
Reorienting Evaluator Competencies: Learnings from Evaluation Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background: In India, COVID-19 outbreaks and economic disruptions have caused widespread human suffering, including deaths and livelihood losses. This has exacerbated vulnerabilities in socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The pandemic has highlighted the need for evaluators to be adaptable and innovative in addressing uncertain and dynamic situations. Using literature and the authors' own experiences of conducting evaluation during the pandemic in India, this paper discusses what may be key evaluator competencies in a post-pandemic world.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to critically consider how evaluators practiced research and evaluation during the pandemic from the perspective of their competencies, and to explore issues of adaptability, communication, and ethical dilemmas, as well as the role of communities in shaping and informing evaluations.

Setting: The study was conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluation practice in India.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Case studies with interpretive approach.

Data Collection and Analysis: In addition to three case studies and secondary literature and media reports, this study is based on a few in-depth interviews.

Findings: The paper suggests that evaluators need to develop two core competencies—strategic thinking and emotional intelligence and resilience—to navigate unforeseen challenges and engage diverse communities in a sensitive and empathetic way.

Keywords: *evaluator competencies; COVID-19 pandemic; emotional intelligence; strategic thinking; grassroots collaboration.*

In the lockdown everything changed suddenly. We felt the same insecurity and vulnerability that we had felt when we first arrived in Delhi two decades ago. My husband's work of ironing clothes inside an apartment building came to a standstill for five months. I used to work as a domestic worker in the same apartment building. I lost my job too. We went over a month without proper meals due to shortage of food and money. Since we did not have a ration card in Delhi, we did not receive any assistance with ration supplies. As soon as the unlocking process began, both of our adolescent sons were forced to work in factories. They stopped attending school during the lockdown and have not resumed since.

—Nisha, a woman migrant domestic worker in Delhi

Recorded and translated by the authors in Delhi, October 10, 2020

Since early 2020, India has endured recurrent COVID-19 outbreaks and economic disruptions, which have brought widespread human suffering from the loss of lives and livelihoods and have exacerbated vulnerabilities among socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. In April and May of 2020, for example, pandemic-related lockdowns caused a significant influx of informal workers to return to their hometowns from metropolitan areas, with many subsequently returning to the cities post-lockdown, though a substantial portion faced job loss.¹ The pandemic also contributed to other social problems, including increased domestic violence, physical and mental health issues, and behavioral problems (Agrawal et al., 2021; Bansal, 2022).

In addition to the COVID-19 crisis, other pressing issues, such as climate change, increasing levels of inequality, and socioeconomic discrimination between regions and societies (Barron et al., 2023; Islam & Winkel, 2017) have pushed the evaluation discourse to focus on the relevance of evaluation as well as the roles and necessary competencies of evaluators themselves. There is, for example, a growing recognition that the field of evaluation may have a role to play in helping address challenging problems such as inequities and sustainability (Sridharan, 2021; Ofir & Rugg, 2021). From the perspective of evaluation practice, issues of ethics and privacy have also

become increasingly salient areas of discussion in the wake of the pandemic (Arriagada Bruneau et al., 2020; Goldstein & Kondylis, 2020).

Based on our multiple experiences conducting evaluations in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper suggests that communities need to be placed at the core of evaluation practice in order to prioritize and center their needs, perspectives, and voices. This implies involving community members at all stages of the evaluation process—from defining the evaluation questions to collecting the data to analyzing findings and making decisions based on those findings. It is in this light that we reflect on what we believe may be critical evaluator competencies in a “post-pandemic” world. Drawing on three case studies in particular, this paper highlights important lessons learned from conducting evaluations in India during the COVID-19 crisis and how these lessons might inform future thinking around the kinds of evaluator competencies that may be needed both during and after crisis situations like the pandemic.

Evaluator Competencies in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India

The field of evaluation has evolved over time and so too have the evaluator competency frameworks that guide its practice. For example, it has been argued that a critical evaluator competency is effective communication, including active listening and the ability to adapt to diverse contexts (Mertens, 2008; Patton, 2018; King, 2020). At the same time, evaluators also need to address power dynamics, privilege, and social justice in evaluation practices, adapting approaches to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders (Yarbrough et al., 2010). The importance of ethical awareness for evaluators (Greene, 2007), including recognizing ethical principles and potential conflicts, obtaining informed consent, and protecting participant information, has also been emphasized (Podems, 2014). In this paper, we discuss two evaluator competencies—specifically, strategic thinking and emotional intelligence and resilience—that we think may be especially critical in the face of urgent challenges such as the pandemic.

The recent pandemic has highlighted the need for evaluators to be adaptable and innovative in addressing uncertain and dynamic situations. As previously noted, the COVID-19 lockdown in India put migrant workers and their livelihoods at the

¹ Numerous studies have analyzed the 2020–2021 lockdowns' impact on the lives and livelihoods of

informal workers in India. See, for example, Sumalatha et al. (2021) and Chakraborty (2020, 2021).

forefront of the development debate (Bhagat, et al., 2020; Gokhroo, 2021), with several observers calling it a “migrant crisis” (ILO, 2020). Limited resources combined with restricted mobility made implementing humanitarian and developmental programs a herculean task. As evaluators, it was no longer feasible to proceed as usual. In addition to exploring alternative data collection methods, we often needed to convince evaluation commissioners that certain project-specific interventions should be temporarily halted or, at least, reoriented. During the lockdown period, we also relied on remote methods, despite, in many cases, not having prior experience using such tools. And, when collecting the data, many of us were unprepared for the difficult and often heartrending questions that individuals and communities would ask, such as, “What would happen if we did not receive our daily ration tomorrow? We would like to receive rations for at least the next few days. Could you please assist us?” While working with domestic workers in Delhi, for example, one woman asked us, “Will our children ever be able to attend school?”

Such experiences encourage us to look more critically at existing evaluator competencies. In our view, evaluators require competencies that can help them better respond to diverse human experiences, vulnerabilities, and the intricate social dynamics that may be profoundly disrupted by a crisis like COVID-19. This is where we think evaluators need to be trained to be adaptable and ethical, as well as good communicators. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many existing approaches and strategies have revealed their limitations in meaningfully addressing the complex and rapidly evolving challenges resulting from the current crisis.

Over the last four decades, many evaluators and professional evaluation societies conducting research on evaluation have proposed competency development frameworks (e.g., Kirkhart, 1981; Mertens, 1994; Patton, 1990; Scriven, 1996; King et al., 2001). Almost all existing competency frameworks believe that a set of core evaluator competencies would prove valuable for a variety of purposes—particularly in formal training and professional development programs. Hence, some of them developed a process for constructing, validating, and refining a comprehensive taxonomy

of core competencies for program evaluators (Stevahn et al., 2006). However, most of these competencies primarily address general program evaluation without any specific considerations of a particular situation in the context of emerging issues of the pandemic, climate change, and increasing inequalities among societies and people. There is limited research on essential competencies required by professionals in certain contexts or themes. (Diaz et al., 2020). Froncek et al. raised similar sets of questions, such as, “Who is responsible, capable, or simply assigned to conduct evaluations and what does this mean for evaluator competencies within a specific context?” (2018, p. 122). In the next two sections we attempt to deepen our reflections based on our learnings around adaptability, ethics, and communications from conducting evaluations during and after the pandemic, and suggest potential learnings from our experience in India to further the discussion on evaluator competencies.

Learning from Evaluations During the Pandemic: Three Case Studies

In order to shed light on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the practice of evaluation, in this section, we present discussions on three case studies in India that we believe offer valuable reflections on evaluator competencies.

Case Study 1: Study of a Resettlement Colony in Delhi

A non-governmental research organization based in Delhi began an evaluative research project in mid-2019 to assess the impact of relocating migrant communities to a new settlement on the outskirts of the city.² The primary objective of this study was to analyze a decade-long struggle of female informal laborers, highlighting their experiences during displacement, including the loss of their homes and livelihoods, as well as their current difficulties in a landscape where government initiatives offer assistance through skill development programs to access employment opportunities. The research also aimed to delve into the resilience mechanisms

² Delhi holds the highest percentage of inter-state migrants among all states in India, with many of these migrants working as informal laborers. To manage urbanization and development, the city relocated these migrant communities for improved living conditions, access to services, and economic opportunities. However, this effort raises questions about ensuring amenities and livelihoods in new settlements. For more on migrant

worker challenges, see <https://thewire.in/urban/kapashera-narela-delhi-ncr-infrastructure>; <https://www.mahilahousingtrust.org/savda-ghevra-a-story-of-resettlement/>; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/myth-of-resettlement-in-delhi/>

that enabled them to adapt to their new situation, starting from scratch, including the struggle to find new job opportunities since their previous workplaces became nearly inaccessible due to distance. Additionally, the study sought to investigate the effects of the extension of the metro rail to their new area of residence. This exploration aimed to understand how improved transportation connectivity facilitated access to better employment opportunities in other parts of the city. It also delved into the legal, governance, and infrastructural support provided by the government to enhance their economic conditions and future prospects. The study aimed to identify the areas where governmental interventions could improve the lives and aspirations of the relocated individuals.

Design and preparation of tools for the study were finalized by March 2020, but just before launching the data collection drive, the government announced a lockdown due to COVID-19. As previously discussed, almost all of the potential respondents for this evaluation research study lost their current jobs and were by then struggling to secure their daily livelihood. A significant number of them had to return to their home states under extremely challenging circumstances, where no transport facilities were available. This case raises questions for evaluators around the need to adapt and innovate, while also maintaining ethical standards, particularly during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. It also encourages evaluators to reflect on the need to reorient their skills to more nimbly navigate challenges, assess interventions, and guide policy improvements for vulnerable communities.

Case Study 2: Impact of COVID-19 and the Lockdown on Trends of Service Utilization at the Community Level

A research and evaluation firm based in Delhi, NCR, conducted telephonic surveys in Uttar Pradesh, India, exploring the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on community-level service utilization. Initial conversations with respondents revealed financial struggles and unemployment among low-income households, leading to reduced food accessibility and exacerbating nutritional insecurity. Daily wage labor-dependent households were particularly affected, while lockdown measures suspended essential outreach services, such as health care and family planning. The study attempted to assess the distinct vulnerabilities of different demographic groups, analyzing rural-urban variations, intersections

among vulnerable segments, and complex issues such as behavior change and mental health during the pandemic. Focusing on economic distress, food security, nutrition, and health impact, the study also attempted to incorporate the social fabric and financial situations of rural households.

Given the urgency of the study and the need for physical distancing, the firm modified its data collection methodology from field-based to telephonic, using a smaller convenience sample. This shift to telephonic interviews led to shorter questionnaires, resulting in some missed qualitative insights from the community. Moreover, there was a selection bias in the sample, as the interview listings were based on information provided by government-recognized health activists, potentially leaving out the most marginalized women from the system. The absence of visual prompts during telephone interviews might have resulted in the loss of contextual and nonverbal data. To respond to these challenges, the study attempted to adapt by integrating both in-person human interactions (through enumerators embedded within the community) and digital methods (such as telephonic surveys), enabling a data collection approach that could support the human element through local enumerators with a deep understanding of the community.

Case Study 3: Impact of the Lockdown on the Lives of Informal Workers in Delhi

Beginning in late March 2020, the same nongovernmental research organization mentioned in Case Study 1 (Study of a Resettlement Colony in Delhi) was unable to carry out its operations. This was because most of its ongoing studies were field-based, focusing primarily on women workers in the informal sector—such as domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, waste pickers, and construction workers. Following the widespread news of massive job losses, food insecurity, and the return migration of workers to their home states, the researchers sought approval from the donor to conduct a series of rapid assessment studies with the same informal workers in Delhi with whom they had previously interacted for other studies. As a first step toward this, the organization collaborated with six grassroots organizations to design and conduct a study. The new study aimed to assess the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns on livelihoods, and also to generate immediate actionable evidence from the ground and disseminate this widely to aid in the formulation of timely policy measures. The series of quick evaluation studies did not target specific program

interventions but instead focused on understanding the effects of the emergency situation on the lives of marginalized women workers in Delhi. These rapid evaluation studies were conducted twice: The first round took place in May and June 2020, during the peak of the lockdown, while the second round occurred in October 2020, when the lockdown was lifted and many migrant workers started returning to Delhi. This case study highlights a challenge that we believe evaluators will increasingly have to face in a post-COVID world: How best can evaluators work with grassroots organizations to design and execute studies that are genuinely contextually relevant and sensitive to the changing needs of marginalized populations? Thus, we believe we are able to move beyond simply assessing the impacts of particular projects to raise broader questions about vulnerable people's well-being.

Lessons from Three Case Studies

Considering the above three case studies, let us now reflect on the challenges and lessons for evaluators based on our firsthand experiences conducting evaluations in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ethical Dilemma

One key challenge faced during the practice of evaluation revolves around ethical considerations. When planning the study on the resettlement colonies in Delhi (Case Study 1), for example, the evaluators encountered ethical dilemmas which ultimately led them to abandon the study. Specifically, the evaluators recognized that collecting data on an old trauma during a crisis would be morally incorrect. Revisiting traumatic memories from the past amid a fresh crisis could have serious implications for the mental well-being of the respondents. The evaluators acknowledged their limitations in providing adequate support to the individuals and realized that merely extracting data for research purposes would not be appropriate. As a result, ethical concerns took precedence over the collection of data, as the researchers were unable to adequately handle the emotional burden of respondents recounting traumatic experiences or reliving distressing memories. In such situations, evaluation questions should be determined by the key beneficiaries

themselves, rather than by evaluators or funders. Here, the external evaluator should not make the call when it comes to deciding what questions to ask. The ethical dilemma raises questions regarding the role of the evaluator in the evaluation process, both in terms of the methods to be adopted and the questions to be asked.

Collaboration with Grassroots Organizations

Collaborating with grassroots organizations and communities was crucial for evaluations conducted both during the pandemic and after its intensity had begun to subside. Although this is not new, COVID-19 highlighted the dire need to genuinely understand community contexts and also be aware of the deep differences in the diversities of contexts. The pandemic highlighted the critical imperative to involve communities in both the planning and the implementation of the study. While such an imperative has always been known to evaluators, the pandemic highlighted with urgency the need to start our work by understanding community perspectives. As noted in the slogan "nothing about us without us,"³ we believe that the urgency to collaborate with grassroots organizations in a pandemic world has only grown.

A number of studies have noted that local organizations had a deeper understanding of community conditions and challenges, often distributing rations and medicines during lockdowns (Acharyya, 2020; Ajmal, 2020; Jesline et al., 2021). In Case Study 3 (Impact of the Lockdown on the Lives of Informal Workers in Delhi), we illustrated the importance of collaboration with grassroots partners to conduct the rapid assessment studies, which involved remote focus group discussions (FGDs).⁴ These grassroots organizations served as vital intermediaries between evaluators and communities, moderating discussions while external evaluators observed remotely with minimal intervention.

Besides collecting the data, the grassroots partner organizations also provided social counseling and referred respondents to government and non-government agencies that could assist them. For example, one of our partner organizations in Case Study 1 (Study of a Resettlement Colony in Delhi) facilitated the provision of health insurance to street vendors.

³ See more about this slogan at <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/iddp2004.htm>

⁴ The grassroots collaborators for the study were Domestic Worker Forum (DWF) and Chetanalaya (for

domestic workers); Mahila Housing Trust (MHT; for home-based workers); Janpahal (for street vendors); Bal Vikas Dhara (for waste pickers); and Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham (for construction workers).

Through another grassroots partner organization, rations were distributed to domestic workers and financial assistance was provided for families severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. This same organization also focused on registering migrant workers for government assistance and entrepreneurship training programs as soon as the lockdown was lifted. A third partner organization provided learning materials and in-person classes to children of waste pickers' families who were unable to attend online classes due to lack of access to mobile phones, while a fourth grassroots partner organized community kitchens for the families of construction workers. As part of the financial relief measures for workers, they ensured that workers registered under the construction workers act would receive government assistance.⁵

In a post-pandemic world, we believe that the need for partnerships between grassroots implementing partners and evaluation teams has only grown. Our experience working with these organizations during COVID-19 highlights the need for the field of evaluation to stress the importance of co-constructing evaluations with multiple stakeholders, advocating for their interests and also paying attention to the importance of helping build the capacity of local researchers and practitioners.

Challenges to Capture Non-Project Interventions

As illustrated in the three case studies above, the COVID-19 pandemic, due to its widespread and multifaceted impact on communities, underscored the importance of considering non-project interventions and their intersection with evaluation in India. Traditional project interventions frequently focus on specific outcomes within predetermined boundaries, often without serious consideration of the broader context in which interventions occur. The pandemic disrupted these boundaries, revealing complex interactions between various factors that were beyond the scope of individual projects, often rendering traditional project-level theories of change inadequate. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, it became evident that the effectiveness of project interventions was deeply intertwined with external factors such as healthcare, social protection, and economic policies. For instance, the lockdowns and economic downturn affected livelihoods, which in turn

influenced food security, mental health, and overall well-being. The pandemic emphasized the importance of considering systemic and cross-cutting issues, calling for evaluations that aim to account for the interactions between project interventions and external factors. To address this, evaluations need to adopt a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that recognizes the interdependencies between projects, policies, and external dynamics.

Rethinking Evaluator Competencies in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As we reflect on the above lessons, the two competencies that we discuss are strategic thinking (UNESCO, 2017) and emotional intelligence and resilience. While there is literature on both of these competencies, in the present discussion, we reflect on the importance of thinking about such competencies in light of our experience conducting evaluations in India during the pandemic.

Strategic Thinking

In our experience working in India, evaluators are sometimes trained to be quite mechanical. We tend to follow clearly defined evaluation protocols and plans and are not trained to think of interventions themselves as dynamic or fluid. What COVID-19 emphasized was the need to be flexible and strategic, as interventions themselves were required to adapt to the multiple realities of the changes caused by the pandemic. In this light, we think that one underemphasized competency for evaluators is the need to be strategic. In our view, what constitutes strategic thinking in evaluation is informed by the ideas of Michael Patton in his work on developmental evaluations (Patton, 2014). As underscored in the discussions around the three case studies in this paper, we think that evaluators need to help with both the evolution and the adaptation of programs. Our focus needs to be more developmental as the spaces around programs shift, shrink, or expand. Based on our experience, presently we have limited training on evaluations that can respond to dynamic and fluid interventions. We believe thinking about sustainability is going to be an increasingly

⁵ See more here:

<https://www.newslandry.com/2020/04/23/covid-19-relief-how-india-doesnt-count-the-poor-as-workers>

important challenge that evaluators need to respond to (Sridharan & Nakaima, 2019).

Evaluations that adopt a broader systems perspective demand strategic thinking to identify connections, potential synergies, and areas of collaboration among different interventions (Weiss, 1998). Evaluators must assess how interventions align with overarching development goals, policies, and socioeconomic trends (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Strategic thinking enables evaluators to comprehend the broader context of the crisis, including its causes and impact, as well as existing response efforts. Such an understanding is crucial for developing evaluations that have the potential to be responsive to the specific needs and challenges faced by communities.

In the three case studies discussed above, strategic thinking is evident in various ways. In Case Study 2 (Impact of COVID-19 and the Lockdown on Trends of Service Utilization at the Community Level), for instance, we had to modify the data collection methodology for more strategic purposes—in this case, shifting from field-based to telephonic surveys to facilitate physical distancing, altering the questionnaire, and combining human-digital interfaces to overcome selection bias and loss of qualitative insights and allow for timely assessment of the pandemic's impact on service utilization. In Case Study 3 (Impact of the Lockdown on the Lives of Informal Workers in Delhi), the inability to conduct field-based operations prompted strategic thinking on the part of evaluators, as evidenced in their decision to conduct rapid assessment studies collaboratively with grassroots organizations to quickly assess the pandemic's impact on marginalized women workers.

In addition to guiding methodological decisions, we saw in all three case studies how strategic thinking enabled a shift in evaluators' priorities from solely evaluating the project to actively supporting the larger goal. At the same time, strategic thinking can help in embracing new ideas and perspectives, thereby allowing evaluators to align their efforts with the evolving priorities of diverse stakeholders. In Case Study 3 (Impact of the Lockdown on the Lives of Informal Workers in Delhi), for example, evaluators shifted toward rapid assessment studies and collaboration with grassroots organizations, reflecting the need to address urgent issues despite limited resources and changing circumstances. The case studies discussed in this paper illustrate the need for strategic thinking and strategic collaboration when navigating unexpected challenges in evaluation practice during a crisis or with limited access and resources. As noted in the UNESCO definition of

strategic competency—that is, “the abilities to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield” (2017, p.10)—there is an increasing need for evaluators to think about how best to plan for local sustainability and local collaboration.

Emotional Intelligence and Resilience

A second evaluator competency that emerges from the three case studies is the need for empathy, or the need to understand what the beneficiaries themselves are experiencing. While most interventions aim to make incremental or transformative changes for individuals, it is important to recognize that interventions are embedded in larger contexts in which often stronger, sometimes overwhelming forces may be operating. As an example, COVID-19 and the policy and regulatory context that developed in response to it overwhelmed most of what any program could hope to achieve. In such a context, it would be irresponsible to continue with a business-as-usual approach. For evaluators, it became imperative to understand what program beneficiaries were experiencing, and many of these experiences were outside the rigid boundaries of what any program was trying to achieve given the impacts of COVID-19. Further, the pandemic's disproportionate impact on society's most vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals and communities, such as migrant workers, made it important not just to have empathy, but also to understand why evaluators need to be concerned about social inequities, while also recognizing the power of external forces like COVID-19 to amplify vulnerabilities. In addition, different individuals might have had very different experiences of the pandemic. Building empathy becomes vital given the multiple challenges related to the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the diversity of people's experiences.

Emotional intelligence helps evaluators develop empathetic and genuine connections, fostering trust and transparent communication with diverse stakeholders. This competency aids evaluators in navigating intricate power dynamics, addressing sensitive topics, and working to ensure that marginalized voices are acknowledged throughout the evaluation process, specifically when collaborating with grassroots organizations involving diverse communities, stakeholders, and individuals who possess distinctive viewpoints and requirements. In other words, it makes the evaluation process more mindful of people's

responses and recognizes their context-specific needs (Peshkin 1991, Collins & Cooper, 2014).⁶ Emotional intelligence can, in turn, raise the salience of the data, empower evaluators to contextualize findings, and facilitate meaningful dialogues for more informed decision-making.

Resilience, on the other hand, plays a pivotal role in navigating unforeseen challenges in the evaluation process, and in ensuring its relevance and efficacy in achieving desired results. While resilience is conceptually different from emotional intelligence, we have included it here because we believe that enhanced emotional intelligence can contribute to resilience. Important lessons from a recent article on resilience include the fact that traditional research has generally paid “relatively little attention to uncertainty and unpredictable conditions, including the particulate competence of the unforeseen, and how organizations can achieve degrees of resilience” (Herberg & Torgersen, 2021, para. 1). We believe that thinking more explicitly about resilience will be helpful to evaluation. For example, Herberg and Torgersen (2021) suggest the following six types of resilience competence: (1) general preparedness, (2) characteristics and competence of the individual, (3) sound relations, (4) creative behavior and improvisational skills, (5) the ability to reflect and learn, and (6) emotion efficacy. Emotional intelligence coupled with resilience aids in integrating the intentions of the community, the evaluator, and the program itself. It also aids in identifying their common goals.

Based on our experience, even though there are competencies that stress the importance of understanding the beneficiary’s perspective, we believe that the implications of empathy as an evaluator competency are not sufficiently developed or described. We learned from Case Study 1 (Study of a Resettlement Colony in Delhi), however, that empathy was vital in navigating the sudden disruption caused by the COVID-19 lockdown, as potential respondents faced job losses and were struggling to secure livelihoods, and decided to abandon the project. The evaluators were mindful of and prioritized the goal of understanding the emotional impact of the immediate crisis on participants to which the past trauma of relocation for migrant communities and consequent livelihood loss would be added during data collection. In Case Study 2 (Impact of COVID-19 and the Lockdown on Trends of Service Utilization at the Community Level), moreover, the

adaptation of data collection methods—shifting to telephonic surveys and remote digital methods and integrating these with in-person human interactions through enumerators embedded within the community—helped the researchers build a rapport with the community and continue communication despite employing remote digital methods of data collection.

In this paper, we have stressed the need to forge collaborations with diverse stakeholders, particularly in crisis settings, not only to negotiate unforeseen challenges but also to understand, identify, and integrate stakeholders’ needs in order to develop a culture of trust and create greater synergies between them. As expressed by one of the evaluators working on Case Study 3 (Impact of the Lockdown on the Lives of Informal Workers in Delhi), there was a sense that trust was beginning to develop between participants and the evaluation team, as indicated by the fact that not a single participant asked them, “Why are you asking so many questions? Will any of it lead to change?” In this same case, while evaluators were not able to anticipate the needs of participants, they attempted to build connections and bring together grassroots organizations, participants, and evaluators on a common platform. As one of the evaluators stated, “We were not simply data gatherers for the evaluation process” but were actually working “with” rather than “on” the participants.

These case studies highlight the crucial role of emotional intelligence and resilience in helping evaluators more effectively navigate complex and emotionally charged situations while conducting evaluations and nurturing empathy and compassion toward crisis-affected communities and individuals. By cultivating emotional intelligence, the evaluators started to obtain a deeper understanding of the emotions and responses of participants in relation to the crisis environment, and, thus, were better able to identify, adapt, and be proactive in managing the common goals of diverse stakeholders.

Evaluators who are mindful of emotional intelligence and resilience may be better positioned to approach data collection and engagement with sensitivity and understanding, appreciating the hardships endured by participants. Strong communication skills can enable evaluators to listen more actively, empathize, and communicate in a culturally sensitive manner. Working toward more collaborative relationships and inclusive

⁶ Goleman (1998) identifies two dominant aspects of emotional intelligence: personal and social competence. Here, the paper takes into consideration only the social competence of the evaluators, which involves social

interaction and skills and empathy—that is, understanding and communicating with others.

decision-making can help evaluators in navigating complex stakeholder dynamics, support data-driven decision-making, and contribute to the overall effectiveness of the crisis response.

Conclusions: The Future of Evaluation Capacity-Building Programs

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the three case studies discussed in this paper shed light on critical competencies that we believe would be helpful for evaluators. In addition to adaptability, communication, and ethical concerns, which suggest prioritizing respondents' well-being over data collection, evaluation practice during the pandemic highlighted the role of communities in shaping evaluation questions. We learned from our practice that working with grassroots organizations is critical in gaining a deeper understanding of local communities and for implementing effective program interventions. Additionally, the pandemic underscores the importance of the systemic and contextual factors related to the project, in both the short and the long run.

In our experience, the pandemic highlights the need to strengthen the following two core competencies: first, a strategic approach that allows evaluators to identify connections, synergies, and collaborations among interventions, and align their efforts with overarching development goals; and, second, emotional intelligence and resilience, both of which are vital in navigating challenges and engaging sensitively and empathetically with diverse communities.

The question becomes, how does one develop such strategic thinking as well as empathy as part of evaluator competencies? While on-the-job training is clearly one way to bring more strategic thinking and empathy, post-COVID-19, we think there is a need to re-emphasize the importance of these two competencies as critical skills evaluators must learn about. In our experience, at least in the Indian context, interventions are often considered to be fixed and most of our explorations of beneficiaries' experiences lead to treating individuals more as elements of a data collection exercise; the importance of building relationships and genuine empathy tends to be underemphasized. The recognition that many of the beneficiaries had experiences that were more seriously consequential than what evaluators themselves experienced during COVID-19 should be a guiding factor in building skills to enlarge our own frameworks to learn from beneficiaries' experiences. In this light, much of empathy as a competency begins with the recognition that even the best thought-out

intervention does not fully understand the individual's context or other contexts that influence how the individual interacts with the intervention. This requires a humility and an openness that goes well beyond evaluation protocols and plans.

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