

Preliminary take-aways of the Unintended Effects of International Cooperation

Conference of January 16th & 17th 2017, The Hague
Prepared for the OECD DAC network of development evaluation meeting

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On January 16th and 17th the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a one and a half-day academic-policy cross-over conference together with the Radboud University to discuss the unintended effects of international cooperation. The aim was to determine firstly if unintended effects needed to be taken more systematically into consideration by planners and evaluators. The second aim was to explore how unintended effects could be integrated into evaluations. With over 150 registrations, and 22 academic papers, the conference attracted a range of interested parties, varying from international evaluators and evaluation services, to researchers and policy makers alike. This brief on first take-aways presents some initial findings for the meeting of the OECD DAC evaluators network of February 2017.

Is enough attention being paid to unintended effects in evaluations?

The OECD stipulates in its evaluation guidelines that evaluation of development programs should be concerned with both intended and unintended results. A meta-evaluation of USAID evaluations shows that only in 15% of the cases unintended effects were taken into considerationⁱ. An assessment of NORAD's evaluations showed that in one of three NORAD evaluations, there was no mention of unintended effects, even if this was explicitly mentioned in the Terms of Reference. When the ToR didn't mention side effects, only one out of 4 researched them.ⁱⁱⁱ The first analysis hence indicates that OECD guidelines for evaluations are not followed systematically in this respect by its members.

Participating evaluators cited various reasons why they occasionally experienced challenges to follow the guidelines : (1) the lack of interest of policy makers to look beyond direct positive results of the programs; (2) the lack of funding and time made available for evaluations; (3) a lack of understanding on how to detect and measure unintended effects. Participants exchanged on (1) typologies of unintended effects; (2) specific unintended effects that were encountered and lastly (3) potential methodologies to capture unintended effects.

Which different types of unintended effects exist?

One of the key-note speakers of the conference, Mrs. Jabeen, presented a typology of unintended effects elaborating on a recent publication.ⁱⁱⁱ She proposed a classification of unintended effects based on 4 criteria (1) knowability; (2) value ; (3) distribution of effects; (4) temporality. *Knowability* refers to whether or not unintended effects are anticipated. Unanticipated unintended effects can be subdivided into unforeseeable and unforeseen effects. The *value* relates to whether the effects were positive, negative or neutral. The *distribution of effects* refers to whom these effects accrue: either to participants, non-participants or the system as a whole (or in part). Since unintended effects can occur simultaneously when implementing an intervention or may appear after quite some time, it is relevant to determine also their *temporality*. In addition to this classification, the literature review prepared for the conference identified as a last classification mechanism the degree to which these effects could have been avoided or mitigated.^{iv}

A preview of some of the unintended effects

More than twenty academics, practitioners and investigative journalists presented their work, resulting in some surprising unintended effects and discussion.

- For instance, one of the unintended effects that appears regularly overlooked are effects of employment of national staff. While there might be positive income effects for the employees (over a million of national staff were found to be working for aid-funded agencies) and their dependents, there might be negative effects on for instance local government capacity.
- An evaluation expert of a development finance institutions explained how their financing of a hydropower project had unintentionally contributed to violence in the area. If a better ex-ante political economy analysis of the region would have been done (not just a risk assessment of the project), this could have been foreseen. One paper focused on the unintended effects of a hype of attention for one topic: sexual violence in DRC. It showed for instance how this excess of attention spurred false rape claims.
- Finally, the conference featured various success stories of organizations and evaluation departments that have been successful in integrating a more systematic research and action on unintended effects. One NGO, Search for Common Ground, showed how in 3 years time it increased from 15 to over 40% the number of evaluations that paid attention to positive and negative unintended effects. It had helped them to better mitigate some of their unintended effects, notably with respect to gender

The majority of the examples at the conference showed that quite some of the negative unintended effects could have been avoided.

How can unintended effects be captured?

Some suggestions were made to spot potential unintended effects ex-ante, ex-durante and ex-post the intervention:

- To determine what is unintended, it is needed to make explicit what *is* intended. In addition, if possible, policy planners are invited to include unintended effects in a Theory of Change. Since 'unintended' doesn't mean 'unanticipated', reading relevant literature could be an important element to determine these 'alternative impact pathways'.
- Based on this Theory of Change that includes unintended effects, an evaluation scope can be determined that looks beyond only the target group, and beyond just the regular timeframe (if these anticipated unintended effects are expected to be sufficiently large and may already be visible).

- Increased dialogue between evaluators and policy makers, in which these unintended effects are discussed, even before beginning a program, is highly encouraged.
- Evaluators were suggested to further experiment having an agile methodology as to be able incorporate unanticipated unintended effects in the evaluation as it evolves.^v

What will happen next?

Participants to the conference decided to set up a community of practice that would work together to gather more information, exchange ideas, stimulate research and focus on outreach to other parties. Participants demonstrated willingness to explore together further on unintended effects and lower barriers to take them into account. The conference was just the beginning of a process and not the end. Nevertheless, to understand the potential flavor of future recommendations the following take-aways for further contemplation were already discussed.

A selection of some of the preliminary suggestions:

To evaluation departments: (a) consider performing an assessment with respect to what extent unintended effects have been taken into consideration in previous evaluations (such as the NORAD assessment) and on that basis suggest potential improvements (b) include in a detailed way unintended effects in Terms of References if appropriate and feasible. .

To evaluators: (a) if not done already, include unintended effects in a Theory of Change for the program that is to be evaluated; (b) be creative and attempt a new method in the next evaluation, for instance taking change in the program- and surrounding area as a starting point, and reason backward from there.

To standard setters in the field of evaluation: (a) determine if there is a need for more guidance in the field of unintended effects; (b) if so, work together with interested parties to develop these guidance.

To program planners: (a) include unintended effects in the Theory of Change; (2) include evaluators right from the start of the project.

The 'Unintended Effects' community of practice

It would be most appreciated if you would be willing to think along with the organizers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Radboud University to bring this initiative to the next level. You can read the Working Papers at the site <https://www.ru.nl/anthropology/vm/unintendedeffects/> . Also, a briefing note for policy planners will be made available there. Please email to unintended-effects@maw.ru.nl to provide us with suggestions or remarks.

ⁱ Hageboeck, M., Frumkin, M., & Monschein, S. (2013). Meta Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations 2009 - 2012. MSI.

ⁱⁱ NORAD (2014) Unintended effects in NORAD's evaluations – a deskstudy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jabeen, S. (2016). Do we really care about unintended outcomes? An analysis of evaluation theory and practice. Evaluation and Program Planning, 144–154.

^{iv} Koch, D.J. & L. Schulpen (2016) 'Unintended effects of international cooperation: a preliminary literature review.' http://www.ru.nl/publish/pages/814787/koch_schulpen_2017_literature_review_unintended_effects.pdf

^v Morell, J. (2010) Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty. Guildford publications