Systematic triangulation in evaluation

Data scarcity or unreliability and complexities of comparing and cross-checking information from diverse domains are among the most common challenges evaluators face. Systematic triangulation is a viable option to address such limitations. Used to identify key evaluation findings, its application has proven to be useful to addressing the limitations encountered in country-level evaluation analysis conducted by the Independent Evaluation Office of the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

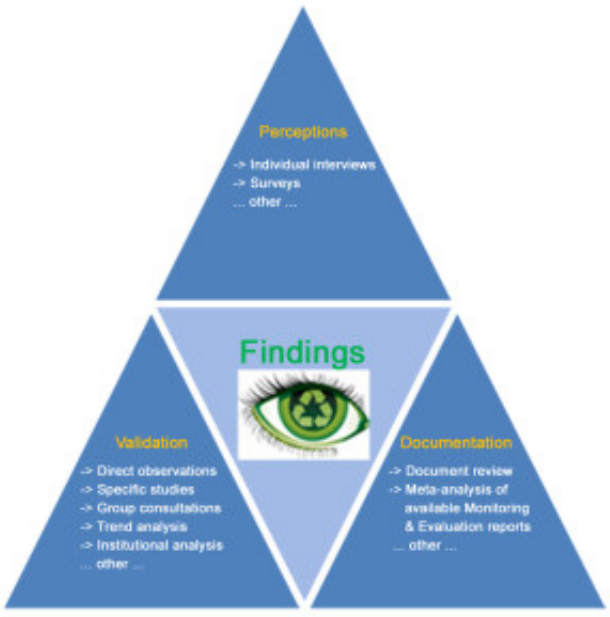

Fig. 1.

The GEF, one of the most important sources of funding specifically supporting environmental projects and programmes throughout the world, operates in five main areas of focus. These include as diverse environmental sectors as biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, international waters and chemicals, corresponding to a rather diversified set of scientific domains such as ecology, soil science or chemistry, just to name a few.

GEF country-level evaluations face several contextual and methodological limitations, including the scarcity or unreliability of national statistics on environmental indicators and data series – especially in Least Developed Countries – the unreliability of project performance and results data from the older projects, and challenges in evaluating the impacts of GEF projects; among others. These limitations are also faced by those evaluation departments of other international organizations tasked with the conduct of country-level evaluations.

Triangulation is a powerful research technique that facilitates cross-verification of evaluative data and evidence using more than two sources. The identification of key preliminary findings through systematic triangulation in the Office's country-level evaluations aims at responding to pre-determined key evaluation questions. Triangulation of evaluative evidence is conducted by collecting data/information from a number of a different sources and/or applying different evaluation methods and tools to the same key evaluation question.

The Office conducts triangulation by cross-checking information and analysis resulting from the data collected in three research areas: Perceptions, Documentation and Validation (Fig.1.).

Fig. 2.

The collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative information and data results in the identification of method-specific findings in response to the key evaluation questions. These findings are triangulated with the ones that emerged from other methods related to the same question, with the aim of identifying the key evaluation finding that responds to the respective key evaluation question. In other words, through following this systematic procedure the analysis moves progressively from method-specific findings to key preliminary evaluation findings.

The additional data gathering and evaluative analysis that follows as a result of the triangulation brainstorming session aims at: (a) confirming or challenging the key preliminary evaluation findings identified, and (b) identifying the missing key preliminary evaluation findings (Fig. 2.). As a result, further research is conducted to collect the additional information needed to fill the identified gaps in the analysis.

Triangulation offers an opportunity to deal with data scarcity or unreliability, commonly encountered in evaluation of environmental programmes. Furthermore, triangulation helps dealing with the multi-disciplinary nature of evaluation, which attempts to answer questions involving multiple areas of knowledge, as opposed to general research, which is often restricted to one discipline or scientific domain in terms of questions asked and methods used.

The approach to systematic triangulation developed by the Office is well suited to evaluate GEF country portfolios, which involve support in different GEF focal areas and face common data challenges. The approach provides a response to those authors advocating for the need to further develop triangulation protocols, procedures and/or methodologies. The approach also contributes to evaluation practice, especially in relation to those evaluation units of other international organizations involved in country level evaluations, which face similar difficulties in data availability as well as in the multidisciplinary nature of their evaluand.

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