

Rising to the Challenge: Monitoring and evaluating capacity development

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Evaluating capacity building is notoriously difficult for several reasons. One challenge is to move beyond end-of-learning-event evaluations (conducted in the training room) and find evidence of (a) what learning, if any, has been applied into the workplace and (b) whether or not this has translated into positive changes in organisational performance. A second challenge is to achieve this within a time-bound period, while minimising the requirements on financial resources and staff time. This case study describes our experience developing a comprehensive design, monitoring and evaluation (DM&E) framework and how it is being used to uncover data related to both expected and unexpected results.

Who we are

VBNK is a Cambodian learning organisation with a significant track record of providing training, facilitation, coaching and OD (organisational development) consulting services.ⁱ Clients include Cambodian and international NGOs and Government Ministries working in the Cambodian social development sector. As a learning organisation, we work with others to elaborate and disseminate innovative learning approaches relevant to development and management practice in Cambodia. We believe that if we are to be effective in this endeavour, then we need to challenge the status quo and break away from patterns of the past. At times this involves challenging cultural norms and entrenched hierarchies that limit the capacity of individuals and organisations to step back and critically analyse their work and to adapt and change.

Our theory of change thus includes three pathways:

- Providing quality learning services that improve the capacities of individuals to contribute to workplace and development goals;
- Providing holistic approaches to sustained organisational capacity development;
- Working collaboratively to influence how others think about and do capacity development.

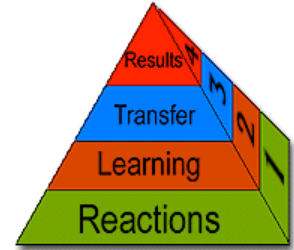
Raising the bar

Prompted by a critiqueⁱⁱ of how capacity building providers working with civil society organizations are evaluating their capacity building efforts, VBANK set out in 2010 to critically

¹ Case study presented at the Intrac 7th Evaluation Conference, *Monitoring and evaluation: new developments and challenges*, the Netherlands (14th-16th June 2011), available at [intrac ME conference papers 2011 VBANK](#)

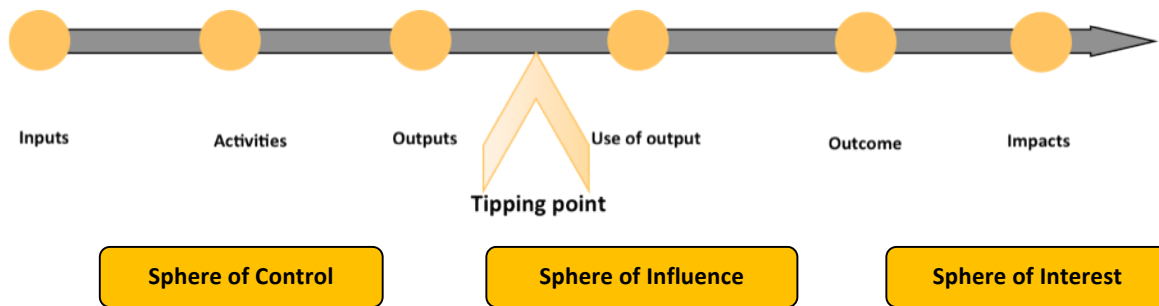
examine how we were evaluating our services and to link to our theory of change to a comprehensive DM&E framework for capacity development.ⁱⁱⁱ We were routinely conducting end-of-programme evaluations for all client services (either post training or on completion of OD interventions), typically monitoring activities and outputs and levels of satisfaction. In 2010, (at the start of a new strategic plan cycle) we wanted to “raise the bar” and to better measure what direct influence we were making on capacity development.

We began by comparing our evaluation approach with Kirkpatrick’s^{iv} four-levels for evaluating training programmes. We confirmed that we consistently generated data of levels one and two. But there was less evidence of the application of learning (level three) and little or no evidence of impacts (level four), the latter only surfacing through self-reported testimony of an organisation’s staff and not directly from beneficiaries.



The review also highlighted the need to question how we were defining learning objectives. Referring to Bloom’s taxonomy^v distinguishing cognitive levels of thinking, it became apparent that too often learning objectives expressed conditions like “deepen understanding” and “increase knowledge.” The lack of focus on behaviour change posed obvious difficulties for M&E. Further, inconsistency in how objectives were stated meant we were unable to make reliable comparisons across different services or from year-to-year.

For this reason, we introduced a results chain. The visual description from inputs to impact and the focus on “use of outputs” helped staff see the relationship between what they do in their job performance and its influence on the desired results. Focusing on how individuals, teams and organisations apply their learning has been of particular value in closing the gap of what is often a big jump between output and outcome, a grey area generally based on assumptions and attribution.



The results-chain articulates VBNK’s sphere of *control* (inputs, activities, outputs), sphere of *influence* (use of output, outcome) and our sphere of *interest* (impacts). This has opened up a discussion with staff about our role and response-abilities in capacity development and about the relationship between actions taken and subsequent effects.

The final step was to update the existing performance standards for DM&E and reporting. These minimum standards define a set of “must do” processes for all training and OD services. We then drew on our system of development supervision^{vi} and routinely-scheduled “Learning

Weeks”^{vii} and Programme Unit meetings to help staff clarify and internalise the framework and to discuss the implications for the annual impact assessment.

Organising the annual impact assessment (IA) study

Prior to 2006 VBNK scheduled annual “follow-up” with clients and former participants to determine satisfaction levels. The findings were limited but did provide a means to surveying future needs. Beginning in 2006, we introduced the annual IA, with the purpose of providing more reliable and comprehensive M&E data. Over the years, the IA study provided evidence of professional growth and increased self-confidence, increased work abilities and improved work performance that could be attributed back to our services. We were also able to reflect on our own performance and how well we had been achieving the annual plan priorities. But there was a growing sense that we were replicating the same findings from year-to-year. IA 2010 thus provided an opportunity to test out the comprehensive M&E framework and to challenge the assumptions, which shape how we approach capacity development, namely:

- Capacity development requires a long-term commitment to a process of change and needs to occur at multiple levels in an organisation for learning to take root;
- Creative approaches (e.g. art, theatre, role playing) encourage individuals to un-learn and let go of old habits;
- Equitable and trustful relations and processes that encourage peer learning and reflective practice are a key condition of learning;
- Competence derives from skills and confidence to apply these skills. Other qualitative factors – like trust, pride and commitment – are also fundamental in the condition of learning and in the process of achieving capacity.

Kirkpatrick notes that each successive level in his model represents a more precise measure of the effectiveness of a training program, but also requires a more rigorous and time-consuming analysis. That is, if we wanted to explore “use of outputs” and “outcomes” in 2010, we would need to focus our study. Four focus areas were selected:

- Working in multi-stakeholder partnerships (because we are increasingly working in complex partnerships and wanted to critique our contribution).
- Factors influencing the application of learning in an organisation (including how managers enable learning).
- A “learning forum” approach that encourages creativity and peer learning.
- Our own performance towards improving quality and effectiveness, as this would allow us to ask if we were “walking the talk.”

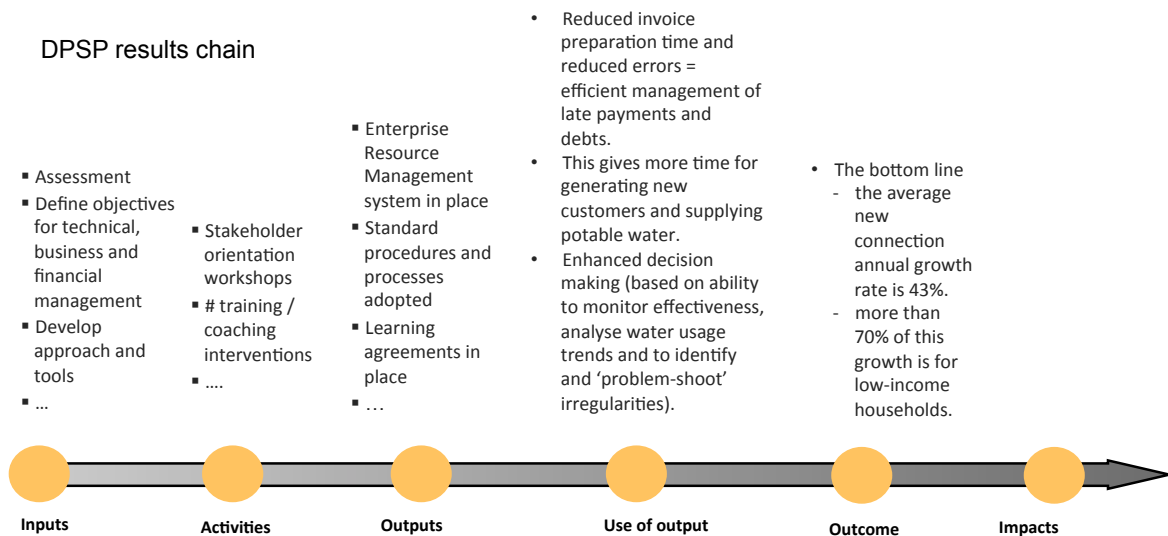
Early on we took a decision to engage staff in the evaluation of our services. This is because we wanted to build our own capacity and to bring our learning and practice together. This has meant preparing staff through training sessions on research methodologies (e.g. defining research questions, facilitating focus groups and interviews, locating change stories, gender analysis, sifting through and organising data, making connections, drawing conclusions and drafting the research report).

A team of two or three VBNK staff was assigned to analyse results chains for each focus area, describing first the support provided and then *tracking the ripples*^{viii} forward. The ‘ripples’ relate to a series of questions, which in turn correspond with Kirkpatrick’s four-levels. The intention was to uncover: [how] has new learning been applied? How is this evidenced through behaviour change at work or in an individual’s personal life? What stories illustrate changes in organisational effectiveness (changes in management practice)? Are there examples showing changes in the way NGO/Government agencies are working with communities (changes in development practice)?

Findings

A long-term commitment to a process of change

We are currently working in a multi-stakeholder water and sanitation programme. The aim is to partner with private domestic water supply providers (DPSP) so as to increase the supply of potable water to rural and remote communities. VBNK’s role has been to provide inputs on business and financial management. Another NGO is providing inputs related to water sanitation. The results chain developed during the IA study shows how we have been able to link outputs, use of outputs and results.



The analysis also highlighted the importance of building credibility and confidence early on if private sector partners are to commit to a long-term change process. The starting point was to establish equitable relationships that allow all stakeholders to clarify and negotiate expectations; openly express concerns; and together explore alternatives. Equally important was to focus on incremental “wins” that have a direct impact on the bottom line. Early interventions with the DPSPs looked, for example, at how they could reduce invoice preparation time and invoice errors or how they could reduce production costs without compromising water quality. Later we turned attention to longer-term changes that would require greater

commitment, but would allow for an expansion of their businesses. That is, focusing on “early wins” enhanced the DPSP’s confidence to invest in the change process.

Factors that influence learning and change

In 2010 a client approached VBNK to customise a training course on project cycle management. She noted that there were “*relationship difficulties and little collaboration across work units.*” We agreed on two training courses: project management skills also combining interpersonal skills and participatory impact assessment. During the follow up, participants commented not only on the technical skills they had gained but also on the learning processes used. The results chain, based on data generated by staff and managers alike, provided examples of how the training had contributed to a deepened grasp of project planning as well as to increased collaboration and relationship building. Unexpectedly, the HR manager also participated in the training and had subsequently applied the planning tools with his own teams. The findings support the assumption that training programmes that set out to address ‘hard’ skills as well as ‘soft’ people skills are more likely to lead to learning than those that only deal with the technical side of organisational life.

The example also exemplifies that managers are key in ensuring learning is taken forward. The manager (above) recognised the importance of encouraging relationship and dialogue and was willing to take on the challenge. Results chain data from VBNK’s leadership programme confirm that focusing on relationships and harmonisation within small teams does influence change in individuals, e.g. from dominating others to accepting other’s ideas, to valuing other’s contributions and drawing more on consultative approaches and consensus building in decision making. This is a significant finding in a context where hierarchy and status are predominant.

Breaking the patterns of the past

Appreciative Inquiry and Most Significant Change have proven particularly useful in Cambodia, to uncover stories of change. Story telling resonates strongly with Cambodians because it breaks through the “blame” culture that prevails in many settings. We have discovered that the telling of change stories encourages individuals to be reflective and that lively interactions emerge when an individual is able to tell her/his story and receive acknowledgement from peers.

We have also been able to confirm that creative approaches do encourage individuals to reflect on and break from patterns that discourage participation and learning. An elderly woman who had participated in a VBNK-led learning forum had this to say:

...I felt that my knowledge was sufficient compared to the others... when I was in the small group, I could answer some questions. And I heard others listening to me and this allowed me to feel valued. The turning point was the new methods of silent drawing in a group to create a picture and the exercise on river of life. The river of life was an entry point for expressing my own history... I liked this because I didn't feel on the spot.

What have we learnt?

We set out to enhance our impact measurement but quickly realised this would also mean integrating DM&E and minimum performance and reporting standards. Making the effort to carefully document post-course evaluations and reports lays the groundwork for tracking how the outputs have been used and possible outcomes that follow. This has become the tipping point to improving IA. The results chain creates a schematic to distinguish what we can *control* and *influence* from our sphere of *interest* (positive social change). This provides an entry point for building agreement about shared purpose with client organisations.

We work on the assumption that “less is more” and annually select only four focus areas. The challenge is to connect the learning from one year to the next and also to push to explore new areas. At a minimum, we commit to conducting post-evaluations of all training and facilitation services and to asking participants to specify intended learning objectives for subsequent follow up.

In committing staff and financial resources to IA, we need to balance learning and earning. A pay-off has been that we are building our capacity to provide evaluation services to clients. Yet another pay off has been that we are opening up discussions about the beliefs and values that not only influence our own learning but also affect how our clients learn.

ⁱ For further details, go to: www.vbnk.org

ⁱⁱ Nigel Simister with Rachel Smith, 2010, Monitoring and Evaluating Capacity Building: Is it really that difficult? INTRAC Praxis Paper # 23 (January 2010)

ⁱⁱⁱ ECDPM (2008) ‘Capacity Change and Performance Study Report’, Policy Management Brief 21, available at [http://www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/5321BD4DC0C1DB09C1257535004D1982/\\$FILE/PMB21-e_capacitystudy.pdf](http://www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/5321BD4DC0C1DB09C1257535004D1982/$FILE/PMB21-e_capacitystudy.pdf)

^{iv} Kirkpatrick, D.L. (1994). Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler. See also: [Donald Kirkpatrick \(1994\)](#)

^v Specifically, Bloom’s Taxonomy for Cognitive Levels of Thinking (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) as a guide for developing focused and measurable objectives: <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>

^{vi} Development Supervision (DS) is an approach to support both individual learning and accountability through routine supervision and monitoring. DS is the primary approach for performance management and development. In this process, staff and supervisors meet routinely during the year to discuss progress towards personal learning objectives. The regular talks help staff deepen understanding about setting priorities and realising their own objectives.

^{vii} Learning Weeks are internal learning events at VBNK. In 2010, we scheduled three learning weeks.

^{viii} John Hailey and Rick James (2003) ‘NGO Capacity Building: The Challenge of Impact Assessment’, paper presented to the *New Directions in Impact Assessment for Development Methods & Practice Conference*, INTRAC, Oxford. November 2003