Mixed Methods for Complex Programmes: The Use of the DOME Model for the Evaluation of Public-Private Partnerships Against Educational Poverty in Italy

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, for the first time in Italy, impact evaluation has been requested as a standard for social projects implemented by public–private partnerships and, more specifically, a condition for them to be financed through the national educational poverty reduction program. This article presents and discusses the Developmental Outcome Monitoring and Evaluation (DOME) model, a mixed and participatory method for the impact assessment of complex and innovative educational poverty reduction programs.

RESUMÉ

Depuis quelques années, pour la première fois en Italie, on exige une évaluation des répercussions comme norme pour les projets sociaux instaurés par les partenariats public-privé et, plus spécifiquement, comme condition pour le financement de ces projets par le programme national éducatif pour la réduction de la pauvreté. Cet article présente et discute le modèle « Developmental Outcome Monitoring and Evaluation » (DOME), c'est-à-dire « surveillance et évaluation des résultats du développement ». Il s'agit d'une méthode mixte et participative pour évaluer l'impact de programmes complexes et innovateurs de réduction de la pauvreté éducative.

Keywords / Mots clés : Developmental Outcome Monitoring and Evaluation (DOME), educational poverty, impact evaluation, public-private partnership, social program / Developmental Outcome Monitoring and Evaluation (DOME) ou surveillance et évaluation des résultats de développement, pauvreté éducative, évaluation des répercussions, partenariat public-privé, programme social

Traditionally, the impact assessment of a program separates the program's success (i.e., what works) from the analysis of how and why the program works. The first consideration relates to attributional designs based on causal imputation models of net effects to the program (Campbell, 1969; Rubin, 1974, 2005). The second consideration relates to designs aimed at a procedural understanding of the contribution that the program actions can offer to the generation of results (Mayne, 2017; Stern, Stame, Mayne, Forss, Davies, & Befani, 2012).

Each of these two methodological approaches have constraints and limitations, meaning neither can fully explore the impact dimensions of a program. For this reason, impact assessment approaches have evolved to integrate several methodologies (Weiss, 1998; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Some interesting contributions include the possibility of combining the counterfactual approach and the theory-based approach to give empirical force to theoretical modelling and to assign a causal logic to the mediation and moderation mechanisms underlying the programs (Leeuw, 2012; Peck, 2020).

In Italy, impact evaluation has recently become the standard for public–private social projects and has even become a condition for financing by the national program to combat educational poverty.

Child poverty is a complex phenomenon that has lifelong impacts. Structural inequalities faced by children experiencing poverty include living in isolation from urban centres and the services they offer; lack of social educational supports; lack of incentives to attend school consistently; few opportunities to participate in sports activities, trips, and cultural events such as exhibitions, concerts, or shows. The lack of this articulated set of opportunities—on which the development of basic skills and abilities and psychological and relational experiences depend—is what has been defined for some years as "educational poverty" (Save the Children, 2014).

In Italy, unified interventions exist to combat educational poverty; however, these interventions are often fragmented based on funding eligibility. The first and the most significative of such initiatives is the Contrast Fund for Educational Poverty, established in 2016 by the Italian Government, the Foundations of Banking Origin system, and the Forum del Terzo Settore (Forum of the Third Sector), and entrusted to the management of the social enterprise ConIBambini.

To date, the fund has financed 355 localized initiatives administered by public–private partnerships (networks of schools, local authorities, associations, social enterprises), committing about €600 million to the issue. The management of these projects is generally entrusted to the territories themselves, whereas the fund plays a supportive role (financial, organizational, and technical) to promote a new generation of "educating communities" (Tomei & Galligani, 2020) or "territorial educational agreements" (FDD, 2022). The goal of the fund is to complement the territories' measures to combat the material and monetary deprivation faced by families, and to offer significant experiences and opportunities to children experiencing social exclusion and poverty.

The strategies used within the different projects are particularly complex since they mobilize many actors that move at different institutional and contextual levels and according to different normative or organizational frameworks. For all these reasons, the impact assessment of projects against educational poverty in Italy is a valuable case study for the experimentation of innovative methodologies.

Where to evaluate these projects, all the different actors need to monitor their own strategic actions (Giddens, 1990). If the partners involved do not develop this "reflective" skill or reflex, it will be difficult for them to grasp the strategies that emerge through complex dynamics (Mintzberg, 2007), to perceive what is happening during the intervention, identify what is working (or not) and understand whether the actions of the project are having the desired impact (Koleros & Mayne, 2019), and to integrate the results of the evaluation in their renewed strategic commitment.

The VOIS (Valutazione degli Outcome e dell'Impatto Sociale) research team at the University of Pisa created the Developmental Outcome Monitoring and Evaluation (DOME) model, a mixed and participatory method for the impact assessment of complex and innovative educational poverty reduction programs (Tomei, forthcoming). The DOME model is structured around four pillars inspired by the research design of developmental evaluation (Patton, 1994; 2011).

Figure 1. DOME model
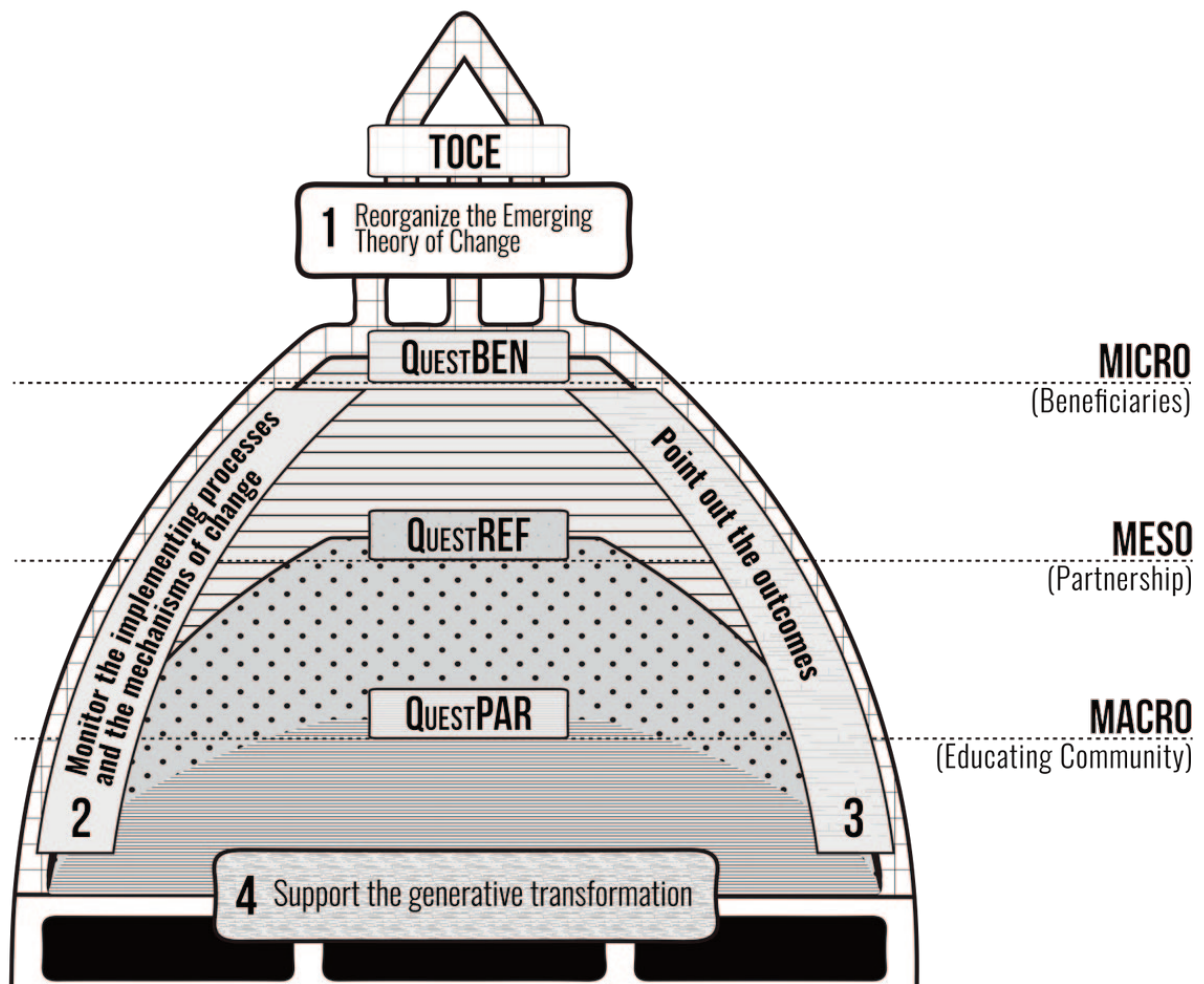
The four pillars are the foundation (pillar 4), the supporting walls (pillars 2 and 3), and the capstone (pillar 1). The "materials" or tools specific to each pillar are what "holds" the dome in place, similar to Brunelleschi's dome in Florence. The "dome" metaphor helps illustrate the role of the of the pillars within the assessment process.

- The first pillar of the DOME model, "Reorganizing the Emerging Theory of Change," corresponds with the research activities that link the actions, results, outcomes, and impacts, which are at the centre of the subsequent research observations. This pillar is based on the Theory of Emerging Change (TOCE), which "supports" the whole methodological framework of the assessment (Galligani, 2019).

- The second pillar of the DOME model, "Exploring the Mechanisms of Change," represents the underlying mechanisms that explain individual and organizational changes caused by the project and/or by more general changes on the external (institutional and socio-economic) context. Three different mixed method tools allow for the exploration of the changes taking place at the educational community level (QuestREF, i.e., participative process monitoring), at the partnership level (QuestPAR, i.e., interorganizational social network analysis), and at the beneficiaries' level (QuestBEN, i.e., counterfactual evaluation of the effects of the program on beneficiaries).
- The third pillar, "Giving evidence to the outcomes," aims to conceptualize and analyze the causal links and the mechanisms of change (using narrative strategies, i.e., outcome harvesting) to uncover a reliable theoretical representation of the mechanisms generating an impact.
- The fourth and final pillar, "Supporting generative transformation," promotes the (public) utilization of the evaluation results (Patton, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Currently, the DOME model is used by the VOIS team at the University of Pisa to assess the impact of 30 different projects, aimed at the reduction of educational poverty. These projects are led by non-profit organizations and implemented at local and regional levels through public–private partnerships.

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