

HOW-TO-BRIEF

The “How To” series of briefs is for the use of Pilar 1 project managers (and future managers of R&I projects), to guide them with tips on possible ways forward for upgrading their five core capacities to manage for impacts.

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION? (C1. CAPACITY FOR REAL-TIME MEL)

About this brief:

“Developmental evaluation supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments.” (Patton, 2011, p. 1) Developmental Evaluation (DE) works best under the umbrella of Utilization-focused evaluation. UFE is a decision-making framework that allows projects to take ownership over evaluation. UFE is a tool for designing or updating a monitoring, evaluation and learning plan (MEL). A separate UFE brief is available and provides guidance on the main steps of UFE.

Key words: developmental evaluation, monitoring, learning, decision-making, collaborative evaluation

HOW CAN DE BE OF INTEREST TO DESIRA PROJECTS?

DeSIRA projects face a number of interrelated challenges that make it difficult to predict outcomes, let alone results. We are aware of multiple factors including climate change; COVID; environmental degradation; institutional barriers; marginal economic, social and educational conditions; politics; dishonesty; inter-organizational coordination; and, logistical factors including security concerns. Often these factors ‘combine forces’ and push a project off course and cause delays - much like a sailboat in a storm that loses sight of a lighthouse. How then can projects reconcile unpredictability with monitoring, evaluation and learning? Many conventional evaluation tools work best in stable conditions, where outputs and outcomes fit standard categories and remain largely predictable. However, under uncertain and dynamic contexts, we need complementary tools to navigate in turbulent waters – like a GPS when the lighthouse is no longer visible.

THE RELEVANCE

Within UFE, DE is appropriate as a means “...to develop measures and monitoring mechanisms as goals emerge and evolve. It seeks to capture system dynamics, interdependencies and emerging interconnections.” (Gamble, 2008: 62).

- DE is conducted from a utilization-focused evaluation approach
- It facilitates on-going innovation by helping those engaged in a pilot project examine the effects of their actions
- DE can help shape and formulate hypotheses about what will result from actions
- DE can be used to test hypotheses about how to foment change in the face of uncertainty

1. BASICS OF DE (WHAT)

- Primary focus is adaptive learning
- Emphasis on real-time feedback
- The evaluator is embedded in the initiative; actively shapes it
- Attention to capturing system dynamics, emergent strategies
- Flexible, evolutionary
- Appropriate to document a model-in-the making

2. PRINCIPLES (HOW)

- Developmental purpose: inform and adjust the innovation under development
- Evaluation rigour: question assumptions, use appropriate methods
- Utilization-focus: intended evaluation uses by intended users; ensure actual use
- Innovation: describe the change process and emerging outcomes, adjust
- Complexity: provide a complexity lens to evaluation, acknowledge unpredictability
- Systems thinking: appreciate boundaries, emergent properties, interconnections
- Co-creation: develop the innovation and implement the evaluation jointly: DE becomes part of the change process
- Timely feedback: inform adaptation process as findings and insights emerge – rather than on pre-determined times or end of project targets

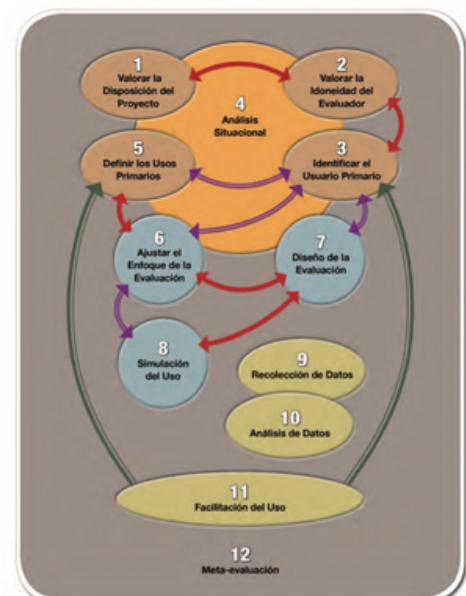
3. BROAD NICHES OF DE (FOR WHAT)

- Ongoing development
- Adapting principles to a new context
- Responding to a sudden major change
- Guiding an innovation process
- Scaling an innovation

4. STEPS OF UFE (HOW)

While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).

The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing evaluators' readiness; identifying primary intended users' identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others.



Focusing the evaluation takes place through the definition of key evaluation questions; which in turn guide the design of the evaluation. ‘Simulation’ is about test-driving plausible data sets to double-check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when some questions may not be as strategic as they first appeared.

A unique aspect of UFE is Step 11: facilitation of use, which ensures the findings and evaluation processes are fed back to the users. The closing step 12 captures the experience through a meta-evaluation 1.

5. UNIQUENESS OF DE (HOW)

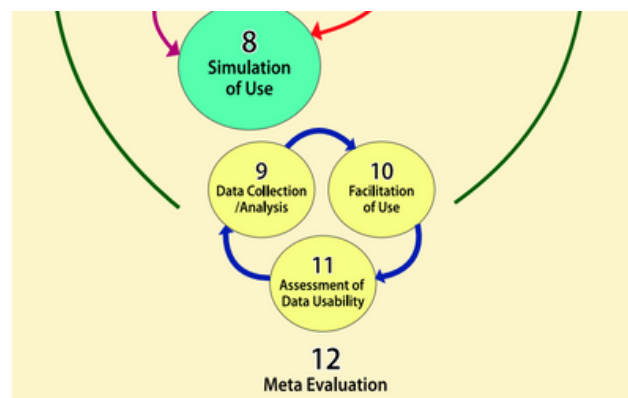
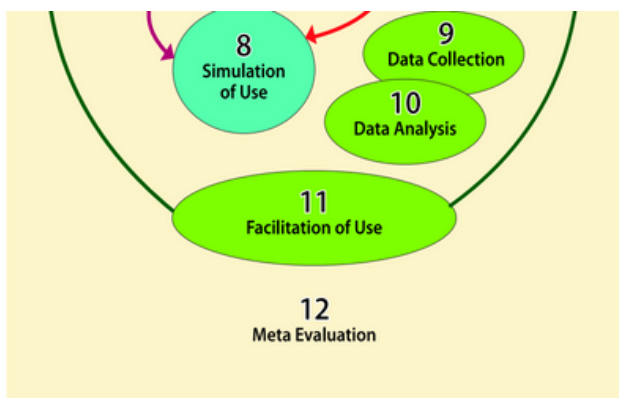
Under the UFE umbrella, DE is a possible ‘evaluation use’. A UFE evaluation design may include multiple evaluation uses, some of which may be DE. In DE, data collection and use both take place in short cycles in order to provide evidence for timely decision-making.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIPS

“Facilitation in DE is not about trying to lead people to a pre-determined out- come, rather it’s about supporting people to think and create their own pathways towards achieving their shared purpose”. (Gamble et al, 2021:30)

In UFE and in UFDE, the evaluator helps partners to think critically, surface assumptions, pause and reflect on how a process is unfolding. The most crucial step is the formulation of key evaluation questions that address the nature of the innovation or model in the making. Examples include:

- Identifying key forks in the road and reflecting on the criteria used to make decisions
- Generating feedback from pilots for ongoing adaptation
- Documenting how the project or initiative responds to unexpected circumstances
- Bringing evaluative thinking into rapid response initiatives



Contrast between the facilitation of use as a single step in UFE (left) and as an ongoing cycle in DE (right) – adapted from Norman & Navas (2014).

1. In a 2012 book on UFE by Michael Quinn Patton, five additional steps were added; see the Recommended readings and websites.

- Identifying key issues that need to be registered and analyzed before going forward with experimental adaptation
- Looking for indicators of system change and transformation
- Tracking and learning across different scales of work, including deriving lessons from experiments in contrasting environments

There are various evaluation methodologies that are relevant in DE including Most Significant Change, and Outcome Harvesting. Both allow for the collection of perspectives based on stakeholders' lived experiences of change and provide systematic ways of analyzing the findings.

RESOURCES

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