Capacitating Local Partners on Data Quality in Monitoring & Evaluation Through Participatory Processes

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Orlen C. Ocleasa: Good morning everyone. Magandang Umaga – That's how Filipinos say, 'Good morning.' Yesterday we were looking at the forest, at the map, but for us also to appreciate the forest, we need to also look at its trees and the beauty of its trees, and how its trees make up the forest.

So that's what I have now. The paper that we're presenting is a specific – a particular contractor of U.S. programming funder, and how we also collect this data for ourselves.

Taking from the notes from the previous presenter that the strong culture of M&E flows down from the funder, and USAID is very good in this strong culture of monitoring and evaluation, flowing down to the organization, the contractors and then also going to the local farmers.

So many of the developing programs for projects implemented by USAID are contracted, and the contractor is also partnered with local organizations and I'm thinking that -- actually the local organizations are the ones implementing directly in the field and supposed to be also doing their own monitoring and evaluation system aside from the contractor monitoring them.

So this is what I will be talking – but I will be focusing more on consciousness on data quality, on monitoring and evaluation. Just a review – this is the USAID data quality dimensions. USAID is monitoring the validity of the data.

What are we measuring? The reliability, the consistency of this data, the precision of these data, the correctness of this data, accuracy, and then the integrity - that is also now what we call data flow and then the timeliness; how relevant is the data to the decision-making?

And data quality is already stated. It can't be used in more decision-making and so how is the data quality – why is it important? Because we can use them in the project design at the start or maybe in formulation of a strategy, or an early strategy of the project in the middle of the – mid-term.

This can be a basis for a formation of a theory of change or the results framework -- and the same thing, the target; the monitoring of evaluation and learning plan; reporting up to the management, reflection and decision-making and then the policy decision-making. This is how data quality is important. That's why the U.S. Government, the U.S. Inspector General, and USAID also conducts data quality audit to several projects.

And some of our projects, of ACDI/ VOCA in Africa are already audited for this. So that's why we are conscious also of data quality. So I will go to this point specific, this is our project. It's sponsored actually by U.S. Department of Agriculture and our organization ACDI/ VOCA and this is the CoCoPal project.

In these days, following the USAID monitoring and evaluation policy data, we have – we follow the same policy as USAID. So that's a little about the project. It's called CoCoPal because it's called Cacao, Coconut, and Palay – palay is rice; get aid to farmers, we get them to modern field schools training for service data, useful agricultural interventions but all focused now on developing also the value chains, not only to farmers but the other – the suppliers, the input suppliers, the buyers and traders.

So – and we partner with four major partners. CocoaPhil is the Coco Foundation Philippines; Philippine Rice Research Institute. PASFCO is the Philippine Small Coconut Farmers Organization, and the LandCare Foundation. We have one government partner there, the field rice -- the Field Rice Research Institute.

So how did we start with the project. Aside from having the project and project – side project and the interventions we also require them to have this monitoring and evaluation system.

So we – but of course before we introduce our own – we have our own system, the – you see we have our own system which is also anchored on the USAID M&E policy that they will ___ the following. The performance monitoring plan is also the one that we are – we have been using.

We want this to be the buzzword of the department, so that it will be easier for us to consolidate all the data from the partners but of course we will impose our own system. We have to evaluate and assess first the M&E system because the partners, they have their own M&E system and we don't want to change them, and of course we have to assess how we can integrate them, and so we access the capacity in implementing this – the M&E system that we want to introduce to them.

And the capacity building is not only on human resource training but it also includes provision of natural resources; equipment, logistical needs, so on, and some funds. And so we have this M&E assessment with the partners at the start, based on different – we – based – the assessment is based on what information needs we want to know.

What capacitation we should do with the partners for them to have efficient M&E and also provide us with quality data. So what we did was that we – our guy, that's John, you heard earlier, on our rating systems. We had the partners, and their staff, rate themselves first and we also have our own ratings, but our rating is based on the evidence that we will present.

We may just ask, "Do you have this?" "Yes." "Do you have this data?" "How do you rate this part?" Or we want to see the evidence. So if they say, "We have equipment for M&E." "Yes, so what are these equipments?" You know, "What are the programs that you have?" Or, "You have a competent staff?" They say yes, okay, so we will assess also how the competence of the staff. We may have some – give an exam and also – so this is evidence. It's how the rating is done.

So this is our finding. The different partners, they have also already they have been doing M&E planning. They have an M&E plan but it's not one that is under – or the one that is required by the USAID or USDA which is the performance monitoring plan and they have a different template. Other than that it's really _____.

In terms of M&E resources they have equipments, some of them have equipment: computers. These are the ratings by the way, the score ratings: five, working very well; done very well, working, not working, insufficient.

And then in terms of man-partner – the two partners, they have staff but the other partners will still depend on the funding that they give to – before they can hire staff. That's why they have the zero, manpower there, and of course they have – the two organizations are staffed that's already, and one is the government that's why they have their budget.

In terms of experiences and structure we also have that criteria. So based on the track records already, we do monitoring and evaluation, so we have also assessed that one. In terms of the structure some of the partners only have one person as the M&E and the manager. Others, we have partners and then we have other staff.

And another area we look into is the database and establishing a database is one of the monitoring and evaluations needs. So basically we have data, and only one partner had the GIS because we also integrated use of GIS in our system, in our organization.

In terms of data collection that is also their experiences, the reporting and the other ratings, and then there is the capacity building of partners in the organization. So they are planning for the – how they do on the score.

Based on those needs at the time, we asses also on what are the provisions that we will make with the partners. So when we submit an annual work plan budget or a request for funding for subgrantees. We identify, "Okay, so you need computers for this, you need the software; we can grant these funds." So it will help us decide in terms of budget, location, and things that we need.

It also helps me decide the training needs of the partners, so we have basic M&E, we have the – establishing the database and then other stuff. They're – many of the partners said that it's only here in the program that they learn to use ____, imagine having a simple access for a database. Some of them, they're just learning because of their budget, you know, because ____ programs they are the most common one – simple but _______.

And then at the mid-term we also try to follow through with a budget. In spite of this capacity-building M&E that we give them, in spite of these equipments and all these things, we found out there was a delay in the data collection. There were still problems in data collection. So that is our – so how did we tackle? Again, we adjusted again, we visit them, we look at their database, their data collections, we made some tracking on how they collected the data and will help the tracking.

This is one of the partner's tracking systems. We track back. So how did they collect the data? From the farmers to the CEF. CEF is the one in the field collecting the data, to the consolidator at the provincial level who is updating the data to the M&E person.

We – yes, we train the partner's M&E person but it's now the responsibility for partners also to train their field staff. Unfortunately some – in the findings that we have here they were – they failed to train some of their field staff. That's why there is now a bottleneck here in terms of data collection, aside from other factors like distances and others. So this is also affecting the data quality at the mid-term level.

Then when the project is about to close, about six months before its closing, we tried again, we tried to conduct a data quality assessment, and actually it's a practice for future data quality only that will happen to our organization and to the partners because we know that the data quality audit may not only be up to the contractor level but even up to the partners level. I think even the Missions are being audited by the Inspector General for data quality.

So what we did – remember that the partners collect data; they report to us the data, they report the progress and then we tried to consolidate their reports, the progress, with the actual data. So what we did in the simulated data quality assessments that from your data source, which is the paper capture form, we tried to check the interest there in the interest also in the computer, if it is matching, accurate.

So we randomly picked some of the capture forms and then try to assess in – in the computer, and then if it does match, what are the reasons. So we interviewed a M&E point person, then we jointly check the documents, the capture forms. So we check the completeness of the capture form; how complete is the capture form, and then we check also the – the matching of this, important here, as I said before, with the computer, and then we match the documents we discussed.

In one of the partners we found out that they hired an encoder. An encoder doesn't really know about the data; just encodes the data. If he cannot read, he loses _____. No, so that is how data encoding is important, you know. That's why some people say that the one who collects is the one who encodes it better, you know, because if the other – it's collected by other enumerators and then encoded by another encoder, that's when they can't understand.

So these are some of the – tracking, the first one, we check the paper documents, the data source, and then we try to counter-check that with the ______ in the computer, and then of course we discuss with the partner staff, and not only partner staff but also the field data collectors. They're the three that – those are the field – for the participatory process, you know, on the data quality assessment for data quality audit.

Okay, so, lessons learned. Project Partners M&E capacity and needs assessment at the start of the project. You know, so we have a process, you know, what – what extent is the capacity of our partners. We don't just assume that our partners already have the M&E needs because sometimes they have their own M&E system but it may not be in line with what the contractor and the donor wants, you know, so we want it to match.

Aside from that, the logistical support – aside from the logistical support, we give of course computer programs and others; technical assistance, like training should be given to local partners, and I agree in the first report – coaching is also needed. We still need coaching, visiting of these partners, and a more frequent regular data quality assessment that is done directly by whatever is needed to correct the data collection; transmission and encoding.

In our case we only have a mid-term , check the quality; so we learned the lesson that maybe we can make a quarterly data assessment, a more frequent monitoring and collecting, so that's how the data.

So I would like to end this one with some words to ponder. In building the capacity of our partners we need to balance everything, like the picture here. This is staff transportation in one of the places in Mindanao. This is called a ____ because it's like a ______. You have to ride together and then you have to get off together, yeah.

It is – you need to balance because in our experience also we required a lot of documentation with our partners to the extent that partners are kept busy in preparing documentation for evidence that implementation now slows down.

There are also partners which are very fast in implementation but the documentation is lacking; so the documentation is lacking, everything is lacking, especially financial documentation, you know, and it's done with a shortcut and then, "Okay," they're given permission to follow," this is a pilot obviously, and then – so we needed to balance everything. So I think that ends my report, thank you.

Moderator 1: All right, thank you so much Orlen. That was a really interesting presentation and I particularly appreciated, I think from a lot of our colleagues in the Philippines as well as other countries about the importance of a participatory process through the entire thing.

Another thing that really struck me from that was the importance of assessing, even from the beginning, where the partner is at in their capacity. One of the things that USAID-RDMA has been piloting with the International Rescue Committee is a tool.

I think we've probably all seen different organizational capacity assessments, but this one very specifically focused on M&E capacity, and using that in I think the beginning in order to understand where a partner is at, and with another partner they had likened the capacity-building effort sometimes to, you know, an English teacher showing up in Thailand where there just – we just assume, "Okay, well, this person, imagine an American, knows English;" just go into a classroom and start teaching English without really understanding the needs and the levels of the people in the room, and I think we can all agree that in order to really effectively design something we need to understand first where people are at.

All right, we are going to have just five minutes for questions for both Orlen and Jeff's presentations. So if anyone has comments or questions they would like to share.

Audience Member 1: Thank you very much, Orlen, for the very interesting presentation. I'm very impressed by the efforts you put into ensuring quality data. I think that's very impressive and at the same time I also realize that, that would require a lot of resources from your project. So that – this would lead me to my question in terms of how much actually you have budgeted for the entire M&E system and what is the practice in USAID in terms of determining the budget for M&E in the project?

Moderator 2:	Wow, budget already. That was a slightly predominant write-in question.
Orlen C. Ocleasa:	I have not memorized the budget. Actually we have very little – the budget allocated for the project is the whole amount – for three or four million dollars. So if you noticed most of the activities there are built-in in the activities of the other project partners.
	So if you have activity for training, the budget for training is also taken out on that, and if you have a – so that's where we begin – a budget for provision of – computers and programs it's in the subgrantee's administrative costs that they will have this capital outlay.
	That's built in there, including the software, that's built in but in terms of monitoring activities our project only – budgeted for baseline, mid-term and internal reviews, and not by the partner, again, they'll use it on a geography base.
Audience Member 2:	Hi, just to follow-up about USAID's budgeting. I can't speak for all of USAID as we're – we're very large. The standard for the agency that we strive for is about five to 10 percent of total program funds dedicated to monitoring and evaluation of which at least three percent is for external evaluation.

So it's a full standard through the entire mission but for specific activities there's often a different budgeting process, you know, a $10 million activity as opposed to $500,000. There may be a different percentage that would be used for monetary evaluation but we are having a greater push that we should really put our money where priorities are, and we are definitely prioritizing M&E and I think all would agree that we do need a budget in order to effectively do this.

I was also interested when you said quarterly data assessments. We actually require every three years of our partners and certainly to do something more frequently is effective but it's also more costly. I'll leave the rest to you.

Audience Member 3: Thank you, my questions are addressed to Jeffrey. Interesting that you are applying theory of change and theory of action in your M&E. The – how are you distinguishing the two? I wonder if you're not using theory of change and you're just using theory of action. Or the other way around, what would happen to the M&E?

And the second is, the M&E work plan that you have showed us looks like that you are identifying or using indicators for the activities but obviously, based on the presentation, I noticed that you are applying more of the results-based principles in your approach, so I think we are looking for the outcomes with the indicators rather than the activity, I think because, like I said, you are doing an M&E – actually I am adamant in using the word, 'M&E system.'

And when you're doing the M&E and you're identifying indicators for everything, almost everything: activity output and the different outcomes, I am afraid the system would collapse.

Jeffrey Phillips: Great question. First on theory of change versus theory of action. The way that we use these tools, I guess you could call them, is for the theory of change to make an if-then statement. So, if something, then something else. What will happen? What will be the big high-level change? We consider this to be kind of more of a theoretical exercise. The theory of action is then what specific intervention, what specific activity will you be conducting to achieve this theory of change? So we kind of – we almost think of it as, one, being more of a high-level theoretical theory of change, and then the theory of action is the specific test that's necessary to get there.

You know this is a useful exercise because it helps our local partners who – many of whom have never done an M&E training before, see the forest from the trees, so to speak and to see kind of the big picture, what their hope is striving for and the change of conditions, and then how their specific activities will achieve that.

Your second point about the M&E work plan and the specific example that I gave is very well-taken, you know, and we actually talked about this at our table yesterday. Where do you draw the lines in terms of which indicators are appropriate to use for your programs that are kind of customized for each activity, so to speak, and which ones, you know – or do you kind of try to fit that into USAID or State Department or whoever the donor is, into their indicators to meet the data that they're collecting, and this is this kind of balance that you know as Richard said has been going on for thirty-some-odd years.

In my personal opinion it's very helpful for me, especially for partners who are doing this for the first time, to come up with an indicator for very specific output results and intermediate results because when I want – expect to receive reports from them, you know, this is a monitoring tool as well as an evaluation tool and, you know, we work in China where our ability to travel is limited and so these M&E work plans that are often in a way that we can ensure the activities are actually taking place as designed.

So that's why these kind of outcome – these output-level indicators are important but your point is very well-taken.

Moderator 1: I think we're gonna have time for one more question.

Audience Member 4: I just wanted to follow-up a little bit on that, Jeffrey. So many years ago I worked for the IRS Housing Organization in ____ and my first M&E experience was at the USAID office there, trying to get us to put together an M&E framework proving how a $900,000 voter education program was gonna change electoral behavior in Peru.

So my question from that is from thinking about building local capacity for CBO's how has it been going over the past 10 years in terms of educating donors and funders about what is and isn't useful in terms of thinking through outputs versus outcomes, particularly in areas such as where the parties are doing democracy promotion, et cetera, et cetera, and have you seen that change over time, and how is that outreach being conducted with donors, and then generally for all of us who think about how do we express our – to our funders and donors what's actually feasible as a metric?

Moderator 2: Speaking on behalf of USAID…

[Laughter]

[Background conversation]

Audience Member 5: Just one quick back to Jeff's, presentation I just want to try and understand a little better, your model. I guess, what do you give as an example on ____ of all indicators, what it's like to __ ______ but then there also seem to be like more of the 'M' part and then I'm not very clear about what's happening to the 'E' side when you say this model you build botht M&E capacity. If you would elaborate in half a minute, otherwise my throat will complain.

Jeffrey Phillips: Yeah, I mean you're absolutely right. Those indicators are more on the monitoring side but when it comes to evaluating, you know, we consider our M&E approach to be – you know – what we call utilization focused. So with this data that we gather, how can we then use that to help improve the results of programming.

So that's exactly why we have the target and the actual how next to it because when the reports come in and we see that they're falling short, that they said they were gonna train 40 people and actually were only able to train 10 people, well why? And this is the basis of what we call a learning discussion that are – look at the progress and say, you know, let's take a time-out here, what's going on, why have – has this, the results of this area been really strong? Well, whereas in this area they have nothing and how can we change that? And we consider our – these monitoring and evaluation plans to be organic, right? Like we reinforce with our partners that, you know, if they don't reach their targets they're not gonna get their funding cut, you know, we want to know before it's too late why they're not reaching their targets, and make some course correction or some changes to optimize the results of their program.

So I think the evaluation part of M&E happens through the whole process of implementing this M&E work plan and that's where this kind of consistent follow-up is really important.

Moderator 2: Okay. So we have a question from somebody who hasn't asked a question.

Audience Member 6: Hi, I'm Karim _______. I'm from USAID Pakistan. I have a general question. There is always a missing link between M&E and budget. So I don't see any link here as well, a country who wants to make a link between the budget and the M&E systems.

Audience Member 2: Can I add on to that because – thank you. I wanna add on to that because I think that's really important building also on ¬¬¬_____'s point, the 'E.' If three percent is going – of budgets are going to external evaluation what is left for implementing partners to do evaluation? It's not there now and I've actually seen it taken out of budgets and so how can implementing partners do 'E' for M&E – or sorry, 'E,' the evaluation, put inside the budget.

So that's a question I have to RDMA or USAID in trying to do budgets for evaluation.

Moderator 1: Somebody else from USAID like to answer that?

[Laughter]

I had mentioned at the beginning that we can't speak for all of USAID in different countries. There is sort of the gold standard that automated direct assistance, our handbook was revised just last November to include that five to 10 percent as a gold standard for all of our program plans to be devoted to monitoring and evaluation.

So if you say five to 10 percent, three percent for external, we're looking at two to seven percent for internal evaluations as well as monitoring but that is for an entire mission and not necessarily the specific activities, and I fully agree with you that it is necessary at that activity level and I think this is where, you know, these bigger policies are just starting to trickle down that at that activity level what does that five to 10 percent actually mean and how do we start planning for the – those monitoring evaluation activities at the beginning and not, "Okay, the project is ending next year; the activity is ending next year – oh, we should have done an internal evaluation because we don't know when their office is working."

So we are also – and I think _____ has helped us to really push for internal evaluations as well because we find them to be very important for all learning purposes, not just because we're required to, but for our own learning, as well as making sure that the monitoring complements the evaluation is essentially, you know, sometimes we're using in some ways kind of triangulation with evaluation, and that we're also not using evaluation to make up for bad monitoring or lack of monitoring, as that happens as well.

So we as an agency are striving towards this but it's just now at the stages of that activity level and if you are USAID contractors please remind us at the beginning if we forget that because it is important. We want to work with you on budgets.

Moderator 2: Can we go one more – one last comment from USAID.

Moderator 1: Michael's a softie this morning [laughter.]

Audience Member 7: Let me just very quickly – my name is Clarissa Redding and I'm actually in the Africa Bureau at USAID in DC, and I'm concentrating on monitoring and evaluation and just to – just to address one of your concerns I think some of the implementing partners, may feel as though it could be an afterthought precisely what is said, something may not have been working in the beginning with whomever that external evaluator is – so if you're doing – you know – you're setting aside three percent for gold standard of evaluations that more than likely is coming from someone that just focuses on evaluation and is not going to be the implementing partner evaluating themselves.

So they really should be working, in the beginning – people getting to not only help set up those monitoring systems but then also to point out the evaluation _____.

Moderator 2: Okay, folks. It sounds like it's been an exciting morning --

[End of Audio]