

Evaluative thinking



While monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a growing practice in social development, it is still a largely siloed process, data from which is not always used to inform programmatic improvements for greater overall impact. **Dr Fatima Adam**, programme director of research and evaluations at Zenex Foundation, explains that evaluative thinking is about embedding an organisational culture of holistic and responsive approaches to work

What is evaluative thinking?

Evaluative thinking is a form of critical thinking that emphasises the adoption of a methodical approach to deciding on the appropriate course of action to minimise risk and maximise return, to solve developmental problems. Simply put, it's an attempt to make our thinking more explicit and to align programme design, strategy and evaluations, rather than creating silos.

Does evaluative thinking replace M&E?

One doesn't replace the other – they are complementary. Social development has evolved from simply implementing projects and programmes to capturing data and finding evidence of what works and what doesn't. Programming and M&E have typically been viewed as separate processes. While there has been an uptake of M&E practice, it remains separate from daily work and the utilisation of data has been limited. Evaluative thinking takes M&E beyond the metrics and embeds a culture of holistic thinking into all aspects of an organisation, to transform the way that work is conducted. The M&E spectrum ranges from formal evaluation, to adaptation, to reflective evaluation, and the goal is to move the dial to strong reflective reasoning and an adaptive organisational and evaluative environment.

Which tools can be used to support evaluative thinking?

Evaluative thinking is based on the principles and practices that underpin how problems are assessed and how solutions are provided. We must listen to claims, examine the supporting evidence and measure the validity of them. So, the 'tools'

are more strategic and philosophical, and aim to drive organisations to engage differently. They aren't about ticking boxes but about how an organisation functions, based on its system of beliefs.

When a problem is identified, its validity and backing evidence, as well as the types of assumptions that inform it, should be questioned. Evaluative thinking is always hinged on solutions that come from understanding where the assumptions around a problem stem from. It is important that we ask ourselves what assumptions underpin our development programmes and how these assumptions were informed. In this way we can assess the merits of the range of assumptions we make. We should also try to generate alternate assumptions to test the veracity of initial assumptions. In addition to assessing the evidence basis of different assumptions, it is also important to establish the value base of different assumptions. For example, if your organisation only funds randomised controlled trials to evaluate social development initiatives, there is an assumption about what comprises evidence, which speaks to your organisation's notion of what constitutes knowledge.

How can evaluative thinking be integrated into organisational culture?

In order to inculcate this kind of thinking into an organisation there must be a safe enough space to openly share, question and critique work. Time and opportunities to reflect and engage as a team must be intentionally set aside. Additionally, the views of internal and external stakeholders must be considered to avoid becoming

insular about the assumptions and evidence that the organisation holds, and to ensure that these are constantly being unpacked. Working in this manner is about weighing the validity of the different perspectives presented in evidence and making the practices clear in all activities that an organisation engages in. It can be a slow process.

What steps has Zenex Foundation taken to embed evaluative thinking and what are some of the outcomes?

Zenex Foundation has embraced and successfully integrated evaluations into its work. In this regard, most of Zenex's projects are evaluated and there is rigorous thought surrounding the evaluation commissioning, design and management process. However, it has come to recognise that this does not always result in maximum utilisation and uptake of report findings. Also that focusing only on evaluations without integrating it into all aspects of our work has limited value. As such, we are trying to shift from evaluations to evaluative thinking which is more encompassing. We subject our strategy, projects and programmes to significant critique, we try to ensure tight and logical alignment from the problem being addressed to the proposed solution, and we make explicit all our thinking that informs the design of strategy and programmes.

DR FATIMA ADAM

Programme director of research and evaluations, Zenex Foundation
info@zenexfoundation.org.za
www.zenexfoundation.org.za