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Evaluation and communication mentoring for capacity development: a hybrid as a decision-making framework

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Abstract

We report on a decision-making framework that enables projects and programs to take ownership of their evaluation and communication plans. The framework is a blend of utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) and research communication supported by mentoring. This combination we have found has resulted in the development of a hybrid tool that also helps project teams clarify and update their Theories of Change. This result is significant as most of the partners have been information society research projects that are complex and dynamic. The approach has been delivered as a capacity development effort with attention to partner's readiness to received mentoring. The partners have produced evaluation plans and research communication strategies that they own and utilize. This approach grew out of two IDRC-funded capacity development research projects (DECI-1 and 2) that provided mentoring in evaluation and communication for information society research teams globally, between 2009 and 2017. The mentoring progress was tracked through debriefing and process documentation with some use of checklists. Case studies were produced to summarize the process and outcomes. While the project began with a focus on evaluation and communication, the resulting hybrid framework has wider knowledge management potential by enhancing reflective learning throughout the evolution of a project.

Keywords: decision-making framework, mentoring, capacity development, utilization-focused evaluation, research communication, theory of change

Introduction

This paper summarizes over six years of action-research in capacity development in the fields of evaluation and communication. Both fields share several common elements: the importance of engaging users from the beginning, the importance of achieving and maintaining readiness, the notion of pretesting data collection tools and communication materials alike, as well as the notion of users taking ownership of their evaluation and communication activities. It is based on experience with the two-phased Developing Evaluation Capacity in Information Society Research (DECI) project which was made up of a team of practitioners spread over several three continents[i]. The team members worked as evaluation practitioners, communication advisors, and action-researchers. Many of our partners are research networks while others are projects in various fields. Their work is often exploratory, setting the foundations for new fields of action and research supported by the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Networked Economies Program. We have found that the partner research teams face many challenges that can include:

- Accounting for evolving targets, especially when dealing with cutting edge or experimental topics;
- Attaining and maintaining readiness within projects to engage in evaluation and communications planning, especially during the project start-up period.
- Reaching agreement within the management team on the nature of the change that needs to be tracked (the attribution Vs. contribution question);
- Engaging the policy community early in the research process - a difficult-to-apply practice in research communication;
- Documenting and sharing findings in meaningful ways with varied audiences;
- Maximizing the learning from the process and the outcomes to inform practice, further research, advocacy and policy making.
- Designing and contributing to their own communication and evaluation plans that can be used – i.e. articulating the purpose, who will use it and how, as part of the planning or implementation stage (and not only at the end of the project cycle).

We have explored these challenges through two action-research projects in the field of capacity building, one on utilization-focused evaluation (UFE), and the second combining UFE and Research Communication. DECI-1 ran from 2009-2011; and DECI-2 (with communication added) started in 2012 and continued until 2017. DECI 1 & 2 have been funded mainly by IDRC[ii] as have the partner projects that have been supported. The partner projects had the option of being mentored by DECI-2, but it was not required. The major focus of these projects has been research on information and communication technology for development (ICTD) to inform policy-making. During the 2010-2015 period, a focus on Open Development drove much of the research agenda, including cyber security and privacy, open education and open science.

The DECI-2 approach has shown value as a decision-making framework that helps project teams clarify their Theories of Change, while taking ownership of their evaluation and communication plans (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017). The approach is a hybrid of utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) and research communication. In UFE, a small number of evaluation 'users' are invited to focus on evaluation 'uses' or 'purposes'; this step nudges them into decision-making about goals and mechanisms. UFE per se can be applied without a communication dimension; however, we have found that the hybrid has advantages that are explained below. We have also learned that projects have various levels of readiness to take on evaluation and communication planning, depending on a range of factors that we outline below. While the framework enables a close integration of the two fields, it does not require it. In addition, the framework catalyzes the expression of an implicit theory of change that is often emergent and needs to become explicit to guide the project strategy. It challenges the partner project teams to define the 'why', the 'what' and the 'how' of their project and the evaluation and communication plans. The hybrid is the result of several years of trial and error that we have come to see as an evolving framework based upon the lessons learned.

Concepts from the literature

Emergence and complexity

As evaluation researchers and practitioners, we find ourselves most often collaborating with projects that have uncertain outcomes. Some are research projects about emerging topics, others involve multiple stakeholders who perceive issues and change strategies differently. In short, the bulk of the projects we have supported are not just complicated; they are complex (Barnes *et al.* 2003). Complex projects are those with limited or at best emerging certainty amongst stakeholders about how to address an issue, combined with limited or growing agreements amongst them on how to proceed (Bryson *et al.* 2011). In complex projects, cause and effect relationships are difficult or impossible to predict, although they can be documented once they have occurred. Complex or dynamic interventions need evaluation approaches that embrace uncertainty, which is not a matter of simply using conventional tools differently (Ling 2012).

In complex settings, there needs to be clarity about what can be expected from evaluation. Kuby (2003) argues that in today's international evaluation arena, we must move away from the false ideal of "scientific proof" and instead aim for plausibility. Plausibility, it is argued, is at the core of credibility especially given the growing acknowledgment that development is difficult and complex (Kuby 2003: 69). The notion of 'contribution' is also getting attention in the impact research field, where research utilization is viewed as a complex, interactive process that is dependent on relationships (Douthwaite *et al.* 2003; Morton 2015). These voices are consistent with those that argue that the contradiction that arises from political pressures to 'appear to be in control' (as in results-based management) in a world of uncertainty which requires some response where multiple pathways for change are acknowledged (Eyben 2013). Therefore, having a decision-making framework is very important: project teams must 'navigate' and agree on what to evaluate or what aspect of communication to focus on since the implementation is emerging and constantly changing.

Power, readiness, theory of change

Who decides on what evaluation logic is applied is very much an issue of power and control. Someone will be making decisions and it is important to make explicit who is deciding why the evaluation is needed (and related decisions of how to do so), as this input will determine its use. Those in charge of preparing and implementing a program or project will develop a theory of change that captures their views as well as their biases. Often, the theory of change is tacit, partly due to the emergent nature of research projects. In many of our evaluation efforts, making a theory of change explicit provides a common ground for stakeholders to agree on a common strategy or to review an existing one. It exposes assumptions that can be challenged, and it can provide a shared map about what is worth evaluating and communicating. A theory of change is a 'leveler'; it also helps to create readiness for evaluation.

> Power has to do with hierarchy. The leadership of a project, and the funder are often assumed to be the primary users of an evaluation; however, in Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) this is not always the case. Power also must deal with the inevitable weight/influence that a funder brings to a relationship - as there is dependency influence in most grant funding arrangements. Timeliness has to do with the moments when a project is ready to take on evaluation or communication planning steps. Most projects have calendars that shift due to unpredictable factors. Being able to provide advice at the moment when it is needed and is contextualized appears to be key to the success of the mentoring. Commitment by staff and buy-in from managers is a requirement, and one that may be firm at one point, but may wither with time. Commitment is also about having staff members who want to learn evaluation and communication skills, and who have the time and budget to do so. Lastly, organizations come in many colours and shapes and finding those with a learning culture is an important prerequisite of readiness. Some individual and organizational readiness conditions may exist, while others can be nurtured during a project. In either case, readiness is an ongoing process, not a static condition and it calls for different supports at different times. (Ramírez & Brodhead 2014: 2-3)

Making multiple pathways for change known is a way to enhance transparency. Such an effort acknowledges that a project or program team does not have a blue print for change, but is seeking a plan. A recent review by USAID on 'complexity-aware monitoring' flags the importance of embracing the perspectives of the different stakeholders (Britt 2013). As one engages more stakeholders in evaluation, their different and often contrasting views on what a project is expected to achieve (their own theories of change) are bound to emerge (Bryson *et al.* 2011).

A theory of change describes how a project is intended to work, by outlining a sequence of activities and outcomes along with the underlying causal assumptions (Mayne 2015). They are often designed at the planning stage, and used for monitoring and evaluation. With complex or evolving projects, they often need to be updated because there is uncertainty due to emergent new dimensions in the project context. Maine (op.cit.) sees the value of having several versions of a theory of change for different purposes and audiences. First, a storyline or narrative version can be shared with managers or policy makers; this is the public version. Second, an overview diagram that shows a simplified trajectory of change to serve as an overall map for internal use. Third, a detailed version may address the causal assumptions and include nested theories of change that detail certain components, including impact pathways and assumptions about causal links.

Context

Both John Maine (op.cit.) and Isabel Vogel (2012) emphasize context as a dimension that needs to be addressed. Vogel's work focuses on theories of change for research projects. She includes an analysis of actors, stakeholders, networks and power relations; she also pays attention to analyzing how responsive the context is to new evidence. Some recent work has expanded the dimensions of context, with emphasis on what it means for public sector institutions (Weyrauch *et al.* 2016). The authors flag the macro context (media, donors, citizens, private sector, research organizations), as well as inter and intra-organizational relationships. They then address internal dimensions including organizational capacity, culture, and management processes. While this level of detail is beyond the scope of our work, it underlines the importance of appraising the context within which one is working.

The attention to situational analysis is reflected in the hybrid that DECI has developed, as both UFE and ResCom include this shared step. In ResCom, this step is part of audience analysis. In the theory of change design process, questions about specific, expected changes in awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes of stakeholders need to be specified. However, this should be done while acknowledging the limited control a project has over such outcomes. Because of the high level of uncertainty, Vogel recommends a set of critical reflection steps and questions. The questions she recommends overlap with the questions that are asked in the UFE/ResCom hybrid: they challenge project teams to be explicit about trajectories of change and assumptions, and to review and adjust their project strategies as the context evolves.

Barnett and Gregorowski (2013) write about the use of theories of change in monitoring and evaluating research uptake. They underscore how theories of change are most useful as an "'organizing framework' against which to explore and better understand complexity during implementation" (p1; their emphasis). As with Vogel, they see potential in an iterative, incremental reflection, especially as policy change processes are unpredictable, non-linear, and attribution is difficult to determine. They suggest attention be placed in theories of change on how policy change happens (citing Stachowiak 2009). We find the emphasis on reflection and ongoing adjustment compatible with our hybrid approach, and a consistent theme in the literature.

Knowledge for action

For applied research projects, an evaluation challenge is to track the uptake of the findings, be it in the form of increased policy influence or contribution to 'field building', especially with emerging topics. In the context of many of the IDRC projects that we have supported, 'field building' refers to the exploration and development of new areas of applied inquiry. For example, the OCSDNet project has shaped "open and collaborative science for development" as a legitimate field of applied research. There are different pathways or theories of change that merit attention: some focus on trajectories for policy influence (Stachowiak 2009) while others address knowledge-for-action and knowledge mobilization (Ottoson 2009; Bannister & O'Sullivan, 2013). The links between research and research uptake are often tenuous (Weyrauch *et al.* 2016). Such processes do not lend themselves to conventional evaluation methods where one can use clear outcome measures. Rather, other methods that document 'contributions' are more appropriate (Barnes *et al.* 2003; Douthwaite et al., 2003, Buskens & Earl 2008, Hospes 2008, Morton 2015).

For instance, Morton's (2015) 'research contribution framework' is a theory of change that sets a pathway that is question-based and seeks to uncover contributions to change (as opposed to attributions). In this interactive approach, the ways in which research is conducted, communicated, and taken up are as important to understanding and assessing impact as wider utilization. Morton's interactive model also acknowledges the importance of networks and of research impact as 'a process involving many actors interacting and communicating over time' (Morton 2015: 2)

Elsewhere, research utilization has been referred to as a complex interactive process, as opposed to a linear one (Nutley *et al.* 2007). Nutley et al. add that the nature of the engagement with each audience is especially important, one that should include participation by stakeholders in every stage of research, including the formulation of research questions. The focus on audiences in an evaluation paper is an example of the overlap between the two fields. In our partner project contexts, those audiences have included local health authorities, other NGOs and civil society organizations, researchers and research organizations, government officials and to a lesser extent the private sector.

Evaluation and communication hybrid

In the context of the projects we supported, evaluation and communication approaches were often introduced as project management tools to enhance project outcomes. Evaluation: as a means of ensuring project strategies stay focused and documented outcomes; and communication: to support relationships among networks of researchers and to make sure project's results are shared. The early engagement of stakeholders in defining research project objectives was possible to the extent that many of the research networks had open calls for proposals that allowed bidders to develop locally relevant research proposals.

From a theoretical perspective, few researchers work with both fields in tandem. One field tends to drive the other - as is the case of approaches to evaluate communication for development (Hanley 2014, Myers 2004, Parks *et al*. 2005, Lennie & Tacchi 2013 & 2015). In contrast to this direction, one finds communication strategies enhance the uptake of research outcomes, be they to track the outcomes of networks (Horelli 2009, Albrecht *et al.* 2014, Taylor *et al.* 2014) or to enhance policy influence (Carden 2004, Lynn 2014). There are also cases where the knowledge translation value of evaluation is emphasized (Donnelly *et al.* 2014). On a practical side, we have learned a great deal from the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) framework, developed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI 2006). The RAPID framework emphasizes the importance of engaging audiences from the start, which links communication and UFE. ODI has since developed ROMA that stands for Rapid

Outcome Mapping Approach and it is available as a tool to help organizations plan and evaluate policy influence.

Common themes in communication planning include: understanding the nature of the issue; mapping out who needs to be involved; determining intended audiences & conducting audience research, introducing communication functions that respond to the needs; working with affordable, accessible, and tested methods and media; researching the facts and key content; pretesting any materials before dissemination; defining outputs and outcomes; and finally implementing, monitoring, and improving. When looking at the main steps of utilization-focused evaluation, we find: project or network readiness assessment; evaluator readiness and capability assessment; identification of primary intended users; situational analysis; identification of primary intended uses; evaluation design; simulation of use; data collection; data analysis; facilitation of use; and meta-evaluation (Patton 2008). These steps are often iterative and non-linear, much the same as in communication planning and implementation:

> It does not take much imagination to see the linkages between communication planning and UFE. While some UFE steps seem to confirm the communication planning process (communicators pre-test materials; evaluators simulate data collection), others augment it (the notion of including a meta-evaluation into any communication process is appealing). However, there are a couple of principles of UFE that have emerged as especially relevant from our action-research project. The first one is about the ownership of the process: Patton emphasizes this principle and we have lived it in our project experience. Having control over every component of the evaluation has led the projects we work with to assume a learning process that is reflexive and committed. The second is about facilitation vs. external measurement: as evaluators, we have become facilitators, as opposed to external judges. We have engaged the project teams through many challenging steps. In the project, we observed that our coaching role shifted to a mentoring one: we were learning as peers. In my communication experience, this role is also the most effective. (Ramírez 2011: unpaginated)

Some of the evaluation 'uses' or 'purposes' proposed by our partners constituted forward-looking questions about pilot activities that would need to be adapted and refined through implementation. 'Developmental evaluation' is an approach that responds to this challenge. UFE is a decision-making framework within which developmental evaluation fits, depending on the uses and key evaluation questions. The emphasis in developmental evaluation is on adaptive learning, real-time feedback, flexibility and capturing system dynamics (Gamble, 2008; Patton, 2011). The notion of utilization-focused developmental evaluation (UFDE) was advanced by Patton (2008) and has been reported in empirical examples (Patton et al., 2016; Ramírez et al., 2015).

It is also evident that stakeholder engagement is central to participatory action-research, which has always had a strong communication dimension in the methods and tools employed (Chambers 2005). Stakeholder engagement also happens to be central to utilization focused evaluation approaches (Bryson *et al.* 2011). Accounts of ‘evaluation as an intervention’ include the active engagement of stakeholders in the process of inquiry (Lynn 2014). In participatory action-research ‘…value is placed on decentralization, open communications and sharing of knowledge, empowerment, diversity and rapid adaptation’ (Chambers 1997: 197). In UFE, the emphasis is on evaluation ‘users’ who own the decisions over an evaluation’s uses (purposes).

In the communication field, one theorist produced a family tree to summarize the main branches and paradigms (Waisbord 2001). The two major branches are the so-called ‘dominant paradigm’ (characterized by: mass communication, unidirectional, top-down & prescriptive blue prints) and the participatory one (characterized by group media, bottom-up and horizontal communication methods, and emergent processes). A similar tree has been developed in the evaluation field, and it profiles comparable differences. Conventional methods are compatible with accountability and control, while social inquiry methods tend to use mixed and participatory methods (Christie & Alkin 2012).

The overlap that we have explored is based on the participatory ‘branches’ of both fields. Among other features, they share a commitment to facilitating, as opposed to directing (White 1999, Bessette 2004). Both work well within a searching paradigm, as opposed to a top-down planning one (Easterly 2006, Quarry & Ramírez 2009; Ramírez & Quarry 2010). We have found that both work well in support of projects that are complex, involve multiple stakeholders, and often begin with disjointed or dynamic theories of change. There appear to be advantages when combining the two fields of applied work as each one may provide a new lens that the other has not considered. This process has a name: “Orthogonal thinking draws from a variety of, and perhaps seemingly unrelated, perspectives to achieve new insights. It is the even momentary blurring of boundaries to see what might emerge.” (Ogden 2015: on-line). The overlap between both fields has led us to think that 'communication focused evaluation' would not be an oxymoron (Ramírez, 2011).

Facilitation and mentoring

Our emphasis on facilitation has translated into a capacity development approach that is based on mentoring, as contrasted with teaching in workshop formats. We have come to learn ‘…that “readiness” is a key and ongoing consideration that has power, timeliness, commitment, organizational, and cultural implications. If readiness is established (and maintained), it creates the context within which mentoring can have an impact. Mentoring is about supporting learners at the time and place when they desire and can use the advice’ (Brodhead & Ramírez 2014: 1). We have taken ‘coaching’ to be more associated with teaching a pre-existing syllabus or content; and ‘mentoring’ as a peer support to problem solving. We have preferred to focus on ‘mentoring’ in previous publications (Brodhead & Ramírez, 2014). In our experience, mentoring can help balance the power relationship, unlike coaching. In the literature, there remain debates about the definition of ‘mentoring,’ but most definitions emphasize the importance of relationships (Baugh & Sullivan, 2005; Weyrauch, 3013). ‘Research on mentoring indicates that the process of mentoring helps emerging professionals learn technical expertise, become familiar with acceptable organizational or professional behavior, and develop a sense of competence' (Jones, 2014: 85).

Our capacity development work has focused on experiential learning, with its roots in adult education (Kolb 1984) and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön 1978, Schön 1991). Our capacity development outcomes are best described as a team of nimble, flexible practitioners with 'practical wisdom' (Ramírez *et al.* 2015; Hearn & Batchelor, 2017). This flexibility is compatible with Developmental Evaluation where there are not checklists or established blue prints for the facilitation work.

An action-research project in capacity development

The DECI-2 project builds on a preceding research project, entitled DECI-1, that provided ongoing support and capacity building in Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) for IDRC supported projects and evaluators in Asia. Through DECI-1, we mentored five Asian research networks that produced evaluation reports using the UFE approach; we also produced five case studies that summarized the process and outcomes. From the case studies, we developed a UFE Primer for evaluators that is available for free in three languages (Ramírez & Brodhead 2013)[iii]. DECI-2 expanded coverage to the global south in Africa and Latin America in addition to Asia, to support a number of global network projects in both evaluation and in research communication (ResCom). The integration of UFE with Research Communication is the area of innovation for DECI-2- and it is the focus of this article.

The overall objective of DECI-2 is to build capacity in evaluation and communication among global research projects supported by IDRC. DECI-2 brings together a combination of objectives that allows for action-research, capacity development of regional mentors, and mentoring support to partners. The specific objectives are the following:

- Meta-level action-research: To develop and test-drive a combined approach to UFE and ResCom mentoring.
- Capacity development for regional consultants: To build capacity among regional evaluation consultants (mentors) in the concepts and practices of both UFE and ResCom.
- Capacity development for project partners: To provide technical assistance to project researchers, communications staff and evaluators toward improving their evaluation and ResCom knowledge and skills.
- Assistance to project evaluations and communication planning: To contribute towards the completion of UFE evaluations and communication strategies for designated research projects.
- Sharing lessons: To communicate the DECI-2 project findings and training approach to practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

Capacity development approach

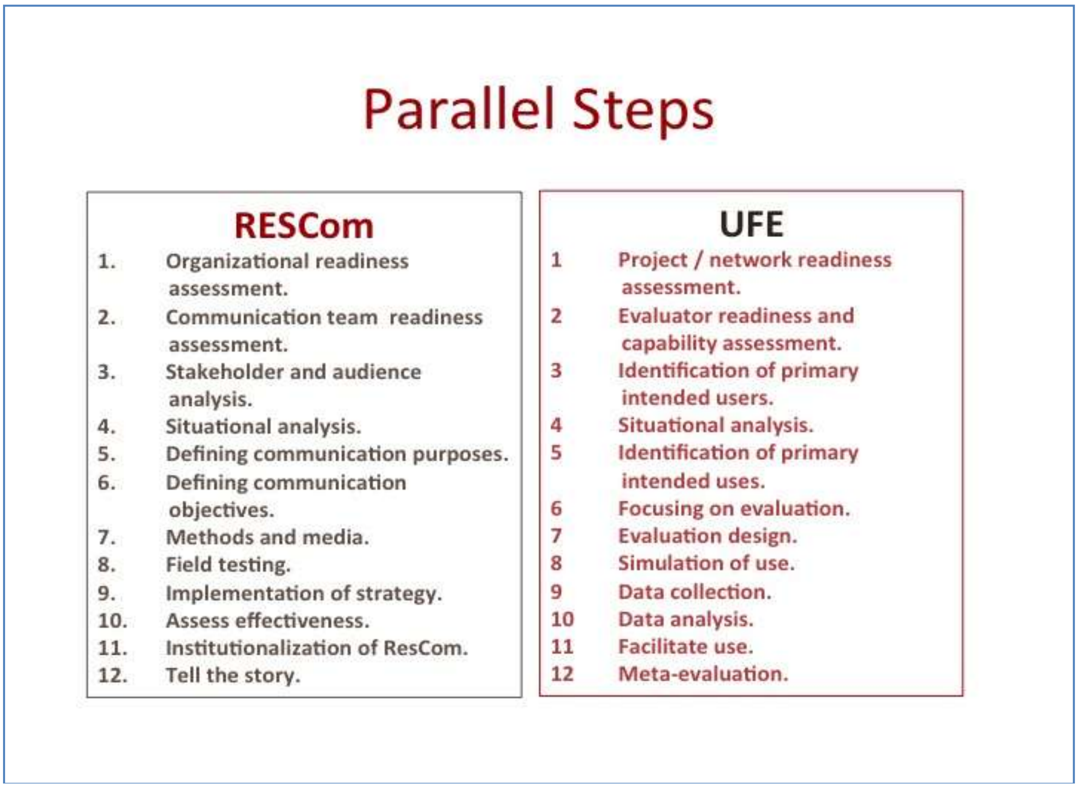
As we begin a partnership with a project, we explore their 'readiness' to work with us. The notion of readiness emanates from the first step of UFE. It focuses on the level of willingness of the team and the evaluator to take on a new approach. It also requires buy-in by senior management to enable this involvement, and is mindful of the limitations imposed by funders. The latter is of great importance in our view as some funders impose evaluation frameworks that pre-determine many evaluation design decisions. In our practice, we explore the extent to which the key project stakeholders can become 'primary evaluation users' which gives them greater control of the design of the evaluation. This process allows the project stakeholders to gain ownership of the evaluation, and to create an evaluation culture (Mayne 2009). We have learned that achieving readiness is not straightforward because 'Readiness has power, timeliness, and commitment, as well as organizational and cultural implications. It is not a once off, instrumental review, but rather an ongoing consideration' (Brodhead & Ramírez 2014: 2).

A second touchstone of the DECI approach is mentoring. Both UFE and ResCom planning are learned best through practice: experiential learning is at the core (Kolb 1984). They require an accompaniment that matches learning moments. In DECI-2, we have been experimenting with a combination of coaching (that follows an established set of steps associated with the UFE framework) with mentoring (that focuses on guiding, adjusting, and trouble-shooting together). Mentoring is a pivotal concept in the capacity development literature, especially the observation that blueprints tend to fail (Horton et al., 2003) and that capacity development requires action-research-reflection (Lennie & Tacchi 2013). Our guidelines are based on adult education and community development concepts, something that the external evaluation of DECI-2 confirmed (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017). We start with where the learner(s) are at; engage them on their terms; and enable them to discover and own the learning process.

The evolution of the decision-making framework

Our framework began as two parallel sequences of steps. Figure 1 summarizes the twelve UFE steps that Patton established in the 4th edition of the 2008 UFE book. On the left side, we list a parallel set of steps that we developed based on existing communication planning methods. We saw benefits in the UFE process as it shaped the ResCom variation: namely the notion of readiness at the start; and the review of usefulness towards the end.

Figure 1: Parallel steps in ResCom and UFE



We noticed efficiencies when implementing the first few steps together. In addition, there was a shared logic in steps 5-7 that enhanced effectiveness.

Beyond the steps that were complementary, there was an emerging confluence of the two: evaluation, for example can generate content to be communicated while communication can also be the focus of evaluation. We realized that when evaluation and communication inputs are offered in a modular fashion (as Lego blocks) they fit into each project context uniquely. We also noticed that it was the first few steps of both approaches that mattered the most.

In 2016 the full DECI-2 team met in Cape Town, South Africa, to review lessons together with some partners and IDRC. One of the outcomes of the workshop was the recognition of the need to simplify the approach into its essential steps. We concluded that the combination was not mandatory – a project could benefit from only working on evaluation or communication – yet the combination had benefits. We subsequently summarized the steps and referred to this approach as a hybrid decision-making framework (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Summary of the hybrid's most strategic steps

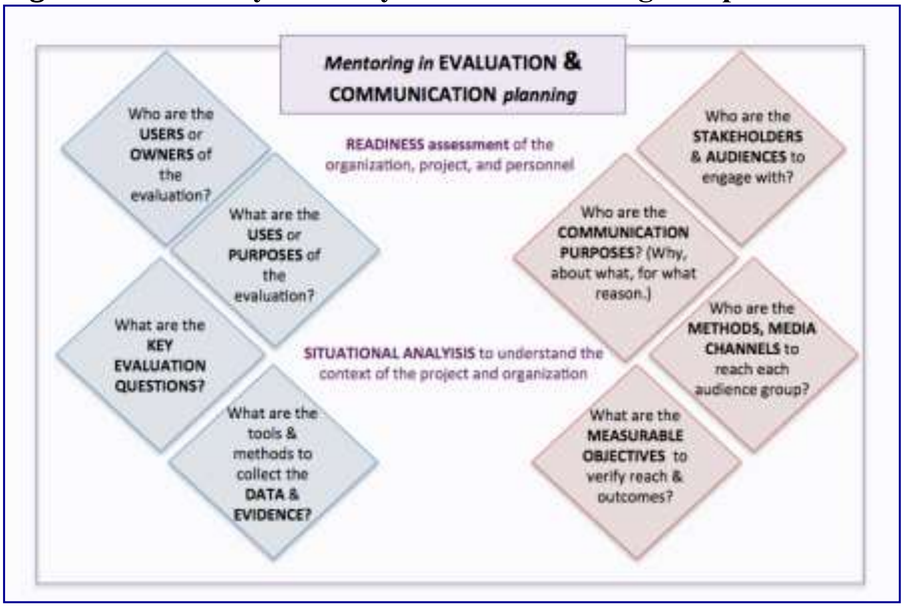


Figure 2 shows Readiness Assessment and Situational Analysis as shared steps that are relevant throughout the duration of mentoring a project. The UFE steps (left side) and the corresponding ResCom steps (right side) can be done in parallel or sequentially. As mentioned before, readiness may appear promising at the start, but can wane over time. The same ongoing attention is needed on situational analysis, especially with projects that are experimental and where circumstances are likely to shift. Depending on the nature of the project, the process can be as short as 3 months or can extend for most of the duration of a 3-year project.

A step that is not evident in Figure 2 and yet remains central to the approach is the 'facilitation of use and process' (Step 11 in UFE). This exercise is one where the evaluation team helps the primary intended users review the findings, and recommendations, and put them to work. It also includes a reflection of the evaluation process. With most of the DECI partnership projects, we have produced a Case Study (Step 12 of UFE is a meta-evaluation) and we have found the discussions regarding the development of the case studies most useful in helping the partners reflect on changes that have often taken place months after our mentoring support was completed.

Partner outcomes

We have documented outcomes of the projects we supported in the form of evaluations completed and communication strategies developed and implemented. We have examples of how the mentoring has enhanced projects' internal decision-making, and improved their own outcomes. In a few cases, notably at the grantee level, we have seen evidence that project strategies were modified because of the challenges posed by the evaluation and communication questions posed by our mentors. In particular, while defining evaluation USES and Key Evaluation Questions, and also defining communication purposes and audiences, the process has pushed teams to be specific and to move away from generalities.

Box 1: Example from a case study in India

Tea garden workers in Assam, India have had insufficient access to health facilities and essential services. Many of the tea workers belong to the indigenous (“Adivasi") community, suffer high rates of maternal and infant mortality with minimal access to legal and advocacy resources to address violations. In response to this situation, two organizations (Nazdeek & Pajhra) piloted a nine-month project whereby women volunteers were given mobile phones to report health rights violations. Women were expected to text the code violations, which were populated on a map, and which confirmed the location and type of violation.

While the project had a technology to test through field experimentation, it was not clear how to gauge whether the experiment was working. On the evaluation side, the mentoring revealed a number of assumptions about how the experiment would work, that had not been expressed. ‘Communication’ was associated with dissemination campaigns. The result of the situational analysis (a shared step between UFE and ResCom) shed light on the context and the field level constraints that had not been expected. On the communication side, it became apparent that the project would face challenges connecting with the local government due to a history of confrontation. The audience analysis step allowed the team to connect with government as a future audience, and begin establishing a basis for collaboration.

“Following the communication strategy designed with the guidance from the DECI mentors, Nazdeek, Pajhra and ICAAD released the report, *No Time to Lose: Fighting Maternal and Infant Mortality through Community Reporting* and sent out a joint-press release about the report. The press release mentioned that commitment from the government was gained with the plan to establish a ‘Citizen Grievance Forum’ at the Block level to address maternal health violations. A short video was also made and distributed highlighting stories of maternal mortality cases from the ground and testimonies on how the App is used as a tool to report cases.

The Nazdeek team reported that media coverage was good, around 4-5 local and national newspapers covered the press conference, including The Hindustan Times, and the kind of coverage was indeed positive. More recently, Time Magazine and the Guardian, covered the story of the use of App as a tool for community reporting to reduce maternal and infant mortality in Assam.”

Nazdeek and Pajhra, ISIF grantees, Assam India
Source: DECI-2 case study http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net

In several instances, we have evidence of evaluations being used during the project’s implementation, very much in line with a Developmental Evaluation approach. However, we feel that we have also found uses beyond existing typologies of utilization (see Visser *et al.* 2014). For instance, the process enables the project teams to express assumptions and discuss them openly, which is common to UFE.

However, we have also found that this process works as a means of testing and visualizing a project's Theory of Change (Barnett & Gregorowski 2013, Mayne 2015, Vogel 2012). Further, we have found that in dynamic projects that are breaking new ground, the Theory of Change evolves as findings emerge. In selected cases, we have evidence that the modified project strategies led to significant outcomes (Box 1).

The Assam experience began with a focus on UFE. During her site visit, the evaluation mentor was able to verify some of the constraints of the project context. She was able to witness how some implementation barriers that arose, were unexpected by the team. For instance, they had not appreciated the different reasons why some of the women volunteers did not feel comfortable reporting the violations. While the team was focusing on the experiment, they had assumed that the local health authorities would be interested in the project and the findings. However, the situational analysis steps confirmed that in the past, the same organization had followed confrontational practices. As the local health authority was a main 'audience' for the research findings, the communication component needed to go beyond a simple dissemination focus. The audience analysis step of ResCom revealed the need to create a trusting relationship before producing any materials from the project if they were to be seen as credible and used.

The UFE mentoring helped the project team expose assumptions and address the barriers faced by the women volunteers. The ResCom mentor helped them address the relationship with their audience, before producing materials for dissemination. As a result of the changes to their strategies, they were able to convey the findings and contribute to a change in local health authority policy and behaviour. They employed a variety of methods and media (workshop, booklet, in-person visits, group meetings and discussions) to address a number of communication purposes (listening & understanding, as well as advocacy and dissemination). In a presentation made to an international conference, the project director reported on the lessons, as well as the achievements (including how the District Coordinator was not personally monitoring the district hospital to ensue the women received better care).

Conclusions

We live in an era where new methodologies and toolkits emerge on a regular basis, some providing refreshing new perspectives (the advent of Outcome Mapping); others providing innovations that have a short shelf life. Our hybrid framework is made up of familiar parts, especially if the reader has a background in participatory action research, adult education and/or community development. It also has some innovations, namely the introduction of two fields of applied work that are often kept separate, especially in large organizations. We have shown that our hybrid is made of the participatory branches of evaluation and communication work; hence the characteristics listed above are shared among them. What we feel is indeed new, and worthy of further exploration, is the notion that these combined frameworks enable complex projects to course-correct their strategies.

Partners who have covered this ground appear to pick up a new common sense; a new way of thinking in evaluation and communication terms. From a capacity development perspective, we have sufficient evidence to show that our just –in-time mentoring stimulated this this confidence/skill (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017). With regards to helping projects elicit and modify their Theories of Change, we feel there is a need to further refine the approach as our evidence remains emergent.

This hybrid framework is question-driven, learning-oriented and enables project teams to reflect on assumptions and expectations that may not be shared otherwise. Our emphasis on producing case studies constitutes a reflective practice that enables our team and our project partners to witness newly honed competences in interdisciplinary work. Cutting edge, field building research projects are dynamic. Their theories of change evolve as findings emerge especially as many of their outcomes are unpredictable. Helping them ascertain gains, document progress, and engage different stakeholders requires an ongoing adaptive strategy. We have learned that providing support through mentoring constitutes an effective mechanism to build problem-solving competencies within research organizations as it nurtures a culture of learning.

Testing the hybrid approach which combines UFE and research communication in the field with practice-based situations has yielded many important findings some of which are summarized in conclusion.

The value-added dimensions of this hybrid framework include:

- A decision-making framework to improve efficiency (use of findings by a variety of stakeholders including practitioners, researchers, policy makers) and effectiveness (policy influence)
- A capacity building approach that enables practitioners to review their project logic and adjust project strategies as conditions change during implementation and when adjustments are necessary to enhance impact
- An approach for developing useful evaluation and communication plans

Relevance

We have noted that the hybrid has relevance in the following ways for the following project stakeholders:

- Evaluation commissioners gain confidence that project designs and operations reflect the Evaluation Principles of Development Assistance
- Project managers obtain a framework that builds-in ongoing strategic updating as a project context evolves to ensure project objectives are reached
- Practitioners in the evaluation and communication roles broaden their perspectives with a decision-making framework bridges both fields

Our basic steps (Figure 2) and our guiding principles (see below) are in line with the literature on collaborative evaluation (Cousins et al., 1996; Shulha et al., 2016), and on collaborative inquiry into evaluation (Cousins et al., 2012).

Emerging guidelines

Through our lessons learned, we have identified a number of guidelines that have shaped our work:

- Utilization-focused evaluation is a decision-making framework
- Research communication enhances use of findings for influence
- Attention is paid to readiness from the beginning
- Training is through demand-driven, just-in-time mentoring
- Course correction of project strategy is expected and planned
- Utilization is the focus from initial project design to completion
- A collaborative, learning and reflective process is embedded
- Participation and shared ownership are fundamental
- The process builds individual and organizational capacity
- Complexity and evolving contexts are addressed
- Demystifying evaluation and communication concepts facilitates learning uptake.

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[iii] www.evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net