Do Big Projects Deliver Effective Solutions in a Complex World?

Summary of the Eval*for*Earth Discussion

MAY 2025

The discussion was initiated by Advisor at the Community of Evaluators (CoE) Nepal, **Ram Khanal, Ph. D.**, on 29 March 2025. Drawing from evaluation experience in agricultural development, natural resource management and climate resilience projects across Asia and Africa, Khanal aimed to explore whether large-scale interventions genuinely deliver sustainable and transformative change for food security, small-scale agriculture, and rural development.

OBJECTIVE OF THE DISCUSSION

The specific objectives were to: a) Explore the comparative advantages and limitations of big projects versus smaller interventions; b) Identify conditions under which different project scales succeed; and c) Explore strategies to enhance effectiveness regardless of project size.

Ram Chandra Khanal

Guiding Questions

Participants were invited to reflect on the following questions:

1. **Do large projects in food security, agriculture, and rural development deliver real value for money, considering their context and intended results?**
2. **Do existing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and evaluation approaches in large projects effectively capture local-level changes, outcomes, and challenges?**
3. **In the evolving development aid landscape, how can evaluation enhance the effectiveness of large-scale interventions while ensuring collaborative learning and sense-making, context-driven solutions, and adaptive management?**

BACKGROUND

Large-scale interventions are designed to deliver scale, visibility, and resource efficiency. However, their impact depends on how well they align with local needs, support adaptive management, and encourage learning among stakeholders. What are other key factors to a successful project?

The online discussion gathered 16 contributions. Participants came from diverse professional backgrounds and different regions of the world. Participant profiles included, among others, researchers, professors, M&E specialists, development professionals, gender and social inclusion specialists and independent consultants. The discussion was dynamic, reflecting a wide range of perspectives and fostering a constructive exchange of ideas.

KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

Structural challenges and limitations of large-scale projects

The discussion brought together diverse perspectives from development practitioners to critically examine the effectiveness of large-scale projects in addressing complex global challenges. Participants highlighted several structural limitations that frequently undermine big projects, noting how overly ambitious designs often fail to account for implementation realities on the ground. Many pointed out that these projects commonly suffer from bureaucratic inefficiencies, with multiple management layers consuming significant portions of budgets before reaching the intended beneficiaries. Several contributors emphasized how the reliance on short-term consultant models in large interventions erodes institutional memory and local capacity building, leaving little lasting impact after project completion.

Context matters: when scale succeeds and where small excels

The dialogue revealed important nuances about when and how scale can be effective. Participants provided compelling examples where large projects succeeded, particularly in infrastructure development and emergency response situations where coordinated, resource-intensive action was essential. These successful cases typically combined technical interventions with robust local capacity-building components. Conversely, contributors presented strong evidence that smaller, community-driven initiatives consistently outperform in areas requiring behavioral change or cultural adaptation, benefiting from deeper contextual understanding and more participatory approaches. Many stressed that these smaller projects often demonstrate greater cost-efficiency and flexibility, avoiding the bureaucratic bloat that plagues larger interventions. A key insight was the importance of cultural resonance-projects that aligned with local values, and that practices showed significantly better outcomes, regardless of scale.

Rethinking approaches: from evaluation to hybrid models

The discussion produced valuable insights into M&E approaches, with participants advocating for more participatory systems that engage local stakeholders in defining success metrics. Several contributors highlighted how conventional top-down M&E frameworks often miss crucial contextual factors that determine project effectiveness. The conversation also explored innovative hybrid models that combine the resources of large-scale interventions with the local responsiveness of community-driven approaches, suggesting promising directions for future development practice.

CONCLUSION

The discussion concluded that the core issue is not the project size alone, but rather the fit between approach and context. Three critical lessons emerged: a) Project design must be guided by a clear purpose rather than a predetermined scale; b) Meaningful community integration is essential, regardless of budget size; and 3) Hybrid models pairing large-scale systems with local governance show particular promise.

WAYS FORWARD

To enhance the effectiveness of large-scale interventions, the following can be done:

- **Co-design with communities**: Engage local stakeholders in the design and implementation of projects to ensure cultural sensitivity and contextual relevance.

- **Invest in local systems**: Strengthen local institutions and capacities to promote sustainability and ownership.

- **Adaptive learning**: Implement flexible M&E systems that incorporate qualitative methods to capture behavioral and psychological drivers of change, enabling real-time learning and course correction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere thanks to all participants and members of **EvalforEarth** for their active engagement in this insightful online discussion.

Special appreciation goes to **Dr. Ram Chandra Khanal**, who initiated the discussion and contributed significantly to its depth and relevance.

The experiences, resources, and reflections shared by community members and invited experts were invaluable in helping to examine whether large-scale interventions genuinely deliver sustainable and transformative change for food security, small-scale agriculture, and rural development.

Discussion moderation, curation, and collation: *Dr. Ram Chandra Khanal and Innocent Chamisa (EvalforEarth)*

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