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Assessing Performance of Social Sector Development Programmes Using Programme Data - Improvements on Existing Analytical Frameworks

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: There are no known rigorous methods for assessing performance of social human development programmes using programme data. This study aims to explore how routine programme data generated by international agencies, NGOs, and governments in low-income countries can be systematically used to assess the performance of social sector development programmes. It also aimed to evaluate existing analytical frameworks for such assessments, identify their limitations, and propose methodological improvements to enhance their effectiveness.
Study Design: This was a methodological and analytical study using a case-based framework application approach, supported by qualitative and quantitative secondary data analysis.

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Methodology: We applied a generic analytical framework to assess programme performance across three dimensions: achievement of intended results, systemic change, and adaptive capacity. The analysis used secondary data, including service coverage, financial utilization, and beneficiary feedback. Where necessary, primary data was collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Identified limitations of the framework were addressed through methodological enhancements, including deep-dive analyses, integration of external datasets, and stakeholder consultations.
Results: The framework effectively assessed "what" was implemented and "how many" were reached. However, it was limited in addressing "so what," "how well," and "what effect," offering minimal insight into programme quality and impact. Limitations stemmed from the original design of programme data, which is often not aligned with structured performance assessment needs. Improvements—such as defining key concepts, triangulating with administrative data (e.g., HMIS, EMIS), and conducting focused geographic analyses enhanced the framework's utility.
Conclusion: Routine programme data holds significant potential for real-time performance assessments and programme improvement. However, existing frameworks require methodological refinements to unlock this potential. The proposed improvements can guide development actors in generating actionable insights from existing data to inform adaptive management and strategic learning. These improvements can lead to a lot of value being generated from the huge investments that are made in generating routine programme data. In addition, such improvements will provide information for use in decision making and as input to have processes such as programme evaluations.

Keywords: Social sector development programmes; programme data; analytical frameworks.

1. INTRODUCTION

International agencies such as United Nations programmes and funds, international and national Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) implement large scale social sector development programmes in support of low-income countries (Klassen et al., 2010). These social sector programmes are mostly in poverty reduction, food security, health, water and sanitation, nutrition, education, protection, and gender empowerment amongst others. Beneficiary Governments, UN agencies and NGOs generate a lot of data as they implement these programmes (Prasun, 2019). At individual government, UN agency or NGO, there is a lot of programme data[1] generated at output level (Independent Expert Advisory Group Secretariat, 2014). UN agencies, NGOs and beneficiary governments (implementors) invest in monitoring and information management systems (IMS) to manage this data. It is estimated that such data is in petabytes and costs hundreds of millions of dollars a year (Smyth & Vanclay, 2017).

This data constitutes a rich source of information that can and should be used for assessing programme performance before periodic 3- or 5-year impact and outcome evaluations (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007). While advances have been made in development of models for analysis of big data (Wang et al, 2025), there are methodological limitations with analysis of routine programme data. This paper explores how such assessments should be conducted. It explores existing analytical frameworks for such assessments. It also outlines limitations of the analytical frameworks, limitation of programme data and offers methods to improve such assessments.

2. DATA FROM SOCIAL SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Implementers (mostly UN agencies, NGOs and governments) of social sector development programmes generate various types of data. This data includes: (i) budgets, (ii) financial resource utilization, (iii) status of indicator targets (quantitative and qualitative), (iv) supplies purchase and use, (vi) performance of sub guarantees, (vii) feedback from affected people, (viii) value for money amongst others. Such data is maintained in Information Management Systems (IMS), in various electronic formats, as hard copies and some is kept as tacit knowledge by staff of implementing agencies (Gale et al., 2013).

[1] *Programme data is here defined as data which does not come from statistically representative household surveys.*

The value addition of this data is that it can be used for assessing programme performance to support programme course corrections and adjustments. Management Systems International (MSI) (2019) has extensively used this kind of data for programme assessments in countries like Pakistan. Other than developing a comprehensive analytical framework to analyze such data and use it for performance assessments, various processes that can be used to assess programmes using programme data have been proposed (MSI, 2019; Zhu et al., 2018). The lack of an analytical framework has been shown to be a barrier to analysis and use of monitoring data (Cheboi & Kalanda, 2025).

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ASSESSING SOCIAL SECTOR PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE

There are no generic protocols and frameworks for assessing various programme performance using programme data. This is due in part to the multiplicity of social sector development programmes (Chan et al., 2006). Stufflebeam (1983) developed an analytical framework to assess performance of education programmes, all in limited educational setting contexts. In other areas such as community monitoring of environmental sustainability, Khairlida et al. (2021) have also proposed a framework. Others such as Hayat, A. et al (2020) have also proposed similar frameworks for monitoring humanitarian programmes.

In a recent attempt to create a generic framework for assessing development programmes, Cheboi & Kalanda (2025), developed an analytical framework to assess programme performance using programme data. This analytical framework can be used in any social development sector be it health, polio, education, food security, water and sanitation and others. The analytical framework has a limited set of objectives and a limited set of questions for each objective. The main analytical questions are:

- ✓ To what extent is the programme achieving what it is intended to achieve?
- ✓ To what extent is the programme leading to systemic change?
- ✓ To what extent does the programme enable corrections and adjustments?

Tabel 1 is a proposed Analytical Framework used to assess performance of a social sector development programmes in UNICEF Afghanistan (Cheboi & Kalanda, 2025). Based on this framework, assessment included use of methodologies such as desk review and secondary data analysis of available data. Where applicable, primary data collection through Key Informant Interviews and focus group discussions was conducted. By design of this framework, primary data collection is limited.

Table 1. Analytical Framework to assess programme performance

Objectives	1. To what extent did the programme achieve what it intended to achieve?	2. To what extent is the programme leading to systemic/transformational change?	3. To what extent does the programme enable corrections and adjustments
Questions	• Is the programme reaching and supporting the most vulnerable children? • Is the programme investment achieving the desired results for children? • Is the programme implementing the 'right' programmes, the 'right' areas of the intended geographical locations? • Is the programme equity focused • Is the programme gender-sensitive? • Is the programme inclusive? • Is the programme climate-sensitive?	• Does the programme strengthen humanitarian, transition, peace, development, climate and environmental nexus? • Are the implementation strategies working as expected? • Does the programme have the right mix of partnerships, • Can the selected interventions be done at scale? • Are the interventions sustainable? • Are the interventions implemented economically?	• Are the assumptions the programme made still holding? • What are the main bottlenecks to achieving the desired results? How can the programme address the bottlenecks? • What are the main gaps in the programme delivery (outcomes/outputs, implementation strategies, indicators, key interventions)? • What are the lessons learned, if any? • What are the unexpected/unintended effects of the programme, and how can they be managed? • Are there any unexpected and emerging issues facing targetted populations of the programme??

4. RESULTS OF USING THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

An assessment using the analytical framework in Table 1 was useful. It highlighted that using programme data, it is feasible to assess *"what",* i.e., "what a programme in implementing". Such data is also informative in terms of "*how many*". Programme data can be used to assess variables like "number of people reached with services", "number of geographical locations reached with services". There are however limitations on the use of this analytical framework.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Programme data analyzed using this framework is however very highly limited on evidence on the "*so what*". The data analyzed using this analytical framework does not answer questions on what happens or has happened to those reached with services. Programme data analyzed using this framework does not answer questions on "*how well*" a programme is performing in reaching affected populations. In addition, such data has limitations on answering the question of "what effect", i.e., it does not provide any information on outcomes and impact of a programme. In addition, other limitations related to:

- While it is possible to assess coverage, the framework as is cannot assess effective coverage
- While it is possible to assess coverage, the framework as is cannot assess efficiency.
- With only traditional programme data, a deep dive into a specific area cannot be carried out
- Multidimensional deprivations cannot be assessed with traditional monitoring data

6. IMPROVEMENTS TO THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Conducting a programme assessment using existing programme data and existing analytical frameworks has some structural limitations as outlined above. The major limitation is that programme data is collected for purposes other than structured assessment of programme performance.

Such data is also limited because its collection does not, normally, align with specific analysis questions. Mostly, programme data is collected for accountability to donors and for tracking progress at output based on agreed indicators. Programme data is therefore, a priori, not collected to answer questions as in the Analytical framework in Table 1. As a consequence, there are also no ready and set methods to analyze such data.

Other limitations of applying this analytical framework to programme data include (i) loss of nuances and inputs from the designers and implementors of a programme, (ii) lack of specificities and in-depth data from geographical areas of implementation to draw area specific conclusions, and (iii) external data which may shed more light on success of a programme is not included.

These design and methodological limitations can be improved to better assess programme performance. Based on the use of this framework, Table 2 outlines some actions that can be employed to improve both analytical framework and methods of assessment.

Table 2. Actions to improve assessment of programme performance using an analytical framework

Methodological improvement	Specific actions to improve performance assessment
I. "Deep dive" analysis on a selected programme:	In consultation with programme designers and implementors:
A. Assemble the body of evidence	1. Reach consensus on focus geographies for the analysis. 2. Reach consensus on the reference period and determine period of analysis 3. Agree on a set of indicators 4. Acquire external sources of evidence any additional programme evidence
B. Conduct the selected programme-focused analysis	1. Review external data sources that can be triangulated with programme data. 2. Outline data gaps 3. Apply the analytical framework
C. Develop a special dissemination product	Based on the above deep-dive analysis, prepare a special deliverable (max. 3 pages in length) on the effectiveness of the selected programme

In addition to the methodological improvements outlined in Table 2, we propose some more improvements based on recent work in employing the analytical framework (Cheboi & Kalanda, 2025). These improvements include:

- Establishing consensus on definitions of concepts such as sustainability, quality, inclusion and value-for-money in each context where the assessment is being carried out.
- Take stock of possible case studies and/or promising practices for each programme area.

○ Map and assemble a richer body of evidence to inform the analysis, combining programme data with the country's administrative data sources (e.g., HMIS, EMIS)

- Deepen understanding of the programme' s contributions. This could entail

○ **Selecting a province or subset of provinces and assess the story that emerges:**

- What the programme and other stakeholders are implementing in the selected areas.
- What changes are occurring in the province(s), e.g., in care-seeking practices (e.g., service use in social sectors); participation (of women/girls, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable children); measures of wellbeing (e.g., GBV, child marriage, acute watery diarrhoea).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Development agencies and governments in low-income settings invest a lot of resources in collecting programme data. Such data needs to be analyzed to create value through programme adjustments. There are limited analytical frameworks to analyze such data. Recent proposed analytical frameworks have been tested, and they have limitations. This paper has proposed methodological improvements to such analytical frameworks. Development agencies and the governments they support should continually use such frameworks, learn lessons and improve on them for better analysis and subsequent course corrections. Improvements in analytical frameworks for analyzing routine programme monitoring data can lead to a lot of value being generated from the huge investments that are made in generating such data. In addition, such improvements will provide information for use in decision making there by making programme designs better and in turn, making programmes more effective. Information from improved analysis frameworks will also be invaluable inputs to other processes such as programme evaluations.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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