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Building Local Sustainability for Adaptive Development Programming: A Practitioner's Guide to Capacity Building for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

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Jeffrey Phillips: I actually like to begin with a joke. I know we're still on our first cups of coffee. Sherlock Holmes, who is a British detective from the 18th century, I believe, and his assistant, Dr. Watson, are going camping. They pitch their tent under the stars and went to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, Holmes woke Watson and said, "Watson, look up at the stars and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions of stars." And Holmes said, "Well, what do you deduce from that?"

Watson replied, "Well, if there are millions of stars, then if even a few of those have planets, it's quite likely that there are some planets like Earth out there, and if there are some planets like Earth out there, there might be life." Holmes turned to Watson and said, "Watson, you idiot, it means somebody stole our tent."

[Laughter]

Jeffrey Phillips: So I think this joke is a good introduction to the importance of evaluative learning, of not only drawing conclusions, but drawing the right conclusions that help inform your program.

My name is Jeffrey Phillips. I'm a Hong Kong-based program officer with International Republican Institute, or IRI.

For the past three and a half years, I've been working with IRI's programs in China, Laos, and Timor-Leste, designing and implementing activities to advance freedom and democracy in areas such as civil society development, political parties, civic institutions, democratic governance, and the rule of law.

During my tenure at IRI, the Institute has redoubled its efforts to apply rigorous M&E standards to the democracy and governance work we do, both internally and with team country partners with whom we work. As a program officer previously based in our Washington, DC headquarters, and now in the field, I've been on the front lines of this M&E transformation. I have personally been the recipient of dozens and dozens of M&E trainings, and have conducted countless more with local partners. Just Tuesday, I trained our local staff in our Thailand office here in Bangkok, and tomorrow, before my flight back to Hong Kong, I'll be training our Thai sub-grantee, who's working on women's political participation.

I've titled this presentation "A Practitioner's Guide," because though I do not hold a PhD in evaluation studies, I do have more than three years of experience training in-country organizations on principles of M&E, data collection, and how to use information to improve programming. So I would like to spend about the next 15 minutes or so doing an overview of IRI's innovative approach to M&E, the methodology behind our approach, and then offer some key findings and recommendations you may find useful in thinking about how to build the M&E capacity of your in-country partners.

IRI is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing democracy worldwide, with over 60 active country programs. As this graphic illustrates – it may be a little difficult to see – but principles of M&E permeate every facet of our work, from the proposal design phase at the bottom through program monitoring, reporting, and implementation, and kind of weaving it through all aspects, up to the ultimate objective of advancing democracy worldwide.

We increasingly realized that local partners are a critical component of our work. They are our eyes and ears on the ground, our better place to access information and collect data, our force multipliers for achieving results, and have a lasting impact long after IRI leaves the country.

For the past several years, IRI has been working to build the capacity of local organizations to conduct monitoring and evaluation. The goal of this effort is to increase local organization sustainability and improve programming. Our theory of change is that by increasing capacity for M&E, particularly for learning, these organizations will have the skills and desire to regularly reflect on and improve their programs based on evidence.

In 2009, IRI created an internal office of monitoring and evaluation to oversee the institutionalization of IRI's M&E practices throughout the institute. The office of monitoring and evaluation overseas local partner capacity building through two initiative, the local partner evaluation program, and a more ad hoc country-specific training program that varies based on the programs we're doing in each country.

The local partner evaluation program began in 2011 as an innovative approach by our office of monitoring and evaluation to provide local organizations worldwide with intensive in-country training, followed by regular remote support by our M&E specialists. During the program, each organization is mentored through the development of an evaluation, including the methodology, data collection tools, and analysis strategy. Each organization receives seed funding to implement its small scale evaluation, enabling these partners to take full ownership over the evaluative projects. Lastly, IRI works with the local program partners to operationalize findings, ensuring evaluation results are utilized.

Apart from this program, our regional division dedicates significant resources to build local partner M&E capacity on a country by country basis. In each case, IRI's M&E approach is based on program theory and utilization-focused evaluation principles. Local partner trainings begin with a workshop to develop a program theory, theory of change, and theory of action.

First, partners develop a program theory narrative that asks key questions to help them identify the problem they seek to address, and then develop a high level theory of change to conceptualize how their intervention will ultimately change conditions. And finally, a theory of action that examines how the activities will address the problem to effectuate change.

From there, IRI coaches organizations through a results chain exercise which visually represents a sequence of results that they need – that need to occur to realize theory of change, action, and objectives. By helping local partners form a clear understanding of presumed cause and effect of their program activities, these organizations often identify leaps in logic and necessary interventions to overcome these gaps.

Then IRI helps the local partners define inputs, activities, outputs, outcome, and finally, impact of the program to fit within a logical framework. And then based on this, IRI works with local partners to develop M&E work plans with measurable, clearly defined indicators, set targets, and create data collection strategies, and then after the training concludes, IRI program staff oversee local organizations as they implement the plan.

So I know this is really difficult to see, but this is one example of a results chain that we developed with one of our China program partners. And I think one of the key takeaways from this is that this was developed in a very participatory way. So the IRI program staff who developed this with the local China partner did not dictate the results chain to the partner, but really walked them through, you know, what are the input level results? What are the activities? What are the output level results, the intermediate results, to – or outcomes, and finally, impact.

And you can see that it starts with, you know, capacity training. I think is a training of trainers type program. And some of the results are cross-cutting horizontally, and it works all the way up to the top level objective. And doing this activity with the program partners really helps them understand what are the logical steps of each of their actions, and how does that work toward achieving their objective?

And this is a sample monitoring and evaluation work plan, and I consider this to be a critical document for successful program implementation. As you can see in the left hand column, I just list the activities that the partner is conducting through the life of the program. Then next to it is the corresponding indicator. Then we set targets, and then I have a column called actual, that when we develop this we leave blank, and I expect that when they submit the reports back to me, they'll fill in the actual column, so we can measure the progress that they're making toward their targets.

And finally, the right hand column, the data collection strategy. And these M&E work plans often take a variety of different forms, and can be much more complex, but we're really working with grass roots organizations, and my goal is to make sure that we – when they walk away from our training, that they have a very clear set of action items that they need to accomplish, a very clear idea of what data they need to collect, and a strategy for how they're going to collect that data to make sure that the program is being implemented in the right way, and that we arrive at a consensus and agreement about their activities.

So one kind of tip that I have is that in – when I'm developing indicators, I actually like to use a mix of both qualitative and quantitative indicators. I find quantitative indicators are a really good way to probe for kind of illustrative anecdotes that sometimes the partners might not submit with their reports, but if there's an indicator kind of prompting them to come up with some stories or anecdotes, that can really improve their reporting.

So I'll just give one quick example. The activity here is a county level land rights training program. So we developed in the participatory way what the indicators are. And one of them is just the number of individuals trained. The other – the next one is kind of the knowledge uptick. And finally, a qualitative indicator that gets the outcomes, which is anecdotal evidence suggests officials utilized lessons from the training in the development of policies.

So it'll be really hard for them to submit hard evidence to prove that, but the stories that they submit can really enrich our programming.

So I just want to talk quickly about what we've done with our China program.

Moderator: We have about five minutes.

Jeffrey Phillips: Five minutes? Okay. So I'm going to – maybe I'll just go right to the findings.

So we had some key findings that we've accumulated from our experience doing these programmings. First, probably the most compelling finding is how monitoring and evaluation training combined with hands on regular mentorship encourages local organizations to think differently about how they design, implement, learn from, and adapt programs, ultimately in favor of more results-oriented programming.

Local partners, many of whom have received capacity building trainings from different funding organizations, value our hands-on support. Second, we found that local partners highly value the program theory and utilization-focused approaches to evaluation.

And I'll give one short anecdote of this. One program partner was conducting a training of trainers program to increase women's political participation in China. During the course of the program, the partner related a problem with the quality of inexperienced trainers who were delivering follow-on trainings. This issue came to light as a result of data in this case gathered from post-training questionnaires showing low ratings for the follow-on trainings.

In a clear example of how we use data to course correct, we urged the local partner staff to arrive at the project site two days prior to the local training to deliver more guidance to the local trainers. The local trainer skills improved as a result, and the organization followed this model of sending an advance team to coach local trainers for the remainder of the training program. Without this special focus on M&E, this correction might not have been made for some time.

A third finding is that in some cases it's difficult to achieve behavior change for civil society veterans who've been doing this work for a long time. This is what I call teaching – having a hard time teaching old dogs new tricks. These partners often consider data collection to be a burden, and this requires more hands-on support work to be done.

Fourth, we've found that sometimes we achieve breakthroughs with partners who -- once preconceived notions were broken down. For example, one China program partner previously participated in a donor evaluation, after which time his funding was drastically cut. This organization assumed that evaluations were essentially punitive. After our training program, we helped them understand the opposite to be true, and this partner quickly evolved into a willing training participant.

So just real quickly, what are our recommendations? I have one minute left, so I'm going to cruise through these. The first is, you know, this help desk style support, where it's not only delivering the training, but also constantly following up with – because without this follow-up, you risk losing many of the results you hope to achieve with your initial training.

Second, I recommend time M&E deliverables to contractually obligated reports, and have a comprehensive strategy for partner follow-up. Third, encourage partners to utilize M&E findings into their programs to improve their programs, and having learning workshops with them is a good way to accomplish this.

Fourth, a training the trainer approach may be a cost-effective way to disseminate basic M&E skills, but beware inexperienced trainers who might lose something in their follow-on trainings without proper guidance and coaching. And finally, that a strong culture of M&E by the funder flows down to organizations. And really, if you all commit yourselves to strong M&E principles from the top, that will flow down to the local organizations. In our experience, in cases where partners didn't really follow through on their M&E plans and get the results we were hoping for were as much a result of IRI's lack of follow-up as it was on negligence by the partners themselves.

So I apologize if I ran over a little bit, but those are kind of some of my thoughts about IRI's approach, and I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[Applause]

Moderator: Thank you for this helpful perspective. It seems like one of the major themes that we're getting from this is the continuous engagement. First from the funders, we've been talking about, or the donors, as well as for this continued capacity building. It can't just be a one-time training, but thinking about creative ways –

[End of Audio]