Involving Project Staff in Evaluation Planning: The China Open Cities Project

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Sponsors of international development programs have generated a good deal of information about the results of their investments in project reviews and assessments. By and large, they have found that such evaluations more often meet the information needs of the project sponsors than the needs of the various groups involved in the project being evaluated.

To redress the situation, some end of-project assessments are being conducted as learning exercises for the partner organizations involved in the management and delivery of the project activities. These end of project assessment exercises are an experimental process aimed at obtaining better information about project process and performance as well as improved ownership by all concerned about the future use of evaluation recommendations.

In essence, the experimental approach falls within a category of evaluation known as self assessment or empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et. al. 1996) For us, the approach we are using is seen as a learning model for assessment. A learning model goes beyond simply measuring the total impact of a project – it aims at helping all partner organizations become more effective in meeting their own goals as related to their project work. Each partner organization has an opportunity to be both teacher and learner. They have opportunities to learn more about themselves and to teach what they learn to their partners. Also, the partners have an opportunity to learn about "evaluation".   In the self

assessment work we are doing, learning is at the centre of our process.

More specifically, 'self-assessment' is a collaborative process in which project partners define important questions, systematically collect, analyze and present information about the questions , in order to improve the results of their work.   In this way, the 'self-assessment' is an empowering process; an exercise that assumes that the people who have intimate, day-to-day knowledge of the project are best positioned to articulate ways to improve the project. It also builds the capacity of staff to generate and utilize information to achieve better results.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has recently begun to experiment with the self-assessment learning model for project and program assessments. They see a self- assessment process as a positive step in involving stakeholders in the evaluation process; which would intern provide more value for money to them. (Lincoln and Guba, 1989) One example of this experimentation is the Open Cities Project in China. The purpose of this project is to strengthen the capacity of municipalities and training institutions in urban management and economic development. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) is the Canadian partner who works with the Special Economic Zones Office (SEZO) of the People's Republic of China, to implement the Project. Both institutions have had extensive experience with external evaluations and felt many of them to be unsatisfactory.   They were looking for alternative ways to generate useful

information about their management processes and results. CIDA , also, has had some reservation about their evaluation activities. After discussing the self evaluation process with FCM, SEZO and the project monitor (Universalia) , CIDA decided to support the self-assessment of the China Open Cities project as a pilot exercise in having the project partners evaluate their own work. CIDA and the project partners had two overriding concerns at the start-up of the self-assessment work: (1) how to ensure participant ownership of the process while (2) ensuring that the assessment outputs – the data collected, the analysis made and the reports written – were seen by detached government sponsors as credible and objective.

The thinking among the group members was that they could increase the likelihood of addressing both concerns successfully when they took extra care in the planning stage of the self-assessment. This paper describes the process the group followed in planning the assessment, and the issues they dealt with as non-specialists in evaluation and research methodologies.

Methodology

The methodology refers to the design and planning stage of the project self-assessment. Following a few informal discussions about the process over a 3-month period, the work began with a two-day 'planning workshop' in January 1997 and ended with the formal approval of the assessment 'workplan' in May 1997 by the Joint Project Steering Committee – the project's main governing and oversight body.

Preliminary Thinking

The partners began the process in a two-day 'planning workshop' that was meant to help them articulate their objectives for the assessment and the results they expected of it.

Each of the partners described their reasons for getting involved in the process, their past experience with evaluation and self-assessment, their concerns with undertaking the work, and the support that they were looking for from the technical specialists at Universalia. While they were interested in the past performance of the project, they were more focused on how they could use the assessment to help them formulate and deliver a new project. By the end of the workshop, they reached agreement on the general process they would follow in doing the work, the objectives of the exercise, the responsibilities of the people involved, the other resources they would use, and the schedule of activities and outputs.

Issues and Work-Packages

When the partners brainstormed their objectives in carrying out the self-assessment, they identified the performance issues they wanted to address, as well as the uses of the information they would generate, and the type of learning that they were expecting from their participation. They grouped and arranged their 21 objectives into seven main 'issues,' which boiled down to questions about the results of the project, how the management affected the achievement of these results, how the evolving design affected results, how the Canadian and Chinese contexts affected results, and what the return on the investments made by the project partners and sponsors was. The partners also wanted to identify the development and operational lessons learned through the project, and the organizational capacities that were being built through the self-assessment process. They decided to plan and carry out the process in seven 'work-packages' that corresponded to the 'issues' that comprised the self-assessment, rather than planning and carrying out 'one big self-assessment exercise.

Work Planning

FCM and SEZO each identified four people in their organizations who would work on the 'self-assessment team.' The partners each appointed a senior member to represent them on a 'steering committee' with the project officer from CIDA. FCM then gave each of its four team members responsibilities to head up one of the 'work-packages' that dealt with results, project management, project design and project context. A Universalia team member was given responsibilities for the return-on-investment 'work-package,' while the team decided that the lessons learned and capacity building 'issues' were best dealt with in work shops at the end of the process. SEZO decided that its four team members would work in a more traditional manner with responsibilities that cut across all 'work-packages.' The team decided on meeting again during a second planning work shop in Beijing in March.

Conceptual Frameworks, Questions and Reporting

In preparing for, and carrying out, the second planning workshop, the team members focused on defining the content of the self-assessment. This took place at the level of the 'work-package' – by developing conceptual frameworks for describing and assessing each of the 'issues,' and by identifying the main evaluation questions for these 'work-packages.' As part of their internal project monitoring work, some of the team members had previously collected information from past participants about the results of their involvement in the project. This information allowed the team to design a conceptual framework for evaluating the results of the project. They borrowed established frameworks from the literature on project management and strategic planning for the management and context work-packages, respectively. The team members then

identified the four or five main questions that they would need to answer to assess project performance in the particular 'issue.' They then developed the report outlines for the work-packages by incorporating their conceptual frameworks and main questions into a generic template for reporting. They assumed there would be four pieces to any 'work-package' report: a background, a description of the 'issue,' a summary of evaluation findings, and an annex of supporting information and detail.

Sources, Methods and Instrumentation

The team members identified the main sources of information for answering the questions in each of the work-packages. In each case they asked, what information do we have among ourselves, what information do other project stakeholders have, and what information exists in the project documents? They decided to survey past participants in China about the results of the project, while asking individuals to draft 'discussion papers' that addressed specific issues. They identified the sources they could bring together into a focus group and those that would be interviewed individually. They decided to prepare for focus groups and interviews by sharing pertinent 'discussion papers' with the people being interviewed. They agreed to begin drafting the reports straight away, and share the drafts in progress among team members and interested stakeholders.

Results of the Process

The team members have developed a good understanding of the process after a relatively short period of time. They reached agreement on the purpose and general parameters of the exercise by focusing on a set of targeted outputs in the process. They produced a terms of reference for the self-assessment work, which they shared with the assessment steering committee and then with the JPSC. They also produced all of the traditional

components of the work plan – the list of objectives, the evaluation questions, the data collection matrices, the schedules, etc. – for each of the work-packages. Most importantly, they drafted report outlines as a way of establishing a common understanding of the end product in each of the work-packages. They realized that they could then 'manage' the production of the report, rather than managing data collection, analysis and report writing.

Issues and Lessons Learned

Both partner organizations entered the process with concerns about human and financial resources available for carrying out the work. Their concerns were justified as the planning stage alone took over 100 person-days to complete. The organizations were attracted to the exercise in part because they believed only they could get at the data on results. Their organizational cultures encourages learning and active participation. Despite their concern with expending too many resources on the exercise, they would not want to carry it out without a thoroughness in the planning and information gathering processes.

Lesson learned: Self-assessment processes are time- and labour-intensive. The organizations that are attracted to the process might be those that value thoroughness in their learning exercises.

Both partners wanted to get a handle on the process from the outset. They wanted to be clear about where they were going, and straightforward methods for getting there. They decided to break the work down into smaller, manageable pieces, and put the responsibility for those pieces into the hands of individuals. They also wanted to establish a number of milestones in the process so that their progress was clear and laudable to outsiders. They developed a bimonthly 'update' format through which they could

report to stakeholders and appended the products of their work.

Lesson Learned: By breaking the assessment into smaller, individual pieces, and presenting the planning pieces as they are completed, the team members are managing to work at their own paces and seeing the results of their work.

The team members needed to reach agreement on the content of the assessment. They saw the necessity of developing conceptual frameworks for the 'issues,' but they only moved forward in this work once they connected the frameworks to the outlines of the reports they would produce. With the report outlines drafted and agreed upon, the team members were able to plan the methods and design the instruments with greater purpose and clarity.

Lesson learned: Reaching agreement on the final outputs of the process allows the team members to build momentum in working toward the same end.

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