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EVIDENCING AND EVALUATING PERIOD POVERTY INITIATIVES FOR IMPACT

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let's talk. period

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INTRODUCTION

This brief summarises the ways period poverty initiatives can be evaluated to report progress, effectiveness and impact[1]. Demonstrating effectiveness and impact is not only vital to documenting and sharing what works within the menstruation sector, but also to creating an evidence base that encourages local and national government to invest in effective period poverty initiatives. This brief:

- summarises how a range of period poverty organisations use evaluative techniques to inform their service delivery
- explores whether organisations have the resources, including time and money, to capture data that would allow for a robust impact case to be made
- provides suggestions for an array of possible impact categories and types of data collection, as well as guidelines for best practice in evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

We searched the academic literature and best practice guidelines for information about three of the most common forms of evaluation for organisations: process evaluation, outcome evaluation and impact evaluation. From September to October 2019, we also issued a call for evidence for evaluation practices of UK-based period poverty, equality and education initiatives. Fourteen groups responded, providing practice-based evidence. These groups were engaged in a range of evaluation types for initiatives involving menstruation education, free period product distribution and/or period poverty and menstruation equity advocacy (for more details, see *Table 1 UK-Based Period Equality Initiatives,* in *Menstruation Learning Brief 2: Best Practices and Latest Innovations in UK Period Poverty Initiatives*). We also carried out in-depth interviews with organisational volunteers and asked them how they evaluate their initiatives. We collated and analysed evidence thematically to identify:

- best practices in evaluation
- current evaluation practices – overcoming the barriers, identifying facilitators
- innovative practices in evaluating period poverty, equality and education initiatives.

1 Impact has been defined as a change in an important positive or negative outcome for people or the planet in Impact Management Project https://impactmanagementproject.com/impact-management/what-is-impact/

BEST PRACTICES IN EVALUATION

The UK Evaluation Society Guidelines for good evaluation practices (1), recommend the following:

- Clarity: The design, implementation and report of an evaluation needs to be communicated in a transparent manner for all stakeholders.
- Integrity: Ethical principles should be upheld, acknowledging a responsibility to service users in obtaining true and valid evaluative results.
- Independence: Conflicts of interest and power differences should be addressed in obtaining evaluative data.
- Accessibility: The evaluation's findings should be made publicly available and should be disseminated to relevant stakeholders.
- Trust: Ethical evaluation requires that implementation and reporting of data is fair and just in order to promote trusting relationships.
- Equity: The human dignity of participants and stakeholders must be upheld in the implementation and reporting of evaluation data. All perspectives should be respected, regardless of the participant's social position.
- Transparency: All components of the evaluation design, implementation, data collection and analysis should be available to stakeholders.
- Diversity: All cultures, genders and ages should be respected in the evaluation. Those who have been traditionally marginalised in society may be harder to reach, but their input should also be sought as part of the evaluative process.

CURRENT EVALUATION PRACTICES – OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS, IDENTIFYING FACILITATORS

Many organisations reported using *process evaluation* for their initiatives (sometimes referred to as 'monitoring,' (2)). Process evaluation involves evaluating how a programme is performing and any changes needed as it progresses. It is helpful to keep in mind the difference between proposed activities (what you intend to do), outputs (what you will produce) and outcomes (what will happen due to your initiative) (3). This type of evaluation can start as soon as the initiative begins, or mid-way through. It can be repeated at intervals throughout the project. The data collected can be both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data often focusses on the experiences of the service users in engaging with the initiative and whether they have ideas for how the initiative can be adapted, expanded or improved. Quantitative data might measure demographic characteristics of those accessing the services, or might keep a tally of how much or how often a service is being accessed (2).

Cyrenians, an organisation who educate about menstruation and distribute menstrual supplies, reported using a variety of process evaluation techniques. Their development workers regularly check-in with the partnering organisations they deliver to, and track the number of products sent out to each organisation. They also ask organisations to report any feedback they receive from service users as well as a rough number of individuals who are using the products.

Some organisations reported using *outcome evaluation*. This type of evaluation measures the effects that an initiative has on the service user group. These effects are determined by the outcomes that you are trying to achieve, and should ideally be measured at the start of the project (the baseline) and at the end of the evaluation period. Outcome evaluation will help determine whether your project has achieved change in the population. Outcomes that might be useful to measure include changes in knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs, reducing the prevalence of health risks or illness, or changing the use of services (4). Brook, a menstrual advocacy group that educates about menstruation and distributes period products, evaluate the effectiveness of their menstrual education programmes with young people by gathering pre- and post- programme data. They also use the questionnaires as an opportunity to find out what kinds of menstrual products their groups are using and where they obtain them.

Piloting your evaluation before using it on a larger scale is recommended in order to check that it is easily understood by the participants and it is feasible to collect and analyse the data. Rethink Periods (City to Sea) are a group that educate about and distribute renewable period supplies. They piloted their evaluation early in the project, enabling them to make helpful changes to improve evaluation accessibility and data analysis tools. Lessons learned from the pilot evaluation now mean that online questionnaires for teachers and pupils are embedded into the programme, including the use of QR codes in teacher training slides to make accessing the questionnaire even easier. Google Reports is then used to analyse data in a more accessible and timely manner, providing a more effective means of tracking immediate and longer term impact. Piloting different evaluation tools is *almost* as vital as piloting the project itself, to make sure you are able to capture what you need, learn, and ensure future success.

The following case study highlights how one period poverty organisation evaluates their initiatives using both process and outcome evaluation:

CASE STUDY 1: 'KEEP IT SIMPLE': EVALUATING IMMEDIATE IMPACT FOR FUTURE SUCCESS

'Keep evaluation simple, and ensure there is enough time for it,' states a representative from Bloody Good Period (BGP). BGP use a 'traffic light system' to measure the impact of their education programme, which provides female sexual and reproductive health information to asylum seeker and refugee women. The traffic light system provides a quick, accessible and anonymous way for women attending sessions to provide feedback, by giving statements on content and delivery via 'red' , 'amber' or 'green' stickers (e.g., green = good), at the end of the session. A3 sheets of paper are used to capture the feedback, with BGP volunteers being available to facilitate the process and answer questions, as needed. Gathering feedback in this way works well, in the context of session time constraints and potential language difficulties the women face.

The feedback informs future sessions and shapes how BGP work with each drop-in centre, ensuring that tailored service user needs are the key priority. This approach not only ensures that education sessions meet the needs of the women, but it also informs practice around period product distribution and signposting of services, demonstrating immediate impact for service users.

Impact evaluation demonstrates a change in positive or negative outcomes resulting from an initiative or intervention. When considering the impact that your initiative might have, be sure to consider a wide range of possible outcomes – economic, environmental, social, cultural, health/quality of life, policy and services. Impact data should ideally be both qualitative and quantitative, 'no numbers without stories. No stories without numbers' (5, p. 3).

In order to show the true impact of an initiative, the possible effect of other factors that could potentially be related to your outcomes should be explored. If you can rule out the effects of these extra variables, you can build a claim for a cause and effect relationship between the activities in the initiative and real world change. A control or comparison group can help to randomly distribute any possible extra factors between the groups, which allows you measure whether the changes in outcomes can be attributed to the initiative or intervention (3). Like outcome evaluation, the most convincing impact evaluations utilise data collection at the start of a program (to provide a baseline) and at repeated intervals during program implementation.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

There were common shared barriers identified by many of the organisations. The most common barriers included difficulties in finding time to evaluate initiatives and a lack of money to fund the evaluations. Collaborative Learning Networks have been identified as a method to help organisations with common aims to work together to amass a range of evidence (6). These networks can help to:

- jointly share costs of consultancy regarding the best types of questions to ask for evaluative purposes,
- share data collection platforms that are best to use for data collection and analysis
- come together to identify similar data to be collected across the organisations, resulting in a larger evidence base to draw from, whilst not being overly onerous for any one organisation
- provide opportunities to work together to solve commonly-faced problems in the menstruation sector.

Several UK based organisations have worked in collaboration to evaluate specific period poverty initiatives, or research key strategy priorities. Such collaborations can provide access to skills, resources, networks and funding, leading to more in-depth insight and the establishment of longer-term impact, being mutually beneficial for those involved.

An additional barrier identified by organisations was collecting information about the effectiveness of their initiative when one of the presiding principles is that no questions should be asked of the participants to allow for confidentiality/anonymity. Organisations reported overcoming this issue by utilising non-invasive techniques to help them understand if their initiatives were well-received and what further resource was needed. For example, Pride and Periods, a group who raise awareness about period poverty and distribute products from libraries, collect product request forms to inform them of the resources most needed by those accessing the service. As an example of collecting information about how the service is received, Bloody Good Period employ a traffic light system, where the service can be simply rated using a green-amber-red designation, as mentioned in Case Study 1.

CASE STUDY 2: COLLABORATION, STRATEGY AND LONG TERM IMPACT

Dr Emily Wilson, CEO Irise International, states: “Working closely with academic institutions has been a key part of Irise’s approach since we first started. NGOs can help researchers and students to focus on practical questions with real and immediate implications for policy and strategy, and in return universities can provide independent support for generating evidence of what works best”.

Irise International educate, research and advocate on menstrual matters. They have ongoing links with several academic institutions to measure the impact of their work, both within the UK and internationally, with research and impact measurements being key goals in their organisational strategy. Irise benefit from having advisors and trustees with academic expertise on their Boards, who are crucial in fostering collaborations to develop research/evaluation projects. These projects seek to address existing strategy aims, with the outcomes being used to directly impact future priorities and long-term strategy.

A collaborative masters’ student project with Leeds University’s School of Politics and International Studies led to a key change in strategy and direction for Irise. The research outcomes were presented to the Board of Trustees, providing valuable insight to aid their decision-making, and gave the student experience of influencing policy, highlighting the mutual benefits that such collaborations provide.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN EVALUATING PERIOD POVERTY, EQUALITY AND EDUCATION INITIATIVES

There were several innovative recommendations and methods of evaluation reported by organisations in the interviews and calls for evidence. Some of these are:

- Be open to unexpected findings. Pride and Periods, for example, found through their evaluations that menstrual pads were sometimes being collected to help with bladder incontinence issues. This information helped inform expanding their service to meet this unanticipated need.
- When working with young people, simple descriptions of how they experienced the initiative might work best. When working in primary schools, the Real Period Project, an organisation that educates about menstruation, utilised a draw and write evaluation, which may make it easier for young children to communicate their ideas (7).
- Sandwell Council, who have an initiative to educate and distribute period products, track the impact of their #GirlCodeSandwell project, via the use of Twitter analytics. The project aims to provide free products to young people who need them and improve menstrual health education and awareness within the area. Twitter analytics allow the council to understand how the #GirlCodeSandwell hashtag is used. It can measure project engagement and impact by searching the hashtag to see who is sharing information about the project, what information is shared, where support is needed and which partners are engaging with the project.

CONCLUSION

Good quality evaluation is important for an organisation to understand whether it is meeting its own objectives and helping those it sets out to aid. Additionally, funding is often contingent on whether impact can be demonstrated by the organisation. This brief set out suggestions for a range of evaluation types, as well as current and best practices in the field.

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JOYCE NICHOLLS

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