

SHARING STORIES – A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN THE PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the process of incorporating a Most Significant Change (MSC) approach into the M&E framework of a bilaterally funded project. It highlights the process of reconciling different expectations of donors, partners and the managing contractor. The paper argues that a number of key factors have ensured the support for, and institutionalisation of the approach. It also highlights a number of important issues which it argues should be considered when utilising participatory approaches within bilaterally funded projects. This is illustrated by examining the practice of International Development Support Services' management of the AusAID funded, Pacific Children's Program.

INTRODUCTION

Context

The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) of Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa are three distinctly unique and diverse countries. Fiji and Vanuatu are part of the Melanesian group of Pacific Islands, whilst Samoa is part of the Polynesian group. The groupings are based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences. Polynesian islands are largely mono-ethnic, while Melanesian states have a higher level of cultural diversity. Vanuatu has approximately 101 languages and Fiji 10 languages. The islands have also largely been defined by colonial boundaries. The French and British colonised Vanuatu. Britain also colonised Fiji and Samoa. In all Melanesian countries except Fiji the indigenous population is in the clear majority (OCAA 2002).

The countries are currently facing environmental challenges, as well as tensions relating to the increasing interaction of the global economy with local, primarily subsistence economies. Though their populations vary, Fiji, 775,072, Vanuatu, 186, 678 and Samoa, 161,298, they are all relatively small and 'young' countries. The percentage of the population less than 15 years is 35% for Fiji, 42.7% for Vanuatu, and 36% for Samoa (UNDP 1999).

The Program

Whilst recognising the cultural and social differences between the three countries, they all share a commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Pacific Children's Program (PCP), funded through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), was initiated to support the Government and NGOs of the countries to achieve their obligations under the Convention.

The purpose of the Program is to “increase family, community and government responsibility for child protection in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa”. The Program works in four component areas. (1) appropriate country level information on child protection. (2) family and community preventive action programs. (3) government and institutional understanding of and commitment to child protection (4) regional coordination and project management. Key activities include the development of national Child Protection Information Systems, Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities, community-based activities supported by a facilitator guide to work with communities, small grant scheme and advocacy activities.

The Program is implemented through Coordinating Organisations (Partners) in each country who are responsible for both coordinating and implementing activities as appropriate. In Samoa the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA) takes on this role, in Fiji the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) and in Vanuatu, Save the Children Australia, Vanuatu office. The Program also works through other networks including NGOs and other government agencies.

The Program is managed on behalf of AusAID by International Development Support Services (IDSS), a wholly owned subsidiary of Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, a member of Oxfam International. IDSS is guided by values central to the community development approach to development. Its management and implementation of bilaterally funded projects incorporates a strong emphasis of participation, partnership, responsiveness, equality and environmental sustainability. Based on this philosophy towards development, IDSS’ winning tender for the PCP stressed the importance of working towards developing a Pacific model to support child protection. Its implementation strategy was based on the use of local resources, and existing institutions. It stressed an action learning approach at both the community and government level. It also emphasised the importance of building on the strengths of existing cultural norms, such as the cultural importance of children. IDSS also pledged support towards ownership of the Program by local stakeholders.

It is within this context that IDSS initiated the inclusion of the MSC approach within the M&E framework of the Program. IDSS has been managing the three-year Program since April 2001.

Community based primary prevention approach

As noted above, IDSS’ implementation strategy inherently aims to build Program activities around a context defined by stakeholders, communities, and local resources, within a community development framework. Based on this foundation IDSS defined a community based primary prevention approach to support child protection in the Pacific. This approach provides the environment in which the MSC approach has been supported as part of the Program’s M&E activities.

The community based primary prevention approach was informed by a number of different frameworks, in particular the work of Robert Chambers, and is premised on community development principles¹.

The approach was also informed by theory originating within the child protection sector, in particular the *risk and protective factor paradigm*. The paradigm argues that multiple

influences affect child development. It defines a risk factor as a variable that increases the probability of a future negative outcome, and a protective factor as a variable that decreases such a probability (Coie 1993)². The Program's approach is to strengthen and support those protective factors that support child well-being. A study undertaken by the Program at its inception, identified a number of protective factors, such as religious principles and the strength of churches within communities. The network of immediate and extended family structures and socialisation of children by not only parents, but the extended family (and often the village) was also identified as supporting the development of children (Plange 2002).

The community based primary prevention approach also mirrors a strengths based or assets based framework to community development. Asset based community development is defined by three interrelated characteristics, asset based, internally focused and relationship driven (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993)³.

To develop the approach we were also informed by what are described within the child protection sector as "*whole of community programs*" which are comprehensive, multi level prevention efforts that typically maintain an individual or family level component, but which also address the socio –cultural context within which children and families live (Tomison 2000).

Whilst PCP's approach was founded on the principles and theory of these different frameworks there are few precedents of putting these into practice. In fact as Prilleltensky (2001) points out there are very few child protection programs directed towards primary preventive activities. IDSS recognised the lack of practice as an opportunity to develop and implement the approach, taking as appropriate, strengths from different frameworks, to develop one which suits the Pacific context.

Tominson (2000) notes that due to the fact that there are so few primary preventive programs very few rigorous evaluations of preventive programs have been done in Australia or internationally. Those that are implemented are usually only small-scale pilot programs with little funding provided for evaluation. Again IDSS considered the lack of monitoring and evaluation practice in relation to primary preventive programs as an opportunity to consider how best to support the Program through M&E consistent with its approach to Program implementation.

Expectations

As a bilaterally funded project the Pacific Children's Program has three main parties involved in project implementation and management; AusAID, Program partners and IDSS. As in any development activity, these parties have similar expectations and needs, but are also driven by their own contexts and as such have different requirements and expectations of the Program and more particularly its M&E framework. In relation to the preparation of the M&E framework, and the incorporation of the MSC approach these differences have had to be reconciled by IDSS. A cursory analysis can demonstrate the divergent positions.

As the funding agency, AusAID expects the Program to be implemented by IDSS in accordance with the design framework established, and corresponding contractual arrangements. AusAID holds IDSS accountable for achieving Program objectives as set out within the logframe, and accordingly expects to monitor IDSS against the Program's

logframe. This practice is outlined within *AusGUIDE*, which informs AusAID's management practice. It states "the logframe matrix provides a core tool and reference point for developing and implementing the monitoring framework" (AusGUIDE 2002). *AusGUIDE* also specifies "key result areas" as one component of AusAID's performance information framework for reporting to Federal Parliament (AusGUIDE 2002). It is useful to note that within the AusAID guidelines there are no specific details on the requirements of a M&E framework. Also only a brief discussion of contractor requirements is provided to inform reporting against key result areas, to ensure AusAID requirements are met.

As with all activities, AusAID also expects the M&E framework to inform future programming. Specific to the Program, AusAID expected that evaluation activities would inform a further two year extension of the Program, as noted in the Program's design document, it anticipated that Phase Two would be "based on the mid term review and final review of Phase One" (AusAID 2001).

Partners in each country again have their own expectations for the Program. Institutionalisation of the Program's activities and capacity building of staff has been an important expectation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Samoa. In Fiji the Department of Social Welfare also aims to incorporate the community based primary prevention approach within its own strategic plan and approach to department activities.

Program partners expect monitoring and evaluation to inform their own practice for the future, as well as ensure that through the framework they are held accountable to their own bureaucracies of which they are a part. Program Partners have also expressed a desire to inform AusAID of Program practice, as a means of advocating for modified or further support, as appropriate.

IDSS required a M&E framework which ensured that contractual obligations with AusAID were fulfilled. It also required M&E methods that tested the quality of the approach, consistent within the Program's overall approach, as outlined above. IDSS considered that whilst the logframe based approach satisfied the requirements of AusAID it did not satisfy its own requirements for an approach which employed participatory processes, action learning, and encouraged local ownership. Its requirements were beyond those required by AusAID and as such it proposed the MSC approach as a supplement to the conventional M&E approach to meet these needs.

IDSS also required an approach which supported staff, Program partners and implementers to learn from their experience. It was considered equally important that Partners learn from their experience, to inform their own practice for the future, as it was for donors. It was also considered important to encourage local ownership of, and responsibility for the Program. IDSS therefore required an approach to support these needs.

In order to incorporate the MSC approach as part of the M&E framework IDSS had to reconcile these divergent expectations and requirements of the three parties. The next section of the paper will discuss the process of incorporating the MSC approach and reconciling the different expectations and needs of the three parties.

The Story so far

IDSS has experience of preparing M&E frameworks based on the conventional logframe based approach, as required by AusAID. The PCP framework built on these existing M&E frameworks previously prepared at IDSS for other AusAID funded projects, and which have been recognised as best practice by AusAID (AusAID 2000). However, as stated above, IDSS considered that the logframe based approach was not wholly in accord with the approach of the Program. The community based primary prevention approach emphasised a recognition that we didn't know the answers, whilst the logframe based approach lays out the answers! IDSS also considered a number of weaknesses in the logframe based approach. It felt that the logframe based approach could not sufficiently support the Program and IDSS' requirements. Weaknesses identified included the view that conventional monitoring data is analysed in a form and context that strips it of context. It fails to capture the complexity of the actual practice of and reasons for change, and is biased towards meeting the needs of the donor, and developed to ensure the contractual compliance of the contractor. IDSS also considered it valuable to uncover unanticipated outcomes, which the conventional logframe based approach could not, as a means inform policy of AusAID for future activities of the Program, and wider sector involvement.

As a result of these considerations, a discussion paper proposing the use of the MSC approach as a supplement to the conventional logframe based approach was included in the draft M&E framework prepared by IDSS. A process was then undertaken to gain the support and approval for its inclusion with both Program partners as well as the donor.

The proposal was firstly presented to AusAID as part of a presentation of the Program's first year report, and refinement of Program design. The validity of a narrative type approach as a means of assessing impact was questioned by AusAID technical advisers. However as a supplement to the conventional logframe based approach the approach was given in principle support. The approach was also considered to be appropriate within the cultural context and approach of the Program.

The proposal was discussed by Program partners at the second Project Coordinating (PCC) meeting, the highest level of management for AusAID funded bilateral projects. PCC members include AusAID, Partner governments and Program Partners, Program staff, NGO representatives and IDSS. Clear endorsement of the approach was provided by each of the partners. They considered that it adequately met their expectations and requirements of monitoring and evaluation. They also valued its 'bottom up' approach to M&E which put the practice of activities in the field and experiences of beneficiaries at the centre.

With approval by both donor and partners the challenge now is to develop the proposal into practice at the national and regional levels. It was agreed at the second PCC that individual country discussions would be held to determine the process for implementation at the national level based on their own contexts and implementation arrangements, which would then feed into the regional approach. A regional workshop with partners and stakeholder representatives will also be conducted to build capacity in the implementation of monitoring and evaluation, including the MSC approach. AusAID has fully supported the capacity building initiatives.

Collecting stories

The MSC approach will be fully integrated into the management structure of the Program, and implementation will involve a wide stakeholder base at the national level. The proposed approach builds on previous practice of MSC approaches as outlined by Rick Davies (1998) and others (Dart 2000).

Domains of change have been proposed which relate to the logframe Purpose of the Program as a means to determine Program impact and effectiveness. They are broad enough to ensure that unanticipated outcomes are identified through the process. Further discussion will be required with Program partners to finalise the domains. The proposed domains of change are:

- Changes in the awareness of child protection issues at the family, community or government level
- Changes in responsibility for child protection at family community or government level
- Changes in participation in child protection related activities at the family community or government level

A further “any other type of change” is included to allow staff to identify any type of change that they judge as important.

The proposed collection and analysis of stories will start with Program Managers collecting stories within each of the domains of change. The gathered stories will be discussed with Coordinating Organisations, and a short list of significant stories chosen for presentation to the Child Protection Task Force which is a cross sectoral inter-agency committee, with members from both government and NGOs. The Task Forces act as both implementers and reviewers of Program activities in each country. The Task Forces will undertake a review of stories presented and refine a selection to what they consider to be most significant. One set of significant changes from each country will be presented to the Project Coordinating Committee (PCC) meeting held every six months. Stories will be analysed at this level supporting a regional understanding of the Program’s impact.

The analysis of stories will be utilised as a strategic management tool for implementing and evaluating Program activities at both national and regional levels and will enable learning to inform decision making by Program management. Most significant changes could also inform future IEC materials for the Program, or provide a rationale to prioritise funds in a particular area of the Program. The discovery of unanticipated changes could also inform AusAID to establish support to other related areas.

IDSS considers it important that analysis and decision making rationales are conveyed to all levels within the framework, especially to Program beneficiaries. There are a number of existing avenues for such feed back to occur, ensuring that information is not simply extracted at the community level. Primarily, feed back will be provided through Program Managers and Program partners. The Program’s newsletter could also provide a brief update of the process. Another opportunity is to feed back to community members the most significant changes selected, through song, theatre, videos or community plays.

It is also proposed that all collected stories be collated and presented in a separate document and distributed to all key stakeholders at the end of each six month period. This will provide an opportunity for there to be a separate analysis of all stories collected by the Program. It will also provide an opportunity to examine the process of analysis to define the most significant changes and why these decisions were made, which in itself will provide an important understanding of the Program's implementation.

IDSS recognises that there are a number of key issues to consider in relation to the MSC approach. We argue that in recognising these, and establishing clear expectations of what it can deliver as a supplement to the conventional M&E framework, the approach will add value to M&E and the Program for all parties.

It needs to be recognised that subjective analysis is inherent to the MSC approach. As Roche notes research is not truly objective but rather involves valuing subjective opinions and perceptions (1999). The MSC approach accepts and values such subjectivity, building its strength on the wisdom and judgement of ordinary people.

It is also important to consider the potential for bias that may exist within the approach. Recognising where it lies and why will also be critical to its implementation and understanding of how the story based analysis of the Program is working. Bias may occur in gathering stories from a certain beneficiary group and there may be bias within the analysis phase. This could result in skewed findings and analysis of the Program's impact. It will be important to recognise the potential biases prior to implementation and put in place as appropriate, measures to counter any potential bias.

Supportive environment

IDSS' proposal for the incorporation of the MSC approach as a supplement to the M&E framework has been fully supported by AusAID and Program partners. In fact the process of introducing the approach which many consider to be *an invalid science* has been relatively pain free. This section will highlight a number of factors which IDSS considers have ensured support for the approach.

Trust

The approach taken by IDSS to implement the Program aims to build relationships and trust at all levels. It supports partnerships, recognising the strengths that each party brings to Program implementation and encourages ownership of Program activities through active participation in all areas of planning and implementation. Building trust was a particularly important part of IDSS' approach during the inception phase.

As an outcome of this, a degree of trust has been established at all levels within the Program. Trust between the donor and IDSS, trust between IDSS and its Program Partners and staff. Based on this trust, the intent of introducing the MSC was seen as a valuable contribution to monitoring and evaluation of the Program. It was not considered as a performance management tool, or another burdensome donor requirement by partners. The donor also recognised the added value that the inclusion of the MSC approach could bring to the Program. Established trust has also created an alliance framework to Program implementation, where requirements and expectations of the three parties have merged closer.

IDSS considers that the trust established between all parties provided a supportive environment in which the proposed MSC approach was accepted by both Program partners and the donor.

Compliance

In preparing the M&E framework, IDSS followed best practice, meeting donor requirements. With compliance met, the MSC approach was proposed as an additional element beyond the requirements of AusAID. It could be argued that based on the achievement of compliance, AusAID was in a position to favorably view the proposal to include the MSC approach as a supplement to the M&E framework. IDSS expects that such support would not have been forthcoming if the MSC had been proposed as a replacement to the conventional logframe based approach. Based on a year of implementation AusAID was also in a position to measure IDSS' capacity and intent to deliver the Program in accordance with its approach.

Participatory approach

IDSS' community development based approach, coupled with the community based primary prevention approach of the Program, lend themselves to participatory M&E methods. The MSC approach supports the reflective nature of the Program. Rather than assuming that we know what the outcomes of the Program will be, the MSC approach allows the beneficiaries to tell us. It will then be an opportunity for Program staff, Program Partners, IDSS and AusAID to reflect on the information provided.

Traditional Stories

The use of oral stories in the Pacific is an important tradition, which also complements the MSC approach. Before writing defined history, culture and tradition were shared through spoken word. Through storytelling social and cultural customs, history, norms and behaviour were shared and transferred within the community. There is also a rich history of stories and speeches being used as part of ceremonial occasions. Stories were designed to pass on knowledge and ownership of ceremonial artifacts, beliefs and history. It is within this context that the MSC approach has been proposed as an element of the M&E framework. It is argued that the experience and value placed on storytelling has supported the incorporation of the MSC approach.

Issues in developing the M&E framework inclusive of the MSC approach

In closing the paper it is useful to examine a number of important issues, or constraints which IDSS has identified in developing the M&E framework, and more particularly incorporating the MSC approach within the framework, as a means to provide lessons learned for future policy and activities.

Participative Approach

An important issue which has both ensured and affected the process to date has been the emphasis of a participative approach to Program implementation. As recognised within the community development field, active participation takes time. Within the context of a community development approach, the pace of project implementation is not, and should not be dictated by donors, management or an unrealistic pre defined timetable for implementation. Taking this approach to the Pacific Children's Program, we are working with the pace of our partners and also through existing systems and institutional structures, which involve cross sectoral collaboration and discussion, dialogue and negotiation in the planning, development and implementation of key

activities. As a result there have been some delays in implementation, inclusive of finalising the implementation of the M&E framework, and the MSC approach. Conventional aspects of the M&E framework are in place and operational, including the achievement of key milestones and associated reports to AusAID, regular reporting and management meetings. Whilst there have been delays in finalising the MSC approach, IDSS considers that in order for the approach to be successful, the planning process must be participatory and inclusive and owned by the Program partners and stakeholders, to support sustainability of activities at end of Program.

As noted above the participative approach of the Program lends itself to the MSC approach, and has in fact ensured the incorporation of the approach with relative ease at all levels of the Program, including the donor, Program staff and partners. The impact of a participatory approach must therefore be considered, particularly in light of bilaterally funded projects which have relatively short time frames to achieve project objectives.

Partner Responsibilities

It should also be recognised that involvement in the Pacific Children's Program is not the primary activity of our Program partners. The Program is just one aspect of a wide portfolio of responsibilities. Often key government staff, NGO representatives and stakeholders in country, are taking on multiple roles in various forums and functions. They are heavily committed and active across the wider community. As such there are different priorities within Program partners and key stakeholders. In developing the M&E framework, and finalising the MSC approach it has been important to be cognisant of workloads and priorities of our partners and key stakeholders and work within their time frame that is realistic, given other commitments and responsibilities.

Regional Program

The regional aspect of the Program is also complicating in that the Program is in a sense three separate projects, but combined at the regional level. At the beginning of the inception phase, Program partners stated that the Program could not work unless activities were implemented at the local level, based on local context and requirements. Activities at this level could then build on a regional dialogue and provide lessons learned. It was strongly argued that activities generated at the regional level, and then filtered down to the national level, would either be so generic as to have no impact, or be inappropriate to also have no impact at the national level. Hence the Program is implemented so that outputs are achieved through different strategies, approaches and often different activities at the national level. The development of the M&E framework needs to be cognisant of this environment. We need to ensure flexibility of approach and management at the national level to suit local conditions, but at the same time, ensure an agreed and consistent outcome for further analysis and discussion at the regional level, in order to then provide a Program wide analysis for learning and future activities. Again these issues must be considered when both designing new projects and implementing regional activities.

Lead times

It could be argued that the preparation of the M&E framework did not start early enough. A long lead time is required to develop such a framework especially utilising a participatory approach, across three different countries, and working with three separate Partner agencies. However IDSS argues that to have prepared the M&E framework, inclusive of the MSC approach, earlier would have been pre-emptive. It was only through working through the inception phase that the context, issues and environment

were understood, to then know what was appropriate and required. It would also have been preemptive to have established the framework prior to establishing relationships, trust and partnerships. Implementers are therefore faced with an interesting dilemma. Setting up an M&E framework within a participative approach requires a long lead time, and therefore should be initiated in the early stages of a project. But at the same time, it is necessary to allow for relationships to be built, trust gained and partnerships developed in order for the process to be effective and outcomes achieved. Implementers must balance these two competing forces, which within a bilaterally funded project are weighed towards achieving outcomes within relatively short time periods.

Verification

The rigor required by the donor to validate the findings of any M&E practice is also another important issue that needs to be considered when developing M&E frameworks. For the Pacific Children's Program, IDSS proposed the MSC approach as a supplement to the conventional approach, not as a replacement. This has enabled AusAID to support the approach. It will also be important to consider issues of verification in finalising the approach and implementing in each country. As stated above, bias, which is inherent within the approach, will need to be considered. It will be important to recognise the potential for bias, deconstruct and understand how it may form and why. This will enable an informed analysis of the approach and also the results generated through its implementation. It will also be important to ensure adequate skills and training for implementation. Training in analysis, negotiation skills and participatory processes necessary for the MSC approach will be included as part of capacity building activities. Monitoring and support will also be included on an ongoing basis.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore the practice of incorporating the MSC approach within the context of a bilaterally funded program. Within this context the different expectations and requirements of the main parties to Program; Donor, country Partners and managing contractor had to be considered and reconciled. IDSS argues that a supportive environment ensured the successful incorporation and institutionalisation of the approach. The paper also raises a number of important implications for future practice which should be considered as part of the preparation of any M&E framework of a bilaterally funded project.

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¹ In particular the notion of 'handing over the stick' is an important foundation for the approach. We also respect the capacity of people to control their own development. The reflective nature of the approach also enables trust in the knowledge, wisdom and judgement of people and an action learning orientation. The approach is also founded on the premise of starting where the people are at now, rather than applying an externally pre defined model to the context.

² Durlak (1998) identifies eight successful protective factors, within a number of levels of analysis; community, school, peer, family individual and other. The protective factors are described as social norms, effective social policies, high quality schools, positive peer modelling, good parent/child relationship personal and social skills, self efficacy and social support.

³ Asset based community development is defined by three interrelated characteristics. Firstly it is asset based, it starts with what is present in the community, the capacities of locals, and the associational base. Secondly, it is internally focused. The development strategy concentrates on

the agenda of building and problem solving capacities of locals and local institutions. Thirdly, it is relationship driven. It aims to build and rebuild relationships around communities, associations and local institutions. (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).