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Critical reflections on the use of meta-evaluation in the 'Assessing Communication for Social Change' project

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Introduction

Participatory approaches to impact evaluation and evaluation capacity building (ECB) are increasingly seen as effective, especially in complex settings where the context is 'impossible to manage', such as in developing countries (Valery & Shakir, 2005: 87). Patton (in Horton et al, 2003: viii) argues that aiming for multiple levels and kinds of impacts from an evaluation is particularly crucial when resources are scarce. However, meta-evaluation of projects that use participatory evaluation for ECB purposes must be continuous in order to increase the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methodologies and sustainability of M&E systems, to share learnings from these experiences, and to improve the outcomes of capacity building activities.

This paper critically reflects on the use of meta-evaluation in the research project 'Assessing Communication for Social Change' (AC4SC), which, since 2007, has developed and trialled a participatory methodology for evaluating the impacts of development communication programs in Nepal. AC4SC is a four year project which involves collaboration between researchers from two Australian universities and staff from both Equal Access Nepal (EAN) and its umbrella organisation, Equal Access International. EAN produces radio programs that aim to foster positive social change by providing needed information to the community and outreach activities. AC4SC focussed on the development and implementation of a participatory impact assessment methodology for assessing the impacts of EAN's radio programs. The project's key stakeholders include: staff from M&E, radio program production, and management at EAN; a network of community researchers in five research sites; and community members.

Following an overview of the focus of this meta-evaluation, the AC4SC project, and the meta-evaluation methods, we critically reflect on some key themes, issues and contradictions that emerged from our review of the various meta-evaluation methods. Next, we discuss our use of meta-evaluation to enhance evaluation capacity building within Equal Access Nepal. We also consider some of the contextual challenges and issues that affected the outcomes of the project and the meta-evaluation. Finally, we draw some conclusions and learnings from our review of the use of meta-evaluation in the AC4SC project.

The focus of the meta-evaluation in AC4SC

The focus of our meta-evaluation of AC4SC was similar to that of Uusikyla and Virtanen (2000: 51) who describe it as 'an approach to quality control for single evaluation studies'. Like Uusikyla and Virtanen (2000: 50), we saw the process as a tool for learning that involves 'continuous and reflexive evaluative inquiry'. The AC4SC research team considered this as an important part of the participatory action research (PAR) methodology used in AC4SC. In effect, it required levels of reflection on project activities that might otherwise not have occurred in the day-to-day implementation of the project.

There are two levels of participatory research and methodologies in AC4SC. First, there is the development of a team of community researchers who engage regularly with their local community to understand local issues and the reception of radio programs and their impacts on individual and social change. The community researchers' information is used by the M&E team to increase EAN's understandings and improve practices. Second, at a more meta-level, is the development of 'transformative relationships' between the research team and EAN staff to guide the development and implementation of the impact assessment methodology. The axis here is the M&E team, the main focus of our ECB efforts, who have the difficult job of translating academic theory into practices that work for their organisation, but must also influence those theories. It is this second, meta-level of evaluation that we focus on in this paper.

The Assessing Communication for Social Change project

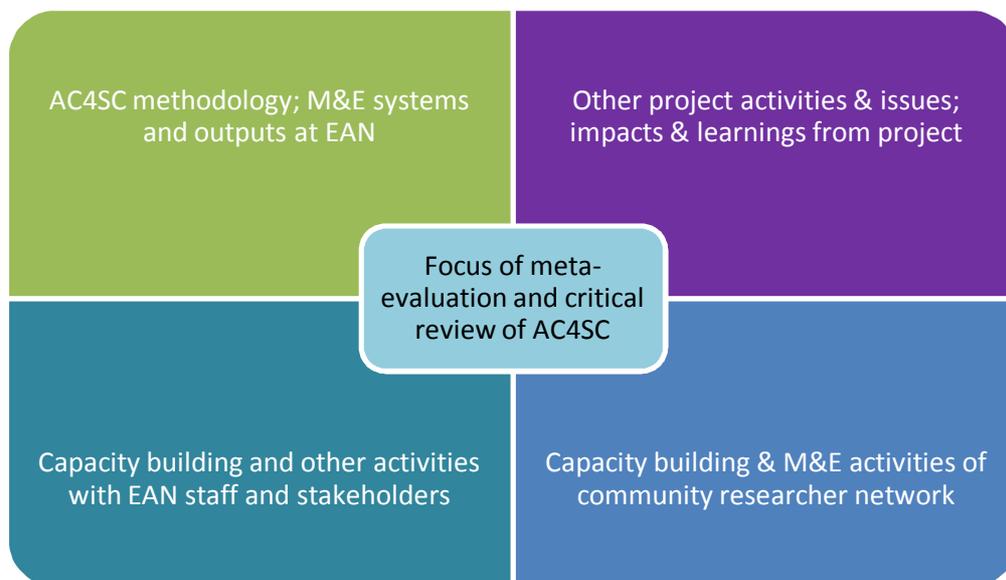
AC4SC's challenge was to design a participatory impact assessment methodology that was practical and sustainable, but also innovative and rigorous. This required encouraging the development of an organisational culture that supports the use of participatory M&E and engages in continuous learning for improvement. The methodology also aimed to address donor requirements for impact assessment, based on accountability and 'proving' impact, as well as the need for ongoing feedback that could be used to improve the radio programs.

Overview of the meta-evaluation process in AC4SC

Our meta-evaluation of AC4SC involved regular project reviews using multiple methods to evaluate activities and the impacts of the project on EAN and the community researchers. The meta-evaluation evolved as the project proceeded, but with six consistent aims:

1. Assess the effectiveness of the impact assessment methodology, EAN's M&E systems and processes, and our capacity building and other activities, and identify ways that they could be improved.
2. Collaboratively develop and implement strategies to improve project activities so that they better met the needs of EAN.
3. Identify ways that the AC4SC methodology and M&E systems could be made sustainable into the future.
4. Develop an understanding of the context of the project and the various groups involved.
5. Identify impacts of the project on EAN's programs, capacity and staff, and (to some extent) the community researchers and the community.
6. Develop new learnings and knowledge to develop an AC4SC toolkit and other project outputs. (This toolkit is being developed as a transferable version of the impact assessment methodology).

The diagram below shows the four key elements of the meta-evaluation:



The methods informing each of these aspects of the meta-evaluation included:

- Critical review and reflection meetings
- Group and individual interviews
- Feedback questionnaires
- Observations and keeping a field work diary
- Informal feedback and discussion
- An in-depth review of EAN's use of the Most Significant Change technique
- Recording improvements and learnings and reviewing the meta-evaluation process and outcomes.

We mainly used qualitative methods in the meta-evaluation, but some quantitative data was also collected via feedback questionnaire. Some methods such as feedback questionnaires and interviews were quite structured and formal; other methods such as the use of email and Skype chat discussions were more informal. Outputs from the meta-evaluation included meeting notes, analysis of feedback on capacity building activities, interview and project reviews, interview transcripts and notes, information prepared for the AC4SC toolkit, and academic publications.

Critical reflections on the meta-evaluation process

A critical review of the strengths and limitations of each method used in the meta-evaluation highlights a number of issues that must be considered for meta-evaluation in development contexts. Several of these issues, such as the need for adequate time and effective engagement of all key participants, are often discussed in the participatory evaluation and ECB literature (see Gibbs et al., 2009; Lennie, 2005; Napp et al., 2005). Others, such as acknowledging issues of power and knowledge, are less often discussed (Gregory, 2000).

Understanding the context

Meta-evaluation enabled the research team and to understand the organisational, social, political and cultural context of the project, and the implications of these contextual factors for the success of the project. For example, individual interviews with EAN staff provided insights into how interviewees conceptualised social change, M&E processes, Nepali culture, and communication practices.

Engagement and inclusion of all staff and stakeholders

The meta-evaluation mainly involved EAN staff and community researchers, with some input from EAN stakeholders and the community. Most of the input came from the M&E team. However, our critical reflections on the project suggest that a higher level of engagement with senior staff of EAN and greater ownership of AC4SC within EAN would have resulted in the project being given higher priority, especially in the first years when we often found that little project-related activity was conducted at EAN between visits by the Australian research team.

Building relationships based on mutual trust and effective communication

Our critical reviews highlighted the importance of taking time to form relationships with project participants based on mutual trust and effective communication and collaboration. We found that the face-to-face review meetings in Nepal and the Skype chat meetings we used regularly in years 3 and 4 of the project built effective collaborative relationships and provided encouragement and support to the M&E team.

Effectiveness of using a variety of communication methods

Effective meta-evaluation was also achieved using a variety of communication methods. In the first two years of the project we encouraged everyone to use the AC4SC website for feedback and discussion. However, some EAN staff thought the website was not user-friendly, so Skype chat was used more frequently. The research team kept in regular contact with the M&E team via Skype to discuss problems and identify solutions.

Power and knowledge relations

The Australian team members often controlled discussions and agendas and there was a tendency for the M&E team to defer to us as 'the experts' and to agree with our suggested strategies for improvements. However, some face-to-face meetings were conducted in the Nepali language and most of us relied on translators to understand the discussion. Since only a partial translation was provided, it was often difficult to effectively follow the discussion. This led to feelings of frustration among some of the research team. In this situation, the EAN participants were more empowered than the research team.

Effectiveness of a participatory, mixed methods approach

A mixed methods approach to meta-evaluation increased the quality of the feedback, and added rigour to the process. For example, the weaknesses of feedback questionnaires, which did not provide in-depth feedback, were sometimes not fully completed, and tended to provide quite positive feedback, was balanced by the use of individual interviews which provided more critical, in-depth feedback on the project.

Time and resources

A key issue for all participatory evaluations and ECB projects is the need for sufficient time and resources (Boyle et al., 1999; Lennie, 2005; Papineau & Kiely, 1996). Lack of time was an ongoing issue that affected the meta-evaluation of AC4SC: some critical review meetings and interviews were rushed because of the large number of activities that the research team needed to complete during their visits to Nepal. In addition, it was not always possible to follow through with strategies for improvement due to other competing demands on our time and that of our EAN partners.

Using the meta-evaluation to enhance evaluation capacity building

The meta-evaluation enhanced the evaluation capacity building process at EAN in several ways. We evaluated the effectiveness of interactions between the research team and EAN staff at the end of

all collaborative activities. This helped us to reflect on what kinds of activities and processes for mutual learning and for training were most effective. During some of the capacity building workshops participants took turns to present feedback at the end of each day, reflecting on what they had done and learned, and suggesting what might be given more attention.

One different meta-evaluation activity was a review undertaken by a member of the Equal Access International management team during a visit to Kathmandu in June 2010. She conducted group discussions with the M&E team and content teams, and one-on-one interviews with key EAN staff. This produced quite different insights into AC4SC. For example, the M&E team were able to reflect on the processes we went through in AC4SC in order to give advice to others. They complained about the way that the impact assessment methodology developed through AC4SC was not predetermined: there was 'too much change and development as we went, no clear vision from start'. While this was deliberate, it also reflects their frustration with our PAR approach, where we were facilitating rather than directing developments. At the same time, the benefits in terms of ECB were strong, since the M&E team confidently put forward suggestions for improving the research planning process and how others might learn from this process.

We are also using meta-evaluation data to construct a transferable toolkit on the impact assessment methodology for similar communication for development organisations. The M&E team are contributing examples for the toolkit, and providing inputs to its design and overall content. This is again producing critical reflection on what they have learned, on what works well and what needs further modification. In addition, we have found out more about new M&E team activities that are improving EAN programs. Critical reflection and additional learning are taking place as the M&E team identify how to pass on what they have learned, and fix things that don't work in order to improve the toolkit.

Some reflections on the use of different evaluation methods

The face-to-face interviews conducted by a member of EA International empowered the M&E team to be more open and honest in their criticisms of some aspects of the project and reflect on how some things could have been improved. This outcome may be due to several factors, including our explicit request before these interviews to 'be critical' and how we framed some questions, such as 'what advice would you give to others?'

A key finding is that we obtained different evaluations when we asked for an explicit evaluation of the project, such as the interviews described above and the research team's discussions with EAN staff, compared to what we obtained through collaboration around a more concrete output, such as the toolkit.

Intercultural communication and other contextual factors

Meta-evaluation requires an organisational culture in which critical comments are well-accepted, people are willing to learn from evaluations, and leaders actively practice and support this 'learning organisation' ideal. However, issues related to politeness, 'face' and intercultural communication may have affected the ongoing process of mutual learning and improvement within EAN.

Staff turnover within EAN also hindered the potential to learn from our ongoing meta-evaluation and to 'fine tune' what we were doing in ways that would benefit EAN. There was a regular succession of M&E managers during the course of the project and several content production staff engaged with the project eventually left. The meta-evaluation connection between the research team and EAN tended to be focused on the M&E manager as the key link, so without a consistent manager in this position who fully understood and supported the project, our ability to effectively assist in the fine tuning of the project was hampered.

Other contextual factors that are likely to have affected the meta-evaluation include:

- The hierarchical caste-based nature of Nepali society and people feeling anxious about questioning authority, especially in the current political climate. This raises macro contextual issues such as deference to authority and teachers.
- The education system in Nepal which has a very rigid and conservative structure, in contrast to the participatory processes we were implementing. In Nepal your teacher is seen as a 'guru' and should not be questioned.
- The M&E team was in a weak and vulnerable position at the beginning of the project. We wanted them to be reflexive but they were constantly being criticised by the content team who did not think that the M&E team were collecting data that added value to their programs.
- There are issues around how self-critical EAN should be in stakeholder meetings in which EAN's competitor organisations participate. This is seen as a challenge since EAN wants to differentiate itself from other organisations and promote their approach to M&E, especially their community researcher network, which in the Nepalese context is relatively unique.

Learnings from the meta-evaluation of AC4SC

Our learnings from the meta-evaluation of AC4SC concern the organisational context, communication and relationships; the methodology and meta-evaluation processes; and evaluation capacity building. They include:

Learnings related to the organisational context, communication and relationships

- Take sufficient time to form relationships with participants that are based on mutual trust and effective communication and collaboration.
- Using a variety of communication methods to conduct the meta-evaluation was quite effective.
- Greater engagement with senior staff and greater ownership of the project within the organisation is likely to have resulted in the project being given a greater priority.
- Staff turnover hindered the potential to learn from our ongoing meta-evaluation and to 'fine tune' what we were doing in ways that would be of most benefit to EAN.
- The organisational culture, hierarchical and power relationships and other contextual factors affected the meta-evaluation process.

Learnings related to the methodology and meta-evaluation processes

- The meta-evaluation required quite a lot of time and resources that were not always available. This affected the project since we did not always develop useful learnings soon enough to make timely changes to the project.
- The PAR methodology was important to the effectiveness of the meta-evaluation. While this 'learning by doing' approach was not always well appreciated, the process of collaboratively developing the AC4SC toolkit provided a perfect vehicle for the kind of reflexive practices that we aimed for throughout the project.
- A mixed methods approach to the meta-evaluation increased the quality and richness of the data, and added rigour to the process. The strengths of some methods balanced the limitations of other methods.

- We obtained quite different evaluations of the project when we asked for an explicit evaluation of the project compared to what we obtained through collaboration around a more concrete output such as the toolkit.

Learnings related to evaluation capacity building

- The meta-evaluation process helped to improve evaluation capacity building. Collaborative development of the toolkit facilitated far more in-depth reflection on what they had done and what they learned in the project, compared with other methods.
- Meta-evaluation outcomes can be effectively used to enrich and enliven the outcomes of evaluation projects such as practical toolkits. Using the outcomes in this way enables the learnings from such projects to be passed on to others.

Conclusion

There were many different benefits from our ongoing meta-evaluation of the AC4SC project, particularly:

- increased evaluation skills, knowledge and capacity, including improved critical reflection and review skills;
- development of new knowledge and learnings, including about the complex organisational, social and cultural context of the project and the effects of such contextual factors on the outcomes of the project;
- forming effective collaborative relationships with participants in the project;
- development of an impact assessment methodology, and M&E systems that are likely to be practical and sustainable and more useful than if we had not undertaken our meta-evaluation of the project.

The meta-evaluation was essential to understanding various constraints and issues related to the organisational context that affected the success of the project and the development of better M&E systems and capacities within EAN. These issues include those related to the hierarchical culture in Nepal, communication barriers, power relations, and the time and resources available. We also identified several limitations of the various methods we used which were balanced by the strengths of other methods. Despite these issues, we think that we met the aims of our meta-evaluation quite well. Our next step will be to triangulate our extensive meta-evaluation data to develop a rigorous 'ultimate' meta-evaluation of the project.

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