Who owns the Knowledge? An equitable approach to evaluation at the grass roots level.

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Introduction

The context for this conference paper (and presentation) and my approach to evaluation at the grassroots, local community level is that most of my work is in the field of international aid and development. Within this field of work I work mostly in the Melanesian states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu where I am fluent in the lingua franca of each country. This is not to infer that these methods and tools are restricted to situations where the lead evaluator is able to speak the language. Indeed I have used these tools and methods to great effect in situations where I have required an interpreter such as in Timor Leste.

The methods and tools outlined in this paper are not restricted to use in developing country situations, nor are they restricted to use in discrete remote village communities. Indeed these tools can be used in any evaluation situation where the evaluation requires inquiry into the views of an identifiable population or group. Such groups could for example be the population of a village on an island in Vanuatu, or it could be a group of single parents in a suburb of an Australian city.

Implicit in my approach to evaluation of projects at the grassroots level and my use of the tools I will describe in this paper (and presentation) is that they are user friendly for evaluators/evaluation team members; they are user friendly for evaluation informants; they encourage participation, and they draw on and reflect an oral tradition. While oral traditions are often seen as belonging to mostly developing societies they are not restricted to them. Oral communication is generally the mode of communication with which most people are most comfortable.

The notion of equity in evaluation referred to in the title of this paper (and presentation) relates to the knowledge generated in an evaluation – the knowledge generated is shared, not appropriated. It is important then that when people provide information to evaluators, that information is seen as the knowledge of that person or persons and is treated with respect.

The knowledge provided to evaluators by informants during grassroots evaluations form part of the story of those informants. By respecting and valuing those stories evaluators can provide an empowering opportunity for those who may otherwise go unheard. In the words of Friere and Macedo[1],

[1] As quoted in Labonte, Feather and Hills, 1999, p3.

"...the first act of power people can take in managing their own lives is 'speaking the world', naming their experiences in their own words under conditions where their stories are listened to and respected by others."

Stories also reflect people's knowledge. That knowledge defines who the people are. This knowledge is shared, but never given away!

My approach to evaluation at the grassroots level

Evaluations should provide something of value for all those involved. This includes the project donor who most often is also the evaluation commissioner. It also includes the project implementing organisation which in the case of community development projects, is very often a non government organisation (NGO). The target community is also a critical group in grassroots evaluation.

Target communities in community development project may be seen as partners at best, but most often as beneficiaries. In project evaluations it is the members of these communities who as informants to the evaluation, provide vital information which informs evaluation findings and conclusions. It is also these community informants who are most often forgotten when it comes to being made aware of the outcome of the evaluation.

In relation to the value added (to a project, its outcomes and for those involved), this will depend on the use made of the knowledge generated by the evaluation process.

Evaluations conducted at the grassroots level should also be based on a strength based approach (SBA) to the community engagement event which is the evaluation. As Professor Roger Maaka[2] points out, it is important that research and evaluations do not create or reinforce negative images. The starting point of the evaluation should then be what have been the positive outcomes of the project – intended or otherwise. This means finding out the 'what is' as distinct to the 'what was intended (they may well be the same). For the local community the 'what is' is the reality for the local people. The 'what was intended' is the concern of implementers and donors. However the 'what is' ought to be of vital interest to all because this reality is what the project offers for the future of those for which the project was intended – the community; the so called beneficiaries.

The SBA approach which I use in grassroots level evaluations involves three tools; Appreciative Inquiry (AI) informed focus groups, Pocket charts (PC) and the Ten Seed Technique (TST). These three tools are explained and their benefits are discussed below.

[2] Professor Roger Maaka's opening keynote address to the 2010, Australasian Evaluation Society's annual conference, Indigeneity in research and evaluation (Pipitea Marae)

Appreciative Informed Focus Groups

Appreciative Inquiry is an inquiry into the best and valued things or, finding out what is good, worth keeping and building on. It does this by focusing on examples of success and the causes of these successes[3], [4]. AI asks positive questions to generate a constructive dialogue between the inquirer and the informant. The ensuing dialogue provides data for the inquirer and also provides the informant with the opportunity to clarify for themselves (if they had not already done so) what their strengths, goals and opportunities are. The evaluation uses questions framed in positive terms, which align with the four (4) stages of AI i.e. the 4Ds- Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny. These 4 stages can be expanded as:

Discover – finding out the good, valued aspects of people's lives that they attribute to the project;

Dream – what does the participant wish for their own/family/community's future?

Design – how will what they have achieved from the project help fulfil their dream?

Destiny – What will the participant do now with what they have gained from the project?

In using this approach for the facilitation of focus groups I change the fourth D, Destiny, to 'Do' because do is more easily understood by both local people and local facilitators.

Examples of the indicative questions asked by the facilitator to initiate the dialogue are:

- Discovery: What did you learn/gain from this project? What has been the benefit for you and your family and your community from this project?
- Dream: What would you like your future to be like using the knowledge you have gained from this project?
- Design: What will you do/how will you use what you have gained from the project to achieve your dream?
- Do: What do you plan to do in the future with what you have learned from this project?

By encouraging people to focus on the benefits from the project (being evaluated) people are more likely to consciously make the effort to utilise those benefits for their future wellbeing. Using the best of the past to build the future is a key aspect of a SBA to development. As Professor Thomas Schandt[5] suggests, "The past is our future".

In the context of the evaluation the focus groups, which can if necessary by segregated by sex, age and/or status, is public, personal and flexible. Public in that all present are able to hear what is said and see by whom it is said. Personal in that people express <u>their</u> view about

[3] "Appreciative Inquiry" http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/Appreciative.htm. Downloaded April 22, 2009

[4] Cooperrider, D.L. & Srivastra, S. (1987), Appreciative inquiry in organisational life, I Passmore, W.A. & Woodman, R.W. (eda.), Research in in organisational change and development (Vol. 1), Jai Press, Greenwich

[5] Professor Thomas Swandt, key note address, Reflections on the psychology and sociology of evaluation. Australasian Evaluation Society's 2010 annual conference.

whatever the question asked to initiate the discussion. Flexible in that good facilitation is able to respond if necessary to dynamics of the dialog within the focus group.

The Pocket Chart

The Pocket Chart is a simple data collection tool that allows people to express a view - anonymously if they choose to do so. It involves a person placing a voting token into a pocket upon which is depicted an issue or subject they wish to vote for or support. Issues or subjects are depicted in a way that is able to be understood by all and is most often pictorial. Women and men use different voting tokens to allow for the disaggregation of data. Such disaggregation can also be done for age groups. The Pocket chart also provides a degree of quantification to issues that lend themselves more to qualitative data collection methodologies and does this without intrusive questioning. Each time the pocket chart is used, the results are counted in front of all those who participated in its use. In this way everyone is aware of the results.

As a data collection tool the PC is very appropriate for this type of evaluation because it is anonymous, user friendly, personal and allows for the easy disaggregation of data (by age, sex or status). Anonymous in that if a person wishes to preserve their anonymity they can do so. This may be very important when inquiring into what may be sensitive issues. It is user friendly because a person does not need to be literate, articulate or posses any other skill than to have their own opinion/view. It is personal because it asks for an opinion/view which relates to them alone. The use of different tokens for different groups allows for easy disaggregation of data when counting.

Ten Seed Technique[6]

The TST or the Ten Seed Technique is a participatory tool that can be used for rapid assessments related to the current status of the community in relation to an issue. The TST uses ten seeds (or similar) to represent an entire (relevant) population to which the evaluation applies. The seeds are placed on a contrasting background of a depiction of the issue being discussed and the group (focus group) of people involved move the seeds to represent the proportion of the population depicted (or otherwise) by the picture/question. In response to a question such as, 'How many families have a rainwater tank?' and for example if three seeds were placed over a picture of a water tank this would mean that 30% of families had a rainwater tank.

The TST enables all people to be involved and it is public, non-personal but communal and the result is based on consensus. The non-personal nature results from the fact that the TST is asking for a response from the group about the total population/community. In this way it is a safe environment for vulnerable individuals as it does not identify the individual. It is public in that all present are able to participate and observe the process and the result. The consensus nature of the TST is very important and reflects the traditional decision making process which applies in many indigenous communities. The consensus nature of the result also

[6] Dr. Ravi Jayakaran, World Vision China. http://www.rcpla.org/pdf%20download/Ten%20seed.pdf

means that the TST may take considerable time to conclude. It is important that this time is available and that the TST facilitator plays no part in the process other than initiating it.

A particular aspect of the TST activity and the AI informed focus group discussions, is that evaluators are able to observe body language exhibited by participants. In relatively small population groups involved in grassroots evaluations, body language can be an interesting pointer to factors affecting the data collection process and activities.

The three tools combined

In evaluations of this type I use all three tools at every evaluation site. The benefits to the evaluation and to the community of using all three tools are:

- It maximises participation – because everyone can participate if they choose to do so.
- It provides a transparent process of data collection. Everyone present can see and hear and observe the whole process and knows the results of the PC and TST activities. Everyone knows what knowledge the evaluators are taking away from the site.
- All knowledge is left behind at the site and is only taken away as shared knowledge.
- The three tools provide triangulation in analysis by obtaining data regarding the same issues from different processors. Discrepancies that arise (e.g. in data from segregated focus groups or between men and women in PC results) can be very enlightening to evaluations. Such discrepancies are dealt with as they would be with discrepancies in data from any collection tool.
- The tools also provide a degree of quantification to what is predominantly a qualitative methodology. However the quantification is as sound as that which may be obtained from other more traditional quantitative tools such as surveys.

The value of the evaluation to those concerned with the evaluation

As previously stated the value that an evaluation brings to the various stakeholders in an evaluation is dependent upon the use that those stakeholders make of the knowledge generated by the evaluation.

At the community level

Because of the user friendly, participatory and transparent nature of the evaluation when using these tools for data collection, the participants retain ownership of the knowledge generated by them during the evaluation data collecting activity at a particular evaluation site.

An awareness (often new) of the community in which they live by those participating in the evaluation can be a valuable experience for participants. A chief of a village in Solomon Islands commented after the completion of these evaluation activities in his village, “I learned many thing today about my people which I did not previously know”.

This method of evaluation at grassroots level highlights the relevant and the lived reality of the people involved. Because it is also a SBA, the awareness of the positives can enhance the sustainability of the positive outcomes of the project whether they were intended or not.

At the implementing organisation level

Community development work at the grassroots level in developing countries is mostly conducted by NGOs with locally recruited staff. While staff members have integral knowledge of local culture and practices, fulfilling the expectations of donors can be challenging. By using tools which are user friendly, staff are better able to gather data required for donors - baselines, monitoring reports and subsequently, evaluations.

If such tools are used to establish baseline information at the beginning of a project, ownership of the knowledge and the subsequent monitoring process is shared by the implementing organisation and the community. This situation means that implementing organisation staff and the community members can monitor together the changes that the community themselves have identified is desirable. Changes in what was hopefully a partnership of project design.

This shared process enables both the implementing organisation and the community to make informed decisions regarding their respective future directions and priorities. From an evaluation perspective, it places the evaluation within the project rather than an event that occurs at the end and outside of the project. This situation enhances the sustainability of the positive outcomes from the project because it reinforces the positive effects and benefits from the project for both the community and the implementing organisation. This partnership situation helps implementing organisations to be more closely enculturated into a community rather than being the bearer of outside goods and knowledge which is how NGOs are most often perceived in developing societies.

At the donor/commissioning agency level

This SBA approach to grassroots level evaluation enables the donor to know whether or not the funds provided were beneficial to those targeted by the donor funded intervention – regardless of what the outcomes were, intended or otherwise, did the community benefit? Such information is very useful to donors when determining future funding strategies because it focuses such strategies on outcomes as distinct to needs. Needs are associated with deficiencies and failures which forces donors and implementing agencies to be the saviours of deficient societies rather than being partners in assisting developing communities to build on their strengths.

By using this approach to grassroots evaluation and indeed evaluation at any level and context, data/knowledge generated is more specifically related to the issues targeted in the original project design rather than prescribed outcomes. Again the positive nature of the evaluation process's enhancement of the sustainability of the project outcomes, expected or otherwise, is something which donors can relate to and derive a degree of satisfaction from.

So what's different with this approach?

For all the reasons outlined above, using a Strength Based Approach in evaluation supported by the use of user friendly data collection tools, equity for all stakeholders is more likely to

be achieved. This methodology is also culturally friendly especially in indigenous contexts. However it can be as culturally friendly in any population context where there is disadvantage and marginalisation.

Because this approach is not confrontational and threatening it encourages maximum community participation because it allows for the involvement of all who wish to participate to do so.

The process allows all stakeholders equal access to relevant knowledge and all knowledge generated at the evaluation site – the village, the community/population meeting – is known to all present before it leaves the site as shared knowledge with the evaluators.

Don't surveys of statistically derived representatives of communities do the same?

To me the very short answer to this rhetorical question is NO they do not.

Surveys can be intimidating for both the person being surveyed and the person asking the survey questions. Where literacy is an issue, or where cultural mores present reversed power relationship situations in conducting surveys, the outcome from the process is questionable. For example an illiterate person can be quite intimidated by the written form and may be unfairly compromised by such a situation. Similarly a person conducting a survey may be required to breach cultural taboos, such as questioning authority figures, which may also render the process questionable. Surveys are also open to surveyor bias, especially where literacy and/or language is a problem between the surveyor and the surveyed.

Surveys collect data from individuals who may not necessarily represent the views of the broader community. Because the data is gained from individuals, it may be seen as other community members as being threatening or secretive. This situation may be exacerbated by the fact that surveys are taken away to be collated and analysed and may never be returned to the community. This appropriation of knowledge by evaluators is a common outcome of evaluations and presents an ethical challenge for evaluators at all levels but especially at the grassroots levels where budgets are often so small that feedback to communities is often not possible.

Conclusion

As evaluators we have dual obligations. We are commissioned to collect and analyse data to fulfil the requirements of the commissioning agency and are generally financially rewarded for this work. We also have a duty of care to the community/group/population into whom we are requiring in the evaluation process. Because of this dual responsibility we must ensure that all stakeholders are regarded as equals in the evaluation and that each stakeholder, community, implementing agency and donor/commissioner is fairly rewarded for their part in the process. A rewarding experience of awareness raising and future possibilities for the community; a strengthening of capacity and credibility of the implementing organisation; an

evaluation report for the donor which provides evidence of the real outcome of the project and that can usefully inform future funding strategies.