

Challenges and key success factors to integrating learning and change in monitoring and evaluation of development projects

Case study of an urban agriculture project in eastern Cuba

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Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is still too often used as an approach to account for the results achieved by development projects or programmes rather than for reflection on lessons learned. However, when M&E is used for learning purposes, it can help project managers and team members to improve project performance. The systematic collection and joint analysis of positive and negative experiences can enhance the learning necessary to promote organisational change and project steering.

This paper addresses the challenges and key success factors of integrating learning and change in M&E of development projects, based on an action research study implemented by a Cuban NGO within an Urban Agriculture project in eastern Cuba.

The main objective of the study was to assess a process of change that aimed to prepare staff members to use M&E as a learning tool. At the beginning of the study, it was highlighted that in the context of this project, M&E had been a central part of the project cycle; however, the evaluation methods used were mainly quantitative and focused on the measurement of results at a level of agricultural production. These methods have proved to be insufficient in providing the feedback that would generate learning and improvement at the level of project objectives. Thus, the study was also meant to build on the conceptual and methodological capacities of the project personnel to implement a participatory impact M&E system.

One of the main challenges encountered in the research was that project managers and team members initially had a difficult time using M&E as a mechanism for learning and change, instead of its more conventional role as a control and accountability mechanism. As a result, they were somewhat resistant to monitoring and evaluating their performance, afraid that the results could be used against their work and their personal performance. Another challenge observed, was the lack of time reserved for learning and knowledge sharing throughout an M&E process.

In order to tackle these challenges, a process of learning and change was launched among project managers and team members, in order to identify key success factors. First, resistance was addressed through dialogue, reflection and action, which led also to the empowerment of individuals and the team as a whole. Once the team members

understood the causes of their fears, they were able to confront them proactively. Second, an external facilitator was engaged, opening space for reciprocal feedback and the synchronisation of communication rhythms among participants. This proved to be a key aspect to steering the learning process: the facilitator was able to motivate managers and team members to engage in a learning process while at the same time implementing M&E of their project.

This paper will first summarise the theoretical framework used in the study to analyse the process of learning and change. Second, it will describe the methodology used to generate knowledge, collect data and analyze the results of the process. Third, the main outcomes will be discussed, in order to fourth, reach conclusions and recommendations drawn from the study.

Theoretical framework

In development cooperation, current trends define M&E as an integral part of Project Cycle Management (PCM). It is concerned with systematically measuring variables and processes over time and its main purpose is:

to provide ... better means for learning from past experience, improving service delivery, planning and allocating resources, and demonstrating results as part of accountability to stakeholders. (World Bank 2004)

M&E is an important instrument for the management of development projects and employs quantitative and qualitative measurement tools. As such, it contributes to improving the implementation of projects by enabling continuous feedback of their performance, allowing for the identification of problems as they arise.

Furthermore, based on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Evaluation Quality Standards, M&E contributes to the quality of project management by providing information on:

how results (output, outcome, impact) are achieved and by assessing effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of a specific development intervention. (OECD, 2006)

Likewise, M&E can help assess how beneficiaries use project inputs and outputs, measure their satisfaction with progress, and identify ways by which project interventions can become sustainable.

Based on these premises, it is important that project managers and teams participate actively in the M&E of their projects for they are permanently on the field, are related to the various stakeholders and have a better idea as to how the project is being implemented. However, since M&E tends to put them on the 'spot' – for they are the ones in charge of the 'positive' outcomes of the project – they might be hesitant and resistant to value and accept the learning objectives of M&E. In that respect, project staff and managers have to be prepared to conduct M&E of the projects by acquiring

concepts and skills and by learning to accept it as a knowledge generating and sharing tool.

In M&E literature, many authors emphasize the need for training the team as part of the system adopted. Formal training contributes to ensuring that goals, limitations, pre-conditions, requirements and components of M&E are understood (Vahlhaus and Kuby 2000), and allows staff to develop the necessary implementation skills. Other authors add that all team members should practice M&E in the field by, in order to assure the appropriate learning of techniques (SLE 1996 and 2000).

However, formal training 'cannot replace the learning process of project teams, which is necessary to internalise their own participatory approach' (Foster et. al. 1998:15). Experience demonstrates that 'knowing concepts and techniques of M&E is necessary, but does not automatically lead to committed practice' (Lobb-Rabe 2000: 26). It is important then, to establish a stimulating and knowledge generating and sharing environment where staff members and managers reflect, analyze and assume responsibility for the M&E process and its results.

This form of knowledge 'is created through a process of verbal communication between different individuals' (Burr 1995: 4-5). Thus, in order to engage in a learning process this communication has to be based on self- reflection and dialogue. Self-reflection helps individuals to discover their own interests, and the consequences of their daily activities. Dialogue helps people to understand and share their different perspectives, as well as their taken for granted assumptions (Isaacs 1993: 5). In other words, self-reflection and dialogue can foster sincerity, truthfulness, legitimacy and comprehensibility in communications.

Other sources assert an alternative perspective: 'verbal communication is not sufficient to guarantee effective learning' (Gergen 2002: 56); rather, knowledge is created through a 'learning cycle of action that involves planning, observing, acting and reflecting. This cycle promotes change and innovation, empowering those who participate in the process' (Röseberg 2001: 48).

Thus, by carrying out M&E, staff members will be able to observe and reflect upon results on the spot, and to plan and act upon them while becoming participatory facilitators. This form of learning contributes to the ability of staff members and managers to handle resistance to M&E in a constructive manner. While implementing M&E, they learn to identify for themselves and with other stakeholders those factors that might have influenced the project. For instance, they have the chance to observe the adverse effects, reflect upon them, and then act accordingly. Likewise, they will be able to observe positive outcomes of the intervention and act upon their enhancement. Both these responses can generate a motivating effect on both project steering and learning.

Finally, literature reflects that knowledge can be generated and shared by people through the assistance of an external facilitator in terms of his or her ability to provide feedback to participants and bring a balance into their communication rhythms. Therefore, an external facilitator engaged in M&E processes implemented by project

staff and managers can, through his or her relative distance to the project, help pinpoint biases, pre-conceptions, limitations and blind spots that emerge throughout the process. Moreover, successful facilitation can also help highlight a team's potentials and strengths, encourage mutual respect and understanding, and facilitate the emergence of horizontal relationships between staff and managers.

Based on these premises, the following hypotheses guide the study:

- In monitoring and evaluation processes, self-reflection, dialogue and collective action, embedded in a process of planning, action, observation and reflection, are required to generate knowledge.
- An external facilitator enhances the process of learning in a reflective, dialogical and action-oriented manner.

A qualitative, action-research methodology was used to test these hypotheses. The next paragraphs will give a more detailed description of the methods and tools applied through out the research study.

Methodology

The study analysed a learning and change process carried out by members of a Cuban NGO in their preparation to establish an M&E system. Action-research was considered to be the appropriate methodological framework, based on the assumption that action contributes to relevant research outcomes:

truth is revealed and established more through the testimony of actions than through logic or observation alone. (Fals Borda 2001: 30)

Another aspect that characterizes action-research is that human behaviour is part of the subject of research. In that sense, it 'entails direct involvement with and/or observation of human beings in social systems' (Rowan 2001: 10). Finally action-research seeks to enhance learning and to analyze the evolution of interaction and communication dynamics. Moreover, it actively includes the researcher, scrutinizing his or her assumptions, perceptions of the problem and learning processes.

The dynamic features of the interactions to be observed, described and analyzed called for a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. This approach further helped interpret 'important meanings of the interactive process that results from spoken and non-spoken symbols that represent social realities' (Flick *et al.* 2001: 4).

Sources of information and data collection tools

The fieldwork lasted eight weeks; a total of forty-two people participated in the study, comprising eight staff members, a professional research assistant, thirty-one farmers and two managers. All of them provided significant information and feedback to the research process.

The most important research tools used in the study were: individual and group semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, group intervention, feedback sessions and participant observation. In total, fifteen individual and ten group interviews were carried out among staff members, managers and other project stakeholders, in order to hear their opinions on the process of learning and change. Seventy percent of the information collected through individual and group interviews was tape-recorded and transcribed; while thirty percent was recorded through hand-written notes.

Informal conversations complemented information collected through the interviews. These took place mainly during lunch, coffee breaks and other informal settings. Additionally, informal conversations with other stakeholder groups complemented background and context information. These conversations were registered in personal journals elaborated by the researcher and her assistant and reflected upon between them.

Group intervention was one of the most important data collection tool in this study. It functioned as a 'vehicle for joint action and co-learning' (Steyaert and Bouwen 1994: 142) between researcher and participants. Eight formal workshops, with on average eight people per session, took place over a period of eight weeks. In total, thirty hours of formal sessions took place. Discussions, reflections and conclusions were registered in minutes elaborated by participants and notes made by the research assistant. The minutes depicted the interaction among participants, their moments of inflection, divergence and agreements. For triangulation purposes, the minutes were also written by participants on rotation basis: each participant had the chance to write at least one of them.

In order to analyse the learning and action component of the research, six practice-oriented meetings were carried out in order to gain feedback on the processes taking place during the research. The research assistant elaborated meeting minutes and observations were also recorded in personal journals. These meetings allowed the researcher to observe and analyse the learning through action proposed by the research study.

Finally, the research team became part of the daily life of the NGO and was able to become a participant observer of the internal dynamics of the organisation and its members. Participant observation allowed for the discovery of unspoken perceptions of staff members, their difficulties and frustrations as well as their successes and moments of joy. This also helped assess the quality of the relationships between staff members and managers. These impressions, reflections and observations were recorded in a personal journal and reflected upon jointly between the researcher and her assistant.

Data analysis

Part of the data analysis took place during the data collection phase and participants validated this analysis throughout the feedback sessions and in the two general workshops, in which project stakeholders and team members participated. The workshop objectives were to validate the information gathered, to include all stakeholders in the process and to observe the evolution of the learning process

experienced by project staff and managers. The workshops also allowed participants to share with each other stories and experiences drawn from the learning process that took place.

Data was analysed inductively and in an exploratory manner, meaning that the information obtained from the different sources was classified and arranged in emerging concepts. The reporting of results and presentation of data had the characteristics of ethnographic research, for it was done in a confessional style and conveyed 'the uniqueness of the field situations' (Golden-Biddle and Locke 2001: 75).

The next paragraphs will summarise the main results that evolved from the analysis of the data collected in the study.

Results

The results show that reflection and dialogue contribute to the understanding of critical M&E concepts, and to the development of a learning environment. Furthermore, it leads to changing behaviours and attitudes towards those concepts, and to the appreciation of reflection and dialogue as means of interaction. Participants acknowledged that this form of interaction allowed them to relate better to one another and strengthened support-mechanisms within the organisation.

Additionally, the learning-cycle based on planning, acting, observing and reflecting allowed participants to learn skills and further their knowledge of concepts related to M&E. Results show that this learning cycle helped participants to change attitudes towards M&E and enhanced team building.

Finally, the field experience corroborates that a feedback-relationship between facilitators and participants enhances learning and change, if it is based on reciprocity: constant giving and receiving of feedback. Participants not only learned to appreciate feedback as such, but they also learned additional concepts and skills through the knowledge shared in the process. Furthermore, reciprocity provided a basis for interaction, which enhanced the constructive change in attitudes and behaviours. This reciprocal feedback exchange, supported further by the synchronization of communicational rhythms among participants, tended to lessen existent power relations among participants including the facilitators. In all these respects the hypotheses were confirmed.

The process of learning is characterised by different levels and orders of empowerment, which are interconnected and interchangeable. *Basic learning concepts* are followed by the *acquisition of skills*. These two levels are a *sine qua non* to the learning process but do not represent empowerment in themselves. Next, *language* affects changing attitudes towards concepts. That means that participants understand the attitudes towards and assumptions of concepts through dialoguing and reflection, for instance pertaining to their fears towards M&E.

Talking about participatory M&E....we used to see it as something formal....but now we realised that we have to use it, because its results are ours, it is done for our interest. We own the necessity to implement it, because we are the ones that will use it in order to improve the project. It is precisely this vision that we gained. We realised that we have to come in with our opinions and criteria, the moment we are planning the evaluation... I think that is also what we gained from these training sessions. (Group Interview 16.09.03).

Subsequently, *action* contributes to learning in a cycle of observation, reflection and planning. In other words, changes in attitudes and assumptions are fostered not only by personal reflection and dialogue but also by the concrete application of those concepts in practice. Box 1 below illustrates how a participant's attitudes towards M&E changed in the process of its implementation. The final stage represents learning and change based on *reciprocal feedback* and *co-learning*.

Initially, project team member A asserted that impact monitoring or evaluations in general "can provoke fear or rejection from the people involved in the project... and that (the outcomes) depend on how it is carried out"(Module I, Minutes 18.09.03). This assertion was explored more deeply in the practical sessions. When we went to visit beneficiaries to interview them about their perspective of the project, A would get a bit nervous, worried that the farmer would express something that might affect her work negatively. The farmer, also hesitant to answer some questions openly, also perceived this fear. Thus, the conversation between the farmer and the staff member did not allow the research team to really understand the farmer's perspective of the project. The staff member's hidden fears surfaced off and on in other sessions. However, the first moment of inflection came while working on the M&E planning. The staff member expressed: "*I am actually internalizing to which extent our project has influenced the beneficiaries, and maybe, without this participatory M&E, I would not have realised it. I feel content...I like the way we are reflecting about things now...it lets me appreciate the project better*" (Practical meeting 2 – Minutes 01.10.03). This recognition gave her the opportunity to express her appreciation to the project. In the next meetings, the resistance reduced. The second moment of inflection came during her first interview on her own – without a facilitator. She faced the difficulties of explaining and justifying the actions of the project to the beneficiaries, but her role as an interviewer stopped her from doing that. In the feedback session, she recognised: "*It was very hard for me to remain neutral; those are the people I meet on a regular basis. I had to make a big effort to listen to what they had to say, instead of explaining why some things turned out the way they did. As project representative, I felt I had to explain them things, but I restrained myself*"(Practical meeting 4 – Minutes 09.10.03). At this point, much of what she shared about her experience was based on the reflection of the action, instead of defensiveness. Throughout the process, this staff member has shown great capacity for learning and as a result her insecurities turned into strengths. This transformation was recognized by the project coordinator in the last workshop referring to the team situation: "*I would like to thank the facilitators for tearing apart the terror that existed in the team with regard to M&E and to the team for establishing new standards*"(Final stakeholder workshop – Minutes 04.11.03).

Box 1: changing attitudes to M&E through action

The final level of reciprocity and co-learning contributes to real empowerment because of the feedback shared between participants, both among those that provide feedback as well as those that receive it: whereas the former highlight the blind spots of the latter and risk vulnerability, those receiving feedback have the possibility to recognise their own blind spots and deal with them in a competence-building way (as illustrated in Box 1). However, the reciprocity of feedback implies that the roles of

giving and receiving feedback alternate between the participants. In other words, those giving feedback become receivers of it and vice versa. Once participants have reached this final level of the learning and change scale, they are ready to become facilitators of the M&E process themselves. This stage allows them to build the basis for the construction of a learning spiral with other stakeholders in turn, and repeat and replicate the cycle again based on the same conditions. That situation can contribute to the sustainability of the process.

Integrating the facilitator's role with the regular roles and tasks of individuals has proved to be useful in terms of overcoming time restrictions, one of the largest limitations to the process. If, on the one hand, the process of learning and change takes place in a context where individuals and organisations already have assigned roles and defined tasks, M&E becomes an additional task and creates new responsibilities, a potential stress factor among staff members. Moreover, finding time for training is unlikely, nor is it recommendable. If, on the other hand, learning is immersed in the day-to-day activities of participants, the project staff can gradually include this process in their working routines, reducing time constraints, and engaging in a process of empowerment.

Beyond an individual level, the learning process undertaken also contributed to the empowerment of the organization as a whole. People related better to one another; they improved their interpersonal relations; they helped each other; and they learned from one another. However, the cycle starts only if the organization allows for an environment of learning and sets the basis for the learning process to evolve through resources and willingness. If the individuals within the organization are open to the process, they will enhance the organization to be open to the process as well. Conversely, if the organization is open to the process, it will need to provide the necessary resources and encourage staff members to undertake the process. In other words, the individual empowerment is directly connected and reinforced by the organizational empowerment. In that sense, the organization and its staff can learn from M&E, and the development project will be able to account for its impact not only to the financiers, but also to the beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

Conclusions

This study has theoretically and empirically tested a process of change and learning characterised by self-reflection, dialogue, collective action and feedback. The results demonstrate that these elements can lead to the empowerment of individuals and organizations willing to engage in M&E. However, these results depend on an organizational and individual commitment to using M&E for knowledge creation and sharing. These indeed are the premises upon which development projects should be based, if interaction and communication among stakeholders is to lead to empowerment. Such processes will not only enhance a better implementation of a M&E system but will create a stronger overall learning and change environment.

It is important to emphasize the learning qualities of M&E and to transform control mechanisms into more constructive learning and change processes, in order for

organizations and their staff members to overcome their fears of jeopardizing their work and knowledge and engage in project assessments. This transformation of perspective can motivate project staff and can create a fertile basis for project improvement. The objective is that ultimately, through communication, action and reciprocity, development practitioners are better equipped to implement M&E approaches. This will contribute to greater learning capacities, to improved project implementation, and will help development practitioners maintain their motivation and commitment to development objectives.

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges and key success factors of integrating learning and change in Monitoring and Evaluation of development projects, based on an action-research study carried out within an Urban Agriculture project in Cuba. The main challenge found was that the project team did not recognise M&E as learning tool. Instead, they tended to believe that the results could be used against their work: M&E was deemed as opening room for criticism to their performance, putting their knowledge and status were at stake. Another challenge observed was the lack of time for learning and knowledge sharing. Thus, additional time to reflect and learn from the experience was initially not well received.

In order to tackle these challenges a learning process was launched among project team members, from which key success factors were identified. Resistance was addressed through dialogue, reflection and action, which led also to the empowerment of the team as a whole. Once the team members understood the causes of their fears, they were able to confront them proactively. Further, the role of an external facilitator, in charge of opening space for reciprocal feedback and the synchronisation of communication rhythms among participants, proved to be a key aspect to steering the learning process.

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