

PRINCIPLES OF CONTRIBUTION ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Contribution Analysis is gaining momentum as an alternative approach to impact evaluation of complex interventions. It is popular for its stepwise approach that seems simple and less demanding than other approaches, such as counterfactual designs. We argue, however, that the steps can be deceptive: CA demands a certain mindset in which the steps must be performed, which is however poorly documented. We provide below 10 principles with a view to helping new practitioners engage in meaningful contribution analyses.

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INTRODUCTION

Contribution analysis (CA) is a theory-based impact evaluation (TBIE) approach. The term was coined at the end of the 1990s by John Mayne (2000) with a view to provide an alternative to counterfactual thinking 1) adapted to uncertainty and 2) responding to the needs of policy-makers. It was progressively operationalised in the 2000s before “coming of age” at the beginning of the 2010s when it started embracing complexity (Mayne 2012; Delahais and Toulemonde 2012; Stern et al. 2012).

In recent years, CA has gained momentum in certain areas, in particular in the evaluation of European or EU-funded interventions, and in the evaluation of aid / development interventions. In my experience, commissioners and evaluators are mostly attracted by [[Contribution analysis]] (CA) for two reasons:

- The common sense idea that interventions may be worthwhile by contributing to expected changes rather than being attributed the merit of these changes. When asked to evaluate impact,

they are relieved to see that there is an approach that is compatible with their own views of things, especially when compared to counterfactual approaches.¹

- The fact that CA presents itself as a sequential process. The steps are easy to understand, at least superficially, they seem easy to follow. Just go from step 1 to step 6 or 7! People see CA as a simpler approach, less technical than counterfactual approaches.

But this second reason may actually prove to be more a problem than an asset. The first four steps in particular² are what makes CA special (Ton 2020): a long time is dedicated to making plausible claims (theory-building phase), that can then be tested before the results are presented in a Contribution story (theory-testing phase). These four steps are iterative and, we would argue, recursive³. This aspect, which is very different from a conventional TBE and from deductive impact evaluation approaches such as counterfactual evaluation, is complex; demands a certain level of rigour and expertise; and is generally not understood by newcomers to CA. Actually, CA can be deceptive for those who were looking for a simpler way of dealing with impact⁴. However, even when this aspect of CA is acknowledged, the stepwise approach may be misleading for evaluators who do not understand what is the general mindset behind CA.

We argue that in the past 10 years, much has been done to defend the credibility of CA as a TBIE approach (Mayne 2019), to refine its concepts and processes and tools, but not so much to explain what was the mindset behind CA. In fact, this paper was triggered by several cases in which we met people willing to do a CA using the available literature, but could not actually do so with the existing guidance. In line with our 2012 paper (Delahais and Toulemonde 2012), the objective here is to assist those evaluators doing CA in practice by providing “principles of Contribution analysis”. It is also to verify to what extent is this mindset shared by practitioners of CA and other “theory-inspired” approaches.

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To help those who are candidates to do a CA understand and acquire the needed mindset to do it successfully, we provide below a series of 10 principles. These principles do not aim at replacing the CA steps. They are here to provide guidance to those who engage in CA, in general terms, and also every time they do not know what they are supposed to do. For instance, what to do when an initial claim drawn from an intervention’s objective appears unlikely; when there are too many claims and not enough resources to test them; when there are debates about the robustness of a claim, etc.

¹ This is particularly visible, for instance, in the European context, where Managing Authorities of Structural Funds are required to evaluate the impact of their programmes, and are given a choice between “counterfactual” and “theory-based” approaches.

² Setting the causal question; developing a theory of change; feeding the theory with existing information; making contribution claims.

³ Iterative means that the steps are part of a loop, e.g. developing the ToC (step 2) leads to reconsider the causal question (step 1), etc. Recursive means that, within these steps, the same process is done several times until a condition is satisfied. This is particularly true when it comes to developing Contribution Claims.

⁴ This simpler way may, in fact, not exist. But as we will see here, it is also possible to develop simpler approaches, with the principles of CA in mind, with no claim of assessing impact.

M.Q. Patton proposed that principles should GUIDE evaluators when they are faced with concrete issues. GUIDE stands for principles that provide (G) (meaningful) guidance; are (U) useful; (I) inspiring; (D) developmentally adaptable; (E) evaluable (Patton 2018). Donna Podems proposed such principles for Feminist Evaluation with the support of M.Q. Patton (Podems 2018). We have aimed to provide such principles here, which are related to 1) how an evaluated intervention is viewed; 2) the evaluation approach; and 3) to the evaluator's stance. They, of course, overlap and should be taken together.

Note: The terms used below are often generic (e.g. an intervention, a theory of change...). Though it is not the focus of this paper to define terms that have been defined elsewhere, we provided some details on our specific understanding in the footnotes.

PRINCIPLES RELATED TO EVALUATED INTERVENTION FRAMING

As other approaches or models do, Contribution Analysis is set into a certain view of what the world is and what an intervention can do, which is that of the complex. CA only makes sense in that certain view. The three principles are here to help practitioners navigate complexity.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY

This is the first and probably most important principle of Contribution analysis, which pervades all the others. In his initial works on CA, John Mayne insisted that “we must recognize that determining definitively the extent to which a government program contributes to a particular outcome is usually not possible, even with a carefully designed evaluation study” (2000). This is not only a question of measurement, though.

We evaluators tend to believe that public interventions can address public problems. And interventions are usually presented as having a linear impact on those problems. But the CA practitioner needs to consider interventions as bets, which consequences (or their nature) are uncertain. The more ambitious the goals, the more uncertain or even unlikely they are to be reached. Mature interventions, or carefully designed interventions, can reduce the level of uncertainty, but never suppress it.

This is only an application of system thinking and complexity thinking:

- First, change ⁵ happens continuously as a consequence of powerful drivers and many overlapping interventions (see principle 2). Even if desired changes are observed, they are unlikely to be due to one intervention alone.
- Second, an intervention's contribution can never be certain, if only because pathways to change are manifold and uncertain, and their ability to trigger change depends on configurations of stakeholders, contexts, etc.
- Third, change is complex and cannot be fully embraced, so one can never know whether an intervention has had consequences that were overlooked, because the relationship between an intervention and change was not identified

⁵ Change is what is happening, independently from (but possibly in relationship with) the intervention. For instance, whether our societies are going towards gender equity is change.

- Fourth, even when a relationship is identified, our measurement instruments are defective and never fully grasp the causal relationship between the intervention and its consequences

This has very practical consequences at all steps of CA. In particular, the CA practitioner needs to distance from an intervention's objectives or its logic (though these are, of course, a material that can be used to develop a theory of change [ToC, see principle 2] and later, contribution claims). They need to enter into an iterative journey of making claims, testing them, improving them (principle 6). They will navigate into a **continuum of plausibility** in which they will increase or decrease the degree of confidence related a claim (Befani and Mayne 2014) – which is different from making assumptions and testing whether they are true or not.

We argue that because it acknowledges uncertainty, CA is particularly suited for interventions which contribution to drivers of change is particularly uncertain, but is still likely – or when the stakes are high to prove or disprove a contribution (because it matters for stakeholders, for instance).

2. START FROM THE BIG PICTURE

In a conventional TBE, the emphasis is put on the evaluated intervention, and change is left in the background, as a “context” or a “final impact”. TBE may overstate attribution of impact to the evaluated intervention by maintaining out of their scope the many external reasons that may explain change.

CA goes the other way around and starts with unfolding change. Context and its major drivers are at the centre, and the first and foremost question of a CA is whether the evaluated intervention, among others, is likely to have any impact on these drivers of change.

Here there is an ambiguity with the notion of ToC. Funnell and Rogers (2011) have rightly pointed at the distinction between a “theory of change”, the term referring here to “the central mechanism by which change comes about for individuals, groups, and communities” (p. 31) and a “theory of action” which displays how the intervention connects to the theory of change at different steps. We have ourselves proposed a distinction between an “overall ToC” or “system of change”, which depicts the system to which we want to contribute, and contribution claims, which are plausible statements about the pathways and mechanisms through which an intervention can contribute to this system (Delahais, 2022).

The process through which an overall system is built for the purpose of the evaluation, and then the evaluators look for a connection between the intervention and the system, is absolutely key to a CA for three reasons:

- first, this work implies not only to look for logical connections, but also to conceptualise contribution (e.g. by looking at different theories or claims that frame contribution in different ways). Because CA does not focus on interventions but on the system, contribution can be of a much different nature than the one expected from the intervention and may include aspects related to the political or diplomatic context of an intervention, its implementation, how stakeholders are using the intervention in support of their own strategy, and even technical details such as forms or indicators to obtain support⁶.

⁶ For instance, when evaluating the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), a European fund in France, we found that a major vector affecting contribution was related to accountability requirements. In particular, the

- second, it redefines what is plausibility, which is not anymore only what is “supported by prior empirical evidence or common sense” (Connell and Kubisch 1998) but also 1) what is possibly connected to the major drivers and trends that constitute change and 2) in relationship with which other drivers (see principle 3). In some situations, this may request quite a long process of trial-and-error in which different frames are used to identify plausible claims.
- third, because the area(s) of connection between the evaluated intervention and the system of change actually constitutes the evaland of the CA. The system of change is indeed too large and complex to be fully embraced; there is therefore a need to agree on what will be the focus of the evaluation and this focus is this “niche” that is carved into the system, in which a contribution is plausible

3. SITUATE THE INTERVENTION AMONG A MULTIPLICITY OF DRIVERS

An axiom of CA is that any change is a consequence of multiple drivers, of which only some can be comprehended. Drivers can be socioeconomic, cultural or environmental; they can have consequences on their own or in combination. It should first be accepted that we human people cannot entirely make sense of them, of the direction of change or of causality (Morin 1988). And probably, because CA is pragmatic (principles 5 & 6), the CA practitioner should not try to embrace it all.

What is expected here is to build a model, which will be wrong but useful (Box, 1979). This model tries to explain how change is unfolding in the particular area of interest of the intervention, and will emphasise on those drivers which can be connected to the intervention. Existing theories and concepts about what drives changes are particularly useful here (Delahais, 2022).

Because we are looking at the big picture (principle 2), it is quite likely that the evaluated intervention will not appear as a major driver of change itself, which means that the focus may need to change to look at the contribution to those drivers that are affecting change (“zooming in” on those drivers) and considering how a contribution to those drivers may indirectly affect change (Delahais and Toulemonde 2017)⁷.

After zooming in, a similar work has to be done at the level of contribution claims themselves. In CA, mono-causal explanations are unlikely to be a sufficient or necessary driver of change. CA brought the notion of “causal package” (Mayne 2012), in which an intervention may not be sufficient or necessary to trigger a change, but a package of drivers, among which the intervention, can.

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need to collect information about the beneficiaries to feed the programme’s M&E system was preventing those farthest from employment to join, and leading those helping young people to circumvent the programme’s requirements to still help them.

⁷ For instance when evaluating the contribution of two research centres to sustainable forest management in the Congo Basin (Delahais, Flichy, and Ekoumou 2014), it is clear that research is not the main reason for improved forestry practices. Therefore the evaluation zoomed in on certain drivers affecting forestry practices, such as, for instance, wood product certification. Certification is based on data, and research produces data. It is therefore possible to make a contribution claim at this level.

It is really an added value of CA to handle these situations well in which the intervention is unlikely to be the main driver of change. The combination of the 3 principles above should help the CA practitioners deal with such situations:

- they look at the big picture and try to understand where the intervention fits, among other drivers of change, and assess its role in comparison with those other drivers
- they start with claims, which are more or less plausible, but also conceptualise claims which make sense in the system of change. Being able to locate the intervention in the system is a key criterion of plausibility
- they navigate a continuum of plausibility: all claims can be considered, but all have to go through a process of iterative improvement, until they are considered plausible enough to be tested.

Using this approach, it is perfectly possible to conclude that contribution is implausible at the initial stages of the evaluation – or, more likely, that possible contributions and the perimeter in which they are plausible will be discovered along the evaluation process. This has consequences in terms of commissioning the evaluation: ToR need to 1) be open enough regarding what will be the evaland, and 2) leave enough time to the initial stages of the evaluation to do this work properly.

PRINCIPLES RELATED TO CLAIM-BUILDING AND TESTING

The process of building claims is crucial to CA. However, the task may look daunting given the wide scope and uncertainty that affects the process. The following principles are here to help the CA practitioner in building and testing those claims.

4. LEND YOURSELF SERENDIPITY

Developing contribution claims, including the empirical tests that will be used to test them, is not a linear process. It takes some time, some lateral thinking and curiosity to do so. So this might be seen as a preliminary principle: the CA practitioner should give themselves opportunities to exercise such thinking and curiosity, and enough time to ruminate them.

There are many ways to do so: the CA practitioner can collect anecdotes (Patton, 2014) through interviews or workshops; they can look for different theories or concepts, read other evaluations; they should probably engage in Socratic dialogue with other team members, or partners from different backgrounds to refine their thoughts. They should engage in wrong but promising directions, because they might lead to new claims that were not identified at first. They should be sceptical and look for “contrary cases” that challenge the common view of how things work (Ton et al. 2019). They should study values and understand what they mean in terms of underlying mechanisms of change (see principle 10). CA practitioners know well that the claims that are finally made often do not look like those that were expected at first – but that this does not come out of magic either.

This process of being constantly open to new things and to testing more aspects than those that would be strictly needed in a conventional evaluation has a very practical consequence, which is that the CA practitioner always end up collecting more material than needed. This is a collateral damage that cannot be totally avoided. Regular trimming of contribution claims can help. One should, however, resist the temptation to use everything (see principle 8).

Of course this need for serendipity is at odds with the constant need in evaluation to go faster, to provide an inception note 4 weeks after a contract is signed, etc. However, the constant development of contribution claims in CA is an asset: at each stage of the evaluation, there are some new findings that can be shared - one can tactically use this to gain time for nurturing the evaluation process.

5. BE HUMBLE IN YOUR CLAIMS

Humility is a core principle of CA. As seen in principle 1, it is first recognised that the outcome of interventions are always uncertain. But humility also touches how claims are made in a CA in several ways:

- how and why an intervention may lead to expected outcomes, through what pathways and mechanisms, can never be entirely known. We are making claims that concern some of them and we need to be aware that we are unlikely to be exhaustive in doing so.
- the claims that are made in a CA are never fully “true” or “wrong” and it is not our aim to say so. What we can do is testing claims systematically, accumulate evidence and progressively tell whether a claim is verified in context (does it work, for whom, in what context, why so).
- in some cases, uncertainty cannot be reduced through the accumulation of evidence, or the benefit-to-cost ratio of deepened investigation would be too low. It is also part of a humble attitude to recognise that in CA we are not in a quest for truth, but for being useful in reducing uncertainty where it is possible to do so.

We argue that the humble attitude should also concern how CA practitioners should engage with stakeholders, in presenting the process of claim-building and claim-testing. In CA, involved stakeholders need to understand the nature of the work that is done, especially given its iterative nature (see principle 6). In CA, the initial claims can be quite vague, they may be based on anecdotes, on a comparison with another intervention, etc. They will get better along the process, but the stakeholders need to be convinced that professional work is underway, and that it is OK if the evaluator cannot provide a set of assumptions and measurements at the beginning.

The negotiation should also include what can be shown in the CA, and the significance of the results. This is especially true when a contribution is highly uncertain. CA may be able in some cases to provide a high level of confidence in contribution in general or only in some cases; or a low level of confidence on some claims and a higher one on others⁸. The process should be transparent and discussed with stakeholders.

6. ITERATE UNTIL CLAIMS ARE ACCEPTABLE, NOT PERFECT

Identifying detailed contribution claims at the beginning of a CA is unlikely - or perhaps, it means that a CA was not needed for this evaluation.

⁸ For instance, in the evaluation of a recently inaugurated high speed railways, the theory-building phase showed that any widespread economic contribution was unlikely, but that we could identify cases of “reputed contribution”. We chose to test an economic contribution on these cases, on the ground that if a contribution was identified, it did not mean that it was widespread; but that if no contribution could be evidence in these best case scenarios, any contribution at all was unlikely.

CA follows an abductive process in which assumptions about contribution are iteratively formulated, tested, improved, or rejected. In CA, the ToC and the contribution claims are always work-in-progress. Some claims will be abandoned because they are not supported by evidence or do not fit with the objectives of the evaluation. Some serve as “leads” at the beginning of the evaluation. Interrogating these claims will help find other claims that are better adapted to the evaluation scope. And some others will progressively gain traction, be refined, and supported by more and more accumulated evidence.

An important question is when it is needed to make the cut between the theory-building and the theory-testing phase. The CA practitioner may be worried that their claims are not strong enough to pass them to the test. However, we argue that:

- evaluations must be done under data, time and budget constraints (Bamberger et al. 2004) and our role is not so much to bring the truth as to reduce uncertainty on an intervention’s impact
- we navigate along a continuum of plausibility (principle 1): claims will never be perfect before testing
- some claims may be more or less plausible at this point, but they do not all matter for the evaluation process or for stakeholders: it’s also a moment to decide on what is worth making an additional effort in testing (principle 10)
- the process of developing empirical tests, which shade a different perspective on claims, will in itself affect the degree of plausibility of claims – it is therefore not as if assumptions were tested as such: the continuum of plausibility is continuing here.

The logic here is not to finalise claims, but to stabilise them enough, so that they can be presented and discussed, and choices related to which should be tested and how be made transparently (principle 5).

7. DESIGN EMPIRICAL TESTS WITH PLURALITY OF NEEDS AND APPROACHES IN MIND

In itself, CA is open to any sort of approach or method. Different types of approaches can be used to answer different types of data needs, for instance in order to answer the major questions of theory-testing: “what actually happened?”, “what is the evidence that the intervention contributed to these changes?” and “what is the evidence that these changes are better explained by other drivers or by a combination of both the intervention and other drivers?”. The last two questions can be answered using a series of empirical tests, as in process tracing (Collier 2011). There are examples of light (Delahais and Lacouette-Fougère 2019) or heavy (Befani and Mayne 2014) uses of this approach. Not all CAs have a similar level of requirements in terms of what is sufficient evidence to support or discard a claim⁹. But again, not all approaches have similar views of what constitutes sufficient evidence.¹⁰

⁹ For instance, in the evaluation of two tramways in Morocco, approx. 20 claims were made, themselves broken down into 70 pathways. Some of them were tested thoroughly while for others, only limited additional evidence was collected. This was decided collectively in a workshop with the stakeholders involved in the intervention.

¹⁰ In a recent evaluation of an intervention producing knowledge on international organisations and aiming for use of the information, an analogy was taken with statistics. Because of the profusion of tests that was deployed, the approach was very good at ensuring the validity of a use claim, and at rejecting Type I errors (false positive). It was less good at ensuring the validity of a non-use claim, and at rejecting Type II errors (false negative), because cases in which use was most unlikely had been voluntarily left aside. Being able to

In any case, this level of requirements (which may differ from one claim to another) should be discussed transparently.

Though CA is rooted in generative causality, the use of different approaches will bring different types of causal inferences (Stern et al. 2012). Care should be brought to the conflicts that may arise from using different approaches and methods, without refusing the possibility to have, for instance, a quasi-experimental approach mixed with ethnological observations. This will not be, however, without paradigmatic and pragmatic issues that will need to be considered (Delahais 2018)¹¹.

In practice, a very concrete difficulty is that the approaches and methods and tools that will be used in the evaluation usually have to be detailed in a commercial proposal. At this stage, though, the evaluation commissioner and providers can only have a vague idea of the claims they will deal with: they need to make an educated guess. In any case, they will often have to make do with a series of imposed methods and will usually have limited room for manoeuvre to adapt to the claims to be tested.

8. BE LAZY

This last principle may sound a bit provocative, but it is still important. A contribution analysis makes the CA practitioner deal with a wealth of assumptions about the intervention, but also about competing explanations, all of which need to be tested, leading to a mountain of information, which is too much to deal with in most settings. The CA practitioner needs to find tactics to avoid spending too much time on claims that do not matter (see principle 10) or which are actually implausible.

Laziness implies:

- a process of carefully improving the degree of confidence in different claims with limited resources. This typically includes using simple, efficient tests before going into more detail. This is particularly important for alternative explanations, which can be numerous. For instance, reconstituting the chronology of events can be useful to quickly discard some assumptions (Delahais and Toulemonde 2017).
- identifying the inflection points which may explain why an intervention is making a contribution or not; the crucial, strategic issues that matter to the stakeholders or to general interest, and which mitigation can be fed by the systematic testing of claims
- avoiding launching any systematic empirical tests before the claims are stable enough, 2) have been judged important to test by the evaluation team and the stakeholders.
- trying to be proportionate in terms of testing to the importance of claims, or to the evidence already accumulated.

reject Type I errors improved the causal claims made. Rejecting less Type II errors meant that use could be more important than what was concluded.

¹¹ For instance, the evaluation of the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) in France included an overall Contribution Analysis, six counterfactual evaluations of projects funded by YEI using quasi experimental designs and a qualitative evaluation of innovative projects funded under the YEI. The different rhythms of these evaluations, as well as the difference in what constituted evidence were among the compatibility issues that were experienced at the time.

In the end, laziness acts as a safeguard – perhaps against the evaluators themselves. To do a CA well, it is necessary not to test all assumptions and not to use all the accumulated information, but focus on what really matters. Again, the goal is being useful, not finding the truth.

PRINCIPLES RELATED TO THE EVALUATOR

In this last section, we consider two final principles, that relate in priority to the evaluator and their stance in the CA process.

9. BE REFLEXIVE AND CONSIDER OWN BELIEFS

This principle may sound quite general. In a sense, it is about evaluative reasoning. In the words of Schwandt (2018):

Evaluative reasoning [...] stems from a commitment to engaging in analytical reflection on and appraisal of assumptions and claims, coupled with continuous learning and a willingness and ability to modify one's views in light of reasoned arguments and evidence. Earl (2013), for example, links evaluative thinking to an "inquiry habit of mind" in which an individual "consider[s] a range of evidence and keep[s] searching for increased understanding and clarity by engaging in a spiral of systematic analysis of the situation, professional reflection, action and reanalysis" (p. 188).

Though this process is – or ought to be – collaborative, it is also very personal. The CA practitioner will go through a wide range of claims, some of which will be deepened while others will be discarded. In this process, they need to be aware of their own beliefs about an intervention and what works or not – and how they may affect what they judge as a plausible claim or not. This is even truer when the evaluators are working outside of their own culture.

Not only should the CA practitioner update their beliefs; they should also help the evaluation stakeholders do so all along the evaluation process. The CA process often brings counter-intuitive or “offbeat” statements about an intervention and its results. They “work” as long as those stakeholders involved in the process have followed the process of CA and updated their own belief along the evaluation. There is a risk otherwise that the results will not be considered credible, whatever the data collection and analysis engaged.

10. EMBRACE VALUES

This final principle will also feel like a basic requirement for many evaluators. Schwandt (2018), again:

Evaluative thinking is unique because it is (or ought to be) grounded in a procedural logic for combining relevant values with nonevaluative (observational) data to accomplish the practical task of making evaluative judgments, and that logic is the familiar four-step general logic of evaluation.

In CA, important efforts are devoted to identifying and testing causal assumptions in a systematic manner. But as in any evaluation, the process of studying values (own's and the stakeholders') within a Contribution Analysis is not only used to support judgement. It irrigates the whole evaluation process (Gullickson 2020).

Values are used to focus the CA on certain impact pathways at the ToC stage, and also to agree on which contribution claims matter more than others and should be investigated in detail (see principle 8). But studying values is also a way to identify assumptions; and in particular, clarifying that there are different or competing values associated with an intervention and a system of change is a great way to identify different or competing claims, especially in the context of transformational initiatives (Delahais, Sage, and Honoré 2020).

CONCLUSION

These principles build on 15 years using CA in a variety of settings and training people in using this approach. 3 of these principles are related to the intervention that is being evaluated; 5 to the process of building and testing claims; and 2 to the evaluator's stance and evaluative thinking.

These principles are personal in a way; but they also offer a position with which to disagree: do other CA practitioners agree with these principles? Are these principles not limited to CA, but can also be associated with other "theory-inspired" approaches? I look forward to discussing them to answer these questions.

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