Using Realist Evaluation

Itad experience

21 February 2018
An introduction to realist evaluation

• What is realist evaluation?
• Why choose realist evaluation?
• How does it work? (examples)
• There be dragons: health warning
• How best to use it
What is realist evaluation?

- Theory based approach, developed by Pawson & Tilley (1997)
- Not ‘what works’ but ‘what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why?’
- Answers this through opening up the black box: developing and testing theories about how the resources introduced by programmes in particular contexts ‘spark’ mechanisms which generate outcomes.
- **Generative** model of causality
Why choose a realist approach?

• If you’re interested in understanding not just whether a programme worked, but how and why it did.

• ...To inform decisions about whether to fund, or how to design a programme, or whether to scale up or close.

• Realist evaluation is useful when we don’t yet understand how, why and for whom programmes work/don’t work... And when we want to know how to adapt a programme to new contexts and new people.
Why choose realist evaluation?

Can provide *generalisable insights* on how to scale a programme up or roll it out to different contexts, therefore provides findings with *external validity*.

Causal *mechanisms* are *real* forces or processes that exist in the world...which are not unique to a particular setting...similar mechanisms are present and explain causal links in different situations.
How do you do a realist evaluation?

Three broad iterative stages

1. Theory of Change
   - Realist literature review
2. Initial ICMO configurations
3. Data collection and analysis
4. Synthesis
   - Refined ICMO configurations
   - Refined ToC

Developing theory

Results in Development
How do you do a realist evaluation?

• These steps look quite familiar...so what’s different about realist evaluation?

1) A different approach to interrogating theory
   – Focuses explicitly on what works for whom (O) in what contexts (C) and why (M)
   – This guides literature review, sampling, tool development, interviewing and data analysis.

2) Heavily focused on KII, but with a twist (realist interviewing)

3) It’s a philosophy!!!
CMOs: the core analytical unit of RE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditions which influence <em>whether</em> mechanisms spark, and <em>which</em> mechanisms spark, for different groups of people</td>
<td>Forces or powers that explain <em>how and why</em> an intervention leads to change</td>
<td>Short, medium and long-term changes, intended and unintended, resulting from an intervention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Real perceived risk of apprehension**
- **People know the cameras are there**
- **Deterrence**
- **Reduced car theft**
- **Natural surveillance**
- **Reduced car theft**

*Results in Development*
Example of using realist evaluation to generate new insights on what works and why, in different contexts (taken from BCURE)

- How does training and skills development lead to behaviour change in everyday working practices?

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<tr>
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<th>Intervention (s)</th>
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<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>High level champions with a clear mandate for reform</td>
<td>Tools introduced that are practical and enable staff to do their jobs more easily</td>
<td>The value of an evidence-informed approach is ‘showcased’</td>
<td>High-level decision to standardise Evidence-informed Policymaking</td>
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Example of an M4P CMO

- How does training in GMP lead to increased production and quality of raw milk?

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<tr>
<td>Market demand for increased quantity and quality of milk</td>
<td>Farmers trained using a ToT approach to apply GMP</td>
<td>Farmers see value in applying all 12 steps of GMP</td>
<td>Farmers’ increase production (but have not increased quality)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How and where are we using realist evaluation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Thematic area</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Evaluation focus countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foodtrade East and Southern Africa (FTESA)</td>
<td>Agriculture and Trade</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>4 in East and Southern Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Africa Food Markets (WAFM)</td>
<td>Agriculture and Trade</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>4 in West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED)</td>
<td>Climate Change and Resilience</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>13 in Africa, Myanmar and Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Climate Fund (Compass)</td>
<td>Climate Change Finance</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Lesson learning across global portfolio of 230 programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>6 across Asia and Africa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Health warning: risks and dangers

1) How realist can you really be in international development? (practical considerations)

Frequently encountered challenges:

• Resource constraints (trying to do too much)
• Scarce data
• Researchers unfamiliar with the approach
• Language, culture and power considerations make ‘realist interviewing’ challenging
Health warning: risks and dangers

2) The risk of truisms, especially in complex evaluations (the *flattening effect*)

May not be appropriate in situations where:

- The theory is relatively well understood
- You try to do too much (testing multiple outcomes across multiple cases, for multiple respondent groups)
- In attempting to answer broad questions, you synthesise upwards leading to ‘lowest common denominator findings’
How best to use realist evaluation?

- Applying realist approaches sparingly and to maximum effect!
  (think carefully, *why am I choosing this approach?*)

- Consider combining realist evaluation with other approaches
Thank you for listening

Any Questions?

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