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Real-Time Evaluation

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About

This paper is part of the BetterEvaluation **Monitoring and Evaluation for Adaptive Management** working paper series. It focuses on using monitoring and evaluation to support adaptive management.

The series can be accessed at <https://www.betterevaluation.org/monitoring-and-evaluation-adaptive-management-working-paper-series>

While focused especially on international development, this paper is relevant to wider areas of public good activity, especially in a time of global pandemic, uncertainty and an increasing need for adaptive management.

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Executive Summary

Real-time evaluation (RTE) has been practised and documented over the past 20 years, initially in humanitarian projects. There is now increasing interest in learning from this experience to inform evaluations in other areas, especially in development.

There remains considerable variation in how real-time evaluation is understood and implemented.

Different definitions have included one or more of the following features:

1. Real-time (or more current) data collection
2. Real-time (or rapid) reporting back of evaluation data
3. Multiple timings of evaluative activity
4. Support for different types of learning - single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop
5. Engaging different users together in dialogue for sensemaking and action planning.

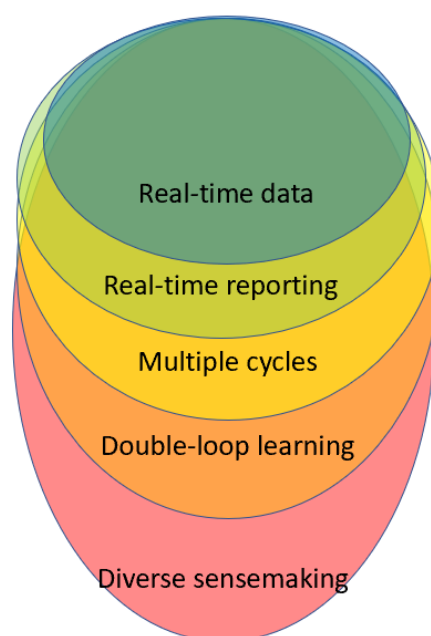
Some RTEs include all these features, and involve use of real-time data, reporting information in real-time to inform implementation, multiple cycles of evaluative activity, support for different types of learning, and engagement of wider range of users to make sense of and use this information. Some RTEs have only included some of these elements.

The situations in which RTE is appropriate, and what is needed to make it work, depend on the way in which it is being defined, and the intended benefits from doing it.

This paper outlines the different ways in which RTE has been defined and is understood to work. It analyses how RTE is similar to and different from other approaches to supporting evidence-informed action. It discusses when it is appropriate to use RTE and what is needed to make it work well.

It also provides links to additional resources, further reading and examples of RTEs.

Real-time evaluations can include one or more of the following features:



What is real-time evaluation?

Real-time evaluation (RTE) was first undertaken for evaluation of humanitarian interventions, with an early reference to RTE in 1998 in the Good Practice Review Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies, by the Humanitarian Practice Network, and a UNHCR RTE of its response to the Afghanistan emergency in 2002. Since this time, around 50 RTEs have been undertaken of humanitarian interventions and a smaller number of other types of development, including Norway’s International Climate and Forest Initiative, Danida’s Support to Sustainable Coastal Fisheries in Myanmar, and Kenya and Mali Country programmes.

More detail of examples is provided in the references at the end of this paper.

The table below shows some of the practical dimensions of RTE in terms of how and when it is undertaken – and variations in how these have been done.

There is considerable variation in how RTE has been defined, focusing on different combinations of key features, and sometimes using different terms including real-time reviews, real-time assessments to distinguish these from traditional evaluations which need to meet existing standards in terms of scope and comprehensiveness.

Other terms that have sometimes been used to refer to evaluations that have similar elements to RTEs include rapid-feedback, rapid assessment, and rapid evaluation methods.

Definitions of RTE have varied over time and in different sectors, including one or more of the following features:

1. Real-time (or more current) data collection (often in conjunction with use of previous data)
2. Real-time (or rapid) reporting back of evaluation data
3. Multiple timings of evaluative activity
4. Support for different types of learning - single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop
5. Engaging different users together in dialogue for sensemaking and action planning.

Aspect	Approach
Scope	Specific initiative (e.g. response to a humanitarian crisis), or country program
Timing	During implementation, not at the end or after completion
Duration	Can be short, or iterative over a longer period
Purposes	Usually to support ongoing improvements (by local implementors) – and sometimes lesson learning for the future (by others). It is not usually seen as appropriate for narrow accountability purposes (compliance) but sometimes as part of wider accountability for ongoing improvement.
By whom	Either internal team (with organisational separation) or external team (with content knowledge)
How data collected	Emphasise field visits, interviews - also remote technologies, big data, remote sensing -which can provide data quickly
How findings reported	Rapid feedback to intended users, dashboards, face to face meetings
How use is supported	Engagement in sensemaking and active support for use, including engagement in development of recommendations to respond to findings

Focus on real-time data collection

The WFP in its first RTE in the 2002-2003 Southern Africa crisis emphasised its value in terms of documenting what was done and learning (as well as its role in presenting immediate feedback to primary intended users and supporting self-evaluation by staff on the ground) :

*WFP's efforts to find appropriate ways of evaluating humanitarian relief operations as they unfold have included the recent development of 'real time' evaluation, an approach that aims at **reviewing and capturing important lessons** at several stages of a particular response.*

Focus on real-time reporting

Many definitions of RTE have focused on the issue of real-time reporting. For example, OCHA Services (UN Office for Co-Ordination of Humanitarian Affairs) used this definition for their resource portal on Inter-Agency Real Time Evaluations (IA RTEs) (emphasis added):

Inter-agency Real Time Evaluations are an IASC mandated evaluation tool intended primarily for learning in emergency operations with field level inter-agency coordination & management at the core

- *Characterized by shared management & methodological oversight with procedures & methodology developed by an inter-agency Support Group*
- *Carried out at the early implementation stages of an humanitarian operation **which almost simultaneously feeds back its findings for immediate use** by the broader humanitarian community.*
- *Seeks to identify gaps, access constraints & potential threats to the "humanitarian space",*
- *Assesses the relevance, quality, & timeliness of the response, unlocks inter-stakeholder coordination problems or operational bottlenecks,*
- *Provides Real Time Learning debriefs for the Humanitarian Country Team*
- *Asks "how adequate was the response as a whole and what operational results as well as positive & negative outcomes for the affected population did it produce"?*

The example on the following page, from the 2010 Inter-Agency RTE in Haiti, 3 months after the earthquake, illustrates the extensive activity to support use of findings both at the implementation site and with other key stakeholders:

Real-time input / feedback provided	Short description
Input to the internal assessment of lessons learned of the Humanitarian Country Team	As an input for the IASC Principals meeting on the 6th of May 2010, the OCHA Head of Office prepared in consultation with the Humanitarian Country Team a short paper on issues identified during the first months of the response. As this was being done at the time of the evaluation mission, the team provided input for this paper in two separate meetings.
Briefing of the Humanitarian Coordinator	Preliminary results were shared with the Humanitarian Coordinator and his staff before the IASC Principals meeting.
Workshop with international NGOs	Using 'Open Space' methodology, ¹³ the evaluators met with a group of international NGOs to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the response, identify root causes and develop ways forward.
Workshop with national NGOs	Using the same Open Space methodology, the evaluators met with a group of national NGOs to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the response and collect recommendations for the international community. The national NGOs used the workshop to start a debate about how they could improve collaboration with international actors.
Debriefing with workshop component with key stakeholders in Haiti	At the end of the evaluation mission, the evaluation team organized a debriefing for key stakeholders, bringing together representatives of Haitian civil society, the Haitian Government, the United Nations, international NGOs and the Red Cross movement. The evaluators presented preliminary results. In the workshop component of the meeting, participants brainstormed recommendations for immediate use and for future, comparable disasters.
Participatory strengths and weaknesses analysis with clusters	The evaluation team conducted strengths and weaknesses analyses with the Protection, Early Recovery, Camp Coordination Camp Management, Agriculture and Food Clusters as well as with the Inter-Cluster. The results of this analysis were presented to the clusters and/or shared in writing with the cluster coordinators. Some cluster coordinators and the inter-cluster coordinator used the results as a starting point to discuss necessary adjustments and possible improvements within the clusters with cluster participants.
Reporting of a case of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)	During interviews with local communities, the evaluators learned about a case of SEA. The evaluators reported the case to the advisor for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) hosted by OCHA and put her in touch with the person who had told the evaluators about this incident. The PSEA advisor took up the case and reported back to the evaluation team about progress made.
Establishing links between different actors	Due to the intense interaction with numerous stakeholders in-country the evaluation team was in a good position to establish links between different actors. For example, the team linked stakeholders of the "Logement" sub-cluster with the Communication with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) initiative.
Identifying quality issues and reporting back to ensure follow up	For example, the evaluation team identified quality problems in the WASH response in Camp Corail and reported them to the GenCap Advisor, who was then able to follow up the issue with the respective agencies.
Debriefings and presentations in New York, Geneva and London	Directly after the evaluation mission, the evaluators held debriefings with various stakeholders in New York and Geneva and presented preliminary findings in London.

More recently, Intrac (2017) has also emphasised the real-time reporting aspects of RTE (emphasis added):

*"Real-time evaluation is designed to provide **immediate (real time) feedback to those planning or implementing a project or programme, so that they can make improvements. This feedback is usually provided during the evaluation field work, rather than afterwards.**"*

Support for double-loop learning as well as single-loop learning

Other definitions have emphasised the use of RTEs, going beyond single-loop learning focused on error detection and correction.

In his 1999 review of RTEs, Polastro emphasised the immediate use of RTEs and also their use for supporting policy and organisational change, which may involve double-loop learning to revise assumptions and conceptual models (emphasis added):

*An RTE is a **participatory** evaluation that is **intended to provide immediate feedback during fieldwork.***

*In an RTE, **stakeholders execute and manage the response** at field, national, regional and headquarters levels.*

*An RTE provides instant input to an ongoing operation and **can foster policy, organisational and operational change** to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the overall disaster response.*

RTEs are **formative evaluations of intermediary results**. They can free up operational bottlenecks and provide real-time learning. An RTE is intended to be a support measure for learning in action. RTEs are also improvement-oriented reviews, dynamic tools used to adjust and improve planning and performance.

They can **contribute to reinforcing accountability** to beneficiaries, implementing partners and donors, and **can bridge the gap between monitoring and ex-post evaluation**.

RTEs are, in principle, **carried out in the midst of an emergency operation**.

This is particularly relevant for development interventions that require adaptive management, with iterative, ongoing review, reflection and replanning to guide implementation under conditions of ongoing uncertainty. (See working paper series:

<https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/monitoring-and-evaluation-adaptive-management-working-paper-series>)

Focus on diverse engagement in sensemaking

Some organisations have emphasised the role of staff and other stakeholders contributing to sensemaking in the evaluation, sharing the role of drawing evaluative conclusions rather than simply providing data to an evaluator.

The UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit emphasised the engagement of staff, especially in terms of developing recommendations for action on the basis of the evaluation:

“a real-time evaluator is actually a facilitator, encouraging and assisting staff to take a critical look at their operation and to find creative solutions to any difficulties they are encountering”,
UNHCR, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, 2002.

CARE International, Oxfam GB & UNHCR, in their guidance on RTE, defined it in a way that focused in both its intended use in real-time and also the engagement of staff in the process of reflection (emphasis added):

A real-time evaluation (RTE) is a rapid peer review carried out early on in a humanitarian response to gauge effectiveness in order to adjust implementation and take corrective action in ‘real-time’, when this can still make a difference. Pioneered by UNHCR, this innovation is both a process and a tool to improve the quality of response programmes. RTEs offer staff involved in a fast-paced response an unusual opportunity to ‘step back and reflect’.

How is real-time evaluation understood to work?

The five features of RTE are each understood to have the potential to contribute to evaluations that are more useful.

Feature	Problem identified in conventional evaluation	RTE features that address this
1. Real-time (or more current) data collection	Often poor documentation of implementation especially in rapidly changing interventions, making it difficult to inform changes or document lessons for future interventions	RTE is undertaken during implementation and uses field visits and interviews to document implementation more comprehensively and accurately than would otherwise be the case. This data can be used immediately and in the future for other interventions.
2. Real-time (or rapid) reporting back of evaluation data	Often considerable delay between data collection and evaluation reporting. Sometimes there is a debrief before leaving a field visit but it tends to focus on checking accuracy of data collection.	RTE includes rapid feedback of data as part of the field visit.
3. Multiple timings of evaluative activity	Often only mid-term and end of project evaluation without systematic use of evaluative evidence in between. This limits the potential for use in improving an existing intervention.	RTE is done at a number of points throughout implementation.
4. Support for different types of learning - single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop	Mid-term reviews often focus on single-loop learning – identifying discrepancies between planned and actual activities and results and suggesting ways to improve compliance. This is important but not sufficient, especially when interventions are not well understood or need to be adapted to address changing circumstances. End of project evaluations are more likely to be able to support double-loop learning (reviewing and revising assumptions and conceptual models such as theories of change). There is little attention to triple-loop learning (reviewing how learning occurs and should occur in terms of processes and evidence used)	RTE explicitly addresses all three types of learning – single loop (identifying discrepancies), double-loop (supporting revisiting of assumptions and the implications for making changes to the theory of change and implementation activities), and triple-loop (reviewing what evidence is being used and how to support decision making).
5. Engaging different users together in dialogue for sensemaking and action planning	Implementors often seen as mostly data sources, with the external evaluator drawing conclusions and making recommendations which are reported back for uptake.	RTE explicitly involves bringing a range of stakeholders together to make sense of the data and jointly develop recommendations for action, bringing greater expertise to bear and also developing greater ownership of and commitment to the findings and recommendations.

Comparison with other approaches

A number of other approaches to supporting the use of evidence during implementation share some of the five features of RTE, as shown in the following table:

	Real-time (or more current) data collection	Real-time (or rapid) reporting back	Multiple timings	Support for different types of learning (double-loop and triple-loop)	Engaging different users together in sensemaking
Real-time research	✓	✗	?	?	?
Real-time monitoring	✓	✓	✓	✗ Not usually – tends to be focused on single-loop	? Not necessarily
Formative evaluation	? Can use retrospective data	? Can have a time lag	? Can be done once (mid-term review) or several times (e.g. annual review)	? Not necessarily	? Can be done entirely by external team
Process evaluation	✓ Usually, but can involve retrospective data collection	? Not necessarily Yes, if focused on compliance	? Can be done once (mid-term review) or several times	? Not usually – often disconnected from theory of change and double loop learning	? Not necessarily
Action research	✓ Usually, but can involve retrospective data collection	✓ Usually	✓ Usually more than one cycle planned	✓ Usually	✓ Usually
Developmental evaluation	✓ Usually, but can involve retrospective data collection	✓ Usually	✓ Ongoing and multiple episodes	✓ Usually	✓ Usually

The different ways in which each of these terms have been defined and used means there are no definitive distinctions between them. The following table sets out some suggested distinctions between RTE and these other approaches: following table sets out some RTE and these other approaches:

Approach	Key similarities	Key differences
Real-time research	Includes real-time data collection and analysis with the intention of both informing implementation decisions and improving documentation of implementation	Focuses on providing information to answer factual questions about what is happening and why (descriptive and causal questions) but not evaluative questions about what is good/better/improving/worth continuing.
Real-time monitoring	Focuses on providing real-time data especially in relation to expected or target performance.	Does not necessarily include processes for sensemaking and double-loop or triple-loop learning as RTE does but can be focused entirely on single-loop learning (identifying deviations from the plan).
Formative evaluation	Focuses on informing decisions about how to improve implementation.	It can be undertaken entirely by an external evaluator providing expert advice or collaboratively, whereas RTE involves intended users in sensemaking and formulating recommendations
Process evaluation	Focuses on the processes of implementation	Could be for a range of purposes including which could be for a range of different purposes, including checking compliance with plans and targets to support an impact evaluation (checking fidelity) or scale-up (compliance), or documenting an innovation, or supporting ongoing process improvement.
Action research	This could involve many similar processes to real-time evaluation.	The distinction might be in the emphasis on real-time learning in RTE. Involves explicit cycles of action that is then studied to inform subsequent action.
Developmental evaluation	Intended specifically to support ongoing learning and adaptation of a complex, emergent intervention. This could involve many similar processes to real-time evaluation.	Developmental evaluation is intended to be throughout implementation whereas some RTEs appear to be episodic.

When RTE is most likely to be appropriate

The different features of RTE mean that it is likely to be most useful and feasible in certain circumstances. The following table explores these in terms of each of the features of RTE:

RTE will be appropriate in situations where the potential benefits it brings warrant the additional costs of engaging in it - not only the costs of engaging an external team, but the costs of programme staff and others engaging with them.

In some cases, it might be more appropriate to embed some RTE elements into a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system rather than to frame RTE as a discrete and additional activity.

Feature	When this is most likely to be appropriate – useful and feasible	Potential implications for use of RTE beyond humanitarian evaluations
1. Real-time (or more current) data collection	When existing monitoring and evaluation systems are not adequately documenting important aspects of implementation – for example, during an emergency when staff are focused on delivering services.	For non-emergency programmes, there might be more opportunity to plan real-time documentation as part of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, rather than needing to engage a real-time evaluation team to do this as an additional activity.
2. Real-time (or rapid) reporting back of evaluation data	When existing monitoring systems are not providing timely or relevant data needed to inform actions and decisions. When there is scope to make changes in response to real-time data.	For non-emergency programmes, there might be more opportunity to plan real-time reporting as part of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, rather than needing to engage a real-time evaluation team to do this as an additional activity.
3. Multiple timings of evaluative activity	When currently planned evaluation events or active engagement with monitoring data will be insufficiently frequent to support decisions	For non-emergency programmes, there might be more opportunity to plan iterative cycles of evaluative activity as part of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, rather than needing to engage a real-time evaluation team to do this as an additional activity.
4. Support for different types of learning - single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop	When currently planned evaluations do not adequately support double-loop learning – especially in cases where adaptive management is needed in the face of ongoing uncertainty, and assumptions need to be revised. When there is a clear theory of change underpinning an initiative which can be usefully reviewed and revised.	For non-emergency programmes, there might be more opportunity to support double-loop learning as part of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, rather than needing to engage a real-time evaluation team to do this as an additional activity.
5. Engaging different users together in dialogue for sensemaking and action planning	When currently planned evaluations are focused primarily on producing an independent judgment and conclusions, and this will be insufficient to support program improvement.	For non-emergency programmes, there might be more opportunity to plan to engage stakeholders in sensemaking as part of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, rather than needing to engage a real-time evaluation team to do this as an additional activity.

What is needed to make RTE work?

Choosing RTE when it is appropriate is part of what is needed; the other part is implementing it well. The following table summarises some of the particular challenges for implementing RTE that have been identified.

Overall, the biggest challenges relate to having clarity among all stakeholders about the purpose of the RTE and what would constitute a good RTE, and ensuring that the evaluation team undertaking the RTE have the range of necessary skills and adequate resources to meet these standards

Area	Specific challenge
Developing and using theories of change	Supporting reflection on evidence in ways that support the development and revision of locally relevant theories of change Adequate content knowledge to be able to support double-loop learning informed by evidence rather than simply documenting assumptions
Framing evaluation purposes and questions	Being clear about the focus primarily on learning and improvement rather than upwards accountability (which needs to be met in other ways) Managing a potentially emerging set of evaluation questions and purposes
Answering descriptive questions	Risks of providing interim evidence which gives a false view of the situation Risks of presenting inaccurate findings due to limitations of data collection within tight timelines (e.g. small and limited samples) Technical challenges in real-time analysis
Answering causal questions	Addressing causal inference in close to real time, usually without credible counterfactuals
Answering evaluative questions	Managing potentially changing reference points or different perspectives on these - e.g. evaluative criteria and standards and what are appropriate ways to synthesise evidence about performance across different dimensions – such as trade-offs between conflicting objectives
Reporting and supporting use	Supporting different types of learning and learning styles across different groups of users
Managing evaluation	Engaging suitable evaluators, with sufficient content knowledge and facilitation skills Logistics for supporting ongoing engagement (especially during COVID 19 travel restrictions) Defining contracts given emergent nature of the evaluation design and work to be done Addressing the issue of what constitutes appropriate levels of independence for evaluation Divergent views of what are appropriate roles for the evaluation team (especially in terms of views on independence and confidentiality) and standards for quality in the evaluation report

Conclusion

The growing interest in RTE reflects dissatisfaction with traditional evaluation, especially in terms of providing timely information, supporting adaptation and learning, and documenting and learning from this for future innovations.

RTE does not only involve doing evaluation in real time but doing a fundamentally different type of evaluation to the classic external, independent, accountability-focused development evaluation, one which is more directed at supporting adaptation of implementation and policy.

It will therefore be appropriate where there is an ability to use the information during implementation to make changes – to change the conceptualisation of the intervention, and to implement changes to actions. Interventions with limited capacity to change implementation are therefore less likely to be appropriate for RTE. There is also a question of whether high level programmes (such as a country programme) will be suitable where they lack a coherent theory of change, and where it is difficult to engage all stakeholders.

Effective implementation of RTE requires a shared understanding among stakeholders about the purpose of the evaluation, the role of the evaluation team, and the standards for the evaluation process and reports. It also requires particular skills in the evaluation team and in those managing them.

The issues addressed by RTE are not unique. The key features of RTE might be seen in other approaches, especially integrated MERL systems which combine monitoring, evaluation, research and learning, where these are intended to support ongoing learning and adaptation beyond single-loop learning. However in situations where evaluations are more usually limited to Mid-Term Reviews and Final Evaluations, the use of the RTE label might help to create space for a different approach, providing the term is not misunderstood to refer only to real-time data reporting.

References and resources

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Examples of real-time evaluation

Humanitarian programmes

1. 2001 UNHCR Sudan/Eritrea emergency May – July 2000
2. 2001 UNHCR internally displaced people in Angola
3. 2002 UNHCR Afghanistan emergency
4. 2002 HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Project) Afghanistan
5. 2002 HAP Sierra Leone
6. 2003 WFP Southern Africa crisis 2002-2003
7. 2004 UNHCR emergency in Chad
8. 2004 Care International, Darfur crisis (phase 1 and phase 2)
9. 2005 IFRC (international Federation of the Red Cross) Tsunami response in Asia and East Africa (first and second round)
10. 2005 WFP Indian ocean tsunami
11. 2006 IASC (inter Agency Standing Committee) Darfur crisis
12. 2006 IASC drought response in Horn of Africa
13. 2006 UNHCR Lebanon and Syria emergency July- Sept 2006
14. 2007 UNHCR IDP operation in Somalia
15. 2007 Oxfam South Asia floods July-September 2007
16. 2007 FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami
17. 2007 FAO Highly pathogenic avian influenza (first RTE)
18. 2007 IASC Mozambique floods and cyclone
19. 2007 IASC Pakistan floods and cyclone
20. 2007 UNHCR IDP operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo
21. 2007 UNHCR IDP operation in Uganda
22. 2007 UNHCR IDP operation in Liberia
23. 2008 Care International Deutschland Zimbabwe
24. 2008 Oxfam Cyclone Sidr
25. 2009 IASC Gencap project
26. 2009 Oxfam Cholera Zimbabwe
27. 2009 Oxfam East Asia region typhoon Ketsana/Ondiv and West Sumatra earthquake
28. 2009 UNICEF Georgia crisis
29. 2010 UNICEF Sa'ada conflict in northern Yemen
30. 2010 UNHCR shelter grant programme for returning displaced people in Northern Sri Lanka
31. 2010 FAO Highly pathogenic avian influenza (second RTE)
32. 2010 IASC Typhoons Ketsana and Parma in the Philippines
33. 2010 IASC Pakistan's 2009-2010 displacement
34. 2010 IASC Pakistan's 2010 flood crisis
35. 2010 CRS (Catholic Relief Services) Flood response in Pakistan
36. 2010 CRS Pakistan response in the Swat Valley
37. 2010 IASC Haiti earthquake
38. 2010 Tearfund Haiti earthquake
39. 2011 CRS Haiti earthquake response
40. 2011 ECHO European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) (Haiti 2009-2011
41. 2011 DEC Pakistan floods

More information about the above RTEs can be found in Kruger and Sagmeister (2014) including full citations and URLs.

42. 2018 DfID "Rapid Real-Time Review" Somalia Drought

Other development programmes

1. 2011-2017 Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative
2. 2013- 2016 Gavi Full Country Evaluation of immunisation programs in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia
3. 2015-2020 Danida Country Programme for Kenya
4. 2016-2019 Danish Support to Sustainable Coastal Fisheries in Myanmar.
5. 2016-2020 Danida Market Development Partnerships
6. 2017-2020 Danida Real-Time Evaluation Mali Country Programme