

# Developing ownership in a cross-country multi-stakeholder evaluation

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## **Abstract**

In 2003, the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia commissioned an evaluation of the Meena Communication Initiative (MCI). The MCI is a major human rights intervention campaign in South Asia that began in 1991. Its overall goal is to promote the Rights of the Child and bring about a transformation in the disadvantaged situation of girls in South Asia, through the use of a multi-media Entertainment Education approach. This approach is designed to use the drawing power of popular entertainment to influence its audiences' awareness, knowledge, understanding, capacities and practices in relation to the status, rights and treatment of girls.

The evaluation focused on the key outcomes and implementation processes of the MCI in the four countries in which the initiative has been most extensively applied, namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Its audiences were identified as the UNICEF Regional Office, the four Country Offices, external donors and partner organizations involved in the MCI implementation.

This paper focuses on developing evaluation ownership among multiple stakeholders. It draws on the experience of the evaluation of the MCI to examine a sequence of stakeholder involvement which progresses through a number of stages from identifying the focus and scope of the evaluation to providing feedback on draft final reports. Issues related to this approach are then considered, along with lessons learnt in relation to its use in multi-stakeholder evaluation projects.

## **Introduction**

The Meena Communication Initiative (MCI) is a major human rights intervention campaign in South Asia that began in 1991 with support from UNICEF Country Offices in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Its overall goal is to promote the Rights of the Child and bring about a transformation in the disadvantaged situation of girls in South Asia, through the use of a multi-media Entertainment Education approach. This involves the use of stories of the adventures of a nine year old South Asian girl (Meena) and members of her family and village community. The stories carry messages relating to education, health, gender equity, and freedom from exploitation and abuse, and have been conveyed through media such as television, radio, cinema, mobile screenings, comic books, posters, street theatre, billboards,

school materials and youth club activities. The approach was chosen to use the drawing power of popular entertainment to influence its audiences' awareness, knowledge, understanding, capacities and practices in relation to the status, rights and treatment of girls.

The MCI is designed to support and reinforce programme objectives supported by UNICEF and its partners. As such, it has been linked to a number of education, health and social development programmes undertaken by UNICEF partners in government, NGOs, the media and the private sector, and has received major funding from external donors. UNICEF personnel at country levels have played a key role in the conceptualisation, development and implementation of the MCI, and have a major interest in the nature and extent of its future operations. Since the mid 1990s, the MCI has been co-ordinated on a regional basis from the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, located in Kathmandu, Nepal.

In 2003, the Regional Office commissioned an external evaluation of the MCI, that would involve a range of UNICEF stakeholders at country and regional levels along with the external evaluation expertise.

This paper focuses on developing evaluation ownership among multiple stakeholders, using the experience of the MCI evaluation to examine a sequence of stakeholder involvement which progresses through a number of stages from identifying the focus and scope of the evaluation to providing feedback on draft final reports. Some key issues related to this approach are then considered, along with lessons learnt in relation to its use in multi-stakeholder evaluation projects.

### **Nature of the evaluation**

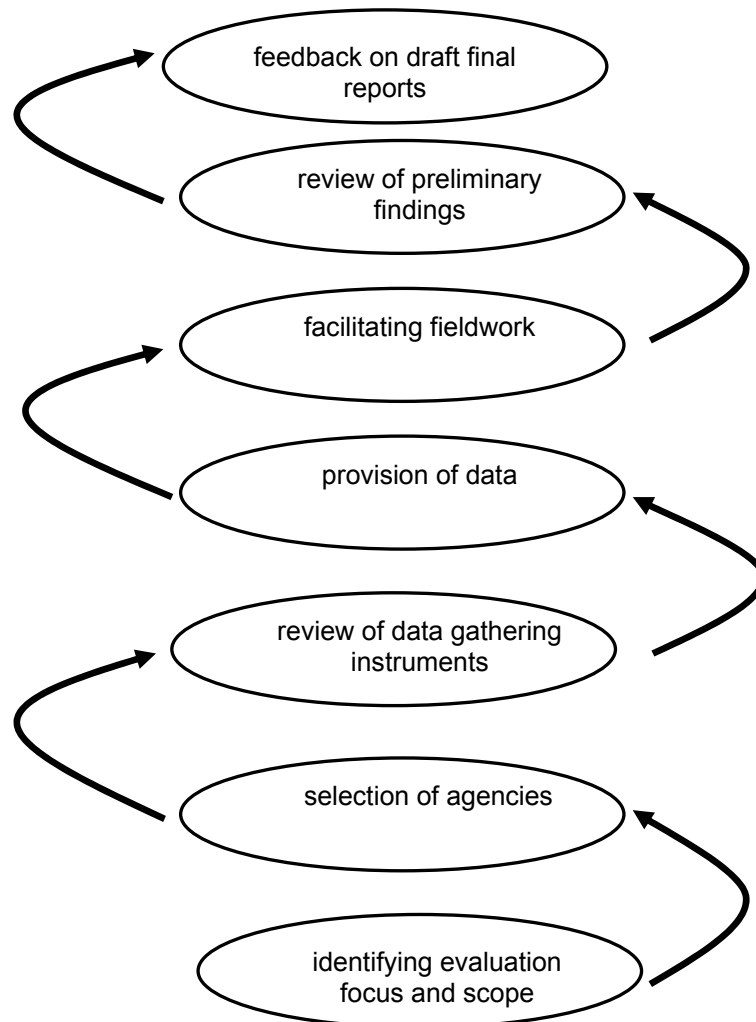
The evaluation focused primarily on implementation processes of the MCI and its short-term outcomes in terms of changes in knowledge, skills and practices among its target audiences in the four countries in which it has been most extensively applied, namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Separate local research agencies were engaged in each of the four countries to undertake country level evaluations, with a regional consultant employed to provide advice to the four agencies and the Regional Office, to monitor the work of the agencies, and to prepare a regional synthesis evaluation report.

It was decided that the UNICEF Country Offices in the four countries would engage in a participatory process with the Regional Office and the regional consultant throughout the planning, implementation and reporting stages of the evaluation, with the evaluation's independence being maintained through the engagement of the external regional consultant and the four research agencies. A prime reason for directly involving the Country Office stakeholders was to promote continuing ownership of the MCI as it headed into a new phase of development that would no longer be supported by substantial external funding. A secondary reason was to recognise and capitalise on the experience and insights of the Country Office personnel associated with their longstanding involvement in the implementation of the MCI.

### **Levels of stakeholder involvement**

The Country Offices and the Regional Office were progressively involved in the evaluation at seven distinct levels, as illustrated in Figure 1 and as described in the outline that follows.

**Figure 1 Levels of stakeholder involvement**



The process of involvement began with the four UNICEF Country Offices and the Regional Office discussing and determining the focus and scope of the evaluation. The personnel involved in these deliberations included planning and monitoring and evaluation officers. The decisions taken were then expanded into two Terms of Reference documents – one for the evaluations to be undertaken at country level and one for the regional consultancy.

Proposals were then sought from research agencies in each of the four countries. Submitted proposals were considered and assessed by the respective Country Offices and Regional Office personnel, leading to the selection of four agencies.

The country agencies prepared draft data gathering instruments in the light of details in the Terms of Reference documents and advice from the Regional Office. Regional Office and Country Office personnel, along with the regional consultant, then reviewed the draft instruments in order to produce an acceptable set with a standard format and common sets of questions, as well as items that related to country-specific aspects of the MCI implementation.

Among the data gathering instruments were two questionnaires for UNICEF personnel in each of the four countries, focusing on implementation details and costs of the MCI in their respective countries. The Country Offices, along with their state and province/district offices, subsequently completed and submitted these questionnaires.

The Country Offices also facilitated other aspects of the fieldwork, in particular assisting in decisions on areas from which to gather information in each country and providing details of key personnel in the field.

As the data were analysed, the agencies were asked to make presentations to the respective Country Office personnel on their research operations, key results and preliminary findings. The Country Office personnel in turn reviewed and provided feedback on the preliminary findings.

Draft final reports were submitted by each of the agencies to the Regional Office. The respective Country Offices were asked to review and provide feedback on these reports, for consideration by the agencies. The Regional Office and the regional consultant also provided feedback. Final reports were then submitted by each of the agencies.

### **Promotion of ownership**

As noted earlier, a prime reason for involving the Country Office stakeholders in the evaluation processes was to promote their continuing ownership of the MCI. The extent to which such ownership has been achieved and the ways in which it will be exercised and demonstrated have yet to be fully seen. At the time of writing this paper, the final regional synthesis evaluation report had just been submitted, with major decisions on the future operation of the MCI yet to be taken. From a design viewpoint however, the stakeholder approach that was adopted can be seen to contain a number of features that together should help to achieve the intended ownership outcomes.

First, the approach was proactive. It sought to establish conditions in advance that would be conducive to developing ownership as distinct from working in a reactive fashion to promote ownership of the findings and recommendations after they had been reported. Thus, for example, the stakeholders were involved in determining the focus and scope of the evaluation, providing them with an opportunity to identify their interests and priorities and to have these reflected in the evaluation terms of reference. In so doing, they needed to identify and consider the interests and priorities of other stakeholders, such as external donors, and to plan with Regional Office personnel to ensure that the focus, scope and key evaluation questions were appropriate and balanced. This may be seen as promoting both an awareness of the need to go beyond

the priorities of any one group of stakeholders and a willingness to endorse findings and recommendations that might reflect multiple priorities.

Secondly, the approach was comprehensive. As Figure 1 indicates, the Country Office stakeholders were involved in all major stages of the evaluation, thereby reducing the risk of their feeling alienated from the evaluation's findings and recommendations. As Patton (1997:334) notes, the provision of formative feedback by stakeholders helps to avoid surprises in the final report and the difficulties that may be faced by stakeholders in dealing with these.

Thirdly, the approach was cumulative. The progressive involvement through the planning, implementation and reporting phases of the evaluation meant that the stakeholders were developing an increasing level of ownership. It became a continuing and more deeply involving journey, with the stakeholders able to see how their input at each level was helping to shape events and activities, and also to see the results that were being generated from these events and activities. In effect, responsibility for the credibility and acceptability of the evaluation outcomes was being increasingly shared by these stakeholders by virtue of their progressive inputs. This outcome relates directly to one of the key reasons advanced for stakeholder participation, namely validation and increased utilization of program evaluation results (Morris, 2002:50).

Fourthly, the approach was authentic in that it required genuine input on significant issues. The stakeholders were able moreover, to see that their input was taken seriously, as evidenced by subsequent decisions taken on matters such as choice of agencies, changes to draft instruments, and selection of samples.

### **Some issues to be addressed**

The adoption of a sequential involvement approach raises a number of issues. Prime among these is the continuing need for those involved to check their interests and priorities against their fellow stakeholders, including those not directly involved. The need for this to occur when determining the evaluation focus, scope and key questions was noted earlier. At this stage, the process reflects what one might expect as part of a commissioning process. The AES Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations (Australasian Evaluation Society, 1998:1) for example, state that

*The commissioners have an obligation to identify all stakeholders in the evaluation and to assess the potential effects and implications of the evaluation on them, both positive and negative.*

This however becomes a recurring requirement when a sequence of involvement is in place. In the case of the MCI evaluation, the four sets of Country Office personnel thus needed to balance the interests and priorities emerging from their specific country contexts and experiences with those from the other countries and the Regional Office, as well as with stakeholders such as the external donors and MCI implementation partners in government, NGOs, the media and the private sector, at each of the seven levels. The continuing nature of their direct involvement meant that the balancing exercise could not be confined to the initial stage, nor deferred, as decisions informed by priorities and consideration of options were continually needed.

This continuing involvement carries a further implication. Direct involvement of stakeholders at the various levels, if it is to be authentic, requires a recognition that the commissioning, guiding and implementation of the evaluation are taking on a collaborative dimension. This in turn needs to be reflected in the commissioning and management decision-making processes adopted for the project.

A related issue is that of time needed to engage in discussion and decision-making among stakeholders at each stage. In the case of the MCI evaluation, this was compounded by two factors:

- i. the physical distances between those involved, given that they were variously located in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, with the regional consultant at times in the region but mostly in Australia; and
- ii. by the nature of the Country Office stakeholders' work, which involved a significant amount of travelling within and beyond their countries.

Telephone and email communication assisted to some extent in this instance. In general terms, the adoption of a sequence of involvement approach requires recognition of its impact in terms of time and resource commitment, and the related effects on project timelines.

A third issue is that of the extent to which stakeholders have the appropriate knowledge and skills to contribute to the discussion and decision-making at each level. Aspects under consideration in the case of the MCI evaluation included, for example, determination of population samples, design of instruments, and analysis and review of data. The stakeholders in this instance were able to draw on their varying expertise and experience, with their contributions helping to contextualise and add to the insights and advice provided by the Regional Office, the country agencies and the regional consultant. The contributions from the various parties in effect were of a complementary nature.

An implication of this issue is the need to acknowledge variations in the knowledge and skills that people are bringing to the exercise, and for participants to recognise their strengths and limitations and to work within these. Additionally, as Bamberger (1997:269) notes in his analysis of a development project in Tunisia, the sharing of insights and responsibilities provides opportunities to strengthen local evaluation capacity among the stakeholders involved. While primarily designed to promote ownership, the process also takes on an educative focus. In a similar vein, Cousins (2001:115) refers to program implementers being 'apt to improve their abilities to incorporate and integrate interpretations of evaluation data into their existing personal knowledge structures and frames of reference', as a consequence of linkages with the evaluators.

A fourth issue is that of defining the role boundaries, particularly where there are potential conflicts of interest among the stakeholders. In the MCI evaluation, for example, the Country Office personnel were involved in providing data to the agencies regarding their country's implementation, as well as reviewing preliminary findings and draft final reports. Data were also being gathered from other sources, with the local research agencies having the responsibility to collate, analyse and draw conclusions from the data overall. The Country Office stakeholders who had

contributed data had to be able to take on a different and detached critical reviewer role when considering what was being presented by the agencies. This required an appreciation of the research and evaluation process, an ability to switch roles, and a willingness to acknowledge that other points of view and interpretations may also be valid and possibly more compelling. As with the previous issue, this issue may be seen as part of the educative process that ideally will be occurring in such cases.

Patton (1997:357) suggests a particular strategy that may assist, namely to ‘seek to affirm and reaffirm that everyone is interested in what works best for intended beneficiaries’. This strategy places focus on the common purpose that links the various stakeholders. In the case of the MCI evaluation, the common purpose was the alleviation of disadvantage faced by girls in South Asia, and the ways in which the MCI could best achieve this.

North (1997:327) extends this by stressing the importance of developing trust and mutual respect in the evaluators’ relationships with the stakeholders, especially so in evaluations that involve multiple implementing organizations and diverse cultural settings.

### **Lessons learnt**

The sequential approach to stakeholder involvement that was taken in the MCI evaluation was considered to have significant potential for developing evaluation ownership among Country Office personnel. The issues that have been outlined suggest that this potential is not automatically achieved. Specific attention to such issues, in both the initial planning and ongoing implementation stages, is needed to ensure that they are not detracting from the quality of the evaluation or the extent to which stakeholder ownership is realised.

Ideally, this attention is part of the explicit agenda for both the commissioning body and the stakeholders. It then can become an integral component of the shared strategic planning and monitoring of the evaluation, and a running theme through the various levels of involvement. In so doing, it can provide a positive contribution to the establishment of an evaluation climate that promotes and affirms stakeholder involvement. Key elements underpinning such a climate include establishing means for continuing and regular communication, building in sufficient time for stakeholder interaction, promoting a willingness to listen to other views, and having open and transparent processes. This type of evaluation climate should also assist in achieving the additional benefits that have been identified as potentially occurring in the quest for ownership, in particular that of facilitating access to a range of knowledge, skills and insights and promoting evaluation-related learning among the stakeholders involved.

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