

LEARNING BY DESIGN

Perspectives on monitoring and evaluating a Southern-focused knowledge service

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This is one of a series of short publications through which GNet and its partners reflect on what they have learned about supporting Southern researchers to contribute and debate research in development thinking, policy and practice.



"Could we have a look at GNet's M&E system?" This question has been asked many times of Sherine Ghoneim, GNet's Programme Director, and Robbie Gregorowski, GNet's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) advisor, at Itad.

GNet's M&E 'toolkit' is available online (see *Further Information, p4*) but, of equal value to those managing and evaluating knowledge services, is understanding what happened when the M&E approach was applied and how it has been adapted during the life of the programme. Programme managers and consultants have different interests and objectives when undertaking M&E. In this publication, Robbie Gregorowski, an Itad consultant who has worked with GNet throughout its 2010-2014 phase of DFID funding, and Sherine Ghoneim share their personal reflections on how GNet's M&E was developed and has evolved over time, what they learned and their advice to others.

Start by drawing on what's already known

GNet's history with Itad dates back to the consultants being commissioned by DFID in 2009 to carry out an Output to Purpose Review (OPR) of GNet. Sherine remembers that Itad had just completed an OPR for the Mobilizing Knowledge for Development programme at the Institute of Development Studies and was developing a niche in understanding knowledge brokerage and knowledge intermediaries. In the OPR, Itad recommended that GNet create a clear M&E framework informed by a strategy of what the programme wanted to achieve and its Theory of Change. At the same time GNet was becoming alert to the risk of losing strategic focus if its programme choices were driven by what donors wanted to fund rather than the difference GNet wanted to make in the world. Therefore, when it came to developing their M&E system for the next phase of DFID funding, Itad was an obvious choice.

"It's useful to have semi-independent evaluators working with you", observed Sherine. "With knowledge intermediation, unlike other types of services, it's important to get a really good understanding of the M&E methodology, tools and techniques and what they are employed towards." GNet wanted its M&E to be clearly linked to its Theory of Change and to focus on changes in behaviour and how

sustainable these were in the Southern research to policy environment. At this point GNet learned the importance of looking at what other people had done and the reasons behind their decisions. "I would really invest at the outset," Sherine recommends to fellow intermediaries, "to learn from others in the same field of what worked and what didn't and how and why, and why the choice was made in the first place. What have we learned and how have others dealt with that particular issue? So the design aspect of M&E is informed by current thinking." In deciding to work with Itad on its M&E, GNet was able to draw on the knowledge Itad had gained from undertaking evaluations for other intermediaries, during this critical planning period.

Meeting the challenge of flexibility and consistency

The latest phase of GNet ran from 2010 to 2014 and one of the challenges GNet and Itad faced during this period was how to keep the M&E framework consistent while being innovative and responding to changes in the environment. "For a multi-year programme there needs to be some flexibility," says Sherine. "Responding to changes in indicators halfway was a key challenge; some we were able to take on board by way of a pilot and accommodated where we could. One needs to have the flexibility but also needs buy-in to the particular indicator through the lifetime of the programme."

Robbie agrees, "I think we knew it would be an iterative process of developing an M&E system; getting the balance between a consistent framework to be rolled out year on year and having flexibility to bring in new tools and frameworks as they emerge, as the programme evolves or the logframe changes." In the last two years, for example, GNet has been using social media to facilitate interaction between Southern researchers, and between Southern researchers and policymakers, prompting the need for a new set of indicators. A key principle for Itad was to ensure that any new or adapted M&E methods were underpinned by established frameworks. Robbie points to GNet's capacity building of researchers' confidence and ability to communicate research as an example: "We did a lot of research into how you assess capacity building efforts, particularly through workshops," he says. "Typically, end of workshop self-perception feedback is about the design of the workshop, which tells you very little

about one-off increases and more importantly nothing about the sustainability of the training and how that has changed their behaviours."

Drawing on the Kirkpatrick Model of training evaluation, Itad created a pledge method for GDNNet (see p.4, *The Power of Pledging*), which speaks to Step 4 of the model - behaviour change. Robbie acknowledges that there is a significant cost-benefit to this approach. "Following up with people on a three-monthly, six-monthly and annual basis, and writing up the case stories is costly but it does give you that deeper understanding," he says. "What we felt was that it's not cherry-picking; these are cases that can be traced over time. For knowledge brokers they give a very direct link from your effort to the change farther down the line, an evidence pathway, which you can attribute to what you did".

No method is perfect or gives the whole picture.

Robbie and Sherine have strong opinions on how M&E tools should be used. Sherine is troubled by the reliance on basic website statistics to gauge effectiveness of online knowledge brokers. "They do not give a complete picture; they are necessary but not sufficient. With the changes in technology, if the purpose is outreach and uptake, web stats are probably one of the weakest indicators because mapping the extent to which knowledge travels, where and how it lands is getting increasingly difficult with the use of social media and social networks."

Robbie shares Sherine's concern about getting a full picture. He says: "We always planned to use a range of methods and what we tried to do was not just apply a single method to a single indicator or output. We always wanted to be able to triangulate by not relying on one method or data source." In GDNNet's and Itad's experience, this does not have to mean much more effort or cost, and there is a considerable benefit in having each method address more than one indicator so one can verify or pick up anomalies in results coming from another method. In Robbie's opinion, every method has its limitations but he believes it is dangerous to have absolutes: "At the moment online surveys are falling out of favour. People are concerned about selection bias, 'survey fatigue', insufficient responses for them to be representative, etc.," he says. "I would counter that by saying that there are weaknesses, but it's about how you use them."

While the reliability of the data obtained through online surveys can be affected by response rates and opt-in bias, for GDNNet, the online survey has added value: it offers the team a means of reaching out to and engaging with their user base to understand their needs better. Robbie advises that one should acknowledge a tool's weaknesses, apply it to its strengths and use alongside other methods to make the results more robust.



Key advice from Robbie:

Don't do M&E as a once a year reporting process. Rather see it as a continual learning process.

Do adapt existing M&E methods to meet your needs.

Don't let perfect be the enemy of good: if a method is not perfect for your situation then don't worry. In practice, M&E for knowledge services is not a precise science.

Different incentives, different contributions

Programme managers, team members and external consultants have different priorities when it comes to M&E and this is echoed in the different roles played by Itad and GDNNet. "We're there to facilitate the M&E," says Robbie about Itad's contribution, "providing strategic guidance and establishing the framework." The day-to-day data collection and understanding how the M&E works form part of GDNNet's domain, through a process of capacity-building from Itad. Robbie has witnessed over the past four years how GDNNet staff have become more and more confident in the data being generated and their ability to roll out the M&E framework.

Sometimes the choice of whether Itad or GDNNet carried out the work depended upon the impact it would have on the quality of the data being collected. The pledge follow-up, for example, is the responsibility of GDNNet's Zeinab Sabet, who facilitates their capacity building workshops. "It would have been very difficult for Itad to collect that data because there's no relationship," points out Robbie. "Saying to a participant 'you've never met me but...' wouldn't have worked." In other cases, it is more appropriate for the external consultants to take the lead. "A lot of the collection of the material is done by the GDNNet team, but in certain areas, such as the survey, definitely the semi-independence of Itad plays in well there, because we need that distance," says Sherine. "It's different from generating our own survey results. Getting the message across of that independence really helps solicit independent responses".

M&E offers many benefits to managers

As well as helping to keep the programme on track, Sherine welcomes the evidence that M&E provides to guide management decisions. In 2011, GDNNet introduced 23 Thematic Windows to its online portal, with topics chosen to match those in which the researchers said they were most interested. If GDNNet had continued, Sherine would not have wanted to rely on web traffic to assess the value of maintaining them all. Evidence from M&E about uptake of the individual Thematic Windows would have been essential to

help to understand more clearly why some Thematic Windows had been used more than others, and to which ones GDNNet should prioritise allocating resources.

Sherine has also seen the effect that involving a whole team in M&E can have on motivation and cohesion. "Focusing on a single activity as an end in itself is not sufficient to get people to work together coherently," she observes. "Getting the different team members to work on the M&E gives them a better understanding of what we're ultimately trying to achieve, and shows them how the whole programme holds together and how effort in one area affects another." As a manager, Sherine has seen how staff who work on M&E find it easier to stay on track and to learn how their contribution makes a difference. "So, for example, within the Knowledge Services team, if someone is focused on abstracting, letting them see the value of what they do through seeing the answers to the members survey, for example, really provides a different exposure that empowers them and keeps the enthusiasm and commitment in place."

Robbie recommends embedding the implementation of M&E systems into everybody's work and avoiding limiting it to just an external M&E consultant working with a counterpart in the programme. Itad introduced a process of recording interactions and individual learning to GDNNet, with the logs synthesised annually. "The log templates are used by the whole of the GDNNet team, and noting down when they've facilitated a connection between a Southern researcher and a policymaker brings them into being responsible for M&E and draws them into exploring and understanding the results they produce, and into the programme management."

Take a few risks

For Itad, their work with GDNNet was an opportunity to pilot approaches that were new to them, as well as to GDNNet. Innovative approaches and methods were prompted by the indicators in GDNNet's logframe. One of these, namely bibliometric analysis of the use of Southern research by Southern researchers, proved to be unworkable but in trialling the approach, GDNNet and Itad gained a deeper understanding of the nature of Southern research.

"Four years ago bibliometrics was gaining popularity as a quantitative method by which researchers could attribute their impact in terms of their publications and how they were being used by other researchers," remembers Robbie. "We looked into citation analysis software and it proved to be inappropriate in a Southern context; the software is driven by citations in formal peer-reviewed journals and Southern researchers simply don't publish enough in those publications, but more in what we'd call 'grey literature', the policy briefs and manuals, which you can't pick up in citation analysis." Itad then tried a manual citation analysis of a random sample of research papers featured on the GDNNet portal but it is a

method that Robbie cautions against others attempting. "It pretty soon descends into a chaos of confused assumptions: How do you define Southern research? What if it's a research team with Western and Southern researchers? Is it the country of the institution or the publisher that you look at?"

A lot of the papers sampled either did not include citations or the research was not cited systematically. "You might say it was a failure," remarks Robbie, "but a number of people have spoken to me about citation analysis and I've been able to say that for these reasons it's not appropriate and won't work, and probably saved people lots of time." Itad decided to replace citation analysis with inclusion of questions in the web survey, asking Southern researchers about their perceptions of the use of Southern research. Through open-ended questions Itad and GDNNet learned that generally, if Southern researchers want theory-based research they look to the North but if they want something that is practical and pragmatic they look to Southern research.

M&E can be your research function

Neither Sherine nor Robbie see M&E as purely an accountability function but consider it to be central to GDNNet's learning and course correction and it has helped generate understanding about Southern researchers in a rigorous way that can stand up to scrutiny. Robbie sees an opportunity with GDNNet's M&E findings to change people's perceptions and understanding about Southern research. "We've been advocating for an organisation, GDNNet or another one, to change perceptions about Southern research. It is not inferior to Western research but complements it, and in many ways is more innovative, more practical, more problem-oriented and can demonstrate more simply and clearly impact or use in policy, than you often get from standard peer-reviewed articles produced in the West."

Online surveys are seeing a decline in responses as people experience survey fatigue but Sherine notes that the GDNNet survey has played a vital role in maintaining a link with members and ensuring that Southern voices are heard.



Key advice from Sherine:

Design M&E from the outset.

Don't limit M&E to capturing results - make it part of the culture and use it as a living management and team empowerment tool.

Be flexible – don't ignore changes in the context and environment.

Don't reinvent the wheel – learn from others and keep an eye on related programmes and methods.

The Power of Pledging

The GNet team has always understood that increased confidence and ability immediately following a capacity building event is not particularly meaningful in itself. Of greater importance is a long-term and sustainable increase in confidence and ability among Southern researchers and what this means for the way they do their jobs. To understand more about this, Itad designed a participants' questionnaire, which includes a section called 'the pledge'. Participants are asked "What will you do differently as a result of attending this workshop?" and are invited to make a pledge, which starts: "Within the next three months I will...". The participants are told they will be contacted by GNet three months later to see what happened.

A sample of workshop participants with interesting or promising pledges are invited to take part in a short telephone interview, which asks about the extent to which they were successful in implementing their pledges, the changes this brought about or what constrained them if they were unable to implement them. The interviews are written up as cases and have shown GNet a very clear link from training, to increased confidence and ability, to direct application by the researchers: the sustainability of the capacity building effort. GNet has been able to revisit some of these cases a full year after the workshop and this follow-up, in particular, has highlighted the complexity of any change pathway from enhanced research communications capacity to informed policy.

"A key lesson learned is that the annual survey is still a good instrument and probably the only one I know of that actually draws a picture of the changing or consistent requirements over the years of Southern researchers."

Knowledge intermediation needs a different approach

As Robbie comments, the trial and error and innovations in GNet's M&E often arose from necessity. "Not a lot of it had been done before and it's that classic problem in M&E: lots of people talk about the theory, but the manuals, the practice, and the 'How do we do this?', didn't exist. You couldn't just do a Google search for setting up an M&E system for a knowledge broker; you wouldn't find the answers. People would tell you about the challenges or the theory, but they wouldn't tell you: 'This is our experience and how we set up a system'." Itad realised that there would need to be some experiments and GNet was keen to support that, but it was important to balance the risks by drawing on the tried and tested methods and piloting some new ones. In its final year, GNet was asked by DFID to pilot a pre- and post-workshop content analysis method for participants of its policy brief training workshops, to strengthen the existing self-

assessments of ability and pledge follow-up interviews. Sherine welcomed the addition of more objective data about participants' abilities that the review method produced. "It has been a useful exercise and I'm pleased we were able to have an opportunity to compare this objective assessment of participants' skills, before and after the workshops, with the scores the researchers gave themselves." If the programme had continued, Sherine feels it would have been important to have validated the results from the pilot by consistently using the indicator, particularly given the subject matter of GNet's training (research communications, rather than research methodology or proposal writing).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the amount of learning exchanged between knowledge intermediaries about M&E. Sherine believes this needs to be stepped up and for there to be more dialogue between intermediaries, donors and other stakeholders so that appropriate indicators can be established that meet everybody's needs. She concludes: "Knowledge intermediaries together need to be part of a two-way process, informing if there are changes in the industry that affect what can be measured and what is meaningful."

Further Information:

GNet's Baseline and M&E Framework 2010, and the subsequent annual M&E reports are available to download from <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/>

For a general introduction to M&E methods which can be adapted, see *Better Evaluation* - <http://betterevaluation.org/> and *Monitoring and Evaluation News* - <http://mande.co.uk/>

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