



EVENT SUMMARY

RESEARCH METHODS SUMMER SCHOOL

Exploring Practice and Challenges in the Field

27 & 28 June 2017

Dr. Gerard McCann, of DSA Ireland, opened the Summer School, framed in terms of the research methods presentations of the coming days and the overarching concepts of evaluation, accountability and results frameworks. He also shared a personal reflection on cross-cutting issues in the development sector in the Global North and Global South.

“Developing and Implementing a Theory of Change” by Ana Stiglic, of the Norwegian Refugee Council, covered a top down Theory of Change, which utilizes long term goals and statistical indicators as a vital tool for implementing humanitarian aid. She articulated the value of a Theory of Change in serving target communities by its living nature and its usefulness for accountability, evaluation, and the conceptualisation of complex projects. A discussion of practicality and communicability concluded the presentation.

“Strengthening Ethical Practice in Development and Humanitarian Research” by researchers Dr. Maja Haals Bronson and Dr. Mairead Finn began by delineating the concept of ethics in the non-profit and academic fields. To structure the discussion, Dr. Finn discussed the difference between ethical codes and ethical guidelines, as well as the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence. She underscored the varying responsibilities and relationships through the research process, challenging participants to take conscientious steps to safeguard those involved at all levels. To provide a case study of ethics in action, Dr. Bronson detailed her work in north-western Rwanda and how she was able to appropriately interact with and protect families. She found ethical practices to be vital for anyone interested in doing research, especially in politically charged contexts.

“Getting Quality Data from Interviews” by Assistant Professor Dr. Paula Mayock introduced the nature of qualitative data and the role of the interview. She outlined main principles; that the data we get is largely dependent on the interviewer; the importance of approaching the interview well-informed; the need for detailed narratives; and the centrality of probing questions to generate data. Dr. Mayock asked us to view interviews as conversations with a purpose and concluded with, “to be a good interviewer, we need to work on ourselves and have a critical self-awareness.”

“Doing Better Focus Groups: A How to Guide” by Assistant Professor Dr. Paula Mayock outlined the characteristics, uses, and history of focus groups. She asked us to look at focus groups as a way to “make visible how people articulate and justify their ideas in relation to each other,” discovering beliefs and attitudes by way of social interaction. Dr. Mayock gave practical advice, describing the role of the mediator, suggesting the style of question and language, and discussing potential dynamics of the group. She provided a video example of quality practice in focus groups and invited conversation on how to best address potential problems in focus groups.

“Choosing the Right Quantitative Evaluation Design” by Ana Stiglic, of the Norwegian Refugee Council, demonstrated an approach to critical decision making by modelling real world scenarios in which decisions on quantitative evaluation need to be made. To assess the effectiveness of a program, Stiglic utilized a flow chart of selections to determine which samplings, tools, and statistical tests are most reflective of actual impact.

“Choosing the Right Statistical Test” by researcher and PhD candidate Margaryta Klymak developed at greater length the best types of mathematical tests for data analysis in varying contexts.

“Data Gathering in Fragile Contexts” by Alex Tran of GOAL Global centred on the subject of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, the tracking of sick and death instances, and ways to effectively mitigate damage. He entwined the practices of integrating local cultural customs and developing digital statistical models to discover which strategies had the most impact on reducing cases of Ebola. Ultimately, Tran found that in order to maximize access to information about the disease and where to seek medical treatment, utilizing community leaders was an invaluable strategy.

“Researching with Marginalised Communities: Focus on Children” by Sinead Matson, a doctoral student studying children in urban India, highlighted the variety of work which can be done to address childrens’ needs. She argued that “in order to research a group of children, you must observe them in their world,” and went through practical exercises including illustrations, snowball fights, and photo voice. These are accessible mechanisms to generate profound qualitative data. She concluded with several of her own research examples and the efficacy of these methods in interacting with children.

“Case Study: Researching in Post War Settings” by researcher and Associate Director at DCU, Dr. Walt Kilroy, worked through a practical example of research in the field. Conscious of the complexities that researchers face, he found that there is often more than one answer for how to design and conduct research. He described the power structures inherent in research that could inhibit our ability to take in the most accurate data and conclusions. Dr. Kilroy encouraged us to have awareness, reflexivity, and openness, to question our assumptions relentlessly and listen intently in seeking out all facets to convey a full story.

“Digital Data Gathering and Data Visualisation for Research” by Alex Tran and Phil Farrell, of GOAL Global, looked at the power of technology in evaluating data, visualizing information, and communicating our findings. The ethical implications of digital data holdings were explored, as well as practicalities of holding data in fragile contexts. The value of this method is found in improved efficiency through location tracking, sound recording, monitoring of response time, integration of user interface during the collection process, and real-time response input. By using an app and participant involvement, Tran showed us just how quickly data can be uploaded by completing an entire study and synthesis process during the presentation.

“The Value and Challenges of Results Frameworks in Development Programming,” a panel discussion, integrated the concepts of ethics and accountability into practical methods for evaluation. With Mary van Lieshout, DSAI Chair and advisor with GOAL, Chairing the discussion, the panel opened with an introduction to measuring our actions in terms of impact, and the role of results frameworks’ in facilitating this oversight. Van Lieshout asked the panel, “How do we make this a tool that works for us?” Knowing that results frameworks aim to focus on specific models for identifying and motoring phenomena in order to ensure organisations’ accountability and conscientiousness, she worked through the panel’s perspectives on how to best implement results frameworks.

Peter McEvoy, independent development consultant, described a shift in the last twenty years from few monitoring tools to sophisticated results frameworks. Calling for knowledge, intuition, and understanding, he emphasized our need to be sensitive to the fuller image of sector and environment. Mary Brophy, Irish Aid, explained the worldwide commitment to a results-based narrative in evaluating the non-profit sector and outlined Agenda 2030, which emphasizes a tangible impact. As both Anne-marie Coonan, Concern Worldwide, and Enida Friel, Oxfam Ireland, were coming from an NGO background, we heard how the sector has adjusted to results frameworks. They stressed their increased ability to promote change and the transition of reporting language from recording organisations’ actions to demonstrating impact on the lives they affect.

In applying results frameworks, the panel implored participants to view it as a living document, providing flexibility to adjust both inputs and indicators. While it is created and maintained at a management level, the local context and beneficiaries should be kept at highest priority, and allowing for variance is imperative. Results frameworks are not a magic bullet, they argued, but rather a tool which can be conscientiously used in conjunction with other strategies to improve the rigor of the work. Although perfect indicators don’t exist, an effort should be made to seek out the most measurable, objectively verifiable data for the sector and environment. There was an acknowledgement that “some indicators are better suited to a higher level, some more granular,” and that this provided a better evaluation of work. The addition of qualitative data allows us to have a more complete image of the landscape, and can often provide explanations for variances in our quantitative indicators.

Ultimately, the goal is to improve human lives in relation to poverty and inequality. This should always be at the forefront of our minds in developing and executing development and humanitarian strategies. They stressed that the soul of the results framework should be created and sustained through the lens of the beneficiary, and we should “be brave in maintaining quality and focusing on the most vulnerable populations.”