Evaluation in Our New Normal Environment: Navigating the Challenges with Data Collection

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Background: Data collection is a critical component of all evaluations. However, it often presents a number of challenges under the best of circumstances. For instance, the evaluation budget and time frame both have implications for the quality and type of data that is collected. Additionally, adherence to high quality international ethical best practices is necessary when collecting data for any purpose, methodological rigor is important for ensuring the credibility of the evaluation, improving access to important documents and stakeholders, as well as decreasing excessive evaluation anxiety on the part of critical stakeholders, when possible, is vital. These challenges have now been considerably exacerbated by the COVID-19 global health pandemic which has changed our world in fundamental ways. In what is now considered as our new normal environment, evaluators will need to make profound changes to the manner in which they plan and undertake data collection.

Objectives: This paper examines the many and varied challenges that will be encountered with data collection in our new normal environment. This new normal has had an impact on evaluation practices in all countries, developed and developing, and has significantly amplified existing challenges in countries with limited evaluation culture, budgets, technological coverage, access, and connectivity. It makes an important contribution to the literature since data collection has historically and traditionally been conducted using primarily face-to-face field work and through the freedom of movement of people to undertake this task.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Desk review was utilized for the preparation of this paper.

Findings: Evaluators need to be extremely flexible, innovative, and amendable to different approaches to data collections as our new normal environment will likely be with us for a while. This pandemic has thrown everyone a very painful curveball and introduced significant new work-related challenges for a myriad of work types and work environments. Innovation and the willingness to learn new methods have become an important necessity to help with learning, accountability, transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the plight of the most vulnerable and evidence-based data is the only means to assist this group. Evaluators must rise to the challenge, devise new ways to collect data that is credible and useful, and continue to promote the importance and benefits of the field of evaluation. As such, evaluators have an important role to play in the global economic recovery efforts.

Keywords: budgets, challenges; COVID-19; data collection; evaluation; evaluators; new normal environment; time frame

Introduction

The devastating and raging COVID-19 global pandemic has plunged our world economy into an economic recession. Concurrently, it has created anxiety among our world's population brought on by uncertainly about the future, rising unemployment, mental health issues from lockdown and social distancing, financial stress regarding how to pay bills and meet daily commitments, and a host of other issues. The magnitude of this pandemic is quite unprecedented and has paralyzed and crippled even the most prosperous nations. The trajectory of the social and economic consequences are still difficult to predict with any degree of accuracy several months into the pandemic (United Nations, 2020a).

As countries and organizations globally grapple with survival as a first priority, budget cuts are inevitable. According to Patton (2020), evaluations have historically been one of the first items to cut during economic downturns. Many evaluators may therefore find themselves facing a very uncertain future as demand for evaluation services plummet. Still, the need for evidence-based data and evaluation is perhaps now more important than before. Our world is in crisis and the economic repercussions will likely affect every country. As such, there will be fierce competition for limited financial resources (Chelsk & Kelly, 2020). Additionally, since monetary resources are in scarce supply in every country and since the effects of this most recent crisis have been overwhelmingly felt by the poor and the marginalized all over the world, evidence-based data is critical for ensuring that financial resources are optimized for societal good and that the voices of those most affected are brought to the fore. Evaluators may therefore need to re-strategize their trade so that they can continue to earn a living while making a valuable contribution to the global economic recovery efforts.

This paper will examine the many and varied challenges that will be encountered with data collection in our new normal environment. This new normal has had an impact on evaluation practices in all countries, developed and developing, and has significantly amplified existing challenges in countries with limited evaluation culture, budgets, technological coverage, access, and connectivity. It makes an important contribution to the literature since data collection has historically and traditionally been conducted using primarily face-to-face field work and freedom of movement of people to undertake this task. The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides an overview on the current global situation, explains why evidence-based data is of critical importance in this environment, and briefly summarizes the existing challenges with data collection. Section two examines the myriad of challenges that evaluators are likely to encounter with data collection in our new normal environment and provides some strategies for dealing with these challenges. The final section envisions the transformation changes that will be necessary for the evaluation profession post COVID-19.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the World Economy

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has eroded decades of economic development progress and crippled our world economy in unprecedented ways. As the world grapples with the economic devastation brought on by this pandemic, billions of people are reeling from the magnitude of a shock that has triggered what is predicted to be the worst economic recession since World War II (World Bank, 2020). In addition to the staggering economic impact, the pandemic is expected to produce long-term societal and humanitarian impacts with the poorest and most vulnerable populations around the globe taking the hardest hit from the pandemic. As uncertainty, job and income losses, and other disruptions loom in the immediate future, governments are confronted with the dilemma of choosing between continued lockdown to preserve public safety and the revival of their economies (Bethune, & Korinek, 2020; United Nations, 2020a, 2020b). With this in mind and keeping optimistic that the pandemic will eventually abate, most countries are cautiously starting to reopen their economies (United Nations, 2020a; World Bank, 2020). Simultaneously, countries are acting as a catastrophe insurer (Canuto, 2020) and trying

to facilitate macro-economic support to help with the stabilization of the economy, implementing safety nets to assist those with disrupted livelihoods and diminished prospects, funneling additional resources towards healthcare systems, and implementing national protocols to reduce the spread of the virus (World Bank, 2020). These temporary emergency actions are aimed at preventing country economies from coming to a complete standstill (Canuto, 2020).

Presently, even the most prosperous nations are feeling the economic wrath of this pandemic. The situation in low income countries is however of great concern as developing country economies were already in a very fragile state prior to the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). The economic despair created by the pandemic, combined with other issues such as natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, wildfires) and social challenges (e.g., poverty, inequity) (Stephens et al., 2020) have now considerably exacerbated the delicate economic situation in numerous countries. The emergence from the pandemic will therefore undoubtedly leave lasting and severe scars as many countries will not be able to provide adequate safety nets and macro-economic support to their populace and businesses during the pandemic. The cross-border spillovers from the pandemic are also particularly troubling. Countries that rely heavily on tourism, trade, and commodity exports will face considerable hardship if the pandemic persists for longer than anticipated as this may require reintroducing lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus (World Bank, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic on businesses and jobs is predicted to be quite staggering. Already, businesses from a range of sectors, particularly smaller enterprises, have suffered catastrophic losses, thus posing a serious threat to continued sustainability (International Labour Office, 2020). To contextualize, approximately 55 percent of the 20 million jobs lost in the US during the month of April 2020 originated from businesses classified as small and medium sized (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020a). On the global front, the negative economic impact on businesses has translated into a large proportion of the world's population becoming redundant or

getting pay cuts and reduced work hours. Specifically, the International Labour Organization (2020) estimates that as much as 38 percent of the world's population will be displaced because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many in the informal sector. Worse, in some sectors, some types of jobs may be made permanently redundant post COVID-19 as many companies are currently resorting to more automation of labor in an attempt to combat the spread of the virus (Kelly, 2020).

Finally, this pandemic has highlighted an important interdependent or circular relationship between socio-economic status and the poverty burden. Poor people are disproportionately affected by global crises. They tend to be employed in more precarious jobs, are the first to feel the economic consequence of the crisis at the household level, and are the ones that will continue working in precarious and often dangerous conditions in order to survive (Fisher & Bubola, 2020). In the current COVID-19 crisis, while the economic shutdown has affected the majority of the people around the world, the biggest impact from a survival perspective has been felt by the poor and the vulnerable (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020b). Not only have these people had to continue working in very dangerous conditions in order to avoid starvation or the loss of their shelter or homes, but they have also been dying at disproportionate rates (Fisher & Bubola, 2020). Their lack of access to proper health care means that many had developed several underlying conditions before the start of the pandemic thus making them more likely to die of complications related to COVID-19 infections (Fisher & Bubola, 2020). Finally, in many parts of the world, middle- and lower-income women have also been disproportionately affected by the recession that has been brought about by the pandemic. Some have dubbed this latest recession as a "She-session" in relation to the fact that lower- and middle-income women tend to hold some of the most precarious jobs and are the first to be laid off following an economic downturn (Gupta, 2020).

Why Evidence-Based Data is Critical in Our New Normal Environment

The preceding section has highlighted the turmoil and uncertainly that the world faces. To help with the rebuilding efforts, strong evidence-based data will be required to guide decisions. Millions are currently in despair and financial resources are in short supply. Credible data is urgently needed so that priorities for rebuilding can be properly focused. In this environment, developmental data is particularly important as this type of data is critical for shaping and informing policies to ensure that no one is left behind (Persaud & Dagher, in press). The future will likely be vastly different to the past. The world must learn from this dreadful pandemic. Many countries may need to think about diversification as tourism and hospitality services are likely to be severely affected over the next two years and automation of labor will likely reduce the demand for many types of jobs. Diversification is also important to help countries weather another major shock of this magnitude. As governments focus on rebuilding efforts, policies need to be sufficiently proactive to enable the world and individual countries to be better prepared for future shocks. Policies must focus on building a future to eliminate basic poverty and ensure that all have a basic standard of living. Immediate focus must also be placed on assisting those who are currently unemployed to get back on their feet as dependence on state welfare is not sustainable. Partnerships among the public, private, and non-profit sectors are important in these rebuilding efforts. Policies cannot be piecemeal. Rather, they must be holistic and proactive, and they must pay special attention to the most powerless, marginalized, and silent victims, especially those who are not visible to decision-makers. Data, especially that which is disaggregated to show variances between groups, must therefore be seen as the "lifeblood of decision making and the raw material for accountability" (Independent Expert Advisory Group, 2014, p. 2).

Challenges with Data Collection Prior to COVID-19

According to the literature, evaluators encounter several data collection related challenges. These challenges are many and varied and span a continuum from being highly complex and complicated and hard to resolve, to being less complex and more easily resolvable (Persaud & Dagher, 2020). The experience of the evaluator obviously plays a major role in how successfully various types of challenges are handled. A very common challenge confronting most evaluators pertain to the evaluation budget which is often impractical for the scope of work required (Bamberger et al., 2004, 2006; Persaud, 2016, in press). The budget in turn impacts the time frame which is also a common problem in a majority of evaluations. Rushing data collection can severely compromise the quality of an evaluation (Rossi et al., 2004). Regularly, clients ask for much more than is realistically possible with the available budget and time frame (Persaud, in press). Methodological issues also pose a concern in some evaluations when the sample is preselected by the client and many important stakeholders are omitted (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004) thus biasing the sample. Additionally, data collection can be quite challenging when indicators are not properly designed (Kusek & Risk, 2004), when baseline data are non-existent (Bamberger et al., 2016), when access is denied to program documents and records, when documents are maintained in hardcopy form (Persaud, 2016), when budgets are spent on gathering data associated with the funders' indicators and needs (Clements et al., 2008), and when critical stakeholders manifest excessive evaluation anxiety (Donaldson et al., 2002). Finally, evaluators are sure to encounter ethical and political challenges of one sort or another at some point in their career (Morris, 2015; Royce et al., 2001).

Navigating the Myriad of Data Collection Challenges Confronting Evaluators in the COVID-19 Environment

Conducting evaluations in our new normal environment will be vastly different to what we have grown accustomed to and will admittedly present many new challenges and considerably exacerbate existing challenges (see Figure 1). However, since evaluators have little choice they must adapt and embrace these challenges and find new and more creative ways to collect data which may not be quite as easy as it sounds. Evaluators can no longer operate with a business as usual approach. This section will highlight several challenges that are likely to be experienced by evaluators and provide some strategies on how evaluators can address these challenges.

Need for Evaluation

Evaluation is perhaps more critical than ever in this very chaotic environment. As the world navigates COVID-19 and tries to rebuild the world economy while working under difficult and unimaginable circumstances, the opportunity costs associated with the use of financial resources will take on increasing importance as numerous competing needs vie for the same financial resources. As organizations everywhere try to do the most good with limited financial resources, accountability and transparency will be important to ensure that financial resources are being utilized in the best way. Unprecedented suffering is taking place across the globe. Worldwide, governments have tried to assist those most in need in substantial and tangible ways. However, no one would have predicated the suffering that this pandemic has caused, nor the period of time that it would last and its devastation on the global economy. As financial resources get depleted, evaluation, as well as monitoring are likely to recede into the background, as governments and other organizations understandably place their priorities elsewhere and devote their energies to other activities including rebuilding efforts and trying to save jobs.

Evaluators—like millions of the world's population—will therefore face difficult times. During times of economic recession, monitoring and evaluation has historically suffered, as governments reprioritize needs, implement major cutbacks on spending, and reallocate funds to more pressing needs. Given this reality, evaluators will therefore need to re-strategize their trade so that it can be sold as a critical activity—rather than a bureaucratic burden or luxury (Patton, 2020). In this environment, real time credible data is paramount for informed decision-making. Evaluators can therefore make a valuable contribution to this important exercise.

Data Collection Challenges

Data collection is the very foundation of evaluation. Under normal circumstances, this activity can present a number of challenges which have now been considerably exacerbated by the COVID-19 environment.

Evaluation Budgets: As previously mentioned, evaluation budgets by and large are often quite inadequate for the scope of work proposed even in good times (Bamberger et al, 2004; Persaud, 2016, in press) and is one of the first expenditure items that is generally cut during difficult times (Patton, 2020). The evaluation budget of course has major implications for what can realistically be done when conducting an evaluation. In this environment, face-to-face field work will necessitate substantial cost increases due to the need for personal protection equipment (PPE) and mandatory self-quarantine when international travel is required. It may even be necessary to provide PPE to all data collection personnel, as well as interviewees, as these persons may not be able to afford these items. Increases in travel costs are also likely as public transportation grapple with lost revenue from social distancing requirements. With looming budget cuts for evaluation on the horizon, evaluators may need to considerably reduce the evaluation's scope and settle for primarily remote data collection. However, substantial scope reduction can minimize the value of an evaluation and remote data collection presents its own unique challenges.

Time Frame: The gathering of high quality and credible data requires adequate time. Yet, the literature indicates that time constraints are a common phenomenon in most evaluations (DaSilva, 2011; Persaud & Dagher, 2020; Rossi et al., 2004). The time frame for data collection in our new normal environment is likely to be considerably increased. If in-person field visits are made, quarantine restrictions in the destination country and on return to the home country will need to be taken into account when estimating the timeline, which in turn will translate into budget increases. Curfew restrictions may also limit the cutoff time for daily field work. The alternative is of course to collect all data remotely. However, remote data collection may still increase the time frame because participants may only be available at certain times. Furthermore, it is usually more difficult to connect with persons remotely as persons are less likely to feel embarrassed for not keeping an appointment. Social distancing rules within organizations and the use of skeleton staff in most organizations will also make access to program records more difficult and also affect the time frame for document review. Additionally, communication with critical stakeholders may require multiple attempts as these persons will understandably be busy with other urgent priorities (Persaud & Dagher, in press).

Access to the Right People: Getting to the right people may often require being physically in the field. However, the global shut down of the world during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the curfew restrictions still in place at this time, limits access to certain groups. Obtaining contact information for vulnerable persons during a crisis is also a very difficult endeavor as data on vulnerable populations are not in public domain. Thus, closure of government and non-governmental organizations will make access to records quite challenging. As organizations reopen, access may still be challenging because of social distancing requirements and the use of skeleton staff (Persaud & Dagher, in press). Some organizations may have also implemented payroll cuts as a means of survival. Reduced staff translates into more work for existing staff who are in office on a given day. If organizational records are maintained in electronic databases, extracting lists of vulnerable populations will be considerably simplified as organization staff may be able to access these records remotely to provide to the evaluator. However, in many developing countries, records are still maintained in hardcopy form. Getting access to hardcopy records will thus be considerably more difficult and will definitely take more time and effort.

Access to Technology: Technological advances have completely revolutionized our world. Today, approximately 90% of the world's population now live within range of a 3G mobile network (United Nations, 2019). However, extreme poverty in some parts of the world means that many cannot afford technology. Additionally, approximately 840 million people are still without electricity (United Nations, 2019). Remote data collection in certain areas may therefore be quite problematic even though many free electronic platforms are now available (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Whats App) which can considerably reduce data collection costs. To address this problem, prepaid phones can be utilized. However, there is a cost associated with this strategy for the purchase of phones, phone credit, delivery of the phones to interviewees, and additional phone batteries. Moreover, interviews will need to be conducted in a relatively short time frame to prevent depletion of phone batteries and the phones may need to be linked to a specific phone number so that the phone credit is not depleted which may take some time (Persaud & Dagher, in press).
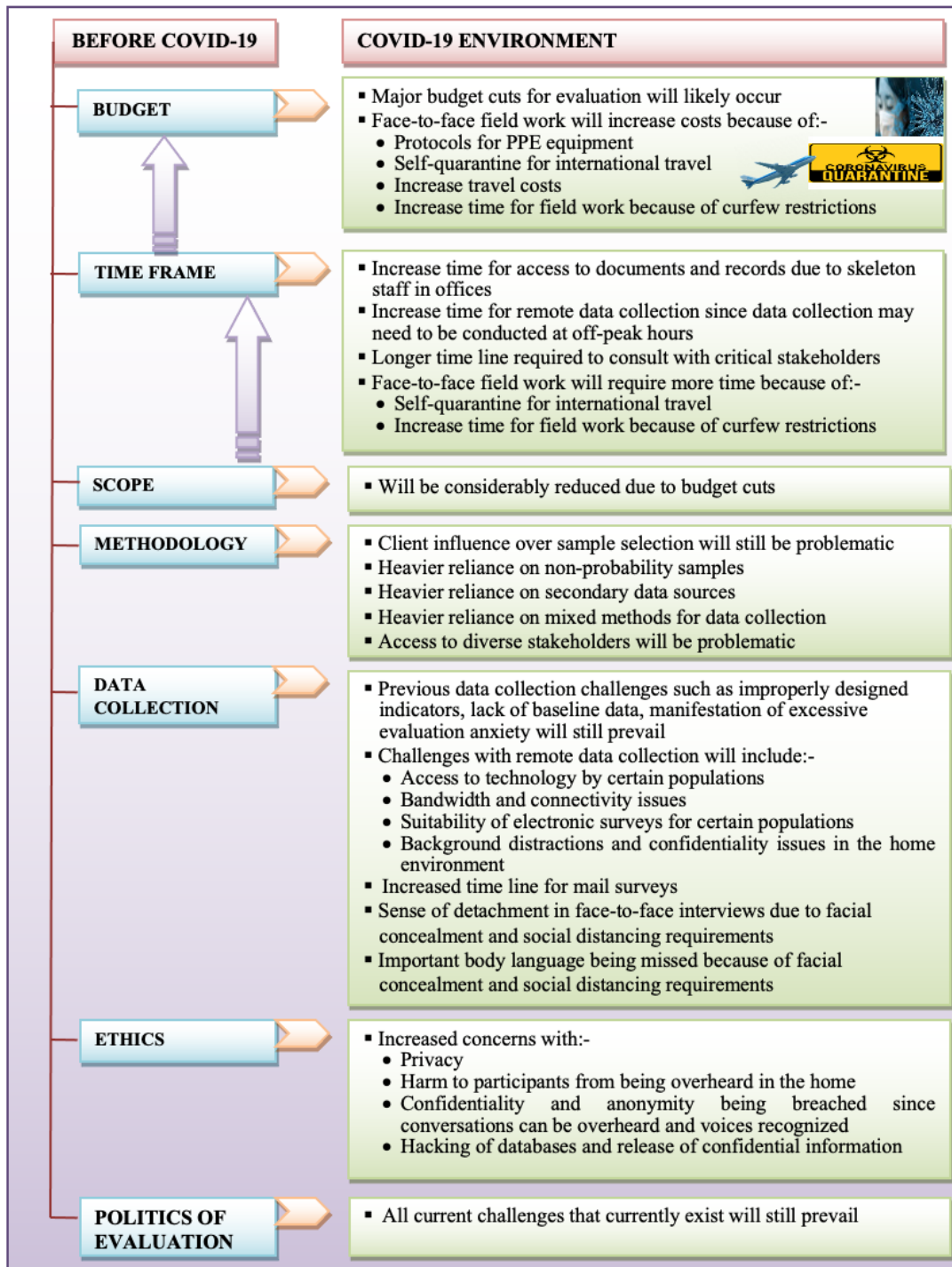
BEFORE COVID-19

BUDGET

TIME FRAME

SCOPE

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

ETHICS

POLITICS OF EVALUATION

COVID-19 ENVIRONMENT

- Major budget cuts for evaluation will likely occur
- Face-to-face field work will increase costs because of:-
  - Protocols for PPE equipment
  - Self-quarantine for international travel
  - Increase travel costs
  - Increase time for field work because of curfew restrictions

- Increase time for access to documents and records due to skeleton staff in offices
- Increase time for remote data collection since data collection may need to be conducted at off-peak hours
- Longer time line required to consult with critical stakeholders
- Face-to-face field work will require more time because of:-
  - Self-quarantine for international travel
  - Increase time for field work because of curfew restrictions

- Will be considerably reduced due to budget cuts

- Client influence over sample selection will still be problematic
- Heavier reliance on non-probability samples
- Heavier reliance on secondary data sources
- Heavier reliance on mixed methods for data collection
- Access to diverse stakeholders will be problematic

- Previous data collection challenges such as improperly designed indicators, lack of baseline data, manifestation of excessive evaluation anxiety will still prevail
- Challenges with remote data collection will include:-
  - Access to technology by certain populations
  - Bandwidth and connectivity issues
  - Suitability of electronic surveys for certain populations
  - Background distractions and confidentiality issues in the home environment
- Increased time line for mail surveys
- Sense of detachment in face-to-face interviews due to facial concealment and social distancing requirements
- Important body language being missed because of facial concealment and social distancing requirements

- Increased concerns with:-
  - Privacy
  - Harm to participants from being overheard in the home
  - Confidentiality and anonymity being breached since conversations can be overheard and voices recognized
  - Hacking of databases and release of confidential information

- All current challenges that currently exist will still prevail

Figure 1. *Data collection challenges before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.*

Bandwidth and Connectivity Issues: Internet connectivity issues are often a problem under the best of circumstances. However, at this time, internet usage have considerably increased as a substantial proportion of the world population are operating from home. Bandwidth and connectivity issues, coupled with constant disconnections can considerably frustrate data collection efforts on the part of both parties (Persaud, 2020). Additionally, some homes may only have access to one computer or cell phone. Thus, trying to communicate with certain persons may be difficult or impossible because multiple family members may be using the same devise for work and school activities, or to prevent boredom. Persons engaged in data collection may therefore need to try to communicate at off peak hours (e.g., before 7.00 a.m., after 10:00 p.m.) which may be inconvenient to the interviewers, as well as the participants. Differences in time zones can add another layer of complexity especially when the time difference is more than 4 hours.

Use of Electronic Surveys: The use of electronic surveys can definitely reduce data collection costs and several platforms are now available to administer these surveys at low cost or entirely free when a small number of questions are being used (e.g., Survey Monkey). However, this means of data collection many not be suited to certain types of populations because of writing and reading deficiencies. If the recipient has access to technology, the survey can be administered by an interviewer reading the questions and recording the responses. However, this will translate into more time which has cost implications. Also, the problems with bandwidth connectivity and access to technology may also be an issue and may affect the quality of the data and the level of bias in the results. Still, this may be the only suitable means for data collection at the current time and evaluators can account for these challenges in how they aggregate the scores and how they formulate the results.

Putting Participants at Ease: Putting participants at ease is an essential attribute of a good interviewer. When interviews are sensitive and are conducted in a face-to-face environment, participants are likely to feel more embarrassment and discomfort compared to remote participation without videos. However, the human presence which can often bring comfort with a facial expression and is important in certain types of interviews such as domestic violence will be lost, especially due to PPEs. It will therefore be important for persons conducting sensitive interviews to have a pleasant voice to soothe participants who may be in distress and to encourage discussion. Furthermore, evaluators can also draw on experience of colleagues who have had to interview people in situations where, for religious or customary reasons, interviewees' faces are not completely visible.[1]

Use of Mail Surveys: When technology is not an option, mail surveys can be employed. However, like electronic surveys, mail surveys may similarly not be suited to certain populations with minimal education. Additionally, mail surveys generally have a low response rate. As such, an incentive may need to be offered to solicit participation (Persaud et al., 2019). In this environment, the best incentive may be monetary compensation. However, if the money is sent at the same time as the survey, many participants may take it and not complete the survey. Additionally, if lockdown measures are in place, mail surveys will not be suitable. Moreover, even if a lockdown is not in place, skeleton staff at post offices will increase the timeline for getting responses. Thus, if the data is urgently required, this will not be a suitable means for data collection. It is also important to note that this method can also raise questions related to the misrepresentation of the situation at hand. Often, it is those who are very invested in the process who decide to engage and while compensation could be provided to increase participation, doing so will not eliminate partiality in the data. As noted earlier, evaluators will have to account for this

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[1] To compensate for the limited facial observations, one can pay more attention to the participant's body language and the tenseness of their body, their eye movement, and the behaviour and body language of others who are around the participant.

weakness and properly reflect it in the outcomes of the evaluation.

Working from Home: Working from home can present numerous challenges for evaluators and other data collection personnel, as well as the persons who must provide the data. Most homes are without a decided office space and quiet time is likely to be a problem with the entire family at home. Both parties may have many types of distractions in the background (e.g., screaming children, adults shouting or quarreling, radios or televisions playing). If there is only one computer or one cell phone in the home there will also be competing demands on use. If the interview is not conducted at an appropriate time, the participant may also be distracted with personal chores. Some participants may also not be in a frame of mind to talk or may suffer from mental health-related issues that makes it hard for them to talk. To deal with this problem, data collection may need to be directly scheduled to the time most appropriate for each individual participant which may extend the timeline and budget.

Detaching from Rigor as the Gold Standard: A certain degree of methodological rigor is important in evaluations. However, COVID-19 is quite unprecedented and it may be argued that some data is better than none at all. Emphasis may therefore need to be placed on the use of less scientific and robust samples. In this new normal environment, evaluators may find that heavier reliance may need to be placed on the use of non-probability samples, particularly convenience samples. The ability to make generalizations may therefore need to be sacrificed at this time. Such drastic methodological changes may however not be palatable to many and will require a fundamental change in mind-set.

Ethical Issues: As remote data collection becomes the primary means for data collection in our new normal, additional concerns with respect to privacy, informed consent, harm to participants, and anonymity and confidentiality are on the horizon. There is therefore a need for more detailed protocols on ethical best practices for remote data collections. Currently, most evaluations generally do not require Institutional Review Board approval. However, evaluators still employ an ethical mindset to execute their evaluations using international best practices for data collection. The problem of course is that current guidelines do not offer much advice on remote data collection because this is still a relatively recent phenomenon.

Privacy is likely to be a major concern. When cameras are being used, individuals may feel like their privacy is being invaded as strangers can now see into their homes. Others may be concerned about the security of these online systems. Even if cameras are not used, interviewees may still be worried that the interviewer may overhear something that is not desirable from background conversation. This may be particularly troubling if the interview is being recorded. Moreover, when recordings are used, interviewees may not be as candid since they may be concerned that the recording may be leaked. Informed consent is of course still required for remote data collection. For instance, participants are asked to tick a box for an electronic survey and told that their agreement to participate in the interview will be recorded to maintain evidence of informed consent.

Harm to participants may also be of increasing concern. In the case of gender-based violence for example, interviewees may be afraid to report sensitive information because of fears of being overheard by their abuser and the ramifications from additional violence. If a survey is being completed, and the person has to move away from the computer for any reason, someone else may see the survey responses and similarly inflict harm. Alternatively, for other types of sensitive interviews, other family members, friends, or neighbors may either overhear the conversation or see the partially completed survey and share this information with others. Harm may also be caused by anxiety from taking part in the interview when participants are totally stressed. Mental health issues therefore require consideration in this very chaotic environment.

From the interviewer's side, privacy issues may also be a concern. Moreover, because electronic platforms can be hacked, this is an additional concern. Persons other than the interviewer may also overhear a confidential

interview and speak about it which may cause harm to the participant. Maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of handwritten notes, electronic surveys, and recordings is also a difficult exercise in a home environment, especially if other persons are using the devise.

As we move into the future, it will be necessary for detailed ethical protocols to be developed for operation in a remote environment to safeguard and protect privacy and minimize harm to participants in this new environment. In the meantime, persons can protect privacy of prying eyes by simply using a microphone instead of a camera, or using a background imagine to prevent strangers seeing into the homes if their device can facilitate this feature. Interviewers may also need to take typed notes, rather than recordings, and password protect these documents. If recordings are made, they should be password protected. Hacking is beyond the control of all parties. The best protection to assist in preventing hacking is to logout of websites when moving away from devices. If multiple persons are using the same device, the device may need to be set up with individual passwords for each family member. Data collection (interviews or electronic surveys) will also need to be conducted at a time when the participant can feel comfortable and safe. Finally, data collection personnel will need to be considerably more vigilant to ensure that survey data is not left exposed on home computers and that participants are not being overheard when sensitive interviews are being conducted.

Use of Primary versus Secondary Data Sources: Using first hand data is naturally better than using second hand data. However, during a mandatory lockdown and/or curfew restrictions, evaluators may not be able to collect primary data and secondary data sources may therefore need to be heavily relied upon. However, note that a secondary data source would have been a primary data source for another organization. As such, you may still not be able to get access to it immediately as it may not be publicly available. When using secondary data sources, keep in mind that the data was collected for another purpose and may not be entirely suited to your needs. It

may also be dated, and may contain errors (Persaud et al., 2019). There may also be inconsistencies between secondary data sources because of the methodology used. Cross validation is thus absolutely important to validate the integrity of secondary data sources. Heavier reliance on desk review is therefore likely to substantially increase in this environment.

New Safety Protocols for Face-to-Face Field Work: New guidelines on physical distancing will make face-to-face field work quite awkward. The use of PPE equipment may also act as a barrier for developing rapport with an interviewee and for putting the interviewee at ease. For instance, the interviewer will need to speak louder which may come across as shouting. Facial expression which is so important for communication will also be lost with the wearing of masks and shields.

Quantitative Versus Qualitative Data Collection: Qualitative data can really enrich an evaluation. However, given the ethical concerns previously discussed, in addition to budget and time constraints, it may actually be beneficial to rely on a mixed methods approach in order to triangulate results. Given the new normal that we currently live in and the importance of a nuanced understanding of this new environment, it is important to invest in a diverse and mixed data approach to evaluation.

Trustworthiness of Data: Evidence-based data is premium in this chaotic environment where just about everything needs attention. However, care needs to be used when using data from the web as even reputable websites often have inaccurate data. Specifically, the Davey et al. (2020) article highlighted that several countries used flawed data from the World Health Organization's website to initially create their policies on COVID-19 and later had to revise their policies.

Engaging with Diverse Stakeholders: Multiple voices should always be heard during an evaluation. However, curfew requirements and lack of access to technology may make this task impossible or difficult. Additionally, gender-based balance may be more difficult to

obtain in this environment as women will undoubtedly be expected to be the primary caregivers in many cultures. Taking care of children and the sick will therefore considerably increase the work load of women, thus creating a time constraint for this group.

Ensuring Safety of Personnel Deployed for Field Work: Proper training will be needed to ensure that those engaged in data collection in the field are property trained so that they do not expose themselves or others to the virus. Training will also be needed to ensure that persons performing field work are following local protocols for social distancing, use of PPE equipment, and sanitization (Dayton & Bolden, 2020). More effort will also be needed to conduct field work in outdoor venues as this will permit better social distancing.

Greater Reliance on International Community Liaisons: Given the challenges with international travel, greater reliance may need to be placed on local community liaisons in the international country to collect data (Dayton & Bolden, 2020). Where technology presents a challenges, these liaisons may need to engage in strategic leveraging and use local community structures to bring together people for data collection purposes.

Considerable Flexibility and Adaptability Needed: The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that evaluators need to be very flexible with data collection. Evaluators expend good time and effort to develop the methodology for an evaluation. This master plan is then used to execute the evaluation. Major diversions from a master plan would have been somewhat unprecedented prior to COVID-19 and the evaluation would most likely have been seen as not being very credible. However, daily changes to protocol in this new environment necessitate that evaluators be very flexible. Additionally, modalities may need to be continuously and instantly changed in response to what is happening. Philosophies with respect to rigor is therefore likely to considerably change as some data is better than no data at all. The challenge of course is to restrategize on how some rigor can still be maintained to preserve the creditability of the evaluation's findings.

Crystal Ball Gazing—Transformational Changes Necessary for the Evaluation Profession During and Post COVID-19

As has been noted throughout this paper, the recent crisis has impacted evaluation in ways that have not been imagined before. The new or amplified list of challenges that evaluators will now be facing, and which they will likely be facing in at least the near future, raises significant concerns about the depth, breadth, and quality of work that evaluators can accomplish. With the current drift towards performing the majority of the work online and from home offices in some sectors of the economy (Fisher & Bubola, 2020), this 'pivoting' process is also likely to find some support in the work that evaluators do and could also lead to evaluation processes that depend more heavily on online and distant processes. Unfortunately, while this might bring about some advantages, like financial savings and the decentralization of evaluation processes towards local interlocutors and/or evaluators, the move towards virtual evaluations raises significant ethical and quality concerns and leads to the loss of vital face-to-face interactions.

The following is a discussion of potential adaptation measures that can be taken given our current situation and in challenging situations taking place in more 'normal' times. All of these suggested adaptation measures require evaluators to be pragmatic, exceedingly proactive, flexible, adaptable, and accepting of risks and uncertainties (Patton, 2020).

Increased Inclusion of Theory: Rigorous evaluations have always required assessments of the theoretical framework that guides the design and implementation of projects, programs and policies. However, given that the current crisis has highlighted the consequences of long ignored unintended consequences of certain policies and interventions, paying increased attention to this level of analysis has become more vital than ever. Moreover, the study of theories, especially theories that shed a different perspective on what the project, program or policy is attempting to do, can help identify

interconnected factors and additional areas that would also need to be assessed, especially when they highlight potential intended and unintended consequences.

Increased Reliance on Field Actors: Restricted movement, health and safety, coupled with budget and time constraints will significantly reduce the ability of evaluators to access field data. As such, evaluators might consider a heavier reliance on third party field work. This can include local evaluators, if the evaluation is being performed by international, regional, or non-local evaluators, local researchers and experts, local civil society organizations, front-line workers, and other subject experts. However, in some cases, this might require additional training, especially as it relates to ethical concerns and protection.

Improved and Updated Data Gathering Protocols and Guidelines: Heavier reliance on remote data collection necessitates new updated protocols and guidelines to address ethical concerns. These guidelines should be meant for the lead evaluator and whomever else the evaluator is working with. The guidelines should also cover the use of third party data and the potential ethical concerns with the quality of the data that has already been gathered and the steps that should be taken for the anonymization of the data and the protection of participants.

Increased Inclusion of Alternative Information: To increase their understanding of the situation at hand and to increase their attention to some of the potential unintended consequences, evaluators might find it beneficial to draw on reputable third party information gathered through reputable media outlets, reputable reports from civil society and non-governmental organizations, reports and studies completed by researchers, and data gathered by other entities (e.g. geospatial data). However, access to this alternative information may come at a cost, perhaps a cost that is beyond the capacity of the evaluator or the funder. Furthermore, gathering this data requires special attention to the quality of the information and the transferability of the information that was gathered for another purpose.

Leveraging Collaborations among Funders and Evaluators: Given limitations in access, movement, and capacities, evaluators can draw on greater collaboration between evaluators and with international funders. This can help increase partnerships for joint evaluations, improve the sharing of information, and leverage the evaluation team to compensate for weakness or inexperience in certain issues or approaches. However, it can also increase concerns about data quality, the transferability of the data, and the potential exclusion of important indicators, questions and/or analysis.

Developing and Drawing on Open Access Platforms for Evaluators: Evaluators have the potential to significantly benefit from lessons learned and from experiences of other evaluators. Given our exceptional circumstances, the current limitations, and the need for innovative approaches, an open access platform for and by evaluators and other experts can help inform evaluators, provide some guidance on or potential solutions for certain challenges, and offer learning tools to help evaluators implement new and alternative evaluation methods.

Increased Investment in Data Gathering at the Source and in an Evaluation Culture: Strong monitoring systems to collect high quality/timely data have always been essential. However, this data is significantly more important now given the limitations on the ability of evaluators to work to gather historical data, spend significant time and travel dedicated to gathering baseline data, and building indicators or filling in the gaps. As such, more attention needs to be paid to developing a culture of evaluation and continuous and consistent data gathering. With this unprecedented crisis that has put into question much of what we have taken for granted and much of what we thought we knew, the role of evaluation has become essential for learning to inform the next set of policy solutions and approaches, for accountability, especially as it relates to the impact on the most vulnerable, and for transparency to inform the public and those holding the funders and decision makers to account.

Increased Attention to Equity and Vulnerability: As was noted earlier, this pandemic has been experienced by different sections of societies in a very lopsided manner. Evaluations cannot ignore questions related to equity and vulnerability. As such, evaluators have to pay special attention to equity-focused evaluations or evaluations that focus on the intended and unintended consequences of policies, programs and projects on the most vulnerable groups. This approach can help assess the gaps between the three main groups of direct and indirect beneficiaries—best-off, average and worst-off—and thus better understand the processes and contextual factors that lead to these consequences (Bamberger & Segone, 2011).

Conclusion

This most recent pandemic has reminded us of how vulnerable we really are, how interconnected we have become, and how uninformed many of us are about the plight of the most marginalized and vulnerable people. It has also introduced significant new work-related challenges for a myriad of work types and work environments.

Evaluation, which has always been considered to be underfunded, has been hit hard by the current crisis. Whether it be related to budget cuts, access, movement, ethical considerations, and other data gathering challenges, evaluators have found themselves struggling to adjust to their new normal while maintaining a high level of rigor in their work. Dealing with these challenges requires evaluators to be flexible, innovative, and amendable to different approaches.

This paper has endeavored to highlight the main challenges that evaluators presently face and will likely continue to face for a while. It has also provided some suggestions of mitigation strategies and much needed changes to help the field of evaluation, and evaluators themselves, begin to deal with these challenges. While it is clear that this pandemic has thrown everyone a very painful curveball, innovation and the willingness to learn new methods have become an important necessity to help with learning, accountability, transparency, and with providing the most

vulnerable and silenced groups the voice they need to improve their plight.

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