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Embracing Evaluative Thinking for Better Outcomes: Four NGO Case Studies

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Embracing Evaluative Thinking for Better Outcomes:

Four NGO Case Studies



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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

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Preface

Michael Quinn Patton • Utilization-Focused Evaluation • Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA

Evaluation is an activity. Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business. This distinction is critical. It derives from studies of evaluation use. Evaluation is more useful – and actually used – when the program and organizational culture manifests evaluative thinking.

Evaluative thinking involves systematic *results-oriented thinking* about what results are expected, how results can be achieved, what evidence is needed to inform future actions and judgments, and how results can be improved in the future. Evaluative thinking becomes most meaningful when it is embedded in an organization's culture. This means that people in the organization expect to engage with each other in clarifying key concepts, differentiating means and ends, thinking in terms of outcomes, examining the quality of evidence available about effectiveness, and supporting their opinions and judgments with evidence. Evaluative thinking is what characterizes learning organizations. Keeping up with research and evaluation findings becomes part of everyone's job. Inquiring into the empirical basis for assertions about what works and doesn't work becomes standard operating procedure as people in the organization engage with each other and interact with partners and others outside the organization. Critical thinking and reflection are valued and reinforced.

Infusing evaluative thinking into organizational culture involves looking at how decision makers and staff incorporate evaluative inquiry into everything they do as part of ongoing attention to mission fulfillment and continuous improvement. Integrating evaluation into organizational culture means "mainstreaming evaluation," that is, making it central to the work rather than an add-on, end-of-project paperwork mandate.

Indicators that evaluative thinking is embedded in an organization's culture include:

- Evaluative thinking permeates the work so that all involved consciously and constantly reflect on project, program, regional, and organizational experience with a view to implementing improvements based on what is learned.

- Evaluative thinking is demonstrated in the implementation of well-focused programs and in the use of high-quality evaluations that feed into program and organizational decision making.

- Time and resources are allocated for reflection on evaluation findings and using those findings.

The antithesis of evaluative thinking is treating evaluation as a check-it-off compliance activity.

This volume of case studies significantly advances our understanding of what evaluative thinking means in different contexts and evaluation situations. InterAction, the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results for Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA), and the NGOs that participated in these case studies demonstrate a commitment to take evaluation seriously, enhance evaluation capacity through serious attention to evaluative thinking, and thereby enhance evaluation use. Moreover, by publishing these case studies they contribute to the developing profession and practice of evaluation globally. I offer my congratulations and appreciation. This volume sets the stage for the International Year of Evaluation in 2015. It is thus both timely and cutting edge. ■

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Preface

Samuel D Braimah • Executive Director, African Evaluation Association • Accra, Ghana

The development world has never lacked innovative concepts, approaches, or paradigm shifts. In December 2013, the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), CLEAR Anglophone Africa, and InterAction sponsored the Sub-Saharan Africa Practitioner Workshop on Evaluative Thinking and Evaluation Use in Accra, Ghana.

Forty-four participants from 17 international NGOs and 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa attended the workshop. This publication brings together these participants' perspectives and academic discourse on evaluative thinking as well as documented field experiences from across the African continent. The Introduction deals with the definitions of evaluative thinking and posits compelling reasons why development actors, including governments, must understand the concept and embed it in all their structures. The case studies from African countries highlight the different development actors who have integrated evaluative thinking into their development approaches, show how the approach has influenced the review of original plans, and distill lessons learned.

If the influence evaluative thinking has had on the development initiatives described in the case studies is to become sustainable and scaled up, then development actors need to break some norms and chart new paths in their efforts at fighting poverty. The key elements of evaluative thinking – such as developing an attitude of inquisitiveness, believing in the value of evidence, posing thoughtful questions, etc. – must become an integral part of everything they do. The normal trend of evaluations driven by donors and sometimes shackled by limited budgets needs to be replaced by the drive to build a critical mass of evaluative thinkers and by making evaluation the *head* and not the tail of development planning and implementation.

Unless "beneficiaries" develop the practice of asking critical questions that will solicit answers affecting their lives, they will always be spectators in their own development.

It is my sincere hope that this publication will contribute to the new wave of development thinking and practice that puts evaluation at the center of development initiatives. ■

Introduction

By Carlisle Levine

InterAction, the largest association of U.S.-based international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to humanitarian response and development, and the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results for Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) have undertaken a study of international NGO evaluative thinking practices in sub-Saharan Africa.

In this study, four international NGOs[1] present their experiences using evaluative thinking at the organizational, program, and project levels. These NGOs, InterAction, and CLEAR-AA hope that these case studies can offer guidance to other organizations interested in evaluative thinking, as well as serve as examples to donors of the sorts of learning processes international NGOs are using to improve their effectiveness.

In this first chapter, we define evaluative thinking, describe why it is important for organizational effectiveness, and explain how an organization might embed evaluative thinking in its practices. We reference the experiences of the contributing international NGOs as examples, with further information captured in the case studies that follow.

1 These international NGOs include Catholic Relief Services Ethiopia, CARE Rwanda, Plan International Uganda, and Winrock International Kenya.

Evaluative Thinking: Why, What, and Who?

At any given time, how do we know how effective our strategies, operations, or programs are? In other words, how do we assess the quality and value of our work? How do we know how well we are meeting the needs of those for whom we work? How will we know if our efforts are having any unintended effects, positive or negative, and for whom?

Finding out requires more than simply collecting and analyzing monitoring data or undertaking and using evaluations, since monitoring data on its own might not tell a full story, and evaluations might not anticipate and respond to all relevant questions. We also need to explore questions of quality,

value, and importance, as well as how they inform our assumptions, judgments about what is good or not, and decision making.

To ensure that our activities effectively respond to existing needs, all involved parties must be engaged in ongoing reflection that examines context, activities, and results (both intended and unintended). This ongoing reflection requires identifying and questioning our assumptions (including assumptions about quality and what we think matters to people). Gathering evidence to test these assumptions might include interviewing colleagues, intervention participants, community members, donors and other stakeholders; collecting focus group or survey data; reviewing documentation; conducting an evaluation or study; and/or analyzing statistics. Reflecting on this evidence and how we interpret it in light of our evaluation criteria can take place through regularly scheduled or specifically set up review meetings. This evidence and the outcomes of reflection processes can then be used to inform strategic decision making. In this way, we are applying evaluative thinking.

The exact definition of evaluative thinking is evolving. There is no universal agreement on what it entails. There are still questions about its relationship to similar concepts, such as reflective practice and critical thinking. Our definition emerged through input provided by InterAction members at a workshop[2] and builds on a number of definitions provided by experts in the field.

Evaluative thinking is ideally embedded in an organization. It applies to all aspects

Evaluative thinking is ongoing, systematic inquiry and learning about quality and perceptions of what is important. It is aimed at informing decisions to improve performance and results. It involves establishing processes that include:

- Identifying our assumptions and defining the values that will inform our judgments about what counts as good or bad performance;
- Posing thoughtful questions that challenge our assumptions and how we make judgments;
- Pursuing deeper understanding through evidence gathering;
- Reflecting on those questions and the evidence gathered from various perspectives, including those of people intended to benefit from an activity or intervention, to make a judgment of value;
- Considering what is not evident and unintended effects;
- Making evidence-based, transparent decisions; and
- Taking action.

(based on A. Baker and B. Bruner (2012); J. Buckley and T. Archibald (2013); M.Q. Patton (2013); McKegg and King (2013))

2 The African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), CLEAR-AA and InterAction-sponsored Sub-Saharan Africa Practitioner Workshop on Evaluative Thinking and Evaluation Use took place in Accra, Ghana in December 2013. Forty-four participants from 17 INGOs and 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa attended the workshop.

of an organization's work: organizational processes, strategy, programs, and projects; it involves all staff, including management, program, finance, and administration. In embracing evaluative thinking, all members of an organization seek to better understand intervention logic, underlying assumptions, processes, and what success would look like from different perspectives, and then consider alternatives in order to optimize results.

Attitude and the connection to action are, in our experience, key to the effective practice of evaluative thinking. Evaluative thinking requires a willingness and flexibility to continuously question the way things are done and the assumptions about quality that underlie them, as well as how different stakeholders value what is being achieved. It also must be linked to action, since at its core, evaluative thinking is aimed at helping us make better decisions that lead to more positive development outcomes.

Evaluative Thinking: How?

Enabling Environment

Evaluative thinking is facilitated when it takes place within a conducive enabling environment. Environments are created or allowed by governments with which international NGOs partner, donors who fund international NGOs' activities, and the partnerships and networks within which international NGOs operate.

Governments

Governments can influence an NGO's use of evaluative thinking, since NGOs often partner with them in their work, and they may require NGOs to report according to the data required by their monitoring systems. When governments are not intervention partners, they are intervention stakeholders, since interventions and their results have implications for government's plans.

Governments demonstrate their openness to evaluative thinking in the degree of transparency they demonstrate in their decision making, as well as the degree of transparency they demand from contractors and others who benefit from government or donor funding. Transparency allows the public to see and understand the data and values on which decisions are based and helps to create a positive environment for evaluative thinking.

Governments also demonstrate their openness to evaluative thinking through their tolerance of criticism and their willingness to hear different points of view. Parts of governments that are willing to experiment with new policies and approaches and openly learn about their benefits and drawbacks are similarly more likely to encourage or enable evaluative thinking.

To foster or engage in evaluative thinking with government partners depends on the relationships that international NGOs establish with them. In these relationships, governments, citizens, and international NGOs seek to promote questioning, evidence gathering, and reflection about quality and value that responds to the interests of each, without harming the relationships that exist among them.

Evaluative Thinking: Some Supportive Factors[3]

Enabling Environment

- Governments that are open to questioning and different perspectives
- Donors that are open to questioning and are flexible in their funding
- Trust-based relationships with government, donors, peer organizations, and communities
- Functioning national or regional evaluation networks

Organizational

- Organizational culture supportive of inquiry, reflection, and learning
- Leadership and senior management support for evaluative thinking
- Influential organizational champions for evaluative thinking
- Strategies, policies, and practices that encourage questioning, reflection, and evidence-based decision making
- Staff dedicated to promoting evaluative thinking
- Budget dedicated for evaluative thinking activities
- Job descriptions and performance plans that prioritize and reward evaluative thinking
- Investments in staff's evaluative thinking capacities
- Processes that engage partner organizations and communities in evaluative thinking processes

Individual

- Staff attitude and mindset, including willingness to question assumptions and seek evidence
- Staff knowledge and skills for engaging in evaluative thinking, including skills related to listening, facilitation, and participatory monitoring and evaluation
- Membership or participation in M&E networks or associations

3 This list of supportive factors and the remainder of this chapter build on information gathered from InterAction members participating in the Sub-Saharan Africa Practitioner Workshop on Evaluative Thinking and Evaluation Use.

In many cases, government officials may feel pressure from citizens to demonstrate accountability. To give these officials options beyond acquiescence or resistance, and to increase the chances that evidence will be used, NGOs need to work with both government officials and citizens to reach consensus on vision, standards of performance, and how progress will be measured. Ongoing communication can allow government officials to also have ownership of the reflection process and the desired actions that emerge from it.

Donors

Donors can positively or negatively affect evaluative thinking. On the positive side, donors can push organizations to really think through the changes they are trying to influence and the effectiveness of their strategies in doing so. They can also support evaluative thinking by having flexible funding structures or allowing organizations to adjust their programs based on evidence.

On the negative side, donor rigidity or demand for quick results can impede evaluative thinking by not allowing space for reflection about quality and value and making adjustments. In these situations, organizations are forced to stick to a plan and implement at full throttle, doing and not thinking. This may result in an intervention that meets targets but not objectives, or that fails to maximize its contribution to positive development outcomes. The organization might also be unable to anticipate and respond to unintended results, positive or negative.

With donors, international NGOs committed to evaluative thinking seek to establish trust-based relationships that allow for reflection, learning, responsiveness, and flexibility. They seek to foster a culture of questioning the quality and value of what they are doing and contributing to, rather than focus on narrow reporting on predefined objectives.

> **"Indicators can be deceiving. We need to check to see if objectives are really being achieved."**
>
> – **Theophile Twahirwa**, CARE Rwanda

> **"Evaluative thinking helps you see what is not seen when developing and implementing a program."**
>
> – **Barrack Bosire**, Winrock International, Kenya

Civil Society Partners and Networks

Civil society might contain strategic civil society partners, networks, or technical working groups that champion or are committed to evaluative thinking. It may contain coordination bodies that bring together international and national NGOs with donors, UN agencies, and government entities to reflect on the quality and value of interventions. International NGOs should play a role strengthening these networks, working groups, and coordination bodies, and fostering their use of evaluative thinking.

Organizational Environment

Organizational Culture

Within an organization, promoting evaluative thinking begins with the organizational culture, the attitudes and values of staff, and the level of trust that exists among staff

and between staff and management. Is the organization results-focused? Is there tolerance for mistakes and a willingness to learn from them? Does the organizational culture allow for experimentation and failure? Is there a reward system in place to recognize innovation and learning? Are staff encouraged to ask questions and identify assumptions?

Champions of Evaluative Thinking

Overcoming resistance to change, which is an inherent result of applying evaluative thinking, takes time and often requires senior management support. Thus, champions of evaluative thinking are critical for advancing it within an organization. Ideally, leadership and senior management demonstrate their commitment to evaluative thinking and drive it. Alternatively, unit and team leaders may champion evaluative thinking within their spheres of influence.

Staff Dedicated to Promoting Evaluative Thinking

Having staff dedicated to evaluation and the promotion of evaluative thinking, as well as their placement within an organizational structure, affect the integration of evaluative thinking within an organization. Many organizations have some variation on a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) or program quality and learning department. Where these staff members are part of senior management or are well positioned to influence senior management, an organization is more likely to advance evaluative thinking. Having M&E staff within field offices and affiliated with different units within an organization also helps to ensure that evaluative thinking will permeate all parts of an organization, as they are closer to activities and are better positioned to catalyze evaluative thinking among staff associated with them.

For M&E staff to effectively promote evaluative thinking, their roles, responsibilities, and authorities must be clear. Coordination among monitoring and evaluation staff, other staff members, and leadership also must be well established. Finally, the organization must budget adequately not only for M&E functions and activities, but also for activities specifically aimed at promoting evaluative thinking.

At the same time, evaluative thinking cannot be left to M&E specialists alone. It must be the responsibility of everyone in an organization. M&E staff may encourage evaluative thinking practices and facilitate evaluative thinking processes. However, staff directly involved in initiatives may be the first to know when questions about quality and value need to be raised. They also offer a critical perspective when one is questioning intervention assumptions, gathering evidence, and deciding on alternative approaches.

CARE Rwanda **involved project staff as data collectors** as a way to spur their questioning and engage them in reflection on intervention assumptions and practices.

Strategies, Policies, Processes, and Practices

Ideally, an organization incorporates evaluative thinking into its strategies, and mandates reflection through its policies, processes, and practices. Accountabilities and feedback mechanisms between staff and management need to be designed to encourage questioning and learning. Having a monitoring and evaluation policy and a dynamic monitoring and evaluation system can provide a structure to support evaluative thinking. Staff can then build opportunities to practice evaluative thinking into processes, program designs, and M&E plans, and can be involved in these from design through dissemination. Some have suggested that, in designing processes and interventions, focusing on theories of change can help staff think about assumptions related to quality, value, and importance, and how activities contribute to results. Theories of change should be developed in collaboration with communities and other stakeholders, whose perspectives should not only play a role in determining what and how things are done, but also how things should be valued.

In CRS Ethiopia's case, **technical working groups** for each intermediate result were established to meet every two months. They analyze data provided by program participants to determine how effective the intervention is from the perspective of those intended to benefit from it. The information moves up and is incorporated into reflective thinking at each level and then links back to communities.

Evidence that an organization supports evaluative thinking may be seen in the following:

- Does an organization have a learning agenda that incorporates evaluative thinking?
- Is there a budget to support evaluative thinking activities?
- Does an organization engage in processes, such as strategic planning and evaluation, that create opportunities for questioning practices and reviewing approaches?
- Are staff who are directly involved in the implementation of a process or initiative also involved in data collection, analysis, synthesis of evidence about quality and value, and presentation as a way to enhance their own learning?
- Are there processes in place for ensuring data quality?
- Are evaluation findings documented and disseminated?
- Is there space for reflection in the form of regular review meetings, reflection workshops, after action reviews or learning platforms? Is there broad participation in those spaces?
- Do management and staff rely on evaluation findings and other forms of evidence to inform decision making?
- Are decisions made transparently, so that all staff understand the values and evidence that informed them?

- Do all affected staff take part in decision-making processes?

Investing in Staff's Evaluative Thinking Capacities

Once an organization has established a conducive culture; leadership commitment; dedicated M&E staff; a budget; and strategies, policies, processes, and practices that support evaluative thinking, then it can fruitfully invest in building its staff's evaluative thinking capacities. This may involve developing and disseminating guidance documents, holding regular evaluation and evaluative thinking capacity-building workshops for staff, integrating evaluative thinking into technical and sectoral workshops, creating platforms – face-to-face or virtual – for information sharing and learning, offering mentorship in evaluative thinking, and creating a network or working groups dedicated to promoting evaluative thinking.

Building the capacities of staff, local partners and community members to adopt evaluative thinking practices, as described above, is often thwarted by short project durations that limit engagement. With this in mind, organizations that seriously value evaluative thinking need to identify ways to engage staff, partners, and community members beyond the limitations imposed by a project. As with all of the activities described above, this may demand the investment of core funds and staff time beyond project parameters.

Engaging in Evaluative Thinking with Partner Organizations

When initiatives involve partner organizations, then advancing evaluative thinking also demands promoting it with partners. This can happen through involving partners in intervention assessment and design, as well as synchronizing relevant tools, processes, and systems. Holding regular program-level review meetings to identify the different values about performance from donor and community perspectives; systematically applying different sources of evidence to questions about quality and performance; and encouraging making sense of and reflecting on results and new learning to inform decisions is essential to embedding evaluative thinking into program implementation.

Engaging in Evaluative Thinking with Community Members

Where community members are involved in initiatives or where they are supposed to ultimately benefit from an initiative, involving them in evaluative thinking related to the initiative can help ensure its appropriateness and effectiveness from their perspectives. For example, they can be involved in validating the theory of change from multiple perspectives and encouraging the sustainability of its results. This can mean greater community participation in assessments, intervention designs, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Feedback mechanisms such as satisfaction surveys, comments boxes, and complaints response mechanisms can

> **"Unless participants develop the practice of asking critical questions that will solicit answers affecting their lives, they will always be spectators in their own development."**
>
> – **Samuel Braimah**,
> Executive Director,
> African Evaluation Association

In Plan Uganda's **Community Strengthening and Inclusion (CSI) planning approach**, community members are involved in action research and assessments, a visioning process, developing a community action plan, an oversight committee, reflection and action planning, and designing and implementing an M&E plan. Community members' participation in action research helps them identify people with needs, better include them, and respond to their needs. It also helps them identify the resources required to respond to those needs. The creation of CSI committees helps ensure sustainability of the approach and promote community cohesion.

provide community members, partners, and organizational staff with evidence that can help them identify and question assumptions and practices. Community members may also be able to suggest better ways of measuring the success of an intervention.

Individual Capacities

A number of characteristics have been identified as critical for allowing individuals to engage in evaluative thinking.

Staff members must have attitudes that are open and willing to questioning assumptions, receiving feedback, reviewing, and revising practices. They must be curious about what is going on, how things work, and how they might work better. They must be committed to investing time and effort into questioning, gathering evidence, reflecting, and participating in decision-making processes.

Since engaging in evaluative thinking in organizational and development settings often is done with others – whether colleagues, other NGOs or CSOs, government officials, or community members – doing so successfully depends on having good relationships. These relationships must be based on trust; agreement regarding desired outcomes; and a commitment to questioning, evidence collection, reflection, and revision that will help ensure that interventions are optimized to achieve their goals.

To lead evaluative thinking processes, staff must have monitoring and evaluation knowledge, particularly regarding participatory approaches if they wish to advance these processes with populations lacking formal education. Additionally, they need evaluative thinking skills, such as facilitation, analysis, and communication.

Organizations can help promote staff evaluative thinking capacities through a number of means. Management can include evaluative thinking in job descriptions, contracts, and performance plans. Management can also clarify how roles, particularly monitoring and evaluation roles, relate to others to help create a framework for interaction around evaluative thinking. Leadership can raise awareness about evaluative thinking and motivate staff to engage in it through example, by asking questions and by creating spaces for reflection. Monitoring and evaluation staff can help management create tools, such

as those associated with review processes, designed to facilitate evaluative thinking. They can also provide relevant training materials and training opportunities. Management can create opportunities to learn from experience. External consultants can be brought in, when their additional skills and perspectives are required, to work alongside staff.

Beyond the capacity-building opportunities offered through their organizations, staff can further build their evaluative thinking skills through participation in evaluation networks and sharing experiences through network discussions, webinars, case study exchanges, and journals. ■

The Cases that Follow

The chapters that follow present four case studies from four international NGOs. The cases focus on experiences using evaluative thinking at the project and organizational levels. Case writers provide overviews of the projects or organizations on which they are focusing and explain why their organizations decided to integrate evaluative thinking into their work, although at the time they did not necessarily give what they were doing that name. The cases go on to describe the organizations' evaluative thinking processes and the decisions they informed; identify factors that enabled evaluative thinking in their organizations, as well as challenges they faced; and provide lessons learned useful beyond their organizational contexts. The final chapter synthesizes the findings from the four cases and presents areas for further research.

For each of the international NGOs included in this study, the experiences they describe of using evaluative thinking are relatively new. CRS Ethiopia institutionalized evaluative thinking within a consortium of NGOs to better achieve program objectives. CARE Rwanda is using evaluative thinking to ensure that a project not only achieves its targets, but also achieves its objectives. Plan Uganda has piloted an evaluative thinking approach with community members to contribute to better community development outcomes. Winrock International Kenya is using evaluative thinking together with project participants and their donor to ensure that their project design and implementation approaches meet project participants' needs.

In CARE Rwanda's case, an opportunity to engage in evaluative thinking was created during a **country presence review**.

In CRS Ethiopia's case, a program evaluation **revealed errors** that CRS wanted to correct in order to achieve the program's objectives.

Each organization's institutionalization of evaluative thinking continues to evolve. No organization would be expected to have in place all of the pieces described in this chapter. Rather, the cases captured in this study offer views of how different evaluative thinking processes are emerging, with each a work in progress. From the studies, readers can gather ideas to help them think about building evaluative thinking into their own organizations. We are most grateful to the organizations represented in these cases for sharing their experiences to date and allowing us to learn from them. ■

CRS Ethiopia:

Evaluative Thinking in Ethiopia Joint Emergency Operations Program (JEOP) in Ethiopia

By Anley Mihret • Catholic Relief Services Ethiopia

Introduction

The main objective of this case study is to share Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Ethiopia's experience using participatory evaluative thinking to improve corn soya blended (CSB) utilization. A secondary objective is to get constructive feedback regarding the participatory evaluative thinking approach. The study is based on evidence gathered from seven NGOs[1] that form a consortium implementing the Joint Emergency Operations Program (JEOP), a two-year Title II[2] emergency food aid program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

As this study illustrates, participatory evaluative thinking processes and the use of evidence to inform decisions can significantly help a program reach its intended objectives. The major achievement of the JEOP's evaluative thinking process was to improve the CSB utilization practice of eligible groups: children aged 6-59 months and pregnant and lactating women (PLW). JEOP leadership made changes in the program's strategic direction based on evidence it gathered, leading to improved CSB utilization and achieving the program objective to prevent malnutrition among the target groups.



CSB orientation and demonstration session provided by health extension worker at health center in Shalla woreda to caregivers/mothers. (Photo: Meseret Assegid)

1 The consortium, led by CRS, includes CARE, Food for the Hungry Ethiopia (FHE), Save the Children International (SCI), World Vision Ethiopia (WV), the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), and GOAL. CRS implements through its local Catholic Church partners, the Hararghe Catholic Secretariat (HCS) and the Meki Catholic Secretariat (MCS). As the lead agency, CRS is responsible for overall consortium management.

2 Title II is the USAID/Food for Peace Emergency and Private Assistance Programs, which provide for the direct donation of U.S. agricultural commodities for emergency relief and development programs.

Program Description

To respond to ongoing emergency food needs, the Ethiopian government's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) leads emergency response efforts through the Disaster Risk Management and Food Security Sector (DRMFSS) office. Since 2002, the World Food Program (WFP) and international NGOs, including CRS, have been the Ethiopian government's primary partners in providing emergency food. In 2010, a group of seven international and local NGOs, led by CRS, formed a consortium to provide emergency food assistance through the Extended Joint Emergency Operational Plan (EXT-JEOP).

The EXT-JEOP was developed to ensure a steady pipeline of emergency food, building on CRS's logistics and commodity management capacity, and was implemented from August 2010 to July 2012. The EXT-JEOP partners provided emergency food in 70 Woredas[3] preapproved by USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) across six regions[4] and the special administrative district of Dire Dawa. As a result of this experience and lessons learned in increasing efficiency and effectiveness, USAID/FFP extended the EXT-JEOP program to incorporate additional components, including a CSB utilization strategy. In August 2012 the EXT-JEOP became the Joint Emergency Operations Program (JEOP), and it continues to be implemented by the consortium led by CRS.

3 Woreda/district is the third-level administrative divisions of Ethiopia. A Woreda is composed of a number of wards, or neighborhood associations (Kebele), which are the smallest unit of local government in Ethiopia.

4 Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, SNNPR, Somali and Tigray.

The JEOP is also a two-year (2012-2014) program; its overall goal is to protect the lives and livelihoods of emergency-affected rural Ethiopians. The program provides emergency food assistance and livelihood support to vulnerable communities in drought-prone areas of Ethiopia to increase their resilience to drought and food insecurity. JEOP operates in 77 Woredas located in 22 zones of six regions of the country, representing more than 90% of geographic coverage of the former EXT-JEOP.

As part of its intervention, and following the Ethiopian government's emergency targeting guidelines, the JEOP program distributes CSB as a supplementary food to prevent malnutrition among all members of groups most vulnerable to malnutrition: children aged 6-59 months and PLW. The JEOP program targets transitory or acute food insecure households through a targeting process led by the Ethiopian government's DRMFSS office.

However, information from various sources including post-distribution monitoring (PDM), self-assessments, donor program reviews, field visits, final evaluation reports, and a rapid assessment undertaken by a nutrition consultant, identified critical problems in CSB utilization, particularly related to ration dilution, overfeeding, and improper preparation of CSB. Targeted groups received CSB with other general food rations and without adequate information about its use. As a result, they used CSB as a primary food source and shared it with family members ineligible for the CSB allocation. Thus, the intended CSB beneficiaries were consuming insufficient quantities of CSB, preventing its optimal nutritional impact.

When CRS and its partners became aware of these findings, they realized that they needed to make changes to increase the program's effectiveness. This led the consortium to reconsider how it had been using monitoring and evaluation and to take a more evaluative thinking approach.

Evaluative Thinking Process

With the goal of making better progress in reducing malnutrition in PLW and children aged 6-59 months, CRS and its partners decided to focus on the following positions, structures, and processes.

Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator

The coordination of implementing partners' M&E activities reduces the information gap and data inconsistency and helps inform decision makers on time. In August 2010, the EXT-JEOP steering committee (composed of directors and program managers of consortium members) decided to hire a monitoring and evaluation coordinator to oversee and coordinate all consortium M&E activities and to address the problems identified in previous emergency assistance programs by developing an effective M&E system. Started in August 2012, the JEOP M&E system includes PDM, which is described in detail below; quarterly joint monitoring and household visits; and a consistent M&E system that consolidates information on behavior change communication (BCC), nutrition technical assistance, and compliance with memorandums of understanding (MoUs) related to standards and modalities for food distributions signed with each consortium member. The M&E Coordinator consolidates partner data into useful reports for decision-making and chairs the M&E Technical Working Group, which is described below. As needed, the M&E Coordinator also provides technical support and capacity building support to the M&E staff of consortium members. While the M&E Coordinator reports directly to the Deputy Chief of Party/Program Quality, the coordinator also receives significant technical input from CRS's East Africa regional technical advisor for M&E to guide program monitoring and evaluation activities. The introduction of an M&E coordinator helped the program have an effective and functional monitoring and evaluation system, get timely information for decision making, enhance learning and reflection sessions among partners, and develop data collection tools (particularly for CSB PDM surveys conducted three times a year).

Consortium Program Management Structure: Technical Working Groups

To support the management of the JEOP program, consortium members decided to establish technical working groups for each program objective. These include working groups on: M&E, CSB, program management, commodity management/ logistics, food monitoring, and early warning. Every technical working group reports to the core management working group, which is composed of program managers. The core management working group then reports to the steering committee, which makes decisions based on the information provided.

The technical working groups comprise the

technical specialists of each partner, and each serves a specific function. For instance, the CSB technical working group is a group of nutrition specialists from the seven JEOP partners and is led by the CRS-JEOP BCC & nutrition advisor. The M&E technical working group is composed of M&E specialists from each JEOP partner and is led by the CRS-JEOP M&E Coordinator.

The technical working groups meet every two months to reflect on critical findings, issues, concerns, and challenges. After these internal reflection sessions, the groups share information with the communities. Each group then prepares an action plan based on the recommendations of the community and staff at the grassroots level, so that program participants receive better services. Issues that require decisions are forwarded to the core management group, which makes those decisions after discussions with the donor and concerned government offices. In addition, for each technical working group reflection session, the technical working group documents the topics discussed and action plans developed, as well as the results of regular PDM processes, discussions and results.

Implementing Partners' Organizational Structures

In addition to this consortium program management structure, each implementing partner has its own organizational structure up to the district level. At the district level, project managers, officers, food monitors, and distributors work closely with government officials – such as health extension workers – and the community.

All monitoring and evaluation information is collected from program participants at the community level and then aggregated at the district level and shared with partners. Partners report to CRS, and the technical working group discusses the information and offers decisions at different levels. The feedback system mirrors this information flow: once the information is compiled, it is shared with the community through partners and staff at the grassroots level.

A Key Data Collection and Reflection Process: Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM)

PDM is a systematic investigation that allows programs and projects to monitor beneficiary and partner perceptions of the program implementation and food delivery process. CRS began using PDM as a process monitoring tool in 2011 with the EXT-JEOP program. This tool helped the emergency program become much more results-oriented, primarily due to the timeliness of the data it provides.

PDM is conducted following each monthly round of food distribution. In this case, the data collection checklist was developed by the M&E technical working group. Information is collected through focus group discussions. According to set standards, each partner conducts six cluster focus group discussions immediately following each food distribution. The cluster groups comprise two groups, one male and one female, with discussions held separately. Focus group participants are systematically selected from JEOP beneficiary lists using a random sampling technique. This monthly PDM provides information on food aid utilization and

issues related to quality and quantity; it also assesses beneficiary satisfaction with the registration and distribution process, detects shortcomings, and provides relevant data for decision making.

In addition to these monthly focus group discussions, all JEOP implementing partners conduct a quarterly CSB PDM survey. The survey focuses on caregivers' CSB utilization practices and uses a house-to-house survey method using the Lot Quality Assurance Sampling (LQAS) technique. The main objective of CSB PDM is to regularly assess changes in knowledge and practice in CSB utilization by beneficiaries.

PDM is an important M&E tool for getting firsthand information from beneficiaries. Each partner produces a PDM report after each food distribution round is completed and submits it to CRS. The CRS M&E unit critically reviews each partner's reports and produces one consolidated report for the core management working group described in the previous section. This group makes any needed decisions and also provides feedback to each partner. In addition to sharing the consolidated report with the core management working group, major findings are presented in M&E technical working group meetings.

Actions Taken as a Result of Evaluative Thinking

During the new JEOP design phase, CSB was one of the priority issues taken into consideration. All implementing partners were involved in the design process in December 2011, during which an ideal theory of change was discussed. In EXT-JEOP,[5] the theory of change stated the program objective in two strategic objectives as:

Strategic Objective 1: Flexible assistance and support provided to anticipate and respond rapidly to the food needs of both Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) and Non-PSNP emergency-affected Ethiopians in NGO operational presence Woredas with following Intermediate Results: 1) Forecasting/early warning – Data collection of NGOs contributes to FEWSNET; analysis; communication to trigger release of resources in a timely manner; 2) Targeted population accesses sufficient and appropriate food in a timely way.

Strategic Objective 2: Depletion of household assets in targeted communities prevented with following Intermediate Result: 1) Productive assets of household protected from liquidation due to shock.

However, based on the issues with CSB utilization identified through the PDM surveys and self-assessment reports, the consortium modified the theory of change for the current JEOP.[6] In this new theory of change, CSB utilization is recognized as a priority issue by including it as an intermediate result. It had not been included in the previous program, EXT-JEOP, at this level. The strategic objectives in the current JEOP are:

5 The Extended Joint Emergency Operation Plan (EXT JEOP) – Project proposal submitted to USAID/FFP on November 18, 2009 and revised on February 17, March 31, and April 5, 2010.

6 Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP) – Project proposal submitted to USAID/FFP on June 29, 2012.

Strategic Objective 1: Transitory food insecure populations have met their emergency food needs with three Intermediate Results including CSB Utilization strategy:

1. Targeted communities and project stakeholders use functional participatory Early Warning and Response System.

2. Targeted populations access a sufficient full basket of food in a timely manner.

3. PLW and children 6-59 months appropriately use supplementary fortified blended food per government of Ethiopia guidelines.

Strategic Objective 2: Targeted households protect their assets with two following Intermediate Results:

1. Targeted household have increased access to financial services.

2. Timely conditional food transfers reduce stress sales of livestock in targeted households.

The rationale for developing this theory of change was the recognition that the EXT-JEOP program had not met the intended objective of CSB. The stakeholders involved in developing the new theory of change were implementing partners, government stakeholders, donors, and the community, all of which provided valuable information. The major sources of information for developing the theory or logic for CSB utilization were regular PDM, self-assessments (which fed into the working group structure) and USAID program reviews.

The current JEOP proposed the following activities under this intermediate result to address the critical problem of CSB utilization (ration dilution, overfeeding, and improper preparation of CSB) and to improve optimal nutritional impact:

- Develop locally appropriate BCC and training materials, such counseling cards;

- Train partner staff on CSB utilization strategy;

- Train focal JEOP partner staff for health facility workers (HFWs) trainings;

- Provide training for roll-out of CSB preparation;

- Conduct demonstration sessions on CSB preparation and use with CSB beneficiaries at the village level;

- Conduct meetings with the food security task force (FSTF) and general food distribution (GFD) committees on CSB standards and use at the household level;

- Conduct CSB Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM) jointly with health extension workers (HEWs);

- Create linkages between JEOP GFD and emergency nutrition interventions in the target areas through sharing of information on general health and nutrition.

These activities derived from detailed problem analysis during design phase with all



CSB in CRS primary distribution point warehouse in Nazareth. (Photo: JM Bihizi)

partners, including government stakeholders. Introduction of these activities brought significant change on optimal nutritional impact and forced beneficiaries to pay closer attention to the issue of CSB utilization.

Other major changes made to the program as a result of the evaluative thinking process include:

- Changes in the program organization structure to include nutrition specialists for each partner. For instance, the BCC/ nutrition advisor position was created to focus on CSB utilization practices and behavior change communication, and each partner assigned staff responsible for the nutrition component of JEOP in orienting HFWs and HEWs on CSB utilization and preparation and delivery of messages for caregivers at food distribution centers.

- The creation of linkages between JEOP GFD and other emergency nutrition interventions and programs in the targeted areas. CRS and partners establish better coordination between GFD and emergency nutrition interventions to track malnourished children admitted into Outpatient Therapeutic Programs (OTP) and refer them as CSB beneficiaries. Households of children discharged from OTP should continue to receive GFD rations and CSB to prevent relapse.

- The creation of linkages with HFWs and HEWs. After the BCC tools were developed, the HEWs are using these tools to create awareness among household caregivers on how improved CSB usage can protect children aged 6-59 months and PLW from malnutrition.

All of the changes above were decided by the core management group with input from the technical working groups based on discussions with each partner. It was also important to secure approval from USAID as the donor and to reach agreement with government stakeholders involved in the CSB strategy implementation process.

These decisions made using evaluative thinking processes affected the outcome of the program. The CSB utilization practices of the targeted community have improved, and the program is now on track to meet its objectives. The positive results are due to BCC tools and orientation sessions provided to HEWs and caregivers. They understand the objective of CSB food and have enough knowledge about who is eligible for CSB, how to prepare and when to feed CSB food. Though a formal nutritional impact study is needed to confirm these outcomes, the

physical condition of children indicates they are found in good nutritional status. The OTP case in JEOP operational Woredas is significantly reduced as compared to non-JEOP operational Woredas in the same region. The following table shows the CSB PDM survey results for the major indicators used to measure progress regarding the knowledge of caregivers in preparation and feeding practices:

Indicator	Quarter I (baseline)	Quarter II
% caregivers practicing proper CSB preparation	16	45.4
% caregivers practicing proper CSB feeding	28	44
% caregivers practicing proper CSB utilization	7.3	30.3

Source: Second round CSB PDM survey report, July 2013.

Factors that Enabled Evaluative Thinking

The emergency food assistance program had already been going since 2002, and through these years it addressed the immediate food needs of vulnerable to save lives. Over time, however, the emergency program developed by the Ethiopian government and its partners became results-oriented due to the slow-onset nature of the food insecurity. Side-by-side program quality and accountability issues became a priority for implementing organizations. The establishment of technical working groups and prioritizing the introduction of M&E into emergency programming are major factors that enable evaluative thinking. CRS and its partners recognized that to achieve the program's intended goal, monitoring and evaluative thinking had to become part and parcel of the program. Some of the factors enabling evaluative thinking included:

- The willingness to learn from previous implementation. Both failure and success can help implementing organizations come to evaluative thinking process.

- The existence of a monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) policy. In the CRS MEAL policy, the accountability and learning component in particular helps to more fully engage CRS and its partners in evaluative thinking process. Learning and accountability form the core point of evaluative thinking.

- The donor's focus on monitoring and evaluation, with more requirements for emergency program implementing partners to regularly submit results that were achieved through developed Indicator Performance Tracking Table (IPTT) and detailed implementation plans (DIPs).

- The willingness of implementing partners to incorporate evaluative thinking processes in the emergency program and to contribute their own expertise – for example, participation in technical working groups and adopting Simple Measurement of Indicators for Learning and Evidence-based Reporting (SMILER) M&E approach developed for JEOP.

- Organizational structure of CRS as lead agency and partners – for instance,

CRS's creation of an M&E position for the emergency program.

- Commitment of the senior management team to the evaluative thinking process.

Challenges to Using Evaluative Thinking

The greatest challenge to practicing evaluative thinking was bringing partners with different organizational cultures and objectives to the same page. Most partners did not take the emergency program as seriously as other development programs, seeing it simply as distributing emergency food aid. Specific challenges included:

- Partners generally think in terms of their organizational objectives, so bringing everyone to common ground for the project is difficult. The technical working group system and some revised strategic directions facilitated this for both JEOP program and implementing the CSB strategy.

- Introducing an evaluative thinking culture in partner organizations. Evaluative thinking is an intentional, constant process of questioning, reflecting, thinking critically, learning, and adapting. While learning is at the essence of evaluative thinking, adopting one partner's thinking or behaviors can be challenging. To bring all partners into agreement, CRS identified evaluative thinking capacity gaps within partner staff, provided training, and arranged continuous orientation sessions, particularly for project managers and M&E staff.

Sustainability of Evaluative Thinking

The evaluative thinking process will be sustained through the technical working group structures established for each component of the JEOP program. This structure is the main strategy that informs the group's decision making in the evaluative thinking process. To ensure its sustainability, CRS has:

- Rolled out its M&E system to all partners and established a participatory M&E approach;

- Identified partners' capacity gaps and provided training to partner staff, particularly in M&E systems;

- Strengthened learning events – CRS organized learning events every month with all program and support staff;

- Allocated a sufficient budget for M&E, learning and documentation, and reflection sessions of each technical working group.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Evaluative thinking relies on the flow of information critical for decisions about outcomes. This information flow offers a framework for connecting evaluation with the insights that decision makers want for reflection and an adaptive response.

If evaluative thinking efforts are to inform an organization's decision-making practices, then there needs to be a comprehensive strategy for

evaluative thinking to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability. A strategic approach to evaluative thinking requires a clear vision for evaluation; a culture that fosters individual, group, and organizational learning; and a supportive environment. The establishment of technical working groups, which considers professional mix, allowed CRS Ethiopia JEOP program to put in place a process that allowed evidence-based decision making.

Key lessons from this process include:

- The JEOP program is complex and widespread. CRS, as the lead agency, gave due attention to management issues by allocating sufficient budget and time for review of project achievements. Allocating enough resources for learning sessions – such as technical working group meetings, reflection sessions organized after PDM surveys, quarterly reports, and the mid-term evaluation – greatly increased the program's ability to achieve its intended objective. After each reflection session, each technical working group develops action plans based on the recommendations from different M&E findings. Each partner is responsible for implementing the action plan, and CRS closely monitors its implementation status.

- Encouraging partners to share their experiences facilitates learning and enhances program effectiveness. For example, the JEOP program adopted PDM tools from one of the consortium members.

- Sharing information with all stakeholders, particularly with those responsible for making decisions, is crucial to making evaluative thinking processes effective.

- Creating a learning environment is very important. The bimonthly technical meetings and the reflection sessions enable partners to learn from the findings and experiences of partners in different areas of intervention.

- Evidence-based decision making improves program outcomes, putting the program on the right track to achieve the intended goal. In this case, the outcome of the program, particularly in terms of CSB utilization, improved. ■

Plan Uganda:

Community Strengthening and Inclusion Planning: An Evaluative Thinking Approach for Effective Project Implementation

By Julius Batemba and Angella Agado • Plan International Uganda

Introduction

In 2011, Plan Uganda received a five-year grant from the Australian government's AusAID department to implement the Promoting Rights and Accountabilities in African Communities (PRAAC) project. The PRAAC project, implemented in the districts of Kampala (Kawempe division), Kamuli, and Lira, focuses on increasing access to legal and socioeconomic rights by the most marginalized people (young people aged 10-24 years, women of all ages, and people with disabilities). Prior to implementation of the project, a situational analysis was conducted using participatory learning and action (PLA) research methodologies. Various tools[1] were used to generate understanding of participants' access to their legal rights, determinants of access to rights and services, levels of legal knowledge among the most marginalized people, and the prevalent legal service providers in the communities.

The results were revealing: the PRAAC Baseline Report found that the most marginalized people, the category of interest for the project, were excluded from participation in development initiatives and were believed to have no rights in the community.[2] The data generated provided the benchmark upon which the planning for the community interventions could be based.

However, during the course of implementation, the project staff realized that most marginalized people continued to be less involved in project planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes. This was negatively affecting understanding of their situation, ownership of the project, and sustainability of the good practices championed by the project. It seemed like the project was reenforcing the status quo. To realize meaningful participation and inclusion of the most marginalized people, a community strengthening and inclusion (CSI) planning approach was piloted in Adyel Owango village.

1 Tools used included wealth ranking, gender analysis, stakeholder analysis, body mapping, resource and social mapping, gap analysis, use of Venn diagrams, historical profile, transect walks, etc.

2 People believed that women's rights were held by their husbands, that children had no rights because they depended on parents, that the elderly are people waiting to die, and people with disabilities were considered useless.

This case describes the CSI planning process, the rationale and justification for CSI planning, and the methods and tools that the team used to carry out the CSI planning process. It also discusses data generation for CSI planning, the use of data for CSI action plan development and translation of the community vision into action. The case further explores the application of CSI planning as an evaluative thinking tool, and highlights the enabling factors, good practices, and challenges or limitations encountered while engaging with the CSI planning approach. Finally, the case discusses the sustainability of the CSI planning approach, makes recommendations, and draws lessons for better application of the CSI planning approach in the future.

CSI Planning as an Evaluative Thinking Approach

CSI planning represents a participatory approach to working with community members, especially the most marginalized. It involves "handing over the stick" to marginalized people, allowing them to envision, plan, and take the lead in delivering desired change in their community and lives. The approach is referred to as community strengthening and inclusion planning because, through it, Plan Uganda seeks to include the needs of the most marginalized people in the community and ensure that the planned outcomes accrue to them.

Step 1: Participatory Learning and Action Research – Data Generation for CSI Planning

The CSI plan development commenced with repeating PLA research in the community to identify its most marginalized people and document their status in respect to rights awareness levels, gender relations and roles, aspects of inclusion, legal service provision points, and access levels to legal services, as well as their attitudes, perceptions, and practices. Information gathered included data about people living with disabilities in respect to their gender, age and type of disability. With the level of detail captured during the PLA research, Plan Uganda was able to easily identify the most marginalized community members. This enabled the team to ensure that all people who were part of these categories were specifically targeted and invited to participate in the CSI plan development process.



A local facilitator helps community members sharpen their vision. (Photo: Plan Uganda)

Step 2: Information Sharing

Prior to the launch of the CSI plan development process, all the people identified as among the most marginalized were specifically mobilized to participate. A crucial step was for the PLA research team to share the information generated from the

PLA study with them and other community members. Two kinds of information were shared: 1) general information about the project, its scope (geographical, technical, and time), what the project was able to offer or not offer, and the strategy the project would employ to deliver its outcomes; and 2) the study findings, which included, among other things, a baseline assessment of legal rights in the community, the existing gaps in knowledge and awareness of legal rights, the legal service points and providers of the legal services, and determinants of access to and use of legal services. Further, the PLA team shared information about the profile of the community (demographics, natural and human resources, and assets), opportunities, and strengths the community could build on, as well as the gaps that needed to be addressed to facilitate increased access to legal rights by the most marginalized people. Finally, the team explained the methodology the study employed to generate the findings, as well as to demonstrate how the generated data would be used to inform planning aimed at increasing the most marginalized people's access to legal rights and services.

Step 3: Visioning

Equipped with the facts pertaining to their legal rights, as well as the available assets and opportunities in the community, community members synthesized the information. With local facilitators taking the lead, community members were divided into various groups: men, women, out-of-school youth aged 10-24 years, people with disabilities, and community leaders. Each group was led through the visioning process to imagine what they would like their community to look like or have in five or so years. The groups were encouraged to illustrate their visions. After each group completed the visioning process, all the groups convened for a plenary session where each of them made a presentation of its vision. The most frequent themes across the various visions were identified, and similar issues emerging from the different groups were noted. Thereafter, the selection process ensued to find the most representative vision, one that appealed to the aspirations of the most members. The agreed-upon community vision was:

> *A community where people don't travel long distances to access services, health information, and/or health facilities; where there is a friendly and equal health care and treatment environment for all, and a community equipped with adequate medical supplies and drugs to prevent incidences of disease outbreak; a community that is empowered to monitor and take action to address emerging health concerns in the community.*

Step 4: Developing a CSI Action Plan – Setting the Goal, Objectives, and Activities

PRAAC project staff then helped the community develop their own action plan, building on already-present assets and opportunities. Having selected the vision, they proceeded to develop a goal that was perceived to be realistic and achievable in one year. The goal that the community members agreed to was: *To improve the economic livelihood security of the people of Adyel Owango and access to health services by 2014.*

Subsequently, objectives to facilitate realization of the goal were also developed.

These included the following:

1. To increase access to health information, availability of drugs and medical supplies, and treatment for the people of Adyel Owango by end of 2014;

2. To reduce incidences of disease, death, and disability among mothers giving birth at home and children;

3. To monitor health workers for improved customer care and effective service delivery to the people of Adyel Owango village; and

4. To increase health-seeking behavior among the people of Adyel Owango village.

The goal-setting process concluded with community members reaching consensus on activities that would help realize the developed objectives.

Having completed the visioning process and development of a one-year community goal with objectives and activities, the community had to come up with a CSI plan. The CSI committee, constituted under the guidance of the PRAAC team, developed a one-year CSI action plan that would guide the implementation of the activities agreed upon by the community members. In this plan, the committee identified which activities the community could carry out on its own and which activities required collaboration with other people. The activities were prioritized, factoring in when each would be completed and which CSI committee member was ultimately responsible for each activity's implementation.

Step 5: Institutionalizing the CSI Planning Approach – Establishment of the CSI Committee

To ensure effective accomplishment of the objectives and activities, it was critical that a committee be created. The community selected the committee in an open, participatory, and transparent manner. The nine-member CSI Committee comprised representatives of all groups that participated in the CSI planning process (e.g., local leaders, community volunteers, people with disabilities, women, youths and men).

The CSI Committee was responsible for developing and implementing the CSI action plan, as well as monitoring the status of rights in the community and the quality of service provision. It engaged in community sensitization and engagement with the duty bearers such as the local council officials, clan leaders, and the police, as well as service providers and community members to ensure that the activities planned to realize community members' aspirations were actually implemented. Overall, the CSI committee members served as a link between community members, legal service providers, and duty bearers: they monitored the situations that exacerbate the denial of legal rights and services and acted to overcome any challenges that arose.

How the CSI Approach Encourages Evaluative Thinking

The CSI plan seeks to ensure increased access to legal and socioeconomic rights by the most marginalized people. It anticipates a community that is actively engaged in

decision making and is able to demand accountability from duty bearers. Being participatory in nature, CSI planning offers ways of assessing and learning from changes that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of those most directly affected. CSI planning, therefore, embraces the following participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) principles:

- Primary stakeholders are actively participating (not just sources of information).
- The capacities of local people to analyze, reflect, and take action are strengthened.
- Stakeholders undertake joint learning at various levels.

As a result, the approach catalyzes commitment to taking corrective action.

CSI Planning: Review Meetings

Monthly reflection meetings are one of the avenues in which the CSI approach encourages evaluative thinking, especially by the community. To ensure that the activities are implemented as planned, CSI committee members routinely monitor the households in the village and document the complaints raised by community members with respect to inadequacies exhibited by service providers. For example, one resident remarked, *"You are turning us away from the health center and yet we are all Ugandans,"* referring to workers at a health center that were denying community members services because they lived outside the catchment area for that facility. This routine monitoring data gathered by the CSI committee guides monthly reflective discussions in which CSI committee members reflect on the activities implemented during the month, assessing whether they are on course to realize the community's goal and objectives. The committee documents the shortfalls, takes corrective action, and/or devises strategies to ensure the effective implementation of the planned activities.

For example, responding to community members' demand, a decision was reached to organize an outreach program for mass immunization and HIV testing in the community. PRAAC project staff coordinated the activity by sourcing service providers such as health workers, while the CSI committee mobilized community members to participate in the outreach program.

Further, through routine hygiene monitoring of households, the CSI observed that some households did not have pit latrines, while others had unkempt and bushy compounds. The CSI committee intervened and convinced those that did not previously have pit latrines to construct them. So far, over 15 have been sunk.

It has also encouraged households to clear bushes around homes, which are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. This effort was triggered by the need to curb the high malaria prevalence rate in the community where children and pregnant women are most at risk. This outreach conducted by health workers in the community, which was organized by the CSI committee members in collaboration with PRAAC staff, awakened community members to the need to take responsibility for their hygiene and the environment around their homes.

As a result of the knowledge and empowerment generated by the project and the CSI planning approach, the CSI committee has passed a bylaw that compels all households to participate in cleaning the water source to improve community health. Prior to the intervention and establishment of the CSI committee, the community used to clean the water source once a year; now, it is cleaned once a month. This has improved the quality of water and subsequently minimized the risk of contracting waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

The committee has also approached duty bearers to bring community members' concerns to their attention. For instance, the committee had a discussion with the health centre II[3] management over the issue of turning away and/or segregating patients not from the parish where the health facility is located. Generally speaking, health-seeking behavior is now high and viewed as a community responsibility.

As a final example, through the use of CSI planning, over 30 young people have formed a Village and Savings Loan Association (VSLA). Through it, they are saving money and engaging in income-generating activities.

The monthly reflection meetings are an opportunity for committee members to reinvigorate themselves, while pursuing the goal and objectives agreed upon by the community members. They also provide an avenue for mentorship by the PRAAC staff on using routine monitoring data to develop

3 This is the lowest health facility in the community. Health centres are government health services providing institutions.



A young girl decides her future. (Photo: Plan Uganda)

action plans, or engaging with the concerned duty bearers and/or community members to address the identified undesirable situation in the community.

Most Significant Change Story Collection and Meta-Analysis for Learning

Another important method for promoting evaluative thinking is the Most Significant Change (MSC) story collection method. In an attempt to gain an understanding of whether the project, and in particular the use of the CSI plan, has contributed to the realization of rights, the PRAAC team collects MSC stories quarterly. These stories are analyzed to gain an understanding of not only specific issues related to health rights, but also cross-cutting issues in the community – such as education, culture, gender, and socioeconomic issues – to appreciate the local context in which the project operates. This has given the PRAAC team and CSI committee a broader understanding of the intervention, and of the changes realized by the most marginalized people. The approach has enabled the team to document changes in attitude, knowledge, and practices resulting from the intervention,

and also helps the team identify gaps that still exist.

MSC stories are instrumental in bringing out the unintended negative or positive consequences of the project activities. This information helps the CSI committee and the PRAAC team to replan and realign the strategy as needed. For example, outreach programs were added to the project design after stories revealed a number of undesirable hygiene situations and a health information gap in the community. Through other stories, the CSI committee and PRAAC team learned that in some homes, as participating women have gained knowledge about their rights, conflict and domestic violence have been exacerbated. Realizing this, the CSI committee and PRAAC team recognized that they needed to develop a response.

CSIP: Enabling Factors

The successful engagement in CSI planning and its results accruing to the most marginalized people has been realized because of a number of factors, ranging from community-level to organizational-level to project-level.

Community-level enabling factors

Like any other approach, CSI planning may fail to have a lasting impact if mitigation measures are not put in place. To ensure that there is an ongoing interest in data and its use to make evidence-based decisions, even after the project has closed, a number of measures have been factored into the CSI planning process. These measures are visible at both the community and institutional (Plan Uganda) levels.

The involvement of all community members during the CSI planning approach is one of the measures instituted at the community level that is critical to the evaluative thinking process. As a result of this broad participation, the CSI action plan generated is recognized as a people's plan and not a PRAAC project plan. This is critical because community members and especially the marginalized people feel they have a duty to make it succeed; it belongs to them. There is a high sense of ownership and determination to see the lives of the people in the community change.

Further, the establishment of the CSI committee comprising all categories of people in the community, including the most marginalized, is significant because the structure will remain even after the project closes. The capacity of the members has been built not only through formal training by PRAAC project staff, but also through the monthly dialogues that offer opportunities for continuous mentorship and reflection that promotes learning and improvement. Most importantly, the community members and especially the most marginalized people have been empowered with knowledge about laws and their legal rights, where to access legal services, and the processes of claiming their rights. This new knowledge is an asset they will rely on for their lifetime.

Organizational-level (Plan Uganda)

At an organizational level, Plan Uganda's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research (MER) framework demands management responses to the studies conducted by the organization. It provides forums for reflection on the research or evaluation findings

(validation meetings with stakeholders), and has a fully-fledged MER department that is responsible for all studies and monitoring in the organization. There is also buy-in from the management on issues pertaining to MER. The organizational culture that encourages learning and provides a platform for information sharing has been instrumental in encouraging data use to improve project implementation and the achievement of planned results.

Plan Uganda has also created a project database to document and manage all data generated by the project to facilitate the evaluative thinking process, particularly the use of data to inform evidence-based decisions for program effectiveness. Additionally, the database facilitates the assessment of project performance, enabling staff to take corrective actions that refocus planning and implementation to better achieve project outcomes.

Project-level (PRAAC) enabling factors
At the project level, the donor for the project, AusAID is interested in M&E functions. The budget approved for the MER functions (10-15% of the project budget) has been critical for the success of the CSI planning processes.

The project approach has been conducive for the CSI planning approach. It encourages use of PLA research methodologies to generate data for learning and improvement during project implementation. The project has invested in building staff capacity in participatory research methodologies, and holds quarterly country-level and biannual regional monitoring, evaluation, research, and improvement (MERI) reflection workshops that enable staff to use data to improve implementation.

Individual-level enabling factors
Finally, individual interest in applying new PM&E approaches, as well as the freedom to try out new ways of thinking, explains the success of the CSI planning processes.

CSIP: Good Practices

The CSI planning process led to the following positive outcomes:

- Plan Uganda as an organization is accountable to its stakeholders. Every process is undertaken in an open and transparent manner. There is no suspicion. Where challenges are encountered, the community members and Plan staff deliberate and agree together on the next course of action.

- Plan Uganda is living up to its aspirations, increasing access to rights by marginalized people, especially children. These people have been specifically mobilized and targeted to participate in development initiatives like CSI planning. A case in point is the use of wealth ranking data to identify needy children for sponsorship.

- Plan Uganda is promoting learning and ownership among stakeholders.

- Plan Uganda is empowering marginalized people to take action and demand their rights.

- As a result of community participation in the project, the project outcomes are proving to be sustainable.

- As a result of the project approach, duty bearers are working amicably with community members to ensure increased access to rights by marginalized people.

- Community members are actively involved in demanding services from service providers.

- Community members are actively participating in making decisions that affect their future, such as demanding health services, making bylaws to maintain a clean water source, ensuring the sick in the community seek medical attention within two days, and ensuring a clean and hygienic environment in and around the homesteads.

CSIP: Challenges and Limitations

The CSI planning process faced a number of challenges and limitations. Like any other participatory methodology, its calls for patience and a substantial time investment, given broad participation in decision making processes. This same broad involvement and time required make the approach resource-intensive in terms of budget and personnel. Keeping the CSI committee motivated and focused requires ongoing mentorship and support. Finally, the project team has had to work hard to manage community members' expectations.

Lessons: CSI Planning as a PM&E Tool

- Marginalized people are knowledgeable about their situation and can offer solutions when engaged in a meaningful manner.

- When marginalized people are empowered, they can shape their own destiny and are optimistic about future possibilities.

- The CSI planning process as a PM&E approach enhances inclusiveness and cohesion among community members and builds a positive relationship between community members and duty bearers. The outreach program organized by community members and joint monitoring of health in the community are examples.

- CSIP as a PM&E approach is empowering. Using it, marginalized people can demand accountability, rights, services and information from duty bearers.

- CSIP as a PM&E approach enlists people's commitment to take action to change their situation.

Recommendations

- There is need for continued involvement by community members in every CSIP process so that their expectations are well managed and the process is transparent.

- Being frank and honest about what the project will or will not offer paves the way

for continued and sustainable community engagement with the CSIP and its implementation.

- There is need for continuous mentorship and support to help the CSI committee stay focused during implementation of the CSI action plan.

- Resources allowing, CSIP as a PM&E method is worth replicating in other communities for effective and sustainable change.

Conclusion

Prior to the institution of the CSI plan development, the PRAAC team did not know if they and the community volunteers were really reaching the right categories of participants. With the adoption of the CSI plan development, the team has been able to identify the most marginalized people in the community and is able to track them and determine whether they are benefiting from the project or not.

Further, the CSI planning approach provided an opportunity to elevate the needs of the most marginalized people through PLA research; their involvement in envisioning the future and change they wished to see; their engagement in developing the goal, objectives, and activities necessary to accomplish their vision; and their participation in activity monitoring. The approach also offered the most marginalized people an opportunity to engage in reflective meetings to generate learning that informs decisions and/or corrective actions for effective programming.

Additionally, the data generated informed the CSI planning process. For instance, the community members used the data to develop a vision that emphasized health rights, despite the project focus on legal and socioeconomic rights. The project team accepted the change based on the broad community participation that informed it and the evidence on which it was based.

In a nutshell, CSI as an approach entrenches evaluative thinking in project management processes. CSI planning creates spaces for duty bearers and citizens to engage in reflective dialogues and has been valuable in catalyzing ownership of the project by marginalized people. It has promoted cohesion not only among the community members but even bridged the gap between the most marginalized people and duty bearers as equal members of the CSI committee. ■

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Winrock International, Kenya:

Evaluative Thinking Study: A Case Study of Yes Youth Can! Western Project

By Barrack Bosire • Winrock International, Kenya Yes Youth Can! Western Province Project

Introduction

This case study presents Winrock International's experience in using evaluative thinking to improve the USAID-supported Yes Youth Can! Western (YYC-W) Program. This program is designed to respond to the specific sources of vulnerability, marginalization, and dissatisfaction among Kenyan youth – particularly in areas affected by the 2007-2008 postelection violence – and considers the option of youth-led, youth-managed, and youth-owned processes alongside a mentorship approach to youth programming. The YYC-W Program contributes to USAID Kenya's strategic objective of strengthening and sustaining Kenya's postelection recovery, and is part of a new generation of USAID youth development programming that has been informed by past experience.

The complex issues addressed by this program and the sensitive context the program operates in require Winrock and other project stakeholders to constantly reflect on and question the way things are done. This case describes how USAID, Winrock, implementing partners, and youth have worked together to think through strategies and identify more effective ways of achieving the desired outcomes. As a result of this evaluative thinking process, the program has undergone several significant changes that make it more likely that the program will achieve its goals.

Program Description and Strategy

YYC-W is one of six regional programs supporting a greater voice for Kenyan youth in national reform and creating new livelihood opportunities through a network of youth, supported by public-private partnerships. Funded by USAID and implemented by Winrock International and three other partners – Mercy Corps, World Vision, and The Cooperative League of the USA (CLUSA) – YYC-W supports youth in Kenya's Western Province to recover from the postelection violence witnessed after the disputed 2007 national general election. The ethnic violence that broke out after the election killed over 3,000 people and displaced 500,000. The YYC-W Program builds the capacity of village youth organizations (village youth bunges) to engage with markets, the government, and communities to pursue youth needs and interests more effectively in a way that builds

positive interethnic networks. The program targets youth in 2,844 villages across four counties in Western Kenya – Busia, Bungoma, Kakamega, and Vihiga – with a total population of 2.9 million people.

The YYC-W Program's vision is to have an empowered Kenyan youth in Western Province exhibiting leadership in peacebuilding, social service, and economic prosperity for holistic community development. Its objectives are:

- Support youth to achieve a greater voice in local and national issues.
- Increase youth productivity, employment opportunities, and income.
- Increase young women's access to social, political, and economic activities.

As an implementing partner for YYC-W, Winrock organized implementation into three phases and held Monday morning staff meetings to reflect on the previous week's happenings and incorporate what was learned from the activities. In the second year, the Monday morning meeting expanded to include youth leaders.

- **Phase 1**: Organize and establish structures at village and county levels ("activity zero") – outreach to youth. Winrock supported monthly feedback and planning meetings with selected youth leaders mentored to reach out and engage youth to form Village Youth Bunges (VYBs). This continues under a Constituency Coordinating Team, a forum that brings youth with different roles together to plan, implement, coordinate, and report constituency activities across western Kenya. Constituency review and planning meetings are key and continue to play a management role for youth to learn, act, and contribute to evaluative thinking.

- **Phase 2**: Capacity building for enhanced governance and livelihood development targeting VYBs, County Youth Board members, county youth bunge Savings & Credit Cooperative (SACCO) societies, and National Youth Bunge Association. These are platforms for leadership roles, sessions to reflect on structures, systems, and forward planning for the growth of youth organizations with a focus on youth participation, decision making, productivity, and the inclusion of marginalized groups.

- **Phase 3**: Institutionalize gains and results into sustainable youth-owned, youth-led, and youth-managed processes encompassing organizational development systems. Enforce standard practices and formal engagement with public and private partnerships. This phase in an effort to ensure the sustainability of the County Bunge Forum Networks/SACCOs.



Togetherness Village Youth Bunge President holding the award winning Fireless Cooker. (Photo: KYYC staff)

Evaluative Thinking Process

The integration of evaluative thinking into the YYC-W Program achieved a number of things. First, it revealed that several of the critical underlying assumptions made by the program were incorrect, which would have prevented the program from fully achieving its goals. The program assumed that the youth leaders that purported to be speaking for the youth were genuine, and that giving funds through commercial banks, as has been done in other youth projects, would reach the youth. The program also faced resistance from politicians, who at the time viewed it as a ploy by the West to engineer a change of leadership from the old guard to the youth. Second, the evaluative thinking process revealed that the program's targets were too low and that a majority of youths were left out. This meant that either the vision and project goal or the project targets had to change.

USAID played a major role in the evaluative thinking process. At the beginning of the program's implementation, USAID posed several fundamental questions to Winrock. These questions had to be addressed if the program was to have credibility and be able to reach youth at the grassroots as envisaged. USAID was concerned that the program as designed would not achieve the desired results because the engagement strategy developed by the selected implementing partners would not effectively reach youth. While Winrock International and other implementing partners were set to begin implementation based on the approved proposal, USAID asked the partners to consider the following questions:

- Who are the youths being empowered?
- Where are they located?
- Who are the youth leaders, and what are the characteristics of successful youth leaders?
- Are existing youth leaders effective – i.e., are youth aware of them, do they accurately represent youths' interests, are they able to connect with youth?

To answer these questions, Winrock and USAID conducted joint field visits at the initiation stage of the program. The purpose of the visits was to verify if the program's youth leaders were self-appointed or true representatives. The field team went to the area these "leaders" said they came from to see if they were familiar to the youth there. Winrock and USAID found that the majority of the youth did not know these leaders, or that the leaders did not entirely represent youth interests. In some cases, these youth leaders were representing the interests of shadow personalities – mostly politicians – that were using youth for their own benefit. This came out clearly when the youth in the leaders' villages could not identify them.

Based on this information, USAID and Winrock agreed to add an activity that was not in the proposal, now referred to as "activity zero." This activity called for Winrock to mobilize youth into units called village youth bunges, and to conduct elections at the village level. Leaders elected at the village level would elect leaders at the constituency level, who would in turn elect leaders at the county level, who in turn would elect leaders

at the national level. This gave birth to a legitimate structure that was used by the program to engage youth.

The mobilization of youth and the launch of the youth program came with another challenge that made both the donor and Winrock question whether it would be prudent to continue with the program as it was. Immediately after the launch and the commencement of mobilization, political leaders resisted the program; they accused USAID of funding a program for regime change, accusations which were then picked up by the media. During discussions in the reflective meeting of YYC regional implementing partners, an analysis of how the program had been talked about in the media indicated the need for a different approach. Partners agreed that the program should be redesigned and certain terms changed. For instance, one project objective was reworded from "leadership for change" to "transformative leadership," and the program title changed to "Yes Youth Can!" from "Strengthening Activism."

Having engaged legitimate youth leaders and addressed the negative political reaction, the program began having joint meetings between the donor, the implementing partners, and the youth leaders. These meetings became important in implementation and the program decision-making process. The meetings, which brought together the Chief of Parties (COPs) from each implementing partner, were held weekly during the initial startup stages of the program and were later reduced to monthly when the program picked up momentum. Decisions were consensus-based, using



Counting votes. (Photo: KYYC staff)

the facts gathered in the interactions with youth in various regions and a review of the objectives, suggested activities, and desired results.

The meetings were used to arrive at decisions that required a change from the project's approved design. For example, the program had assumed that the sites selected would reach sufficient youth to help them lead in peace building. However, an analysis revealed that the program would actually reach less than 20% of the general youth population in the region, making the program risky to a few and neglecting a majority of the youth, potentially increasing animosity instead of building peace. This led to the decision to work to scale instead of just in selected sites. The program had to involve at least 60% of the total youth to justify the vision "empowered youth in western Kenya."

Later on, the meetings led to a change in how funds would be disbursed. In the original program design, two funds had been set aside for empowerment initiatives: an investment fund and a grants fund, which were to be used for different reasons and

disbursed in different ways. The grants fund was to be applied directly and disbursed to youth for funding start-up enterprises or strengthening any that existed, whereas the investment fund was to be disbursed through existing microfinance institutions or a bank of choice by the youth. Both had to change.

Through consultative meetings, the youths rejected the plan to disburse the youth investment fund through a microfinance institutions or Commercial banks and proposed that the funds be disbursed through SACCOs instead. A SACCO is a membership-based financial institution that supports members in saving regularly and accessing loans based on the savings they have. This suggestion was based on an analysis done by the Ministry of Youth, which the youth involved in the program shared with the YYC-W partners. The analysis compared youths' ability to access funds disbursed through microfinance institutions vs. funds disbursed through the Ministry of Youth's sub-county offices. It revealed that youth shunned microfinance institutions due to the demand for collateral, which most youth have no access to. The youth leaders and all the implementing partners agreed to the idea of forming SACCOs that would be youth-led and managed, and would have friendly financial access terms for youth. SACCOs have worked well in the country, as they are easier to access than bank loans.

Similarly, a rapid assessment of the reach and utilization of the first round of funds disbursed in the YYC-W Program led to changes to the grants fund. The assessment was conducted to determine the fund's impact before the second disbursement. It revealed that the first grants had not been utilized to the intended extent and that the disbursement was going to leave out many youth groups, increasing animosity and discontent. The assessment also found that it would be very expensive and very difficult to monitor all the groups that received grant funds, as they were many and spread across the entire region. In addition, the percentage of youth bunges that would be funded by the end of the exercise would be low. This led the program to change from directly funding youth groups to instead funding community social projects initiated by the youth. This decision, arrived at in the partner meeting, will allow the program to reach a wider group of people in the community beyond the youth.

Decisions and Changes Made as a Result of Using Evaluative Thinking

The following decisions and changes were made to the program as a result of the program's use of evaluative thinking:

- **The title of the program:** The project title in the agreement was "Strengthening Activism and Social Advocacy"; as mentioned previously, the title now is "Yes Youth Can! Western." The change was intended to reduce political resistance once program implementation began. The word "activism" made political leaders uncomfortable; the program would be viewed as setting up the youth against the government and current leaders.

- **Changing some project objectives and rewording others:** All objectives had to be reworded once the title was changed,



Youth making sandals. (Photo: KYYC staff)

without changing the goal of the program, so that the program would run smoothly. The project also added some new activities, such as activity zero before the commencement of project activities, and removed others.

- **Change of targeted outputs** from 15,000 youth to 120,000 youth; from 15 youth platforms to 2,466 youth bunges; and from 15 sub locations in three districts in three counties to 2,844 villages in all 212 locations in four counties.

- **Changing the view of youth from beneficiaries to partners:** At the beginning, it was proposed that youth be approached directly through the existing community structure and system that has been used before. Youth were taken as beneficiaries without concrete involvement in decisions. However, initial stages of the program and interaction with the youth revealed that the system had created "gate keepers" that were not letting the general youth benefit. It appeared that the youths selected to mobilize others were involved in several other community development initiatives. While this looked like a good thing at first, the youth complained, asking why it had to be the same youth all the time. The program concluded that youth had to be involved as true partners. An organizational structure to elect legitimate youth leaders was agreed upon, with elections organized from the grassroots level to the county level. The county organizations are now engaged in the project as a representative board composed of youth-elected members, and the project has adopted the implementation principle "youth-owned, youth-led, and youth-managed."

- **Introduction of "Window of Opportunity" program budget:** This budget allows flexibility in spending and offers an opportunity to respond to youth creativity and dynamism in addressing the critical issues they face. As opposed to the strict line item budget description that is common in most projects, the windows of opportunity budget focuses on the bigger picture of what needed to be done. USAID allowed such budgetary flexibility to enable the program to respond to real issues raised by the youth and to ensure that the program achieves its vision of empowering youth through their true involvement and participation.

- **Use of funds in the program:** As described above, changes were made to the two types of funds that had been set aside for empowerment initiatives: the grant fund and investment fund. These changes were made based on input from the youth as well as a rapid assessment and study.

Factors that Enabled Evaluative Thinking

One major factor that has enabled evaluative thinking with YYC-W is the desire to realize project goals and actually empower youth. Many youth programs have not succeeded and benefits have not continued beyond the funding period. To address this issue, we had to ask reflective questions in every step of implementation to ensure the project accurately addressed youth needs. Reflective thinking processes in YYC-W informed decisions and helped implementing partners make adjustments to better serve youth needs and interests.

The project also had to be sensitive to the situation that led to YYC-W's creation – the way that youth were incited to violence after the 2007 election. Another general election in Kenya was around the corner in a year's time, and there were real fears of another eruption of violence. Politicians viewed the program as incitement against the leadership that could potentially pit the youth against the older generation of leaders. This meant that any project action or activity had to be reflected upon and their effects quickly evaluated.

Close donor involvement and participation in project implementation also facilitated evaluative thinking. Though donor involvement is minimal in most such programs, the YYC-W Program has included frequent meetings between project managers and USAID representatives responsible for implementation. The donor's greater involvement is informed by USAID's shift in handling youth programing that focuses on genuinely empowering youth and strengthening youth organizations to operate in a more professional way. This has enabled reflective thinking, adaptive and collaborative approaches, and adjustments are easily implemented once they have been proposed.

Without this close involvement, it would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to make the necessary changes. All the decisions to change the program also required changes in the already-signed cooperative agreement with USAID – Winrock project management in Kenya had to engage the contract office at its headquarters, which in turn engaged the contract office for USAID to assess the implications of the decisions against the signed agreement. The discussions were positive and led each time to modifications to the contract. The involvement of all stakeholders in decisions that had far-reaching effects on the contract agreement – especially youths, who were the principle stakeholders the project was meant to benefit – was crucial to achieving this. Interactive sessions with the youth and other stakeholders are taken seriously, and decisions at these sessions are used in program implementation. Further, flexibility of both the implementing partners and the donor contributed a great deal. Compromises and concessions have allowed all parties to work within some rather tricky rules and regulations governing implementation of USAID-funded programs.

Challenges to Using Evaluative Thinking

One major challenge of using the evaluative thinking process is the changes it leads to.

Although the changes to the YYC-W Program were important, they required Winrock International to seek permission for project modifications from USAID. The desire by both Winrock and USAID to genuinely empower youth combined with their willingness to embrace and act on information youth shared has made these project modifications possible. The way the project acknowledged and took into account the dynamic nature of youth and the diversity across the implementation area precluded the use of standard implementation practices.

Another challenge to the evaluative thinking process was a resistance of all parties – the youth, the donor, and the implementing partners – to the realities the process revealed. Since evaluative thinking was a new approach it was not always easy to accept its findings – even when confronted with evidence – sometimes due to technicalities and the interpretation of the already-signed cooperative agreement that would have to change. The proposed changes involved some risk to the donor, especially in the area of directly funding youth organizations that had low capacity for implementation. The beneficiaries, the involved youth organizations, wanted to be funded but not necessarily mentored, despite their low capacity.



Youth leader emphasises a point during a consultative session. (Photo: KYYC staff)

Sustaining Evaluative Thinking

Winrock International has sought to incorporate evaluative thinking in the day-to-day management of its projects around the world. The monitoring team at headquarters has embraced the process. All staff is encouraged to ask critical question as they implement project activities. The organization encourages staff creativity and provides a learning environment in all project teams. New ideas are embraced, and if they cannot be implemented in the running project, a new project is developed to address the idea. In the YYC-W Program, project staff and youth continue to have regular weekly reflection and planning meetings where the project team, the youth, and partners of the program engage in the day to day project management and arrive at decisions.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Through the use of evaluative thinking, Winrock and other partners have learned lessons that may be helpful in youth programming.

- The frequency of evaluative thinking and the low cost involved, as opposed to traditional periodic and expensive evaluations, enable project managers to address issues in real time – and more cheaply – once implementation has started and identified a gap. Because evaluative thinking is carried out more frequently

there is a higher likelihood of project success, which will be confirmed by the more traditional evaluations.

- Using evaluative thinking after the project has started and beneficiaries are engaged helps identify key issues that may not have been anticipated in program design. Project participants and implementing partners' staff may not have participated in the project design. Evaluative thinking methodology provided YYC-W with an excellent opportunity to apply the youth-led, youth-managed, and youth-owned principle and allowed USAID and its partners to learn from the process. All partners, including youth, know what has worked and what has not, and have shared their assumptions during reflective thinking sessions. This increases the voice of youth in the interventions and in decision making.

- The donor's role is not only to give funds, but also close engagement with implementing partners, asking thought-provoking questions, and frequent interactions that enable mutual learning and make it possible for all partners to accept changes in implementation strategy for the benefit of the community.

- Flexibility as demonstrated by USAID and implementing partners is a result of reflective thinking, which challenges tradition and routine practices in programming for change.

Evaluative thinking used regularly in projects is a valuable tool that makes implementation constantly relevant and increases chances for impact. ■

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CARE Rwanda:

Questioning Program Assumptions for Greater Results: A Pathway to an Evidence-Based Approach to Women's Empowerment

By Theophile Twahirwa • CARE Rwanda

Introduction

Development for all requires inclusive policies and strategies that recognize the role of gender equality in determining positive outcomes for the whole community. Updated and reliable information on gender issues in the community is needed to eliminate gender blindness within both staff and community members' mindsets. Recognizing this, CARE conducted a gender gap analysis in its Village Saving and Loan (VSL) program. Results indicated that normative gender roles and inequitable power relations between men and women significantly constrain women's ability to fully participate in and benefit from the VSL methodology. The gender gap analysis exercise involved training staff to challenge their perceptions on gender, deeply analyzing the voluntary saving and loan methodology in terms of empowering women, and understanding how quantitative indicators alone could lead to mistaken impressions of the program's progress.

This case study narrates the evaluative thinking process developed and implemented by two CARE Rwanda initiatives working collaboratively to ensure that women are empowered: SAFI (Sustainable Access to Financial Services for Investment) and RI (The Social Change for Family Planning Results Initiative). It presents the key findings and recommendations that shaped the current VSL programming, turning it into an entry point for integrated interventions for holistic women's empowerment. It is both a resource for other organizations wishing to examine the process and outcomes of their interventions through a gender lens, and a stimulus for dialogue around possible ways of strengthening the savings groups as a platform for women's empowerment.

Overview of the Program

CARE International in Rwanda started the application of the VSL approach in 1999 and has since improved the model both in the country and beyond. Currently, CARE and partners cover 25 out of 30 districts in Rwanda, reaching over 350,000 poor people, 75% of whom are women. This program was designed to help the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN) implement



Twizerane VSL group. (Photo: CARE)

its financial literacy strategy. This strategy is aimed at increasing the financial inclusion rate (the use of formal or informal financial products), which is currently 47%.[1]

The VSL approach is a stepping stone for poor and vulnerable people to access formal financial services offered by financial institutions, increasing financial inclusion. It consists of three phases: financial education, financial linkage, and enterprise development.

The financial education phase takes between nine and 12 months, where participants learn strategies to save, lend, and keep good records of both. At the end of the agreed period of nine or 12 months, the accumulated savings (share capital contributed) and interest (interest earnings on the loans extended by the group) are divided among all members in proportion to their share capital.

After the first phase, VSL group members need additional capital and a safe place to keep their growing savings. To address this, phase two links the group with a formal financial institution. The VSL group opens an account with the institution, allowing members to both safely store their savings and access bigger loans to foster the group's investment.

In the last phase, VSL group members learn how to develop an income-generating activity or small enterprise. Some group members also learn how to develop a value chain initiative and are later linked to functioning markets. For example, members of one group decided to be involved in cassava

1 "FinScope Rwanda," FinMark Trust, 2008. www.finmark.org.za/finscope.

value chain: improved seeds are developed and distributed to cassava farmers, who are linked to a cassava flour moulding factory, which is linked to supermarkets in different towns. The financial literacy trainings also include a specific training on financial management, focusing on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for good money management practices such as earning, budgeting, spending, saving, borrowing, and investing.

Since 2009, CARE Rwanda has been implementing both the SAFI project and the RI in the Gatsibo District of Rwanda's Eastern Province. The SAFI project aims to enhance the livelihood security and financial literacy of at least 108,200 VSL group members, 70% of whom are women. The RI project was implemented in adjacent and overlapping areas to increase and sustain family planning through a combination of health system strengthening and addressing inequitable gender roles and social norms that influence health. Both projects use the VSL methodology as a programming platform to promote the empowerment of poor and marginalized women in rural areas.

The activities of the two initiatives – RI and SAFI – are intended to work synergistically to ensure that the objectives of both projects are met. Addressing gender dynamics helps to ensure women's meaningful participation in VSL, helping ensure that women can negotiate for and access family planning services. VSL groups provide a critical platform for convening women and couples to have these discussions, as well as sharing family planning information and linkages to services. The SAFI-RI integration is designed to contribute to a range of empowerment outcomes for women, including social and economic empowerment as well as better sexual and reproductive health.

Evaluative Thinking Process/ Methodology

SAFI-RI midterm evaluations

The SAFI midterm review in late 2010 indicated the need to address issues related to gender, power dynamics and communication at the household level, finding that women's active participation in VSL activities was limited. At the same time, a midterm review of the RI found that the integration of Social Analysis and Action (SAA) activities into the VSL training cycle had brought about positive household and community-level changes in couples' communication, the sharing of household chores, and acceptance of family planning.

The successful SAA integration came from a process facilitated by both CARE and partners' staff who worked with some community members to map out areas where rumors about family planning were perpetrated, identifying both the types of rumors and their key perpetrators. The team then developed a plan to address the rumors and misconceptions, focusing on the identified areas and key perpetrators. This was done to establish an enabling environment for people to access sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning. The SAA approach described in the box on the next page was used as a framework.

Box 1: Social Analysis and Action (SAA)

SAA is an approach developed by CARE International to address the social, economic, and cultural factors that influence health. It involves regular dialogue with communities to address how social conditions perpetuate their health challenges. Social analysis answers questions such as: Why does this situation exist? What are the root causes? Who owns and who controls what? Who makes decisions, and for whom?

The SAA cycle is as follows:

1. **Transform staff capacity**: Help staff understand the concepts of gender and gender dynamics before they use them in community dialogues.
2. **Reflect with community**: Staff use these concepts to develop focus group discussion guides, which are used during community dialogues. The result was a map of areas where family planning rumors were perpetrated and what those rumors were.
3. **Plan for action**: An intervention was designed to demystify family planning rumors, targeting both areas and key perpetrators of rumors.
4. **Implement the plan**: When the plan was implemented, it produced the changes seen in the RI midterm review.
5. **Evaluate**: The final stage involves reflecting on the whole process to learn how to improve the next time.

The whole cycle involves reflecting on a prevailing situation, challenging it and exploring different ways of reversing it, and learning and integrating lessons into what you are doing.

SAA Tools

Under the RI project, three SAA tools proved successful after a three-month pilot phase. The three tools are "cartoon," "bead game," and "pile sorting."

Cartoon: A cartoon is an exercise used to sensitize community members on the benefits of family planning. Here two illustrations were used: one with a family size of 14 children in extreme poverty and another cartoon with a healthy family with only two children. The two cartoons stimulate community members to debate and reach a conclusion at the end of the discussion.

Bead game: The bead game educates community members about how the sex of a child is determined. A facilitator explains the roles of chromosomes in determining the sex of a baby, noting that women have two X-chromosomes and men one X- and one Y-chromosome. The facilitator shows a group of men and women a bag with two types of colored beads, one to represent X-chromosomes and the other to represent Y-chromosomes. Four to five women are asked to volunteer to take one X-chromosome, and four to five men are asked to reach into the bag and select a bead. The men then reveal the bead they have chosen and thus the sex of the child. This shows the community that men determine the sex of a baby. Many women had shared experiences where their husbands' desire for sons led them to have as many as 10 children. This sometimes put the wives at risk of domestic gender-based violence (GBV) and the children into extreme poverty and malnutrition. In some cases men looked for women outside their marriage to be able to produce sons.

Pile sorting: Participants list all the household chores and identify those performed by men, women, or both, revealing that almost 90% of household chores are done by women. This situation condemns women to consequences such as physical damage before the age of 40, lack of cleanliness, and frequent diseases. A further consequence is that men often decide to look outside their marriage for healthy and beautiful women instead.

Though simple, these tools produced tremendous positive changes in the community in terms of eliminating GBV and restoring healthy families.

The assumptions underlying the SAFI program and its performance indicators were incorrectly leading staff to believe that the program was having a positive impact on women. One of the VSL program assumptions was that by building women's economic capacity, household income would increase, leading husbands to respect their wives more. The quantitative financial performance indicators – such as portfolio at risk that was close to zero – pointed toward the possibility of high performance.[2]

However, while savings groups were generally doing a great job in terms of financial performance indicators, the SAFI evaluations revealed that quantitative indicators were not telling the whole story and identified the need to further investigate gender roles and power dynamics using qualitative indicators. This served as an "Aha!" moment for the country program management, which realized that something more was needed to contribute to women's empowerment. Some staff implementing VSL resisted this; they had been advocating that VSL and other interventions should not be mixed to avoid distracting VSL group members from their economic activities. Despite this, management recommended a deep reflection on the program using qualitative research. They decided to first train resistant staff and involved them in the study so that if the results ran contrary to their perspectives, they would still own both the results and the decisions made from them.

As a result, CARE Rwanda decided to integrate selected high-impact, low-effort SAA activities into the SAFI project's implementation to address the unbalanced power relations between men and women at the household level that undermine women's economic empowerment through VSL. The expectation was that by helping women actively participate in VSL activities with full support from their husbands or male family members, SAFI would achieve changes similar to those under RI.

First Gender Gap Analysis (GGA)

The first Gender Gap Analysis (GGA) involving SAFI VSL groups was conducted in June 2011 using external data collectors. This GGA was conducted to address the findings of the midterm evaluation. Analysis of the information collected during this first GGA by the staff of the CARE Rwanda VSL Technical Support Unit, however, found that it did not enable any greater understanding of how gender dynamics affect the process and outcomes of VSL programming because some staff who facilitated the process had limited understanding of gender concepts. An important lesson learned from this experience was that project staff, who had felt it was important to "prove" that VSL does not cause any harm related to gender, had influenced the process of data collection in the field and therefore constrained any learning from the first GGA.

Second GGA

Given the problems with the first GGA, in the fall of 2011 the SAFI and RI teams decided to take a different approach with a second GGA. This joint SAFI-RI GGA, carried out with participants from a sample of SAFI VSL groups, was conducted with technical support from CARE USA's Senior

2 "Evidence from Rwanda Sustainable Access to Finance Services for Investment project, Impact Evaluation," Access Africa, 2012.

Table 1: Process Outline of the CARE Rwanda 2011 Gender Gap Analysis

October 26-27, 2011: **Staff training workshop**	• Goals & expectations for the CARE Rwanda Gender Gap Analysis defined • SAFI & RI staff jointly reflect on concepts of gender and gender dynamics • Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide developed, field tested & refined • Plan & timeline for GGA data collection and analysis developed
November 8-11, 2011: **GGA data collection**	• 9 Focus Group Discussion (six with women three with men) facilitated by 2 teams of SAFI-RI staff • FGD notes written up by field teams according to structured guide
November 14, 2011: **Data analysis workshop**	• SAFI-RI staff discuss and analyze data from GGA Focus Group Discussions • Group presentation of key findings to CARE Rwanda senior management
December 5-6, 2011: **Review of key findings**	• Internal reflection by SAFI-RI staff on key findings of GGA • Formulation of recommendations for modifications of VSL methodology to increase its effectiveness as a mechanism for promoting women's empowerment

Technical Adviser for Sexual, Reproductive and Maternal Health (SRMH) from October to early December 2011 (see Table 1 for details).

Contrary to the first round, the second GGA was participatory and done by staff instead of using external data collectors. To ensure that staff would not be biased against the potential findings, they first went through an intensive training that boosted their understanding of gender issues. The training used SAA techniques to explore and reflect on issues relating to gender and gender dynamics in the staff's own lives and work. As a result, the SAFI and RI staff built a common understanding of gender and gender relations, which changed their attitude toward the GGA process and cultivated a willingness to explore the different experiences of male and female VSL group members.

These attitudinal changes led to a reframing of the second GGA to more deeply explore one of the findings from the SAFI midterm evaluation: that unbalanced power relations between men and women were limiting women's participation in VSL activities and negatively affecting women's economic empowerment. The GGA sought to determine how gender dynamics influence the process and outcomes of VSL groups and how VSL

can provide an entry point to facilitate wider processes of women's empowerment. As such, the specific objectives of the GGA process were:

- To learn how gender norms shape and determine women's participation in and benefits from VSL groups;
- To understand the different experiences of men and women participating in VSL groups; and
- To formulate recommendations for strengthening the VSL methodology to address issues relating to gender dynamics.

The second GGA was also conducted to find out whether the projects were helping men and women achieve equal opportunities. By this point, several CARE International evaluations[3] had provided quantitative and qualitative evidence of VSL group members' engagement in income-generating activities, leading to improvements in food security and housing, as well as strengthened social and human capital. Another study showed that CARE had been successful in targeting the poorer segment of Rwandan society.[4] Nevertheless, CARE wanted to look beyond its success. That's why it performed a second GGA.

In the second GGA, CARE followed a methodology that enabled staff at CARE Rwanda and CARE USA to clearly understand gender and power dynamics in programming, facilitate the whole process of GGA, and own the results that led to improved gender programming in CARE Rwanda in general.

The process and tools for the second GGA were developed by SAFI and RI program staff. After they had completed the training described above and gone through a participatory workshop process, these staff developed a focus group discussion (FGD) guide and reporting outline as the data collection instrument for the GGA. The FGD guide was structured to explore questions relating to VSL group members' views and experiences relating to access, priorities, decision-making, control of assets purchased using loans, benefits, challenges and barriers and ideas for improvement of the VSL methodology.

The following six themes were identified through a participatory team process to provide a framework for the FGD guide:

1. **Access to finance**: How do VSL group members obtain the money they need for saving?

2. **Setting priorities**: How do VSL group members want to use the loans and savings they get from the group?

3. **Participation in decision making**: How do VSL group members make decisions about the use of their loans and savings?

3 "Evidence from Rwanda Sustainable Access to Finance Services for Investment project, Impact Evaluation," Access Africa, 2012.

4 "Assessment of the poverty outreach of SAFI Project's VSL methodology in Rwanda," Centre for Independent Research, 2010.

4. **Control of assets from loans**: To what extent do VSL group members have control over the assets they purchase using loans from the group?

5. **Benefits, challenges, and barriers**: What have been the benefits and challenges of participating in the VSL group?

6. **Ideas for improvement**: How could the VSL group be further improved?

It is important to recognize that the GGA process was intended to provide an opportunity for an in-depth qualitative exploration of gender dynamics in VSL groups to complement and enrich CARE's understanding and interpretation of the findings of the SAFI project's quantitative end-line survey. The end-line survey data was collected in late 2011 in a sample of 845 households. When compared to data from the project's 2009 baseline survey, it found significant improvements in household livelihood conditions, access to financial services for VSL group members, and women's empowerment.

Following completion of the GGA data collection, a one-day data analysis workshop was held with the CARE Rwanda SAFI and RI teams, with support from the Health and Economic Development Sector Coordinator leading the team. This workshop served as a first stage analysis of the qualitative data generated from the FGDs. At the end of the workshop, the group presented the key findings of their analysis to CARE Rwanda senior management.

Those findings were then reviewed internally in early December 2011 by a smaller group of SAFI and RI team members with the CARE USA Senior Technical Advisor for SRMH. This second stage analysis led to the development of a set of concrete recommendations for strengthening the VSL approach to address some of the issues relating to gender dynamics identified by the GGA process.

Decisions Taken as a Result of Evaluative Thinking

The findings of the CARE Rwanda gender gap analysis indicate that normative gender roles and inequitable power relations between men and women significantly constrain women's ability to participate in and benefit from the VSL methodology. Gendered social norms and power relations define the ways in which VSL group members of both genders access money for savings; how they invest loans taken from the VSL group; and the extent to which they have both decision-making authority over how those loans are used and control over assets purchased with those loans. The FGD material collected during the CARE Rwanda gender gap analysis highlights the following widely-held views relating to gender roles:

- Both men and women believe that men have more spending money than women, and that many women are dependent on their husbands for any money they need, including for their VSL savings. If women do not have any independent sources of income, and their husbands refuse to give them money, then they have no spending money.

- There are culturally-sanctioned differences between which income-generating activities are seen as suitable for men or

women. Petty trading is seen as a woman's domain, while large-scale businesses such as running bicycle taxis or buying and selling agricultural products are considered men's activities.

- Men have ultimate decision-making authority within the household regarding taking loans, using them, and controlling the assets purchased with them.

- When married women become economically empowered and engage in economic activities outside the household, they are suspected to be more likely to have sexual relations with other men.

The nature of women's participation in the VSL group is therefore limited by their dependency on their husbands for their weekly savings contributions, their lack of decision-making authority about the loans they take, and their limited control of the assets purchased with loans (other than low-value items, which often belong to and are used by the whole household). The gendered nature of income-generating activities undertaken by VSL group members – women tend to invest either in improved household well-being (through consumption-related expenditures) or in relatively small-scale business activities, while men tend to make larger-scale business investments that generate higher levels of income – suggests that women may also benefit proportionately less in economic terms than men from VSL participation.

The GGA findings show that, in many cases, men are controlling the functioning of the VSL groups, even if they are not members of those groups. Not only does this not empower women, it can be markedly detrimental for the women who are actual members of the groups if their husbands force them to hand over money loaned and then misuse it. Women widely recognized that these kinds of problems presented significant challenges for their effective participation in VSL groups. Yet it was clear from the FGDs that most women do not feel confident in making decisions about a loan (whether to take one, how much to borrow, what to use the money for) without their husbands' approval, and that they also see the practice of dividing the loan money with their husbands as a way of ensuring that their husbands will help them with its repayment.

As a result of staff reflection and based on these findings, CARE decided to move beyond the economic domain and look at social factors that might constrain women from making full use of their VSL membership. The results of these processes have drastically changed CARE's view on the VSL model. The new "VSL+" model aims to engage men in women's economic empowerment, and build VSL group members' capacities to create and sustain enterprises. This was piloted in another province and has proven to lead to better outcomes – not only for women, but also for men.[5] In addition, staff who only believed in VSL performance indicators have learned that indicators can be deceiving. We need to check to see if objectives are really being achieved as originally defined. While performance indicators suggested that VSL

5 "ISARO midterm evaluation," CARE Rwanda, 2012.

members (75% of which are women) were financially doing well, the GGA revealed that it was almost only men who were benefitting from VSL activities.

Other decisions taken and implemented in the country program include:

- Critical reflection/dialogue about gender roles and activities were integrated into the VSL training cycle earlier as a means of building the decision-making, communication, and negotiation skills of women members and of finding strategies to promote men's positive engagement with their wives' VSL activities.

- Training of peer/change agents within VSL groups is now introduced earlier to facilitate reflection/discussion about gender and power dynamics and the ways restrictive gender roles and inequitable power relations adversely affect health and well-being. Peer educators are VSL group members (a man and a woman) who are selected based on their basic facilitation skills, and they are trained to facilitate reflection/discussions at VSL and community levels. These reflections are as important as reflections at the household level because these discussions sometimes become sensitive. Peer educators contribute to setting an enabling environment for empowering women.

- Dialogue and debate on gender issues using different forms of media and SAA activities were introduced at the wider community level (in churches and schools, and during community work (Umuganda)).This was done with a view to building a more supportive environment for women to participate fully in, and benefit from, VSL activities.

In addition, CARE USA also asked Access Africa, which provides technical support to country offices implementing VSL, to support CARE Rwanda in revising VSL tools and training manuals to make them gender-sensitive and to integrate learning from this evaluative thinking. Above all, some other processes that were found to contribute to full women's empowerment were also defined and included in the methodology. Examples of some materials that were revised and processes defined as a result of the above critical thinking include the following:

- The various training components of the VSL methodology – including selection, planning, and management of income-generating activities and other financial education modules – were reviewed and strengthened to ensure that they are gender-sensitive, do not reinforce gendered norms about men and women, and help women think bigger in terms of economic activities they aspire to engage in.

- Activities designed to build communication and negotiation skills for VSL group members and their spouses were also built into the trainings provided. Tools from the SAA served to improve the training modules.

- Across CARE Rwanda's vulnerable women program strategy, VSL groups will serve as entry points for different interventions, aiming at achieving gender transformation among VSL group members, their households, and communities.

- Complementary programming activities outside VSL groups were introduced by engaging with couples together and men alone to share information and address concerns regarding the social outcomes of men and women's participation in VSL groups, and to explore and address norms relating to household decision-making and the division of household labor.

- New staff with expertise in gender were added to the program coordination unit to support different projects.

- Similar gender gap analyses in a sample of countries in Africa where VSL programming is being implemented was recommended so that the consolidated findings feed into the development of the proposed gender and empowerment training module and comprehensive capacity building of country office staff.

- Finally, strategies and expected outcomes for addressing gender dynamics around VSL programming initiatives were proposed. The framework clarifies which strategy to use, how to use it, and why (what results/changes do we want to see?).

Factors Enabling Evaluative Thinking

Some of the factors that enabled this evaluative thinking include the following:

- SAFI was the first project in the country office with a larger scale, covering 15 out of 30 districts countrywide with four national partner organizations and two international partner organizations. Because of this scale, the third project objective was learning, which had a relatively sufficient budget and was incorporated into the project design.

- The implementation of SAFI-RI projects coincided with the country office's increasing interest in knowledge management and learning, which was supported by senior management. This influenced the above evaluative thinking exercise.

- CARE International works as a federation. This enables country offices to interact with staff in CARE USA, CARE Norway, CARE UK, CARE Austria, etc., and request technical assistance that could be available in those offices. In this case, CARE USA's Sexual Reproductive Health Advisor was attracted by the initiative and accepted the request to provide technical support.

- Access Africa was available to provide technical support reviewing VSL methodology should the GGA reveal any results requiring further consideration.

- The Rwandan government had started appreciating the VSL methodology, which was implemented in four out of five provinces. When the government learned that CARE was integrating gender into its VSL methodology, it asked CARE to refine this methodology so it could also be integrated into the government's financial literacy strategy.

Challenges Related to the Evaluative Thinking Process

The following are some of the challenges that limit the use of evaluative thinking:

- For evaluative thinking to be successful, staff must have good facilitation skills/techniques. In this case, CARE Rwanda had to conduct the gender gap analysis twice because the first one was influenced by staff who had doubts about its benefits. However, the good facilitation of the second GGA led these staff to change their minds.

- Evaluative processes are not built into the design of the projects/programs and are therefore not budgeted for.

- A lack of simple and well-designed tools to facilitate reflection affects the process.

- Most people still have a misconception that evaluative thinking requires high-level expertise in project evaluation; this needs to be corrected. Evaluative thinking simply requires defining a simple process with simple tools, and then allowing staff to reflect on the concepts. In particular, when some resistance is observed among key staff, a new approach needs to be adopted. Staff should be the main actors during the evaluative thinking exercise, from designing tools through data collection all the way to analysis.

- Evaluative thinking is perceived to be for intellectuals and to require complicated analysis. In reality, community members can also facilitate evaluative thinking exercises. For example, the three SAA tools (cartoon, bead game, and pile sorting) in Box 1 on page 48 produced tremendous results and they were used by community members with only a primary school education.

Promoting Evaluative Thinking within CARE Rwanda: How to Sustain Evaluative Thinking

As a result of evaluative thinking, the following has been institutionalized in the country office:

- A program quality and learning unit was established in 2011 and fully staffed, some with key skills in domains including partnership, research and analysis, communication, economic development, and knowledge management. The key existing staff were reorganized under the new Program Quality and Learning Director position to ensure full integration of evaluative thinking through better coordination of reflection, learning, and the integration of learning into new project/program design. The new position of Researcher and Analysis Specialist was specifically introduced to serve the purpose of evaluative thinking in the organization.

- All M&E staff now report to the Researcher and Analyst Specialist, who in turn reports to the Program Quality and Learning Director to ensure evaluative thinking is systematically integrated into project M&E plans, instead of having M&E staff involved in the day-to-day running of a

project. Research, impact measurement, and knowledge management are the key priorities for the country office program and are assigned sufficient budgets.

- One of the mandates of both the Program Quality and Learning Director and the Researcher and Analyst Specialist is to facilitate on-the-job capacity building for staff to be able to collect data using different methodologies and tools, and to analyze and interpret them. Reports are shared in the forums discussed below.

- The country office put in place enough space for evaluative thinking and reflection, which includes the following:

  - » First, a program management team (PMT) meeting brings together all the project managers, partners, and CARE senior staff every six months to discuss project information and make decisions. For some issues requiring further reflection, a way forward is defined.

  - » Second, in the M&E plan for each project, an annual technical review is planned and an appropriate budget assigned to it.

  - » Third, a Senior Program Management Team was established to address further critical issues by reflecting on different implementation models (such as VSL) and document learning, and where necessary adjusting strategies/models before local organizations partnering with CARE take the models to a larger scale. This was recommended by the Country Presence Review (CPR) that provided guidance on how to scale up interventions through local partners using proven and successful intervention models. The CPR also emerged as an evaluative thinking process that highlighted a few intervention models that were still under innovation/exploration and suggested how to improve them before they were taken to a larger scale.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

- The whole country office and team that went through the evaluative thinking exercise became witnesses to the importance of learning from experience, actually doing the reflection using internal resources. It is not a good practice to solely rely on external evaluations by external consultants because sometimes this limits staff ownership and learning from evaluations.

- It is not effective to give staff a document or a technical paper and expect them to read it, learn, and apply the learning. But participatory exercises pushed staff to own results by actively involving them. CARE Rwanda's management opted to work on staff's mindset, first by building their capacity in gender and power dynamics analysis and second by letting them facilitate the GGA. It then became easy for them to integrate the learning into program implementation.

- There is a tendency to rely on quantitative performance indicators, especially when dealing with economic development

activities. This reflection revealed the power of qualitative information. Given the fact that the program's established indicators were providing a wrong indication of the level at which program objectives were being achieved, the reflection helped adjust the program before participants felt more harm than benefits.

- Evidence can help resistant staff to actually change their minds about what they thought they knew. This evaluative thinking process has shown that, contrary to the belief of some staff that addressing gender and power dynamics would distract VSL group members from their economic activities, doing so actually enables women to benefit from VSL activities.

- Evidence from evaluations and studies has been instrumental in proving the model's success and advocating for its scale-up, resulting in the uptake of the model by the Rwandan government to reach many more people.

Thanks to a journey of implementation, evaluation, learning, and adaptation – which CARE undertook together with VSL group members, partner organizations, private sector organizations, government policymakers, and donors – CARE Rwanda has developed a well-tested model for integrated programming that achieves social and economic impact among poor and vulnerable people. A combination of multiple evaluations over time have allowed CARE Rwanda to move beyond the simple VSL approach toward a more integrated model that connects the poor to the formal financial sector, allows them to set up and sustain enterprises, contributes to gender equality, and has, through its success, been able to influence Rwanda's national financial inclusion policy. ■

Conclusion

By Carlisle Levine

The international NGOs included in this study have in various ways embraced evaluative thinking as a way to improve organizational and project outcomes. Each is early on in its adoption of evaluative thinking – setting up structures, systems, processes and practices that promote evaluative thinking, and building cultures that encourage questioning and evidence seeking.

In sharing their experiences, they offer lessons for others regarding the benefits of evaluative thinking, the challenges involved in it, and elements that need to be in place to ensure its sustainability. Some lessons that emerged repeatedly in the case studies merit a final emphasis follow.

Factors that Enable or Encourage Evaluative Thinking

Leadership commitment is crucial for promoting a culture of evaluation and evaluative thinking, and was highlighted as an important factor in all the cases. Ideally, leadership commitment is demonstrated at the organizational (headquarters or country office) level. However, it is also necessary at the project level, as was well demonstrated in all of the other cases.

Time, human resources, and an adequate budget are required for evaluative thinking processes to take place, as seen in all of the cases presented. Creativity and perseverance might be required to gather evidence – both quantitative and qualitative – that can adequately inform evaluative thinking processes. This was evidenced in the case of CARE Rwanda. Patience is required, as all relevant stakeholders are included in reflections. Roles and responsibilities must be clear and expectations managed, since decisions need to be informed by a wide range of factors, as seen in the case of Plan Uganda.

Donor support is also important to the successful embrace of evaluative thinking. Providing sufficient financial resources and time to allow organizations to engage in evaluative thinking is one crucial contribution,

as is providing partners with the flexibility needed to respond to the possible changes that emerge from evaluative thinking processes. In addition, as the Winrock International Kenya case showed, donors can also play a very substantive and constructive role in the evaluative thinking process itself, if they are closely involved in implementation.

A culture of evaluative thinking must be built over time. Resistance to change and some unwillingness to question established approaches or knowledge are typical to encounter when introducing evaluative thinking. Establishing an open information flow that can inform decision making, as well as an environment conducive for learning is critical for evaluative thinking to take root. In addition to having leadership commitment and donor support, as noted above, presenting evidence that points to the need to think in an evaluative frame can help convince stakeholders of its value, as seen in the case of CARE Rwanda.

Opportunities for scale up or replication may encourage an organization to engage in evaluative thinking, since an organization will want to understand how effective an approach is under which particular circumstances, as well as the assumptions that underlie the approach, before trying to replicate it in other settings. The Plan Uganda case was explicitly a pilot intervention, while in other cases, the organizations are hopeful that they will either be able to continue intervention activities beyond the current funding period and/or that they or others will replicate their approaches in other settings.

Factors that Improve Evaluative Thinking Outcomes

Intentionality is required for organizations to benefit from evaluative thinking. This means giving it a name; creating reflection spaces for it, primarily within the context of existing processes; and developing tools that facilitate it. For evaluative thinking processes to be effective, they need to be included in strategy, process or project design, and budgeted for appropriately. This will help evaluative thinking become part of the implementation fabric, maximizing its ability to guide strategic decision making. The cases presented by CRS Ethiopia, and Plan Uganda articulated this.

Evaluative thinking is not just for experts. Anyone can engage in it; to ensure that suggested changes that emerge are the most appropriate for the context and embraced by all, everyone *must* engage in it. Broad inclusion in evaluative thinking activities may lead to greater insights and to the greater sustainability of the evaluative thinking process, as well as intervention results. In the Winrock International Kenya case, the donor raised new questions informed by its unique vantage point. In the Plan Uganda case, understanding community members' values helped direct the intervention design in new ways, although Plan Uganda noted that maintaining the Community Strengthening and Inclusion (CSI) Committee's engagement required ongoing mentoring. It is hypothesized that, if communities learn to question, those who serve them – both governments and NGOs – will need to respond.

Guidance and simple tools may be required to help all stakeholders step back from day-to-day activities to reflect on what they are doing and learn. Participatory exercises can engage stakeholders more in analysis and questioning than the mere sharing of documents. Ongoing capacity strengthening opportunities can help reinforce the skills stakeholders need to engage in evaluative thinking effectively. Documenting evaluative thinking practices can help new stakeholders understand and embrace them. These lessons learned were clear in the cases of CARE Rwanda and Plan Uganda.

Evaluative thinking requires practice. When stakeholders get into the habit of thinking in an evaluative frame, they are more likely to identify assumptions that ought to be questioned, seek out evidence, and engage in deliberations informed by this evidence in which various perspectives and options are explored. The more they practice, the more responsive they will become to changes in their environment and to new information that, if incorporated into their implementation design, can help them achieve better results, as seen in most of the cases presented.

The international NGOs involved in this study found that, while embracing evaluative thinking required a shift in practices and an investment of time, human resources, and money, the benefits they gained from it justified the costs. By engaging in evaluative thinking, their decision-making processes became more inclusive and transparent, leading to greater accountability to stakeholders. Those who participated in evaluative thinking processes felt greater ownership and empowerment, and experienced an increased ability to analyze, make decisions and take action. They reported that evaluative thinking led to greater cohesion among stakeholders and reinforced positive relationships among them. Engaging in evaluative thinking helped stakeholders identify and address issues more quickly. Using it led to increased learning and improved program outcomes.

This study has served as a first attempt on the parts of InterAction and CLEAR-AA to capture InterAction members' experiences using evaluative thinking and to draw broader lessons from those experiences. This process has offered some very helpful guidance for others interested in embracing evaluative thinking. Nonetheless, as discussed in the Introduction, evaluative thinking remains an evolving area of work. From the perspectives of InterAction and CLEAR-AA, two aspects require special consideration in order to further advance the area of evaluative thinking: the role of valuing within evaluative thinking; and the question of whose values, with a particular focus on the inclusion of those whom interventions are intended to serve. ■

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