Tools and Tips for Implementing Contribution Analysis

A quick guide for practitioners

Tools and tips for implementing contribution analysis: A quick guide for practitioners.

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Four lessons learnt from applying contribution analysis in policy and advocacy settings

Contribution analysis is a flexible approach that lends itself to advocacy impact evaluation. This learning brief provides some lessons for practical management aspects of the evaluation, especially in consideration of time and resource constraints.

Laura Hopkins leads Itad's work on policy and advocacy evaluation. In this brief, she shares her reflections from a series of five recent projects.

Introduction

Evaluating the impact of advocacy is a tricky business. Attempting to unpick how and why a particular campaign, organisation, or group of actors played a meaningful role in achieving a policy outcome is complex. For example, some decision-makers are loath to credit outsider influence when describing their motivations for making a change, which makes it difficult to know if it was a particular paper or conversation that helped. In reality, it is usually a multitude of factors that contribute in different ways and at different times. Which is where contribution analysis comes in.

Contribution analysis is a flexible approach that lends itself to advocacy impact evaluation. It does not seek to 'prove' the role of a particular actor or set of actors in bringing about change, but instead to develop a plausible, credible evidence-based narrative to answer causal questions about their influence.[1]

In the brief Contribution Analysis in Policy Work: Assessing Advocacy's Influence, evaluators Robin Kane, Carlisle Levine, Carlyn Orians, and Claire Reinelt[2] discuss the relevance of contribution analysis to policy settings. They outline the six-step methodology and show how it applies to advocacy efforts.

This learning brief builds on that work to offer practical lessons on applying contribution analysis to advocacy impact evaluations. We focus on practical management of the approach, especially when dealing with time and resource constraints.

This brief offers four lessons that we think cut across the methodology's six steps, in part because in practice it has not been our experience that we have been able to fully execute the steps, nor do so in sequential order. And when we asked our audience at UKES if they had been able to, not a single hand was raised. For that reason, we are often more comfortable describing our work as an approach that draws on contribution analysis.

1 Mayne, J., 2011. Addressing Cause and Effect in Simple and Complex Settings through Contribution analysis. In R. Schwartz, K. Forss, & M. Marra, eds. Evaluating the Complex. Transaction Publishers

2. https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/contribution-analysis-in-policy-work-assessing-advocacys-influence/

We draw on experience gained through a series of five recent advocacy impact evaluations, which share the following common attributes:

- **Summative outcome evaluations:** each of the studies was interested to assess causal inference, to understand the ways in which a set of advocacy actors had influenced a set of advocacy outcomes
- **Timed to support a strategy refresh:** the evaluations were tasked with providing actionable lessons that our clients could use in updating their approach to a given sector
- **Evaluations of a portfolio of advocacy organisations:** all the evaluations were concerned with understanding the role that a group of advocacy actors had played, rather than a specific campaign, project, programme, or organisation
- **Short-term evaluations (6-18 months):** from the time of signing the client contract to delivering the final presentation, all were completed within 18 months
- **Small, networked evaluation teams:** the evaluation teams were all under 10 staff, and all geographically distributed across different countries and time zones

We also build on an interactive presentation at the UK Evaluation Society (UKES) conference in 2019, in which evaluation commissioners and practitioners were invited to share their reflections on our lessons learnt.

Contribution analysis starts with the identification of an outcome (or a set of outcomes) that already has been achieved, along with an evaluation commissioner's interest in learning more about what led to it. Outcomes of interest may be related to policy (e.g., adoption, prevention, modification, implementation), or they may be notable achievements on the way to a policy outcome (e.g., the swelling of public support, the development of an important champion).

Once the outcome is identified, evaluators develop a story of how advocates think the outcome was achieved, as well as alternative stories or explanations, and then test the stories rigorously with iterative data collection. There are six steps involved:[3]
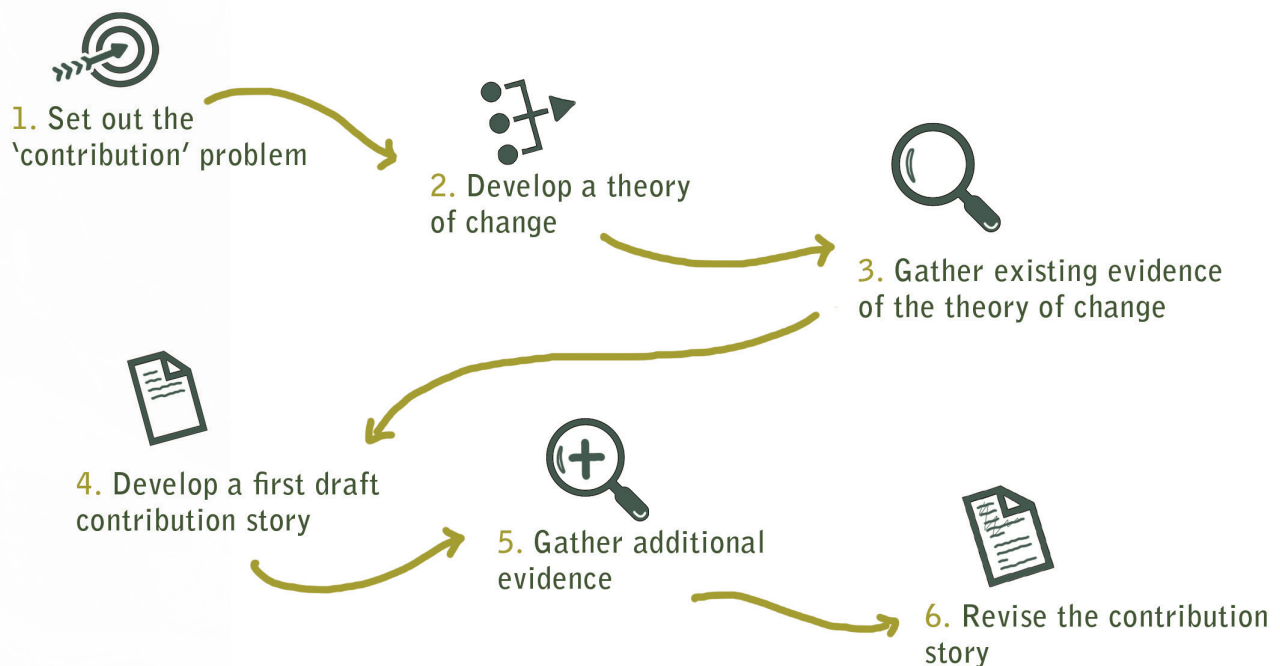
What is an outcome?

We interpret outcome in the broadest sense of the word.

It might be at the highest level: policy change, or funding commitment. It might also be a step along the way, or an intermediate outcome. It could be intended or unintended. It may even be the absence of change.

We are also agnostic as to whether it is positive or negative – we might be interested in understanding why a bad thing happened so that we can prevent similar events in future.

1. **Setting out the attribution problem:** Contribution analysis is more suited to answering some questions than others. For example, it would not be suitable to respond to questions related to return on investment or attempting to establish attribution. A better fit would be questions that are concerned with the different roles actors played in supporting the observed outcome, or understanding enabling conditions for success.

2. **Developing a theory of change:** This theory becomes the story that you 'test' through data collection and analysis. It is the best working version of how change was expected to happen, and the role / contribution of the various advocacy actors under consideration.

3. Mayne, J, 2008. Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. International Learning and Change (ILAC) Brief, 16

3. **Gathering existing evidence on the theory of change:** For each element of the theory of change, including the assumptions, evidence is gathered to understand whether the theory holds, or needs updating

4. **Developing a first draft contribution story:** This is the first attempt by the evaluation team to distil the roles played by the advocacy actors in making change happen. The story should be critiqued: is there good enough evidence for the claims you are making? Which part of the story is unclear? Where are you most/least confident? A key part of the critique should be the postulating of alternative explanations: what else might have caused this change, other than the advocacy progamme?

5. **Gathering additional evidence:** Driven by the critique of the first draft contribution story, more data is gathered to fill the gaps, strengthen weaker parts, and investigate any credible alternative explanations for their robustness

6. **Revising the contribution story:** Based on the additional evidence, the contribution story will likely need updating. The same critical step should be applied here to assess the strength of evidence at this stage, and the existence of alternative explanations. Steps five and six may be repeated multiple times.

Contribution Analysis: Six neat steps

1. Set out the 'contribution' problem

2. Develop a theory of change

3. Gather existing evidence of the theory of change

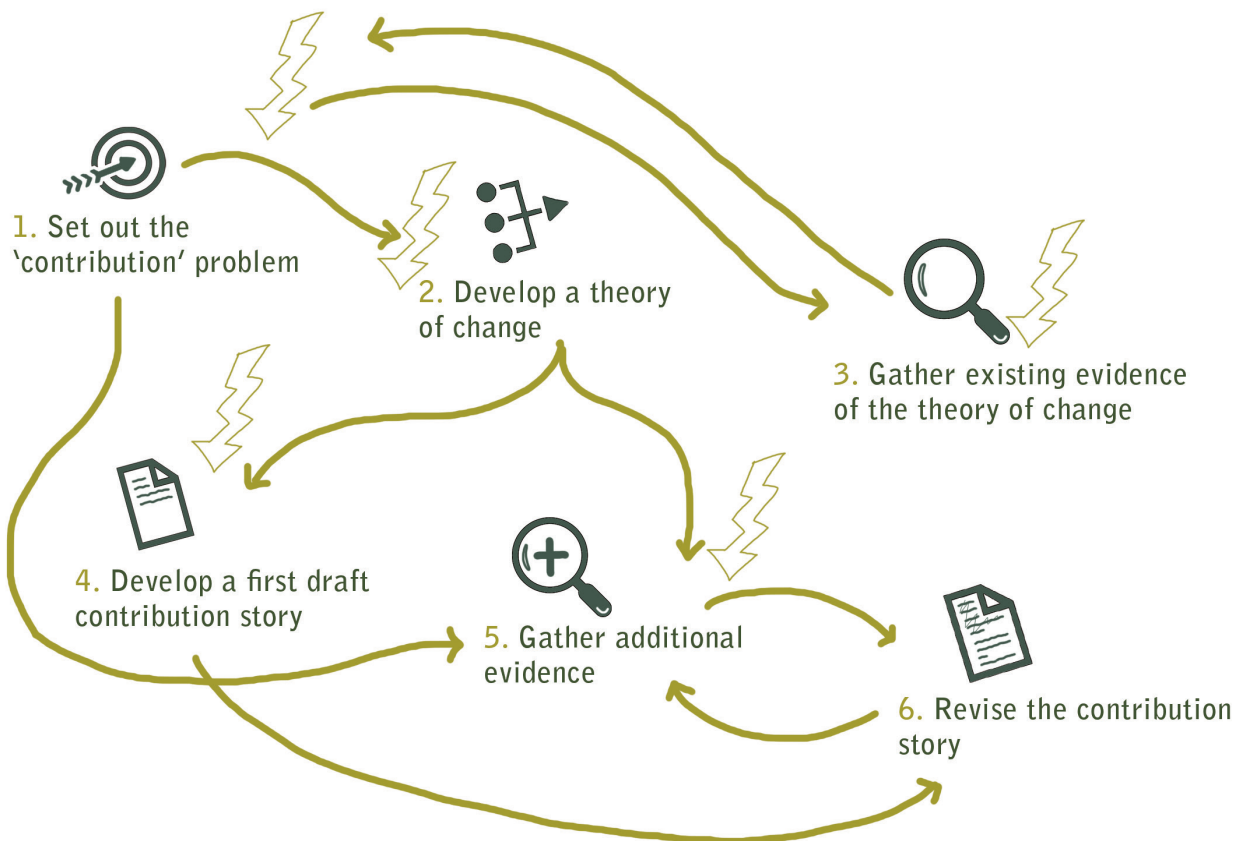4. Develop a first draft contribution story

5. Gather additional evidence

6. Revise the contribution story

Contribution Analysis: A reality check

Before presenting our lessons, we set out five key challenges that we have seen arise when conducting these evaluations:

The reality: Somewhat more complex

1. Set out the 'contribution' problem

2. Develop a theory of change

3. Gather existing evidence of the theory of change

4. Develop a first draft contribution story

5. Gather additional evidence

6. Revise the contribution story

1. It's not always straightforward to set out the contribution problem in the first place

It can be a real challenge to pin down evaluation commissioners to agree on an area of focus or outcomes that are specific enough for contribution analysis. For example, portfolio managers might want an answer to the broad question: what is the influence of our work? This question would be too broad, particularly if the evaluation is on a relatively short timeframe.

The evaluation team has a role to play in supporting commissioners to hone in on a focus that is both meaningful to them and that will work well with the method, especially as this decision will then guide the remainder of the work. If this step is not taken carefully, the risk is that the evaluation will answer the wrong questions. Or that the evaluation will try to answer too many questions, and therefore be unable to effectively answer any of them.

Choosing this focus requires dedicated time upfront from the commissioner, working with the evaluation team. At the start of the work, the evaluation team are less familiar with the subject area and what might be of interest. Some initial desk work can support a structured conversation around a proposed 'long list' of outcomes and questions that can be refined in discussion with the commissioner.

Aspects for consideration at this stage include:
- **Timeframe:** which time period should the evaluation focus on? When did the outcomes of interest occur? Which particular funding round should be considered? And which advocacy period should be included in the assessment? Work from the last 10 years? 5 years?
- **Level of analysis:** If the commissioner is a funder, are they interested in the influence of a particular campaign, advocacy efforts across an issue area or programme, an entire organisation, or their portfolio as a whole – or multiple levels (see Figure 1)? This will have implications for the resources required to answer the questions – a campaign can be fairly targeted (depending on its size and the actors involved), whereas a portfolio can be sprawling.
- **Context:** to what extent will it be possible to identify the role of the advocacy actors in effecting change? For example, commissioners often want to understand the role of an individual organization in bringing about policy change. If there is a sea of actors working on the issue over a long period, heavier investment may be required to unpick the individual roles of particular organisations.
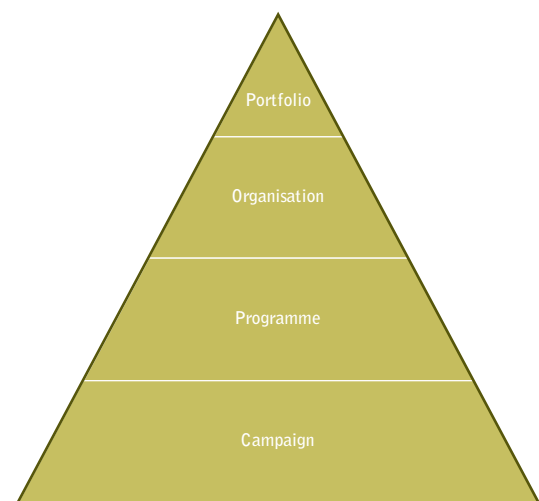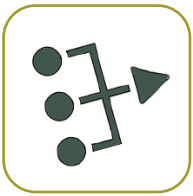

Figure 1 - Possible levels of analysis

There are often trade-offs to be made: a commissioner can look at a number of pin-pointed outcomes in simple contexts, or one outcome in a more complex environment.

2. Developing a (good) theory of change takes time and engagement.

Theories of change make our thinking visible about how a particular intervention is expected to bring about results or change. When done well in ways that articulate our untested assumptions about the change process, they are extremely valuable tools for both those implementing the work and those evaluating it.

For the purposes of contribution analysis, the Theory of Change has some specific requirements: it must include detailed assumptions to support the causal logic, and take care to identify as wide a set of influencing factors as possible so that the process can explore other possible explanations for why and how the outcome was achieved. Since the Theory of Change is integral to the approach, evaluations can be highly dependent on the extent to which clients can provide their inputs.

The challenge is that high-quality theories of change take time. Evaluation commissioners and advocates are often extremely busy and cover a wide range of roles. Their attention span for the evaluation will therefore be limited – and precious.

Getting the focus right (see the first lesson) and understanding which elements of the Theory of Change are of particular interest to evaluation commissioners (e.g., the role of narrative change efforts or the influence of a piece of research) is a useful entry point that can make the process more efficient and ultimately useful. Creative ways of developing Theories of Change can be helpful here - do you need a full-day workshop with everyone in the same room at the same time, or could you iteratively develop the theory through a series of structured one-to-one conversations?

3. Existing evidence can be weak and/or unavailable

Contribution analysis relies on the evaluator being able to gather information from all relevant perspectives and to fully triangulate data sources[4]. For advocacy efforts, we need to examine the contribution story from the perspectives of advocates and the audiences they were attempting to influence. But what happens when a key stakeholder is not contactable?

This happened to us during an evaluation into policy change in Germany, when we were seeking an interview with a member of parliament to verify our findings. Germany had recently been through a parliamentary election and, for the entire duration of our data collection, parliament was in limbo whilst negotiations took place to form a functioning coalition. Because of this we had to soften and caveat some findings and be clear about the implied limitations.

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4. Contribution stories can take many forms

Evaluation commissioners want to consume information in different ways. Some prefer dense written narrative, others a lean visual. The design of the final product is highly influential in shaping what information is prioritised, so it is important to agree on this upfront so that it can appropriately guide the analytical and writing / reporting processes.

In our experience, we have produced different versions of contribution stories for different audiences. For communicating high-level findings with senior management, we have developed visual outputs and accompanying briefs. For portfolio and grant managers, we have developed detailed narratives.

The visuals below provide some examples of the ways in which we have presented contribution stories.
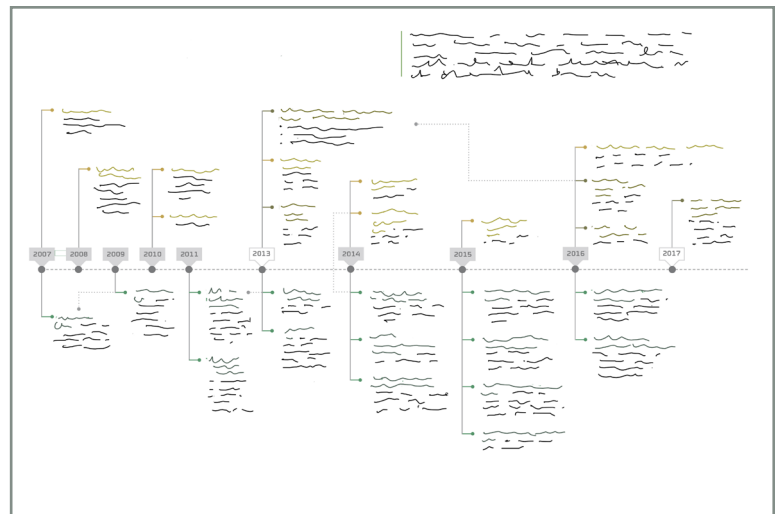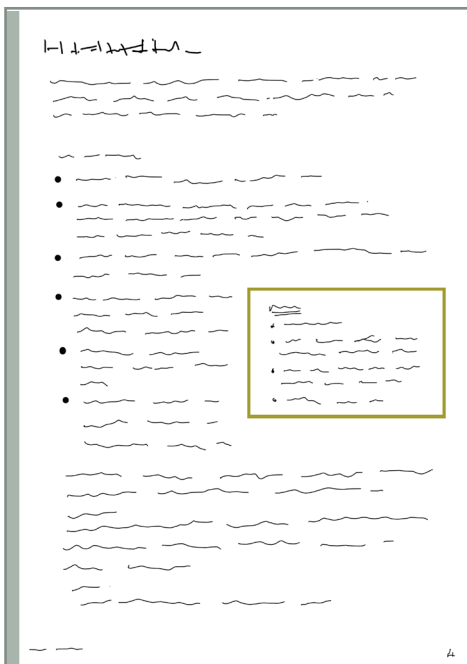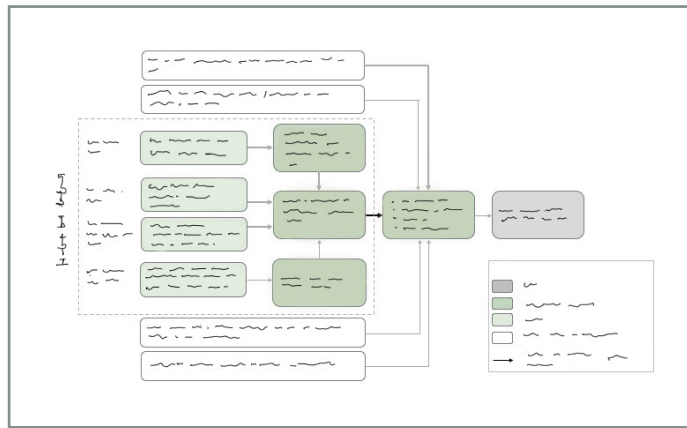
5. Gathering additional evidence can be a challenge

Following the development of the first draft contribution story, the next step is to test and/or validate contribution claims, and to follow-up on alternative explanations. In our experience this process is easy to under-resource and challenging to follow robustly. The most rigorous application of contribution analysis requires gathering and assessing evidence against each and every step in the Theory of Change, including for alternative explanations. The more steps in the Theory of Change, the more resource-intensive this process is – and there are rarely enough resources to investigate more than a handful of alternative explanations in any in-depth way. This is the point where it really bites you if you haven't done step 1 (defining scope) properly.

It is here that our biases as researchers can most easily come in to play. Confirmation bias is of particular concern: because the focus is the theory, careful attention is required to ensure alternative explanations are considered and unintended outcomes explored. It might be that the ToC is completely flawed and you need to be able to find that out.

By this stage, commissioners, evaluators, and stakeholders may have some level of fatigue, and can be drawn towards the contribution claims made in the first draft story. Findings ways to inject energy into this step can be useful. For example, assigning a rotating role of 'bias detector' to team members in a workshop can be fun – each session, one team member is focused on challenging possibly biased contributions from their colleagues.
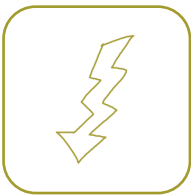
6. And another thing...

As mentioned in the introduction to this brief, we want to remind you that in practice we have never taken each step in sequential order.

For one thing, interview respondents have busy diaries; if they aren't available during the window that you had planned for data collection, and you feel that they are key to your evidence base, you might find yourself interviewing them after the majority of the analysis has been done.

This, coupled with the realities of the timing of proposal awards, contracting, and team members' competing professional and personal commitments (not to mention contextual factors outside of the control of the team - I write as we watch real impacts of the threat of coronavirus to team's ability to travel and work), might mean the working version theory of change is not developed until after a few interviews have taken place.

Four lessons learnt:

1. Start at the end

This lesson covers two concepts:

- **Start with the outcome:** what is the outcome that the evaluation commissioner is most interested in understanding? Start here and work backwards through the likely contributory factors, until you come back to the contribution of the portfolio to these factors. This support mitigation against challenges #1 and #2 above: by focusing on a specific outcome the attribution problem becomes specific and evaluable, and these discussions form the basis of the start of a Theory of Change. It also supports against forms of researcher (and commissioner bias) by changing the focus to being centred on the outcome rather than the work of the portfolio / grantee.

  You can practically support this by asking questions that begin with the outcome and track back to the role of particular actors. See the table below for an example.

Step	1	2	3	4
Questions	What happened that was of interest?	What might have been some contributory factors?	What contributed to those factors being in place?	What was our role in that?
Example	Country A increased its funding for issue Y	Country B increased their funding previously and there was political competition	Country B is hosting an important political event in the next 12 months on issue Y A foundation provided funding for Organisation C to write this report	Grantee 1 published x, y, and z articles in support of Country B hosting The commissioning foundation agreed with this foundation that this report was timely and important Grantees 2, 3, and 4 supported the dissemination of the report to key stakeholders in Country A

There is a tendency in evaluations to seek to isolate the role of one specific factor about which a lot is known (the campaign) and not give due attention to other factors that may have influenced the outcome. This is the kind of Ptolemaic starting point that is unhelpful to understanding an advocacy effort's impact.

In the same way that planning should start with the problem statement at the center, monitoring and evaluation should start with the outcome and work backward to causes.

• **Starting at the end of delivery:** find out what the evaluation will be used for, and how the commissioner wants to receive information in the final report. This will sharpen the focus of the evaluative work to emphasise these important issues in the design and thereby increase usability.[5]

2. Accommodate uncertainty

As described above, it is unlikely that you will be able to follow the steps in the intended order. Evidence will come at all points along the way – and there is likely to be some that you will be unable to collect at all within the parameters of time and resource constraints.

Remembering that contribution analysis is not concerned with the identification of an objective 'truth', but in the establishment of a reasonable, evidence-based story, can be helpful here.

It will be important to understand and communicate the limitations of your method and data to your team, your client, and the evaluand.

3. Understand what is 'enough', and make the most of what you've got

Producing credible findings depends on having a reliable evidence base. Understanding who is truly key in a list of 'key' informants will help focus data collection in priority areas. Building primary data collection on the back of a review of secondary document review will help to make the most of the interview opportunity. It is also important to help inform an understanding of the interests of interviewees to be able to contextualise the explanations they offer for how change came about.

Evidence thresholds for different part of the Theory of Change can be helpful here, especially as some elements of the Theory of Change will be more interesting to clients than others. You'll want to ask yourself: how will I know when I am confident in this finding? How important is this part of the story to my client?

The aim is for credible plausibility, as the 'truth' in many of these contexts – especially advocacy – is dependent on the perspective of any particular actor.

This also relates to understanding the needs of the client. Some of our clients are open about their preference to receive early findings, recognising the trade-off with the level of evidence on which these are based.

5. Coe and Schlangen 2019, No Royal Road: Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation

4. Bring people along the journey

Making time to share emerging findings with clients early in the process both allows you to follow-up leads that are interesting to them, and drop those that aren't – before burning through resources. It supports working along the principle of 'no surprises' and provides them with an insight into any limitations well in advance of the delivery of a final report. It supports a sense of buy-in and agency in the evaluation process by allowing space to shape the research, and reduced the challenges associated with multiple iterations of the contribution story.

To the extent possible, it is also helpful to bring the evaluand along as much as possible by sharing findings in advance of the delivery of the final report. Depending on the extent to which they are a primary audience of the evaluation, this can support utility on their side. Given there is often a power dynamic at play where the evaluation commissioner is their funder, this can also help to alleviate nervousness around what is being presented.

Concluding thoughts

Our aim with this brief was not to deter you from using contribution analysis – quite the opposite! We want to emphasise that it is possible to apply the approach under time and resource constraints.

Thinking things through in advance and carefully defining scope can go a long way to avoid potential pitfalls. Our aim here was to provide some food for thought and practical ideas to support this.

We welcome your reactions and reflections on these lessons and wish you well in your endeavours to apply contribution analysis in policy and advocacy settings.