Lessons learnt in evaluating literacy projects

Zenex Literacy Symposium

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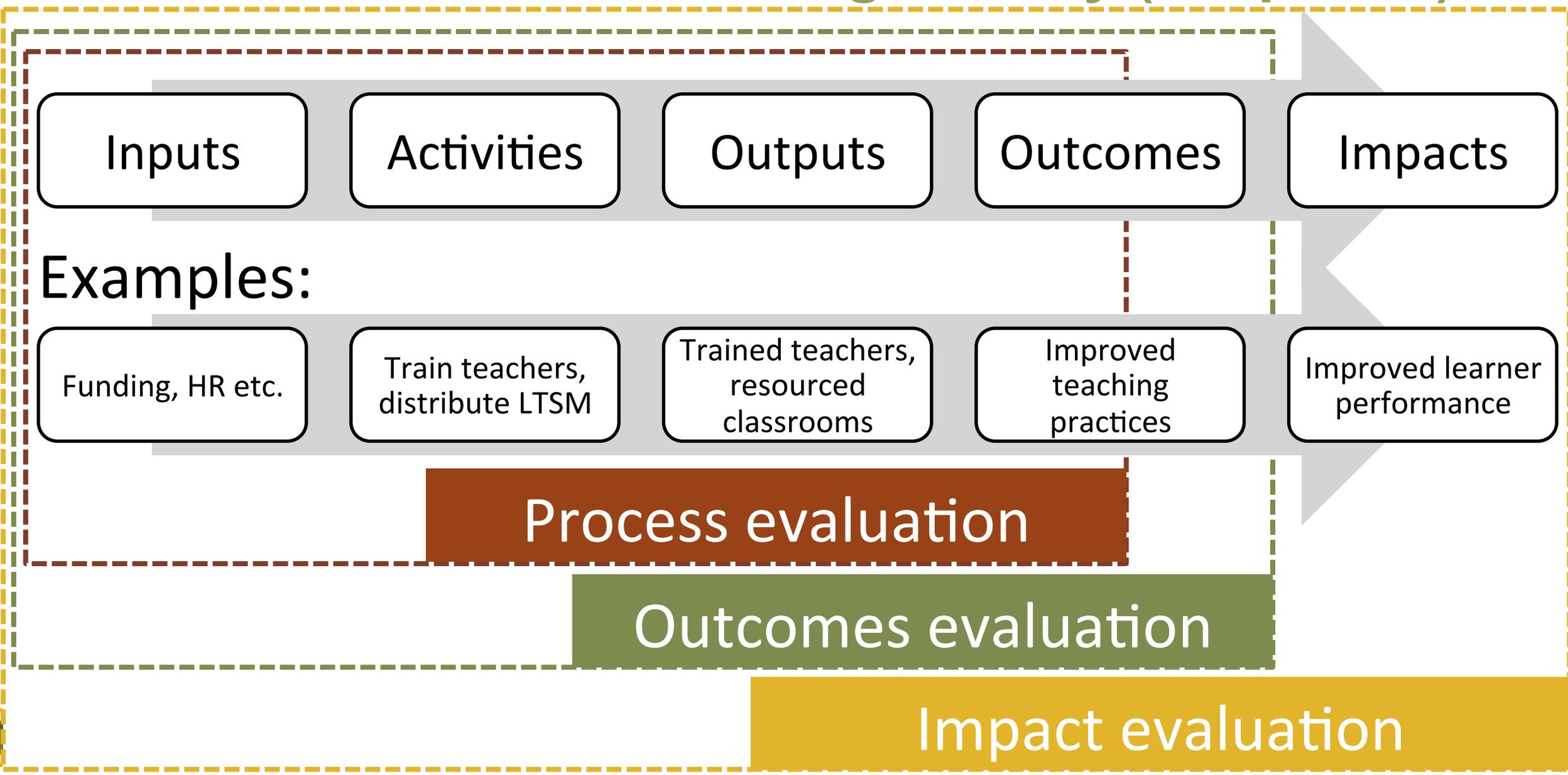
Introduction

- Asked to briefly highlight lessons learnt during recent literacy evaluations

- These lessons apply beyond literacy and education, but particularly important in these contexts

- Fundamental "lesson" is that M&E is not adding sufficient value to the system or fulfilling the important role that it could be

- Let's start by defining some basic evaluation concepts…

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Evaluations in terms of change theory (simplified)

Inputs → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes → Impacts

Examples:

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Funding, HR etc.	Train teachers, distribute LTSM	Trained teachers, resourced classrooms	Improved teaching practices	Improved learner performance

Process evaluation

Outcomes evaluation

Impact evaluation

More on impact evaluations

- An impact evaluation aims to estimate the causal impact of the programme

  - Often through randomised control trials (RCT)

  - Other options include natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs

- Most suitable when delivery model is clearly specified and delivered consistently

  - The implementer must buy in to consistent delivery over time and beneficiaries

  - An adaptive, learn-as-you-go approach to programme design often appropriate in early programme phases, but not suitable for impact evaluations

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Impact evaluations of literacy programmes

- Impact evaluations of literacy programmes tend to be **expensive**

  – Can't simply compare learner performance before and after programme

  – Typically need a control group + a baseline and endline

  – The lack of standardised national testing

- But expense should be weighed against **cost of scaling up or indefinitely funding unproven programmes**:

  – Relatively few programmes result in meaningful learner improvements

  – Even when they do, scale ups are sometimes untested, watered down versions of programme

  – Education programmes use layered, complex theories of change so achieving intermediate outcomes does not guarantee learner performance improvements

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More on impact evaluations

- An impact evaluation aims to **estimate the causal impact of the programme**

    – Randomised control trials, natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs

- Most suitable when **delivery model is clearly specified and delivered consistently**

    – The implementer must buy in to consistent delivery over time and beneficiaries

- Impact evaluations of literacy programmes tend to be **expensive**

    – Often needs (1) primary in-school data collection, (2) control group (3) a baseline and endline and (4) large samples

- But expense should be weighed against **cost of scaling up or indefinitely funding unproven programmes**:

    – Relatively few programmes result in meaningful learner improvements

    – Education programmes use layered, complex theories of change with many assumptions

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Lesson 1: Evaluation type should match programme stage

Evaluation design should fit the programme stage

- E.g. Process evaluations can provide valuable implementation insights, be done earlier and are (generally) cheaper

But impact evaluations are necessary (eventually)

- Given the number of programmes implemented, we're not learning enough
- If large programmes are to be scalable and replicable they should reach a level of maturity where an impact evaluation can be run

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Lesson 2: Make M&E design part of programme design

Evaluations often designed after programme implementation

- Hence cannot evaluate key programme components
- Lack of innovation: e.g. phased roll-outs or testing tweaks to programmes
- Not enough formative evaluations
- Too often evaluations surfaces issues monitoring should have picked up

M&E concepts and thinking often adds value to programme design

- Evaluators sometimes put too much emphasis on what is easily measurable
- But implementers often benefit from the clarity, rigour and focus introduced

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Measurement of educational quality inherently difficult

- Many programmes aim to improve school or teaching quality

  – But quality is not easily measurable

- Learner performance improvement is a good indicator of quality

  – But measurement it isn't always possible

  – It also doesn't necessarily tell us about mechanisms of change

- Other quality indicators have shortcomings, for example:

  – Perception data is important, but is subjective and, often, biased

  – Lesson observations or teacher competency testing often not feasible

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Lesson 3: Use a range of measures / data sources

Must employ a range of them to form a rounded picture of quality

- Most quality indicators are at best proxies

These tools could include:

- Case studies
- Learner workbooks and other forms of structured documentary analysis
- Structured observation tools (e.g. training observation)

Some other useful techniques:

- Consistently structured interview questions across respondents
- Validating interview responses with supporting document requests

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Summary of lessons

We can increase the value and contribution of evaluations if we:

1. Ensure evaluation type matches programme stage

2. Make M&E design part of programme design

3. Use a range of tools / data sources to provide textured findings

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