EVALUATION SUMMARY
International Alert’s advocacy efforts in the IDA 17 replenishment process – part 2

EVALUATION THEME

1. Conflict-sensitive development and humanitarian programming
2. Monitoring and evaluation

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, International Alert (‘Alert’) sought to influence the outcome of the seventeenth replenishment round of the International Development Association (IDA), or IDA 17. In line with its overall advocacy efforts with the World Bank (WB), Alert’s message to IDA 17 stakeholders has focused on changing how that institution works in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCs), with the overall aim being to strengthen the capacity of the WB to prevent violent conflict and to promote sustainable peace.

The evaluation had two main objectives: first, to understand the extent and nature of Alert’s contribution to the IDA 17 process so that the organisation could better demonstrate and learn from its approaches to peacebuilding policy advocacy and the results it achieved; and second, to use this understanding as a foundational case study to improve Alert’s overall approach to evaluating the effectiveness of its advocacy programmes, sharing this emerging expertise with internal and external stakeholders.

A hybrid methodology composed of elements from two different evaluation frameworks was used: Contribution Analysis (CA) and Process Tracing (PT).

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Part of WB, the IDA provides direct support through grants and loans to the world’s poorest countries. With the overall aim of strengthening the capacity of the WB to prevent violent conflict and to promote sustainable peace. Alert’s intervention has included a number of different activities, such as publications, formal and informal meetings and providing technical advice.

The methodology agreed for the evaluation is a hybrid composed of elements from two different evaluation frameworks: Contribution Analysis (CA) and Process Tracing (PT). CA is “an approach for assessing causal questions and inferring causality in real-life programme evaluations”.¹ Having identified a specific outcome, CA requires the development of a narrative, or story, which is then assessed against all available evidence in an attempt to reduce uncertainty about the contribution of a given intervention to that outcome. Conversely, PT is a case-based approach to causal inference, which focuses on the use of clues within a case (causal-process observations) to adjudicate between

alternative possible explanations. It relies on the application of four tests, which aim to assess the validity (or likelihood) of a given attribution claim.

The use of these individual frameworks is a relatively new endeavour for NGOs in the development sector. The hybrid model – the combined CA-PT approach – is newer still and this evaluation may be one of the first attempts to use it in practice. The process specifically involved five steps, some of which were done internally by Alert’s staff and others externally by the evaluation consultant.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The combined CA-PT approach is relatively new and it was used by Alert for the first time during this assignment. The result was largely positive as it shed light on a number of different dynamics related to Alert’s contribution to changes in the WB.

What worked well

• The CA component was an interesting and useful way to assemble a verifiable narrative. Advocacy efforts can take place at different levels, targeting different audiences, and they can fall under the responsibility of different people within the same agency – this is certainly the case with Alert. The end result is often a wide collection of actions that are rarely reflected on as a whole. Assembling the contribution story was really useful exactly for this reason, as it allowed a revision of Alert’s work that included nearly everything that it did during a specific initiative and timeframe.

• The development and testing of different contribution claims (or hypotheses) was useful to reflect on existing links and to identify new ones. One of the unique aspects of this methodology is how it focuses not on evaluation criteria (as the OECD-DAC framework does) but on hypotheses. As an approach, there are shortcomings (see below), but if the claims are well defined, then the whole exercise, and specifically the PT protocol, can serve to truly test whether an intervention-to-outcome sequence is valid.

• The protocol can produce useful findings just on the basis of documentary evidence (as long as this is sufficiently solid). Most of the findings from this evaluation were based on the analysis of official documentation on the IDA 17 negotiation, which came from Alert, the WB and other NGOs. The IDA 17 process was perhaps more ideal for this kind of protocol than others, because so many documents were readily available. However, if a similar assumption can be made about other advocacy initiatives (or if Alert’s standards for producing internal documentation on advocacy processes are increased), then this could still be true.

• The evaluator had previous knowledge of Alert’s IIP and its advocacy efforts regarding the WB, including the IDA 17 negotiations. This helped the implementation of the assignment in general and the development of the contribution story in particular.

What did not work too well

• The protocol is a bit ‘hit or miss’ insofar as it focuses on contribution claims that are not sufficiently defined. This applies to the hypothesis identification and PT component of the protocol. Alert’s main contribution claim arguably suffered from this lack of clarity, especially in relation to the term “to help inform”, which is ambiguous. In contrast, the second contribution claim used the much clearer terms “collectively planning and taking active steps”. It is also true that the evaluation did not test any additional claim and, had it tried to do so, it might have become a considerably more burdensome effort.

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The insights and lessons learnt from using the methodology are very specific to the chosen contribution claims. This again is more related to the PT component of the evaluation protocol, which was limited to the four hypotheses chosen for testing. This obviously needs to be the case for the whole protocol to be used effectively. This choice also means that the resulting findings and recommendations are not easy to generalise, which is certainly true in the case of some of those included in this evaluation.

LESSONS

- Contribution claims need to be well defined and closely vetted. This is one of the main lessons learnt from this methodology. The specificity and clarity of chosen hypotheses are paramount for the approach to be used efficiently. An outcome of this lesson is that Alert will have to invest an adequate amount of time and resources to develop well-defined theories of change and contribution claims whenever it wants to use this methodology again.

- The combined CA-PT approach is most useful if applied to interventions that have been defined and implemented at the programmatic level (for example, spanning multiple years and based on well-defined intermediate and long-term outcomes). In the case of this evaluation, the fact that the timeframe of intervention was limited to 12 months and did not sufficiently comprehend Alert’s overall advocacy strategy vis-à-vis the World Bank, limited the thoroughness and utility of the findings. Alert should consider adopting this protocol exclusively for programmatic evaluations (as Oxfam does).

- Good documentation is necessary. As explained before, solid documentation enables easier and more efficient use of this protocol. Equally important is the fact that key informant interviews with external stakeholders have limited value, in particular for developing the contribution story, as they generally lack information about the rationale of key decisions relating to Alert’s intervention. The alternative could be to develop an ex post verbal history of a given intervention through longer interviews, although this effort would arguably already count as part of the documentation.

- The protocol should be used in a timely manner following the end of the target intervention.

- The evaluator needs to have the right skills and experience. As mentioned before, the fact that the evaluator did not have the right experience created some difficulties and delays in completing the assignment. In the future, Alert should select evaluators who are already competent in using this combined approach or the CA and PT methodologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Alert should consider splitting up the approach and using the CA component and the PT component separately. The CA methodology is arguably easier to master and the development of the contribution story could then be done internally. To an extent, this already happened with the theory of change and hypothesis identification phases of the evaluation, which Alert conducted on its own. The CA step could also be included as part of these efforts and, if done internally, could serve as an opportunity to debrief and already reflect on a given advocacy initiative. Alert could then recruit an external evaluator to review the contribution story and conduct the PT protocol of the evaluation.