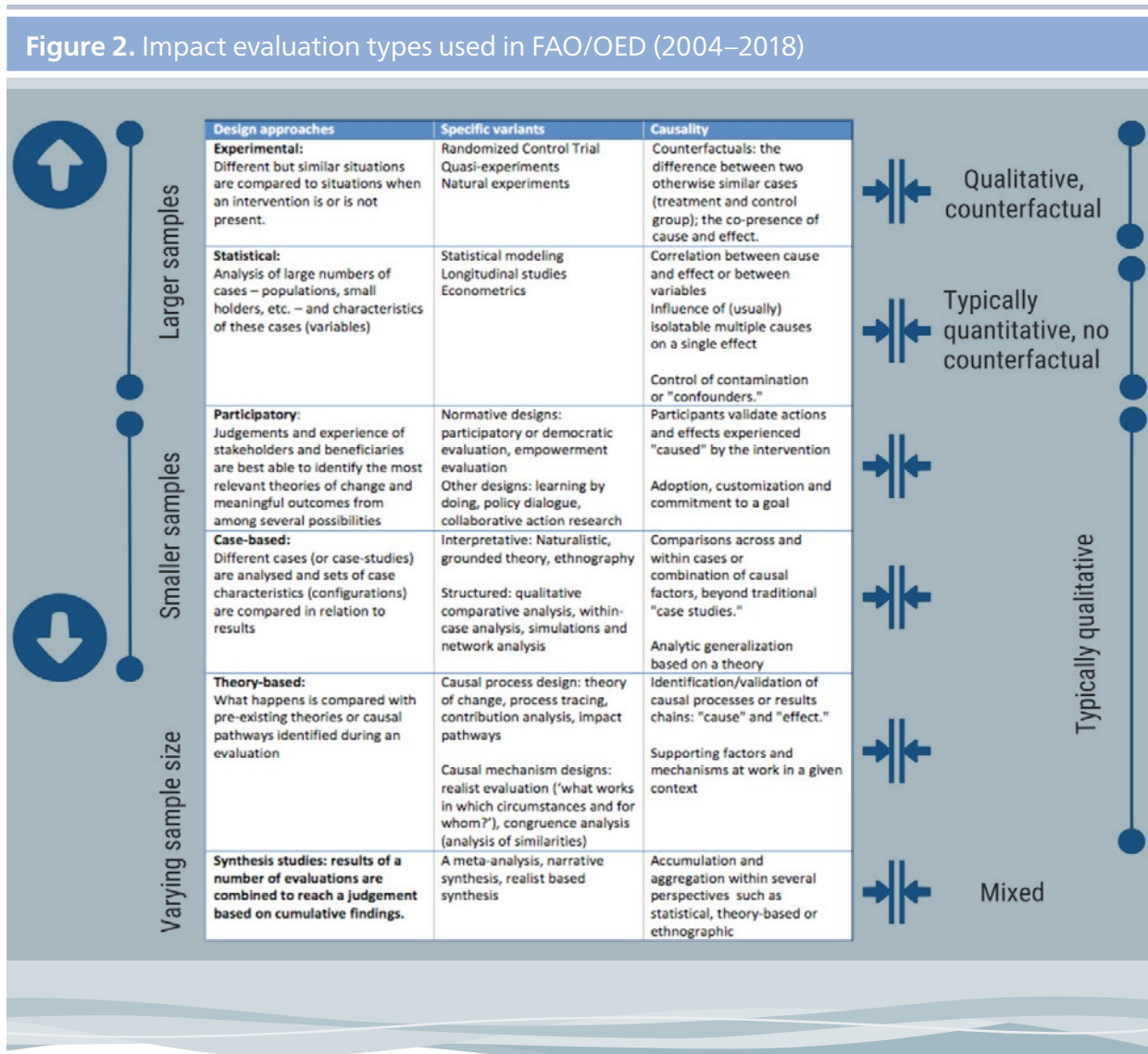
⁷ With reference to the OED capacity development evaluation framework (OED, 2019).

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Appendix 1. Impact evaluation approaches and design choices

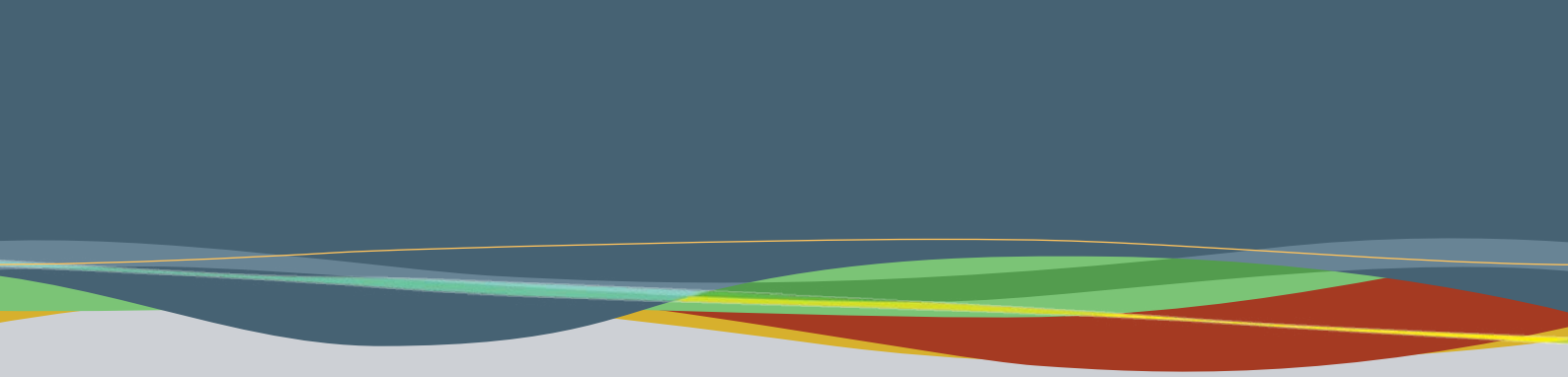
Note: the figures below are from the impact evaluation stocktaking paper commissioned by OED in 2019. More details can be found in FAO, 2019a.



Source: DFID (2012), BOND (2015), Interact (2016), amended.

Figure 3. Impact evaluation design choices based on evaluation questions

Key evaluation questions	Related evaluation questions	Underlying assumptions	Context/ requirements	Suitable designs	Comments
To what extent can a specific (net) impact be attributed to the intervention?	<p>What is the net effect of the intervention?</p> <p>How much of the impact can be attributed to the intervention?</p> <p>What would have happened without the intervention?</p>	<p>Expected outcomes and the intervention itself clearly understood and specifiable</p> <p>Likelihood of primary cause and primary effect</p> <p>Interest in particular intervention rather than generalization</p>	<p>Can manipulate interventions</p> <p>Sufficient numbers (e.g. beneficiaries, households or communities) for statistical analysis</p>	<p>Experiments</p> <p>Statistical studies</p> <p>Hybrids with case-based and participatory designs</p>	<p>IE planning at design required.</p> <p>Consider budget and time requirements.</p> <p>Consider using theoretical attribution based on literature to put FAO's impact into perspective.</p>
Has the intervention made a difference?	<p>What causes are necessary or sufficient for the effect?</p> <p>Was the intervention needed to produce the effect?</p> <p>Would these impacts have happened anyhow?</p>	<p>There are several relevant causes that need to be disentangled</p> <p>Interventions are just one part of a causal package</p>	<p>Comparable cases where a common set of causes are present, and evidence exists as to their influence</p>	<p>Experiments</p> <p>Theory-based evaluation, e.g. contribution analysis</p> <p>Case-based designs</p>	<p>IE planning at design required.</p> <p>Consider budget and time requirements.</p> <p>If no intervention theory exists, consider participatory reconstruction.</p> <p>Consider how to complement qualitative data, for example by theoretical attribution based on literature.</p> <p>If no baselines exist for cases, use memory recall. Triangulate and distinguish between strong and weak findings.</p>
How has the intervention made a difference?	<p>How and why have the impacts come about?</p> <p>What causal factors have resulted in the observed impacts?</p> <p>Has the intervention resulted in any unintended impacts?</p> <p>For whom has the intervention made a difference?</p>	<p>Interventions interact with other causal factors</p> <p>It is possible to represent the causal process through which the intervention made a difference – may require 'theory development'</p>	<p>Understanding how supporting and contextual factors that connect intervention with effects</p> <p>Theory that allows for the identification of supporting factors – proximate, contextual and historical</p>	<p>Theory-based evaluation, especially 'realist' variants.</p> <p>Contribution Analysis</p> <p>Participatory approaches</p>	<p>If no intervention theory exists, consider participatory reconstruction.</p> <p>Consider how to complement qualitative data, for example by theoretical attribution based on literature.</p> <p>Consider how to complement qualitative data, e.g. through control groups. If no baselines exist use memory recall. Triangulate and distinguish between strong and weak findings.</p>
Can this be expected to work elsewhere?	<p>Can this 'pilot' be transferred elsewhere and scaled up?</p> <p>Is the intervention sustainable?</p> <p>What generalizable lessons have we learned about impact?</p>	<p>What has worked in one place can work somewhere else</p> <p>Stakeholders will cooperate in joint donor/beneficiary evaluations</p>	<p>Generic understanding of contexts, e.g. typologies of context</p> <p>Clusters of causal packages</p> <p>Innovation diffusion mechanisms</p>	<p>Participatory approaches and some Experimental and Theory-based approaches</p> <p>Natural experiments</p> <p>Realist evaluation</p> <p>Synthesis studies</p>	<p>Consider involving stakeholders early on in the IE, e.g. through an inception workshop to create ownership and strengthen participation.</p> <p>Include the same stakeholder again in the validation of emerging evaluation findings.</p>



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