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The EBA report "Pathways to Change: Evaluating Development Interventions with Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)", as the title suggests, presents the potential and pitfalls of one specific method for development evaluation: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). First introduced in 1987, QCA is a method for systematic cross-case comparison to understand which qualitative factors are likely to influence an outcome. Qualitative data is translated into a numerical format and systematically analysed in order to detect any causal patterns in the data and allow for causal claims to be tested without the need of a counterfactual situation. QCA is therefore considered "*at the crossroad*" of the qualitative and quantitative culture, incorporating the "*best of both worlds*" (p. 21)[2].

The 185-page report (plus 57 pages of annexes and glossary) covers different aspects of QCA, from trying to define its place within the range of useful methods for development evaluation to offering an eight-step how-to handbook built on real-world cases. For its intended audience – evaluators and commissioners of evaluations – it also considers a checklist on how to quality-assure such evaluations and avoid stepping on a territory densely mined with pitfalls and traps.

Overview

The report consists of three main chapters. The **opening chapter** introduces the method and is divided into two parts. The first part (sections 1.1. and 1.2.) attempts to locate QCA within a broader "*methodological map*" (p. 7) of different rigorous methods for development (impact) evaluations. Part two of this chapter discusses the potential, relevance and limitations of QCA for development evaluation. This is particularly interesting for its use to develop and test a programme theory. Using the fictitious example of evaluating a policy influence programme implemented in eight countries to improve evidence-based policy-making in the health sector, QCA tests the different programme nested theories of change (first and second level) with the aim to identify the conditions[3] that need to be in place in order for stakeholders to reach consensus. In sum, QCA can help the evaluator make recommendations on which types of interventions to prioritise in future interventions. This chapter also contains some useful information for commissioners when applying QCA in evaluation practice, providing guidance on when it might be wise to consider it in a Terms of Reference for an evaluation project.

Chapter two illustrates the sequence of eight practical steps that should be taken in a high-quality application of QCA. Each of these steps is described in terms of opportunity (what the step is useful for), challenges and pitfalls to look out for, or more generically the "issues at stake". The sequence of these steps however is not carved in stone since the order of steps may vary or alternatively not all of these are strictly required. The author argues that while the first three steps (i.e. model specification, ensuring data availability, and calibration) are nec-

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2 Historically, the method has always been very popular with political scientists and other scholars interested in cross-country generalisation.

3 The term 'conditions' is used with QCA rather than 'variables' to emphasise the distinction between QCA and statistics.

essary for a QCA "proper", the last five steps (i.e. the Venn diagram, the SuperSubset Analysis, the Truth Table, the Boolean minimisation, and the INUS analysis) may be considered optional. However, the author argues "*it is advisable to make the most of the opportunities offered by the approach and complete all the steps*" (p. 49).

Chapter three addresses some crosscutting reflections that are relevant for quality assurance at the multiple stages of the QCA application process. This includes the issues of generalisation, bias, and the dialogue with theory. Since QCA's ability of generalisation – its key advantage compared to the more mainstream qualitative within-case methods – is seen with some concern by evaluators with a quantitative background, some authors have assigned it the attribute of "*modest*" or "*limited generalisation*" (e.g. Berg-Schlosser/De Meur/Rihoux/Ragin 2009). The chapter further illustrates how QCA can draw on other evaluation approaches (like Contribution Analysis, Realist Evaluation and Process Tracing) to help make sense of the output generated by the QCA analysis. As the demand for inclusion of QCA in development evaluation (or at least some of its components) rises, a final section proposes a quality assurance checklist for good practice. The 19 listed ideas aim to ensure that the potential offered by the method is fully exploited and the pitfalls evaluators can run into are avoided.

The report also entails three **Annexes.** Annex A lists a range of causal frameworks underpinning scientific inference (with a focus on Impact Evaluation). This helps relate QCA to other evaluation methods using different frameworks. Annex B discusses the differences between QCA in relation to Regression Analysis and Annex C comprises some background information about the evaluation cases used in the report.

Discussion

The report is clearly structured and generally well written (with some inconsistencies and misspellings especially in chapter three) and efforts were made to simplify the technical language, such as hyperlinks to a glossary and other sections for non-everyday use terms.

As regards content, the overarching question to be answered by QCA – "*What sets of factors are likely to influence an outcome?*" – is highly relevant in the development context. The report tackles this question in various breadth and depth through the use of either fictitious, stylised or real-life evaluation examples. The fictitious evaluation, for instance, deals with evidence-based policy evaluation of health systems in eight developing countries. It seeks to understand which conditions have led policy makers to ground their decisions on evidence when legislating on access to the health system for the poor. The three real-life evaluations mentioned for different illustrations in the report include an example of assessing the performance of mobile phones in repairing rural water points ("*Which conditions facilitated the achievement of different outcomes?*"), a gender-sensitive budget support evaluation ("*Which of two policy instruments works best?*"), and a biodiversity evaluation ("*Which conditions facilitate the creation of protected areas?*"). Equally so, QCA can be combined with other, more familiar evaluation methods in development to take on board the perspectives of stakeholders about "*what differences matter and for whom*". Among these methods are the Most Significant Change (Davies/Dart 2005) and Outcome Mapping (Earl/Carden/Smutylo 2001).

In sum, QCA offers a refreshing alternative to the widespread 'counterfactual thinking' (with Randomized Control Trials hailed as the gold standard) as the only feasible strategy to demonstrate causal connections when assessing the impact of interventions. Since QCA marries the depth of qualitative information (it retains the ability to depict complexity) with the rigour of quantitative methods (it allows for replications), the method also contributes to shortening the distance between qualitative and quantitative methods, sometimes referred to as a divide[4].

The paper makes a convincing case of why QCA should be an important addition to the development evaluator's toolkit and has certainly whetted my appetite for applying QCA in evaluation practice. For this to materialise, however, the following four aspects need to be in place: (1) the existence of a theory of change (or several nested theories) to guide the initial selection of conditions and outcomes; (2) the availability of data for all conditions across the cases that are compared; (3) the need for technical and sectoral skills among the evaluation team; and (4) a flexible budget frame, since costs are

4 Despite its name and despite being a case-based method, QCA is not always considered 'qualitative', particularly in the academic traditions of some Latin cultures which translate it "Quali-Quantitative Comparative Analysis" (Meur/Rihoux/Yamasaki 2002) because of its mathematical basis.

difficult to calculate in advance (it is not known beforehand how many iterations are needed). In my experience, none of these aspects can be taken for granted in a development programme context. Hence, while QCA's main protocols are well tried and tested in academic research, I agree with the author's statement that the method may "*still be getting its feet wet in evaluation*" (p. 44).

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