Evaluation of international and non-governmental organizations’ communication activities: A 15 year systematic review – Glenn O’Neil

Abstract

This purpose of this paper is to understand how intergovernmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations have evaluated their communication activities and to what extent they have adhered to principles of evaluation methodology over a 15 year period (1995-2010). 46 evaluation reports and nine guidelines from 22 organizations and four coalitions were coded on type of evaluation design and conformity with six methodology principles. Most evaluations were compliant with principle 1 (defining communication objectives), principle 2 (combining evaluation methods), principle 4 (focusing on outcomes) and principle 5 (evaluating for continued improvement). Compliance was least with principle 3 (using a rigorous design) and principle 6 (linking to organizational goals). Despite these largely positive findings, evaluation was not integrated, adopted widely or rigorously. Implications of these findings and how evaluation methodology could be strengthened are discussed in relation to selection criteria, design and methods and the place of evaluation in communication programme design.

Keywords: communication, public relations, public relations measurement, campaigns, communications evaluation, evaluation, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, non-profit communications, research methods, evaluation methodology
Evaluation of international and non-governmental organizations’ communication activities: A 15 year systematic review

The increasing role of intergovernmental organizations (IOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in today’s world has put them under the spotlight, earning them equally applause and sounding alarms (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; McLean, 2000; Welch, 2001; Mingst, 2004). Organizations such as UNICEF, the European Union, Oxfam and WWF have made increasing use of communications to profile themselves, influence issues and build relations. However, how these organizations manage and evaluate their communication activities have been little studied or analysed (Lehmann, 1999; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007; Sireau, 2009).

This paper sets out to partially fill this gap: To understand how IOs and INGOs are evaluating their communication activities and to what extent they adhere to principles of evaluation methodology through a 15 year systematic review of available communication evaluation reports and guidelines.

IOs are created by governments normally through international or regional treaties to undertake a variety of functions including cooperation, monitoring, dispute settlement or humanitarian intervention (Alvarez, 2006). INGOs are private organizations operating in multiple countries, normally with a voluntary aspect, whose members come together for a common purpose (Mingst, 2004). INGOs undertake a variety of functions including acting as advocates for specific policies, mobilising publics, monitoring or providing
humanitarian assistance. Together, IOs and INGOs are considered as both international non-state actors that form what is referred to as the “international public” or “international non-profit” sector (Charnovitz, 2006).

Communication activities refer to the programmes, projects, actions and campaigns that are part of the management of communications between an organization and its publics (Grunig, 1992). The communication function within an organization normally includes specific functions such as media relations, publicity, marketing support, online communications, image/identity/reputation management and media production. Within IOs and INGOs, there may be additional functions related to their specific nature such as public awareness and education functions (Lehmann, 1999).

**Evaluation of Communication Activities**

The development of communication evaluation has been well documented with the first studies published in the 1920s as the first systematic communication activities emerged in the United States (Watson & Noble, 2007; Gregory & Watson, 2008).

In the following century, academics concentrated on understanding how these activities functioned and what they achieved. Models and concepts of the different types of communication programmes were developed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and consequently evaluation models and methodology were developed that were taught widely (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Macnamara, 1992; Watson, 1997; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006).
Concurrently, professional and industry associations developed guides and toolkits for practitioners (Fairchild, 2003; Lindenmann, 2003; International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication [AMEC], 2010; Huhn, Sass & Storck, 2011). Latest developments have been inspired by management trends (e.g. scorecards, return on investment) and the challenge of evaluating new or social media (Chartered Institute for Public Relations, 2004; Zerfass, 2005; Gregory & Watson, 2008). Recent initiatives have also been undertaken on the specificities of communication evaluation in the non-profit sector (Communications Consortium Media Centre [CCMC], 2004).

Despite these ample academic studies, guides and methods, the evidence indicates that the majority of companies and organizations do not systematically evaluate communication activities. Both in the private and public sector, it is estimated that between 30 - 50% of communication professionals are evaluating their programmes but with some 80% of these focusing on superficial “output” measures, such as the number of mentions in the media, (Walker, 1994; Fischer, 1995; Watson, 1997; Pohl & Vandeventer, 2001; Xavier, Patel, Johnston, Watson & Simmons, 2005; Macnamara, 2006). Reasons for this disparity include the accessibility of communication professionals to data; the impracticality and complexity of methodology required; the vagueness of communication programme design and planning making evaluation difficult; the lack of resources and know-how of evaluation; and the absence of an evaluation culture amongst communications professionals (Fischer, 1995; Kelly, 2001; White, 2005; Macnamara, 2006; Cutlip et al., 2006).
Systematic reviews of evaluations of communication activities, similar to the review undertaken for this paper, were found at the national level, notably in campaigns on influencing policy and individual behavior (Gallagher, 1985; Weis & Tschirhart, 1994; Coffman, 2002;), HIV AIDS awareness campaigns (Bertrand, O’Reilly, Denison, Anhang & Sweat, 2006; Noar, Palmgreen, Chabot, Dobransky & Zimmermann, 2009) and health campaigns (Synder, 2001; Lehmann, 2007). In general, these reviews compared the evaluation designs used and findings produced. No reviews at the international level, the basis for this review, could be found.

**Evaluation Methodology for Communication Activities**

An examination of these models, concepts and guides from academia, practitioners and industry associations shows no consensus on a universal evaluation methodology for communication activities (Rogers & Storey, 1987; Dozier, 1990; Fairchild, 2003; Lindenmann, 2003; CCMC, 2004; Michaelson & Macleod, 2007; Gregory & Watson, 2008; AMEC, 2010). In fact, it has been argued that no “silver bullet” solution exists (Gregory & White, 2008).

However, if evaluation methodology is considered as a set of principles and procedures that guides evaluation in a given field (Davidson, 2005), what can be drawn from the above mentioned body of work is a set of principles of evaluation methodology for communication activities. There is largely agreement that if these principles are applied,
evaluation will be more effective and valuable. These principles are summarised as follows:

1. Defining objectives of communication activities to be evaluated
2. Using a combination of evaluation methods
3. Using a rigorous evaluation design
4. Focusing on effects of outcomes over outputs and processes
5. Evaluating for continued improvement
6. Showing the link to overall organizational goals

This systematic review focuses on how IOs and INGOs are evaluating their communication activities and to what extent has the evaluation undertaken adhered to the above-mentioned principles of evaluation methodology.

**Database and coding**

This systematic review was based on available evaluation reports and guidelines on communication activities of IOs and INGOs. The systematic review followed the standard protocol and stages of such a review (Harden & Thomas, 2005). A selection was made of IOs and INGOs for inclusion based on existing criteria for what constitutes an IO or an INGO, notably:

**INGOs:** Those INGOS with category 1 (general consultative status) with the UN were included. These INGOS tend to be large established INGOS with a presence in many
countries and are considered of an international nature (Simmons, 1998). As of January 2011, a total of 137 organizations corresponded to this criteria.

**IOs:** Those IOs that have received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the sessions and the work of the United Nations General Assembly were included. As of January 2011, a total of 73 IOs corresponded to this criteria.

**IOs – UN:** In addition, included were those IOs that are officially recognised entities of the UN system. As of January 2011, a total of 106 organizations responded to this criteria.

Out of these 316 IOs and INGOs, 86 (43 INGOs and 43 IOs) were excluded from the review. These organizations were excluded on the basis that they did not have any communication function (such as purely coordinating or administrative bodies) or no information could be found on them. Consequently, 230 organizations were included in the review. Relevant reports, guidelines and policies were obtained from these organizations by three means:

- Making contact (through email) with the organizations.
- Searching on the websites of the organizations.
- Searching on two online databases of evaluation reports; the resources database of the Communication Initiative Network (http://www.comminit.com) and the database of evaluation reports of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
Out of these 230 organizations, evidence of communication evaluation was found in 31 organizations including nine organizations that indicated they undertake communication evaluation but that any reports or policies were confidential. For 179 organizations, available information indicated that they were not undertaking communication evaluation. In the remaining 20 organizations, no information could be found on the state of their communication evaluation. In response to contact by email, 10 organizations provided evaluation reports and/or guidelines. The online searches produced documents from another 16 organizations or coalitions of organizations. All reports that had to be considered for the review had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Reports had to be published between January 1995 to December 2010;
- The reports had to be a type of review, assessment or evaluation;
- Communication had to be the central focus of the evaluation;
- The communication activities had to be global or regional in nature.

A set of 46 reports met the above criteria and were included in this review. Nine guidelines were also considered. Table I shows the total the number of reports and guidelines found for this systematic review.

[Table I near here]

“Coalitions” has been added as a type of organization as the review found that four reports were of communication activities conducted by coalitions of IOs/INGOs rather
than one single organization (A20, A29, A34, A46). Further, throughout this paper, non-UN and UN IOs are considered as one group (IOs).

Table IV contains a summary of the key characteristics of the 46 evaluations. Table V contains a summary of the nine guidelines, policies and strategies (located at the end of this paper).

**Coding**

The reports were coded on the basis of the following dimensions: Type of organization, sector, timeline for activities evaluated, coverage, theme, channels used, components used (tactics), evaluation design, data collection methods, level of effects being measured and adherence to the evaluation principles. Reports were coded by this author and an independent coder. Intercoder reliability was calculated for each dimension coded (Cohen, 1960), with percentage agreement ranging from 73% to 100% with a mean of 85%. Cohen’s Kappa (which corrects for chance categorisation) ranged from 0.23 to 1.0 with a mean of 0.64. These results indicate a good agreement between the coders. Discussions between the two coders resolved any differences in the coding.

**Results**

The 46 reports represented evaluation of 46 distinct communication activities of 22 organizations and four coalitions. Most organizations were represented once or twice with the exception being the European Union (EU) which was the source of 16 reports.
The majority of activities were at the global level (63%) with remaining 37% at the regional level (mainly Europe and to a lesser extent Asia). The evaluations spanned 14 sectors with the dominant sectors being social (employment, culture and welfare); humanitarian aid and agriculture. The majority of activities being evaluated ran for one or two years with the majority (37/46) of evaluations undertaken from 2004 onwards. The evaluations indicated that each activity used on average three out of the four channels identified: interpersonal, media, internet and partners. A total of 31 different communication tactics were identified by the evaluations. On average, each communication activity under evaluation utilised five tactics. The most popular tactics utilised were: Websites, media relations, publications and events.

The 46 evaluations and their adherence to the six principles of evaluation methodology for communication activities are now analysed and described further.

**Principle 1: Defining objectives of communication activities to be evaluated**

The notion of defining the objectives of the activities to be evaluated is stressed in the evaluation literature (Weiss, 1998; Shaw, Greene & Melvin, 2006). In evaluating communication activities it is recommended to “establish clear program, activity, strategic and tactical objectives and desired outputs, outtakes and outcomes before you begin” (Lindenmann, 2003, p. 4). Dozier (1990) went further by stating that “clearly defined quantifiable objectives must be set in terms of change or maintenance of knowledge, predispositions, and behaviour of publics” (p. 5). Of note, the majority of
evaluations (78% 36/46) of this review, were undertaken by persons external to the organizations and presumably had no input in the setting of objectives of the activities they were evaluating.

In the current review, 80% (37/46) were identified as having been able to define the objectives of the communication activities being evaluated, albeit retrospectively. Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle specifically mentioned or implied strongly what the objectives of the activities were. Those coded as not complying with this principle did not mention the objectives explicitly or implicitly. Intercoder reliability for this principle was a percentage agreement of 82% and Cohen’s Kappa of 0.54.

Evaluations that concentrated mainly on outputs - 28% (13/46) were typically assessing objectives at that level, i.e. activities to be held; items to be produced or distributed. Thus, determining the objectives at this level was more straightforward. In evaluating outcomes, a focus of the majority of evaluations (see principle 4), the vagueness or absence of the objectives was an issue, as illustrated by the following excerpt from an evaluation:

One concern with this campaign is that there were no clear internally articulated realistic objectives and therefore no explicit agreement about what the campaign was actually intended to achieve. (A31, p. 11)

**Principle 2: Using a combination of evaluation methods**
A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is used extensively and advocated for in evaluation (Weis, 1998; Greene & Benjamin, 2001; Chen, 2005; Voils et al., 2008; White, 2008). In communication evaluation, it is widely implied or stated directly that a combination of methods is preferred (Lindenmann, 2003; CCMC, 2004). It has also been proposed that communication practitioners fail to fully utilise the diversity of methods available or even understand how they might be applied (Xavier, Gregory & Mehta, 2006). In the current review, 91% (41/46) reported using more than one evaluation method with four using only one method and one evaluation (A26) not specifying the method(s) used. Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle mentioned using more than one method. Those coded as not complying with this principle mentioned using only one method. Intercoder reliability for this principle was a percentage agreement of 100% and Cohen’s Kappa of 1.0.

On average, most evaluations used three methods with the most often used being interviews, document reviews and surveys. Figure I illustrates the frequency of methods used in the evaluations.

[Figure I near here]

**Principle 3: Using a rigorous evaluation design**

Communication evaluations have been grouped into broad categories of evaluation design, namely post-only, pre-post, true and constructed cohort studies, time series and experimental/quasi experimental designs (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Hornik, 2002;
Lehmann, 2007). These categories are largely similar to those used in the broader evaluation field (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 1993). Previous studies of communication evaluations have found that the most common designs used are either the pre-post design (without control group) or the post-only design (Rogers & Storey, 1987; Hornik, 2002; Lehmann, 2007). This is confirmed by this review where the majority of evaluations (30/46) were post-only designs with the remaining 16 being post-only with limited time series or pre-data (13), quasi experimental design with control groups (2) and pre-post (1).

It has been argued that a rigorous evaluation design is only possible through experimental or quasi-experimental design both in evaluation in general (Rossi et al., 1993) and in communication evaluation - particularly when the evaluation is attempting to determine causation and isolate the effects of the communication activities (Dozier, 1990; CCMC, 2004). Others have argued that the choice of evaluation design is largely guided by the questions for which answers are sought (Weiss, 1998) and alternative designs have to be considered given the difficulties of undertaking experimental or quasi-experimental designs in communication evaluation. Specifically, difficulties in these designs include issues with randomly assigning units (e.g. individuals or communities) to control and treatment groups (Flay & Cook, 1981; Broom & Dozier, 1990) and “contamination” given that communication activities often seek a multiplying effect making it impossible to “isolate” publics from potential exposure to messages (Flay & Cook, 1981). Dozier (1990) further contends that the relative complexity of evaluation has led to the use of less complex applications of social science research methods to evaluate communication activities.
There is general agreement that an evaluation design needs to provide a level of rigour that gives communication managers confidence in the findings (Dozier, 1990) or “rigorous enough to provide usable and actionable information” (Michaelson & Macleod, 2007, p. 6). For this review, “rigorous enough” was considered as the presence of comparable and varying sources of evidence to justify the conclusions made (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). On this basis, just over half of the evaluations (25/46) were considered of “a rigorous enough” design. Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle showed the use of comparable and varying sources of evidence to justify the conclusions made and an appropriate level of rigour for what they intended to evaluate. Those coded as not complying with this principle had limited sources of evidence and an insufficient level of rigour for what they intended to evaluate. Intercoder reliability for this principle was a percentage agreement of 73% and Cohen’s Kappa of 0.44.

Those considered “rigorous enough” utilised evaluation designs appropriate for what they intended to evaluate. For example, A8 centred on evaluating quality of campaign design and implementation (output effects) and states that it is not within the scope of the evaluation to undertaken an outcome or impact-focused evaluation. So in this case, the evaluation design is considered rigorous enough to evaluate the level of effects as was the case in 11 other evaluations (A4, A7, A9, A11, A13, A14, A17, A23, A40, A41, A42).

Of those assessed as being not of a rigorous design, the majority (A3, A12, A15, A20, A24, A25, A31, A32, A38, A39, A43) lamented the limits of their evaluation designs,
notably the access to, or ability to collect data needed to respond to the set evaluation questions, as illustrated by this quote from an evaluation:

The absence of any initial appraisal of awareness/knowledge levels of segments of the general public, no matter how small these may have been, makes it is extremely difficult to pass a well-substantiated judgement on project completion, on the actual changes that the project brought about. (A24, p. 17)

In general, the evaluations steered away from questions of validity and reliability. Several (A21, A24, A30, A37, A44) mention issues around reliability and validity – notably their difficulties to rule out plausible rival explanations to the changes seen, a question of internal validity (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In terms of external validity, the evaluations overall were not claiming to generalise their findings beyond the activities under review, aside from proposing recommendations for future similar activities (as described in Principle 5 below).

**Principle 4: Focusing on effects of outcomes over outputs and processes**

Evaluation of communication activities can be differentiated by the level of effect being evaluated: output (immediate effect and processes), outcome (effects on audiences and organizations) and impact (long-term effect on society or sector) (Valente, 2001; Lindenmann, 1993). These levels are similar to those used in evaluation in general (Weis, 1998; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The literature advocates for a preference on the outcome
level on the basis of it being of more significance and value to organizations over outputs (too superficial) and impact (too difficult to measure) (Rogers and Storey, 1987; Lindenmann, 2003). The seven principles adopted by the communication evaluation industry in 2010 dedicated one of the principles to this point, as they put simply: “Measuring the effect on outcomes is preferred to measuring outputs” (AMEC, 2010, p. 4). As stated above, studies of current practices indicate that up to 80% of evaluation undertaken focuses on outputs, often by examining coverage received in the media. Various reasons are put forward for this gap between theory and practice, notably cost, ease of use, accessibility of data and complexity of undertaking outcome evaluation (Macnamara, 1992; Gregory & Watson, 2008).

Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle reported evaluating a level of effects corresponding to the outcome level. Those coded as not complying with this principle reported evaluating a level of effects corresponding to the output level. Intercoder reliability for this principle was a percentage agreement of 73% and Cohen’s Kappa of 0.23.

In the current review, the majority of evaluations had some focus on outcomes (33/46). Although, most of these evaluations (31/46) considered more than one level of effect, with the combination of outcomes and outputs being the most frequent (28/46). The evaluation of outputs centred more on questions on efficiency and processes (19) rather than media coverage (8) differing from the trend seen in other sectors. Media sentiment (tone of coverage) was only assessed in one evaluation (A7). The evaluation of outcomes
focused on effectiveness (20) (whether communication activities achieved their stated aims or not, often working through partners and relays), changes to knowledge and attitudes (14), changes to policies, activities and practices of targeted institutions (13) and changes to behaviour (10). The evaluation of impact (12) centred on estimating broader changes to sectors or society. There was a recognition within the evaluations of the importance of evaluating outcomes (even if the data and methods did not fully allow it as mentioned in principle 3 above), as the following extract from an evaluation illustrates:

It is undoubtedly useful to know how many people attended a briefing or how many copies of a brochure were distributed, but it is even more useful to know what were the effects on the understanding and attitudes of those who attended the event or on those who read the document. (A17, p. 54)

**Principle 5: Evaluating for continued improvement**

Evaluation in general has moved from the notion of concentrating only on establishing whether an activity has achieved its objectives to the complementary notion of how the activity can be improved (Wholey, 1994; Weis, 1998). In communication evaluation, Michaelson and Macleod (2007) stated “The goal of a measurement and evaluation programme is not to determine the success of failure of a public relations programme. The goal is to improve the overall performance of these efforts” (p. 11). The Guidelines for Evaluating Non-profit Communications efforts (2004) emphasised “Assessing
whether a campaign caused its intended impact is often important … but evaluation for purposes of learning and continuous improvement is also important” (p. 3).

Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle included in the evaluations reflections and/or recommendations for future communication activities. Those coded as not complying with this principle did not include any reflections and/or recommendations. Intercoder reliability for this principle a percentage agreement of 100% and Cohen’s Kappa of 1.0.

In the current review, 96% (44/46) of the evaluations had a partial focus on continuous improvement. In only two evaluations (A26 and A34) there was no emphasis on continued improvements; these evaluations concentrated only on assessing the progress towards achieving objectives.

**Principle 6: Showing the link to overall organizational goals**

Communication managers often struggle to show how their activities contribute to the overall goals of their organizations (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Watson & Noble, 2007; Zerfass, 2008). Establishing such a link has been identified as a key challenge for communication managers (Huhn et al., 2011). This challenge is reflected in communication evaluation where it is advocated that evaluation be designed to show how communications’ achievements contribute to the organization as a whole (Lindenmann, 2003; Michaelson & Macleod, 2007).
Those evaluations coded as complying with this principle considered organizational goals in the findings they presented, notably by illustrating the level of support provided by communication activities to these goals and/or the links between the two. Those coded as not complying with this principle did not make any explicit link to organizational goals. Intercoder reliability for this principle was a percentage agreement of 82% and Cohen’s Kappa of 0.64.

In the current review, 63% (29/46) of the evaluations endeavoured to link their findings to the overall organizational goals. For example, in A21, the evaluation had as one of its key evaluation questions how the communication activities contributed to the organizational goals; in A37, the evaluation assesses the links between the communication activities and the organization’s identity. Those evaluations (17/46) that did not show the link to overall organizational objectives fell into three categories: Those that focused on evaluating communication activities; Those evaluating specific communication tools, such as websites or publications; and those evaluating activities that were established to achieve objectives distinct from that of the organization, for example, communication activities of a coalition around the 2004 Tsunami response (A34).

Overall, most evaluations were compliant with principle 2 (combination of evaluation methods) and principle 5 (evaluating for continued improvement). Compliance was least
with principle 3 (use of a rigorous design) and principle 6 (link to organizational goals), as illustrated in table II.

[Table II near here]

Compliance to the evaluation principles can be visualised in the form of a Guttman scale, a process to determine whether or not a series of items conform to a specified set of criteria (McIver & Carmines, 1981), as seen in table III.

[Table III near here]

Table III illustrates that only nine evaluations adhered to all six principles (A2, A16, A18, A19, A28, A29, A30, A44, A45). What these evaluations shared in common was that they were on a precise series of communication activities, e.g. campaigns/initiatives on select issues (e.g. A16 sport education, A19 food security) or precise in terms of effects desired (e.g. A2 visibility, A18 message comprehension). In addition, the evaluations were all conducted externally, the majority (7/9) were evaluation designs other than the predominant post-only design – most used some time series pre/during data and all were undertaken between 2004-2010, as were the majority of all evaluations reviewed. Type of organization did not differ from the distribution as found in table I; a domination of IOs with some representation from INGOs and coalitions.

As the scores of compliance decrease from six to five, it can be seen that adherence to
principle 3 (use of a rigorous design) decreases first followed by principle 4 (focus on outcomes). From a score of five to four, adherence to principle 3 continues to decrease as does adherence to principle 6 (link to organizational goals).

Five evaluations adhered to only three (A6, A35) or two (A1, A26, A34) principles. These evaluations were unable to show a link to organizational goals (principle 6); use a rigorous evaluation design (principle 3) and three out of five used only one evaluation method (principle 2).

**Limitations of this review**

Several limitations were identified in undertaking this review, notably that the assembled reports and guidelines do not represent the full body of communication evaluation of these organizations. For the majority of organizations covered by this review (179/230), the author was directly informed or publicly available documentation and policy indicated that they were not undertaking communication evaluation. However, it is possible that communication evaluation is occurring in these organizations but it is not known widely internally, accessible or reflected in available documentation and policy. The limitation of access has also been seen in similar systematic reviews (Coffman, 2002; Lehmann, 2007). In addition, although evaluation reports are the most visible and concrete outputs of evaluations (Weis, 1998) they do not represent all evaluation actions within organizations such as ongoing monitoring of communication activities (Starling, 2010).
Discussion

The review indicates that the prevalence of communication evaluation amongst IOs/INGOs is lower than the estimated 30-50% level for other sectors (Watson, 1997; Gregory, 2001; Macnamara, 2006). Evidence of communication evaluation was found in only 13% (31/230) of the organizations falling within this review. It is possible that prevalence was higher considering the emphasis placed on monitoring and evaluation in the available guidelines on communication evaluation (G2 – IAEA; G6 – FAO; G9 - Oxfam) and given the limitations described above. Nevertheless, the data available indicates that prevalence is above 13% but not more than 30%. Consequently, it can be concluded that only a minority of communication activities are evaluated in this sector.

Low prevalence of communication evaluation in this sector is possibly due to similar causes found in other sectors (e.g. planning, cost, complexity and lack of know-how and interest of communication staff). Some of these points have even more resonance given the particularities of this sector, notably the issues of cost and complexity of the communication activities (i.e. various activities with partners and target audiences spread globally). In the one organization where evaluation was pre-dominant – the EU – it can be surmised that this is largely due to the strength of evaluation policies and processes within EU bodies that were put in place from the mid-1990s onward (European Commission, 2000). In other words, evaluation is a programme requirement for EU bodies whereas in other organizations it is not necessarily so, another possible
explanation for the low prevalence seen. It was also not known on what basis communication activities were chosen (or not) for evaluation with a selection criteria largely absent. This corresponds with findings in other sectors (Gregory & Watson, 2008). The only exception seen was for EU bodies, where selection was based on the importance and budget of activities (European Commission, 2000).

Although evaluation was not widespread, the review found that when undertaken, evaluation of IO/INGOs communication activities adhered to varying degrees to the principles of evaluation methodology set out in this paper.

Common traits found in most evaluations included the utilisation of mixed methods (principle 2) and a focus on continuous improvement (principle 5), mirroring similar trends seen in evaluation in general (Wholey, 1994; Weis, 1998). The dominance of mixed methods was positive but such utilisation did not always strengthen the evaluations in the absence of more rigorous design approaches. The overwhelming emphasis on continuous improvement is positive for communication activities, however it is not known to what extent these suggested improvements, often in the form of recommendations were implemented by the organizations, which is beyond the scope of this review but an area attracting increasing interest (Wholey, 2004).

Where this sector does differ is that when communication evaluation is undertaken it is predominantly on the outcome rather than the output level, as seen with the majority adherence to principle 4. An explanation for this is possibly the adoption of results-based
management systems since the mid-nineties in this sector that has led to a move from the output to outcome levels in evaluation (Mayne, 2007). There has also been increasing interest in outcome level evaluation from donor governments that largely fund IOs/INGOs (Coffman, 2002; Perrin, 2006). This focus on outcomes is also encouraged in the available guidelines on communication evaluation (G5 – World Bank; G8 – Unicef; G9 - Oxfam).

Despite this focus on outcomes, this review found that communication evaluation often lacked a rigorous enough design to evaluate this level of effects, as seen with the low adherence to principle 3. Several guidelines, (G8 – Unicef; G9 – Oxfam), guides (Lindenmann, 2003; White, 2005) and the evaluations included in this review propose ways of strengthening these designs without the use of experimental designs, such as the use of contributive analysis, process tracing, tracking studies, reconstructed time-series data and propensity score matching. However, these approaches were not widely adopted in the period under review. This limitation in evaluation design was also linked to the broader issues: The lack of integrating evaluation into programme design as illustrated by the limited availability of baseline data and/or ability to collect it; the cost associated with more robust designs making them less accessible to this sector (CCMC, 2004); the evaluation process where it was only scheduled after communication activities have concluded (thus the dominance of post-only designs); and the undertaken of the evaluations almost exclusively by people (external consultants) outside of the organizations.
The challenges seen in evaluating outcomes was also related to the specific international nature of the activities. In evaluating “efficiency”, the evaluations were often assessing the influence of IOs/INGOs on national counterparts and networks to communicate, a more difficult effect to evaluate and a challenge seen in international evaluation in general (Mathiason, 2011). Outcomes that were evaluated successfully tended to be clearly defined (e.g. awareness on key messages, precise behavioural or institutional change) and done so with more robust designs. The evaluations also had a considerable emphasis on evaluating outputs, which involved simpler designs (and possibly the inappropriate use of these designs for outcome-focused evaluation). Further, there was an inability of most of the evaluations to consider the issue of isolating the effects of the communication activities and ruling out any other rival explanations.

The review found that not all evaluations were strong in their ability to link to organizational objectives (principle 6). This inability is possibly indicative of the isolation of communications within organizations that has been previously documented (Grunig, 1992) and the existence of communication activities distinct from core organizational goals (e.g. as part of a coalition).

Based on this understanding as to how IOs/INGOs are evaluating communication activities, these finding lead to three key methodological areas that stand out in their need for strengthening to make evaluation more effective and valuable: the selection criteria for evaluation; evaluation designs and methods used; and the place of evaluation in communication programme design.
For evaluation to be more effective and valuable to organizations, there simply has to be more of it. Given the low prevalence seen, it is indicative that processes are lacking that determine what activities must be evaluated. To increase prevalence, selection criteria would be needed, with one possibility being the criteria adopted by EU bodies, based on budget and importance of activities as described previously. Type and scope of activities would also be relevant criteria; as the review found a precise focus of the communication activities with specific objectives was more “evaluable”. Undertaking evaluation could also become an obligation for organizations from donor governments that fund communication activities, an approach increasingly seen (Perrin, 2006). Above all, communication evaluation would need to be further institutionalised and establishing selection criteria with a means to enforce it would be a positive development in this direction.

More robust designs and methods are feasible for communication activities, without having to revert to quasi experimental and experimental designs as described above. In addition to cost, complexity and know-how what is contributing to their limited use is linked to the final area: The place of evaluation in programme design. The review found that communication evaluation has been almost exclusively undertaken as a post-activity action by external consultants. This limited integration within activities means that it is challenging for organizations to adopt more rigorous designs and methods.
However, there are positive signs that organizations are increasingly considering how to further strengthen and integrate communication evaluation: Oxfam has been developing organizational-wide guidelines (G9 – Oxfam) and considering better integration of evaluation in programme design and the role communication staff should play (Starling, 2010); ActionAid and IOM have both undertaken in-depth studies on how to evaluate their main communication activities (G1 – ActionAid; G3 – IOM) as has Doctors without Borders (M. Broughton, personal communication, September 14, 2011). The International Red Cross has undertaken several pilot evaluations and is developing organization-wide indicators for communications (M. Kramer, personal communication, November 2, 2010) and WHO has researched and collated perspectives in communication evaluation in the health field (Rootman, Goodstadt, Hyndman, McQueen, Potvin, Springett & Ziglio, 2001). The evaluations reviewed also indicated that communication evaluation increased from 2004 onwards.

Given that communication evaluation within IOs/INGOs has been little studied or analysed, this review has helped clarify and document recent practice in this area. The review determined six methodology principles and showed it was possible to assess evaluations based on these principles, which could be replicated in other sectors in the future. A significant finding of the review was the discovery of the place of evaluation in communication activities – it was largely found to be an externalised post-activity action. This factor and its link to the low use of more rigorous evaluation designs and methods has not been particularly highlighted in previous studies. This review has also added to understanding of low prevalence of communication evaluation, complementing identified
causes with the notion of the selection criteria, an additional finding in this area. The review highlighted differences with other sectors, notably the international nature of the communication activities of IOs/INGOs which made the application of evaluation methodologies more challenging compared to national-level evaluations and the emphasis on outcomes over outputs such as media monitoring. Finally, the review of the international public sector found similarities to other sectors, such as the use of multiple methods and the focus on continued improvement.

This systematic review has focused on the methodologies of communication evaluation and not on the results they have produced. Related, an area requiring further research is inspired by a question posed over 20 years ago by Dozier (1990): Are communication evaluations that adhere closer to methodological principles more effective in achieving organizational objectives than those that do not?
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[Table IV near here]

[Table V near here]
Figures and tables

Figure I. Evaluation methods used in the 46 evaluations (%)

Table I
Reports and Guidelines included in Systematic Review

| Type of organisation       | Total no. of organisations included | No. of organisations / coalitions where information located | Reports, transcripts, reviews | Guidelines, policies, strategies |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| International NGOs         | 94                                  | 5                                                         | 6                           | 2                                |
| Intergovernmental organisations | 61                          | 3                                                         | 18                          | 2                                |
| Intergovernmental organisations (UN) | 75                          | 14                                                        | 18                          | 5                                |
| Coalitions                 | --                                 | 4                                                         | 4                           | --                               |
| **Totals:**                | **230**                            | **26**                                                    | **46**                      | **9**                            |
Table II

*Overall compliance of 46 evaluations to the methodology principles*

| 1. Defining communication objectives | 2. Combination of evaluation methods | 3. Rigorous design | 4. Focus on outcomes | 5. Continued improvement | 6. Link to organisational goals |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 80%                                 | 91%                                 | 54%               | 71%                 | 96%                      | 63%                            |
Table III
*Guttman scale - compliance of 46 evaluations to the methodology principles*

| Codes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Scores |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|--------|
| A2    | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A16   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A18   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A19   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A28   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A29   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A30   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A44   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A45   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6      |
| A9    | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A10   | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A12   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A15   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A17   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A20   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A23   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A24   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A27   | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A37   | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A38   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A39   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A42   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A43   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A46   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5      |
| A3    | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A4    | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A5    | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A7    | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A8    | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A11   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A13   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A14   | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A21   | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A22   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A25   | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A31   | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A32   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A33   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A36   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A40   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A41   | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4      |
| A6    | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3      |
| A35   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3      |
| A1    | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2      |
| A26   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2      |
| A34   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2      |
### Table IV

*Key characteristics of evaluation reports of 46 communication activities*

| Code | Organisation | Type | Year | Title                                                                 | Coverage | Evaluation design | Principles of evaluation methodology<sup>a</sup> |
|------|--------------|------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| A1   | Care         | INGO | 2002 | Lessons learned from CARE’s Communications in the Afghanistan Crisis, Fall 2001 | Global   | post-only         | No Yes No No Yes No                           |
| A2   | EU           | IO   | 2007 | Evaluation of Communication, Information and Visibility Actions in Humanitarian Aid | Global   | post-only         | Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes                       |
| A3   | EU           | IO   | 2006 | Evaluation of the Information Policy on the Common Agricultural Policy | EU       | post-only         | No Yes No Yes Yes Yes                         |
| A4   | EU           | IO   | 2005 | Study to assess communication, information and promotion programmes concerning beef and veal within the EU | EU       | post-only (some pre and during data) | No Yes Yes Yes Yes No                         |
| A5   | EU           | IO   | 2004 | Evaluation of the European Year of People with disabilities          | EU, EES  | post-only (some pre data) | Yes Yes No Yes Yes No                         |
| A6   | EU           | IO   | 2004 | An Evaluation of the Information and Communication Strategy of the European Commission’s DG for Employment and Social Affairs | EU       | post-only         | Yes Yes No No Yes No                         |
| A7   | EU           | IO   | 2004 | Evaluation of the Information                                        | EU       | post-only         | Yes Yes Yes No Yes No                         |
| A8 | EU | IO | 2007 | Midterm Evaluation of the Sustainable Energy Europe Campaign (2005-2008) | EU | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A9 | EU | IO | 2007 | An Evaluation of Communication Links with SME Stakeholders | EU | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| A10 | EU | IO | 2003 | Evaluation of the information programme for the European citizen “the euro – one currency for Europe” | EU | post-only (some pre and during data) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A11 | EU | IO | 2008 | Evaluation of European Campaigns and Healthy workplace Initiatives 2006 & 2007 | EU, EFTA | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A12 | EU | IO | 2002 | Evaluation of the European Year of Languages 2001 | EU, EEA | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A13 | EU | IO | 2005 | Evaluation of Information and Communication (I&C) activities of DG TREN - ManagEnergy | Global | post-only (some during data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A14 | EU | IO | 2008 | Evaluation of the European Year of Workers' mobility | EU | post-only (some pre data) | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| A15 | EU | IO | 2006 | Evaluation of ESF Information | EU | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A16 | EU | IO | 2004 | Evaluation of the European Year of Education through Sport | EU, EFTA | post-only (some pre data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A17 | EU | IO | 2008 | Evaluation of DG Trade’s communication policy, strategy and activities | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| A18 | FAO | IO | 2005 | Evaluation of the Cross-organizational Strategy on Communicating FAO’s Messages | Global | post-only (some during data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A19 | FAO | IO | 2006 | Evaluation of FAO TeleFood | Global | post-only (some pre data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A20 | GCAP | Coalition | 2006 | The Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) - An External Review | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A21 | Habitat | IO | 2005 | Evaluation of the UN-Habitat Global Campaigns for Secure Tenure and Urban Governance | Global | post-only | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A22 | ILO | IO | 2006 | Promoting Equality in Diversity: Integration in Europe | EU | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| A23 | ILO | IO | 2002 | Evaluation of the InFocus Programme on Promoting the Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work | Global | post-only (some during data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| A24 | IOM | IO | 2002 | Awareness Raising and Information Strategy on People | EU | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A25 | IOM  | IO   | 1999 | Evaluation of IOM public information programmes | Global | post-only | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A26 | IPPF | INGO | 2009 | Advocacy indicators results, 2005 and 2008 | Global | pre-post | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| A27 | ITC  | IO   | 2009 | ITC Client Survey 2009 | Global | post-only | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A28 | IUCN | INGO | 2004 | The Knowledge Products and Services Study | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A29 | MPH  | Coalition | 2005 | Make Poverty History: Campaign evaluation | Global | post-only (some during data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A30 | Oxfam | INGO | 2010 | Evaluation of Oxfam GB’s Climate Change Campaign | Global | post-only (some pre and during data) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A31 | Oxfam | INGO | 2004 | Evaluation of Oxfam International’s Coffee Campaign | Global | post-only | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A32 | Oxfam | INGO | 2006 | External Evaluation of Oxfam’s Make Trade Fair Campaign | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A33 | OCHA | IO   | 2006 | Evaluation of ReliefWeb | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A34 | TEC  | Coalition | 2006 | The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Media Evaluation | Global | post-only | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | No | No | No |
| A35 | UNCTAD | IO | 2000 | Independent review: selected UNCTAD Technical Cooperation Publications | Global | post-only | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No | Yes | No |
| A36 | UNDG | IO   | 2008 | Communicating as One | Global | post-only | Yes | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A37 | UNDP | IO | 2009 | UN Millennium Campaign - external evaluation 2009 | Global | post-only (some pre and during data) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A38 | UNEP | IO | 2002 | Evaluation report - division of Communications and Public Information | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A39 | Unesco | IO | 2005 | Evaluation of UNESCO's Partnerships Aimed at Strengthening Communication Capacities | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A40 | Unesco | IO | 2005 | Ensuring that Publications and Other Materials Released from UNESCO Meet Appropriate Quality Standards | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A41 | Unesco | IO | 2004 | Evaluation of the UNESCO Communication and Information Sector’s WebWorld Internet Initiative | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| A42 | UNHCR | IO | 2005 | "Evaluation of the Department of International Protection’s Protection Information Section | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| A43 | UNHCR | IO | 1998 | Review of UNHCR Mass Information Activities | Global | post-only | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| A44 | UNICEF | IO | 2004 | Evaluation of the Meena | South Asia | quasi-experimental | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
## Note

*Principles of evaluation methodology for communication activities:

1. Defining objectives of communication activities to be evaluated
2. Using a combination of evaluation methods
3. Using a rigorous evaluation design
4. Focusing on effects of outcomes over outputs and processes
5. Evaluating for continued improvement
6. Showing the link to overall organisational goals
Table V

Policies, guidelines and strategies – communications evaluation

| Code | Organisation | Type | Date | Title |
|------|--------------|------|------|-------|
| G1   | ActionAid    | INGO | 2001 | Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy: A Scoping Study |
| G2   | IAEA         | IO   | 2010 | Public Information and Communications Policy |
| G3   | IOM          | IO   | 2001 | Research and Evaluation Methodology for Mass Information Activities – An institutional approach |
| G4   | UNDG         | IO   | 2010 | UNDG/DOCO Communication Strategy 2010 |
| G5   | World Bank   | IO   | 2003 | Strategic communication for Development Projects |
| G6   | FAO          | IO   | 2004 | Corporate Communication Policy and Strategy |
| G7   | ICTP         | IO   | 2009 | Communication Strategy 2010 |
| G8   | UNICEF       | IO   | 2008 | Researching, Monitoring and Evaluating Strategic Communication for Behaviour and Social Change |
| G9   | Oxfam        | INGO | 2010 | Monitoring, Evaluating and Learning in Oxfam International Campaigns |