

Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (DECI)

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i. Basic project information

Project title

Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (DECI)

Keywords: ICTD, utilization-focused evaluation, Asia, learning, ownership, mentoring

Abstract:

DECI introduced Utilization-focused Evaluation to five ICT4D research projects as part of IDRC's PANAsia program. DECI was an action research project that combined the introduction of UFE with a research component to test how appropriate the approach was for development research projects. They included: the PANACEA: e-health network (based in Pakistan); LIRNEasia that focused on policy and ICTD research (based in Sri Lanka); two small grant programs: ISIF: Information Society Innovation Fund (based in Australia) and SIRCA: Strengthening ICTD Research Capacity in Asia (based in Singapore); and the DREAM-IT: Mongolia Country program. Three regional mentors coached project administrators, researchers and evaluators along the steps of UFE. The three regional mentors were, in turn supported by two co-Principal Investigators based in Canada. DECI used action-research as a methodology to test-drive UFE. In doing so, the mentors, who had a strong evaluation background, learned about UFE through practice. Each project completed an evaluation using UFE; most important, as part of the approach they utilized the evaluation process and findings. DECI produced a series of UFE modules, five case studies, a Primer, and the team presented project summaries at several international conferences.

ii. The Research Problem

The content dimension

This problem has both a content and a process dimension. The content one responds to the following trends from the evaluation field, and the evaluation of information and communication for development (ICTD) field.

The bulk of ICTD research has thus far been descriptive; it is now shifting towards more theory-based analytical approaches. During the early stages of ICTD most of the focus was on readiness, availability and later, uptake. This trend has started to change as attention shifted to impact, which in turn required theoretical frameworks to acknowledge the complexity of the change. For example, the sustainable livelihoods framework captures the complexity of people's lives, how they seek to maximize the different assets they have and how they minimize risk and vulnerability. The ICTD literature is beginning to address this, among others, frameworks to better understand how ICTD influences livelihoods and people's decision-making. A common theme in the literature is the importance of understanding the context within which an ICTD project takes place.

A wide range of factors will influence the extent to which project actions can lead to outcomes. (See the summaries of implications in Sections 1.4 and 2.5 of the DECI Literature Review.)

ICTD evaluations have focused primarily on verifying the achievement of project objectives; there is growing attention on learning about other dimensions that affect effective use. Effective use focuses attention on the context and contributing factors that enable people to move from accessing services or technologies, to deriving an improvement in their livelihoods. Michael Gurstein (2003) suggests that “usage” in a community informatics context (ICTD) should be gauged in terms of “effective use”. In his analysis, effective use is possible when the following dimensions are considered: carriage facilities, input/output devices, tools and supports, content services, service access/provision, social facilitation and governance.

There is growing emphasis around outcomes, as intermediary and meaningful achievements, especially for short-lived research projects. Many evaluations of ICTD projects focus on quantifiable outputs (e.g. number of people using a new telemedicine application, or visiting a telecentre), and to some extent outcomes (e.g. people changing their nutrition; the financial viability of a telecentre), and to a lesser extent impacts (e.g. a drop in new cases of diabetes). In select instances we find definite statements about impact (e.g. where an e-government service allows a user to obtain a permit in minutes as opposed to months)¹.

Evaluations are meant to be used; a trend in the evaluation literature is the importance of utilization. For evaluations to be used, they need to be relevant and have utility to the user. They need to be appropriate to the context and realistic; they need to be ethical and accurate. One way to achieve this is to identify the primary users from the start and to learn about their specific needs. Evaluators can help users identify their needs, agree on what information would best address those needs, and generate findings that respond to those needs. Evaluations that engage intended users in the research process lead to more learning among them. This in turn leads to more direct application of the evaluation findings to program practices.

The DECI project incorporates several unique features:

- IDRC is supporting partners to take ownership of the project evaluation agenda
- The intended process is one of mutual learning between the project partners, the regional evaluators working with the partners, and IDRC staff.

¹ A review of research by the Impact of Public Access to ICT Project documented the following trend: most evaluation literature addresses formative (process) dimensions relative to summative (impact); most researchers are limited in their ability to make definitive statements about impact (*contribution* is more common than *attribution*); there is more talk about potential rather than actual impacts; few studies follow a theoretical framework beyond the general idea of ICTs for development; and even fewer ones are based on specific hypotheses. Source: Centre for Information and Society, July 2008. Review of research on the impact of public access to ICTs. Unpublished review. Seattle; University of Washington.

- DECI is developing evaluation capacity among partners who are implementing research projects, many of which are innovative and exploratory.
- The development of a practical UFE guide that is focused particularly on ICT4D.

The first two features are highly unusual in the research donor community; funding organizations tend to impose certain evaluation objectives and approaches, and almost never acknowledge that they too can learn along with the partners. As to the third item, UFE approach is expected to shift the researchers' evaluation concerns away from the conventional focus on whether objectives were reached, to a broader review about process (e.g. To what extent were the methods or case studies appropriate?), to context (e.g. To what extent were the findings context-specific), or relevance (e.g. To what extent were the original research questions appropriate, what better questions could have been asked?).

Process dimension

The process dimension has to do with how most capacity development events on evaluation tend to be one-off workshops with little or no follow-up or monitoring. In such cases there is the expectation that participants will be able to take away relevant information and apply it to their respective projects. We suspect, however, that the uptake is limited. Another process feature of DECI is an action-learning approach where IDRC research partners will be invited to develop and adjust their evaluation plan to follow a utilization focused evaluation approach. Each partner will in turn receive training, mentoring and networking support as they implement their evaluation plan.

The DECI project was developed to provide ongoing technical evaluation assistance to specific PAN partners using a multi-pronged approach. This included the DECI Principal Investigators, the regional evaluators and the responsible Program Officer. These individuals helped to facilitate the design, adoption, critical analysis, documentation, and learning that emerged from implementing a utilization focused evaluation (UFE) evaluation plan in an ICT4D project. DECI integrated this support with the development of a UFE guide for ICT4D projects and upgraded the skills of a small cadre of regional evaluation consultants who were exposed to UFE and ICT4D evaluation needs. The assistance: included formal training, site visits, networking opportunities, provision and discussion about relevant resources, assistance in reflecting on the evolution of each evaluation plan, and opportunities for mid-course changes as deemed necessary.

iii. Project objectives

1. To provide technical assistance to researchers toward improving their evaluation knowledge and skills. Researchers will receive training and mentoring in UFE and particular method(s) that respond to their evaluation questions.
2. To introduce regional evaluation consultants [to be referred as evaluation *mentors* from hereon to differentiate from project evaluation consultants] to the concepts and practices of UFE through engagement in mentoring evaluations of ongoing ICTD projects.

3. To develop a UFE workshop curriculum and test it across different ICTD project settings.
4. To contribute towards the completion of UFE evaluations of designated PAN projects.
5. To develop an approach to M&E capacity development with possible uses in other regions or thematic areas.
6. To communicate the DECI findings in the form of a short Primer directed mainly at evaluation professionals.

iv. Methodology

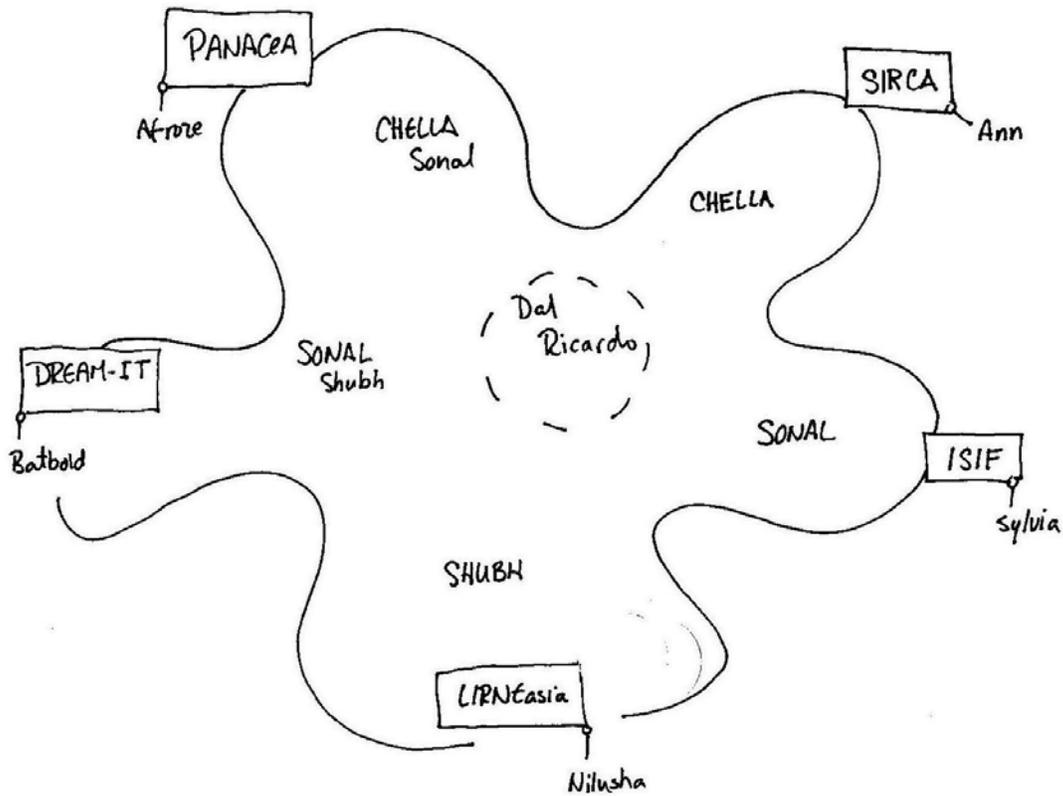
DECI partnered with the following five PAN Asia initiatives:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Research Network: | PANACEA: e-health network
LIRNEasia: policy and telecom research |
| Small Grants: | ISIF: Information Society Innovation Fund
SIRCA: Strengthening ICTD Research Capacity in Asia |
| Country program: | DREAM-IT: Mongolia Country program |

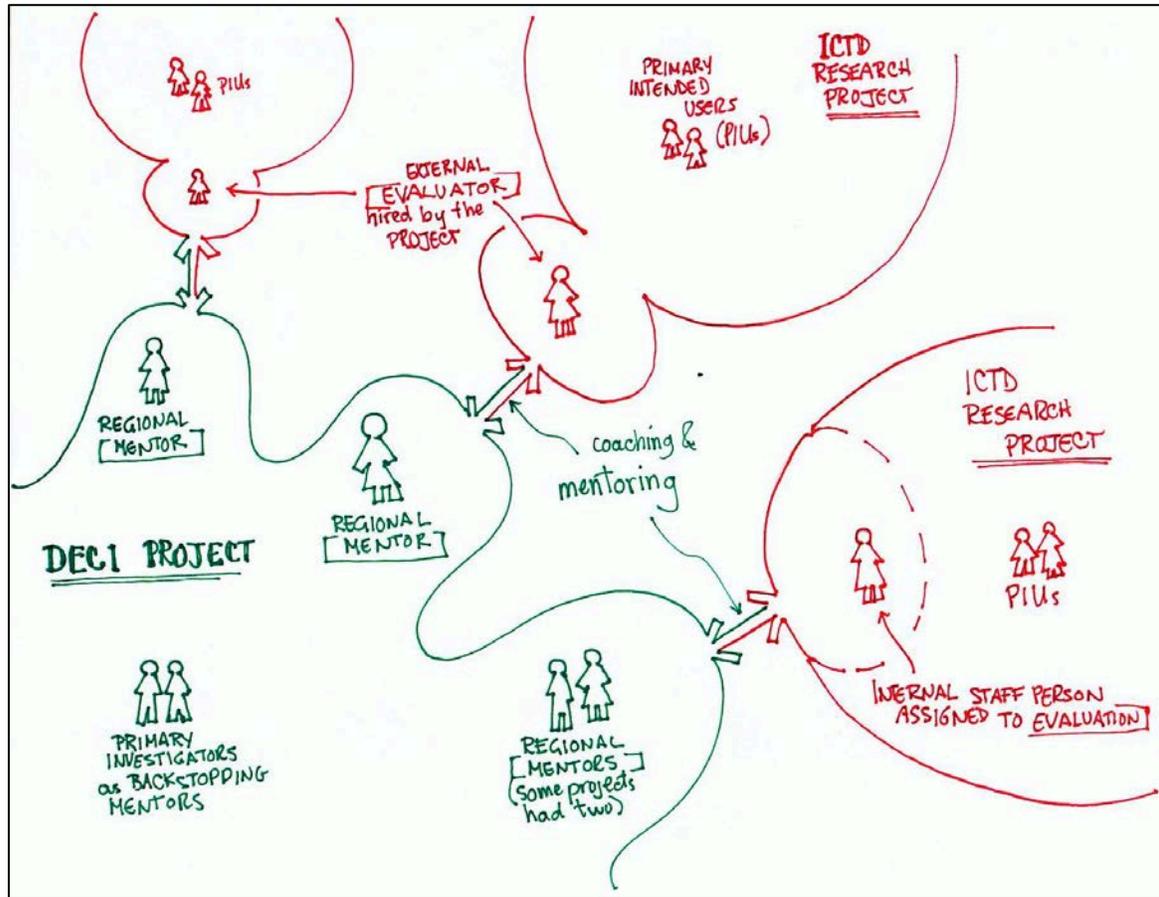
The diagram below summarizes the distribution of mentoring responsibilities:

- PANACEA was mentored by Chelladurai Solomon with Sonal Zaveri as supporting mentor
- SIRCA was mentored by Chelladurai Solomon
- ISIF was mentored by Sonal Zaveri
- LIRNEasia was mentored by Shubh Kumar-Range
- DREAM-IT was mentored by Sonal Zaveri with Shubh Kumar-Range as supporting mentor

The three mentors were in turn supported by Dal Brodhead and Ricardo Ramírez who were both based in Canada. This support included: periodic brainstorming via Skype or Elluminate with the mentors and project representatives, joint review of tasks and logistics, and sharing of relevant materials (such as the modules prepared by Joaquin Navas in South America). The diagram below summarizes the arrangement, and the linkages with the assigned evaluators for each project.



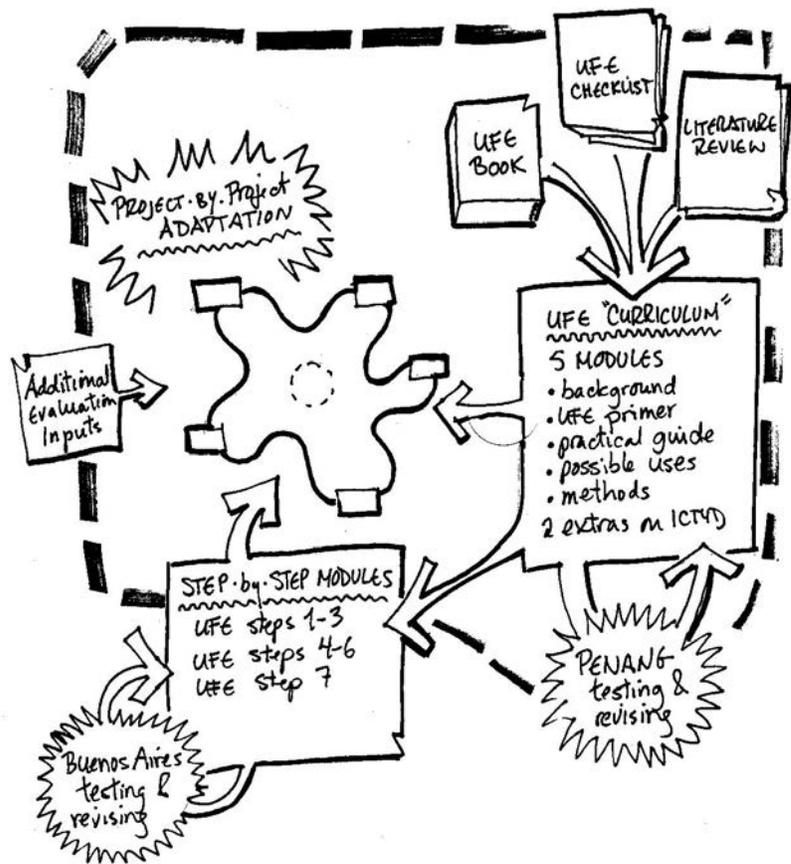
The DECI project regional **evaluation mentors** based in South Asia were evaluation professionals who ‘test-drove’ UFE for the first time. Each project secured the services an **evaluator**, either by hiring external consultants or by assigning staff to undertake this role. The regional evaluation mentors *coached* the evaluators (often times together with the primary users of the evaluation) by introducing the different steps and tasks of UFE. In addition, the mentors provided *peer support* to the project evaluators, as both parties shared a common learning journey. The diagram below illustrates this relationship.



We learned that evaluation professionals using UFE for the first time required mentoring support. It gave them a sounding board as well as the confidence to experiment and a regular opportunity to reflect.

DECI began with a set of UFE modules that were prepared for the June 2009 workshop in Penang to cover the first seven Parts of UFE. The notion of Key Evaluation Questions came from Jes Dart's presentation during the December 2007 Kuala Lumpur workshop. The original modules were uploaded to the project website: <http://evaluationinpractice.wordpress.com/deci-research/ufe-curriculum/>

Through a partnership with the IDRC-supported “Strengthening Public Purchasing” regional project on e-government in Latin America², we had the opportunity to revise the modules further. Much credit goes to the work by Joaquin Navas (a Paraguay-based consultant) who has developed three modules in English and Spanish that were tested through three workshops with a research team at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires. The modules follow each of the first seven UFE Steps with detailed attention to every task (and these modules) were uploaded to the above website. The diagram to the right summarizes this story.



Developing an approach to M&E capacity development

The DECI project was based on learning by doing. Some of the lessons gained include:

1. Gaining trust (between the mentor and the research teams) is key and there is no replacement for face-to-face meetings. Dedicating the first visit to the first two steps of UFE was a promising investment to create a learning environment (as opposed to the initial plan to schedule them to coincide with the evaluation work plan). In addition, attending key project meetings allowed the mentors to engage with key “credibility creators”: key people whose individual buy-in influences others in the project.
2. Keeping the language simple: the more theoretical the material, the less useful it was in communicating with the project teams.

² Fortalecimiento de los sistemas de compras públicas en América Latina y el Caribe a través del uso de las herramientas TIC y de la promoción de la participación de las MIPyMEs – Componente 1 (Strengthening of public purchasing systems in Latin America and the Caribbean through the introduction of ICTs to promote SME participation.)

3. Defining a focus area is not as simple as it appears. Each consultant is providing the researchers with a range of tools to help them reflect and decide on focus area, users, and uses.
4. The UFE process is neither linear, nor predictable. One consultant mentor noticed how researchers had an “*aha*” moment when... “*we ‘unlocked’ their thinking that you could pick up any area - from an existing project, from a crosscutting issue and that one need not wait for a new project which would delay our timeline unnecessarily.*” Another mentor “*...found the sections starting on p. 300 [of the UFE book] - Alternative ways of Focusing Evaluations very useful—in locating where their main objectives for a ‘use orientation’ was.*”
5. Learning from our work, one step at a time was vital. Joaquin Navas observed that a central challenge was to find the key concepts for practical UFE implementation, to reflect on the main challenges faced by evaluators when facilitating UFE processes, and to find opportunities for developing a standard reporting format of UFE processes that would be helpful for doing cross-case analysis.

v. Project Activities

- Drafting of UFE modules based on Patton’s 2008 book and checklist.
- Identification and recruitment of three regional mentors through a competitive process.
- Facilitation of introductory sessions on UFE to potential PANAsia project partners during the 2009 all partner meeting in Penang Malaysia.
- Finalization of the project partners and confirmation of partnerships with DECI.
- Introduction of UFE by regional mentors, including face-to-face visits and remote backstopping.
- Mid-project reflection on strengths and weaknesses in the capacity development and management approach, and sharing the findings at the Delhi Conclave (November, 2010). The presentation is available at the project website.
- Addition of the 6th project objective to communicate the research findings through case studies and a Primer.
- Presentation of project findings at conferences in Sri Lanka, Ghana and the USA.
- Preparation and revision of five case studies and a Primer.

vi. Project Outputs

The project outputs are summarized on the basis of the project objectives.

1. To provide technical assistance to researchers toward improving their evaluation knowledge and skills. Researchers will receive training and mentoring in UFE and particular method(s) that respond to their evaluation questions.

- The capacity developed by the project researchers was demonstrated by the presentations delivered during Evaluation Conclave in Delhi with interview feedback summarized in this Second Interim Technical Report.
 - The power point presentations from the different presentation were uploaded to the [DECI website](#), as evidence of training and mentoring in UFE.
2. To introduce regional evaluation mentors to the concepts and practices of UFE through engagement in mentoring evaluations of ongoing ICTD projects.
 - The capacity developed by the evaluation mentors was demonstrated by the presentations delivered during Evaluation Conclave in Delhi with interview feedback that was summarized in the Second Interim Technical Report.
 - The presentation on UFE delivered by Sonal Zaveri and Chelladuari Solomon at the SLEVA gathering (Sri Lanka, June 2011) and AFREA (Ghana, January 2012) are further evidence of the experience gained by the DECI mentors.
 3. To develop a UFE workshop curriculum and test it across different ICTD project settings.
 - Several versions of the UFE modules have been uploaded to the DECI website: the original Penang modules, the revised modules prepared by Joaquin Navas, and the version prepared by Sonal Zaveri. All of the modules were tested in different workshop settings.
 - The Sri Lanka variation further confirms the need to adjust the curriculum to specific audiences; in this case it catered to experienced evaluators.
 4. To contribute towards the completion of UFE evaluations of designated PAN projects [dependent on project calendars that coincide with the DECI one].

All five evaluation reports have been received.

- The LIRNEAsia CPRSouth Evaluation Report is available on the [CPRSouth website](#) and also available on IDRC [website](#).
 - [The SIRCA report](#), also available [here](#)
 - The Panacea report is available at <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/48142/1/IDL-48142.pdf>
 - The [DREAM-IT report](#) is available [here](#).
 - The ISIF report is currently not publically available.
5. To develop an approach to M&E capacity development with possible uses in other regions or thematic areas.
 - The invitation by IDRC to prepare a proposal for a second phase DECI using the capacity development approach is testament to the perceived value of this approach.

6. To communicate the DECI findings in the form of a short Primer directed mainly at evaluation professionals.
 - Five step-12 case-studies were finalized during the first quarter of 2012; at time of writing the five case studies were being edited.
 - The DECI Primer was finalized during the first quarter of 2012; at time of writing the Primer was being edited.

Capacity development

- Mentors (3 regional, 2 Canadian)
- Evaluators (one per each of the 5 PAN projects)
- Project managers and researchers (PIUs)

UFE curriculum

- Three different sets of modules are available at the project website

UFE Project Specific Evaluation reports

- Kapugama, N. 2010. Communication Policy Research South (CPRsouth) Evaluation Report. Colombo, Sri Lanka: LIRNEAsia
- Sajwani, A.; Khoja, S. & Durrani, H, with Solmon, C. 2010. PANACeA Formative Evaluation Report. Karachi, Pakistan: PANACeA.
- Mizumoto, A. 2010. Evaluation of “Strengthening IDRC Research Capacity in Asia” (SIRCA) Programme. Singapore: SIRCA.
- Chimed, B. Zaveri, S. & Barchuluun, G. 2011. Utilization Focused Evaluation for Development Research to Empower All Mongolians through Information Communication Technology. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia: DREAM-IT.
- Cadena, S. 2011. ISIF Utilization Focused Evaluation – Final Report. South Brisbane, QLD: APNIC.

Presentations

- Introduction to UFE, Penang conference, June 2009
- [Lessons by DECI Mentors](#), Evaluation Conclave, Delhi, November 2010
- [SIRCA Conclave presentation](#), Evaluation Conclave, Delhi, November 2010
- [SLEVA Sri Lanka](#), 6-9 June, 2011 <http://www.sleva2011.com/>
- [Lunch presentation at IDRC, November, 2011](#)
- [AFREA, Ghana, January, 2012](#)
- [ICTD, Atlanta, March, 2012](#)

Publications and website

- [Evaluation in Practice website](#)
- Utilization-focused evaluation Primer (2012)
- Chelladuari Solmon prepared paper entitled “Evaluation practitioner: A journey through utilization-focused evaluation (UFE)” for publication by the [Community of Evaluators](#)

Other outputs

- A partnership with the IDRC-supported “Strengthening Public Purchasing” regional project on e-government in Latin America,³ that led to revised modules covering first seven UFE Steps⁴.
- DREAM-IT checklist and guidelines
- Data collection for documenting the learning among DECI mentors and project evaluators

vii. Project Outcomes

The very first words in the Preface for Patton’s new book (*Essentials of Utilization-focused Evaluation*, Sage, 2012) reads as follows:

“Patton’s book is overwhelming.”

“This was the lead item on a PowerPoint slide presenting some first-year lessons learned in developing utilization-focused evaluation capacity (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2010). The presenters reported that they had to work hard to turn the 667 pager of the 4th edition of *Utilization-focused evaluation* (Patton, 2008) into a practical set of processes they could apply to a real-world development evaluation. Others joined them in reflecting on putting the principles of utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) into practice at the 2010 Evaluation Conclave in New Delhi (Mizumoto & Lim, 2010)....” (p. xvii)

What worked and why

The DECI Primer focuses on two main audiences: practicing evaluators that are new to UFE, and project implementers. While UFE can have other users besides project implementers, the Primer is based on five research project experiences where the project managers were the users. The five evaluation reports that were completed were used. From a UFE perspective, we succeeded and the reasons for this are the following.

1. The DECI project had three mentors with a strong background in evaluation, but who were new to UFE. They partnered with project evaluators who were invited to do the same: to test-drive UFE. The capacity development objectives of the project created a safe environment for experimentation.
2. A second factor in our favour was a project funder interested in experimenting with this approach to capacity development in evaluation. The IDRC team

³ Fortalecimiento de los sistemas de compras públicas en América Latina y el Caribe a través del uso de las herramientas TIC y de la promoción de la participación de las MIPyMEs – Componente 1 (Strengthening of public purchasing systems in Latin America and the Caribbean through the introduction of ICTs to promote SME participation.)

⁴ We acknowledge the work by Joaquin Navas (a Paraguay-based consultant) who has developed three modules in English and Spanish which have been tested through three workshops with a research team at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires.

allowed the DECI mentors and the project partners the freedom to become users and define uses.

3. A third factor was that we followed the checklist systematically. While we quickly realized that it was less linear and called for more iterations, it was useful to cover each task in order. An analogy would be how one learns to drive a standard shift car: you begin with the first gear and move on to the second and so forth. Only later, with experience you realize that when starting on a downhill road you can begin on second just as well; you also being to learn to use gears to slow down, but this comes from experience.

Highlights from the five case studies

LIRNEasia

Communications Policy Research South (*CPRsouth*) is a capacity building effort by the regional Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy and regulation think tank LIRNEasia. Prior to this evaluation, the *CPRsouth*'s leadership was aware that its support from IDRC may end at some point, and the evaluation would enable it to diversify its funding opportunities. It could also allow them to retool its existing activities to better enable it to meet its core objectives; so the decision was made to use the DECI supported evaluation to address these issues. Furthermore, LIRNEasia was also committed to enhance its own evaluation capabilities. The leadership assigned adequate time for one of its researchers to work on the evaluation and thereby build organizational capacity. The choice of focusing the evaluation on *CPRsouth* was also conditioned by the fact that LIRNEasia was interested in assessing the value of its capacity building approach.

Focusing the evaluation (Step Six) was one of the most challenging steps of this UFE experience. In this case the Primary Intended Users were the managers of *CPRSouth*. They were coached to a select number of Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs). In order to organize the main issues they were interested in, and create some order in the very wide range of possible questions that could be addressed, several questions were asked pertaining to: a) the purpose (uses) of the evaluation, and b) the objectives and execution of the program. In reviewing the main objectives and desirable outcomes of the conference *CPRsouth*, an interesting combination of outcomes and process elements were evident. This was the result of an Outcome Mapping approach used to develop the effort, and this structure very easily led to the identification of a small set of formative and summative KEQs that were in line with the primary uses that had been identified.

In the experience of LIRNEasia's leadership, the UFE as a 'self evaluation' was found to be much more useful than previous external evaluations. The project managers stated: "we started using findings even before the UFE was completed", and "it became useful as a whole at the end of the day". Results from this evaluation have also been used by IDRC in shaping their supporting policy research, as well as its support to LIRNEasia and in promoting the *CPRsouth* model lessons to other regions.

ISIF

The Information Society Innovation Fund (ISIF) is a small grants and awards program aimed at stimulating innovative approaches and creative solutions to the provision of ICT access. The expectation at the ISIF secretariat was to evaluate the program itself, not the small grants projects allocated. They saw an opportunity in the UFE method to focus on learning about grant making and grant administration. From the funding side it was also clear that ISIF would have to raise funds beyond IDRC in order to continue its work. That would mean approaching new organizations and look for potential partner and sponsorships other than those currently supporting the program. For this reason, the UFE focused on assessing the secretariat under the assumption that this would provide grist for a resource mobilization strategy and communication campaign.

Three evaluation questions were developed: 1) How effective was ISIF approach/methodology to encourage innovative projects to apply? 2) How effective was ISIF mentoring practices and administrative support during the implementation process? and 3) What were the lessons learned from this investment? What worked and what did not work? Why?

The evaluation findings were used spontaneously from the time the evaluation process was finalized. A variety of uses, always linked to the main intended use, have occurred naturally. The data analysis of the applications received and the feedback provided by current and former grant recipients provided the ISIF secretariat with intelligence to improve the application and selection process, to provide better support to grant recipients and to improve the reporting strategies used. This, in turn, provided validation for the program needed by potential donors and sponsors to secure funding for support. The effectiveness of ISIF's efforts to secure financial pledges has been confirmed, as negotiations to secure funding from donors and sponsors have been concluded and ISIF has secured funding from 2012 to 2015.

SIRCA

Strengthening ICTD Research Capacity in Asia (SIRCA) provides research grants on a competitive basis. Grantees receive funding, mentoring from ICT4D researchers, and support to participate in regional knowledge sharing conferences. The SIRCA management focused the evaluation on: the extent to which the Grant Review Committee selected the most appropriate candidates; the extent to which the mentorship programme actually facilitated learning and/or collaboration between emerging and established researchers; and the extent to which the Workshops & Conferences facilitated the publication and dissemination of research findings.

In the case of the SIRA UFE, the external evaluator proposed to develop the project's 'theory of change'. She felt this exercise would help with Step Six: focusing the evaluation. This exercise helped the evaluator and the Primary Intended User (PIU) to differentiate between Outputs, Short-term Outcomes, Long-term Outcomes, and Impacts.

A total of 27 recommendations were developed on the basis of the findings. The evaluator worked closely with the PIU to narrow down a list of the most urgent and

relevant ones across three areas: the Grant Review Committee, the mentorship process, and the workshops and conferences. Another outcome is that SIRCA has built an evaluation event into its next project phase. SIRCA perceived that the UFE was useful in reflecting the shortcomings of the program and helped tremendously in facilitating the stakeholders' thinking in the development of a more strategic plan for SIRCA's future.

PANACeA

The PAN Asian Collaboration for Evidence-based e-Health Adoption and Application (PANACeA) is a network of health researchers and institutions that conducts collaborative research on e-Health applications in the Asian context. PANACeA works at two levels: Network and Projects. Through this evaluation PANACeA aimed at determining how well the Network supported its research projects, how and what it achieved as a Network.

Step Three (identifying Primary Intended Users) was particularly challenging. Though PANACeA was made aware that UFE focuses on a small team of PIUs, this was not what the Network members desired. They did not want any of the Network members to feel left out of the evaluation process and outcome. Hence they decided that "all of these members hold very important stakes in this evaluation because these are the people who are responsible for executing the functions of the PANACeA Network" (PANACeA Evaluation Report, p.11). They held the strong belief that for the Network to be strengthened further, the PIUs should consist of all the 25 members of the Network. This decision was respected and led to a significant amount of coordination and communication work for the evaluator. Another highlight was the impact of the Simulation of Use (Step Eight). While at first there was resistance to including this step (due to a significant work load) it turned out to be very useful and served much like a mid-way course-correction. It resulted in realigning and revising the interview questions and Uses for a better focus.

By the time the UFE report was ready, the first phase of the project was over. Some "uses" had been already acted upon, such as bringing more intensity and focus into interactive communication; while the remaining 'use(s)' have to be actualized pending the start of a second phase. An outcome we highlight is that some PIUs were encouraged by their own change of perception about 'evaluation'. No longer was it as a scary word that related primarily to funding, rather now it has taken on learning purpose.

DREAM-IT

"DREAM IT" stands for "Development Research to Empower All Mongolians through Information Communications Technology". The project is designed to develop the capacities of researchers and research managers to achieve their objectives, as well as to strengthen strategic linkages and knowledge sharing opportunities among the projects. The UFE by its very design is driven by the needs of the person/s or users. The Primary Intended Users (PIUs) were all the members of the DREAM-IT Board. In UFE it is the users who determine how they will use the findings and chart a course to do so. We learned that this process is not straightforward and within the Mongolian context there

were unique challenges. Determining WHAT to evaluate, WHO will be the users and HOW it will be used turned out to be difficult questions for grantees.

Initially the topic of the evaluation was also expected to be a summative review of the sub-projects or the oversight role of the DREAM-IT board. This view strongly influenced by previous external donor driven evaluations. However, after much reflection, the purpose or the use of the UFE was to understand how DREAM-IT could better manage its projects so that it could fulfill its management oversight role. To that end four sub-projects were selected for the UFE – two of them had been able to complete their objectives within a stated time frame and two had not. The mentoring in this project was particularly important, and the DECI mentor was able to add a third on-site visit thanks to funding for a separate activity. The series of face-to-face workshops and support proved to be indispensable.

A significant achievement of the UFE process was the confidence it instilled in DREAM-IT that it could *do evaluation*. One UFE Board Member recognized that they were not evaluation experts but with the appropriate mentoring they were able to understand UFE, conduct it, and use its findings. Another important achievement was the development of a checklist. The UFE checklist was to be used *in addition* to the general checklist to review proposals for projects. The checklist raises pertinent questions to the new project applicants about planning and implementation of innovative strategies such as piloting very new technologies/ applications, or working with target populations not familiar with technology, or managing partners from different sectors. The checklist could be used to review how realistically new applications addressed innovation in their objectives, implementation strategies and expected outcomes. The checklist was intended to also help the Board to systematically and critically review proposals for criteria (based on UFE research findings) that would enable successful completion, management of such innovative projects as well as assessing if outcomes could contribute to policy influence.

What we would do differently next time

Mid-way through the DECI project we did an internal review of progress. Among the things that we would do differently, we noted the following.

- Ensure preparedness and readiness of all; integrate UFE into future research projects and into their planning; renegotiate with IDRC to get more time committed for getting the work done.
- Identification of the key uses and questions could have been done a little sooner; it was a long time from Penang [the initial orientation] to starting; start this formative evaluation a bit early, so the evaluation is used.
- An earlier training for both project managers on UFE would have been helpful; have a separate meeting with evaluators, to understand the process before meeting with intended users.
- Could have done simulation with real respondents to sharpen the questions; conduct simulation exercise prior to data collection.
- Ensure externally hired evaluators are given contracts that can cover all steps.

We note how many of our own observations refer to earlier preparation, to readiness, to covering steps sooner. One of our mentors even referred to a “Step Zero” to emphasize how much of the readiness was difficult to ascertain at the beginning. A challenge may be to alert potential projects interested in UFE to the conditions before committing to supporting them.

Principles that travel

We are well aware that many readers may not have the benefit of a mentoring process to learn UFE like we enjoyed. While we have emphasized the mentoring throughout, we realize that experienced evaluators may be able to pick up the approach from the checklist, very much on their own. However, what we found with UFE was that the ownership by the users created a refreshing environment of collaborative inquiry. While mentoring was a means to work in such an environment, there may be other ways to create this notion of shared exploration. While UFE is characterized by evaluations that get used, we sense that a broader principle that may travel is the notion of evaluation as participatory inquiry.

viii. Overall Risk and Recommendations

Among the risks that the project faced, we highlight the human component. We benefitted from having a team of committed practitioners who worked and learned through DECI. For others emulating this process, a major risk to consider is the selection of the mentors. We were fortunate to find a team that had significant evaluation expertise combined with facilitation skills. We learned early on that for UFE to succeed the mentors needed to be excellent communicators, nimble facilitators, and diplomats. Projects with mentors that are not skilled in these areas may run the risk of not engaging adequately with the project partners. UFE has many steps, and may appear tedious for a first time user. This means that patience, respectful conversations, and timely encouragement are paramount. A second risk was an incomplete, or unsatisfactory commitment on the side of the project partners. Throughout DECI we were fortunate to have five project partners that joined us in earnest to test-drive the approach. To mitigate this risk, we suspect that the readiness steps at the start of UFE need to be carefully reviewed. These early stages are delicate as the partners will only partially appreciate what the approach entails and the level of effort required if they become primary intended users of the evaluations.

Recommendations for other projects and funders of projects interested in developing a comparable project to DECI, or introducing UFE to a project:

- Confirm a commitment by funders and major stakeholders to explore the approach (in our case Utilization-focused Evaluation) through an action-research process.
- Clarify expectations early on with regards to the role of UFE relative to other possible evaluation and accountability needs. Is UFE a replacement or a complement to other evaluation needs?

- Work as a team, with mentors who are able to trouble-shoot in pairs, and with support from other members that can backstop as questions arise.
- Create an environment of trust where learning from mistakes is embraced.
- Acknowledge that the process takes time, and that the ‘aha moments’ will come once the approach is under implementation.
- Make use of the training modules and feel free to adjust them to each circumstance.
- Ensure that there are funds to complete all steps of UFE, especially the last one that calls for a reflection on the overall development of the approach; this is where much learning happens.
- Carry out a mid-term self-reflection to course-correct and also to celebrate progress.

Appendix 1 Data collection for documenting our learning

(This appendix was included in the Second Interim Technical Report.)

We will ask ourselves two sets of questions:

- a) about UFE overall, and
- b) about its effect on our evaluation practice.

LISTS OF INTERVIEWS

To make the interview short (30 min?) we could send the questions ahead of time. It may not be practical to have two observers at each one, but when this does happen one should take the lead in documenting the responses.

	Project	Interviewer	Observer 1	Observer 2	Informant
1	SIRCA	Chella	Sonal	DB or RR	Ann
2	PANACEA	Chella	Shubh	DB or RR	Afroze
3	LIRNEAsia	Shubh	Chella	DB or RR	Nilusha
4	DREAM-IT	Sonal	Chella	DB or RR	Batpurev
5	ISIF	Sonal	Shubh	DB or RR	Sylvia
6	DECI mentor	RR	Sonal	Shubh	Chella
7	DECI mentor	DB	Sonal	Chella	Shubh
8	DECI mentor	RR	Shubh	Chella	Sonal
9	DECI coord	Sonal	Chella	Shubh	RR
10	DECI coord	Shubh	Sonal	Chella	DB

Proposed guiding questions

A. About UFE (relevant to all 10 interviews)

- What are the 3 aspects of UFE that you have found most helpful and why?
- What are the 3 aspects of UFE that you have found most challenging and what suggestions do you have for other projects/programs?
- What are the conditions or enabling factors that are most important for UFE to succeed?
- In retrospect, what would you/should we have done differently?

B. UFE in your evaluation practice (relevant to interviews 6-10)

- How does a UFE lens alter your evaluation practice?
- What are the 3 aspects of the mentoring experience that worked the best?
- What are the 3 aspects of the mentoring experience that were the least effective?
- What additional mentoring practices would you suggest in future?