Reconciling tensions between accountability and learning: A role for process quality?

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Over the last decade and a half, the nonprofit sector has been strongly influenced by two parallel movements: calls to increase accountability of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) on one hand, and efforts to enhance learning and organisational adaptation on the other. Both are intimately linked to evaluation, which can provide an evidence base to demonstrate results to key stakeholders and from which to identify lessons and adapt future practice. While not inherently in opposition, accountability and learning agendas can create substantial tensions in practice. In this presentation, we characterise the competing expectations generated by these agendas and propose process quality outcomes as a more feasible, relevant way to assess complex development and influencing interventions over relatively short time frames. Grounded in specific examples from current practice, process quality outcomes offer the opportunity to enhance outward accountability and identify how future processes may be more effective.

Background and rationale

The results agenda has increased demands for observable change within the lifecycle of a project. However, as the nature of development shifts from service delivery to capacity building and influencing, it often requires repeated measures over longer timeframes examining units of analysis beyond the individual-level. Demonstrating success to funders, supporters and senior management is quite different than evidence-based learning through the systematic assessment of situations in which intended outcomes did and *did not* occur. Moreover, this agenda can orient accountability upward (and inward), overshadowing outward accountability towards the people that an initiative aims to benefit. While professed commitments to learn from failure may continue to proliferate, they run counter to powerful external and internal incentives to demonstrate immediate, attributable impact.

These challenges are not new. Yet, they persist, and can be particularly intense in contracting funding environments. Do NGOs, their funders and public supporters genuinely expect that entrenched poverty, inequality and marginalization and the structural drivers in which they are rooted will be resolved, and these changes visible, within a two year operational plan or three to four year funding cycle? The elephant looms large in the room.

Potential role for process quality

Assessing impacts on people's lives as a result of agenda setting, policy formation, adoption and implementation are more suitable for decade-long time frames. Over shorter time periods, process quality outcomes may offer a more feasible and relevant option that builds upon existing NGO codes of conduct and contributes to both outward accountability and learning. Process quality is observable, under direct control of implementing organisations, and can be assessed without extensive expertise or investment. It represents a complementary, often neglected element in evaluation that can help to better understand the extent to which implementation factors contributed to (a lack of) change.

Existing frameworks developed in relation to OECD DAC criteria (Chianca 2008), the project lifecycle (Khang and Moe 2008), World Bank projects (Ika, Diallo and Thuillier 2012), and NGO advocacy self-regulation (Hammer, Rooney and Warren 2010) identify more than 50 critical

success factors for development projects. These factors cover ten core process quality dimensions that served as the basis of this analysis. They examine: *who* is involved in what activities, *how* work is conducted, and *what* is being done (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Who, how and what – ten core process quality dimensions

Who
- Stakeholder participation in decision-making & activities
- Stakeholder motivation & interest
- Staff continuity

How
- Responsiveness to changing environment
- Cultural appropriateness/understanding of context
- Ethicality incl. environmental responsibility
- Transparency (data, finance, conflict of interest etc.)
- Adequate resources

What
- Design/scientific soundness
- Compatible development priorities/stakeholder agreement on strategic issues

Application and adaption in practice

Based on these frameworks, we applied the core process quality dimensions to two multi-national initiatives in which Oxfam is involved: engagement in global policy processes by civil society organisations (CSOs) in emerging economies, and Oxfam's programme standard self-assessment involving more than 800 staff in 45 countries. The latter represents an example of how process quality can be monitored.

Example 1: CSO Engagement initiative aims to both increase national and global commitments to reduce inequality and to democratise these policy processes, securing a more prominent role for citizen voice. As such, establishing and maintaining formal mechanisms for civil society engagement serve as both a means by which to achieve policy change and greater equity, as well as an end itself. Initially program indicators focused predominantly on policy change, but as the initiative has unfolded, *who* within civil society has become an increasingly relevant, and more realistic element to assess change over the three year program. Other salient process quality dimensions include how responsive decision-makers and CSOs themselves are to the changing environment, and the extent to which activities are culturally appropriate and grounded in an understanding of the context. In this case, process quality dimensions related to adoption of alleged specifications (was the programme implemented as intended), target population coverage, and favourable institutional context were less applicable and would need adaptation for advocacy-oriented programmes.

While very relevant, how to ensure meaningful stakeholder participation, particularly among more marginalised groups, presents an enormous operational challenge at a large scale – for an INGO operating in more than 90 countries, or an Indian CSO network comprised of more than 4,000 organisations in a country of 1.2 billion people. In these cases, measurement can bring a useful level of specificity, identifying who was involved in what activities and how the participant profile shifted over time, rather than broad statements or infeasible expectations about meaningful engagement of billions of people. In practice, the process quality dimension related to cultural appropriateness also entails context specificity; measures to assess CSO engagement in Russia and

China will need to be operationalised differently than those in South Africa and Brazil, to reflect their distinct modes of influences.

Example 2: Oxfam Program Standards Self-Assessment (PSSA) aims to improve program quality by increasing adherence to Oxfam's Program Standards, a mandatory benchmark for the organization's rights-based work. These eleven standards include process quality elements from design to exit, covering most of the ten core dimensions listed in figure 1 above except staff continuity. The first step in this learning process is a self-assessment of current practice against the standards, using a common tool that operationalizes the eleven standards into observable elements. Based on the findings, program teams develop a detailed action plan for improving program practice in prioritized areas.

From April 2012- December 2013, 143 programs (62%) in 45 countries took part in this exercise, involving more than 800 staff in total. For approximately a third of the programs, partners participated in the assessment process as well. This process was useful in creating a shared understanding of and commitment to program quality, and providing a framework to identify improvement priorities and plans to achieve them. Similar to the first example, stakeholder participation and organizational responsiveness were particularly salient process quality dimensions, highlighting the need for explicit exit strategies, capacity building plans, and the participation of communities in the design, implementation and review of our programs.

The PSSA was a time-intensive exercise, but possible to do without specific expertise. The willingness of program teams to critically assess their own practice was variable so a clear quality assurance mechanism would help to strengthen the credibility of results. The biggest challenge was not so much the self-assessment itself but the use and continuous review of the learning in a rapidly changing organizational environment with multiple competing priorities. The self-assessment has mainly served upward and inward accountability channels; it has reoriented what people are accountable for (stakeholder participation) rather than to whom people are accountable. Thus, process quality can shift accountability practice outward, but is still embedded within institutional lines of accountability.

Summary, limitations and future work

Applying existing frameworks to examples in practice suggests that process quality dimensions related to stakeholder participation, flexibility and contextual/cultural appropriateness are particularly relevant in these complex multi-national development and advocacy initiatives. These types of process measures link directly to program and organizational aims, are more plausible to improve and observe in short to medium term time frames and are more directly under program's control. They provide an opportunity to reorient accountability outward to beneficiaries and partners by what people are accountable for, rather than who they are accountable to. The application of process quality dimensions in practice suggests that several dimensions may need to be adapted for advocacy contexts and that their use and continuous review require as much attention as the initial assessment.

A stronger focus on process quality may partially address the tension between accountability and learning. Process quality measures can help to rule out managerial and organizational factors that may explain the lack of achievement of program goals. Weak process quality can help to account for failure, but strong process quality does not guarantee success. Therefore, process quality assessments represent a necessary but insufficient element of program evaluation. They are a neglected element in current evaluation practice, that if applied more systematically could better identify the subset of programs where it is plausible to expect a change in outcomes, and thus contribute to potentially fewer but more robust outcome evaluations.

References

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More information

This presentation is a work in progress; we welcome questions and feedback. For more information about the practice examples presented, please contact Jasmin Rocha (jasmin.rocha@oxfaminternational.org).

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