



Evaluation of international and non-governmental organizations' communication activities: A 15 year systematic review



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand how intergovernmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations have evaluated their communication activities and adhered to principles of evaluation methodology from 1995–2010 based on a systematic review of available evaluation reports ($N = 46$) and guidelines ($N = 9$). Most evaluations were compliant with principle 1 (defining communication objectives), principle 2 (combining evaluation methods), principle 4 (focusing on outcomes) and principle 5 (evaluating for continued improvement). Compliance was least with principle 3 (using a rigorous design) and principle 6 (linking to organizational goals). Evaluation was found not to be integrated, adopted widely or rigorously in these organizations.

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1. Introduction

The increasing role of intergovernmental organizations (IOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in today's world has put them under the spotlight, earning them equally applause and sounding alarms. Organizations such as UNICEF, the European Union (EU), Oxfam and WWF have made increasing use of communications to profile themselves, influence issues and build relations. However, how these organizations evaluate their communication activities has been little studied or analyzed. Despite the ample academic studies and practitioner manuals offering guidance on communication evaluation ([Michaelson & Macleod, 2007](#)) the evidence indicates that the majority of companies and organizations do not systematically evaluate communication activities ([Macnamara, 2006](#)). Reasons for this disparity include the accessibility of communication professionals to data; the impracticality and complexity of methodology required; the vagueness of communication programme design; the lack of resources and know-how of evaluation; and the absence of an evaluation culture amongst communications professionals ([White, 2005; Macnamara, 2006](#)).

2. Methods

This study sets out to understand how IOs and INGOs are evaluating their communication activities and to what extent they adhere to the following six principles of communication evaluation methodology: (P1) defining objectives of

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communication activities to be evaluated, (P2) using a combination of evaluation methods, (P3) using a rigorous evaluation design, (P4) focusing on effects of outcomes over outputs and processes, (P5) evaluating for continued improvement and (P6) showing the link to overall organizational goals. The systematic review followed a standard protocol (Harden & Thomas, 2005) with 230 organizations included in the review. Relevant reports and guidelines were obtained by making contact with the organizations, searching on their websites and on two online databases of evaluation reports (www.comminit.com and www.alnap.org/resources/erd). A set of 46 reports and nine guidelines were included and coded for conformity to principles P1–P6. Coding was carried out by the author and an independent coder with intercoder reliability calculated for each principle with percentage agreement ranging from 73% to 100% and a Kappa coefficient value of .64.

3. Results

The 46 reports represented evaluation of 46 distinct communication activities of 22 organizations and four coalitions. Most organizations were represented once or twice with the exception being the EU which was the source of 16 reports. The majority of activities were at the global level (63% – 29/46) with the remaining at the regional level. The evaluations indicated that each activity used on average three out of the four channels identified (interpersonal, media, internet and partners) and five tactics with the most popular being websites, media relations, publications and events.

P1: The majority of evaluations (80% – 37/46) were able to define the objectives of the communication activities being evaluated. A focus of the majority of evaluations was on evaluating outcomes where the vagueness or absence of the objectives was an issue. **P2:** 91% (41/46) reported using more than one evaluation method with the most often used being interviews, document reviews and surveys. **P3:** some half (25/46) used an appropriate level of rigour for what they intended to evaluate. The majority of evaluations (30/46) were post-only designs with the remaining 16 being post-only with limited time series or pre-data (13), quasi experimental design with control groups (2) and pre-post design (1). **P4:** The majority of evaluations (33/46) had some focus on outcomes although most considered more than one level of effect, with the combination of outcomes and outputs being the most frequent. **P5:** 96% (44/46) of the evaluations did consider continuous improvement by including in the evaluations reflections and/or recommendations for future communication activities. **P6:** 63% (29/46) of the evaluations endeavoured to link their findings to the overall organizational goals notably by illustrating the level of support provided by communication activities to these goals and/or the links between the two.

Only nine evaluations adhered to all six principles. What these evaluations shared in common was that they were on a precise series of communication activities or specific in terms of effects with evaluation designs other than the predominant post-only design.

4. Discussion

Overall the review indicates that the prevalence of communication evaluation amongst IOs/INGOs is lower than the estimated 30–50% level for other sectors (Macnamara, 2006). Low prevalence of communication evaluation is possibly due to similar causes found in other sectors although some of these points have even more resonance given the particularities of the IO/INGO sector, notably the cost and complexity of the communication activities, often implying partners and target audiences spread globally. In the one organization where evaluation was pre-dominant—the EU—it can be surmised that this is largely due to evaluation being a programme requirement for EU bodies whereas in other organizations this is not necessarily the case. It was also not known on what basis communication activities were chosen (or not) for evaluation in IOs/INGOs with a selection criteria largely absent, which has also been seen in other sectors (Gregory & Watson, 2008).

Where the IO/INGO sector does differ is that when communication evaluation is undertaken it is predominantly on the outcome rather than the output level, as seen with the majority adherence to P4. An explanation for this is possibly both the adoption of results-based management systems since the mid-nineties in this sector that has led to a move from the output to outcome levels in evaluation and an increasing interest in outcome level evaluation from donor governments that largely fund IOs/INGOs.

Despite this focus on outcomes, this review found that communication evaluation often lacked a rigorous enough design to evaluate this level of effects, as seen with the low adherence to P3. Academic studies, practitioner manuals, guidelines and the evaluation reports propose strengthening these designs without the use of experimental designs, for example by the use of contributive analysis, process tracing, tracking studies, reconstructed time-series data and propensity score matching (Lindenmann, 2003; White, 2005). However, these approaches were not widely adopted by IOs/INGOs. This limitation in methodologies applied was also linked to the broader issue of the lack of integrating evaluation into programme design. Further, the challenges seen in evaluating outcomes was also related to the specific international nature of the activities. In evaluating “efficiency”, the evaluations were often assessing the influence of IOs/INGOs on national counterparts and networks to communicate, a more difficult effect to evaluate and a challenge seen in international evaluation in general.

These findings lead to three key methodological areas that stand out in their need for strengthening to make evaluation more effective and valuable: the selection criteria for evaluation; evaluation designs and methods used; and the place of evaluation in communication programme design. For evaluation to be more effective and valuable to IOs/INGOs, there simply has to be more of it. To increase prevalence, selection criteria would be needed, with one possibility being the criteria adopted by EU bodies which is based on budget and importance of activities. Type and scope of activities would also be

relevant criteria; as the review found a precise focus of the communication activities with specific objectives was more “evaluable”.

In addition to cost, complexity and know-how what is contributing to the limited prevalence of evaluation in IOs/INGOs is its place in programme design. The review found that communication evaluation has been almost exclusively undertaken as a post-activity action by external consultants. This limited integration within activities also means that it is challenging for organizations to adopt more rigorous designs and methods.

The review highlighted differences with other sectors, notably the international nature of the communication activities of IOs/INGOs which made the application of evaluation methodologies more challenging compared to national-level evaluations and the emphasis on outcomes over outputs. Finally, the review of the IO/INGO sector found similarities to other sectors, such as the use of multiple methods and the focus on continued improvement.

Short biography: Glenn O'Neil has led some 50 evaluations, research and communication projects for international organizations and NGOs in over 40 countries with a specialization in the communications, advocacy and media areas. Founder of Owl RE, evaluation consultancy, Glenn has an Executive Masters in Communications Management from the University of Lugano and is currently undertaking a PhD in research and evaluation methodology at the Methodology Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Author note

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