Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation Approaches in an International Context: Case Studies of Five Projects Across Multiple Countries

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BACKGROUND

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) approaches focus on incorporating local stakeholder voices throughout project implementation and evaluation. This approach provides implementers and researchers with local context, results that are relevant to key stakeholders, and information throughout project implementation to allow for adjustments or modifications as needed.[1,2] However, it is not always feasible to design an entire evaluation using participatory approaches due to various constraints such as time, commitment, and resources. We will highlight examples of participatory approaches at different steps in implementation and evaluation such as developing data collection tools, refining program implementation, and interpreting findings.

INCORPORATING LOCAL VOICES IN DESIGNING DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Data collection instrument development is one example of an opportunity to engage stakeholders. This could improve appropriateness of tools and provide local context, for example by including locally relevant questions. This could also increase the evaluation participation and response rate, which could lead to enhanced data quality and more realistic implementation recommendations. We provide two examples below.

Engaging stakeholders in survey design in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

IMPAQ developed the first establishment surveys implemented in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Establishment surveys generate key labor market information related to in-demand private sector employment characteristics. A key reason for the lack of establishment surveys in these countries was the private sector's unwillingness to share information with the government due to fears of extortion and taxation. To overcome these challenges, IMPAQ reached out to private sector organizations to build relationships early during project implementation. We invited them to project workshops and offered them positions on our project's steering committees. We included these organizations in the selection of the pilot sector and involved them heavily in the development of the survey instruments and sampling frame to ensure that the resulting data would be valuable to relevant stakeholders. We also worked closely with the Costa Rican National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC) to develop our survey instrument, since Costa Rica is the only Central American government that successfully implements establishment surveys. Working with INEC also built trust with our local partners by showing them that we were tailoring the survey instrument to the Central American context. Through the incorporation of local voices, stakeholders supported us in contacting businesses and advertising the survey, resulting in a higher than 70 percent response rate.

Calibrating reading assessments to match the country context

IMPAQ has led the evaluation of the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition projects in Burkina Faso, (Phase I, II, and III); Côte d'Ivoire; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Liberia; Mali; and Senegal. Across these differing contexts, one of the main objectives of the McGovern Dole programs is to improve literacy skills of primary-school aged children. To measure this objective in each country, IMPAQ assessed students' literacy skills by developing an adaptation of a reading assessment, (e.g., Annual Status of Education Report and Early Grade Reading Assessment) calibrated to the context in each evaluation.

To ensure each of these assessments are appropriate for the national curriculum and aligned with the project's literacy related interventions in each country, IMPAQ followed three critical steps. More specifically, in each country, before launching data collection and benchmarking the literacy skills, IMPAQ:

1. Used the targeted grade's national textbooks, available local teaching materials, and training manuals from the project interventions to **develop literacy assessments aligned with what children have learned**.
2. Held an adaptation workshop convening a group of local reading, curriculum, and assessment experts from the Ministry of Education **to assess the appropriateness of the developed tools and adjust them based on local experts' knowledge**.
3. Field-tested the calibrated tools with non-participant students in targeted grades **to adjust the instrument further with students' literacy skills in reality.**

This participatory practice for developing tools always helps document local realities and deliver reliable, rigorous, useful results that can improve the project implementation and inform policy and practice more accurately.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS TO REFINE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Engaging stakeholders during project implementation improves project performance and addresses local community needs by allowing for project modifications and adjustments during implementation. We will focus on two practices below.

Involving stakeholders to refine a project's theory of change between project phases in Burkina Faso

In a school-based intervention in Burkina Faso, we brought together stakeholders at a workshop to discuss refining the project's theory of change (ToC) to assess whether programs are delivering the right activities for their desired outcomes. For the ToC refinement process, we assessed if the drivers of change and the assumptions of the ToC corresponded to the program's strategic objectives and proposed interventions. We held an in-country pre-workshop with program staff and multiple stakeholders that were involved in previous program phases, such as school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. The workshop enabled us to dig deeper into the limitations, challenges, and suggested improvements identified as part of the evaluation of previous program phases. The team also conducted a document review to utilize knowledge and evidence from multiple sources to ascertain the validity of the various links and key assumptions in the current ToC. Finally, we triangulated the perceptions of key stakeholders and program staff with the findings from the document review and made recommendations to update the ToC.

Sections for Stakeholder Participation

- Designing Data Collection Tools
- Refining Program Implementation
- Providing Feedback on Initial Findings

Convening standing committees in Uganda to inform project implementation

Standing committees meet quarterly for six stakeholder groups divided up by age, gender, and refugee status, to provide feedback to improve project implementation for the Graduating to Resilience activity funded by the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance in Uganda to help improve livelihoods, food security, and resilience of extremely poor refugee and Ugandan households. The standing committees are comprised of elected representatives from randomly selected villages participating in the activity. As representatives from the community, the standing committee members receive both positive and negative feedback from participants and share that information through the committees. Feedback might include suggestions, opinions, advice, and concerns to help improve program implementation. Project staff might also join standing committees to ask for advice on how to solve particular challenges, to work on solutions together, and to get participant perspectives when revising a program intervention or implementing a new idea. The standing committees are an opportunity for open dialogue between program participants and staff through elected representatives. We share the standing committee reports and summary information with the project's Technical Steering Committee and program officers who determine items that are interesting to note, immediate action items, and issues where we need more discussion to determine next steps. For example, we may gain insights on positive impacts, appropriate messaging for program participants, or whether to engage community leaders.

INCLUDING STAKEHOLDER VOICES IN INTERPRETING DATA

Here we will share an example of facilitating interactive stakeholder workshops immediately after evaluation fieldwork to discuss initial findings. Including stakeholder voices for interpreting data can allow for discussion on main achievements and challenges of the project and validating key findings and understanding stakeholder perspectives.

Presenting preliminary evaluation findings at stakeholder workshops

Since 2015, IMPAQ has conducted 28 evaluations of ILAB-funded projects in 21 countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, Kenya, Argentina, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Peru, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Haiti, Malaysia, Zambia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Uganda, Brazil, India, and Malawi. As part of the performance evaluations, the evaluation team typically conducts stakeholder workshops in-country immediately after completing fieldwork to present preliminary evaluation findings and solicit further inputs from stakeholders regarding project achievements. At the workshop, the evaluation team presents initial findings, conclusions and recommendations with time afterwards to gather stakeholder feedback, be it confirming findings or offering new ways of looking at the gathered data. One approach has been for the evaluation team to provide key questions for group discussion and then to have groups of stakeholders present their perspectives. Then the evaluation team incorporates findings and responses from the stakeholder workshop in further analysis and drafting the evaluation report.

CONCLUSIONS

We have provided examples of participatory approaches at different steps in implementation and evaluation such as developing data collection tools, refining program implementation, and interpreting findings.

1. *Burke, B. (1998). Evaluating for change: Reflections on participatory methodology. In E. Whitmore (Ed.), Understanding and practicing participatory evaluation: New directions in evaluation, No. 80 (pp. 43–56). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.*
2. *Guijit, I. (2014). Participatory Approaches. Methodological Briefs. Impact Evaluation No. 5. UNICEF. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/brief_5_participatoryapproaches_eng.pdf.*