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Contribution analysis – a new approach to evaluation in international development

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Since the mid 1990s there has been growing pressure on international donors to demonstrate the effectiveness of publicly funded aid initiatives. Indeed, in Australia and elsewhere the need to show that programs have achieved desired outcomes has witnessed a shift from past preoccupations with the measurement of program implementation, inputs and outputs to a stronger focus on assessing program impact. However, an issue associated with this trend is that development assistance projects are frequently delivered over short time frames (three to five years). This sector reality has meant that donors can often only measure success in terms of progress toward results, rather than reveal a causal link between a program and desirable outcomes.

To address this, AusAID has looked to alternative approaches to aid and development program evaluation. In Fiji, 'contribution analysis' (Mayne, 2001) has been introduced across three programs as a means to consider progress towards outputs and intermediate and end outcomes. This approach recognises that it takes time to achieve an impact and so does not attempt to prove an impact before an impact could actually be achieved. Furthermore, contribution analysis does not seek to definitively prove contribution, but rather seeks to provide plausible evidence to reduce the uncertainty about the 'difference' a program is making (Mayne, 2001).

Contribution analysis was introduced at a program and national level with the AusAID funded Fiji Education Sector Program (FESP) in 2005. At program level contribution analysis is being used to evaluate the contribution FESP is making to the Ministry of Education achieving their priorities. AusAID is also applying contribution analysis to evaluate the contribution that the AusAID program as a whole is having in supporting Fiji achieve their national priorities as articulated in Fiji's National Strategic Development Plan. This paper discusses the specific approach to introducing contribution analysis into FESP, and the challenges faced and benefits gained with this new and innovative approach to aid and development program evaluation.