



DEVELOPING EVALUATION AND
COMMUNICATION CAPACITY IN
INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH



DECI-2 Case study

Evaluating CONDATOS: A web-based U-FE experience that beat the odds

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About the Series

This series of case studies emerged from an action-research project entitled Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research ([DECI-2](#)). The predecessor Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (DECI-1) project focused only on evaluation mentoring in Asia. The subsequent DECI-2 project collaborated with research networks and grantees supported by IDRC's Information & Networks Program between July 2012 and 2017. This particular case summarizes work with the CONDATOS Conference under the coordination of Fundación Avina.

While the initial DECI-2 road map consisted of a sequence of planning steps in evaluation and communication, in this case the focus was only on developing and completing an evaluation plan of the CONDATOS Conference. During the preceding DECI-1 project, we witnessed how utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) works as a decision-making framework within which numerous evaluation approaches can co-exist. The communication steps turned out to be no different as the planning sequence challenged project managers to be clear about their communication purposes, audiences and expected changes.

As evaluation and communication were linked together, we discovered that both processes created a structure for project partners to express and agree on their assumptions, expectations, and outcomes. The approach creates a pressure on stakeholders to make the implicit, explicit and consequently helps teams clarify their Theory of Change. With research projects and with experimental initiatives, this process can take time as emergent outcomes can provide feedback to adjust project objectives and strategies.

Using this approach is how we came about the notion of a hybrid decision-making framework where evaluative and communicative thinking work as two sides of the same coin. All this work to re-discover human nature: as soon as you encounter exciting news you feel compelled to share it.

DECI-2 was developed as an action-research project in capacity development. We tested mentoring as a way of providing evaluation and communication support to our partners. Regional mentors based in Asia, Africa, and Latin America provided the bulk of the mentoring. While our main partners were IDRC-funded research networks (part of the Information & Network program), we have also tested the approach with projects in other fields.

Introduction to the DECI-2 approach

We have developed an integrated approach that combines Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) and Research Communication (ResCom) as complementary processes that can help research projects strengthen their long-term effectiveness.

U-FE

In simple terms, U-FE is an evaluation approach proposed by Patton (2004) that seeks to generate useful, learning-focussed evaluation. In order to attain such a goal, U-FE follows a series of iterative steps from the early stages of a project being evaluated. The purpose of the steps is to help the evaluator facilitate a process that enables a project to implement the key elements of the approach:

- Identification of primary evaluation users;
- Identification of primary evaluation purposes and uses;
- Formulation of key evaluation questions (KEQ) in a systematic way;
- Identification of relevant/cost-effective data collection tools and analysis processes;

- Facilitation of findings use.

Although Patton (2011), the original proponent of the U-FE approach, recently increased the number of U-FE steps to 17, for the sake of simplicity the DECI-2 team preferred to follow the original 12-steps process (2004).

ResCom

ResCom refers to the use of communication strategies for making research findings available, in a timely, relevant and useful way to policymakers as a means of more effectively influencing public policy. Although ResCom did not have a step-by-step process as in the case of U-FE, the DECI-2 team proposed a similar 12-step process for ResCom that would deal with similar topics on the communication side. Such a process is based largely on the RAPID framework¹ and on the common and complementary aspects of ResCom and U-FE. In the same ways that U-FE tries to make evaluation “useful”, ResCom focuses on “useful policy-influencing communication”. It is worthwhile mentioning that as in the case of U-FE, the flow between steps is iterative rather than linear.

Why combining U-FE and ResCom makes sense?

As indicated earlier, DECI-2’s central assumption for combining U-FE and ResCom is that such a combination can help programs increase their long-term outcomes. As described on the DECI2 website, from a practice perspective DECI-2 combines U-FE and ResCom because:

- They share common planning steps (situational analysis, stakeholder analysis) that can enable complementary preparatory efforts.
- Making explicit what to evaluate focuses on the essential purposes of a research project, and this work in turn clarifies communication objectives.
- Both approaches call for researchers to “listen” to what partners need, what is relevant to them.
- The emphasis on “use” in UFE is comparable with the emphasis on targeted messages in communication planning.
- The emphasis is on “facilitating use” in UFE, where the evaluators ensure the evaluation findings get utilized (as opposed to being left to chance) and it reminds us that communication activities and products need follow-up to heighten their effectiveness.
- The integration of evaluation and communication processes ensures that projects focus on communication objectives that are realistic, and measurable in terms of reach and short-term outcomes.

Despite these complementarities, there are also some significant differences that can make it challenging to utilize the U-FE – ResCom combination. The main difference is that while ResCom has a very specific purpose – using communication to influence policy - U-FE is quite flexible in terms of its purpose and use. In this regard, it is easier to find the required project readiness level for conducting U-FE rather than for conducting ResCom. Another practical difference is that U-FE requires less technical knowledge by people who want to learn how to use it. It does not require a background in evaluation to learn how to conduct U-FE. In contrast, ResCom is quite difficult to implement for someone who does not have a background in communication and who does not understand the dynamics of influencing policy.

Introduction to CONDATOS

The Latin America and the Caribbean Open Data Conference (CONDATOS) was first launched in Montevideo (Uruguay) in 2013 as an initiative of the Uruguayan Government to convene key players

¹ <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/2764.pdf>

that could help coordinate regional efforts around Open Data. That first conference was funded by the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), The Economic Commission of the United Nations for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), and the Organization of American States (OAS) through the Latin American and the Caribbean Electronic Government Network (Red GEALC). Although CONDATOS focuses on Government agencies, since its first edition in 2013, it has always been organized in tandem with an “unconference” event called Abrelatam. Abrelatam was organized by a Uruguayan non-government organization (NGO) called Data.UY, with support from another organization called Ciudadano Inteligente. Their goal was to attract other regional non-government actors that were - or could be - interested in Open Data.

Both CONDATOS and Abrelatam started as exploratory and emerging efforts that have been evolving and helping shape the Open Data landscape in the region. This evolution is more evident in Latin America than in the Caribbean. In 2014, CONDATOS’ second edition took place in Mexico City with a similar format and rationale. With 800 participants, it attracted twice as many participants as the first edition. Given this growing interest, some questions arose around the need for making the conference a more formal event within a specific institutional umbrella. In March 2015, some key actors² met in Santiago de Chile to discuss these issues and do some planning for the third edition of CONDATOS, which was held in that same city in September 2015. During the meeting, it was agreed to formalize some aspects of the Conference, in particular the selection of the host country. This planning meeting also provided an opportunity to discuss the possibility of doing some evaluation of the Conference. A representative of the DECI-2 team was invited to do a presentation on Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) as an approach of potential interest, and to describe the support that the DECI-2 team could provide. After some discussions about the most appropriate partner organization, in June 2015 it was finally decided that a U-FE approach was going to be undertaken on the CONDATOS event under the coordination of Fundación Avina.

Mentorship expectations in a complex scenario

Although evaluating the Conference itself appeared as something rather simple, the expectations by the U-FE mentor were low because there were too many factors that made the logistics around the evaluation quite complex. As an initiative with a strong focus on capacity development, DECI-2 works with specific partner organizations. Given the fact that the organizers of CONDATOS change from year to year, there was no obvious specific organization to work with. This gap was perhaps the main challenge around the “readiness” of the organizers. Another major difficulty had to do with the time schedule. U-FE is usually meant to start at the beginning of the project to be evaluated, and the first steps - which are about assessing readiness and designing the evaluation - tend to take a significant amount of time. In the case of CONDATOS, the readiness assessment began with the initial U-FE presentation at the Conference planning meeting in Santiago de Chile (March, 2015). However, most of the other steps – including data collection – had to take place within less than three months. Another significant challenge was that the person who was hired to be the evaluator had a full-time job with a government agency in Argentina, had no previous evaluation experience, and had no availability to travel to work directly with the primary intended users (PIUs)³ prior to the conference.

² Government representatives from Uruguay and Mexico who had been involved in the 1st and 2nd editions of the Conference, representatives of the Chilean Government who were in the process of organizing the 3rd edition, representatives of funding and supporting organizations such as the Economic Commission of the United Nations for Latin America (CEPAL), Organization of American States (OAS), Fundación AVINA, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Iniciativa Lationamericana de Datos Abiertos (ILDA) and Ciudadano Inteligente.

³ In DECI, the PIUs have a direct, identifiable stake in the evaluation and its use – they are expected to be engaged with the evaluation on an ongoing basis during the whole process – to commit time.

Therefore, the entire contextual analysis and design phase of the evaluation had to be done using web-based technology. The same limitation applied to the mentoring process. A further challenge was that the primary intended users of the evaluation were very busy people who were based in different countries, thus allowing for very few interaction opportunities.

Reaching readiness

Assessing readiness – the first step of the U-FE process – is essentially about assessing the commitment of the organization commissioning the evaluation (i.e. the client) to assign resources and time to the process. The lack of a specific organization behind CONDATOS made it difficult to assess readiness. In most cases, identifying the evaluation client is not mentioned as an important U-FE activity because it tends to be a natural role played by the organization that requests the evaluation. However, in this case, identifying the client was not only awkward, but absolutely critical as it became the only piece of evidence that there was a minimum level of readiness to conduct the evaluation process. The turning point leading to readiness occurred when AVINA decided to commit financial resources to hire an evaluator and appointed the director of ILDA - who had been heavily involved in the organization of CONDATOS since its first edition - to supervise the evaluator's work. Other organizations that have supported CONDATOS since the beginning - such as OAS and CEPAL – backed-up Avina's efforts and committed to participate in the evaluation process.

Another important dimension of assessing U-FE readiness has to do with the evaluator's capability as individual to facilitate the process⁴. It is about determining if the evaluator is up to the challenge or not. In this particular case, the main question was whether or not the evaluator was willing and capable of taking the risk of carrying out an evaluation process that had a good recipe for failure (i.e. a very tight timeline, very busy primary users who were difficult to engage and limited face-to-face support from the mentor). To AVINA's and ILDA's credit, they did a very good job at grasping the opportunity that DECI-2 offered and chose the right person. Although the evaluator (Natalia Carfi) had no evaluation experience or background, she was very familiar with CONDATOS; she had actively participated in the first two editions, and had been working for the Chilean Government on the organization of the 2015 edition. Natalia's insider knowledge of the Conference, her excellent understanding of Open Data in the regional context, her previous work experience with key stakeholders, her personal networks, and her eagerness to learn about U-FE were very valuable assets. DECI-2's support provided the tools she needed to feel confident enough to tackle the challenge.

A particular approach to selecting primary intended users

Natalia's mentorship started in June 2015 and the first two U-FE steps (assessing organizational and evaluator's readiness) were quickly discussed and covered. The next step was identifying potential primary evaluation users and inviting them to participate in the evaluation process. Given that there wasn't a specific organization behind CONDATOS, it was decided to select primary evaluation users from partner organizations that have supported CONDATOS from the beginning and who are expected to continue to do so in the future. The evaluator also wanted to include representatives from the national Government that will organize CONDATOS in 2016, as they would be the main users of the evaluation findings. However, this designation was not possible due to the fact that the next hosting Government was only appointed after the 2015 conference. Therefore, it was agreed to have a first group of primary intended users for the evaluation design phase and up to the submission of the final report, and a second group of [future] primary users for the facilitation of

⁴ As DECI-2 mentor, his role was only to help the evaluator facilitate this process.

findings' use. However, at the beginning of the U-FE process there were no talks about who could facilitate the use of evaluation findings step. There were limited opportunities for further action given that the evaluator's contract ended a few weeks after the submission of the evaluation report.

The first group of PIUs was composed of two representatives of CEPAL, a representative from OAS and a representative from ILDA. The second group of PIUs was composed by the representatives of the Colombian Government and civil sector in charge of organizing and hosting the CONDATOS 2016 edition. This idea of having one group of users designing the evaluation and helping interpret the findings, and a second group actually using the findings in a self-facilitated mode constitutes an interesting adaptation of the U-FE process (analogous to a runner passing the baton to the next one).

Purpose and intended uses

After some candid discussion led by the evaluator, the primary users defined the following uses or purposes for the evaluation:

- (i) To help improve CONDATOS; and
- (ii) To generate knowledge.

In other words, the primary users chose to conduct a formative evaluation of CONDATOS as an ongoing initiative, as opposed to simply evaluating the third edition of the Conference. Based on the selected purposes, the primary intended uses of the evaluation were to improve CONDATOS and to identify patterns of effectiveness (i.e. what works well).

There were some discussions on conducting a Developmental Evaluation, but given the very short contract term of the evaluator, it was not seen as realistic to engage in such a process, as it requires the provision of on-going feedback and documenting change over time.

A significant early discovery

As the evaluator guided the primary users into the formulation of the key evaluation questions (KEQ), it was necessary to revisit the objectives of the conference to make sure that the KEQs would be relevant. To most people's surprise, CONDATOS did not have any written objectives, so the U-FE process encouraged the primary users to write down whatever they understood the objectives of the conference to be. To the advantage of the group, most of the primary users had played a key role in launching the conference, so they had a clear idea about its original purpose. After some discussion, they agreed on the following objectives:

1. To create a space that allows regional governments to collaborate and exchange knowledge and experiences in order to strengthen and expand Open Data initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean.
2. To generate an Open Data regional agenda that governments will support.

The discovery that explicit objectives were lacking shows the emerging nature of the Conference, but also the need to formalize some of its basic elements, so this clarification became an early contribution of the UF-E process.

Key Evaluation Questions and findings

Based on the purposes or uses of the evaluation, the primary users formulated five key evaluation questions (KEQ), which are summarized in the table below, along with the most relevant findings that emerged.

Table 1: KEQ and findings

KEQ	Most relevant findings
1. To what extent has CONDATOS met its objectives (see previous section)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CONDATOS has partially met its objectives. Although it has become a space that fosters collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, the Conference needs to address specific practical and technical issues around Open Data and move away from general discussions. It also needs to engage a wider variety of stakeholders, including the private and academic sectors. • CONDATOS has not contributed to generating an Open Data regional agenda yet.
2. What factors have hindered collaboration among (regional) Governments?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other than the usual bureaucratic barriers, the evaluation could not identify specific factors that hindered collaboration. However, in the last edition of the Conference, organizers observed a sharp decrease in the number of participating countries. The data collected suggests that such a decrease may be related to an increasing number of similar Open Data events that compete for the same participants or to the way travel grants are assigned. It also suggests that new efforts may be required to sustain the regional interest in CONDATOS. • Organizing CONDATOS helps the host country advance its Open Data agenda and initiatives as part of the preparatory work for the Conference.
3. What is the regional Open Data agenda?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no defined regional Open Data agenda and the participants who were interviewed perceive that defining one is not a high-priority issue. This view suggests a disconnect between the objectives of the Conference - as understood by the primary users - and the expectations of other stakeholders, such as Government officials and funders. Such a disconnection requires attention by those in charge of CONDATOS because it may require a thoughtful revision of its objectives or its strategy.
4. What are the most important logistic aspects of CONDATOS that should be addressed in order to foster a fruitful sharing of experiences and collaboration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The venue and the agenda must provide space and opportunities for networking. • Web 2.0 communication tools are critical. • English translation is a must. It should also include French to encourage the participation of Caribbean countries. • The convening process should focus on attracting more Government representatives and a wider variety of stakeholders. • The selection process to award scholarships needs to be carefully designed to attract new participants without hindering the participation of recurring actors who raise the discussion level.

<p>5. To what extent would the institutionalization of CONDATOS contribute to build an Open Data agenda in Latin America?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institutionalization of CONDATOS is not perceived as necessary as it could hinder the current informality of the Conference. It could also end up excluding the civil society sector from the organization process. • If countries require a more formal setting to formalize agreements, they could rely on other existing venues, such as Red GEALC, an OAS-funded initiative.
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Evidence of findings' use

In July 2016, the DECI-2 mentor held a conference call with three representatives of the National Statistics Department of Colombia (DANE⁵) who are part of the steering committee that is in charge of organizing and hosting CONDATOS 2016. The purpose of the call was to find out the extent to which the findings of the evaluation report had been used. The first interesting discovery had to do with the way the first group of PIUs had transferred “ownership” of the evaluation report to the second group of PIUs – partly represented by the DANE officials who were interviewed. According to the officials, they received the evaluation report as part of a set of documents sent by e-mail in November 2015 by the OAS representative who was among the first group of users. *“After scanning the documents, the evaluation report became one of our first inputs for organizing CONDATOS 2016”*, said one of the officials. This came as a surprise because the DECI-2 mentor was under the understanding that as part of the facilitation-of-use efforts, another member of the first group of PIUs had had a more detailed interaction regarding the report with the second group of PIUs. Therefore, it can be said that although the report was disseminated in a timely fashion, there wasn't a dedicated external facilitation-of-use step as the U-FE approach suggests. The second interesting discovery was that such a step was undertaken by the DANE officials themselves, who scanned the document. This could call a “spontaneous internal facilitation-of-use initiative”. According to them, the staff members of DANE's Division of Marketing and Diffusion of Statistical Culture extracted what they considered the key points and recommendations from the report and made a presentation to discuss them with other members of the steering committee. This committee is comprised of representatives of the Colombian Government and civil society, who have become the PIUs of the evaluation findings.

According to the DANE officials who were interviewed, the two most valuable and useful sections of the report were (i) the detailed history of CONDATOS as an evolving Conference, and (ii) the final recommendations. According to the same officials, the evaluation report has been useful to the CONDATOS 2016 steering committee because it has:

1. Helped them identify key topics that need to be discussed regarding the organization of the conference and remain focused on “what really matters”.
2. Invited them to reflect on and formulate an objective – which can go beyond the 2016 edition of the conference: *“To promote the demand, access and use of high-quality, timely and innovative Open Data as public assets, in order to (i) generate social and economic value; and (ii) provide countries – at all government levels – and citizens with more and better information for decision-making and participation.”*
3. Helped them think about more effective ways of inviting and engaging frequent participants, as well as to identify new stakeholders who could be invited. As a result, for example, they have invited representatives from other Latin American and Caribbean national statistics agencies.

⁵ The DANE representatives interviewed belong to the *Dirección de Mercadeo, Difusión y Cultura Estadística (DIMCE)* – Division of Marketing and Diffusion of Statistical Culture.

4. Given them the idea to create not just a website to disseminate information, but also a platform to discuss Open Data issues that are of common interest.
5. Helped them become aware about the importance of documenting the conference and its organizational process in order to continue building an institutional legacy for future organizers and hosts. The report also provided them with valuable tips on how to do document the event.
6. Helped them realize it is a very good knowledge base for logistics issues.
7. Made them aware about the importance of taking into account other upcoming international Open Data events in order to come up with a relevant agenda and choose the best possible date. As a result, the steering committee chose to host CONDATOS 2016 at the beginning of November as a way of bridging an Open Data event that will be held in Madrid (October) and another one in Chile (December).

Achievements and outcomes

The main achievement was that despite a very tight schedule, the U-FE process yielded a report that the PIUs perceived as useful and valuable. The major findings and outcomes of the evaluation process were:

- Making explicit some underlying assumptions, such as the perceived value of keeping CONDATOS as an evolving event outside a specific organizational umbrella;
- Identifying and listing key logistic factors that are critical to the success of CONDATOS;
- Documenting the history and trajectory of CONDATOS and making it available to future organizers.
- A consultant who has been involved in CONDATOS since the beginning is now trained in U-FE and is able to continue contributing to the enhancement of the Conference.

The PIUs highlighted other contributions:

“I think that the final reflections and recommendations of the report were the biggest contributions of the U-FE process because based on them, the next hosts will be able to make improvements and required changes [...] Also, the identification of the different stakeholders with their respective roles. Given that they have different levels of knowledge, vision and maturity, their responses are valuable for tabulating the data and drawing conclusions.”

“The recommendations provided on how to structure the future of the initiative were the most valuable contributions to CONDATOS. Also engaging with government officials and clarifying their intentions and expectations about CONDATOS was very helpful.”

Another important contribution of U-FE is that it engages PIUs in a valuable learning process about their project and the related activities. In this regard, the CONDATOS evaluation experience also generated value, as one of the PIUs suggested:

“I think this evaluation process is useful and I think it would be valuable to formalise the outcomes to reflect on community-building exercises in the Open Data space in other regions, as long as the due context factors are considered...I learned more about the nature of different evaluation processes [that can be used in] this kind of let’s call them ‘emergent initiatives’ around the world. This gave me perspective about the process.”

Additionally, there were two unintended outcomes that are worth mentioning. The first one was the fact that the evaluation process required the primary users to define the conference objectives, which has already been mentioned. The second unintended outcome was the call by some key stakeholders for CONDATOS to evolve and become integrated into the broader global data agenda. This discussion highlights the need of CONDATOS to re-invent itself beyond Open Data in order to keep its relevance. This conclusion could also involve going from an annual edition to a bi-annual one. These two unintended outcomes are very important contributions of the U-FE process and invite careful reflection and planning by the organizers of future editions, as suggested by one of the PIU's.

"The evaluation was an excellent exercise to strengthen the things that are being well done and to identify weaknesses, both in terms of content and form. It was also useful to reflect about the objectives of CONDATOS. This is something that had not been done consciously because of the way the Conference was being developed year after year. It will be important to share the evaluation report with the hosts of CONDATOS 2016. Based on my own experience, evaluations reports are kept in desk drawers and people tend to make the same mistakes."

It is worth noting that there is a clear tension between the idea that a regional agenda is needed – proposed by the primary users - versus the idea that such an agenda is not needed – suggested by most of the participants who were interviewed. This tension may indicate that the views of some important stakeholders were not represented within the group of primary users. Although the evaluation process was able to unveil this tension, it did not resolve it. This outstanding difference of opinion could lead to an interesting issue to discuss during the future facilitation of findings use.

Challenges and success factors

As mentioned earlier, the evaluation of CONDATOS had many significant challenges, such as time shortage, unavailability for face-to-face meetings, and conflicting agendas of those involved. The following table summarizes and provides examples in terms of how these challenges were resolved.

Table 2: Challenges and solutions

Challenge	Decisions leading to solution (success factors)	Why it worked
No organization “owns” CONDATOS. Therefore, assessing organizational readiness was difficult.	AVINA, one of the donors of CONDATOS took the initiative to become the evaluation client and assigned resources to conduct the evaluation. Other stakeholders committed to the process.	The fact that key stakeholders that have supported CONDATOS since the beginning were brought into the U-FE process was the main evidence of readiness.
Limited amount of time: Most of the U-FE steps had to be covered in 3 months and there was little opportunity for the evaluator to interact with the primary evaluation users.	A meeting schedule was agreed from the beginning and the meetings were held no matter how many users showed up.	The engagement rules were clearly communicated and the primary users, played by them. This commitment made the decision-making process agile.
	Some U-FE steps were not covered in depth.	The mentor and the evaluator agreed on not going too deep into some steps and decided to cover some of them without engaging the primary users. For example, the contextual analysis was done over the phone between the mentor and the evaluator and was not documented in detail. Similarly, the simulation was replaced by a brief discussion on how the interviewees could respond to the questionnaire. The questions were further tested and refined after the first interviews.
	The evaluator did a significant amount of preparatory work before each call.	Given that all the interactions between the evaluator and the primary users were on-line, the evaluator tried to keep the duration of each Skype call to one hour. In order to accomplish this, she did a lot of preparatory work that in some cases she shared with the team prior to the call to make the discussions more productive. For instance, to advance the preparation of KEQs, she drafted some tentative questions and shared them with the primary users. This step made the process of formulating the KEQs much faster than if they had tried to formulate the KEQs from scratch.
	There was a real need to evaluate CONDATOS.	The Conference was reaching its third edition and most people involved saw value in going through the effort of conducting an evaluation.
The primary users were located in different countries and had very busy agendas: This scenario was challenging since it limited the engagement opportunities.	Avina – the evaluation client – hired an evaluator who was familiar with the Conference and knew the primary users personally.	This action was perhaps the most important success factor of the entire U-FE process because the evaluator did not have to invest time understanding the context around the Conference and/or building relationships with the primary users. To some extent, she also played the role of a primary user. This step made the on-line interaction much easier and allowed the evaluator to make informed suggestions and decisions.

The evaluator had a full time job that was not related to the Conference and was not able to meet the mentor in-person early in the process.	Both parties had to make their best effort to make the process work. The evaluator had to show a real interest to learn and be willing to work weekends and evenings. The mentor had to be flexible and adjust to her schedule, and make himself available for frequent interactions.	In previous experiences, the mentor had met the evaluator in person early on and had spent at least one day planning their work. Face-to-face meetings usually help build the working relationship. However, in this scenario, the evaluator and the mentor had to adapt to a different engagement strategy. For example, they held short, but quite frequent Skype meetings to provide training and address questions. They also used a lot of e-mail communication. Since the evaluator had a full-time job, the mentor had to be flexible enough to work around her schedule.
	DECI-2 had enough resources to share for self-learning.	The evaluator had to invest time reading and learning about U-FE on her own. This work was possible thanks to the fact that DECI-2 had enough resources to share in Spanish, such as the U-FE primer, the training modules and reports from previous evaluation experiences.

One of the PIUs shared his perspective as follows:

"I think it is very challenging to determine the metrics for the value [that] this space creates. CONDATOS operates as a community building exercise, which helps sustain an ongoing communication among key participants in the region. The way this happens often is complex, difficult to trace and non-linear. This could be challenging (and frustrating) for evaluators and potentially funders alike. [However], by engaging with users and other stakeholders, it was possible to address the perceived value and explore potential avenues for the future of CONDATOS. This was a nice development, which I highly appreciate."

Lessons learned and their replicability

U-FE normally requires a significant amount of planning time and a close interaction between the evaluator and the primary users. Therefore, as the evaluation mentor, the DEC-2 mentor was skeptical about conducting U-FE under a tight timeline and with no face-to-face meetings during the design stages. The main lesson of the CONDATOS experience is that it is possible to do U-FE under such constraints, as long as there is evident organizational readiness and the following additional conditions are met:

1. The evaluator knows the subject and the project in depth;
2. The evaluator and the primary users have worked together prior to the evaluation design, or at least know each other in person;
3. The evaluator is proactive at doing enough preparatory work to make the few meetings as productive as possible.
4. The evaluator takes time to do one-on-one follow-ups with primary users between meetings to keep the process going and achieve the scheduled milestones.
5. In case the evaluator has little U-FE experience, she or he has a mentor who is flexible enough to try non-conventional approaches to doing U-FE.

It would be reasonable to assume that this type of "web-based U-FE processes" can be replicated in other projects, but only if the conditions listed above are met. What seems quite unique about the CONDATOS case - and therefore difficult to replicate - is evaluating a project that has no institutional

umbrella, as under such a condition it is usually very difficult to generate enough ownership for resource allocation (in other words, for reaching readiness).

These observations seem to be relatively consistent with another conference evaluation experience. DECI-1 helped evaluate the Communications Policy Research South (CPR*south*) conference, which also had to be evaluated within a tight timeframe. The three main common success factors between the CONDATOS and the CPR*south* evaluation cases are that: (i) both evaluation processes had a strong donor endorsement; (ii) both processes had a highly dedicated mentorship support; and (iii) one of the two people leading the evaluation had participated in at least one previous edition of the conference - the mentor in the case of CPR*south* and the evaluator in the case of CONDATOS - so there was a good understanding of the context. Another common element was that both evaluation processes had a strong formative component, although this does not seem to be a relevant success factor. In contrast, the evaluation of CPR*south* offered more favourable conditions than CONDATOS in the sense that it had a permanent board, well-defined objectives, highly engaged primary users and data from previous evaluation efforts. Additionally, CPR*south* had an in-house evaluator who was not bound by a short-term contract, so she was able to lead the entire U-FE process - including the facilitation of findings' use – and had more time to invest in the learning process. In the case of CONDATOS, the absence of these two factors prevented the evaluator from further engagement in the U-FE process after submitting the report.

The *Toolkit for the evaluation of the communication activities* - a recent publication of the European Commission on how to evaluate conferences highlights the importance of having “SMART” objectives for the conference to be evaluated, which was a critical missing element identified in the CONDATOS U-FE process. The publication also refers to surveys as the main data collection method. Although the evaluation of CONDATOS required in-depth interviews with key actors, using surveys would have been a practical method for collecting opinions from a wider variety of stakeholders on things like logistic organization of the conference, like it was done in the evaluation of CPR*south* prior to engaging in U-FE.

Key events that can help explain U-FE to others

There are two key events that can help illustrate how U-FE worked in this context. The first one has to do with the fact that during the process, the primary evaluation users were asked to put CONDATOS objectives in writing. This step illustrates how U-FE helps people make underlying assumptions explicit, especially when it comes to formulating KEQs. In this particular case, perhaps the people who have been involved in creating and promoting the Conference thought that the implicit objectives were clear to most stakeholders, but the U-FE process challenged the primary users to make them explicit.

The second key event is that after reviewing the evaluation report, one of the primary users asked if the U-FE experience was going to be documented – and even offered to contribute by reading the case study and providing relevant comments – because he wanted to share it with other people. This action illustrates that U-FE enables primary users to gain ownership over the evaluation process and they find value not only in the evaluation findings, but also in the learning process that comes with it.

Lost opportunities

The evaluator was able to contribute to the Conference from a role that she had not imagined before, and she learned how to lead a U-FE process up to the point of preparing and submitting an evaluation report. The main lost opportunity was not having the evaluator go through the complete U-FE cycle which would have included her facilitation of use of the findings. This missed step was due to the fact that her contract ended right after she submitted the report and her full-time job responsibilities did not allow her to take on any further involvement. The main learning about this situation is that when committing to U-FE, the client, the evaluator and the primary users have to take into account that their engagement in the evaluation process needs to go beyond the submission of a report. In fact, facilitating the findings' use is the essence of U-FE as a learning and change process. It is evident that the timeline affected the process and the data quality because it did not allow better planning of things like the duration of the evaluator's contract, engaging a wider variety of stakeholders, the type and amount of data collected, etc. This is reflected in one of the PIU's point of view:

"[In terms of rigor], the evaluation could have been more thorough in terms of stakeholder diversity, interviews and measurements, but given the tight timeline and the limited collaboration the evaluator got from the primary users, it was a good exercise to draw conclusions that can help improve CONDATOS 2016. [Regarding the methodology], the relationship between the interview questionnaire and the key evaluation questions was not explicit enough. Perhaps the way the answers were processed could have been further explained. [Thirdly], more quantitative data could have been included. I missed the results of the indicators, such as numbers and percentages."

The evaluation process could also have led to other products of interest beyond the report. One of the PIUs pointed out that *"with more resources and time, we could have also produced a policy brief in English in order to share the experience with other regions."* Another opportunity that may have been missed is laying some kind of foundation for continuing the evaluation of CONDATOS. There were some conversations with the evaluator regarding the possibility of writing a manual on how to organize and host the Conference. The manual would include a Theory of Change that could help as a benchmark to evaluate future editions of CONDATOS. Given that the evaluator was unable to remain engaged in the process, putting together such a document does not seem realistic at this point.

A different approach to integrating U-FE and ResComm?

As a capacity development and research initiative, DECI-2 aims at implementing U-FE and Research Communication in tandem. However, the context of CONDATOS did not lend itself to applying such an approach, mainly due to time constraints and lack of people to mentor on both subjects. Therefore the DECI-2 team decided to proceed with U-FE mentorship only. Given that the planning phase of this Conference convenes Government officials and representatives from the civil sector to work together, it also became evident that there already was some ability from key non-government actors to communicate their concerns and ideas about Open Data to Government officials. From this perspective, DECI-2 team's flexibility to leave the ResCom mentorship out of the scene may have been another success factor of the evaluation as it made the process simpler.

However, in the case of CONDATOS, facilitating the use of the evaluation findings (Step 11 of U-FE) has been, to a certain extent, an unintended ResCom exercise. The evaluation findings have become important inputs that a team of Government officials – which is part of a marketing division - have communicated. As a result they have used them for planning and organizing the next edition of

CONDATOS. It seems evident that such officials have understood and valued the recommendations of the evaluation, as they have used them to try improving the Conference and increase its regional impact. Having the PIUs facilitate the use of the evaluation findings themselves could be seen an innovation feature of the CONDATOS U-FE experience, especially because those particular PIUs were not involved in the evaluation design.

Conclusions

U-FE usually requires extensive interaction between the evaluator and the primary users, especially during the initial phases that are about designing the evaluation system. Therefore, conducting U-FE in a short timeline and with little opportunity for the evaluator to engage the primary users does not seem to be a good idea. However, the CONDATOS experience suggests otherwise that under certain conditions, it is possible to do U-FE within such constraints. The evaluator and the evaluation mentor agree that the main key success factors were having an evaluator that had: (i) a deep knowledge of the project that was evaluated; (ii) a previous work relationship with the primary users; (iii) a proactive attitude; and (iv) timely advice from a mentor who was flexible enough to try a non-conventional approach to U-FE.

The most important contributions of the U-FE process were:

1. Encouraging the primary users to reflect on the Conference objectives and put them in writing;
2. Identifying, classifying and engaging different stakeholder groups;
3. Making relevant recommendations to improve the Conference, in terms of content as well as logistics.

The CONDATOS U-FE experience had at least three innovations that are worth mentioning. The first one was that there was no organization that formally owned the project, so *reaching readiness* demanded creativity and interest from all parties involved. The second one was the fact that the evaluation process had one group of PIUs for the design phase and a different group of PIUs for the facilitation-of-use phase. The third innovation was that some members of second group of PIUs spontaneously led the facilitation of findings use. This was likely possible due to many unidentified factors, but an obvious one could be that the evaluator had insider knowledge about CONDATOS and was able to make the evaluation report meaningful, in terms of content and language.

DECI-2 aims at integrating U-FE and Research Communication. The ResCom component was left out of the CONDATOS project due to lack of human resources and other readiness issues. The fact that a researcher who acted as primary user of the evaluation will be facilitating the findings' use with Government officials may well become an unintended U-FE/ResCom integration.

Overall, the results of the evaluation were seen as satisfactory and the primary users deem the findings as useful, which is one of the most important things about U-FE. However, what can be called "web-based U-FE" is not expected to work in most situations as it requires careful reading of the context and willingness to take risks. Although mentorship played an important role, the evaluator's proactivity and contextual knowledge was far more important to achieve success. The main weakness of the CONDATOS U-FE process was that there was little follow-up planned with primary users after the data was collected and the departure of the evaluator right after submitting the report, as it limited the opportunities for discussing it in greater depth with PIUs.

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