Evaluating Partnership Programs – Challenges and Approaches

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Introduction

Increasingly programs are being delivered through partnerships of organisations. These organisations may vary greatly in terms of sector, size, structure, objectives, objectives, modus operandi and the nature of their contribution to the overall objectives of the partnership as a whole. With respect to purpose and mode of operation, partnerships vary in terms of their relative emphasis on communication, co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration.

Partnerships can be evaluated from many perspectives. This paper addresses two of those perspectives, namely, how to evaluate:

- the effectiveness of a program that is run by a partnership, given the challenges that such programs present
- the way in which the partnership itself functions as a partnership.

It reports on the methodology of an evaluation (in progress) of the NSW *Our Environment it's a living thing (OEILT) Partnership Program.* The paper shows how the evaluation is applying some principles and methodologies that have been used in the European context by Toulemonde, Fontaine, Laudren and Vincke (1998) as partial technical solutions to challenges confronted in evaluating partnership programs. The paper also reports on the application and adaptation of a particular tool (the Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool) for evaluating how well the partnership itself is functioning. The author is the evaluation project leader with assistance from Larraine Larri and wishes also to thank the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation for its willingness to have this paper presented.

About the OEILT Partnership program

It is useful to understand the nature of this partnership and how it came into being. OEILT itself is a whole of government program that commenced in 2001 and that is funded by the NSW Environment Trust. The program focuses on influencing the behaviour of people at home, work and at play through a range of community education elements. The Program supports the NSW Government's Environmental Education Plan, Learning for Sustainability. The Plan aims to build the capacity of the whole community to be engaged in making environmental improvements and living sustainably.

When applications for the Environmental Trust funds for the program were released in mid 2004 a number of related but separate applications from NGOs and Agencies were received; each built around broad sustainability education issues. The Trust requested that these groups should come together and develop a collaborative proposal for an integrated overarching sustainability education program. The Partnership was born out of this request. It was not an existing coalition and in general, other than occasional pairings of partners for specific activities, the partners had not worked together before on a sustained and programmatic basis.

The resulting application was successful in obtaining a grant of $3.5 million over 2.5 years. The NSW Department of Environment and Conservation is the lead organisation and administrator of the Program, with partners being the Total Environment Centre, NSW Nature Conservation Council, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the NSW Council of Social Services, and the NSW Department of Energy, Utilities and Sustainability. Eleven projects are being delivered through the Program. Some are run solely or primarily by one or other of the partner organisations and some projects are run by several or all organisations collaboratively.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a program that is run by a partnership

Toulemonde et al (1998) identified several challenges involved in evaluating partnership programs that seemed to be relevant to this particular partnership. They linked them to four stages in designing and conducting an evaluation. In summary, they were that:

1. Stage 1: Clarify the main objectives of the program. The challenge: in partnership programs is that objectives are based on compromise amongst partners with different political, social and economic aims
2. Stage 2: Choose the most suitable observation and measurement tools for each type of impact. The challenge in partnership programs is that scattering of interventions makes it difficult to choose suitable and feasible common measures
3. Stage 3: Collect information in the field and analyse it to assess the impacts. The challenge in partnership programs is that diversity across projects and partner activities increases complexity of information gathering.
4. Stage 4: Synthesise a judgment of the program based on the different impacts. The challenge in partnership program is that each partner has different criteria for judging success and weights them differently. The differences in criteria also relate to stage 1, differences in objectives.

Toulemonde et al (1998) suggested a possible solution for each of these challenges. This evaluation has used some of these suggestions. Table 1 shows for each challenge identified by Toulemonde et al (1998), the general solution they proposed and the specific challenge confronted and specific solution used in this evaluation. Table 1 also includes some reflections on the success of the approach thus far and references to Table 2, Figure 1 and Box 1 that follow Table 1.

Evaluating the functioning of the partnership itself.

Partnerships have become a common mode of operation for many programs in Australia (government, non-government, community and private sector). Although partnerships have the potential to deliver more effective and efficient programs to the advantage of common clients and target groups, they can also consume disproportionate amounts of time and resources, create disharmony, and fail to deliver the promised synergies and benefits. Some of these difficulties can arise because the partnership itself is not functioning well. Amongst other things, effective partnerships

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need to have a good match between the purpose, structure, processes and availability of resources over time (Williams, Sankar and Rogers, 2004).

In the United Kingdom, A Strategic Partnership Taskforce was established in 2001 in the Deputy Prime Minister's Office to help find innovative ways in which local government could improve service delivery through working in partnership. It commissioned the Nuffield Institute at the University of Leeds to provide a tool that local authorities could use to assess partnership relationships and aid the achievement of successful partnership working. The tool, the Partnership Assessment Tool (Hardy, Hudson and Waddington, 2003), draws heavily on research conducted by the Institute originally in the field of health and social care partnerships but adapted for use in the context of public/public, public/private, public/voluntary and public/private/voluntary partnerships. The tool is available for use free of charge.

The tool requires partners to use a 4 point Likert type scale to rate each of six statements about each of six principles (i.e. 36 statements). The six principles are:

1. recognise and accept the need for partnership
2. develop clarity and realism of purpose
3. ensure commitment and ownership
4. develop and maintain trust
5. create clear and robust partnership working arrangements
6. monitor, measure and learn

Scoring instructions are provided that enable the preparation of a profile of the partnership that shows an aggregate score and scores against each of the principles. The tool shows how the scores should be interpreted with respect to making judgments about the health or otherwise of the partnership.

In this evaluation, the tool is being administered on three separate occasions: soon after the commencement of the evaluation but about 6 months after the program had commenced, about two thirds of the way through the program and then towards the end of the program. The first two occasions of use are primarily formative in nature for this partnership and the last occasion of use will be summative but is expected to be useful for future partnerships amongst some or all of the partners.

Following the first administration of the tool, the evaluator prepared a diagnostic report on the partnership. Amongst other things it included the profiles of the partnership based on the aggregate results for all partners, some observations on the results (e.g. where there was a wide range of opinion around a particular principle and where there appeared to be more consensus), qualitative comments from the partners, and identification of the key areas in which improvements might need to be made. Separately the evaluator provided individual partner profiles to the individual partners so that each could see how the way in which they had assessed the partnership compared with how the remaining partners as a group were seeing the partnership.

The evaluator conducted a discussion session with partners, drawing attention to the aspects of the partnership that were working well and those that appeared to be working not so well. Partners identified some areas for further development. These areas will be revisited following the second administration of the tool.

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This evaluation adapted the original tool by asking partners to provide comments about their ratings. Halliday, Athana and Richardson (2004) after conducting interviews with respondents to the original Nuffield tool, considered it important to probe the meaning behind ratings. They applied a specific probe custom tailored to each of the 36 statements in the Nuffield Tool but found that it was too cumbersome for respondents. Accordingly the adaptation used for this evaluation simply asked for comments or examples to clarify their ratings. Only some partners chose to do this. Nevertheless their comments proved very useful for understanding the meaning of their ratings, for developing the diagnostic report and for generating discussion. Aware of the sensitivities that can emerge amongst partners, the evaluator invited partners when they were providing comments to identify any that they would like to be kept confidential. All individual partner profiles were also kept confidential.

This evaluation also adapted the tool by asking partners to rate the relative importance of each of the principles and then looked at rated performance of the principles in relation to those principles considered to be most and least important so that attention to improvement could be given to areas that were seen not only as weaker but also as worth fixing. This approach was taken in recognition of Toulemonde et al's (1998) observation that each partner weights criteria for judging success differently.

As well as asking for comments in relation to each principle, this evaluation provided a section at the end of the tool that asked partners to identify:

- something about the partnership that has pleased you or reassured you
- something about the partnership that has displeased you or given you cause for concern
- something about the partnership that has surprised you
- something about the partnership about which you remain uncertain
- any other comments or reflections on the partnership as a partnership.

The evaluation report on the partnership ratings provided additional information about the mean, median and range of partner scores on the aggregate rating of the partnership across all principles and for each of the principles. Areas where there seemed to be least consensus are a useful subject for discussion. This approach was consistent with the observations made by Halliday et al (2004) concerning the usefulness of looking at outliers as well as average scores. Areas where consensus was high and generally positive were areas about which the partnership could celebrate its success and work to ensure that it built on those successes.

The evaluator adapted some of the scoring techniques that are used in the Nuffield manual so that it was possible to more meaningfully explain to partners whether a principle or the aggregate of principles was regarded more positively than negatively or more negatively than positively.

Nuffield proposed use of the tool for benchmarking. However, the measures may not be sufficiently sensitive and reliable to justify use of change scores from one administration of the tool to the next. Halliday et al (2004) identified some difficulties for respondents specific to this instrument that might detract both from validity of the tool if primarily used for the purpose of benchmarking rather than as an instrument to

generate reflection and discussion. In particular they found that respondents were not necessarily able to make the transition readily between reflective mode and ranking mode. Bearing in mind that several of the partner organisations come from an activist background perhaps less disposed to reflection, this difficulty may have been especially pertinent to this application of the tool.
Accordingly the second administration of the tool will again be used to encourage reflection and continuous improvement rather than as a precise measure of change in effectiveness of the partnership. The tool's principles provided a useful focus for early evaluator interviews with individual partners about what a successful partnership would look like to them and these will be revisited at the end. Identifying partner criteria for evaluating the partnership was another way of identifying and addressing the challenge arising from different partners having different success criteria.

In addition to applying the adapted Nuffield tool and facilitating discussion around the results, the evaluation is using one of its case studies – Media and Communications – as an example of the partnership in action. While each project has its own communication strategies there is also a joint communications strategy managed by the partnership as a whole and which requires a high level of co-operation and trust amongst the partners. In evaluating the benefits of the partnership, the evaluation is also looking for specific examples of synergies achieved through partners working together to share lessons learnt, resources, target groups, cross referrals and so on. It will be important to be able to provide data that show whether the value added by the partnership to what could have been done separately by the projects exceeds the amount of effort that goes into developing and managing a functioning partnership.

Conclusion

Partnership programs do present numerous challenges for evaluators. Given the issues identified in this paper and by Toulemonde et al (1998) and others, the diffusion of evaluation effort across several partners and the limited resources typically available for evaluation, it is likely that the data that can be obtained and the conclusions that can be drawn will always be sub-optimal. However this paper has shown how an evaluation is trying to address some of these challenges to improve the final product.

A key element of the success of partnership programs is the effectiveness of the partnership as 'a project' in its own right. Evaluations of partnership programs should therefore include an evaluation of the partnership itself as a key factor that affects success in achieving program and project outcomes. This paper has shown how one evaluation is approaching the evaluation of the partnership itself.

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Table 1: Challenges, Solutions and Reflections on Success of Solutions.

General Challenge Toulemonde et al.	**Program specific challenge**	**General solution** Toulemonde et al.	**Program specific solution**	**Reflections on the solutions**
Objectives are based on compromise amongst partners	Partners are not a natural coalition in that they have not worked as partnership before. Some partners have more activist orientation, some more educational orientation. All agree they want a population that lives in more sustainable ways with desired environmental impacts and improved quality of life. The relative emphasis on the environment and on quality of life and whether as a means or an end, differs across projects	Take into account divergent interests concerning actions and expected impacts – construct a logic model	Overarching program logic - mainly an outcomes hierarchy (OH) built around desired outcomes (e.g. knowledge and skills, changes in practices, environmental impacts) rather than preferred processes. Each project derived its own project logic from the agreed general one. For general Outcomes Hierarchy see Figure 1. More detailed versions of outer rings of Figure 1 were developed by the evaluator to guide data collection processes.	Useful touchstone throughout the evaluation for thinking about outcomes and collecting and reporting data in a more coherent and co-ordinated way. Provides common categories of intended outcomes (e.g. skills and knowledge) rather than specifying particular knowledge to be acquired by particular target groups. Most partners were new to program logic processes so needed assistance to adapt general OH to own project. OH may paper over differences in values rather than resolve them
Scattering of interventions makes it difficult to choose suitable and feasible common measures	Projects had different target audiences, starting points geographical locations, messages and intended outcomes e.g. environmental behaviour change versus organisational capacity building. Some had their own data collection procedures that differed in style for many good reasons. The evaluation data is to be a mix of that collected by projects themselves with advice from evaluator and that collected by the evaluator. The nature of the	Find or create indicators applicable to heterogeneous actions e.g. common scoring sheets for impacts	Common reporting templates (not measurement tools) were developed that identified features of interest (e.g. participation and satisfaction levels, knowledge and skills, actions) and provided guidance for construction of such tools as post participation questionnaires using rating scales, categories for analysing open-ended data. Table 2 is an excerpt. Projects identified which items were relevant to them and whether they were providing ordinal,	Projects differed greatly in scale, frequency of contact with target audience and therefore opportunity to collect structured data. So the templates, while giving guidance on what would ideally be preferred in terms of structured data, also allowed for less structured data, stories etc. that related to the outcomes of interest. Data are far from perfect in terms of quantity and quality and cannot be aggregated but the templates built around the OH give a coherent structure for reporting

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General Challenge Toulemonde et al.	**Program specific challenge**	**General solution** Toulemonde et al.	**Program specific solution**	**Reflections on the solutions**
	projects and the extent of reliance on projects for data creates challenges for the quality and cohesiveness of data		nominal or other data Some additional evaluation capacity building was provided to projects collectively and individually e.g. in evaluation principles and tools	activities and results and for recording and analysing qualitative data. Individual project reports are still collected for program management purposes.
Diversity across projects and partner activities increases complexity of information gathering	There are some common types of activities such as workshops shared by several of the projects but the ways in which these common activities are used differs from project to project. The partnership wishes to find out what sorts of educational processes work under what circumstances and to learn from the experiences of the projects. This transfer of learning is one way in which the partnership has the potential to add value to the individual projects.	Use parallel case studies for similar types of activities	Evaluator is conducting case studies of 4 types of change instruments used to varying degrees by different projects: workshops, incentives, other capacity building activities and media /communications. Box 1 is an outline of the Workshops case study. To design case studies, projects were plotted against matrices of types of activities, target audiences, level of awareness and activity of typical members of target audiences.	In progress – too early to comment on success of this approach. Much of the work will be about the interaction amongst the tools (e.g. what is the effect of using incentives in conjunction with workshops?) Case study findings will be qualitative and issues based rather than quantitative. Matrices of awareness and activity levels have been useful for identifying what is achievable by each project.
Each partner has different criteria for judging success and weights them differently	Organisations come from different perspectives and value systems. Some focus on education involving exposure in a balanced way to information Some have a more activist focus. Some give higher priority to quality of life issues – there is potential conflict with environmental outcomes.	Judge according to several points of view – use multi-criteria- multi-judge analysis	Projects choose the items in the templates that are most relevant to them. They choose what they record in the register of feedback and their choices reflect what is important to them. At the end of the evaluation partners will be asked to rate the success of the program using multiple criteria	The multi-criteria multi-judge approach has already been used for evaluating the functioning of the partnership (see next section of the paper) and provided some useful insights about what different partners want out of the partnership as well as how well the partnership is functioning using ‘standard’ criteria.

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Figure 1: Overview of aspects of the OEILT partnership program about which information will be collected

1. Hierarchy of intended outcomes (inner flow diagram).
2. Program factors that affect outcomes: the effectiveness of the Partnership, Program management, and Project activities and outputs (inner ring)
3. Non–program factors that affect outcomes and program factors that affect outcomes: Partner organisation factors; other external factors (outer ring)

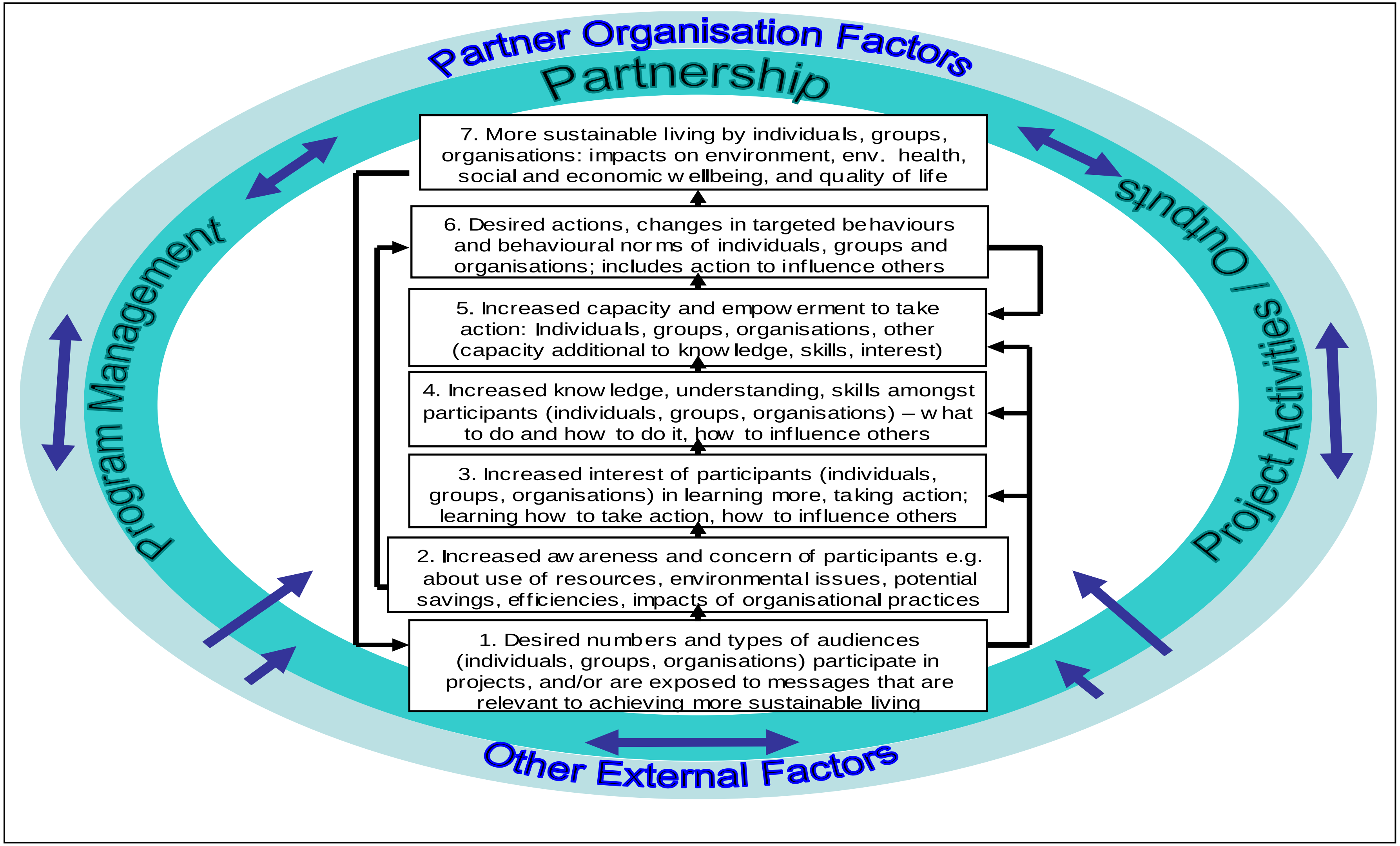

Table 2: Excerpt from one of the templates for projects to report data

LEVEL 4: CHANGES IN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS AT LEAST IN PART AS A RESULT OF PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT OR EXPOSURE TO ITS MESSAGES **Put * beside each of the items below that is relevant to your project. Then provide data for those rows only.** **Please identify how long after participation this information was collected**	**Numbers for whom information is available about change or lack of change -**	**Numbers indicating that at least in part as a result of participation this type of knowledge and skills had increased a lot, a little, not at all**			**Numbers who reported any change (if data not available about amount of change)**	**Source of data** and any response categories used	In this set of items we want to find out how many, in what ways and how much participants have become more knowledgeable or skilled through this project. In this column: 1. Describe specific improvements that are relevant to your project. 2. List any examples given by participants. 3. Also use this column if you have no numerical data but you have some other qualitative data
ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS:		**A lot**	**A little**	**Not at all**			
Knowledge of /skills in alternative practices (i.e. what they and others can do) relating to resource conservation (energy, water, other resources)							
Knowledge of /skills in alternative practices (i.e. what they and others can do) relating to natural environment (biodiversity, greenhouse etc)							
Knowledge of /skills in healthy use of chemicals for household and other cleaning.							
Knowledge of and skills in healthy use of chemicals for integrated pest management							
Knowledge of /skills in alternative practices (i.e. what they and others can do) relating to consumption/bills							
Other knowledge and skills relating to environmental practices (please describe)							

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Box 1: Excerpt from Outline of Case Study of Workshops Conducted by Projects

Case study 1: Training and education through workshops. The anticipated 'generative mechanism' (Pawson, 2002) for workshops is thought to be as follows: workshops are expected to contribute to more sustainable living through developing knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes of participants about the environment or about ways to influence others. For the mechanism to be effective, participants must go on to apply this knowledge and these skills. Workshops may also be used to encourage action through fostering and reinforcing social norms, giving tools for action, providing a context for initiating group actions, engendering mutual support amongst group members and fostering networking and access to resources.

Focus: The case study will focus on training and education through workshops and small group training sessions.

Examples of variations amongst the types of workshops: Workshops range from those

- that are run as a one off event, to a one off event with other follow up activities with opportunities for application, to a series of workshops run over several months
- whose participants are largely unaware of environmental issues to those who are both highly aware and already active and wish to learn how to influence others
- that are targeted to individuals/households, to new groups (and assisting to establish new groups), to existing groups or organisations, to businesses.

Some of the issues that will be addressed through the case studies include:

- What approaches have projects successfully used to attract participants to workshops?
- When workshops have been spread over several sessions, what was done to retain involvement of participants? How successful was this? With which types of groups are series of workshops most likely to work? What else can be done to encourage continuing engagement?
- What types of teaching and learning methods and approaches seem to work best with what types of audiences under what circumstances? (households, community workers, community groups, educators / train the trainer; corporates)
- What have participants done or do they plan to do as a result of participating in workshops?
- How effectively have workshops been with different groups in terms of building social capital, generating group actions, networks and mutual support? What made them work or not?
- How did the workshops work contribute in conjunction with other OEILT activities such as use of incentives and resources, media?
- What is needed to sustain or build on what has been learnt and achieved through workshops etc?

Methods of data collection include:

Projects' own data collections (reported using templates): participation rates relative to targets; pre participation, immediate and delayed post participation surveys, interviews etc; success stories and other feedback

Additional data collected by the evaluator including: participant observation, individual and group interviews with samples of participants, interviews with project managers, staff and steering committees for projects; action learning group discussions of project managers from all OEILT projects using workshops.