



How to measure impact and the obstacles you have to overcome



Research methods

Case studies seek a deep and contextual understanding of a specific problem. They can use all of the data analysis methods in the previous section. There are several types of case studies, but the one most relevant in this case is an impact case study which is most commonly used to evaluate the social effect of a certain program. The researcher evaluates the social situation before, during and after the implementation of the program and compares them. The monitored change is considered to be the impact of said program.

Action-based research uses participatory research and interviews, but surveys can also be used. This method most commonly focuses on the process in order to strengthen the capacity of individuals or organisations and facilitate change. The method also allows for fast redefinition and verification of information and certain terms in the process of gathering data, as the feedback is gained fast.

Quasi-experimental. This method first came from medicine and follows the well-known principle of using a control group. After providing one group with the materials and training, and not giving any of those things to the other, the researcher can analyse the effectiveness and impact of their program. The impact is measured by comparing quantitative differences between the two groups. If the state of the groups differs immensely, it can be concluded that the program had a considerable effect.



Problems



The main **problem** with this method is the selection of the two groups - the researcher has to make sure that there are no systematic factors that could affect individuals in both groups differently. In other words, both groups should be balanced. This method also calls for a bigger budget.

However, the quality of the evaluation results can be lacking because of **several factors**:

- conclusions are based on one type of source. For example, the social effect of the program is overestimated because the only survey it is based on questioned the project managers of the program, and they tend to overestimate the value of their project;
- generalised assumptions are made from case studies of small groups;
- contextual data is gathered by using quantitative methods;
- improper choice of information collection methods (e.g. gathering factual information by asking opinions of respondents).

Data triangulation



Data triangulation is the assessment of the same issue using at least three different sources. Method triangulation - the evaluation of the same question by using the data gathered by at least three different data gathering and analysis methods. There are three steps to triangulation:

1. All possible informational sources are established;
2. Every source of information is used while trying to answer the same question;
3. The data gathered from each source is compared among one another.

Even so, triangulation requires the utmost attention and competence of the researcher, as evaluating different types of data and explaining the differing results is usually a difficult task.

Problems

The biggest challenge for impact assessment is finding a good counterfactual, that is, a situation that the participant would have experienced if they had not been exposed to the program.

A counterfactual is necessary, but it cannot be observed. Ideally, the same group should be compared with and without the impact of the program, but this is not empirically possible. On the other hand, it is possible to compare the situation of the same group of beneficiaries **before** and **after** the impact of the program.

When comparing the situation before and after, it is possible to collect material about the situation “before” at the very beginning of the study or to do so retrospectively. It is possible that the impact of the program presented in this way will not reflect the reality. The before-and-after comparison provides questionable results, as it hardly distinguishes between the impact of the program and external factors over the course of the study.



Surveying the “Before” and “After”

A **baseline survey** is the first set of data gathered on the focus of your study and it should be conducted right after the program starts so as not to influence the results of the “before”. However, it should also not be conducted too early before the initial start, as that could inaccurately portray the situation of the participants as well.

The survey that is conducted after is called a **follow-up survey**. To ensure the desired results, it is important to pay attention to the timing of gathering data after the program - this will depend on the type of effect your program sought to have and the considerable time to get it. If you want to test both short-term and long-term changes, there can be several follow-up surveys conducted. While you can add new questions that have come up during the program process to the follow-up survey, it is best to keep the two surveys as similar as possible, including the wording of the questions unchanged.

It is advisable to make sure that the collected data is high-quality and correctly added into the data sheet. Having back-ups of the data and entering the data as soon as possible after collection can also help prevent losses of data and ensure its quality. It is also important not to generalise the findings of your research too confidently, as the results could vary under different circumstances and population samples.

