

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Bamberger, Michael, Rugh, Jim, and Mabry, Linda. (2012). *Real World Evaluation: Working Under Budget, Time, Data, and Political Constraints* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 666 pages.

Reviewed by Michele Tarsilla

Having evaluated international development programs for over ten years, I have often faced the challenge of balancing (a) the rigour of evaluation theories and methods learned in academia and (b) the flexibility to adapt evaluation designs and methodologies to often unpredictable fieldwork circumstances. As a result, I have developed a special appreciation over the years for all those textbooks and research articles that provide practical tips on how to adapt conventional evaluation designs and methodologies to the specific environmental factors (e.g., time, money, politics) influencing the successful completion of an evaluation. The second edition of *Real World Evaluation* is a good illustration of this type of literature and it has rapidly become one of my favorite evaluation books for a variety of reasons.

First, *Real World Evaluation* (RWE) sets itself apart from most current evaluation handbooks and manuals aimed at international development evaluation professionals. Far from being a simple review of evaluation theories or a compendium of standardized data collection methods, RWE makes an effort (and succeeds in meeting its intended objective) to distill a vast range of evaluation topics into a useful reference book for international development evaluation professionals confronted with time and budget constraints. Rather than reviewing existing evaluation approaches, RWE introduces a new approach altogether and, to this end, uses 19 chapters and 8 appendixes to familiarize the readers with the fundamental elements of the RWE approach (Part 1), the vast range of RWE data collection methods (Part 2), and the most effective strategies to both manage RWE and strengthen in-country evaluation capacity (Part 3).

Second, the three RWE authors¹ are able to bring the current evaluation discourse (often regarded as being too academic) to a more accessible level and a likely wider fruition among international de-

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velopment practitioners operating in a variety of contexts. In doing so, they use the first part of the book to provide readers with an in-depth overview of key evaluation issues, (e.g., sample size, missing data, threats to validity) by also explaining how to address those time, budget and political factors affecting the conduct and utilization of evaluations.

Third, instead of marginalizing relatively technical evaluation topics (e.g., sampling strategies and power calculations) as other similar manuals have done in the past, RWE is very upfront about the need for enhanced technical capacity within the evaluation community and devotes 37 pages in Chapter 15 to discussing this topic. This is well aligned with the authors' push to "think outside the book" and challenge one's own evaluation practice in the search for quality. Good illustrations of that include (a) the RWE predilection for mixed methods (thus overcoming the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodologists); (b) the book's specific focus on cultural competence as a core guiding principle of the evaluation profession; and (c) the review of strategies (accompanied by a series of useful worksheets placed in the appendix) to evaluate complicated, complex, and multicomponent development interventions.

Fourth, what is particularly outstanding about the book is that the comprehensive table of contents does not impair its overall readability and still makes it possible for readers to go through the whole at their own pace and based on their needs (that is, going directly to the specific chapter dealing with a particular issue of personal interest at any point in time). Filled with figures (a total of 48) and tables (a total of 70), RWE also provides readers with sufficient "breaks" from what would otherwise be an excessively dense book. The use of graphic variations throughout the book appears to be all the more relevant as the smaller print may risk intimidating readers who might be less familiar with scholarly literature than with grey literature and evaluation manuals available online (generally shorter in length and characterized by larger print). As a result, this book would be beneficial to quite a large audience, including (a) international development students, (b) young professionals working in M&E, (c) managers and seniors interested in brushing up and expanding their knowledge and understanding of practical evaluation issues, and (d) evaluation users (including government and policy-makers).

Fifth, consistent with the purpose of the first edition of RWE published in 2006, this newer edition expands on some increasingly popular and yet misunderstood evaluation topics. Such is the case

of program theories described as the basis for both performance and impact evaluation design (Chapter 1), quality assurance intended as data reliability and accuracy (Chapters 18 and 19), and threats to validity described as factors within and beyond the evaluator's control that are susceptible of compromising the plausibility of inferences on program effectiveness (Chapter 5). Another pleasant feature included in this edition is the annotated bibliography: by providing some descriptive info on the content of literature that is referred to throughout the book, the authors facilitate the readers' search for additional information on issues of possible interest but not discussed in great details throughout the book.

Sixth, an additional aspect of RWE that makes it an appealing reference for every development practitioner is the constant attention to gender and social exclusion in evaluation, as well as the review of strategies for reconstructing baseline data or comparison group (e.g., through recall questions, the utilization of adequate secondary data, and the adoption of judgmental matching).

Among the few limitations of the book are the lack of an exhaustive section on cost effectiveness, cost-benefits, and economic rate of return (all the more relevant given the current international economic conjuncture and the increased need for accountability), as well as the marginal focus on case study design (unjustly and erroneously treated in the past as a data collection method of scarce validity or generalizability).

Overall, this is a very useful reference book for all international development professionals and is likely to greatly enhance their understanding and practice in evaluation across a variety of contexts. More than being a simple recipe book for enhancing the quality of evaluations, RWE will allow readers to develop a more open-minded, realistic, and positive attitude to evaluation.

NOTE

1. Michael Bamberger is a former World Bank Senior Development Specialist; Jim Rugh is an independent consultant and founding member of the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE); Laura Mabry is a Professor at Washington State University.