

GLCb2033 Monitoring and Evaluation of Social and Humanitarian Projects (Autumn 2024) WEEK 4

Case Study: Evaluating a School Feeding Program in a Low-Income Country Source: School Meals Case Study. **Publication date: June 2023** Prepared by the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, an initiative of the School Meals Coalition.

[https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4671116/1/Toossi_etal_2023_School Meals Case Study United States America.pdf](https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4671116/1/Toossi_etal_2023_School_Meals_Case_Study_United_States_America.pdf)

Targeting and coverage – 5 min

Meals served through the NSLP and SBP are available to all children in schools that operate the programs, and schools receive reimbursements from the federal government for each meal served. Meals are available at no cost to children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level for their household size and at a reduced-price to those from households with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level for their household size. Otherwise, children must pay what is considered full price. Children can also qualify for no cost or reduced-price meals if their household participates in select means-tested Federal programs or if the child is a migrant, homeless, or in foster care. In some States, children can qualify if household income used for Medicaid purposes meet income limits for no cost or reduced-price meals. There are about 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools that participate in the school meal programs. Based on data published in March, 2023.

- 30.1 million children participated in the NSLP in Federal fiscal year (FY) 2022 and over 4.95 billion school lunches were served. Nearly all, 95.4 percent, of these lunches were served for free or at a reduced-price due to special circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, in FY 2019, 29.6 million children participated and 4.87 billion lunches were served. About 75 percent of these lunches were served for free or at a reduced-price.
- 15.64 million children participated in the SBP in FY 2022 and over 2.59 billion school breakfasts were served. Nearly all, 96.9 percent of these breakfasts were served for free or at a reduced price. Prior to the pandemic, in FY 2019, 14.77 million children participated and 2.45 billion breakfasts were served. About 85 percent of these breakfasts were served for free or at a reduced-price. While the USDA gave schools the option to provide NSLP and SBP meals for free to all students regardless of their household's income as a special circumstance during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), it typically does not. However, a policy known as universal free school meals (UFSM) has been adopted by some states. As of March 2023, five states (California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, and New Mexico) have elected to subsidize the provision of free school meals to all students in NSLP and SBP participating schools on a permanent basis, while four (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont) have elected to do so for the 2022-2023 school year. Other states are also considering adopting UFSM. Additionally, schools and school districts can elect to adopt UFSM through several provisions in federal school meals legislation, most notably the Community Eligibility Provision. Through this provision, schools and school districts can serve meals at no cost to all students if at least 40 percent of their students are certified to receive free school meals through participation in select means-tested programs or because they are a migrant, homeless, or in foster care.

Overview

A non-governmental organization (NGO) has implemented a **School Feeding Program** aimed at improving student attendance, retention, and learning outcomes in a N region of the country.

The program provides daily meals to students in primary schools across rural and semi-urban areas.

The donor of the program is the state Government

The NGO seeks to evaluate the program's effectiveness and impact, focusing on short-term results (student attendance) and long-term outcomes (academic performance and nutritional status).

Key Program Goals:

1. **Increase school attendance and reduce absenteeism.**
2. **Improve students' academic performance.**
3. **Enhance the nutritional status of participating children.**

Challenges:

logistics in rural areas, cultural factors, and limited resources

Class is divided into 5 small groups and each group is assigned one M&E approach:

1. **Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (RBM&E)**
2. **Theory-Based Evaluation**
3. **Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E)**
4. **Quasi-Experimental Design**
5. **Mixed Methods Approach**

Each group develops an M&E plan using their assigned approach. Please consider:

- **Objectives:** What specific questions will their evaluation address?
- **Indicators:** What metrics will be used to measure success (e.g., attendance rates, exam scores, BMI)?
- **Data Collection Methods:** How will they collect the data (e.g., surveys, school records, focus group discussions)?
- **Challenges:** What potential difficulties might arise, and how would you address them?

15 min

30 min Presentations, learning exercises and discussions

TIPS

1. Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (RBM&E)

Expanded Explanation: RBM&E focuses on achieving specific results by setting performance indicators and tracking progress toward desired outcomes. In this case, you would measure key indicators like **attendance rates**, **academic performance**, and **nutritional status**. The approach follows a structured framework, typically involving a **logical framework (LogFrame)**, which outlines inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

Key Steps:

- **Set Clear Objectives:** Increase school attendance by 20%, improve math and reading scores, and reduce the prevalence of undernutrition.
- **Define Indicators:** Number of meals served, percentage increase in attendance, average test score improvements, and changes in BMI.
- **Regular Monitoring:** Track progress monthly, compare with baseline data, and adjust activities if targets are not being met.

Reference and Quotation:

- Kusek and Rist (2004) describe RBM&E as a process where "monitoring is used as a management tool to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of projects" (p. 5). They advocate using **performance indicators** to measure success against predefined targets.

Example Application: For the school feeding program, regular attendance records would be monitored to see if there is an improvement since the start of the program. The academic performance could be tracked through termly test scores, while BMI measurements taken before and after the intervention could assess nutritional impact.

2. Theory-Based Evaluation

Expanded Explanation: Theory-Based Evaluation is particularly useful when you need to **understand how and why a program works** (or doesn't work). It involves constructing a **Theory of Change (ToC)** that maps out the steps from activities to outcomes, with assumptions clearly stated. For this school feeding program, the ToC might assume that **providing meals improves concentration**, leading to better attendance and academic outcomes.

Key Steps:

- **Develop the Theory of Change:** Link activities (providing meals) to expected outcomes (increased attendance, improved academic performance).
- **Identify Assumptions:** For example, assume that students will attend school more frequently if meals are provided.

- **Test the Theory:** Collect data to see if improved attendance leads to higher academic achievement.

Reference and Quotation:

- Weiss (1995) argues that **Theory-Based Evaluation** provides "a framework for understanding the causal links between program activities and outcomes" and emphasizes testing assumptions to explain how change happens.

Example Application: The evaluation could involve surveying teachers to assess whether they observe improvements in student attentiveness in the classroom and analyzing if students with improved attendance scores also show better academic results. This would help validate the program's Theory of Change.

3. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E)

Expanded Explanation: Participatory M&E emphasizes the involvement of key stakeholders—particularly the program's beneficiaries—in all stages of the evaluation. This approach is rooted in the idea that **local knowledge** and perspectives are crucial for an accurate understanding of the program's impact.

Key Steps:

- **Engage Stakeholders:** Involve students, parents, teachers, and community members in designing the evaluation, defining indicators, and collecting data.
- **Co-Create Evaluation Criteria:** Let stakeholders decide what success looks like (e.g., children feeling more energetic, parents reporting improved grades).
- **Joint Analysis and Reporting:** Work with the community to interpret findings and discuss what they mean for the program.

Reference and Quotation:

- Estrella and Gaventa (1998) highlight that participatory M&E "encourages a more bottom-up approach to monitoring and evaluation, empowering communities to assess the performance of interventions" (p. 6).

Example Application: Students could keep daily logs on how they feel during school days with meals versus without. Parents and teachers could be interviewed about perceived changes in students' behavior, attendance, and performance. This approach not only gathers data but also **builds local ownership** of the program.

4. Quasi-Experimental Design

Expanded Explanation: Quasi-experimental designs are used when **randomized control trials (RCTs)** are not feasible. In this case, a comparison could be made between schools that receive the feeding program (intervention group) and similar schools that do not (comparison group). The goal is to **establish causality** between the intervention and observed outcomes by comparing changes over time in both groups.

Key Steps:

- **Select Comparable Groups:** Choose schools with similar demographics and baseline characteristics.
- **Measure Before and After Intervention:** Compare attendance and test scores from both groups at multiple time points.
- **Control for Confounding Variables:** Account for other factors that might influence outcomes, such as teacher quality or school infrastructure.

Reference and Quotation:

- Gertler et al. (2016) explain that quasi-experimental designs "provide a credible estimate of the program's impact, although with less certainty than a randomized control trial" (p. 12).

Example Application: Suppose schools in one district receive the feeding program, while neighboring schools with similar socioeconomic profiles do not. The evaluation would compare changes in attendance and academic outcomes across the two groups, helping to estimate the program's impact.

5. Mixed Methods Approach

Expanded Explanation: A mixed methods approach integrates **both quantitative and qualitative data** to provide a more comprehensive evaluation. For the school feeding program, this could involve combining **surveys and statistical data (quantitative)** with **focus group discussions and interviews (qualitative)** to understand not only what has changed but also why and how these changes occurred.

Key Steps:

- **Quantitative Data Collection:** Use structured tools like surveys and school records to collect numerical data on attendance, test scores, and health indicators.
- **Qualitative Data Collection:** Conduct focus groups with students, interviews with teachers, and observations to gain deeper insights.
- **Data Triangulation:** Combine findings from both data sources to provide a more robust evaluation.

Reference and Quotation:

- Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) argue that a mixed methods design "yields a richer and more reliable basis for drawing conclusions" and supports better understanding of the program's complexities.

Example Application: While tracking improvements in school attendance quantitatively, qualitative data might reveal barriers faced by students (e.g., distance to school, household chores), providing insights that quantitative data alone might miss.

Additional conditions

1. Developmental Evaluation

- **Definition:** Developmental Evaluation supports the development of innovative and adaptive programs in complex, dynamic environments. Instead of aiming for predefined outcomes, it emphasizes **ongoing learning and adaptation**, helping teams refine their interventions based on emerging insights.
- **When Used:** Suitable for programs that are evolving, where strategies are being tested and refined in real-time.
- **Example:** In a social innovation project aiming to reduce homelessness, Developmental Evaluation would continuously assess the intervention's impact and provide feedback to adjust strategies as new challenges or opportunities arise.

2. Real-Time Evaluation (RTE)

- **Definition:** Real-Time Evaluation is conducted during the early stages or during the implementation of a program to provide **immediate feedback**, allowing for rapid adjustments. The goal is to make timely improvements rather than waiting until the end of the project.
- **When Used:** Ideal for humanitarian aid, disaster response, or any time-sensitive initiatives where immediate corrective actions are necessary.
- **Example:** In disaster relief, a Real-Time Evaluation could assess the efficiency of aid distribution in the first few weeks and suggest modifications to reach more affected communities effectively.

3. Modifications to the Theory of Change

- **Definition:** As programs evolve, the original **Theory of Change (ToC)** might need adjustments based on new evidence, stakeholder feedback, or changes in the operating environment. Modifications involve **revising assumptions, activities, or outcomes** to reflect the reality of implementation.
- **When Used:** Suitable when unexpected challenges or opportunities arise that require a change in strategy.
- **Example:** If a program aimed at improving literacy rates finds that digital resources are more effective than printed materials, the ToC may be modified to emphasize digital learning tools as the primary activity.