

Information and Communication Technologies for Evaluation (ICT4Eval)

Using Innovative Approaches to Development Evaluation

International conference

Rome, Italy, 6-7 June 2017

Concept note

1. The international conference on **Information and Communication Technologies for Evaluation (ICT4Eval)**, organized and hosted by the Independent Office of Evaluation of the International Fund for Agricultural Development - a United Nations specialized agency - sets out to explore vital questions regarding conducting evaluations of strategies and programmes that contribute to rural transformation. Experience confirms that evaluators face recurring challenges in the field. Lack of reliable monitoring and evaluation data and limited resources are common obstacles when performing evaluations across all regions of the world. ICTs used in development are providing new methods of gathering, analysing and disseminating data, and changing the way evaluations are conducted.
2. A decade ago, a large segment of the world's population lived beyond the reach of ICTs. Today, these technologies are everywhere. Whether visible or not, the reach of satellite signals, mobile telecommunications antennas, and TV and radio frequencies covers the globe. More than 85 per cent of the world population lives in areas covered by 2G mobile networks that allow the transfer of data, and 70 per cent of the world population is covered by 3G or better, allowing fast access to the World Wide Web from mobile phones or other wireless networked devices.¹ Today, there is an incredible and vast network of wireless data-sharing capabilities out there. Are we using them to their full capacity to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of our evaluations?
3. From remote sensing technologies, to digital survey applications and data analysis powered by machine learning and artificial intelligence, evaluators now have at their disposal an incredible set of tools that can be deployed in almost any setting. ICTs show great potential in contributing to the quality of the work that evaluators perform, and are critical to strengthening evidence-based policymaking that relies on the evaluation of impacts, outcomes and shortcomings of development initiatives at all levels of activity. Evaluators therefore need to keep abreast of important developments in the field of ICTs to stay at the cutting edge of innovation and to continue shaping the future of development evaluation. This is ICT4Eval.

Objectives of the conference

4. In light of recent technological advances, the conference seeks to establish if recent innovations in ICTs have demonstrable benefits to the intersecting fields of development evaluation and rural transformation. The conference aims to discuss the latest innovative approaches to the use of ICTs in evaluation and will feature best practices that have emerged from the experiences of development organizations and the private sector across the world. The conference sets out to explore what is possible today, and what the future holds.

¹ ITU data <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2015.pdf>.

5. The conference will explore the following questions: Can ICTs contribute to solving the daily challenges of development evaluators? Are evaluators using the most innovative tools and methodologies at our disposal today? Can evaluators of development do better and can more be done? The conference will also encourage discussions about the theoretical concerns in evaluation methodology relating to the use of ICTs – for example, the ethics of using ICTs and their possible impact on sampling bias, exclusion, data security and privacy. On the issue of evidence of benefits, the conference will explore the risks of making the practice of evaluation technology-centric, moving away from multidimensional approaches which are vital when conducting evaluations across different contexts and cultures. These questions are critical when we consider that rural transformation is at the core of the global development agenda, touching the lives of more than three billion people across the world.²
6. In order to tackle the broad topic of ICT4Eval, three main topics will guide presenters and participants, as well as the panels and sessions: data collection, data analysis and data dissemination.

ICTs applied to data collection

7. Evaluations have historically depended on document reviews, observations and interviews during field visits. In some cases surveys are also conducted to collect quantitative data. However, newer tools and sources for data collection have emerged in recent years and stem from three main elements: advancements in the availability of remote sensing systems; widespread availability and use of wireless technology; and the possibility of integrating tools for machine learning and predictive modelling with other data sources. These advances are leading to an increasing level of automation and integration of data collection and analysis, thus making them more accurate, faster, and less expensive. Many organizations such as the specialized agencies of the United Nations, multilateral development banks and international aid foundations, as well as academics and the private sector, have been using such data collection tools for years. What can we learn from their experiences?

ICTs applied to data analysis

8. Computer-assisted data analysis has been around for a long time. Data crunching is a term that illustrates well the task of quantitative data analysis. In the realm of qualitative data analysis, the initial set of tools to have emerged focused on the word count (text analysis), then relationships between concepts, and finally understanding grammar. In recent years, computer-assisted data analysis has seen a surge in efficacy and potential. Powered by supercomputers and complex algorithms, applications that incorporate machine learning, natural language processing, and what is now commonly accepted as artificial intelligence are able to interpret vast amounts of data from unlimited sources and data formats. Software applications are now able to understand text, images, audio recordings, video files, spreadsheets and databases at incredibly rapid speeds. Desktop, cloud-based, and mobile applications are changing the way researchers interact with their data; artificial intelligence interfaces will change the way researchers interact with the world. As a group, how are these tools impacting the tasks of evaluators and what potential do they hold for their work in the future?

ICTs applied to data dissemination

9. Data dissemination is the distribution or transmission of information to the end users. From websites to media relations, dissemination of evaluation findings and recommendations are consistently managed through ICTs. Sharing our data is a key step in finalizing the evaluation process and a prerequisite for the proper use of evaluation findings and recommendations by stakeholders. Generally speaking, there

² World Bank data <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>.

are two common formats that have been used to release data to the public: open and proprietary. Organizations and individuals select the preferred format based on multiple criteria, such as the nature of the data, the level of confidentiality, and the quality of the sources. Whether open or closed, many technologies exist to ensure the prompt dissemination of evaluation findings and recommendation, making it easy for the users and target audience to gain access to valuable lessons learned. Evaluations are learning exercises, and dissemination is the final step to enhancing learning and strengthening impact. Are we doing everything we can to share these results?

Participation

10. The conference will bring together a wide range of partners with expertise in development evaluation practice and application of ICTs in development and/or evaluation, and innovators pushing the boundaries of the use of technology in data collection, analysis and dissemination. Speakers and participants will include experts and technical staff from the United Nations Evaluation Group; the Evaluation Cooperation Group of the multilateral development banks; bilateral and multilateral development and humanitarian organizations; the private sector; academic institutions; non-governmental organizations; foundations; think tanks; and national-level counterparts from evaluation and policy institutions.

Structure

11. The two-day conference will be organized along three tracks, one for each of the principal topics. Plenary sessions on each of the principal topics will be supplemented with presentations on ground-breaking technologies and approaches to conducting evaluations. During the breaks, a technology salon will be hosted to allow participants to explore the technologies discussed throughout the conference.