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Being community and culturally-led: Tensions and pluralities in evaluating social innovation

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Abstract

Evaluating benefits for society is a common requirement for most social innovation programmes, yet evaluating social impact is one of the most challenging tasks. This challenge has salience for service design and designing social innovation – both fields that seek to make social impact. This paper shares insights from researching social innovation practices in Southeast Asia. We draw attention to intelligent ways practitioners in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand are evaluating work with social outcomes, and from this, we generate a propositional framework that supports the core principles observed. We place this framework alongside dominant and traditional models of evaluation to highlight epistemic, political and power differences between them, and reinforce the importance of diversifying evaluative approaches. We demonstrate how alternative evaluative practices are community and culturally-led through specific examples, to reinforce the core principles of building trust, participatory collaboration and being grounded in place, culture and locality.

KEYWORDS: evaluation, social impact, designing social innovation, community, culturally-led

Challenges of evaluating impact

While it is a common requirement for most social innovation programs, monitoring and evaluating generated benefits for society, often referred to as social impact, is a significant challenge. For example, an OECD (2010) report on social sector innovation describes a lack of clarity in what constitutes social impact, and this in turn, disables ways to recognise and account this in current practices (Nicholls, 2009). When we trace how, where and why there are significant barriers to evaluating social impact, it becomes evident that these are complex

and compounded. One key issue identified is that evaluation is predominantly driven from a funder's perspective to evidence accountability and measure against predefined criteria. Various studies have found that the majority of the methods used in evaluating social impact are based on financial accounting and reporting tools (Antadze and Westley, 2012; Mulgan, 2010; Nicholls, 2015). Another study into existing evaluation methods for social innovation argues that methods originating from an economic-based model are "ill-suited to explore, account for, or to support potentially-transformative social innovation" (Weaver & Kemp, 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, the cause and effect mechanism usually linked to results-oriented methods are especially problematic in initiatives that aim to be transformative, due to its engagement with complex systems, sectors and communities.

Other fundamental issues include differing assumptions, expectations and practices relating to evaluation between the funder and practitioners. Top-down evaluation by funders reinforces the power-dynamics of aid (Hinton & Groves, 2004). This is a disempowering experience for communities. Standard models of evaluation that are usually preferred and deployed in the West, are assumed to transfer seamlessly to the rest of the world (Bala-Miller et al, 2008), inadvertently obscuring or replacing cultural, traditional and heterogeneous practices. All together, these present a significant challenge in current evaluation discourse, requiring alternative models that can capture and evaluate multi-dimensional impacts for various stakeholders.

In response to these challenges, calls have been made to develop alternative frameworks that would not only address current limitations of conventional approaches (Antadze & Westley 2012), but support and enable transformative innovation to emerge. For example, Preskill and Beer (2012, p. 2) suggest the importance of meaningful evaluation of social innovation needs to be "designed to give innovators the information and data they need to discover new patterns and pathways, to rapidly test solutions and abandon the ones that fail, and to detect what's emerging in response to their efforts" and "to support adaptation and leave space for the unexpected". Similarly, the 2016 British Council's report (Dovey et al., 2016) on Creative Hubs highlighted the problematic nature in using quantitative metrics to measure the broad range of social impact arising from creative activities. Efforts to address this gap have emerged from different sectors, evidenced by interest from the British Council (2019), Design and Evaluation symposium (2019) organised by the Australian Evaluation Society, and this interest is also emerging in service design (see Foglieni et al., 2018).

More current interest in exploring synergies between design and evaluation coincides with the research program underway through Designing Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific (DESIAP). The first two authors are co-founders of this learning platform. Since 2015, we have been working with various practitioners and researchers in this region through frequent, co-located events to connect, share and generate mutual understanding of designing social innovation, driven by the growing need to support communities in addressing social problems in Asia-Pacific (Akama et al, 2019; Akama & Yee 2016). DESIAP 2017 Kuala Lumpur workshop and public symposium on impact evaluation invited leading researchers and change-makers from Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines to share their experiences and identify challenges and opportunities related to evaluating the impact of their work. These practitioners represented a broad spectrum of working with communities across different countries on a variety of pressing social issues. The discussion also confirmed the obstacles summarised above from published literatures regarding the challenges of evaluation in this sector.

We have analysed the insights from this event and synthesised it into a propositional Designing Social Innovation (DSI) Evaluation framework (see Figure 1). A complete account can be read in our report (Akama et al, 2019). The next section describes the framework's principles and evidences them through examples from DESIAP KL participants' work, followed by discussion on navigating some of the tensions and paradoxes of the social impact landscape.

Principles of DSI evaluation

Many of the initiatives we observed are focused on building capacity through learning and transformation. The practitioners value insider and lay knowledge, respecting experience grounded in particular cultures. We found that practitioners often have to be flexible and use improvisatory tactics in order to adapt to dynamic shifts in projects. It is in these contexts that we explore how alternative evaluative practices have emerged.

The emergent nature of designing social innovation (DSI) means that the primary purpose of doing evaluation is to understand what has been done, what has been achieved to date and how best to progress the work. In contrast to traditional evaluation that assumes or predefines what 'success' is and seeks to evaluate it as an outcome of a project, the practitioners that we observed are continually reframing what 'success' means. They do this by evaluating their process, progress and emerging outcomes with the communities they serve. This means evaluative criteria and processes do not exist outside of a project, but instead are fully embedded and continually changing during the project. Framing evaluation this way allows a shift from a judgemental tone that can be discouraging towards one that aligns with common processes and outcomes that most practitioners understand. This shift also places emphasis on learning, adaptation and an assessment function, in contrast to traditional evaluation that stresses objective, distant, summative, top-down appraisal and measurements that connote numerical quantification.

Another significant feature we observe and highlight is how DSI evaluation is community-led. This means evaluation is based on parameters that make sense to the community, which requires practitioners, funders and intermediaries to understand and address community needs and co-define what 'success' and 'achievements' means. Tensions can arise when there is a lack of meaningful relationship and understanding built between these constituents. When funders or commissioning parties lack understanding and ways to value co-design, participatory or human-centred design process as an important outcome in and of itself, this can lead to a misalignment of expectations and challenges in implementation, and risks outcomes for all concerned.

DSI evaluative practices co-define aims and criteria with community beneficiaries and often follow a learning-by-doing approach. The keystone, articulated in Figure 1, is building trust; participatory collaboration; and being grounded in place, culture and locality. These are common and consistent features that manifest themselves in all nine principles. We observed that impactful DSI practices already have evaluative practices embedded in their approach, hence it is important to acknowledge that these keystone principles are important for both DSI and evaluative practice and are in fact synergetic. In other words, embedding evaluative approaches enables the observed DSI practices to be impactful, and this is the key difference with traditional summative models that separates evaluation as a post-project phase or

principle. The following section introduces these principles and summarises how these are enacted in different contexts.

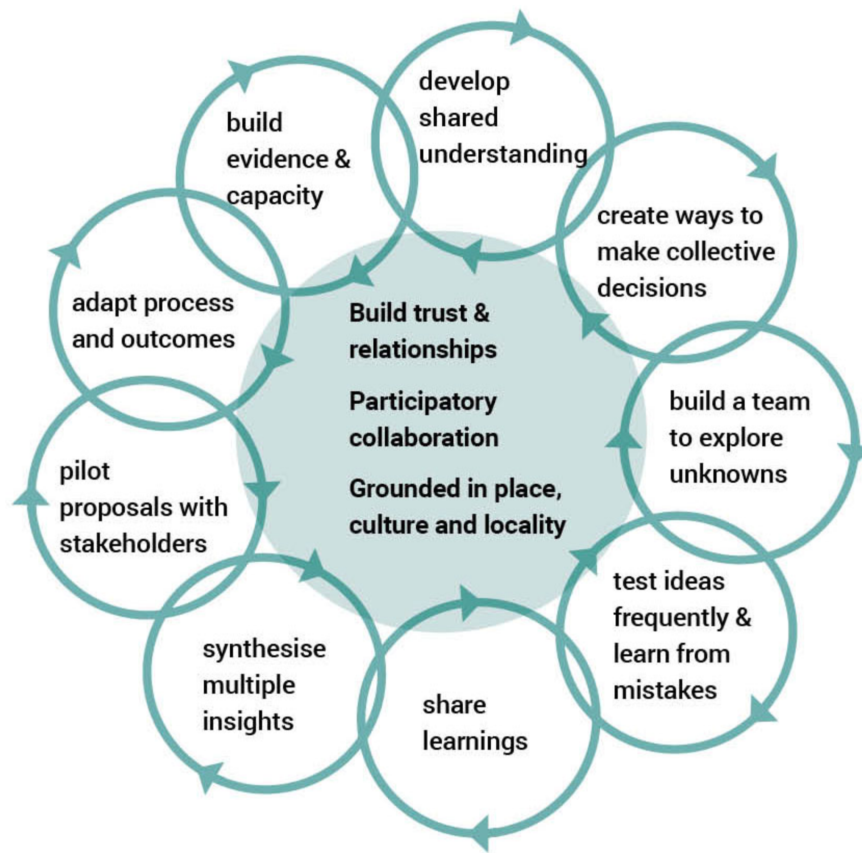

Fig. 1 Designing Social Innovation Evaluation framework

Build evidence and capacity

This principle describes how work is structured and findings are shared in a way that informs, enables and empowers the community. Point B Design and Training is a learning and social innovation lab based in Mawlamyine, Myanmar. Since 2014, they have been delivering programmes aimed at introducing explorative and creative learning approaches to young Myanmar nationals. Htet Yin Tun and her colleagues at Point B describe evidence of impact as identifying and demonstrating how learning took place. When UNICEF commissioned them to work with Myanmar's Ministry of Social Welfare to embed human-centred values, Htet's team began by understanding case workers' needs and how to scaffold their learning. 2015 was the first time in Myanmar's history that governmental children's social services were introduced. To help Htet evaluate how human-centred tools and practices they introduced have impacted on the case workers' way of thinking, they used the 'most significant change' (Dart & Davies, 2003) method to invite accounts. This could be success stories, challenges or problems that they had to overcome through the use of the methods. Using this dialogical, story-based approach also helped bring self-awareness, courage and motivation for the case workers to move forward in their newly defined roles, evidencing ways they have built capacity. This enabled Htet's project team to recognise both large and small impacts that matter to the case workers.

Adapt process and outcomes

This principle aims for a balanced and grounded perspective, ensuring that the evaluation is useful and purposeful for all stakeholders. This is evidenced by INSTEDD iLab Asia which designs and uses open source technology to better deliver critical services to vulnerable populations living in the Mekong Basin. They have created a real-time smart phone app reporting on malaria incidents using mobile technology, requiring usability and technical evaluation of their products, but the compelling demonstration of this principle is seen in the way they also adapted existing tools to meet the needs and limitation of the local contexts. Sokmesa Khiev in the Cambodia office described using a co-design process with communities during the development of the prototype to consider the capacity and barriers (such as time and skills) to ensure that feedback and evaluation can happen easily, continuously, dynamically, and according to the community's timing and information they need. Providing training, support, and evaluating outcomes through a cycle of continuous improvement shows how they overcame common obstacles – lack of time, skills and capacity – to communities participating in evaluative practices.

Pilot proposal with stakeholders

This principle highlights the importance of co-designing and implementing data collection tools with the community. This ensures that the outcomes are locally grounded and relevant to community needs. Often this practice involves supporting community members to be active co-evaluators and co-researchers. Professor Fadzilah Majid Cook from the National University Malaysia works on projects in East Malaysia relating to environmental sustainability in coastal communities. It is more sustainable and effective to train community researchers to conduct interviews with the local community, rather than parachuting external researchers. This approach overcomes issues of trust and also ensures that the questions asked are grounded in local context and knowledge. This also helps build capacity with the local community in which skills of self-reflection, critical evaluation and questioning would often be helpful in areas where land ownership is commonly contested with the local authorities.

Synthesise multiple insights

This principle aims to be inclusive in how evaluation is conducted. An unconventional method shared by Dr Zeeda Mohamad, an Associate Professor from University Malaya (Malaysia) working on campus sustainability involved the use of social media. She is part of the Water Warriors initiative, a volunteer group made up of staff and students interested in water conservation on campus. They have been using social media (in particular Facebook) to crowdsource opinions and evaluate what they are doing over time. The group uses social media not just for real-time reporting of the campus lake's water quality but also to crowdsource opinions on possible solutions when problems arise. This has enabled them to respond to emergent issues in a more dynamic way. Responses to their Facebook posts have also given them the opportunity to collate different perspectives and engage stakeholders from outside the group. These interactions have enabled them to prioritise issues and led to the formation of special interest sub-groups. Whatsapp groups (Voice over IP service) are used to conduct a more deep-dive approach into a particular issue. This simple approach has proven to be an effective way for the group to gather a diversity of insights, generate interests and enable a collective problem-solving approach.

Share learning

This principle encourages practitioners to share their learning as a key part of their evaluation practice. They do this by recording and sharing what they have done, and what

they have learnt through that with others. It also highlights the importance of celebrating effort, progress and achievements. Tandemic, based in Kuala Lumpur, partners with organisations to build innovation capabilities internally and does this in a way that considers the bigger picture – systems, incentives, business models. Emma Rhule (Chief Operating Officer) discussed how they used evaluation to improve their own practice, specifically looking at the efficiency and effectiveness of their approach in order to improve the impact they make. They approach this by using data to analyse and improve their process. For example, they wanted to know how many interviews were required before in-depth insights started to emerge. This learning informs future projects, and was used to better train staff in how they interview and the types of questions asked.

Test ideas frequently and learn from mistakes

This principle supports iterative learning and helps practitioners be more aware of unintended consequences and outcomes. SecondMuse Indonesia supported a North American incubator to design and deliver emergency solar-powered light for disaster settings. It needed to be cheap, lightweight, transportable, and a renewable light source. Simon Baldwin, SecondMuse Director, shared how they helped the organisation embed prototyping as a form of evaluation. As a result, the product went through 40-50 design iterations before the design was finalised. An unintended consequence of the prototyping and continuous engagement with users led the company to change their business model from a straightforward retail model, to a 'buy-one, give-one to community in need' model. Insights that emerged from the prototyping phase revealed that the product was not only useful in communities lacking access to infrastructure but also seen as a desirable 'hip' item for North American consumers. They realised that these consumers were willing to pay a premium for a product that was well designed and had a meaningful story behind it. This example illustrates how testing ideas and learning from them not only resulted in a better product, it helped create a different value proposition.

Build a team to explore unknowns

This principle stems from an acknowledgement that we do not know everything and that we need to ensure we have the appropriate people, processes and approaches in place to reveal what we do not know. Doing so in a sustainable and realistic manner ensures that the initiative continues even when the main funding or project implementers have left. The example of the Water Warriors (WW) community group described earlier demonstrated the use of social media to share problems and recruit interested citizens and experts in other communities to collectively problem-solve. The WW team uses a heartware approach (Mohamad et al, 2015) to engage and attract a broad range of stakeholders to contribute to the initiative. A heartware approach prioritises shared values, local traditions, folk stories and a sense of community to reconnect people back to a place. Activities such as 'gotong-royong' sessions (communal work towards a shared goal) and the use of citizen science are some of the ways the heartware approach has enabled the WW team to call on people with different expertise to work together towards a common goal.

Create ways to make collective decisions

This principle recognises positional and personal authority and power, and the need to acknowledge, reveal, understand and work to manage unequal power relationships. Cyril Tjahja, a PhD student at Northumbria University, illustrated the importance of understanding the social hierarchy of a community to enable collective decision making. CROSSs, a social architecture agency, often works in rural areas of Thailand using a participatory approach on a wide range of projects, from the redesign of interior spaces to

city-wide urban renewal. For the city-wide renewal project in the town of Chumsaeng, CROSSs proposed that the participants sit in a circle during community meetings. This physical reconfiguration changed the social dynamic of the participants and contributed (at least during the meetings) to the equalisation of the power relationship present in the community. The community clearly saw the value in this new form of communication and has since adopted this model for subsequent community meetings.

Develop shared understanding

This principle explores bias and assumptions built up through culture, context, lived experience, training, role etc. It requires that we test against our own and others perspectives and belief systems in order to create an open space for shared understanding to develop. For example, what does success mean to people, and to the community and what might it look like? Assistant Professor Boonanan Natakun, Thammasat University, Thailand uses co-design and participation methods to build community resilience for disaster. He uses various objects, maps and visualisations in a fun, accessible, learning action approach to identify and share resources used every day on a community map. This allows people to express what they see as important, enabling different living cultures and lifestyles to contribute to community resilience. Using creative methods to visualise and articulate these values is important, since they are often hidden or at worst assumed. Making values, perspectives and assumptions tangible enables conversations about them to occur and opens up a space for the development of a new set of shared values and understanding.

Discussion: navigating paradoxical landscape

While the principles and practices of DSI Evaluation are evident and may guide ways to encourage alternative approaches to impact evaluation, there are significant challenges and tensions in navigating the paradoxical landscape of social impact. This paradox is characterised by asymmetries in epistemologies, perspectives, priorities, power and norms. Funding organisations based in the West, the Global North and wealthy economies often commission projects on behalf of (rather than by) the recipient communities. This means the projects are already pre-defined by goals, objectives and success based on Western knowledge, critique and analysis, which has a tendency to privilege independence and objectivity. This is why traditional, formative and summative evaluation aims to test and assure accountability by an outsider. Projects are required to respond to a predefined issue, problem or opportunity identified by the commissioning party. These asymmetries, compounding existing power asymmetries of aid, can omit epistemologies from marginal cultures and communities, whose perspectives, experiences and approaches are arguably just as central. These are entrenched, paradoxical realities for many we spoke with at DESIAP KL, like in Cambodia, where a majority of local organisations are dependent upon foreign aid for survival and delivery of services to their communities, a condition reflected in the Philippines and Thailand (Khieng & Dahles, 2014).

Evidence of practitioners navigating this complex landscape attests to their intelligence and ingenuity. They may not self-identify as 'designers', as they have not been formally trained in design, but their work involves communities in ways that resembles co-design, human-centred design and participatory approaches. For example, their project activity is iterative, based on real-time learning by doing, iteration and adaption to explore opportunities, needs, interests, priorities and potential responses at a grassroots level. They listen to communities

and value insider, lay knowledge and experience. Community members act as project informants, participants, co-creators and co-researchers to define goals, objectives and successes. The highly collaborative nature and shared ownership means there is a significant investment of time and effort to build trust and relationships with and within the community and other relevant stakeholders towards community empowerment. It is reflexive and intuitive, providing multiple points of connection to build a shared understanding of the opportunity / problem being worked on and how best to respond to it.

Evaluation in DSI practices is used to continually develop and improve the outcomes of the work. Here, we have shown how evaluative practices inform the focus and design of the project, understand what is happening (at a system, community and activity level) and what is being achieved. These practices provide sources of information through which those engaged in an initiative can reflect on and adapt to what they are learning, to improve and innovate in a real-time basis. We believe our propositional framework shows promise as an alternative evaluation framework for community-led, culturally grounded and iterative social innovation initiatives.

Conclusion

Arguably, there is more work, research, education and guidance needed to shift from a structured, externally-defined evaluation to an emergent, community-led, culturally-grounded practice for the social impact sector. Yet our research also evidences how co-design, service design and participatory approaches show significant potential in aligning and enabling such opportunities. However, we also caution that the same asymmetries in epistemologies, perspectives, priorities, power and norms of evaluation are mirrored in design, and thus, must be interrogated as part of this work. For researchers and practitioners who are willing to embrace this challenge and opportunity, we invite you to try out the propositional DSI Evaluation Framework and test, break, adapt and make it fit with the constituents, communities and social issues that are being addressed. We do not claim universality or guarantees, rather, we welcome input and possibility for its further iteration, as fellows sharing the same aims in exploring designing social innovation.

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