Benefits and Challenges of Applying Outcome Mapping in an R4D project

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The Community-based Fish Culture in Seasonal Floodplains and Irrigation Systems (CBFC) project is a five year research project supported by the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), with the aim of increasing productivity of seasonally occurring water bodies through aquaculture. The project has been implemented in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Mali and Vietnam, where technical and institutional options for community based aquaculture have been tested. The project began in 2005 and was completed in March 2010.

This working paper represents work-in-progress. It forms part of a series of documents presenting research findings from the project. The reader is advised that it has not been subjected to academic quality control, nor edited for errors of fact or interpretation.

Abstract
There is an increasing demand for researchers to demonstrate the impact of the work within project time frames, yet development is a complex, non-linear process emerging from changes that traditional, managerial approaches to development fail to capture or to understand. Methods to address unanticipated change and increasingly important 'soft' outcomes, such as improved governance have not yet been widely tested or adopted. In response to this gap, this paper describes lessons learned during the pilot testing of Outcome Mapping as part of an action research process in Vietnam, and presents an abridged OM methodology for application at the community level.

Introduction

Throughout the research world, there is an increasing demand for researchers to prove the value of their work. In the Research for Development sector, calls for aid accountability and proven rates of returns on donor investment are keeping scientists under pressure to demonstrate that their work is bringing about quantifiable, tangible change in the lives of the poor. Many scientists have no doubt that their work has brought about change, but the tools to provide clear, unequivocal, attributable evidence of changes are lacking. All too often the hoped for increases in income, greater availability of cheap, nutritious food for consumption, and improved agricultural or fisheries productivity are hard to prove and may not be seen for some years after the project has taken place. Increasing interest in 'soft' outcomes such as improved governance, are particularly hard to monitor. Frequently, important changes may have taken place as a result of research, but may be hard to capture, or unanticipated, and therefore not subject to 'measurement' by standard monitoring practices.

It is widely acknowledged that development is a complex, non-linear process emerging from changes that traditional, managerial approaches to development fail to capture or to understand (Thomas 2008; Biggs and Gurung 2008). Yet, whilst alternative approaches to development with participatory approaches at their core have now become mainstream, uptake of alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation and impact assessment lags behind, due in part to donor reluctance to accept qualitative data as evidence of change. There is also some reluctance on the part of researchers to use methodologies that are often viewed as insufficiently rigorous, too 'soft' and overly cumbersome to apply.

The experiences presented in this paper grew out of a practical need to introduce alternative methods for monitoring and impact assessment in a large-scale, multi-country project. The project, which aimed to test technical and institutional options for community-based fish culture in seasonal floodplains, began in 2005 and was implemented in five countries, namely Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Mali. Although a detailed baseline survey had been put in place to deal with anticipated changes in income, consumption, agricultural outputs and practices, mid-way through the project it was clear that changes were taking place at the community level that would not be captured by the survey. Furthermore, opportunities for reflection, learning and communication amongst project participants were limited. Innovative approaches to M&E were sought to bridge this gap.

Outcome Mapping and Most Significant Change methodologies were selected as potentially useful tools to understand and document change, whilst also encouraging reflection and communication at all levels of project implementation. This papers describes lessons learned during the pilot testing of Outcome Mapping in Vietnam. An account is given of the challenges faced, and a critique of the Outcome Mapping process, before presenting a modified version of the methodology that may enhance usability of OM in the R4D context.

Approach and Methodology

Outcome Mapping is an evaluation method that focuses on behavioural change as a means to bring about sustained change for development. Development of the methodology has been led by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) with the aim of providing an approach which addresses the inherent non-linear complexity of the development process and the difficulties of monitoring impact and assigning attribution (Earl et al.2001).

Outcome Mapping is a three stage process. The first step, Intentional Design, clarifies the overall objectives of the program in terms of the changes it would like to bring about and the strategies the program will use to achieve these changes (Smutylo 2001). Intentional Design helps to answer the Why? How? Who? and What? of the program, leading to the definition of the project Vision, to be achieved through the development of a Mission, Strategy Maps and Organisational Practices, and working with boundary partners to measure progress towards Outcome Challenges and Progress Markers. The Second Stage, Outcome and Performance Monitoring, uses journals to chart changes in the indicators defined in Stage One. The full OM process includes the monitoring of outcomes using an Outcome Journal, a Strategy Journal to monitor strategies and activities and a Performance Journal to monitor organizational practice. The Third Stage, Evaluation Planning, sets evaluation priorities.

Outcome Mapping in Vietnam

Outcome Mapping was piloted in Vietnam to evaluate its suitability as an effective monitoring tool to complement the existing quantitative survey, and to fill the apparent gap in project M&E. The feasibility of applying the OM approach at the community level was also tested during three phases of project implementation.

During Phase One, Outcome Mapping was introduced through a two-step process, conducted over five days. The process comprised a 'theoretical', training workshop, during which the local project team was given an overview of the OM framework, and developed the initial draft for the intentional design stage of the project. In a second step, the Outcome Challenges of the boundary partner groups and their progress markers were developed together with one of the project communities.

At the community level, 24 participants attended the Outcome Mapping workshop, including 9 women, representing farmers, farmer leaders (chairman and vice-chairman of the farmers association), the commune vice chairman, agriculture extension officers, and local research staff. Participants were divided into groups to create a project vision and outcome challenges. The workshop was facilitated by local research staff and was conducted entirely in Vietnamese. By following this approach, we aimed to minimize the influence of the research team and reduce the risk that pre-conceived ideas regarding the

nature of the progress markers developed in the community would be imposed on the community. Each step was followed by presentation and discussion in plenary. Each group produced progress markers to 2009, 2011 and 2013. The outputs from the workshop were later translated into English and evaluated by the research team.

In a second phase, both the international and local research teams produced project visions, outcome challenge statements and progress markers. An additional component was added at this stage, whereby the research teams also identified the activities that the community participants might have to engage in if the project intervention is to be sustainable beyond the project lifetime, and how they as a team might support the community in carrying out these activities.

In the third phase, OM was introduced into a second community. On this occasion, a modified form of OM was introduced, with farmer groups and local authorities identifying their vision for the future, and defining the actions and activities needed to achieve their vision. Finally, they identified their own responsibilities in achieving their vision, and the support they required from local authorities and the research team in order to meet their goals. Monitoring journals were created for each group, based on the defined activities and responsibilities, using easy to measure indicators to assess change.

Benefits, Opportunities, and Challenges

At this stage, a number of benefits and constraints to OM in a community context were emerging from the study.

Benefits

Identifying constraints to technology uptake:

During Phase One, Outcome Challenges and Progress Markers identified by the community revealed the nature of some of the constraints they faced in the development of community-based fish culture. Progress Markers signaling where the community-group would like to see change included indicators relating to how they worked together as a group, and the support they received from local authorities. Whilst some of these issues had been raised during previous visits by the project team, some new issues were raised and were now captured in a more formal way.

Empowerment and responsibility:

Creating a Vision for the future of fish culture and its related outcomes in the village, followed by the development of Progress Markers towards this goal, encouraged project participants to reflect on the linkages between their own activities and the achievement of their vision. This step can create a stronger sense of responsibility and empowerment in the community as project participants clearly recognize their own role in the success of the project . The dependency on external agents to make change happen is reduced.

Encouraging Sustainability beyond the project lifetime:

Progress markers were created to define short term, medium term and long term goals, taking the process and the achievement of Outcome Challenges two years beyond the project lifetime. By doing this, the community group was encouraged to consider the

challenges facing them when the project came to an end. Progress markers were put in place to reflect the mechanisms and actions they will put in place to ensure the long-term sustainability of communal aquaculture in their community.

Accountability of all stakeholders:

The identification of Boundary Partners clarifies the role of different stakeholders in the implementation, responsibility and accountability for project success. Bringing together community participants and representatives from local authorities at the workshop allowed both groups to articulate their expectations of one another in the achievement of project goals, with indicators identified to formalize the relationship between the two groups and their responsibilities. This process also involved the local project team and their contribution to project success. Previously, a more general dissatisfaction was felt towards the local authorities by the community group and the level of support they had received. The OM process seems to be suitable to support dialogue between stakeholders, and eventually lead to mutually agreed action.

Shared objectives:

OM provides a process to ensure that all project stakeholders are familiar with the objectives of the project and can help to identify the expectations of all involved, which may differ widely from the intended objectives of the project at its initial inception.

Challenges

A number of issues were also revealed which could hinder the effectiveness of OM in the research for development context, or which raised concerns about power and accountability in applying OM.

Translation, participation and power:

Outcome Mapping is a relatively complex process that is strongly participatory. Where the process is being communicated to a group for whom the language of the trainer/facilitator is a second language, there is the risk that the concepts that lie at the heart of OM are misinterpreted and miscommunicated. Participatory methods are an expected component of research and development work, yet they require skill and experience if they are to be applied well. In countries where participation is uncommon and top-down control is the norm, conveying the need to permit project beneficiaries to speak openly and without fear is a very real scenario. In addition, the skills needed to guide the project participants through the selection of progress markers, without exerting a modifying influence, also take time and experience to acquire. The process of translating OM workshop outcomes can also add a level of interpretation on the part of the local team who are implementing the research project. Whilst a hands-off approach to facilitation is ideal, there is nevertheless a need to introduce a degree of monitoring during the progress marker stage to ensure that more powerful individuals do not use the OM concept of 'behavioural change' to exert their influence on weaker members, putting in place markers to influence and control the activities of others.

Caution in pursuit of 'behavioural change'

The idea of 'behavioural change' should also be handled with caution if OM does not intend to move into the realm of social engineering, with influence and change externally imposed. However, long terms goals of increased cooperation between community members and greater solidarity will serve to empower and provide a strong base for future community initiated schemes.

Time and terminology

The full Outcome Mapping process is intended for introduction to a project through a three day workshop, following the three-stage process described above. However, there is flexibility within the process to allow adaptation according to the project context. Within the context of the Challenge Program project, even in a relatively condensed format, the process required a substantial time investment on the part of the research team and, importantly, the community group. For this reason, OM was introduced by way of a two step process described above. For the purposes of the fish culture project, the full OM methodology appears to be overly cumbersome.

OM in R4D – Abridged

As the issues above emerged from the first phase of pilot testing, subsequent phases of implementation attempted to address the problems. Of particular concern was the potential for more powerful members of the community to exert control over others by introducing 'expect to see' progress markers committing members of the group to tasks that involved significant financial or labour contributions. Peer pressure and the involvement of local authorities then introduces pressure to achieve the defined targets, effectively creating social penalties if targets are not met. The process introduced in the third phase of the project reduces this pressure, allowing the groups to describe for themselves the activities they need to complete to achieve their vision.

Towards the final stages of the pilot project, an approach emerged that captured the most beneficial elements of the OM process, whilst reducing time investment and complexity to a minimum.

The OM process was divided into activities undertaken by the research team and at the community level. Experience in the early part of the pilot test suggested that two steps should be completed at the community level, ensuring good representation of the perspectives of community level stakeholders. Attempting to complete too many steps in the OM process placed an unnecessary burden on community participants, who already committed a substantial part of their day to the process.Steps One to Four take place prior to meetings at the community level. Steps Four and Five are the only steps completed with the community before monitoring begins in Step Seven.

Step One: Identification of Boundary Partners by the research team

Each boundary partner will produce an individual vision statement, to clarify the motivations and expectations of each stakeholder group

Step Two: The research teams create their Vision statements

Step Three: Research teams prepare Outcome Challenges based on their Vision statements

Step Four: Boundary partners at the community level create vision statements

Step Five: In small groups, boundary partners define the steps they need to take, and the support they need, to achieve their vision of the future

Step Six: The research teams develop indicators for each boundary partner based on the steps and responsibilities defined by each group. Monitoring journals are created comprising indicators and key questions for monitoring progress for each boundary partner.

Step Seven: Interviews conducted regularly with boundary partners to gauge extent to which activities are being undertaken to achieve Visions of the future. Problem areas are identified and support offered to assist partners in achievement of their goals, as necessary.

Conclusions

Combining quantitative and qualitative assessment methodologies in the community-based fish culture project has highlighted their complimentarity and the benefits of including both approaches within project impact assessment and M&E frameworks.

Outcome Mapping has been found to bring a number of important benefits to project monitoring and evaluation:

- Creating a longer term vision for sustainability and impact
- Identifying unanticipated problems and constraints to project success and documenting them in a formal way
- Revealing outcome and impact priorities held by project participants and stakeholders
- Creating a sense of ownership and responsibility for project success, clarifying roles and responsibilities, articulating where change is needed and monitoring progress towards required change

However, a number of disadvantages have also been identified, including:

- The potential for unequal power relationships within the participating group, particularly at the community level, to be expressed in the development of progress markers
- The relative complexity of the approach and difficulties in communicating terminologies and processes if working in more than one language
- Substantial time investment of stakeholders to work through full OM design phase
- Potential for misinterpretation and inappropriate application of the concept of 'behavioural change'

In an attempt to address these issues, the OM process has been modified to place emphasis on progress markers which are more closely related to the impacts that project beneficiaries would like to see as a result of introducing community-based fish culture, and the actions they would need to do as a group if they work towards achieving these impacts.

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