

learning from a clash in values

between an international donor and a local evaluator

A CASE STUDY

Introduction

Donor agencies often have specific, well-grounded research design and methodological expectations based on their European or American experiences. They place high value on specific designs, yet in the developing context of South Africa these approaches may not be feasible. In local townships and rural areas, issues such as low English proficiency, low literacy levels, poor facilities, safety considerations and lack of infrastructure would render many traditional, scientific approaches deficient. This case study illustrates the importance of unpacking the differing values of all parties involved in an evaluation, understanding how this might affect the study and then for all stakeholders involved in the research design to reach some kind of compromise that will result in high quality evaluation research that takes the values of all parties into consideration.

Impact Consulting's approach

Impact Consulting follows the theory-driven evaluation (first introduced by Chen and Rossi, 1981) approach which places causal explanations or theories at the centre of the evaluation design in order to open the 'black box' "...to test the many presumed causal links in...theoretical models" (Rosenbaum cited in Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 11). Within this broad approach to evaluation is Realist evaluation, which provides a theoretical framework that has context, mechanism and outcome (CMO) as the central components to this framework (Pederson, Rieper and Sorensen, 2005: 1).

In establishing these components, a framework is developed which shows the mechanisms linking the inputs and outcomes as they exist in certain contexts (Pederson, Rieper and Sorensen, 2005: 1). According to the Realist evaluation tradition, it is the responsibility of the evaluator to understand how a programme generates social change. In order to achieve this, Impact Consulting uses the Logic Model as a tool. In this way, our modus operandi is congruent with Pawson and Tilley's contention that "...matters of research design and data construction need to be rooted in a very clear-headed understanding of social change and social explanation" (1997: 16). Impact Consulting also places emphasis on following a process of

identifying all the stakeholders involved in a programme so that a complete picture may emerge from stakeholders as to what they believe is taking place in the programme and how this will lead to social change.

The evaluation

The evaluators, Impact Consulting, were approached by an NGO to assist with an evaluation of a pilot programme being run in two schools in a local township. This programme had been conceived and funded by a large international donor agency and, if the pilot proved successful, it was hoped that the programme could be expanded to other African countries with minor adaptations to content. After an extensive consultation process with the NGO, the evaluators were confident that an appropriate research design had been developed. However, increasing involvement and interference from the donor in this project became problematic.

The clash in values

Impact Consulting and the NGO discussed Impact Consulting's approach to the evaluation and this led to the mutual development of a research design framework. A logic model was developed to guide the study and the development of appropriate tools.

The donor representative for the project became involved at this point with different expectations of how the evaluation would be done than those agreed on by the evaluators and the NGO. The main differences in expectations of the evaluation seemed to flow from a difference in underlying philosophy to the research. The donor's was mostly rooted in a natural science/positivist tradition, which has a high regard for experimental designs and a low regard for (or ignorance of) more qualitative social science methodology. This, together with the donor's ethnocentric attitude, negatively impacted the whole evaluation.

Relationships between the evaluators and the donor became strained. The research process became riddled with discrepancies

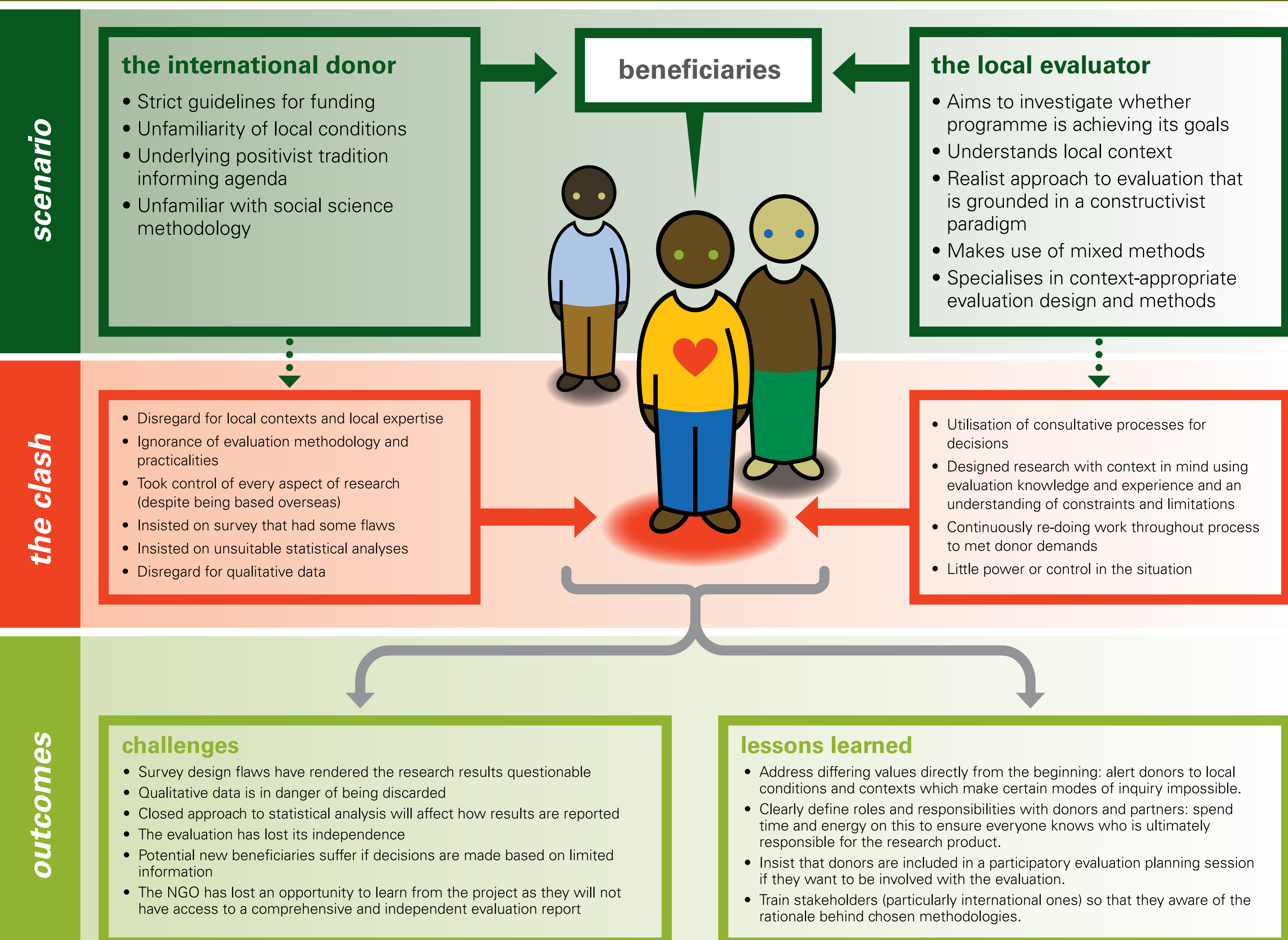
between values and the international donor wielded his power to ensure that the study ran according to his agendas and were based on his approaches. This clash in values and the power struggles have eventually resulted in the integrity of the research being compromised.

Effects of the clash in values on the evaluation process

- The logic model and indicators developed together with the NGO were disregarded and the donors' understanding of the project and its outcomes guided the study.
- The knowledge assessment tool had to be redeveloped three times because the donor wanted it to be done according to a particular methodological approach that was completely inappropriate in the context and with the target group. The donor representative took charge of the final version and the survey now has flaws that compromise its validity.
- The statistical analysis of the data was guided by the donor representative and he has refused to consider alternative segmentation of the data.
- The donor representative is unfamiliar with qualitative research and is therefore not interested in these findings or in reporting on them, despite the fact that extensive qualitative data has been collected.
- The donor representative has decided that he will take responsibility for the final report (based on his own approach) which will be used by his peers to decide whether or not to further fund this programme. It is unclear whether this report will accurately reflect the success (or not) of the programme.

References

- Pawson, R. & Tilley, N. 1997. *Realistic Evaluation*. SAGE Publications: London
- Pederson, L.H., Rieper, O. & Sorensen, E.M. 2005. *Is Realist Evaluation a realistic approach for complex reforms*. Paper presented at the Nopsa conference in Reykavik, Iceland, on 11-13 August 2005



scenario

the clash

outcomes

the international donor

- Strict guidelines for funding
- Unfamiliarity of local conditions
- Underlying positivist tradition informing agenda
- Unfamiliar with social science methodology

beneficiaries

the local evaluator

- Aims to investigate whether programme is achieving its goals
- Understands local context
- Realist approach to evaluation that is grounded in a constructivist paradigm
- Makes use of mixed methods
- Specialises in context-appropriate evaluation design and methods

- Disregard for local contexts and local expertise
- Ignorance of evaluation methodology and practicalities
- Took control of every aspect of research (despite being based overseas)
- Insisted on survey that had some flaws
- Insisted on unsuitable statistical analyses
- Disregard for qualitative data

- Utilisation of consultative processes for decisions
- Designed research with context in mind using evaluation knowledge and experience and an understanding of constraints and limitations
- Continuously re-doing work throughout process to met donor demands
- Little power or control in the situation

challenges

- Survey design flaws have rendered the research results questionable
- Qualitative data is in danger of being discarded
- Closed approach to statistical analysis will affect how results are reported
- The evaluation has lost its independence
- Potential new beneficiaries suffer if decisions are made based on limited information
- The NGO has lost an opportunity to learn from the project as they will not have access to a comprehensive and independent evaluation report

lessons learned

- Address differing values directly from the beginning: alert donors to local conditions and contexts which make certain modes of inquiry impossible.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities with donors and partners: spend time and energy on this to ensure everyone knows who is ultimately responsible for the research product.
- Insist that donors are included in a participatory evaluation planning session if they want to be involved with the evaluation.
- Train stakeholders (particularly international ones) so that they aware of the rationale behind chosen methodologies.