

## Conducting Impact Evaluation In Initiatives Supporting Youth Employment

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### Abstract

Persons with various experiences in evaluation can understand the term “impact evaluation” in different ways. This article presents an explanation of “impact” in reference to the Logical Framework Matrix, evaluation criteria, and causality. Then, various designs of impact evaluation are described, such as experimental and quasi-experimental, theory-based, ruling out alternative explanations, case-based, and participatory ones. Regardless of the given approach, one of the crucial issues for measuring impact are organizational aspects, including planning and necessary resources. Although impact evaluation seems to be one of the most requiring, it brings valuable evidence on the attribution of a given intervention<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** evaluation, impact evaluation, attribution, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, theory-based evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> The term „intervention” is used interchangeable with „initiative” which means evaluated project, program or policy.

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## Introduction

Impact evaluation takes an important place between other kinds of evaluations of initiatives supporting youth employment. While more often conducted evaluations are focused on project design, processes, implementation conditions, and the final achievements, impact evaluations are used to answer the questions concerning causal effects – changes that can be directly attributable to evaluated intervention (Gertler et al. 2016). Such evaluations support the assessment of the effectiveness of the initiatives aimed at youth employment. They also enable their improvement and evidence-based decisions regarding efficient management of allocated resources. Although impact evaluations are usually complex undertakings, time-work-and-money consuming, their benefits cannot be overestimated.

The primary purpose of this article is to present basic information on impact evaluation that may be subject of interest to the persons who grant, commission, and implement projects aimed at youth employment. Respective stakeholders can benefit from an impact evaluation in various ways as it demonstrates what would have happened without their intervention<sup>2</sup>. For instance, grant givers can make a rational decision on the further financial support of the sponsored initiative. For the project team, assessing their work's impact can be a starting point for improvements and achieving better results. In turn, project recipients can find out to what degree observed changes were caused by their participation in this initiative. Moreover, impact evaluation enhances project ownership, utilization, responsibility, and cooperation between various stakeholders.

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<sup>2</sup> Vide abovementioned comment.

## Ways of understanding impact evaluation

The term "impact evaluation" can be understood differently depending, among others, on experience in the field of evaluation. Usually, people who mainly deal with project implementation consider impact as any effect resulting from evaluated initiative. Referring to a Logical Framework Matrix consisting of logically connected elements (objectives, outcomes, outputs, activities, and inputs), project teams usually identify impact evaluation with measuring achieved results such as outputs and outcomes that are immediate effects of performed activities. These two project elements are often confused, so it may be helpful to explain the difference between them.

**Outputs** refer to the first level of the project results. These are deliverables, such as various services or products/goods offered to or prepared by project recipients. In youth employment projects, these are, e.g., vocational training and accompanying materials (presentations, exercises, textbooks), workshops for developing soft skills, internships for project recipients, trainee's diaries, business plans, C.V.s, and application letters prepared during the project. These outputs contribute to the achievement of **the planned outcomes** that are direct results of performed activities and reflect immediate changes in recipients' awareness, attitudes, and competencies (knowledge and skills). These changes can be observed and measured as they appear immediately after finalizing respective project tasks (such as training, internship). Project outputs and outcomes can be assessed considering an evaluation criterion of the **effectiveness**, which deals with project accountability (as it compares planned and achieved outcomes).

A project aimed at youth employment can increase knowledge and skills that enable finding a job or establishing a start-up, as well as raise motivation and develop more active attitudes towards vocational activation. Outcomes used by project recipients enable attaining assumed objectives such as increasing entrepreneurship or employment of young people in a specified time interval. Project objectives are connected with the initiative's impact that appears in the long-term perspective and can affect a **wider community** of project recipients (their families, friends, and co-workers). Emerging entrepreneurs can employ their colleagues, and young employees may transfer acquired competencies to their associates. Outcomes can be compared to "seeds" subsequently disseminated by project participants in their social milieu. Project impact understood in this way can be identified with the evaluation criterion that assesses deferred changes resulting from a studied initiative.

However, "impact" recognized as one of the evaluation criteria is not the same as "impact evaluation". The first one is defined by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 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). In this case, the term "impact" focuses more on the **effects** of a given initiative than on **causality**, which is a crucial feature of impact evaluation that examines not only deferred changes of a given intervention but also its contribution to final results (NONIE, 2009). Assessing contribution means

determining if this initiative helped to achieve the observed outcomes. However, we are also interested in **the scale** to which the intervention brought about those results. In that case, it is important to determine attribution, which means *“the extent to which the observed change in outcome is the result of the intervention, having allowed for all other factors which may also affect the outcome(s) of interest”* (3ie, 2012). The attribution is a core issue of impact evaluation as it deals with proving if observed changes were caused by the evaluated intervention. In projects focused on youth employment, such evaluation would also consider external factors such as conducive economic conditions, the favorable situation on the labor market, etc., that could contribute to the observed changes in the employment rate. Thus, besides descriptive questions concerning the type and scale of the project effects and their context as well as inquiries, if these changes are a success or need improvement, impact evaluation also investigate to what extent examined shifts are **due to the evaluated intervention** rather than to other factors including another employment initiatives.

Inference on attribution requires a **counterfactual approach** that enables comparisons between the effects caused by intervention and the hypothetical situation in which this undertaking would not have occurred. Such comparisons support estimating “net changes” or **“net effects”** that can be assigned solely to the evaluated intervention. Usually, it is challenging to expect large-scale effects resulting from a single, short-term project. However, it is possible to estimate the changes resulting from numerous, similar projects (with the same objectives and dedicated to the same target group<sup>3</sup>) or an intervention that has been implemented repeatedly (as following editions).

Impact evaluation can also estimate the **efficiency and sustainability** of changes caused by the examined intervention. Assessment of project efficiency requires comparisons between achieved effects and inputs invested in project implementation (mainly money but also human, organizational, technical, and time resources). In turn, sustainability means the durability of attained effects/changes after project completion and ceasing its financing.

We can use all the above-mentioned information resulting from impact evaluation for making **crucial decisions** concerning evaluated intervention – whether to replicate it (continue in the same form), improve or cease, scale it up or adapt for a different target group or conditions of implementation.

## Various designs of impact evaluation

Impact evaluation differs from other evaluation approaches that are confined to assessing various effects caused by a given intervention. If we have to determine **the causality** and exclude other factors that could cause observed changes, experimental and quasi-experimental designs are the most recommended approaches.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. a program within which many projects are implemented.

**Experimental design** requires random selection of the members of the two compared groups – experimental and control ones. The **experimental group** (also called a treatment one) participates in an evaluated intervention (e.g., youths whose employment is supported by training, coaching, and internships). The second one is **the control group** consisting of the persons who are **maximally similar** to the members of the experimental group as regards their demographics such as sex, age, level of education, place of residence, but also other features that can contribute to the observed changes between these two groups (initial level of competencies or motivation for seeking a job). If these two groups are selected **randomly**, changes found after completing the intervention can be attributed exclusively to its influence and not to the results of other differences between the experimental and control group (except for their participation in the project). Random selection of the members is rarely possible in the actual project conditions – also due to ethical issues. Thus, this design is more often used in experimental settings.

In the case of projects or other types of interventions (programs, policies), **quasi-experimental designs** are more useful. This approach is less robust than the experimental one and is based on the maximum similarity provided by **voluntary sampling** (treatment group<sup>4</sup>) and **purposive matching** (comparative group) instead of random selection. In practice, there are a treatment/test group consisting of volunteers who take part in a project and a purposively sampled comparison group that does not participate in this intervention but is maximally similar to the first group. The most popular methods for creating comparative groups are **regression discontinuity design (RDD)**, **propensity score matching (PSM)**, **matched comparisons**, and **judgmental matching**. In RDD, participants are selected (for evaluated intervention) due to their value for a numeric rating that slightly exceeds (treatment group) or is insensibly out of range (comparison group) a designated threshold/cut-point. In case of youth initiatives, it could be the age of the candidates or their results in the basic skills test. PSM method is more robust than matched comparisons because of its statistical nature. Thus, a large set of statistical data is required to create a comparative group consisting of persons maximally similar to beneficiaries of an evaluated intervention (test group). This similarity is determined by characteristics that influence the propensity to contribute to this initiative. Matched comparisons are based on similar logic, but non-participants are selected case-by-case (and paired with the project recipients), considering the factors that influence investigated change. In judgmental matching, a comparison group is set up by finding an equivalent for each beneficiary determined by an expert judgment on factors influencing the examined effects.

In order to precisely assess the net change, one should also consider the difference between the **initial** (pre-test) and the **final measurement** (post-test) of the achieved effects. Collecting **longitudinal data** (a panel including at least two measurements) significantly enhances the estimation of produced impact. Although various research plans are possible here (different combinations of initial and final data in two groups), the ideal schema combines pre-test and

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<sup>4</sup> This group consists of the recipients of an evaluated intervention.

post-test conducted in experimental and control groups<sup>5</sup>. This approach enables a precise assessment of achieved effects, e.g., change of the economic status of youth participating in an evaluated project aimed at their vocational activation. If we assess the final level of this status solely, without knowing the initial one, we will not be sure if this level has actually changed (increased, decreased) or stayed the same.

Conducting quasi-experimental research with an initial and a final measurement requires caution in data analysis and interpretation due to numerous phenomena that **distort the observed differences** between the two groups. Campbell and Stanley (1963), as well as Cook and Campbell (1979), described different threats to the **internal validity**<sup>6</sup> of such designs. It is worth mentioning some factors, which can be referred to youth employment and entrepreneurship. One of them is **history**, i.e. various phenomena/events occurring between the first and the last measurement (the longer this time interval, the higher risk of this influence). The period of systemic changes (political, economic, social ones) and unstable labor market, e.g. due to pandemic COVID-19, affected impacts of the projects dealing with youth professional activation. The next factor is the **maturation** of the project participants (particularly the younger ones, e.g. 15-18 years old), which is a natural process of spontaneous changes that affect observed impacts by improving or deteriorating them regardless of an evaluated initiative, especially the longer one. **Testing** can also confound impact assessment by gaining practice and sensitization of the examined youths on the job issues, thus influencing the second measurement. **Selection bias** resulting from inappropriate recruitment criteria and self-selection for the project may also distort assessing impact. If the group participating in investigated intervention consists of more motivated and active youths, they will be more prone to find a job or start a small business than “average” NEETs<sup>7</sup> to whom they are compared. Similar effects can bring **mortality**, i.e. attrition of the recipients of an evaluated initiative. Loss of less motivated youth during project implementation can lead to a higher employment rate of the remaining participants. The next source of distortion can be **instrumentation** resulting from modifying the impact measure (tools, procedures, researchers). A factor of a statistical nature that affects impact is called **regression to the mean**. It relies on spontaneously averaging in the final measurement of extremely low or high pre-test results. Serious risks that influence achieved effects are also **social interaction** between examined groups leading to **diffusion** of the assessed impact. This process can result in **spill-over** or **contamination/infecting** effect when an evaluated project or other intervention influences a control or comparison group. Moreover, some above-mentioned factors can also interfere with each other<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This is so-called Solomon’s plan or Difference in Difference one (DiD).

<sup>6</sup> This term means that a given intervention (experimental treatment) causes a real difference between an experimental and a comparison group, and there is sufficient evidence supporting this claim.

<sup>7</sup> Young people not in employment, education or training.

<sup>8</sup> Interaction of selection, history, pre-test, conditions in which research is carried out, and the intervention can also distort external validity of the counterfactual plans.

Impact evaluation can be combined with a **theory-based approach** (theory of change) to examine links between respective elements of **the causal chain** leading to a planned shift: inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. This non-experimental approach can also be very useful in providing **causal attribution** and analyzing alternative **casual paths** (White 2009). For instance, problems with achieving planned outcomes (e.g., soft competencies acquired by the youths) might result from the failure of the theory of change (inappropriate activities or lack of the proper connection between project tasks, objectives, and outcomes) rather than mistakes in the project implementation (wrongly conducted activities). Such differences may have significant implications for the evaluation findings because, in the latter, one should recommend solutions to improve the implementation quality, while in the first case (failure of the theory of change), it is necessary to modify the project logic.

Besides the above-described counterfactual approach and **verification of the coherence** of evidence for causal relations assumed in the theory of change, there is another strategy for assessing contribution, i.e. **ruling out alternative explanations**. This approach relies on a logical, evidence-based process and can be based on quantitative or/and qualitative data. Examples of qualitative strategies for non-experimental design are **Comparative Case Study (CCS)** and **Most Significant Change (MSC)**. CCS relies on analyzing and synthesizing identified patterns (similarities and differences) across at least two similar cases to answer causal questions regarding the evaluated initiative's success or failure. MSC technique is participatory in nature and involves collecting, discussing, and selecting stakeholders' stories told with their own words. "Significant change" means major or a sudden shift (improvement or deterioration) in the functioning of the persons engaged in the evaluated initiative (including their attitudes, behaviors, moods, etc.).

A combination of the above-described strategies increases the **strength of the conclusions** on impact attribution. United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) advocates using different approaches to establish causal attribution and combine the findings from more than just single impact evaluations. As in other types of evaluation, a **mixed-mode approach** based on different designs, methods, and data – both qualitative and quantitative – seems to be most advantageous also for impact evaluation. Mixed methods enable mitigation of weaknesses of the respective methods by using complementary ones. **Triangulation** of various sources of information and methods of gathering the data offers different points of view on the examined changes, brings a better understanding of these effects, enables deepening, complementing, and verifying gathered data, thus increasing their objectivity and credibility. It is worth remembering that the essential rule of triangulation is "the systematic integration" of various methods and information at respective phases of the evaluation process, not only during conceptualization and data collection but also through analyzing and reporting (Bamberger 2012).

It should be underlined that impact evaluation can also be based on a **participatory approach** that engages various project stakeholders regardless of the methods (e.g., surveys,

interviews<sup>9</sup>) of gathering information on the examined effects. Stakeholders can be involved in every phase of the impact evaluation process – from developing its design through data gathering, analyzing, and interpreting to reporting and using evaluation results.

## Organizational issues in impact evaluation

One of the conditions of successful impact evaluation is **proper planning** of the whole process regarding sufficient resources, such as competent evaluators, the appropriate budget, enough time, and access to necessary data are crucial for the feasibility of this evaluation. When thinking about resources, it is worth ascertaining what information (secondary data) has already been collected, for example, within project documentation or similar interventions. Regarding **proper timing**, it is vital to deliver the data on time – not too early when the examined effects are not fully developed, and thus may be underestimated, or too late, because examined changes may diminish over time or other factors that can influence them after the project completion. In the latter case, the risk of overestimating the observed effects appears, and, moreover, the evaluation results may be delivered too late to support informed decisions concerning future initiatives. Another issue regarding timing is **the impact of interventions that varies over time**. Such changes make observed effects susceptible to the moment when the impact is measured (White 2009). In some projects focused on activating sensitive or marginalized groups, beneficiaries' situation at first may deteriorate before it improves. For instance, empowered youths (especially the impaired ones) may conflict with their relatives who subconsciously block their attempts to find a job and gain independence. Thus, it is essential to know such interdependencies and consider them when deciding on the right moment of measuring the project impact.

## Conclusions

Impact evaluation deals with a change in outcomes directly attributable to the examined intervention and should be understood in a context of a causal effect (as it proves the causal link between the given initiative and its results).

Regardless of the type of research design used in impact measurement, it is essential to incorporate the three key concepts that support such evaluations (Woodhouse et al., 2016). First of them is a **baseline** that enables to present change occurring over time. Suppose we do not know the situation that took place before an intervention, e.g. the level of competence before a training. In that case, it is difficult to show the improvements because the final measurement without a reference to the initial one may indicate no progress (or even deterioration in case of misleading teaching). Although it is possible to reconstruct baselines

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<sup>9</sup> Also not the classical one like story-telling, social mapping, brainstorming and various active methods.



after the evaluated initiative has started (e.g., using beneficiaries' recalls or secondary data), this approach is less robust.

Nevertheless, even if we can demonstrate the improvement by comparing the initial and final results, it does not prove that our intervention caused the achieved progress as other factors could also influence it (e.g. participation in another educational activity). So, the second concept necessary to support causal linkages is **counterfactual** that enables a reference to the situation in which the evaluated initiative did not occur.

Last but not least, is a **theory of change** that explains the **improvement mechanisms** (cause and effect chain) of evaluated intervention, identifies the change factors, and supports contextualization of observed impacts. The theory of change should be reflected in a project logic matrix that presents the causal pathways linking outputs with the process of change and impact.

## Recapitulation

Addressing **causal attribution** requires adopting a counterfactual approach that examines what would have occurred in the absence of an evaluated intervention compared to the observed changes. This approach is based on two designs – experimental, based on random assignment, and quasi-experimental, with a comparison group constructed through purposive sampling. When setting up the control/comparative group is impossible, **the non-experimental** can be used. This design examines whether the evidence is coherent with what would be expected if the examined intervention entailed the impacts and if other factors could provide an alternative explanation. This approach investigates the consistency of gained evidence with causal relationships, i.e. the theory of change of a given intervention by verifying if expected effects are achieved. It is also possible to check if **the timing of these changes proves the hypothesis** of how an intervention caused planned impact or compare various case studies to verify if the same factors interacted in each case to cause identical impact. Another possibility is **ruling out the alternative explanations** for observed change by identifying other possible causes of these effects and collecting data to check if these alternative explanations can be refused (Peersman 2014).

It is worth remembering that impact evaluation goes beyond assessing the size of the examined effects and identifying for whom and in what circumstances an evaluated intervention has been successful. The crucial issue concerns its **attribution and the size of the contribution** to this success.

Due to the greater resources required to conduct an impact evaluation, it is critical to determine if it is feasible and worth the **necessary inputs**. Carrying out a robust measurement claims adequate expertise (specialized skills), sufficient budget, time, and access to necessary data. **Proper planning** is one of the key conditions for high-quality impact evaluation; thus, it should be designed as early as possible in the project cycle, preferably at its drafting phase.

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## Webinars

### [InterAction Impact Evaluation Guidance Notes and Webinar Series:](#)

- Rogers P (2012). *Introduction to Impact Evaluation. Impact Evaluation Notes No. 1*. Washington DC: InterAction. – This guidance note outlines the basic principles and ideas of Impact Evaluation, including when, why, how and by whom it should be done.
- Perrin B (2012). *Linking Monitoring and Evaluation to Impact Evaluation. Impact Evaluation Notes No.2*. Washington DC: InterAction. – This guidance note outlines how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities can support meaningful and valid impact evaluation.
- Bamberger M (2012). *Introduction to Mixed Methods in Impact Evaluation. Guidance Note No. 3*. Washington DC: InterAction. – This guidance note provides an outline of a mixed methods impact evaluation with particular reference to the difference between this approach and qualitative and quantitative impact evaluation designs.
- Bonbright D (2012). *Use of Impact Evaluation Results. Guidance Note No. 4*. Washington DC: InterAction. – This guidance note highlights three themes that are crucial for effective utilization of evaluation results.

Throughout 2015, BetterEvaluation partnered with the [UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti](#) to develop eight impact evaluation webinars for UNICEF staff. The objective was to provide an interactive capacity-building experience, customized to focus on UNICEF's work and the unique circumstances of conducting impact evaluations of programs and policies in international development.

The webinars were based on the [Impact Evaluation Series](#) – a user-friendly package of 13 methodological briefs and four animated videos

- [Overview of Impact Evaluation](#) - Presented by Professor Patricia Rogers, RMIT University, Australia
- [Overview: Data Collection and Analysis Methods in Impact Evaluation](#) - Presented by Patricia Rogers, RMIT University, Australia
- [Theory of Change](#) - Presented by Patricia Rogers, RMIT University, Australia
- [Overview: Strategies for causal attribution](#) – Presented by Patricia Rogers, RMIT University, Australia
- [Participatory Approaches in Impact Evaluation](#) - Presented by Irene Guijt
- [Randomized Controlled Trials \(RCTs\)](#) - Presented by Howard White
- [Comparative Case Studies](#) - Presented by Delwyn Goodrick

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