

IFAD Conference “How can ICTs promote innovations in development evaluation to benefit a more inclusive and sustainable rural transformation?”

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Speaking points for the opening plenary

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Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is an honor for me to speak to you in this conference.

- I would like to share with you some of my own experiences related to the use of ICT in evaluation process. There are millions of ways to use ICTs in evaluation, but I will only pick up something that I have experienced by myself. Although I have a long history with ICTs and also some experience with evaluations, I cannot say that all my experiences have been successful. With a risk of revealing my failures, I would like to x-ray the theme of the conference from three different points of view.

First a case of using ICT in evaluation of an ICT4D for rural development programme

- Since WSIS 2003 and 2005 there have been huge number of ICT4D programmes, many of them promoting rural development.
- I would like to share with you a short story on a Finnish funded rural ICT4D programme in South East Asia some 6 years ago. The project was one of the Asian Development Banks initiatives that

were based on idea of building telecenters in rural villages as access points to information for the farmers.

- I participated the evaluation mission as an observer on behalf of the government of Finland. Based on documentation, I had created a picture of the programme which had an impact in beneficiaries through equitable access to computers and ICT based services like market information, farming support, as well as providers of seeds and fertilizers. In many cases, this was also the practice.
- I did not have high expectations on how ICT could be used in evaluation at that time, but still thought, that all monitoring data on activities would have been recorded with computers of telecenters. I just assumed it, as it was so logical for me that the same computers that were provided in rural telecenters were also used in programme management and monitoring of the use of computers by farmers.
- When visiting the centers, I realized that all the records related to the use of the computers were done manually. The log books were hand written by managers and the forms were filed by hands by users of telecenters.
- I thought that it was a waste of our time to travel all the locations just for collecting the paper documents. Also it was a lost opportunity for telecenter managers to learn how to use a computer in management of the center. And of course, it was a lost opportunity for the evaluator to collect ICT based monitoring data for the evaluation.
- Someone may disagree and say that actually ICT WAS used in evaluation as the evaluator used his laptop for re-typing the logbooks once again. In fact, every evaluator and researcher is using ICT when writing their reports and decorating the report with images and figures, and

infographics, but I think that is not what we mean, when discussing the possibilities of innovative use of ICT in evaluation. Do you agree with me?

- ICT in evaluations should be defined as an **innovative way to do and disseminate evaluations**, not just using ICT or computer as a typewriter or as a calculator when writing the report.
- And as we can see from this case, the innovative and more efficient ways to **use ICT in evaluation should be factored in already in the planning phase of the intervention** – not in the planning phase of the evaluation. Then it is usually too late.
- Just imagine the amount of data that can be collected with computers and especially with mobile devices during the implementation phase of programme, and how that information could be utilized in evaluation later on. Most of the evaluators already know this, but evaluators do not usually participate in planning of the programmes. **How could we deliver this message to those colleagues who are planning the programmes and interventions?**

Secondly, a case of using ICT in evaluation when there is a lack of monitoring data

- I am just planning **a new evaluation on gender equality** as a cross cutting objective in Finland's development co-operation. By sure I know that there is no ICT databases available in this cross cutting objective. And even more, the evaluability assessment revealed that there is hardly any monitoring data available from projects on this topic, although it has been one of the priorities of Finland's development cooperation for a long time.
- After reading articles about the use of **Big Data in market research**, I asked myself, should I use Big Data instead, just because of my background in ICT4D and innovation? Just as an experiment. I know that there are some experimental studies already done on Big Data in evaluation of gender issues by the UN Global Pulse, for example. So, **it sounds very promising.**

- OK, I started to study the topic and get familiar with some known experiments as well as playing with Google Trends and Google Cloud Platform, just to get an idea.
- **My first experiences were not very promising.** When searching some gender related trends in Africa with Google Trends database, I found that Google's data is still quite limited in Africa and in many cases there is no country specific data available, perhaps because the country specific Internet exchange points (IXPs) are still under development in many African countries. Or there is simply too little user generated data available at country level to make any analyses.
- I also thought that the machine learning and analyzing a huge amount of data would require much more advanced ICT skills than I or any of my colleagues at the ministry have. I should hire more experts that have budget implications. Also those evaluators, who understand development evaluation AND the Big Data are not very many. How to find them?
- I was also wandering, if I could use **satellite images for evaluating gender equality**? Just like evaluating poverty by using the pixels indicating light in satellite images of villages. Perhaps, if I first find a correlation between some of the pixels and some gender related social behavior in villages. IF! So, first I should have a research team for finding those correlations, and then, perhaps I could evaluate If I have any money and time left ... Hmm, I found it too risky and time consuming as the evaluation was very important to the senior management of the ministry.
- My conclusion was that if I want to use Big Data in some of my development evaluations, then I should evaluate something else, maybe topics which have Big Data available, not necessary topics that my ministry is interested. Evaluation is a question driven process rather than a data driven process. At least at the moment I think like this. However, I can still see the **potential of Big Data in some of the evaluations in long run.**

Thirdly, a case of using ICT for making evaluation more effective

- **Any evaluation is useless, if not used for learning and for developing the practice.** An evaluation must have an **impact!** This is also emphasized in the theme of this conference: how to utilize ICT in evaluation innovatively to support the development of a more inclusive and sustainable rural transformation? It is indeed a good theme for a conference!
- **From this point of view, I think the dissemination of evaluation with a support of ICT is one of the greatest opportunities to increase the use and effectiveness of evaluations.** And it is not even difficult – at least most of the time.
- This is really something that everybody can do – it is almost like a low hanging fruit ready to eat.
- Just mentioning some of the possibilities that I and my team has been testing in evaluation dissemination. My thinking may be influenced by my long background in e-learning. And in fact, **evaluation is about learning.**
- One effective way to support learning is using **video conference** for validation workshops. In many cases the stakeholders are in different locations, especially in our large scale strategic evaluations, in which field trips are done in different countries. Even though, validation of data is important not only for the reliability of the evaluation, but also for learning of the stakeholders and beneficiaries. Many of the findings and lessons learned of evaluations are applied immediately by the stakeholders themselves, if we provide this opportunity for them.
- You can utilize also ordinary **web based learning management systems** for disseminating evaluation results for the larger audience. It may be difficult to include evaluation results to the ordinary in-service training of the staff, but if there are ready made modules to be included as a resource to any training course, on-line or off-line, it can be made very easy.

- One very powerful tool for dissemination is the **Webinar**. It is very easy to cast the presentation to a larger audience beyond the room, when you are presenting the results of the evaluation. The presentation can be recorded, and shortened and then linked to Web based learning as a resource. You can easily include not only the stakeholders, but also the beneficiaries in to your dissemination seminars. Also Twitter, blogs, news feeds and other mobile social media would make it possible especially for rural stakeholders and beneficiaries to learn from the evaluation results.
- Of course, nobody is printing the evaluation reports any more, but publishing them online. Or are you? Online publishing sounds like an effective way to disseminate the reports – if they can be found easily when needed. However, if we could publish evaluation results in **searchable databases with contextual meta-data**, just like the researchers do in research databases, we could make evaluation dissemination even more effective and accessible. And imagine what a magnificent global good we could have in our hands if evaluation databases were developed with IATI standards. You could then link all the evaluation results in the world to global development funding. So, you could not only follow development funding, but also the results. **That I call Open Data and Open Development!**
- **Finally, ladies and gentlemen**, dear colleagues, with these few ideas I would like to wish you a very interesting conference. Enjoy the conference, and remember what Albert Einstein said about new and innovative ideas: **If at first the idea is not absurd, then there will be no hope for it!**

Thank you for your attention!