Lessons learned from an outcome-based evaluation (June-December 2009)

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Presentation Overview

- Project context and methodology
- Outcome examples
- ‘Closing the loop’
- Lessons learned and recommendations
- Questions/discussion
Context

As articulated in the *Acacia Prospectus (2006-2011)*, the Acacia program had envisaged commissioning an evaluation of the strategy of carrying out programming through the support of research networks.

- Research questions posed in 2008-09:
  1. “To what extent is the Acacia networking approach to programming appropriate and relevant to the needs of African researchers?” (September 2008-May 2009)
2. How effective have Acacia-supported research networks been in:

– Influencing sustained policy dialogue
– Catalyzing thriving research networks
– Increasing research capacity in ICT4D
– Stimulating social & technical innovation in ICTs
– Applying meaningful gender analysis and changing gender relations
+ Contributing to a formal body of knowledge in ICT4D

(See “Outcome format”)


Why “outcomes”? 
Methodology

• Desk-based document analysis and written formulation:
  – Analysed ‘technical’ documents for evidence of internal and external outcomes.
  – Formulated ‘draft’ outcomes using format.

• Open-ended inquiry (network leaders):
  – Complete “Classification” section.
  – Provide clarification/more information.
  – Add/substitute outcomes (“10 most significant”).

• Program officers reviewed outcome forms.
Summarized example of a formulated outcome

Uganda Health Information Network (UHIN)

**Title:** In 2007, the Ugandan district health services of Rakai and Lyantonde developed personal digital assistant (PDA)-based data collection instruments for the monitoring and evaluation of community hygiene and sanitation.

**Description:** Sanitation data related to slaughter houses, butchers, food vendors, eating houses, community water supply hygiene and maintenance, and school sanitation and hygiene are captured on PDAs and directly hot-synched to the district database for analysis.

**Significance:** Change in data collection instrument resulted in more timely and higher quality data collection for the purpose of decision-making than was previously possible using pen/paper.

**Contribution of research network:** UHIN team provided modular training to technical personnel of the districts (how to create electronic forms for use on PDAs, synchronizing data to a computer, and conducting data analysis). The districts subsequently developed the data tools and began performing data collection and analysis electronically.

**Classification** (outcome contributed to the following Acacia objectives):

- Stimulating social and technical innovation using ICTs
  - Technical innovation via mobile telephony.
  - Alternative, innovative telecom and IT policy models.
  - Fostering social innovation (providing solutions for individual and community problems).
What is more important, an ‘internal outcome’ or an ‘external outcome’?

Two options for an outcome title:

A. “In 2007, the Zambia Council for Social Development elected GRACE researcher Brian Kiss Abraham to the advisory committee of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index development process.”

B. “In 2007, GRACE researcher Brian Kiss Abraham began serving as an advisor for the development of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index, a position for which he was elected by the Zambia Council for Social Development.”
Closing the loop

• September: Acacia team begins drawing conclusions of findings collected at that stage based on representation of outcomes contributing to each objective

• October: Acacia Research and Learning Forum:
  – Small-group discussions with evaluation participants.
  – Outcome session with all participants.

• Renewed opportunity for networks to propose outcomes by end of October (repeat of reformulations, question-posing)...
• What constitutes an ‘outcome’ often comes down to a judgment call based on context and perspective.
• There are limitations to using outcomes (strictly defined) to assess a network’s contribution to certain objectives (e.g., “fostering policy dialogue” at the early stages).
• Beyond accountability to funders, the main value in identifying outcomes (internal or external) is the ability to gauge performance.
  – This kind of learning through recognition of ‘who changed and under what circumstances’ can help the research network plan for future research endeavours.
Recommendations: Improving outcome-based monitoring & evaluation (M&E)

• Encourage research networks to designate a ‘learning and accountability champion’ who can collect, collate and help write well-composed ‘outcome stories’ on a regular basis.

• Continue to support evaluation training such as Outcome Mapping...and then ask for results (e.g., consistent reporting of outcomes, or progress toward that end, in technical reports).

• ‘Self-selected’ classification of outcomes and visual representations of data: Handle with care (see next slide).
Example of a graphical representation of outcomes:
Outcomes of research networks (2006-2009) (x), Acacia objectives (y)

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Recommendations: Improving outcome-based M&E

• Address written communication challenges through training.

• Evaluate several evaluation approaches
  – E.g. Appreciative Inquiry: A group process that inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of ‘what is’ in organizations in order to create a better future” (Reframing Evaluation Through Appreciative Inquiry, Preskill & Catsambas, 2006).

• Hire more research interns...(for evaluation work!)
Thank you for your support and input

• IDRC, including the Acacia Team, the Evaluation Unit, and the Centre Training and Awards Program
• 2009 IDRC interns and PDAs
• Ricardo Wilson-Grau
• Research network evaluation participants.