



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

Jennifer Vincent

2009 Research Intern

Acacia Program

jvinc017@uottawa.ca

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)



Context

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)...



Process-based conclusions

- 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).



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.