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Discussion Paper:

DEVELOPING A MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING AND EMPOWERMENT

With the current focus of many development interventions on capacity building and empowerment and increasingly the adoption of Rights Based Approaches an important question to address is the role and approach of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems.

This is an important question for a number of reasons:

- Much development effort, particularly at the macro level, focuses on targets which whilst not in themselves bad, tend to focus on the measurement of primarily structural / activity focused short term results
- Monitoring and evaluation systems are traditionally seen as instruments of accountability and control. As such they do not easily fit into interventions which focus on qualitative changes in people's lives. A characteristic of M&E Systems used for control is that they can be externally imposed, by donors for example.
- The application of participatory approaches to M&E is often focused in one area or part of the process. It is difficult for it to permeate the whole process due to the size, structure and time-bound nature of a project based approach to development. How feasible is it for participation and empowerment in M&E to be operationalised in large scale projects and programmes
- How to assess qualitative change in a participatory and empowering way which is also reliable and credible.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss these questions through the medium of a project in Central Asia which is developing and managing an M&E system and process which aims to address the areas of capacity building and empowerment.

The INTRAC Central Asia Programme (ICAP)

The **Purpose** of this project is to significantly strengthen the capacity, independence and effectiveness of targeted NGOs, CBOs and NGO Support Organisations in Central Asia. This will contribute to the **Goal** which is to develop a vibrant, effective and independent civil society in Central Asia.

In all Central Asian countries, NGOs remain at an early stage of development, with limited capacity and negligible impact on social and economic change. NGOs remain donor dependent and have yet to establish themselves as integral and recognised elements of Central Asian society.

This project constitutes Phase 2 of INTRAC's work with NGOs in Central Asia, and has been designed by INTRAC in close consultation with local project partners. Phase 1 was positively evaluated by all the funding organisations. It succeeded in significantly strengthening the capacity of partner NGO Support Organisations; developing a well trained cadre of NGO Support workers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Phase 2 will extend INTRAC's focus from existing partner organisations in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to new partners in all five Central Asian Republics. It will expand the range of organisations supported by INTRAC to include Community Based Organisations, and build on the pilot Community Development component to further develop linkages between NGOs, beneficiary groups and local government.

Phase 2 has six main outputs:

1. Organisational capacity, independence and effectiveness of *existing* and *new* partner NGOSOs and NGO Coalitions significantly strengthened
2. Development-related knowledge, skills and critical thinking (in relation to issues including participatory development, the role of civil society, poverty elimination and gender) amongst NGOSOs and NGO support staff, promoted
3. Strategies for working with CBOs developed and implemented
4. Effective working relationships between NGOs, local government staff and beneficiary groups promoted in selected target areas
5. Communication and understanding between NGOs and donor community significantly improved
6. Programme of activities regularly reviewed and modified to take account of emerging knowledge

Background to the development of the PME system

Our approach to developing a PME System for the ICAP Programme was to develop a system which would be consistent in its approach and methodology with the purpose and objectives of the ICAP. A key purpose was that the process of developing the M&E system as well as managing it would also act as a model and training support for INTRAC partners in the region.

The process started in July 2001 with the first of a planned series of regional workshops for ICAP stakeholders. The workshops were planned so that key stakeholders (partners and donor representatives) would have an opportunity to comment on and further refine the Programme objectives, as well as participate in the development of the fundamental elements of the Project Monitoring and Evaluation System, before many of the activities began.

Using the framework of participation, with passive through to active participation (Annex 1), we were characterizing the active participation of stakeholders as follows:

<i>Ownership/empowerment</i>	<i>Where stakeholders play a key role in selecting the criteria and indicators for measuring project progress and call the staff to account for the project's performance..</i>
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This part of the process was carried out by working together with the stakeholders to review the objectives, develop 'key questions' and indicators. The outputs of this exercise would be a series of detailed indicator frameworks for the ICAP. These would then be reviewed and drawn into one framework.

The reason for this form of participatory approach was to actively engage key stakeholders in the process and to encourage their ownership in monitoring and evaluating the Programme over the next three years. A hoped for benefit of adopting this approach was that it would model the process of incorporating capacity building and ownership (and by implication sustainability) into the very fabric of the project/programme process. An additional planned benefit was that the development and implementation of the Monitoring and Evaluation Process would provide a relevant and 'live' example on which to base future Monitoring and Evaluation Workshops for NGO's and NGOSO's in the Region. The indicator framework was finalised from the output of the three regional workshops in February 2002 by the ICAP Team.

From this base the next step to develop a set of tools and agreement on where data would be collected was planned for May 2002. The May workshop was based around two country workshops held in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and involved a small number of key INTRAC partners. The half day workshop developed the tools and proposed the data locations (annexed) but did not have the time to develop more specific question guides for the proposed semi structured interviews and questionnaires. These were developed by Jerry Adams for the team to use (annexed).

The basis on which the proposed tools and data locations were selected was as follows:

- The choice of qualitative assessment tools needs to be made carefully on the basis of their **appropriateness** in assessing progress towards the indicators.

Also, qualitative data collection tools require **skill** in order to be used properly and effectively. The key question is: do they provide **reliable** and **valid** data of sufficient quantity and quality?

- Qualitative assessment tools, such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observation combined with analysis of secondary data form the basis for the **data collection** methods. In addition, more participatory tools such as mapping and ranking can be used, as long as they fulfil the criteria above and are not used in an extractive fashion.
- **‘Triangulation’** is the cornerstone on which a methodology to assess impact must be based and from which the qualitative methods are applied. Triangulation is a means of addressing the issues of reliability and validity, because the **bias** in any one method is offset by using another. This does not mean that different methods are randomly selected and put together, but rather they are chosen so that they counteract the threats to validity identified in each. The key here is the **systematic application** of qualitative methods: ‘The accuracy of a method comes from its systematic application, but rarely does the inaccuracy of one approach to the data complement the accuracy of another,’ (Fielding and Fielding 1986).

Triangulation can be applied by using a mixture of methods, tools, and perspectives, for example working in teams and using multiple data sources. The purpose of this is to give an acceptable degree of **objectivity** to the **subjective perspectives**.

- **Validity and Reliability.** The scope of a specific assessment visit needs to be such that it will enable the assessment to be **reliable, valid** and **credible**. Validity and credibility are taken to mean ‘are the results believable?’ There are different understandings of how to assess validity. For example Cohen and Manion (1989) take a very **positivistic** stance and see validity as follows:

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| a) Face validity | Are we measuring what we think we are measuring? |
| b) Bias | Is there a tendency to make errors in one direction? |
| c) Convergent validity | Is the information gained through one method validated by that gained through another method? |
| d) Internal validity | Are the results genuine for this group? |
| e) External validity | Are the results applicable to other situations? |

Following the May 2002 workshop the ICAP team set about collecting data both individually and with partners. This was planned to take two months as it was hoped that we could then have a major review of the data with partners in September. The data collection process took far longer than envisaged as it had to be fitted into the already busy schedule of the ICAP Team.

Between August and the end of September the data from the various interviews, semi structured interviews and focus groups was sent to Jerry Adams to put together into the reporting framework. This was done using the QualDM Software package and, following discussion at the Regional Team meeting in September, also using a standard framework. The process was very time consuming as a number of separate reports had been combined and it took time to classify the information. Rough draft country reports have been produced which have taken the information submitted and produced summaries for each output and country (at this point Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) these will now be discussed in detail with the ICAP Team and with partner representatives.

Discussion Points:

Ownership of the process

The process of developing an M&E System which has the full participation of the ICAP partners has been running for just over a year. It is a challenge and often hard to keep the priorities balanced. It is especially difficult not to fall into the trap of developing and managing the system externally.

It was clear that the participation of different stakeholders was not a 'one-off state' which we set in motion at the beginning of the process and then continued. For a variety of reasons the level and type of participation varied due to lack of time and resources. Maintaining a high level of active participation in this process was far more demanding than originally envisaged. The degree of participation often came down to the fact that though stakeholders were willing and keen to participate, they would be unable to due to other commitments

A way forward would be to have an agreed statement on the type of participation which is expected and what is achievable. At the same time it is clear that there is a need to agree how that participation can be maintained, to monitor it, and where appropriate to take corrective action. This could be through the use of different communication channels such as internet discussion forums etc.

Accessibility of information

There is a clear problem here with ensuring that information is accessible to all stakeholders. An obvious problem that we are dealing with in the ICAP Programme is the fact that the majority of the reports are in English. Underlying this is a more complex problem related to how information is shared, summarized, used and owned.

For the majority of M&E Systems it is common for information to be passed upwards and for reports to be summarized which obviously impacts negatively on the ownership and empowerment of different stakeholders. A difficulty found in the developing the ICAP M&E System was that even though empowerment and participation were desirable and stated conditions they were often weakened due to time constraints and problems of sharing information and coming to a consensus.

A problem with M&E Systems which take a primarily qualitative approach to data collection is the sheer amount of rich data which is generated. Where this is reduced to numerical form it becomes easy to deal with. Where it remains in text or narrative form, for example interview reports, it is dense and hard to synthesize and share. PRA tools which use pictorial approaches whilst being easier to develop are similarly not easily transportable unless accompanied by explanation.

Conflict with the programme objectives

The process of developing and managing a participatory M&E system is very time consuming. Programme staff were very committed to collecting information and saw the value of the process. At the same time it was difficult to integrate the M&E System with an already demanding programme.

There is a clear problem here (common to many development initiatives) that the achievement of activities is seen as a higher priority than time spent in reflection owing to the time-limited nature of the process. The dilemma here is how to maintain a balance between the two.

This point is linked to the previous one in that where an M&E System is committed to upholding certain standards of participation then the process will be far more time-consuming than where participation is not regarded as essential.

Complexity of the process

The process of developing a primarily qualitative system is far more complex than originally envisaged. In part this is due to learning and it is hoped that the refined system will be less complex. However it is still unclear how much the system can be simplified without losing credibility and validity. The problems lie in assessing and communicating complex processes and changes in values and attitudes in ways in which multiple stakeholders can understand and come to common agreement on.

One way of addressing this is through reviewing the data with the stakeholders, in itself a time-consuming process. Another is to use diagrams and pictures as ways of communicating complex data and getting stakeholders to engage with the principal findings and issues as a base from which to discuss and agree on detail.

Balancing a developing process with stakeholder needs

The difficulties that we faced were very much focused around how to maintain a process approach which regarded ongoing learning as a necessary and valuable element, and also recognise the need for timely information. There is a real dilemma as process approaches, being more time-consuming, tend to take more time and resources.

Conclusion

In looking at these questions it is clear that they are all closely related to each other. When designing an M&E System to fit with a process approach, which is consistent with the values of empowerment and stakeholder participation, there are key factors which need to be considered which relate to each other. These are:

- **Methodology.** The methodology used in qualitative M&E systems needs to be soundly constructed so as to address the need for validity and credibility. At the same time the methodology must not be so firmly created that there is no space for innovation , experimentation and adaptation
- **Definition.** The meaning and scope of empowerment and participation need to be defined, or at least agreed for the purposes of the current exercise, possibly with the development of supporting indicators so as to ensure the M&E system is able to make realistic assessments and not become unrealistic and unachievable
- **Limitations.** The M&E System will have limitations. It is not possible for it to meet every need and situation. Key limitations will be primarily in terms of time and resources. In assessing its limitations these need to be assessed as to whether they have to be dealt with or not.

When developing the M&E System it would be useful when considering these points to construct an analysis which allows for these three areas to be addressed by the stakeholders and referred back to over the life of the project/programme.

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