

# Evidence-based development

How can practitioners use research, evidence and existing data better in planning and implementing development projects?

Michelle Matthews

Corporate social investment (CSI) practitioners often talk about “applying learnings”, but how often does it happen? We know that using existing research can help improve project and evaluation design, yet rarely is this rigorously applied in practice. Can we find ways of working smarter with the evidence that is available?

CSI managers should understand what informs their projects and the impact of their funding – they not only have a responsibility to auditors, shareholders and company management, but also to the development of the community and country.

Ideally, project design and evaluations should not be arbitrary or reactive, but must be planned from project conceptualisation phase, and based on clearly articulated project objectives.

The Zenex Foundation, together with Trialogue, shared an evidence-based approach to project design and evaluation in a series of CSI Matters forums held in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town in mid-November 2013.

Practitioners engaged in lively discussions on the use of research and available data to design development interventions in the context of corporate social investment.

## Developing projects

The Zenex Foundation is an independent, non-governmental donor agency that is dedicated to enhancing the quality of mathematics, science and language education in South Africa.

The foundation’s evidence-based approach is informed by practice, research, project evaluations and tools developed to strengthen the design and logic of programmes.

Drawing on 18 years of supporting education initiatives in the country, the Zenex Foundation has developed a decision-making framework as one tool to strengthen programme design.

The tool offers funders a systematic and coherent approach to assessing and designing projects. While the tool was developed specifically for the design of educa-

tion projects, it can be adapted to a range of other social development initiatives.

The development of the tool was informed by a research study that Zenex commissioned to establish what other schools interventions exist in the country and how these interventions are being implemented.

This study led to two key outcomes: first, an extensive data base of approximately 200 research reports, articles and studies on school interventions in South Africa, and second, the decision-making framework. The education intervention database will be made available on the Zenex Foundation website ([www.zenexfoundation.org.za](http://www.zenexfoundation.org.za)) in December 2013.

## How the framework works

The decision-making framework (see figure 1) offers a systematic approach to designing or assessing projects that makes explicit the decision-making processes at all levels, allows for clear link between intervention and intended outcome, and records the rationale for the decisions made.

The framework consists of three interrelated key components that explain the “who, what and how” and is underpinned by a cross-cutting component which focuses on providing a reason for each of the design decisions – the “why”.

Working through different aspects of these helps to make the decision process more logical, and allows for a better understanding of the relationship between the development problem, decisions made around the form of intervention, and the outcomes. This maximises the probability of project success.

The target group (who) component enables a systematic analysis of beneficiaries and areas.

The programme theory (what) component explains how the programme intends to effect the desired change.

The implementation theory (how) element elaborates on practical issues related to implementation.

The framework includes a cross-cutting component that provides the rationale for the various decisions made at different levels

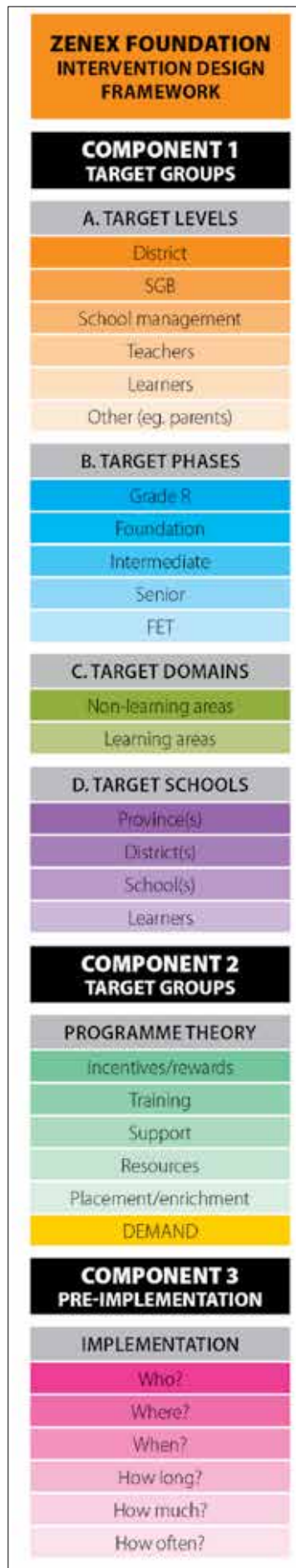


Figure 1

of design. It is important that a decision-making framework take account of the different reasons for the different design choices made.

This cross cutting component makes explicit the basis upon which decisions in respect of all key components of the design are made. This framework suggests that design decisions can be:

- Value-based: this depends on the organisational strategy, ideology, values and interests
- Financial: this depends on the resourcing considerations
- Evidence-based: based on best available scholarship and research
- Innovation-based: based on an explicit decision to trial or experiment with new approaches where evidence is not available

Therefore even when the evidence is strong and persuasive for adopting a particular course of action, other interests and considerations must be factored into the process.

## Using the framework

The response to the framework from the forum attendees was overwhelmingly positive. Many departments don't work with frameworks and even those that do considered this one particularly robust.

For most, the framework was valuable in that it formalises a process – decision-making – that is often done intuitively, enabling practitioners to analyse their own assumptions.

The Zenex Foundation’s framework is also flexible, say practitioners. Whether a CSI department wants to design its own intervention, or assess project proposals presented by NGOs, this framework helps refine the decision-making process.

The focus on the who and how also comes in useful for designing monitoring and reporting systems. At the same time, by helping practitioners get to grips with the why of each element of every project, the framework has a place in shaping overall CSI strategy. Although developed with the education sector in mind, it can be easily adapted to other sectors.

The Zenex Foundation recommends that when funders are developing the framework, they should start with a clearly articulated purpose and outcome, co-design with implementation partners where possible and incorporate their evidence based on experience on the ground to minimise iterations.

Frameworks like this one are not only useful before inception of CSI programmes. They can be helpful in providing a method of interrogating established projects that have grown organically. Furthermore, as new needs arise in the field, frameworks can help to analyse requirements and inform ongoing decision-making.

## Getting real about data

Given the realities of how evidence-based decision-making works in CSI departments, where most are operating on small budgets, and there is a lack of skills and time for finding evidence, companies should look at collaborating on developmental research.

Practitioners should also understand that there are different kinds of relevant evidence – it's not all academic – and many valuable lessons are found in practical experimentation.

“To mitigate the constraints on CSI entities undertaking research, practitioners should explore more forums for collaborating on developmental research. Sharing case studies and ways of working – such as frameworks – can improve everyone’s impact in development,” says Fatima Adam, senior manager of Research and Communication at Zenex Foundation.

Working with a framework can itself generate evidence. Rigour in understanding and documenting motivations and implementation will help CSI practitioners apply the lessons they’ve learned in future projects.

## PLEASE PROVIDE A 50-WORD BIO OF THE AUTHOR

Triologue and Zenex Foundation thank Investec, Sun International and Old Mutual for providing venues for the forums. For more information on the CSI Matters forums visit [www.csimatters.co.za](http://www.csimatters.co.za). Visit [www.zenexfoundation.org.za](http://www.zenexfoundation.org.za) for details on the decision-making framework and education intervention database.



# ZENEX

F O U N D A T I O N

The Zenex Foundation is an independent specialist grant-making agency undertaking the delivery of programmes and projects in Mathematics, Science and language education in South Africa.

[www.zenexfoundation.org.za](http://www.zenexfoundation.org.za)

*Educating for impact in mathematics, science and language*