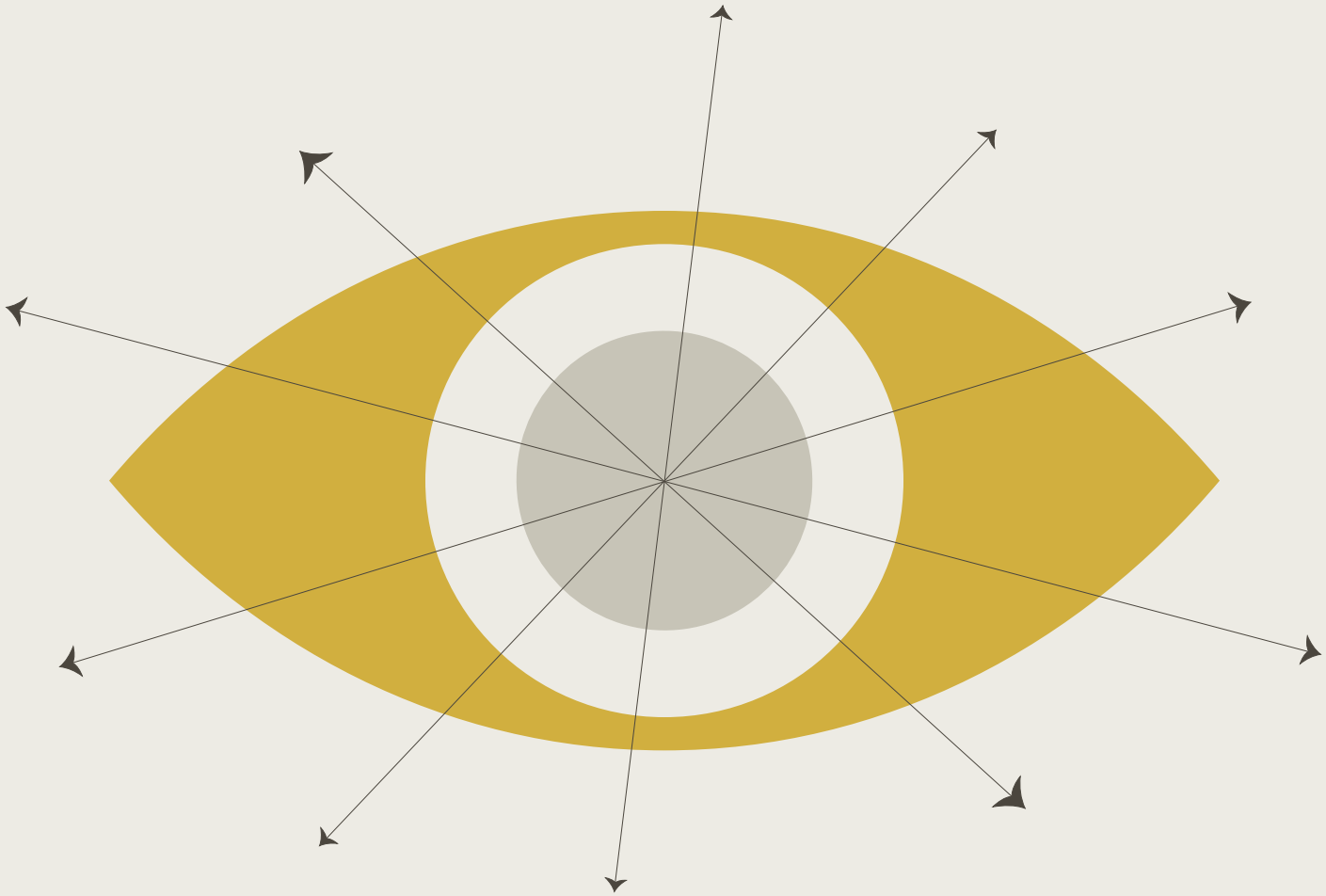
November 2017

Contribution Analysis in Policy Work

Assessing Advocacy's Influence



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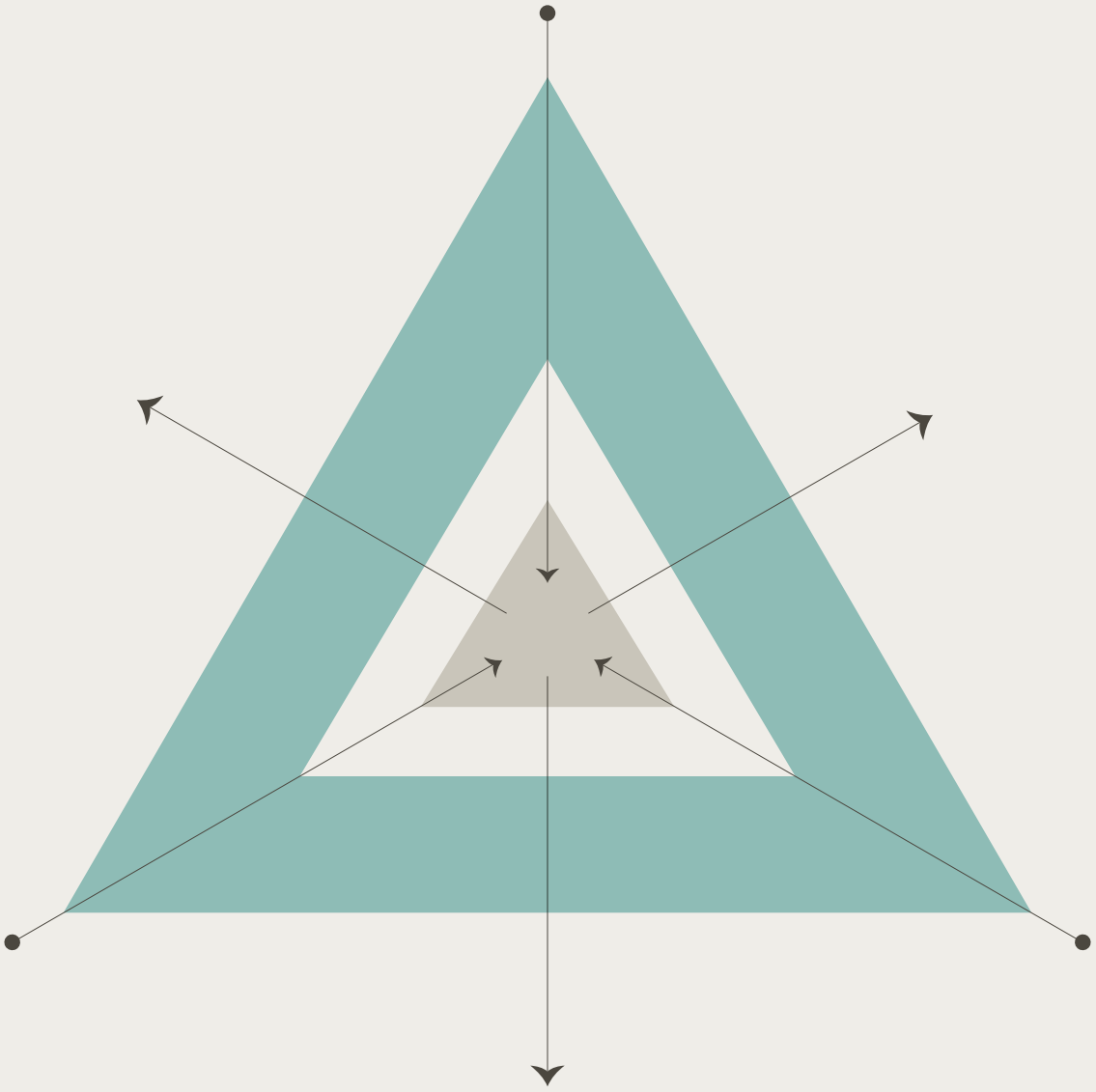
Acronyms and Abbreviations

Alliance	Alliance for Early Success
CA	Contribution analysis
FAA	The U.S. Foreign Assistance Act of 1961
FATAA	The Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016
GPA	The Global Partnerships Act of 2012 and then of 2013
HFAC	House Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. Congress
MFAN	Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network
PPD-6	Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

Introduction

Advocacy occurs in dynamic political contexts, where advocates partner, or work in parallel, with others to advance a policy agenda and counter opposition.



Contribution analysis is philosophically aligned with how policy evaluators generally approach their work.

It is also where strategies and outcomes are often fluid and subject to change in response to external factors. The dynamic nature of advocacy places challenging demands on evaluators, raising legitimate questions about who is responsible and who gets credit for results.

Advocacy evaluation as a field has lacked good, rigorous examples of how to examine the cause-and-effect relationship between advocacy and policy change. A non-experimental impact evaluation method that holds promise is contribution analysis. Using specific examples from our evaluation practice in a U.S. policy context over the past two years, this brief explores the suitability and application of contribution analysis for advocacy and policy evaluation and offers guidance to evaluators who might be considering this approach in their work.

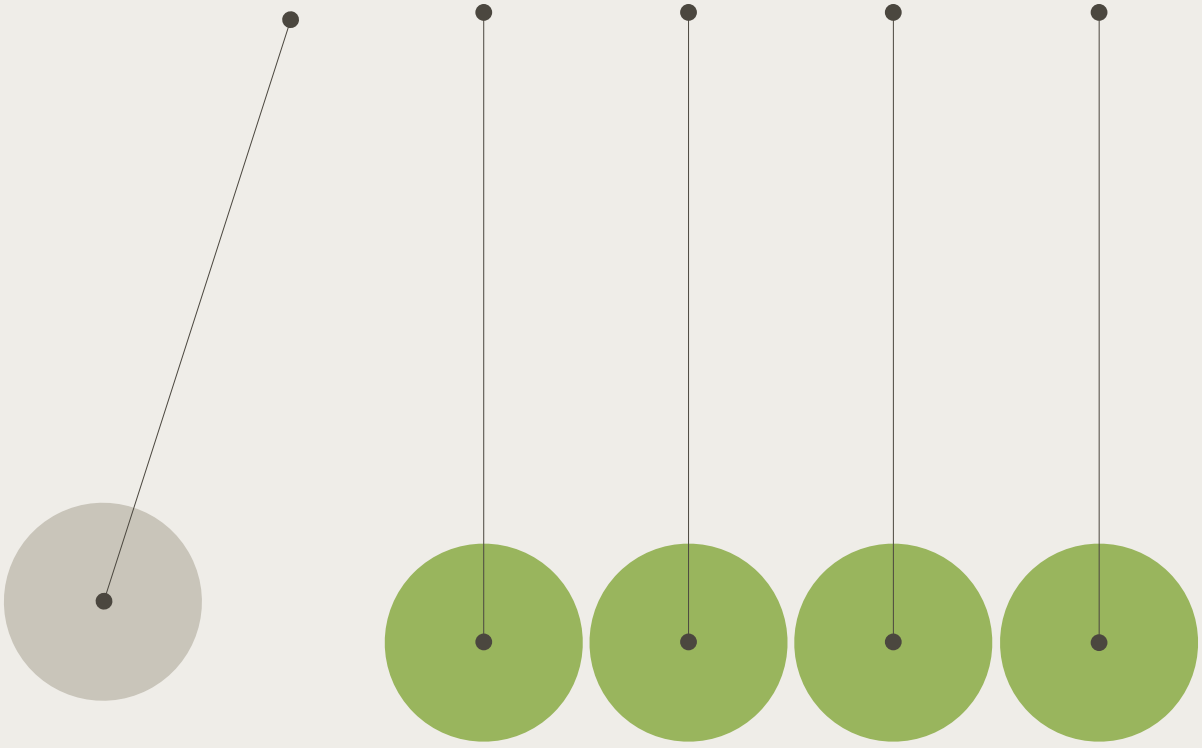
Applying contribution analysis in this context is not without challenges, but we conclude that the framework is philosophically aligned with how policy evaluators generally approach their work, and is useful in systematizing good evaluation practices in this setting. Specifically, we find that it provides rigor in thinking critically about the interaction and relationship between central actors and activities and other influences within a complex multi-actor environment. It also facilitates a more purposeful, deeper, and systematic consideration of the myriad influences on policy outcomes.

In this brief, we first provide background on contribution analysis and its applications. Then, we introduce the specific cases in which we applied the method to assess whether and how advocacy efforts made a difference. We then walk through the six steps of the method, providing details about how each step was conducted. We add a seventh step that focuses on use. We end with some practical conclusions designed to assist evaluators who choose to embark on this journey in their own work.

What is contribution analysis?

Contribution analysis is a theory-based approach to causal analysis that was first introduced in 2001 by Dr. John Mayne, a Canadian public sector evaluator.

Dr. Mayne was concerned with arriving at credible causal claims using program monitoring data (Mayne 2001). Thus, contribution analysis has its roots in public sector performance management, finding strong proponents in Canada and the European Union (Wimbush et al., 2012). More recently, the framework has been applied to other contexts, including research use and knowledge exchange (Stocks-Rankin, 2014; Wimbush et al., 2012; Lemire et al., 2012).



The 6 Steps

Mayne's method utilizes an explicit theory of change, proceeding through a six-step process designed to test the theory against logic and evidence to confirm that an intervention or initiative[1] has contributed to an observed result. The six steps Mayne identifies are:

1. Set out the cause-effect issue to be addressed.
2. Develop the postulated theory of change and the risks to it, including rival (alternative) explanations.[2]
3. Gather the existing evidence on the theory of change.
4. Assemble and assess the contribution claim, and challenges to it.[3]
5. Seek out additional evidence.
6. Revise and strengthen the contribution story.

The aim of this process is to reduce uncertainty about the contribution of an initiative to observed results through an "increased understanding of why results did or did not occur, and the roles played by the intervention (initiative) and other influencing factors" (Befani and Mayne, 2014). It does this by presenting credible evidence for a theory of change that also accounts for other influencing factors (Mayne, 2012). The purpose of contribution analysis is to answer the following question:

In light of the multiple factors influencing a result, has the intervention (initiative) made a noticeable contribution to an observed result and in what way? (Mayne, 2012, p.273)

Three levels of contribution analysis

Mayne (2008) observes that there are three levels of contribution analysis that lead to different degrees of robustness in statements of contribution:

- Minimalist contribution analysis focuses on developing the theory of change and confirming that expected outputs were delivered. Outcomes are assumed, based on the delivery of outputs (for instance, immunization occurs as a result of the delivery of vaccines).
- Contribution analysis of direct influence takes into account other influencing factors and explicitly confirms assumptions about direct influence (such as behavior change) with factual evidence.
- Contribution analysis of indirect influence extends the analysis, attempting to provide factual evidence for at least key parts of the entire theory of change, including at least some intermediate and ultimate outcomes and assumptions.

The cases in this brief use contribution analysis to assess the direct and indirect influence of advocacy initiatives on policy outcomes. We sought to provide evidence for each initiative's contribution to:

- Intermediate outcomes where direct influence could be demonstrated, such as whether policy targets aligned their messages with the initiative's stated principles; and
- Final policy outcomes where influence may have been both direct and indirect, such as the passage of a key piece of legislation.

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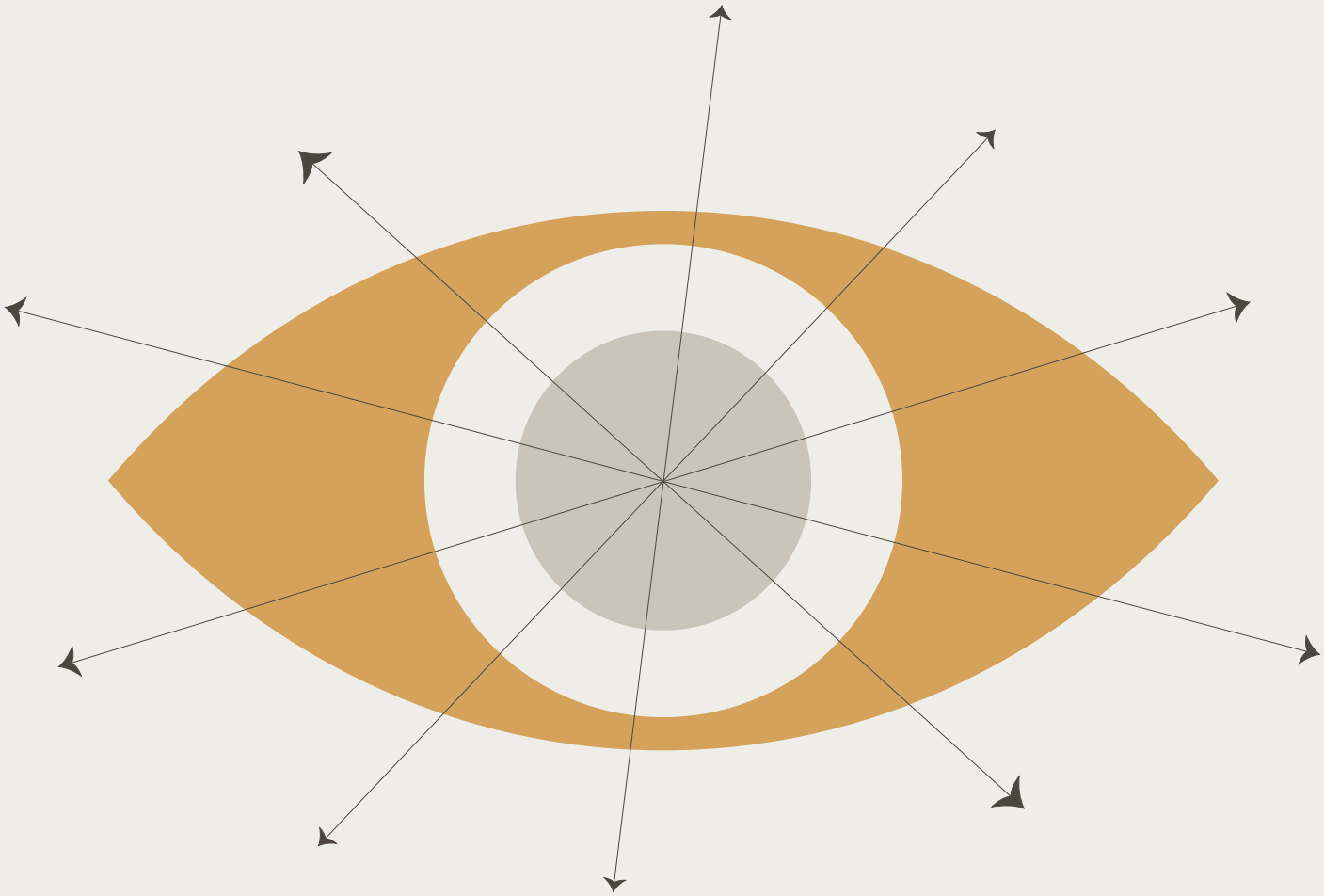
1 In this brief, we use the term "initiative" instead of "intervention" because it is more aligned with how advocates frame their efforts and activities.

2 John Mayne uses the term "rival explanations" in his 2012 article to describe Step 2, however we prefer his earlier term "alternative explanations" and will use that instead in this brief.

3 The literature on contribution analysis uses the terms "contribution claim" and "causal claim" interchangeably, but for consistency we have chosen to use "contribution claim" throughout this brief.

Why consider contribution analysis for policy evaluation?

Funders, implementers, and those involved in, and affected by, initiatives want to know what, if any, difference their efforts make.



Contribution analysis explicitly examines multiple actors and influences.

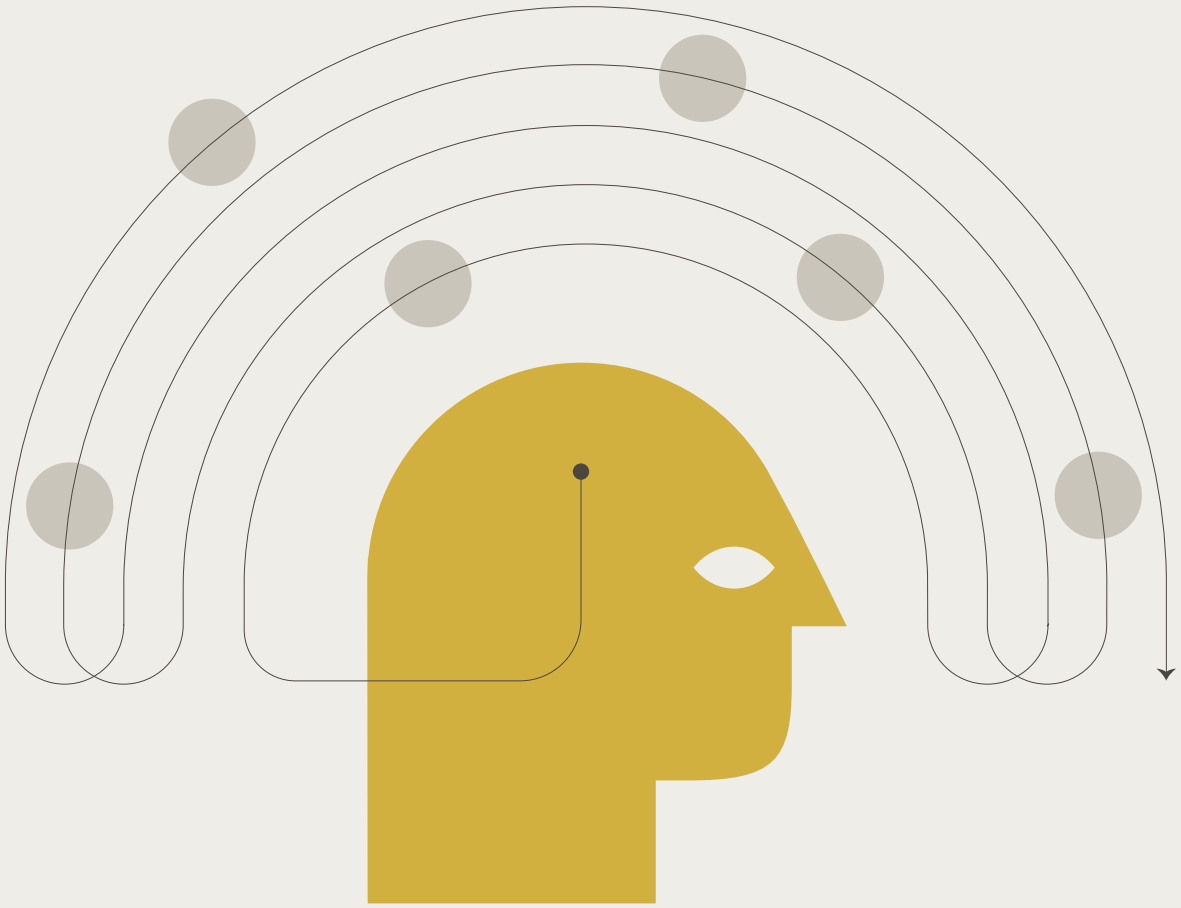
While evaluators are challenged to provide credible evidence of causality or influence between initiatives and outcomes in most fields, this challenge increases in fields such as policy change. Policy outcomes typically result from complex processes involving many actors and influences and often do not fit within a funder's grantmaking timeframe.

A strength of contribution analysis is its ability to unpack impact in a way that explicitly examines multiple actors and influences, and that answers questions about what worked and why. The method can be used to establish credible causal linkages between an initiative's advocacy activities and resulting policy outcomes in both 1) contexts where there are multiple influencing factors, and 2) situations where experimental and quasi-experimental designs are not feasible because too many factors are influencing an outcome, and the individual factors are hard to isolate. In the latter case, it may be more appropriate to use contribution analysis because it is a more process-oriented approach, which seeks to identify and substantiate the causal factors that influenced a policy outcome (Maxwell, 2004; Patton, 2008). Contribution analysis squarely fits within a theory-based framework that looks explicitly at processes and mechanisms for change.

Contribution analysis, like other process-oriented approaches, acknowledges that many factors influence a given outcome. Rather than trying to prove attribution, that A caused B, contribution analysis seeks to identify the contribution that A made to B, while also giving credit to other influencing factors. The credibility of its findings emerges from the care with which a theory of change is described, tested, and revised over multiple iterations, and the rigor with which an evaluation team identifies, tests, and validates contribution claims. This makes it a good fit for complex policy change initiatives.

What should be considered before choosing contribution analysis for a policy evaluation?

The appropriateness of contribution analysis for assessing an advocacy effort's contribution to policy change depends on the evaluation context and resources.



Capacity, skills, access, and relationships all matter in deciding whether to use contribution analysis.

Before making a decision to use contribution analysis, consider the following questions.

» How much time is available for the evaluation?

Using contribution analysis takes time, since its effectiveness depends on being steeped in the context and the content of the policy change dynamics, thorough review of all relevant documents and multiple rounds of data collection, followed by iterations of writing and getting feedback on the contribution story.

» What skills does the evaluator possess?

Evaluators must demonstrate strong qualitative skills, including interviewing skills and the capacity to analyze qualitative data. Producing credible findings depends on unearthing and testing assumptions; probing responses to identify an initiative's influence compared to that of an alternative explanation; and understanding the interests of different data sources, so as to correctly interpret the explanations they offer for how a policy change came about.

» What access does the evaluator have to advocates and policymakers?

Contribution analysis in policy work relies on an evaluator's access to advocates, allies, opponents, and policymakers to gather information from all relevant perspectives and fully triangulate data sources. In cases in which an evaluator has no such access, documents and data from other external stakeholders representing the full range of perspectives on the policy change and how it came about must be examined to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to produce credible findings.

» Is there adequate time and commitment to create a useful theory of change?

Contribution analysis encourages the use of a robust and plausible theory of change, and tests the theory's links and assumptions. Securing the time and willingness to develop an explicit, visual theory of change with the evaluation's main stakeholders is a hurdle in many advocacy evaluation efforts. However, doing so offers several benefits, including additional insight into the most important data to collect through contribution analysis.

» How much time has elapsed since the events occurred?

Contribution analysis depends on key stakeholders remembering events accurately. If a policy change has taken place too far in the past, memories about how it came about may no longer be as sharp as they once were.

» How fragile or robust are the relationships between advocates and policymakers?

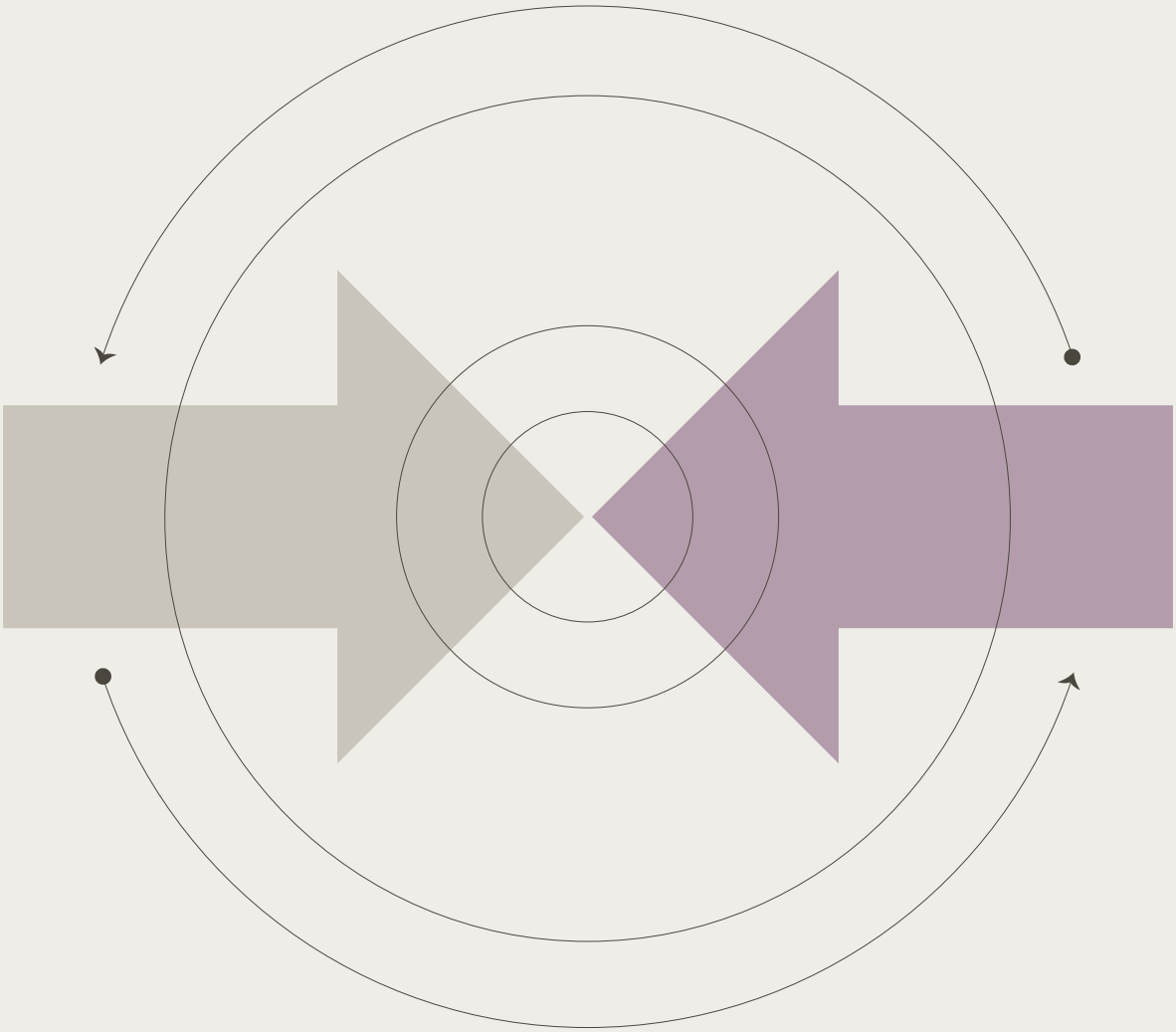
A first principle in contribution analysis, as in most types of evaluation, is to do no harm to relationships. The evaluation team needs to honestly assess how a policy change came about and what influenced it, and must do so with diplomacy, so as not to harm the relationships on which an organization or coalition relies for its advocacy.

» How sensitive are the initiative dynamics?

In highly contentious initiatives, the evaluation team may need to take extra care to protect advocates, policymakers, and the strategies that were used, particularly when the advocacy was quiet and behind the scenes, since publicizing such advocacy strategies could benefit the opposition and/or harm the policymakers involved.

Can contribution analysis be combined with other methods?

Contribution analysis provides a systematic framework based on a theory of change for answering a contribution question.



Contribution analysis is methodologically neutral.

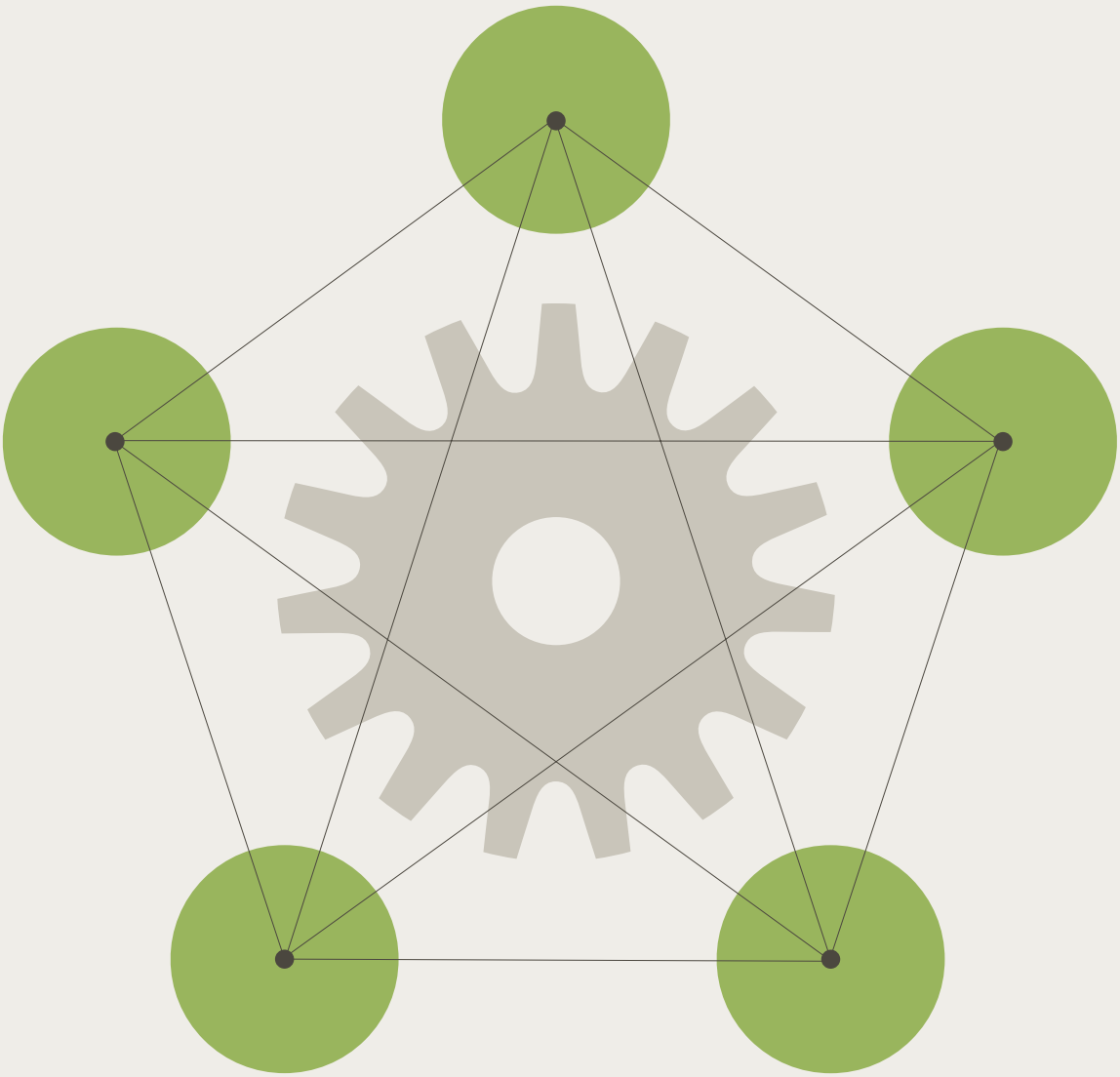
It provides an approach for developing the logic of a contribution story informed by evidence. Yet, it is methodologically neutral when it comes to specifying the procedures used to collect evidence or assess the strength of evidence, so it can be readily combined with other methods.

For instance, Befani and Mayne (2014) suggest that process tracing can be used to strengthen inferences made with contribution analysis. Process tracing is a method of theorizing and testing how a set of interlocking components causes a particular result. Various actors and organizations engage in behaviors and activities that are connected and sequenced to produce effects that explain how an outcome occurred. Process tracing goes into detail about the kinds of evidence that are necessary and sufficient to confirm or disconfirm a causal explanation.

Other methods that can be combined with contribution analysis include outcome harvesting (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2012), General Elimination Method (Lemire et al., 2012), and Relevant Explanation Finder (Lemire et al., 2012).

The Cases

Five experiences using contribution analysis informed the guidance put forth in this brief.



The cases assess causal links between advocacy efforts and policy outcomes.

In evaluations of the past work of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN) and the ongoing work of the Alliance for Early Success (Alliance), two evaluation teams used the contribution analysis framework to assess causal links between advocacy efforts and policy outcomes.[4]

MFAN is a coalition of international development and foreign policy practitioners, policy advocates, and experts who advocate for the reform of U.S. foreign assistance to increase its transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness. As part of a retrospective evaluation of MFAN's first eight years, MFAN and the evaluation team identified the following four policy outcomes with links to MFAN's advocacy that merited deeper exploration using contribution analysis:

- The Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development (PPD-6)
- An effort to rewrite the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961
- The Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 (FATAA)
- The U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) work on Local Solutions

The Alliance operates through pooled and aligned funding from multiple foundations to advance early childhood education policies at the state level. The Alliance engages in coordinated grantmaking with state and national partners, provides state-level consultation, brokers technical assistance, and provides peer learning activities tied to state policy priorities and opportunities. The evaluation of the Alliance was focused on outcomes associated with a fiscal year time frame and was conducted during the last three months of that year. Summaries of these contribution analysis cases follow.

4 The contribution analysis stories developed as part of the MFAN evaluation can be found here: http://modernizeaid.net/evaluation-2008-2016/.

1 Case

The Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development (PPD-6) and MFAN's Influence

Overview

From 2008 to 2010, MFAN advocated for the first-ever presidential directive to recognize international development as vital to U.S. national security interests. President Obama issued Presidential Policy Directive 6 (PPD-6) in 2010.

Outcomes of interest

- Short-term outcome: Key actors in the field agree to shared principles.
- Short-term outcome: Bipartisan support for these principles increases; principles are reflected in both major political party platforms in 2008.
- Intermediate outcome: Champions of these principles influence the 2009 presidential transition; some champions secure positions within the new administration.
- Intermediate outcome: Political will inside administration increases.
- Intermediate outcome: Congress introduces related legislation.
- Policy change: The content and issuance of PPD-6; executive agency changes that flowed from it.

Causal problem

To what extent and how did MFAN contribute to...

- the issuance of PPD-6?
- the content of PPD-6?
- the key changes that flowed from it?

Findings / Results

The analysis confirmed that MFAN's internal work on shared principles and external advocacy prior to the 2008 elections and during the 2009 presidential transition provided some content and political momentum for the interim outcomes leading to PPD-6. The analysis supported the theory of change in several pathways of influence related to awareness, will, and action. However, analysis did not support one potential pathway for MFAN influence, related to the power of pursuing reform through Congress. Additionally, evidence contradicted an earlier hypothesis that MFAN played a role in ensuring that PPD-6 was issued as a stand-alone document.

Key data sources

A literature review, document review, interviews with coalition members and external stakeholders, a member survey, a workshop with MFAN members who were engaged in MFAN's efforts to support a presidential directive on global development, interviews with several policymakers, and a partnership with the MFAN evaluation advisors.

Evaluation / contribution analysis context

This was a retrospective evaluation of a main outcome that occurred six years before, with work and interim outcomes even earlier. The timing of the evaluation process was inopportune: some data collection occurred November 2016 through January 2017, as stakeholders were deeply engaged in electoral campaign work, a tumultuous presidential transition process, and a time of great uncertainty, all of which affected our ability to interview key players.

2 Case

Rewriting the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 and MFAN's Influence

Overview

MFAN sought to influence an effort to rewrite the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 within the U.S. Congress. Between 2008 and 2013, MFAN worked particularly closely with the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and the development community to influence the drafting and introduction of a new Foreign Assistance Act: the Global Partnerships Act (GPA) of 2012 and then of 2013.

Outcomes of interest

- Short-term outcome: A key member of Congress committed to drafting a new Foreign Assistance Act.
- Short-term outcome: The development community came together in support of drafting a new Foreign Assistance Act.
- Intermediate outcome: The GPA was drafted.
- Policy change: The GPA of 2012 and then of 2013 were introduced in the House of Representatives.

Causal problem

- How influential was MFAN in HFAC Chair Rep. Howard Berman's decision to rewrite the FAA?
- To what extent did MFAN contribute to the development of a new FAA?
- To what extent did MFAN contribute to bringing together the development community in support of this effort?
- How important was MFAN's role influencing the GPA's introduction in Congress?

Findings / Results

Rewriting the FAA was due to MFAN. The trusting relationship between the HFAC Chair and MFAN was critical to moving it forward. MFAN played a critical role bringing together the development community in support of this effort and helping bridge sectoral divides. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the time primarily advocated for sector funding and legislation. MFAN helped the NGOs come together to focus on more systemic changes. MFAN also kept pressing the congressman's office to continue drafting the new bill. MFAN was unique in proactively pushing for an FAA rewrite and in its constant contact on the issue.

Key data sources

Documents; interviews with MFAN staff and coalition members, allies, and policymakers; and a workshop with MFAN members most closely involved in the effort to rewrite the FAA.

Evaluation / contribution analysis context

This analysis took place four years after this attempt to rewrite the FAA was completed, and required that interviewees and workshop participants remember back eight years to the beginning of this process.

3 Case

The Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act (FATAA) of 2016 and MFAN's Influence

Overview

MFAN sought to influence the passage of the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act (FATAA) within the U.S. Congress by working closely with a number of congressional offices, parts of the administration, and the development community between 2010 and 2016.

Outcomes of interest

- Short-term outcome: Members of Congress in key positions committed to drafting U.S. foreign assistance reform legislation focused on accountability and transparency.
- Short-term outcome: Members of the administration in key positions supported the passage of U.S. foreign assistance reform legislation focused on accountability and transparency.
- Intermediate outcome: FATAA was drafted.
- Intermediate outcome: FATAA was introduced in Congress.
- Intermediate outcome: FATAA received significant bipartisan support in Congress.
- Policy change: The U.S. Congress passed FATAA and President Barack Obama signed it into law.

Causal problem

- To what extent did MFAN contribute to the development of FATAA?
- How important was MFAN's role in garnering support for FATAA?
- How important was MFAN's role in influencing FATAA's passage and enactment?

Findings / Results

FATAA's passage and enactment resulted from the long-term, concerted effort of the congressional offices involved, along with support from MFAN and a number of ally organizations, with each playing an important role. According to congressional staffers, MFAN played the most critical role among external stakeholders: they presented the bill idea, provided the most regular contact with congressional offices, and conducted most of the outsider legwork to keep the bill moving. Many believe FATAA would not have been enacted absent MFAN's ongoing engagement, given congressional offices' other priorities, or the quality or focus of the bill might have changed. Some felt the administration would have made progress increasing foreign aid transparency and accountability absent FATAA, but that FATAA created pressure to do more. FATAA's passage strengthened the Obama administration's reforms by enshrining them in a statute. Successful implementation will require that congressional offices, MFAN, and its allies keep a close eye on it.

Key data sources

Documents; interviews with MFAN staff and coalition members, allies, and policymakers; and a workshop with MFAN members most closely involved in the development and passage of FATAA.

Evaluation / contribution analysis context

This analysis took place very soon after FATAA's passage, but required that interviewees and workshop participants remember back six years to the early days of FATAA's development.

4 Case

USAID Local Solutions and MFAN's Influence

Overview

MFAN sought to advance country ownership by working with USAID reformers to implement Local Solutions, one of the goals of the reform agenda USAID Forward. Local Solutions aimed to strengthen partner country capacity to set development priorities, implement development programs, and increase sustainable financing for development.

Outcomes of interest

- Short-term outcome: MFAN members developed trusted alliance with USAID reformers.
- Intermediate outcome: The development community backed USAID efforts to increase the percentage of USAID development funds being directed to local partners.
- Intermediate outcome: Opposition was neutralized among private contractors and development NGOs opposed to USAID's goal of increasing the amount of direct aid going to local partners threefold in five years.
- Intermediate outcome: Congress passed budget authorizations that enable USAID to contract with local partners without excessive rules and restrictions.
- Policy change: USAID rewrote its operating procedures to institutionalize locally owned sustainable development, and made progress on defining metrics.

Causal problem

- To what extent did MFAN contribute to the reform of USAID procurement policies and operational procedures to advance local ownership?
- To what extent did MFAN align the development community and neutralize opposition to USAID's reform agenda in Congress?

Findings / Results

The analysis confirmed that absent MFAN, there would not have been a strong, consistent external voice for local ownership in support of USAID reformers. This voice was especially powerful because MFAN coalesced the development community to support USAID efforts, and without this strong external pressure, USAID would have had to contend with more congressional opposition. MFAN counterbalanced the voice of private contractors in Congress who were advocating for restrictions on USAID transferring funds to local partners. MFAN was also instrumental in helping USAID craft the operating procedures that provided guidelines for planning, delivering, assessing, and adapting country-level development programming to advance local ownership.

Key data sources

Agenda framing documents, reports, blog posts, and interviews with key MFAN members involved in USAID reform advocacy; a two-hour workshop with MFAN members most closely connected with USAID reform efforts; interviews with key USAID staff and allies/opponents to the USAID reform agenda.

Evaluation / contribution analysis context

The evaluation spanned the period from 2010 to 2016 and was conducted retrospectively at the end of 2016/early 2017.

5

Case

Contribution of The Alliance for Early Success to State Policy Outcomes

Overview

The Alliance sought to influence state-level early childhood education advocacy, policy, and funding in over 30 states across the country during 2016. The Alliance provided content, advocacy, and policy leadership, and worked closely with partners in states and nationally by providing funding and technical assistance and by using its convening power.

Outcomes of interest

- Short-term outcomes: Increased awareness and knowledge, new and diverse champions, effective policy options, increased momentum, strengthened partnership, common message and voice.
- Intermediate outcomes: More effective advocacy to influence policy and budget process, policymaker action in support of an effective birth through age 8 state policy agenda.
- Policy change: State policies adopted, state policies and programs implemented, state policies funded.

Causal problem

- In what ways has the work of the Alliance strengthened advocacy and leadership capacity for vulnerable young children from birth through age 8?
- To what extent did the Alliance contribute to state policies and public support for, and investment in, early childhood?

Findings / Results

Of the 36 states that partnered directly with the Alliance in 2016, 28 had policy victories spanning the range of policy-related outcomes in the Alliance Theory of Change, including child care access and quality, pre-K pilot programs or expansions, family support programs, and child health.

In addition, 24 states increased funds for children within the birth to age 8 continuum. The Alliance directly contributed to these outcomes by selecting strong grantees, supporting a strong national network, and providing timely and flexible response to grantees operating within the dynamic local policy environment.

Grantees (state partners and national technical assistance providers) who were supported by the Alliance were variously credited with engaging a broad set of stakeholders, informing the discussion, building a strong base of champions, and uniting advocates around common messages and strategies, and interim outcomes that were important contributors to observed policy wins and budget increases.

Key data sources

State policy databases and websites; grantee reports; interviews with advocates, decision-makers, technical assistance providers, and Alliance staff.

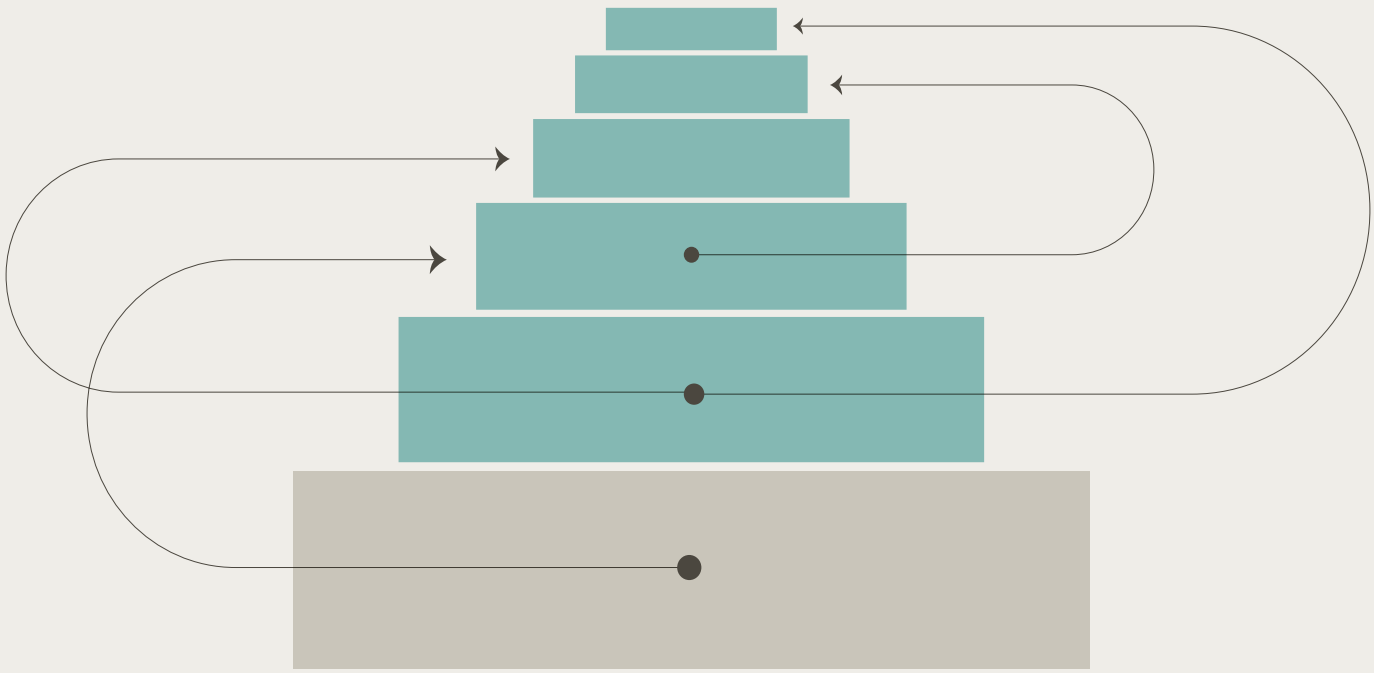
Evaluation / contribution analysis context

The evaluation spanned a single federal fiscal year and was conducted during summer months when several states had not yet concluded their legislative sessions.

How should the contribution analysis steps be applied?

This section offers guidance on how to conduct the six steps of contribution analysis.

We add a seventh step that is focused on use. For each step, we include Mayne's definition, our experiences, case examples, recommendations, and tools we used. In our experience, some steps overlap and/or repeat. This reinforces the iterative nature of contribution analysis. For example, while our teams identified the role of other influencing factors in Step 2, we continued to explore this concept in more depth during Steps 3, 4, and 5. Revisiting ideas at different steps in the process adds to the method's rigor.



Step / **1**

Set out the cause-effect issue to be addressed

- Acknowledge the causal problem.
- Scope the problem: determine the specific causal question being addressed, and determine the level of confidence needed in answering the question.
- Explore the nature and extent of the expected contribution.
- Determine the other key influencing factors.
- Assess the plausibility of the expected contribution given the intervention's (initiative's) size and reach (Mayne, 2012).

Theory

A causal problem and its associated causal question(s) provide a framework to examine the causal relationship between an initiative and a result. Defining the causal problem and questions to be addressed is best done in partnership with the stakeholders whose work is being evaluated. Together, evaluators and stakeholders (or advocates, in the case of policy work) can ask these questions to determine an appropriate causal problem to address.

- Is the causal problem appropriately complex to warrant the use of contribution analysis?
- Is the causal problem meaningful to key stakeholders? Is it a core focus of their policy work?
- Will the inquiry process into the causal problem produce robust evidence to test and validate the theory of change?
- Is the relationship between the initiative and the policy outcomes plausible and significant?
- Is the causal question specific—focused on one initiative and one or two related outcome(s)—and time bound?

Contribution analysis is most appropriate for examining the relationship between an initiative and a policy outcome when stakeholders have had a direct influence, or in some cases an indirect influence. Direct influence may result in a change in an ally or opponent's behavior; an indirect influence may be a change in policy or even an improvement in people's lives or the environment.

It may be less appropriate to use contribution analysis for examining outputs of an initiative (such as knowledge gained from training), since the question about contribution effects could be answered using fewer resources. It may also be less feasible to use contribution analysis to examine the ultimate result of an initiative (such as numbers of lives saved), because of the large number of factors that might have influenced it and the time it may take to achieve it.

Determining the level of confidence or credibility required to answer the causal question in a policy context may differ from other evaluations. When multiple advocates are involved, it is important to acknowledge, at a minimum, the individual, organizational, and coalition contributions that were critical for achieving the policy outcome, as well as the influencing factors that may offer alternative explanations for why the outcome was achieved.

Defining the causal problem and questions is best done in partnership with stakeholders.

Practice

MFAN

When selecting causal problems to address as part of the MFAN evaluation, we worked closely with MFAN stakeholders (including staff, coalition leadership, and the donor) to identify policy outcomes where there was broad agreement that MFAN made a notable contribution either working with the U.S. Congress or the administration between 2008 and 2016. In this process, we conducted research into multiple outcomes that had occurred over the eight-year span of the coalition, including a literature review, document review, interviews with 25 coalition members and external stakeholders, and a survey of 61 members.

In consultation with the MFAN evaluation advisory committee and after initial data analysis by the evaluators, we selected four outcomes to explore in depth, based on criteria outlined in this step. Each outcome had a different network of participants, policy targets, and political contexts, so the assumptions about how change would happen and the influencing factors were different in each case.

We generally chose policy outcomes that were sufficiently specific, such as the passage and enactment of a specific piece of legislation, instead of focusing on MFAN's contribution to advances in U.S. foreign assistance transparency more broadly. With each of the policy outcomes selected, the evaluation team asked: "Recognizing the many factors that influenced [the policy outcome], did MFAN make a notable contribution to it, and if so, what was that contribution?"

Key stakeholders in the evaluation wanted to ensure that all alternative explanations were explored and that every significant actor and factor contributing to the outcomes of interest was accurately acknowledged. MFAN needed a high level of credibility to ensure that it maintained trusting relationships with the allies, opponents, and policymakers it sought to influence, and did not damage its credibility and ongoing influence.

In the case of examining MFAN's contribution to USAID's work on Local Solutions, defining the causal problem was challenging, since there were several outcomes of interest related to USAID implementation over the course of eight years where MFAN sought to have influence. None of the outcomes alone were significant enough to tell the full contribution story, but our first attempt to define the causal problem was too broad: MFAN influenced the political, policy, and implementation framework that USAID adopted to do its work on local ownership. Recognizing the impracticality of investigating all the dimensions of MFAN's influence, we revised the causal problem to focus on the extent to which MFAN contributed to the reform of USAID policies and procedures to advance local ownership through procurement reform and revising operational procedures and metrics. We also explored the extent to which MFAN aligned the development community and neutralized opposition to USAID's reform agenda in Congress.

Step / **2**

Develop the postulated theory of change and the risks to it, including rival (alternative) explanations

Alliance

The Alliance evaluation team worked closely with Alliance staff to identify seven states for a more in-depth look at the Alliance contribution through the actions of key partners, and then to define the outcomes of focus that were either already achieved or expected within the legislative sessions. Where the outcome had not yet been achieved (in some states, the legislature was still in session), the evaluation team circled back to verify actual outcomes at the end of the session. In contrast to MFAN, the evaluation did not focus on a specific piece of legislation, instead choosing to look at contribution to state-level advocacy and policy outcomes more broadly.

Observations

The nature and extent of the expected contribution may vary for different policy outcomes. The four outcomes analyzed as part of the MFAN evaluation ranged from a contribution that MFAN made as part of a broader team, to one in which MFAN was perceived to be the lead advocate, to one where MFAN's contribution was uncertain. In each of these cases, it was important to identify influencing factors and alternative explanations early on so that questions about their contribution to the policy outcome could be explored during the document review process and early interviews. It was also important to ask: "Absent MFAN, what, if anything, might have been different about the policy outcome?"

- Set out the postulated theory of change of the intervention (initiative); identify the risks and assumptions and links in the theory of change.
- Identify the roles of the other influencing factors.
- Determine to what degree the postulated theory of change is contested (Mayne, 2012).

Theory

A theory of change posits pathways of contribution that link an intervention (initiative) and desired results, and make explicit risks and assumptions in the results chain. A useful theory of change for contribution analysis doesn't need a lot of detail; what is most important is to identify assumptions and risks for each link in the chain, and to consider other factors that may present alternative explanations for achievement of the result (Mayne, 2008). Ideally, theories of change are developed with key stakeholders who jointly define the problem, the intervention (initiative) required, and how progress towards outcomes will be assessed (Wimbush et al., 2012).

MFAN's Coalition-Level Theory of Change

1 → 2 → 3

MFAN successfully raises U.S. administration, Congress, the development community, and the public's interest in, knowledge about, and willingness to modernize U.S. foreign assistance.

The U.S. administration, Congress, and the development community work across parties, sectors, and cultural divides to reform U.S. foreign assistance.

U.S. foreign assistance is reformed to be more effective, efficient, and transparent.

ASSUMPTIONS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

- Competing national policy priorities allow space for considering U.S. foreign assistance.
- Bipartisanship is possible in the national political environment.
- The different branches of government are willing to work together.

- The U.S. federal budget is sufficiently healthy to allow for investment in foreign assistance.
- There is sufficient space on the congressional calendar to pass U.S. foreign assistance legislation.
- The administration provides leadership on U.S. foreign assistance reform.

- Global economic, political, social, and environmental conditions are such that U.S. foreign assistance can measurably affect them.

MFAN brings together the right members who can influence policy-makers and organize to achieve reform.

MFAN's structure and governance allow MFAN members to work together in ways that maximize their influence.

MFAN sets a reform agenda aimed at making U.S. foreign assistance more effective and efficient.

MFAN's agenda is targeted effectively to influence key aspects of U.S. foreign assistance over time.

MFAN quickly recognizes changes in the political environment and adapts strategy for greater impact.

ASSUMPTIONS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Those capable of influencing policymakers want to affiliate with MFAN.

MFAN is able to adapt its membership in response to changes in policymakers.

MFAN has sufficient flexibility in its structure and governance to maximize the influence of different types of advocacy efforts.

Given the political environment, the agenda is realistic in the influence it seeks to have.

MFAN has sufficient knowledge of Congress and the administration to inform its targeting.

MFAN members' past experiences are useful and sufficient to adapt strategy effectively.

It is important to identify assumptions and risks for each link in the chain, and consider alternative explanations.

Practice

Alliance

The Alliance evaluation team developed and used a theory of change for the Alliance as a whole that broadly identified the types of investments and actions that lead to desired policy outcomes related to health, learning, and economic outcomes for children, birth through age 8, and the conditions for achieving policy change (e.g., new and diverse champions, strengthened partnerships, effective policy options). Individual states did not have their own theories of change.

MFAN

There was no explicit theory of change guiding MFAN, so the evaluation team constructed a high-level coalition theory of change, shown here on page 32. It was agreed to by key MFAN stakeholders with several modifications, but it was not extensively discussed.

To develop this theory of change, the evaluation team first undertook a thorough review of all documentation related to each outcome of interest. Documents included MFAN's grant proposals and reports, previous evaluations of the coalition's work, strategy-related documents, working group and other meeting notes, statements made by policymakers and by MFAN, and actual policy documents, among others. Using the information gathered through this document review, the evaluators then developed detailed timelines describing how each outcome came about. These timelines provided specific outcome-level information that mapped to the high-level coalition theory of change.

Based on this information, the evaluation team developed implicit outcome-level theories of change, identified explicitly where the causal assumptions most required testing, and developed questions that would guide additional data gathering, primarily through interviews with MFAN staff, members, and external stakeholders. These questions focused on whether MFAN's activities had the desired influence on the policymakers with whom they were working, and to what extent other influencing factors may have affected the outcome.

In the case of FATAA, the timeline mapped to the high-level coalition theory of change raised questions primarily related to the influence of MFAN members and the effectiveness of MFAN's adaptability, as well as MFAN's ability to correctly identify and effectively influence all key stakeholders. A visual example of a portion of the FATAA timeline can be found on the next page.

Observations

Advocates working in a policy context often have implicit theories of change, and don't feel the need to make them explicit. We frequently uncovered implicit theories of change for specific outcomes during the data collection stage and noted them during analysis, but given the time and resources available, we did not create explicit visual theories of change at the outcome level with MFAN and Alliance members.

A Portion of the FATAA Timeline

Questions for further exploration, based on the theory of change assumptions and timeline:

Assumption
MFAN is able to influence policymakers and the development community.

To what degree, if any, did MFAN influence...
- » the bill language?
- » support for the bill within Congress? The administration? The development community?
- » senators to introduce a companion bill?
- » USAID's decision to meet with the bill's lead sponsor?

Assumption
MFAN is correctly identifying and targeting influential policymakers.

Other influencing factor
Other factors beyond MFAN are influencing policymakers on U.S. foreign assistance reform.

To what degree, if any, did USAID influence...
- » the bill language?

Step / **3**

Gather the existing evidence on the theory of change

- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the links in the theory of change.
- Gather evidence that exists from previous measurement, past evaluations, and relevant research:

  1 The observed results
  2 Each of the links in the results chain
  3 The other influencing factors
  4 Alternative explanations (Mayne, 2012)

Theory

When reviewing linkages and assumptions in the theory of change and its results chain, hypotheses are formulated and assessed for where there is strong confidence about the linkage, and where the linkage is less certain. Evidence gathering focuses on substantiating or disconfirming the linkage and looking for alternative explanations for the outcome.

As mentioned previously, contribution analysis is methodologically neutral. The choice of method depends on how the evaluation will be used, the data sources available, the appropriateness of the method to the context, and the resources available (such as budget and time). In policy change evaluation, evidence gathering will likely include a review of documents (public and internal), interviews, surveys, focus groups, network analysis, and media content analysis, among others.

Practice

Alliance

In the Alliance contribution analysis, the evaluation team gathered data related to the theory of change from grantee reports, interviews with grantees, interviews with national technical assistance providers, and interviews with key informants in selected states. The team had access to a range of partners and decision makers in the sample states to solicit their perspectives regarding what contributed to the observed outcomes. These included advocacy partners, key decision makers in the legislature, and individuals in key departmental positions with responsibility for implementation.

MFAN

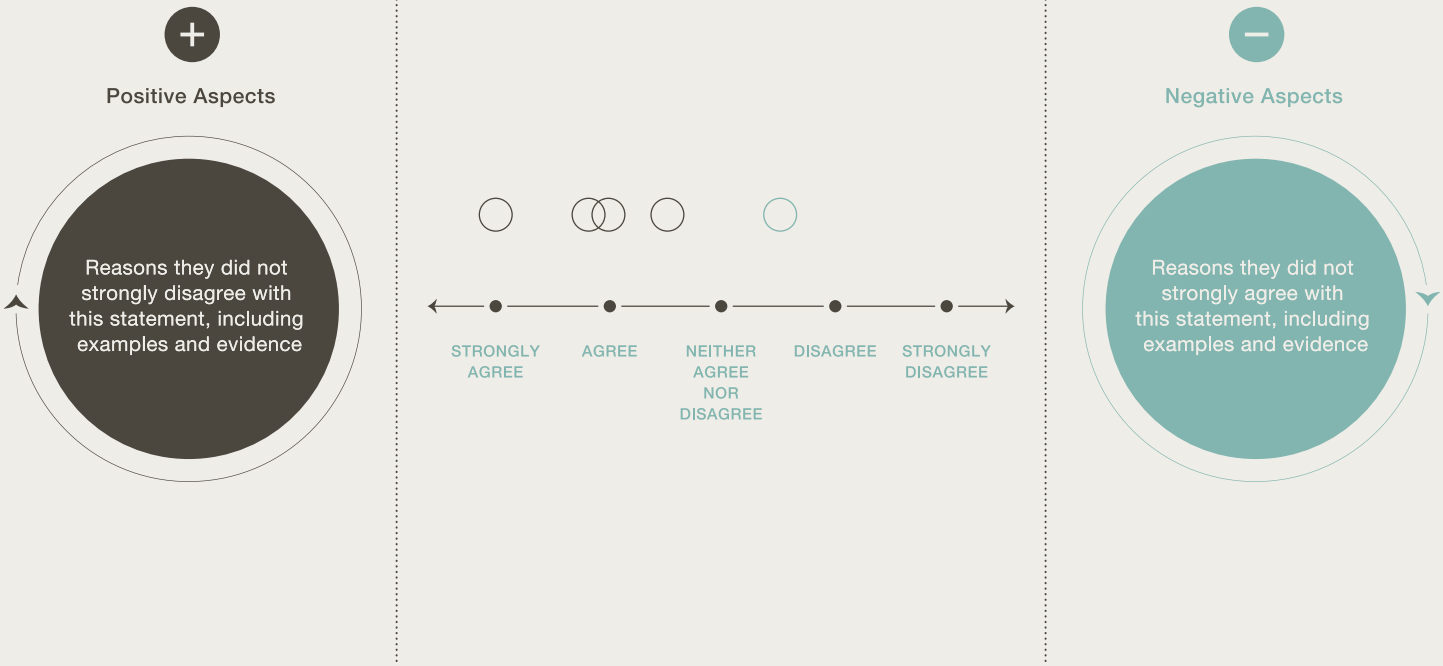
In the MFAN evaluation, the evaluation team collected primary data and reviewed secondary data in parallel during this step. We used multiple data sources to triangulate wherever possible and sought out data beyond stakeholder perceptions. For example, we revisited contemporaneous notes taken over the eight years of the network to identify both actions that MFAN members took and other influencing factors that may have contributed to the observed results. For PPD-6, we conducted a content analysis to compare the text and tone of MFAN foundational public documents with the eventual content of the presidential directive.

The H-Form Exercise

The H-Form exercise encourages participants to rate their views on key concepts and offer evidence to support those views

Depending on the design of the scale, it can deliver both quantitative and qualitative data. In the MFAN evaluation, the workshops featured a flip chart with two statements regarding MFAN's role in the policy outcome, and then an "H" shaped work space. For FATAA, these statements were: "MFAN contributed significantly to the enactment of FATAA" and "FATAA would have been enacted without MFAN."

The horizontal line was a 5-point scale of agreement regarding the statement; the vertical areas were for evidence and examples. For this evaluation, quantitative data was not important and therefore the scale was not numerical. Participants first placed dots to identify their level of agreement with each statement, and then identified why they did not place their dot on each of the far ends of the scale. This encouraged robust conversation among participants, and unearthed new elements of the results chain and contributing factors.



Evidence gathering focuses on substantiating or disconfirming linkages and looking for alternative explanations for the outcome.

In the MFAN contribution analysis, based on the timelines described in Step 2, we developed lines of questioning that we used in participatory workshops with stakeholders who were very familiar with each of the four outcomes. Each two-hour workshop focused on one outcome and allowed knowledgeable stakeholders to engage deeply with the draft timeline, suggest changes, and identify other influencing factors missing from the emerging contribution story. Discussion included key actors and external events that may have contributed to the outcome, unexpected outcomes that occurred, opportunities that the coalition might have missed, and areas that might require additional exploration.

Some of the workshops used a framing question, such as, "You can't understand the full story of how this policy change happened without talking or knowing about X." This framing question was introduced at the beginning of the workshop and revisited several times during the discussion to elicit all the important lines of inquiry. For example, the PPD-6 workshop identified one new pathway of potential MFAN influence to explore, and also generated evidence that countered some initial hypotheses regarding potential contribution.

These workshops also focused on the value proposition of pursuing the policy outcome through MFAN, rather than having individual member organizations pursuing reform on their own. We also explored whether and how MFAN's management structure, decision-making processes, and membership size and composition contributed to, or impeded, its collective influence.

In some workshops, participants engaged in an exercise in which they identified their level of agreement with two seemingly-opposed statements about MFAN's contribution to the policy outcome, and discussed their rationale for those ratings. On page 36, we describe how to conduct this H-form exercise (Guy and Inglis, 1999).

Observations

In the MFAN evaluation, we found that using timelines, holding outcome-specific workshops, posing a framing question to elicit what we needed to know to get the full story, and using the H-form exercise all contributed to ensuring a robust investigation of results, influencing factors, and potential alternative explanations to be considered.

Step / **4**

Assemble and assess the contribution claim, and challenges to it

- Set out the contribution "story"—the contribution claim based on the analysis so far.
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses in the postulated theory of change in light of the available evidence, the relevance of the other influencing factors, and the evidence gathered to support alternative explanations.
- If needed, refine or update the theory of change (Mayne, 2012).

Theory

Assembling a story about the contribution claim starts with a narrative description of the theory of change, the evidence (so far) that supports the contribution claim(s), the hypotheses that were tested and what was found, as well as key contextual factors that created the conditions for the outcome to occur. The story should also address and account for other influencing factors and key alternative explanations.

Practice

MFAN

In the MFAN contribution stories, the evaluation team developed a draft story about each of the four outcomes, based on the information gathered through document review and the workshop. In the case of rewriting the FAA, the outcome of interest was defined as, "The development of the Global Partnerships Act (the new Foreign Assistance Act) and its influence on other legislation and administration reforms." Each draft story then summarized in one or two paragraphs the emerging consensus view on MFAN's contribution to that outcome, and provided a summary assessment of the main contribution claim. The rest of the story described the way(s) in which MFAN contributed to the outcome and provided evidence for the various links in the results chain.

For example, the FAA rewrite draft story described seven strategies and tactics employed by MFAN that appeared to influence congressional and development community interest in rewriting the FAA, the content of this new bill, and its influence on other foreign assistance reform legislation. Because MFAN capacities were of special interest to the evaluation users, the story also identified the coalition capacities that appeared to have the most influence on the coalition's work related to that outcome. In relation to rewriting the FAA, interviewees agreed that influential and experienced leaders among MFAN's members were a central factor in setting the context for the policy outcome, while MFAN's structure, which allowed for open information sharing, also contributed to the coalition's effectiveness in promoting a new FAA. However, MFAN's near-consensus decision-making process may have interfered with its ability to make bold statements. Although its small size made it nimble, it was also perceived as exclusive.

A useful theory of change for contribution analysis doesn't need a lot of detail.

The evaluation team addressed challenges to the story by identifying other factors that certainly or likely contributed to the outcome, as well as questions that the evaluators wanted to explore through additional data collection. The story drew on information gathered through a document review, interviews, workshops, and other data collection approaches. We used quotations from our interviews to make the story more compelling and convincing. The story ended with a timeline of key events as an appendix. Figure 4 provides the template we used for the first draft of our MFAN contribution story.

Alliance

To develop the Alliance contribution story, the evaluation team coded the interviews with staff, partners, and decision makers; held a team analysis session to begin constructing the contribution stories for each case; and prepared a contribution story for each sample state, and for the Alliance overall. Each story focused on three elements:

1. Alternativthe extent to which the Alliance selected and supported an effective organization to serve as an advocacy grantee in the state.
2. The contributions of the national network and Alliance technical assistance in indirectly contributing to outcomes by supporting the state grantee's effectiveness, or directly contributing through their influence on state decision makers.
3. The contributions of the state grantee and its major partners to a range of intermediate outcomes (such as setting the agenda, educating and influencing policymakers, and building new champions) as well as policy outcomes (such as legislative and budgetary accomplishments).

The story reflected 1) enhanced advocacy capacity, 2) state policies adopted, 3) state policies and programs implemented, and 4) state policies funded.

Draft Contribution Analysis Story Template used in the MFAN evaluation / FIG. 4

1. Outcome of Interest (Title)
2. Emerging Consensus View
3. The Coalition's Main Contributions to This Outcome
4. Key Questions to Probe through Additional Interviews
5. Details on the Context and the Coalition's Contribution
6. The Coalition's Capacities
7. Outcome Timeline

The evaluation team addressed challenges to the story through triangulation of sources and interview protocols that asked first about the important influences and events associated with an outcome, and only then asked about the role of specific actors. Beyond the state case studies, interviews with national partners (and grantee progress reports) were used to piece together a national contribution story based on significant accomplishments across the country and the role of these national partners and the Alliance in making progress on early childhood education policy and funding. The national contribution story was built in large part on the state contribution stories, supplemented with additional documentary and interview data related to other states supported by the Alliance. Taken together, a story emerged in which the team had considerable confidence.

Observations

When finalized, a contribution story is the key output or deliverable of the contribution analysis process. It should be useful and understandable for the evaluation's key audience(s). "This is the core step where CA adds most value," according to Delahais and Toulemonde (2012), because evidence is presented in a logical narrative that assesses the causal linkages in the theory of change. The narrative story is "appealing because its language gives the sense of a journey," it is "accessible and easy to follow," and "makes the process of 'logical argumentation,' which underpins the CA process, easy to understand" (Stocks-Rankin 2014).

Assembling a story starts with a narrative description of the theory of change.

Step / **5**

Seek out additional evidence

» Determine what kind of additional evidence is needed to enhance the credibility of the contribution claim.

» Gather new evidence (Mayne, 2012).

Theory

Once the initial contribution story has been drafted, key stakeholders are asked to review it to assess how well the evidence supports the causal inferences that are being made in the story. Engaging key stakeholders, allies, and opponents who are knowledgeable about the policy change can help to identify gaps in the contribution story and any areas with insufficient evidence to validate the contribution claim. Once those gaps have been illuminated, decisions can be made about who to re-interview and who else can shed light on the contribution claim. Data collection activities may include gathering additional evidence regarding observed results; testing the strength of certain assumptions, hypotheses, and alternative explanations; and determining the role of influencing factors (Mayne, 2008).

Process tracing can be useful at this stage. It offers a series of tests for systematically assessing how strong or weak evidence is for drawing causal inferences. Evidence itself is never strong or weak; it must be evaluated in the context of one's observations, and other contextual factors such as prior knowledge (Befani and Mayne, 2014). We didn't use process tracing in our cases; however, we recommend its use for testing and verifying contribution claims with greater confidence if more scientific rigor is needed.

During Step 5, the evaluation team, along with an evaluation advisory committee, may also want to revisit the theory of change to see if assumptions about how the initiative contributed to an outcome have changed. Some alternative explanations may modify the primary hypothesis, which in turn may require gathering additional evidence.

In complex policy contexts, there may be several alternative explanations and numerous influencing factors. If it is not feasible in terms of resources or time to investigate all of these, Lemire et al. (2012) suggest three criteria for selecting which to explore:

» Does it fit with the purpose of the evaluation?

» Is it important to the overall contribution story?

» Does it have utility and importance to stakeholders?

Engaging key stakeholders, allies, and opponents can help identify gaps and areas with insufficient evidence to validate the contribution claim.

Practice

MFAN

In MFAN cases, the evaluation team shared the draft contribution stories with an evaluation advisory committee to discuss the claims and the evidence for them. Each team member laid out the consensus view of MFAN's role and influence, backed by evidence, areas of disagreement, and the consensus about what would have happened absent MFAN. We discussed the plausibility of the stories and where additional evidence was needed to confirm or disconfirm the contribution claim. Lastly, participants identified a list of policymakers, allies, and opponents for potential interviews during the next phase of additional evidence gathering.

When we selected people to interview for additional evidence, we considered who had been closely involved in the advocacy effort and whether they were likely to have direct knowledge of the contribution claim. For instance, the MFAN evaluation team sought additional evidence of how FATAA came about through interviews with current and former congressional staff members who had been closely involved in the process, former members of the administration, and allies. The evaluation team used these interviews to test hypotheses about MFAN's influence that emerged from earlier data collection. We especially wanted to know, absent MFAN, how might FATAA have been different, if at all, and how might the process of bringing it about have changed, if at all.

Alliance

As noted previously, the tight time frame for the Alliance evaluation required some creative condensing of the steps. This was most apparent in Step 5. During the analysis sessions in Step 4, the team challenged its assumptions and conclusions, looked for alternative explanations that suggested a different pathway to the outcome, and identified the need for more information. Additional interviews were conducted followed by another team meeting to bolster the contribution stories. Alliance staff, who were the project officers for each case and knew the inner workings well, were asked to review the contribution stories. Their review was critical to seeing where the story was strong, providing more nuanced explanations, and identifying gaps. In some instances, staff provided additional documentary evidence or suggested additional key informants for interviews.

Observations

When gathering additional evidence, it is preferable to have the evaluation team member who did the initial interviews and wrote the contribution story also conduct the interviews, since she or he has the knowledge and context to ask probing questions and discern the reliability, relevance, and importance of the evidence. She or he will also be better positioned to assess when alternative explanations have been sufficiently addressed. It is helpful to have other members of the evaluation team review the evidence to identify possible blind spots.

The decision to interview opponents may not be appropriate in every case; however, when opponents are open to talking, their perspective on the coalition's contribution to an outcome may add significantly to the validity of the contribution claim.

Policymakers—including elected officials, congressional staff, and government agency leaders—often have direct knowledge of the process and are critical to establishing the validity of the claim. Yet a number of challenges may arise when interviewing them. Policymakers often have multiple demands on their time which sometimes makes scheduling adequate time for an interview a problem. When interviewing a policymaker, it is important to prioritize and ask those questions that no one else has the knowledge to answer. Sometimes that may mean conducting a 15-minute interview and asking only three or four key questions. When one policymaker has knowledge about several different initiatives, and it is not possible to interview them more than once, one evaluation team member should conduct the interview with input from other team members who may have additional questions.

Policymakers may be reluctant to be interviewed on the record if the policy issues to be discussed are controversial. Deciding not to interview the policymaker because of the danger of harm to the policy and advocacy process, or to the individuals involved, may be the right decision, especially if evaluators have access to others who are familiar with the issue and can confirm or disconfirm the claim. Sometimes policymakers may not want to acknowledge that an action or campaign influenced them, in which case it is important to explore the policymaker's motivation for not doing so, and triangulate the policymaker's response and motivation with other sources who are familiar with what happened.

At times, sources interviewed may have conflicting perspectives, which makes a firm statement about the contribution claim difficult to substantiate. In the case of rewriting the FAA, we continued to triangulate data sources until we felt we could substantiate the contribution claim. In the case of PPD-6, a key data source was unavailable, and the ones we could access did not agree. Therefore, we explicitly stated that the evidence for the contribution claim was contradictory, and that the validity of the claim was inconclusive.

Step / **6**

Revise and strengthen the contribution story

» Build a more credible contribution story.
» Reassess its strengths and weaknesses.
» Revisit Step 4 (Mayne, 2012).

Theory

Once additional evidence has been collected and processed, the contribution story may be revised and strengthened. In this iterative process of review and rewriting, the story becomes more compelling and robust. This process can take more time than evaluators usually allocate for this phase of work. Often there are extraneous details that are no longer relevant or necessary for explaining the contribution claim. These should be eliminated so that the story is easier to follow and more persuasive. As a result, the final contribution story may be shorter than the original draft.

Practice

Alliance

In the Alliance case, the final contribution story did not differ substantially from the initial one. The additional data collection resulted in added detail and clarity about key activities that contributed to outcomes and other influencing factors. The final story substantiated contribution claims for each of the seven focus states and for the Alliance role nationally in further state early childhood outcomes.

MFAN

In the case of PPD-6, two of the original hypotheses were not confirmed by the additional evidence. The final contribution story noted that the additional data did not support an earlier hypothesis regarding the value of one of MFAN's strategies, nor the idea that MFAN likely played a role in ensuring the policy was issued as a stand-alone directive. It identified additional ways in which MFAN attempted to monitor implementation of the directive, as well as new insight into the limitations of these monitoring efforts. The final story contained a new section summarizing what would likely have occurred regarding PPD-6 absent MFAN. The story identified a few MFAN capacities related to governance and structure that seemed to have influenced its work on PPD-6, either by amplifying MFAN's role or by presenting challenges to progress.

In this iterative process of review and rewriting, the story becomes more compelling and robust.

MFAN's evaluation advisory committee noted that the contribution stories tended to refer to MFAN's influence collectively without noting MFAN members' individual contributions. Talking about MFAN's overall contribution blurred who worked on which outcomes, and what they each contributed individually that together made a difference to achieving a particular outcome. We were interested in exploring whether individual organizations, working alone, could have achieved the same results without being part of MFAN. For example, in the USAID Local Solutions case, two organizations conducted research, one led education and advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill, and another met regularly with the policy target to discuss how to best redesign operating procedures to advance Local Solutions. Our interviews concluded that no individual organization working alone could have affected the outcome in the same way without the efforts of the others in the coalition. Their coordinated efforts under the auspices of MFAN amplified and leveraged each other, thereby having a more significant influence on the policy ecosystem.

In the case of MFAN, final contribution stories were five to seven pages rather than the original draft of up to 15 pages. Figure 5 provides the template we used for the final contribution stories. We shared the final draft with those we interviewed to make sure that no part of the contribution story put policy targets or advocates at risk. We also wanted to make sure that the story we told about the outcome, and MFAN's contribution to it, was plausible and credible.

Final Contribution Analysis Story Template used in the MFAN evaluation / FIG. 5

1. Outcome of Interest (Title)
2. Consensus View
3. The Organization's / Coalition's Contribution
4. The Organization's / Coalition's Capacities
5. Outcome Timeline

Observations

The publication of contribution stories can be problematic in an advocacy context. Evaluators need to be careful to ensure that the way they write the findings does not negatively affect advocacy on the issue in the future. For example, in a contribution analysis of a stealth campaign to influence a Supreme Court decision, advocates and activists had strong reservations about making the evaluation public "for fear that it might draw attention to the coalition's strategy, organization, and funding, thereby arousing opposition to either the ruling or future efforts in this arena" (Patton, 2008). This is especially a concern when there are ongoing efforts underway to influence policy at the local, state, and federal levels.

In deciding how to report and whether to publish the findings, the goal should be first to do no harm to relationships or future advocacy efforts. In cases where issues are especially controversial, this may mean not publishing findings at all, and instead using them internally. In the case of the campaign to influence a Supreme Court decision, the process and lessons learned were published but the campaign details were not (Patton, 2008). In other cases, like with the MFAN contribution stories, these are being published after careful review.

In deciding how to report and whether to publish the findings, the goal should be first to do no harm to relationships or future advocacy efforts.

Step / **7**

Use the contribution claims to review, learn, and make program improvements

Theory

While the Mayne model has only six steps ending with a revised contribution story, Wimbush et al. (2012) recommend a seventh step on using contribution analysis to support organizations or networks to review their strategies and tactics, learn from what they have done, and make improvements. When contribution analysis is used in a participatory way with key stakeholders in a partnership or network, it provides an opportunity for organizations to think about what they contribute to the partnership, and it builds team capacity for collaboration and a common language to make meaning of the findings and use them to inform future planning (Wimbush et al., 2012).

Practice

Alliance

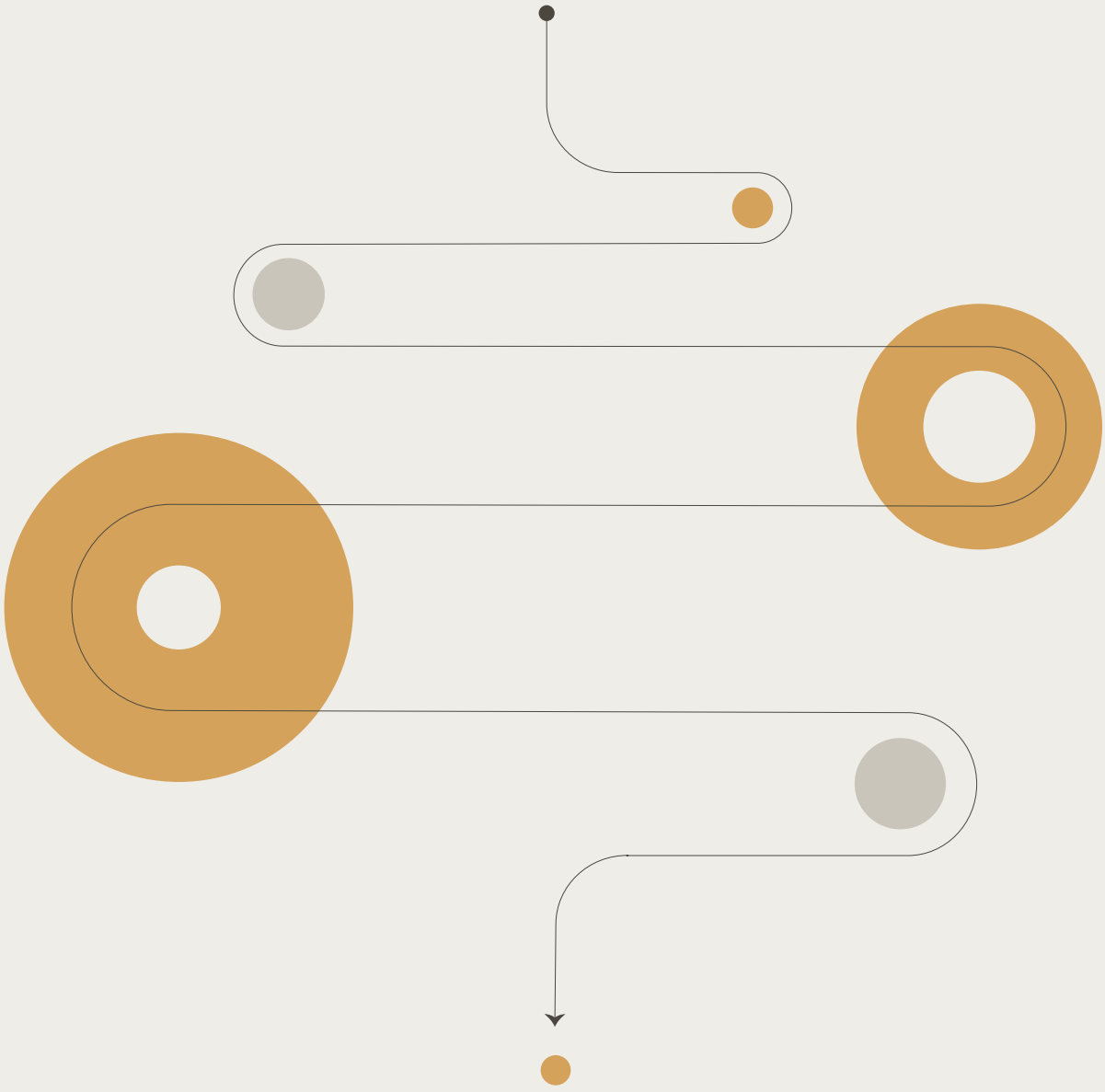
The Alliance contribution story provided a rich explanation of the strategies and pathways in the theory of change that were adding value. It also provided recommendations for improvement. Both of these were of central importance to Alliance staff because they were committed to using the evaluation not only to demonstrate their contribution, but also for ongoing improvement as they continually refine their model.

MFAN

The MFAN contribution stories informed the MFAN leadership team about the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts to influence policy. Each story described how MFAN's membership composition, structure, and governance created conditions that maximized its influence or led to missed opportunities. After our presentations of the contribution stories, we raised strategic questions for MFAN's consideration as it planned its future agenda. These questions stimulated a conversation about how to sustain the accomplishments that had been achieved, while at the same time leveraging MFAN's strengths to shape foreign assistance policy in a new administration and Congress.

Conclusions

While there are challenges in applying contribution analysis within a policy context, we found value in using this approach and would use it again.



The value of contribution analysis lies in its systematic approach to a complex causal problem.

What makes it particularly useful for evaluating a policy change initiative is the systematic way it helps to achieve the following:

» Specify and focus on a causal problem to be explored

  Often in complex initiatives or campaigns that operate over a period of years, the potential range of policy outcomes that could be explored are numerous. When evaluators and key stakeholders jointly define a causal problem to be explored using contribution analysis, they establish parameters about what will be included and what will not. We found that narrowing the focus of the evaluation allowed us to go deeper and be more selective about what evidence we were seeking.

» Construct a theory of change with a results chain that makes the most relevant causal linkages evident

  The theory of change identifies initiative inputs and how they are believed to contribute to desired outcomes. The results chain specifies actions that were taken as part of a policy advocacy process, and identifies other influencing factors that may have contributed to the policy outcome. Once a results chain has been created and the linkages made explicit, then hypotheses about how actions contributed to the outcome can be formulated.

» Guide the gathering of relevant evidence

  Both the theory of change and the results chain provide a framework for what evidence to look for. Too often as evaluators, we seek to confirm a theory of change without also considering evidence that may be disconfirming. Contribution analysis helps evaluators look for both evidence that confirms assumptions and evidence that might contradict assumptions.

» Place evidence in context, and tell an evidence-based story about the contribution of an initiative to a policy outcome

  The contribution story provides a structure for laying out a contribution claim and the context in which that claim is being explored, and presenting evidence that confirms or disconfirms the claim.

» Identify evidence gaps and the information sources that can provide knowledge and insights to fill those gaps

Evidence gathering in contribution analysis is an iterative process, which is one of its major strengths. When key stakeholders and evaluation teams take time to evaluate the contribution story and determine what additional evidence would strengthen the contribution claim, the end result will be more convincing. This is often the stage at which policy targets are interviewed, if the team has access to them, since they have the most direct knowledge about the value that a particular individual, organization, or coalition contributed to the outcome. Triangulation of evidence is key, since any one source may be motivated to embellish or distort the value of a contribution, especially in a policy context.

» Rewrite the contribution story to increase confidence in the ways the contribution claim does or does not hold true

The step of rewriting and focusing the contribution story to present the most compelling evidence for the contribution claim, along with possible alternative explanations, results in much greater confidence in the evaluation product than if there is only one iteration.

» Use the process and the findings to build shared understanding about what worked and what did not work to inform planning for the future

The process of contribution analysis can be used in a highly participatory way to engage key stakeholders to think about what they contributed to a policy outcome, while at the same time acknowledging the contributions of others. The process of evaluating contribution claims collectively deepens a shared understanding about which actions were effective and why, and where there were missed opportunities. This process makes it more likely that stakeholders will make strategic decisions in the future that are better informed and based on solid learning from past experience.

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