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BUILDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE IN ORGANISATIONS FOR MAXIMISING IMPACT

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Well-designed monitoring and evaluation systems that are systemically built in programmes aimed to create sustainable social change, and their sustainable adoption, can bring in a greater degree of programme efficiency and effectiveness. This paper highlights our learnings and experience in building this evaluation culture in organisations, along with a simple toolkit that practitioners can follow.

Target audience: NGOs, Foundations, Impact evaluation consultants and practitioners

Our interest in evaluation culture began when we collectively, as a team of experienced evaluators and social change consultants, started questioning how findings of evaluations and social audits contribute to programme efficiency and the effectiveness of social change initiatives. Some of our engagements with grassroots programmes did help us see that well designed monitoring and evaluation systems could result in sustaining change on the ground, and we began exploring to see if these could be made systemic.

A panel discussion that we curated with the Evaluation Community of India, with the active participation of representatives from the public, private and non-profit sectors, at Evalfest 2020, brought up several suggestions of how to build a systemic evaluation culture, but also raised several questions around how such a culture could be initiated at scale.

Since 2020 we have deepened this work, and will continue to do so through the partnership we have entered into with the Oak Foundation and its India Program grantees.

What is a culture of evaluation, and how is it different from M&E?

Evaluation culture is a subset of organizational culture (Vengrin, Westfall-Rudd, Archibald, Rudd, & Singh, 2018), which in turn is part of organizational learning (Preskill & Torres, 2000). An evaluation culture is a set of organizational behaviours that deliberately seek out information on project / organisation performance, such that the information could be leveraged for improved management

and delivery of outcomes, thereby improving its overall performance (Mayne, 2021).

An evaluation culture is not the same as a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system. Even if an organization has in place planning, monitoring and reporting systems, and conducts evaluations, this system can become burdensome without an evaluation culture (Mayne, 2021). At the same time, evaluation culture and M&E systems are interrelated. Organizations without M&E systems have an insufficient foundation to even begin to create an evaluation culture. Vengrin et al. also draw our attention to the fact that perception of evaluation is a prominent factor identified in the literature as impacting evaluation culture. Individuals with no experience in evaluation (as well as those with negative experiences), are unlikely



Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) framework
Source: USAID

to be motivated to do in-depth evaluations or participate in evaluation capacity building exercises, thereby impacting the creation or sustenance of a culture of evaluation.

USAID’s Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) Framework provides a useful depiction of how evaluation culture and M&E systems are interrelated. The left half of the framework focuses on integrating learning (along with collaborating and adapting) into the program cycle, from strategic planning to evaluation. The right side of the framework focuses on the enabling environment for collaborating, learning and adapting, and it is here that culture is located.

Why is it important?

Values and attitudes drive behaviors that make up the culture of an organization. For example, if an organization values data as providing a learning opportunity, it is likely to have a culture that embraces evaluation. If an organization does not value data, it will likely have a culture of compliance with regards to evaluation (Evaluation Into Action, 2017).

A culture of compliance leads to beliefs that evaluation is time consuming and calls for additional investment. However, a culture of evaluation, or better still, culture of learning is based on the premise that data is needed for continuous program improvement and accountability to stakeholders. These beliefs demonstrate an attitude of wanting data to learn, share, and grow.

The motivation to do program evaluation impacts how nonprofits successfully collect and use data. Whether the organisation has a culture of learning or a culture of compliance determines its ability to leverage evaluations for improving performance and programme effectiveness.

How can it be built?

Building evaluation culture entails both doing so directly, and by integrating learning into M&E systems. To do the latter, a good starting point is Motasim Billah's [blog post](#) on integrating CLA into performance management. The author's suggestions closely resemble those that we would make based on our experience working with projects funded by multiple donors, and the fact that the examples cited in the blog post are all from USAID is only by virtue of the fact that Billah works there.

It is important to note that the products of an M&E system in which learning is integrated may not look very different from one in which it is not. The logic model and assumptions (which are sometimes referred to together as the Theory of Change), indicators and MEL plan are all products which many evaluation professionals would be familiar with. However, in an MEL system in which learning is integrated, the difference lies in the participatory process that is used to develop the products. This distinction is evident from Billah's blog post but, in our experience, bears highlighting, as Forss et al. (2002) do. Forss et al. argue that it is during the process of the evaluation that the main learning occurs, rather than as a result of the final report per se. If managers and staff are involved in the process of measuring and analyzing results information, they are likely to see the value of such efforts and make use of the information gathered (Forss, Rebien, & Carlsson, 2002).

At niiti, we have observed very closely the improvement in ownership that a participatory process of developing an M&E system results in. A very well known international NGO working to build resilience of communities and children was able to overhaul its entire documentation process thanks to field staff understanding better how data from the field could contribute to larger programme outcomes. Participatory methods of designing M&E systems could be considered time consuming and effort-intensive but, as we saw in the case of a community hospital chain delivering healthcare to the most marginalized, the time spent in planning and designing a more robust M&E design helped them streamline and prioritize their activities better, which saw better traction on the ground in terms of outcomes and community engagement.

Research by Cummings (1996) and Salewicz (1997) emphasize the positive relationship between stakeholder involvement in evaluations and their use. Greater participation is advocated on grounds of achieving contextual relevance for the study and a better understanding of the implementing agency's compulsions and constraints. A big role in contributing to a culture of evaluations is played by the recipient's participation in and control of the evaluation process.

A suggestion that Billah makes, which goes beyond integrating learning into the Theory of Change, indicators and MEL plan, is to establish strong feedback loops. The examples of loops Billah cites range

in complexity from low (feedback boxes in the field) to high (a CLA process consisting of a sequence of nine activities, to support the USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program). While in our experience most organizations will find a sequence of nine activities daunting to implement, and should instead be asked to consider a simpler alternative, nevertheless, the lessons learnt from this process in Uganda are relevant to all organizations that seek to build a culture of evaluation. These lessons are shared below.

- **RESOURCE REQUIREMENT** In the real world, learning and adaptation do not happen unless stakeholders collaborate to prioritize them. In a resource-constrained environment, it can be difficult to carve out the staff time necessary to implement CLA activities. And yet this is exactly what must be done.
- **FREQUENCY:** It is insufficient to participate in a single event, workshop, or learning activity. For CLA to be successfully incorporated as a standard way of doing business, continuous attention must be paid to real-time feedback, and that feedback must lead to real-time adaptation. The monthly performance review process was successful in part because it was ongoing (Bassan, 2015).

In “Learning in INGOs: the case of Kenya”, the author Eliud Wakwabubi also emphasizes the importance of ongoing learning. Wakwabubi argues that while most of the 20 organizations researched for the article provide annual or biannual learning opportunities, they run the risk of losing the timely response that may be possible with a more dynamic approach to development planning and reflection. However, only a few organizations had regular monthly learning opportunities (Wakwabubi, 2011).

To build evaluation culture directly, identifying “champions” as catalysts for organizational accountability, learning and innovation is recommended by scholars of evaluation practice. Yet, the extent to which champions are able to create change without the commitment of senior management to organizational learning is debated. In *Participatory Learning and Action 63*, the article by Guijarro positions itself at one end of the spectrum and argues that wherever we are in the organizational chain of management, we have a responsibility for trying to change things from where we stand. At the other end of the spectrum, Raeside argues that it is an organization’s leaders that are the most responsible and best positioned for ensuring individual and collective learning (Are INGOs brave enough to become learning organisations?, 2011).

Somewhat in the middle, Angidou describes her role as a learning champion at a leading animal welfare charity, where she was able to bring about changes to make the appraisal process more learning-oriented and less administrative. Interestingly, Angidou’s role was in Human Resources, and demonstrates that learning champions can be from any department within an organization. Angidou identifies three areas in which the HR function can enhance individual learning and link it to organizational learning, but acknowledges that these opportunities can only become a reality if they are recognized by the organization (Bridging the gap between individual and organisational learning: the role of HR, 2011).

In our experience, the commitment of senior management within an organization, and/or its donors, is critical to organizational learning. At the same time, champions should realize that regardless of how committed their senior management and/or donors are to organizational learning initially, this can increase (or decrease) over time. How information is presented to senior management and/or donors can influence their commitment to organizational learning, and Angidou and Guijarro’s insights in this regard are important for champions to consider.

Angidou states that in discussing the appraisal findings with the senior management team, their leadership style was taken into account when presenting the information (but without altering or

editing it). Guijarro states that they were strategic in how they presented their analysis, and started by sharing their ideas with potential allies, using both formal and informal spaces. They held one-to-one meetings to ensure that influential people were on board, and critically, one learning champion was able to gain approval from her boss (Guijarro, 2011).

The strategies that Guijarro describes using to present their analysis resonate closely with our own experiences conducting and presenting research on the Young Men and Boys portfolio of Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RNP). RNP demonstrated a high level of commitment to organizational learning throughout the project, which began with assuring grantees that the research was not being conducted to enforce grantee accountability, but so that the grantees, donor and other stakeholders could learn from the results. This emphasis was reinforced in an [article](#) RNP published in 2021, titled, “Curiosity over certainty: a learning approach to grantmaking”.

In addition to RNP’s high levels of commitment to organizational learning, the process that was followed to present the research also contributed to it being received with openness and curiosity by both the donor and the grantees. This process has consisted so far of presenting the results first to Rohini Nilekani, and then to the four grantees on whose programs the research was conducted. Perhaps most crucial was the participation of an Associate Director at RNP (who was closely involved with the portfolio and the research process) in both the meetings. By sharing how the research had challenged her own assumptions, and how the results would inform the portfolio in the future, she encouraged other participants to think along the same lines and react in similar ways.

Planned communities of practice can be another effective means to create and spread knowledge and a learning culture (Funder-Initiated Communities of Practice as a Means for Sharing and Creating Knowledge in Order to Strengthen the Adaptive Capacity of Systems, 2021). A good example would be the McKnight program's communities of practice that have provided a space for various actors in Africa and the Andes region to develop adaptive capacity related to food system research and action through social learning. Wenger (1998) argues that even if a mandate for “Communities of Practice” comes from the outside, it is the community that ultimately decides if it will engage in the practice and learning.

Although the above discussion has focused on the role of evaluation culture in creating an enabling environment for integrating learning into M&E systems, it would be amiss not to mention the roles of processes and resources. While in the CLA Framework both processes and resources are separate from culture, this document has also demonstrated how they are related. It was by changing the appraisal process in her organization that Angidou was able to increase the appetite among staff for learning spaces. Similarly, Bassan observed that staff time is a resource that must be made available

Evaluation Culture Toolkit at a glance

Key ingredients that are critical to building a culture of evaluation

- Participatory process with stakeholders for designing evaluation systems
- Active collaboration among relevant stakeholders to prioritize resource requirement for evaluation
- An ongoing review process with adequate mechanisms built for feedback and real-time adaptation
- An ongoing set of learning opportunities and space for reflection
- Creation of “learning champions” drawn from across the organisation / ecosystem
- Commitment of senior leadership to actively engage in the creation and adoption of values and behaviours that contribute to building an evaluation culture
- An openness to challenge the status quo based on lessons learnt and sharing them with others
- Availability of systems, resources and processes that enable and sustain change

if learning is to be integrated into MEL. And finally, champions must have time carved out for learning if they are to be able to catalyze change within their organizations.

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