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## Developing Evaluation Practice in the Information Sector: Introduction to the Special Issue

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# *Developing Evaluation Practice in the Information Sector: Introduction to the Special Issue*

The LEAP IMPACT community of practice is committed to improving evaluation practice in the information sector. The five papers in this special issue reflect some of the different ways in which LEAP IMPACT members are approaching this challenge.

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Sarah Cummings and Kingo Mchombu

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## *INTRODUCTION*

Social actors are continuously, either spontaneously or in a more organized way or both, building relationship with each other to create opportunities for joint learning, increasing their understanding and improving upon current practices. (Engel, 1997)

Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities communities of practice. (Wenger, 1999)

This Special Issue of *Information Development* represents a joint effort by the LEAP IMPACT community. It comprises five papers of varying length and covering diverse subjects. They are demonstrative of a commitment to improving the practice of evaluation in the information for development arena. These papers are not produced by the community as a whole, but they are witness to the diversity and productivity of its members.

This Special Issue has been produced to mark the successful completion of 'Smart Tools for Evaluating the Performance of Information Products and Services: A Writing and Validation Workshop', held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, from 19–22 November 2002. The Special Issue does not, strictly speaking, comprise the proceedings of this meeting, which are in press, but it is strongly allied to the workshop in terms of papers and approaches. It was originally proposed as a way of providing a 'shop window' to

the work and approaches of the LEAP IMPACT members. The five articles included here result from two 'calls for papers' which were sent out to the LEAP IMPACT e-mail discussion list in 2002.

## *LEAP IMPACT*

Since the 1990s, the role of networks or communities of non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) has received increasing attention in the literature. Such networks, including so-called 'communities of ideas', 'communities of practice' or 'communities of purpose' have been used to upgrade the quality of the activities, outputs and impact of these NGDOs; to facilitate a collective learning process; and to contribute to a 'shifting up' of development activities to an international audience (Engel, 1997). Saunders (2000), in his paper on the RUFDATA methodology for evaluation, argues that it is possible to conceptualize evaluation as a series of knowledge-based practices. Central to Saunders' approach is the notion of practice or 'meaning creation' among groups of evaluators. He uses the terminology elaborated by Wenger (1999) and designates these groups as 'communities of practice'. Saunders attempts to describe the process by which communities of practice develop a shared understanding of evaluation. This learning process has also been described by Patton as 'individual changes in thinking and behaving that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning and behaving that occur during the evaluation process' (1998, cited in Saunders).

Against this conceptual background, LEAP IMPACT is a community of practice of information practitioners and evaluation experts who are working together to try to improve the institutional performance of monitoring and evaluation practice related to information services, information products and information projects. LEAP IMPACT has a workspace on the Bellanet website at <http://www.bellanet.org> with an associated e-mail based discussion list. A screen shot of this workspace can be seen in Fig. 1.

This technological platform is a highly appropriate medium for knowledge exchange related to evaluation. The potential of such a platform for this subject area had already been noted in the literature. As McConnell comments:

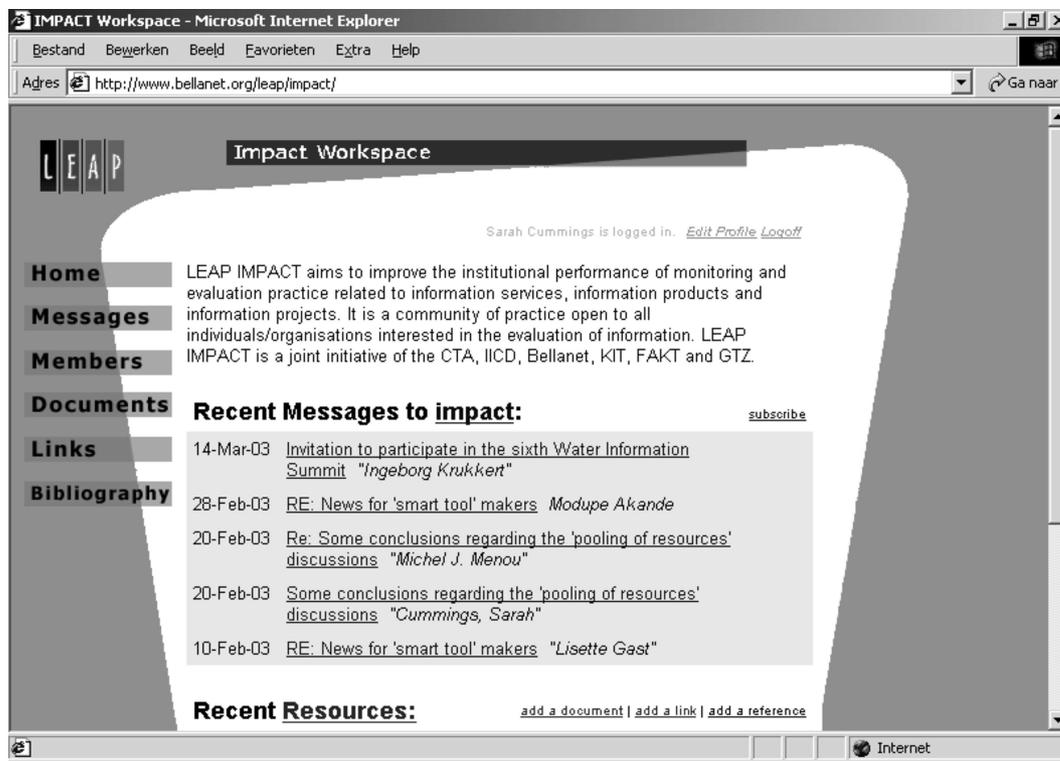


Figure 1. The LEAP IMPACT workspace.

In such a new and challenging field as this, it is even more important that those working, or those interested in working, on information impact are able to communicate with colleagues, exchange experiences, ask advice and share findings. There are various ways of doing this, although a website would provide one useful form. (McConnell, 2000)

## The Beginning

The joint LEAP – IMPACT initiative, which started on 9 May 2001, aims to improve the institutional performance of monitoring and evaluation practice related to information services, products and projects. It has the LEAP prefix because it has an online workspace on the LEAP section of the Bellanet website. LEAP stands for the Learning Evaluation Action Programme which was originally set up as part of the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP). LEAP concentrates on the information and communication technologies (ICTs) field and communication media – primarily the Internet, but also other media such as rural radio. It is very much underpinned by the knowledge management approach, aiming to stimulate organizational learning on evaluation and monitoring practice.

The IMPACT acronym breaks down, in a rather forced way, to Information Management, Perfor-

mance and Communication Technologies. The name is, however, in some ways misleading because it gives the erroneous impression that the community is only concerned with impact assessment. Indeed, it considers the whole spectrum of evaluation, including performance evaluation and impact assessment. On the positive side, the IMPACT acronym does implicitly acknowledge the intellectual debt to the groundbreaking ‘Assessing the Impact of Information on Decision-Making’ research project, more commonly known as the ‘Impact’ research project, which was supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) during the 1992–2000 period. This IDRC research project has been responsible for many new approaches to the measurement of impact in the information field (Horton, 2000).

IMPACT differs from the other communities of practice on LEAP in that:

- it is specifically concerned with the evaluation of information services, information projects and information products, as well as ICTs
- it is not focused on the Internet alone although there will be some overlap in terms of approaches/individuals with the other communities; and
- it is open to all those concerned with the evaluation and monitoring of information.

Like the other LEAP communities, EVALTICA, PANTLEG, and GKLEAP, the workspace for the IMPACT community allows the group to exchange messages, post documents of interest and share information about forthcoming events and news items. It, too, is strongly influenced by the knowledge sharing philosophy.

### *The 'Strategic Alliance' and the Members*

LEAP – IMPACT is a joint initiative of:

- the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA)
- the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD)
- Bellanet
- the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ)
- the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR)
- the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT).

In this sense, as well as being a community of practice, IMPACT is also a more or less informal strategic alliance. For the institutional partners, the initiative is motivated by the fact that evaluation is becoming increasingly important as a tool for internal reporting, capacity building and external legitimization. Without the commitment of the institutional partners who are able to commit resources, particularly staff time, it would be difficult for the community to be so active. Here, special acknowledgement should be made to Bellanet for the workspace it provides on its website, and to CTA, IICD and KIT for their considerable support to the initiative and, in particular, funding of face-to-face meetings.

The LEAP IMPACT community currently comprises some 106 members, located in both South and North. Members are largely either information practitioners or experts and researchers in the field of information. They are to be found in a wide range of institutional settings, including NGOs, universities, international organizations and research organizations. A number of them have considerable experience with the evaluation of information, including some key participants from the IDRC Impact research project and from UNESCO's work in this area. The intellectual heritage from the Impact research project can, for example, be seen in papers produced by some of these experts (e.g. Kanyunyuzi-Asaba, 2002). Other experts come from the field of agricultural research, rather than the information community, and are conversant with the wider evaluation field (e.g. Mbabu, 2002). The practitioners include persons charged with monitoring and evaluation in their own organizations, while for others

evaluation is not their main activity although they carry out occasional evaluations as part of their normal work.

### *Joint Activities*

Since its beginning in 2001, LEAP IMPACT has been active in a number of areas: face-to-face meetings in workshops; interaction on the workspace; and, most recently, working on 'smart tools' for evaluating information services.

Two workshops have been key events in the life of this community: the Technical Consultation on 'Assessing the Performance and Impact of Agricultural Information Products and Services', held in Bonn, Germany, in October 2001; and the 'Smart Tools for Evaluating the Performance of Information Products and Services: A Writing and Validation Workshop', held in Amsterdam in November 2002. These workshops will be referred to throughout the rest of this text as the Bonn and Amsterdam workshops, respectively. These face-to-face meetings have been crucial in keeping the momentum of the community going because they complement and reinforce the interaction via the website and the e-mail discussion list. The workshops have been the occasions when the most work has been done in developing the community's 'practical consciousness' and in developing concrete outputs such as papers. Further details of the Bonn workshop can be found in the summary report (CTA, 2001) and the proceedings (CTA, 2002). The Amsterdam workshop gave the impetus for the development of the 'smart tools' which are currently being elaborated by the community to help information practitioners self-evaluate their own information services. The proceedings of the Amsterdam workshop are currently in press (CTA, in press).

The e-mail discussion list and the workspace itself have both seen considerable activity. This has included messages, an online newsletter, links to useful new resources on other websites, and posting of relevant documents. There have also been two e-conferences: the first one in September 2001, prior to the Bonn workshop which supported its deliberations (Cummings, 2002a); and the second one in the summer of 2002 to examine and review the CTA/ISNAR manual (Mook, 2001). There is also a bibliography available on the website.

### **THE CHALLENGES IN EVALUATION**

The LEAP IMPACT community is concerned with improving evaluation practice and developing common understanding. In the two years of its existence, it has come to recognize, and even address, some of

the challenges facing evaluators, particularly those in a resource-poor setting. Challenges identified by the LEAP IMPACT community include: the need for manuals and tools; difficulties of comprehending the terminology and concepts; the confusing number of frameworks and models; the diverse and dispersed literature; and the need for a paradigm shift in the development field away from control evaluation to self-evaluation for learning.

## *Manuals and Tools*

Many information practitioners and managers are being expected to evaluate their information services. The impetus for this is either externally or internally motivated. Whatever the initial impetus, this is leading more and more managers to undertake self-evaluations without the necessary background in evaluation. In resource-poor settings where information managers may not have access to the diverse literature to help them on their way, they will be thrown in at the deep end when undertaking evaluations. Even in resource-rich settings where information managers have access to the literature, time constraints will also hamper understanding. A manager who is hampered by both time and resource constraints will have nowhere to turn. To overcome these problems, it was felt that a practical 'how to' manual should be developed (CTA, 2002). This need was also identified at the IDRC London meeting in 1999 which marked the close of the Impact research project:

A practical 'how to' manual that could be used by all impact study planners and other key players should be produced. (*Horton, 2000*)

To help meet this need, the IMPACT community has worked on the revision of the joint CTA/ISNAR manual produced by Byron Mook (2001). In addition, based on the manual, the IMPACT community is currently going a step further to provide a series of easy-to-use tools which will assist practitioners to undertake evaluation; the so-called 'smart tools'. These two activities address the frequently expressed need for practical tools and 'smart practices' (CTA, 2001).

## *Terminology and Concepts*

Evaluation concepts and terminology in the context of information for development are not clearly defined. This represents a clear challenge to an information practitioner who is trying to comprehend them. As Khadar has noted:

The multiplicity of concepts and terms currently employed by various specialists and consultants constitutes a serious constraint to the develop-

ment of a coherent body of evaluation literature. Key evaluation terms have more than one meaning or more than one terminology applying to the concept. Various writers recognize this problem (Noel Boissière, Meadow and Yuan, McConnell, etc.). (Khadar, 2001)

For information practitioners, there appear to be a number of specific problems related to the terminology. Firstly, the multiplicity of terms and concepts makes it difficult to understand. Secondly, this is further confused by the fact that these terms are often used in different ways. Thirdly and additionally, little has been done to develop definitions of these terms and concepts that apply specifically to information projects, products and services.

IMPACT has made a contribution to overcoming these problems by clarifying concepts and terminology in the context of information for development, through discussion and through the production of relevant papers such as the one by Khadar cited above. In addition, the need for a glossary was noted at the Bonn meeting:

A glossary of terms should be developed which can be added to (ideally on the LEAP IMPACT website) so that it can be used as a common source for future reference. (CTA, 2001)

As a result of this demand, there will be a glossary of evaluation terms, informed by an information perspective, in the forthcoming 'smart tools'. It is envisaged that these will become standard definitions for information practitioners, ensuring, as far as possible, that we are all talking the same language when it comes to evaluation.

## *Frameworks*

For many practitioners, the wide variety of frameworks is confusing. There is a need for an inventory of frameworks and methods, indicating the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various tools. An inventory of frameworks was presented at the Bonn workshop and the participants endorsed this approach (CTA, 2001). In addition to the inventory, the workshop argued that more work needs to be carried out to determine if a generic framework would be appropriate or if a specific evaluation framework is needed. The possibility of standardizing the existing frameworks by discipline should also be explored. One of the recommendations of the Bonn workshop was that:

The content of the evaluation frameworks is so rich; different frameworks analyse different conditions. The possibility of using a road map to guide practitioners in defining the goals of the

evaluation should be explored instead of using a framework. (CTA, 2002)

To this end, an evaluation road map was presented to the Amsterdam workshop by Ibrahim Khadar and has been further refined for publication in this Special Issue. This 'road map' is a guide to understanding other frameworks and, notably, makes a distinction between performance evaluation and impact assessment, indicating the institutional area in which these overlap.

### *Literature*

The literature on evaluation and impact assessment of information is diverse and dispersed. As the 1999 London meeting identified:

An inventory should be made of other efforts of impact assessment to promote cross-fertilization of methodologies and results from all disciplines and sectors, not just the information sector. (Horton, 2000)

McConnell also considered that:

There is a risk that this body of knowledge might be lost to those who follow. It would be a valuable achievement if the complete documentary record could be identified, copies sought out, a collection established at a designated point(s), and an annotated bibliography publishes. (McConnell, 2000)

The Bonn workshop endorsed this need: 'The inventory on evaluation frameworks presented at the workshop should be revisited, reviewed and additional frameworks added to it' (CTA, 2001). Although IMPACT has not yet gone further than compiling an inventory of frameworks and methodologies (Cummings, 2002c), further work needs doing to document the literature on the evaluation of information, particularly different case studies. The CTA-sponsored inventory of frameworks is also available as the 'Bibliography' on the IMPACT workspace.

### *Paradigm Shift*

Traditional thinking about evaluation is focused on evaluation for reasons of 'control', generally motivated by external agencies and particularly by funders. As a result, information practitioners and other professionals are often fearful of evaluations, distrusting the motives. As Lisette Gast notes in this Special Issue:

Evaluation is perceived as a threat because it has often been the excuse for pulling the plug on a project or activity.

For this reason, LEAP IMPACT is trying to concentrate on self-evaluation rather than control evaluation, representing a paradigm shift in the field of evaluation. Information managers who are prepared for self-evaluation will also have the skills to be more proactive if they later become the object of a control evaluation.

### *THE SPECIAL ISSUE*

This Special Issue comprises five papers presented in alphabetical order of their first authors. The only exception to this is that the paper on 'smart tools' has been put last because of the involvement of one of the Guest Editors of the Special Issue.

The first paper, 'Well Begun is Half Done: telling the IICD story of evaluation' has been written by IICD's monitoring and evaluation specialist, Lisette Gast. In her paper, Lisette tells a story illustrative of one of the knowledge sharing approaches adopted by many of the LEAP IMPACT community. Story telling is generally accepted as a powerful way of conveying knowledge that is heavily mixed with feelings, images and sentiments. In addition, it is recognized as a way of describing corporate history and corporate vision. It is thus very suitable for the story about how IICD's experience has evolved and its approach to developing best practice. The paper demonstrates that IICD's approach has changed over two years, aiming at greater transparency and improved learning. It emphasizes the importance of building trust with both the project team and end-users to get real insight into how a project is working. A fundamental problem facing impact assessment of information projects and programmes is also considered: project and programme plans are abstract and causality is difficult to prove.

The second paper, 'Shaping Evaluation Practice through Consultation and Debate Among Development Practitioners: implications for information programmes' is by Dr. Ibrahim Khadar of CTA. It examines the way in which the development community relies heavily on workshops, seminars, congresses and technical consultations to bring specialists together to exchange experiences, learn about each other's work and, where appropriate, initiate collaborative projects. The author argues that six international workshops which have taken place during 1998–2002 have been important occasions for the creation of new knowledge and the advancement of development practices. These workshops have played and continue to play a key role in shaping evaluation practice in the development community, particularly in the field of information. Two of the workshops considered are the LEAP IMPACT related meetings which took place in Bonn, October 2001, and

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Amsterdam, November 2002. This paper also includes the 'road map' mentioned earlier, which aims to facilitate understanding of evaluation frameworks.

The third paper, 'Assessing the Impact of Information Learnt from a Newsletter and from a Training Seminar', by Bruce Lauckner and Ranjit Singh, describes a methodology developed for the evaluation of a newsletter and a training seminar, both of which were products of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago (NAMDEVCO). Four response phases for the assimilation of information are identified: initial reaction; learning and assimilation of information; trial and adoption; and impact phase. The last two of these may not be applicable to an information product such as a newsletter which is read fairly soon after receipt and discarded. It was established that many workshop participants had adopted new practices from what they had learnt and some were able to report benefits; some of the others were anticipating benefits in the future. This case study allows other professionals to learn from the experience and even to consider applying this approach. In this sense, it represents a typical LEAP IMPACT activity: openly sharing experience of evaluation which will allow others to benefit. In addition, these examples will feature as case studies in the 'smart tools'. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Bonn workshop in 2001.

The fourth paper in this Special Issue, 'Information Dissemination for Development: an impact study', is by Professor Kingo Mchombu. It describes a research study carried out from 1998 to the end of 2000 in three rural communities in Africa: Marindi and Kisarawe 2 in Tanzania and Chiwamba in Malawi. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine whether it was possible to develop a rural development information centre model to speed up community development. Levels of receipt and benefit from different types of information provision were examined, including health information, agricultural information, educational and literacy information and income generation information. Respondents reported improvements in farming, family hygiene, educational performance and health practices (HIV/AIDS prevention and family planning). The rate of impact was low in economic development areas but higher in areas which did not require high external resources and where information and knowledge were the key resources for awareness and action. It was concluded that the dissemination of information through a rural information strategy has the potential to make an impact on community development. This paper is another example of the enduring intellectual legacy of the Impact research project.

The final paper, 'Smart Tools for the Evaluation of Information Products and Services: a collaborative initiative' by Karen Batjes and Sarah Cummings, describes a complex, collaborative project to produce 'smart tools' for the evaluation of information services, projects and programmes. The main target group for the tools is information managers in resource-poor settings who wish to evaluate their information products and services themselves. The toolkit will focus on performance evaluation and not on impact assessment. The tools will be divided into the following modules: the introductory module; preparatory work; data collection and analysis; process tools; and case studies. The editing and consolidation process will take place in 2003, with publication planned for the beginning of 2004. The toolkit represents work in progress and these plans are subject to amendment as the project develops. However, there is no doubt that the production of the 'smart tools' calls for a great degree of cooperation, commitment and trust from the partners, both institutional and individual. An earlier version of this work was presented at the Amsterdam workshop in 2002.

## CONCLUSIONS

This Introduction has described the LEAP IMPACT community of practice and the challenges it faces relating to evaluation in the information sector. The five papers in this Special Issue are each illustrative of the different ways in which this community is committed to improving evaluation practice. The first paper looks at the efforts to improve evaluation practice within one institutional setting, focusing on developing better practices; the second looks at the way in which workshops are occasions when professionals in this area are working together to meet diverse objectives; the next provides a case study of the evaluation of a newsletter and a training seminar which will allow others to learn from and even apply this experience; the fourth paper provides an impact research study of rural information centres in Africa; and the final paper looks at how 'smart tools' are currently being developed. These diverse papers demonstrate how members of the LEAP IMPACT community are working, both individually and together, to improve evaluation practice. Through the exchange of experiences and approaches, and taking into account previous and other continuing work in this area, it is predicted that LEAP IMPACT may well be able to meet some of the challenges facing evaluation in the information sector. To do this, however, continuing collaboration and commitment will be necessary.

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## Note

This paper has been produced by members of the LEAP IMPACT community of practice. This open community aims to improve the institutional performance of monitoring and evaluation practice related to information services, information products and information projects.

## Abstract

**Introduction to a special issue on 'Developing Evaluation Practice in the Information Sector' containing five papers by members of the LEAP IMPACT community of practice of information and evaluation specialists, which aims to improve monitoring and evaluation practices related to information services, information products and information projects. Describes the origins, membership and activities of the LEAP IMPACT community and the challenges it faces in the evaluation of information, including the preparation of manuals and tools, the definition of terminology and concepts and the need for an inventory of frameworks. Summarizes the contents of the five papers.**

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## WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN LEAP IMPACT?

The LEAP IMPACT community is open to all professionals working in the field of monitoring and evaluation of information. If you would like to join, please consult our workspace at: <http://www.bellanet.org/leap/impact>.