

## CHALLENGES IN EVALUATION PRACTICE DURING COVID-19 AND ITS ADAPTIVE METHODS. THE CASE OF MEDIA LITERACY PROJECT IN PERFORMING IMPACT EVALUATION

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**Abstract:** Conducting evaluations during unpredictable times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, requires additional effort to respond effectively and efficiently to the situation. Apart from standardized approaches and processes, it is important to adjust them properly without compromising the quality of the evaluation. Travel and field mission restrictions during COVID-19 obliged practitioners to transform their ways of working and completely rely on innovative ICT-based solutions. This paper aims to present the modalities of data collection and analysis methods used in performing remote impact evaluation and the importance of relying on ICT-based solutions. The questions this paper aims to address are: Can evaluators rely on ICT, and to what extent? Will it constitute credible evidence of stakeholder representation? Can the impact of context be measured, and how? The recommendations are based on theoretical analysis of the literature and practical examples of the impact evaluation of the Media Literacy Project from remote data collection, evidence synthesis through case studies and its impact, lessons learned presenting the reflection of the evaluator, use of meta-analysis, and the use of evidence-based assessment combined with key informant interviews and targeted literature to produce analysis and make policy recommendations. The paper concludes with recommendations on the model's potential for replication and further development to prevent limitations arising from such an approach.

**Keywords:** Impact evaluations, Covid-19, ICT-based solutions, methods, innovations, media literacy

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Performing impact evaluations generally relies on standardized approaches and processes. However, the appearance of the coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19) had unprecedented impacts on every sector, obliging the evaluator community to change and introduce innovative approaches and solutions to cope with new situations. Outbreaks, physical distancing measures, national lockdowns, and travel restrictions compelled practitioners to transform their way of working and rely completely on innovative ICT-based solutions.

Remote evaluations can be cost-effective, fast, and efficient, combining empirical and analytic usability evaluation techniques usually performed separately. In remote evaluations, the evaluator and respondents are at different locations, communicating through a software tool, with the evaluator assessing and analyzing the respondents' interactions through the software system. This approach brings benefits such as the inclusion of respondents from diverse geographic areas, including categories of users that in "normal times" are hard to reach or difficult to schedule interviews with reduced travel costs and time consumption, and increased sample sizes, thus providing more convincing usability results.

However, there are several limitations to performing remote evaluations. This approach involves limited communication channels, resulting in difficulties in building mutual understanding and trust, an inability to capture respondents' facial expressions and other nonverbal cues, and potential limitations of the software system. Key ethical challenges in remote evaluations include the data collection process, the identification and recruitment of study participants, and the inability to create personal connections, especially in qualitative research or quantitative research on sensitive topics.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the adoption of remote usability evaluation methods, which offer both benefits and challenges. Christos Fidas et al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive survey on remote usability evaluation methods and tools, highlighting the importance of innovative ICT-based solutions. These methods are cost-effective, facilitate the inclusion of diverse respondents, and allow for increased sample sizes, which enhance the reliability of the results. However, limitations such as restricted communication channels and potential software system constraints pose significant challenges (Fidas et al., 2013). Moreover, the ethical implications of remote data collection during the pandemic are also a critical consideration. Hensen et al. (2021) explored these implications in

public health research, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities presented by remote methods. Key issues include the data collection process, participant recruitment, and the inability to establish personal connections, particularly in qualitative and quantitative research on sensitive topics. The study underscores the need for ethical considerations in remote data collection to ensure the integrity and validity of the research (Hensen et al., 2021). Additionally, Michael Patton (2020) discussed the necessity for evaluators to adapt their plans and designs in response to the global health emergency. He argues that evaluators must become developmental evaluators, capable of adapting to complex dynamic systems and gathering real-time data to provide timely feedback. This aligns with the theory of change, which helps evaluators focus on key outcomes and develop effective evaluation practices. Patton's insights highlight the importance of flexibility and creativity in evaluation during crisis times (Patton, 2020). Neil-Sztramko et al. (2021) detailed methods to support evidence-informed decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the creation and evolution of a rapid review service. This service facilitates the generation of efficiency measures and supports the adaptation of evaluation practices to cope with the rapidly changing environment. Their study illustrates the importance of rapid and adaptable methodologies to inform decision-making in real-time (Neil-Sztramko et al., 2021). Guidance from the OECD/DAC and IEO/UNDP (2020) on good practices during COVID-19 emphasizes the need for flexibility in evaluation designs, data collection, reporting timelines, and criteria. This guidance supports the notion that evaluators must be pragmatic and creative, adapting their approaches to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Such flexibility is crucial for maintaining the credibility and validity of evaluations in uncertain times (OECD/DAC & IEO/UNDP, 2020). Lastly, the UNODC Independent Evaluation Section (2020) provided specific guidance on planning and undertaking evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. This guidance emphasizes the importance of adapting methodologies and tools to ensure that evaluations remain credible and valid. The document serves as a practical resource for evaluators, offering strategies to navigate the unique challenges posed by crisis situations (UNODC, 2020). This literature review illustrates the multifaceted challenges and adaptive methods in evaluation practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. It underscores the necessity for innovative ICT-based solutions, ethical considerations, flexibility in methodologies, and the ability to provide timely, evidence-based decision-making support. These insights are crucial for understanding how to effectively conduct remote impact evaluations in the current and future crisis contexts.

### **3. CHALLENGES DERIVING THE THEORY OF CHANGE**

In unpredictable and difficult times, it is essential to develop the program theory to improve planning before an intervention begins. Moreover, it helps identify gaps that would undermine successful implementation or the achievement of intended outcomes, can serve as a link to communicate with stakeholders and deliver important messages and decisions, and can guide the design of monitoring and evaluation to support effective implementation and learning for future efforts Patricia (2021).

A theory of change helps evaluators focus on the key outcomes they want to achieve. Its framework also helps develop effective evaluation practices that can inform and direct activity improvement. Gaining a better understanding of what practices are working and what are not is crucial for short-term impact, allowing evaluators to determine how effective mitigation activities are and implement required changes to improve activities. Conducting evaluations can also capture the potential longer-term value of mitigation activities, with findings applied to longer-term, evidence-based practice improvements that generate efficiency measures.

The theory of change represents a structured way of thinking about activities and evaluation by breaking them down into a chain of thinking and focusing on every detail of the process. As Michael Patton notes, the global health emergency implied changes in the evaluation discipline. This starts with the adaptation of evaluation plans and designs, suggesting that evaluators must become developmental evaluators, capable of adapting to complex dynamic systems, preparing for the unknown, for uncertainties, and for the foreseeable future. Another important aspect is the ability to gather real-time data to provide timely feedback on perceptions of the crisis and its implications. Evaluators need to be pragmatic and creative and be able to decide the quantity of data needed to support decision-making. In crisis times, program goals may change, as well as measures of effectiveness, outcomes, target populations, and so on. Consequently, evaluation designs, data collection, reporting timelines, and criteria are subject to change. Evaluators should expect and facilitate change as stated by Patton (2020).

### **4. MEDIA LITERACY PROJECT- MLP**

The project aimed to strengthen civil society organizations' capacities by providing training to staff members and activists with contemporary media literacy and digital security skills to counteract distrust and radicalization stemming from the massive volume of information consumed via the internet and other information communication technologies spreading globally.

The MLP was implemented in 16 countries within the CEE Region, training over 2,600 civil society representatives, journalists, students, and volunteers on subjects related to countering disinformation, digital safety and security, media literacy online, and building positive narratives. The project was initially planned to deliver training locally in each respective country and develop an online training hub over time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered these plans, resulting in the delivery of online training, necessitating changes in project methodology to implement the project efficiently and effectively. Substantive data for the evaluation of the project as a whole were gathered during the trainings to serve for impact evaluation.

## 5. METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

The COVID-19 crisis required prompt decision-making due to rapidly evolving policy and practice needs, resulting in the introduction of innovative methodological approaches for performing impact evaluation. In this case study, the traditional systematic approach was modified through streamlining a variety of methods to produce evidence in a resource-efficient manner. Since the training was implemented online, remote data collection was one of the best options. It included online surveys and in-depth and semi-structured interviews via online platforms (Skype, Zoom, and Webex), resulting in the collection of high-quality data based on the personal experiences of all stakeholders, but with a reduced sample size of online surveys. Evidence synthesis through case studies was performed with selected target groups to gain in-depth understanding and thorough immersed data within a single case. Weekly meetings with country evaluators allowed for ongoing reflections on the progress of the evaluations and the exchange of views and opinions among evaluators. Meta-analysis was also included, focusing on reviewing the media literacy topic in every country to get a quantitative estimate of the intervention's effect in each country separately and then combined. Evidence-based assessment included a combination of data from surveys, interviews, project documents, and targeted literature to produce country analysis and make policy recommendations for future actions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Remote evaluation, if implemented properly with creative solutions, can be a valuable method for future development even in non-crisis times. The adaptability and efficiency of remote evaluations make them a promising approach beyond the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This method allows for cost-effective, timely, and inclusive data collection, which can significantly enhance the robustness and applicability of evaluations.

However, there are challenges that need to be addressed to optimize remote evaluation methods. Harmonizing and combining different remote usability techniques can be complex, and their integration should be streamlined to minimize potential issues. Effective coordination and standardization of these techniques are crucial for achieving reliable and consistent results.

The development of a comprehensive tool with integrated functionalities, such as annotation tools, a common repository, and communication features, could significantly enhance the overall remote evaluation process. Such a tool would facilitate better data management, improve collaboration among evaluators, and streamline the analysis process, ultimately leading to more efficient and effective evaluations.

Additionally, ICT literacy among evaluators is becoming increasingly important in performing evaluations in unpredictable times. Evaluators must be proficient in using various ICT tools and platforms to conduct remote evaluations effectively. Building the digital skills of evaluators will be essential for adapting to the evolving landscape of evaluation practices, ensuring that they can respond to future challenges with agility and competence.

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