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DESIGN, MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING



Considerations from CBM Australia's meta-evaluation

CBM Australia conducted a meta-evaluation of 26 recent evaluations of projects we have supported, including 19 projects that received support from the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). This paper highlights what we learnt about design, monitoring, evaluation and learning.*

The meta-evaluation highlighted some promising practice in design to maximise sustainability and in evaluation practice that can both demonstrate and facilitate change. Some areas to strengthen were also identified, particularly in articulation of indicators and in facilitating cross learning. Key considerations are as follows:

Design

Don't try to "do it all" at the start

There has been a notable shift towards partner organisations, particularly those working in community based inclusive development, using their strengths or specialisms as entry points. Instead of trying to "do it all" and address disability inclusion in all (for example) health, education and livelihood sectors all at once, they have been linking with and influencing others to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. They can then build on this in a more sustainable way over time. This approach is promoting sustainability and preventing situations where partners may be compromising the quality of work by spreading too thin.

In addition to not trying to target all sectors at once, partners in community based projects that are achieving significant change are commonly showing

transformation of their work over several phases to build sustainability. Phases can often be for two or three years, and a common pattern involves a progression from initially working to form self help groups, raising awareness of rights of people with disability and working for access to rehabilitation services. The next steps often involve increasing the focus on community change and systems change and, as attitudes and awareness change, working more within government or local systems and structures. Partners then may go on to communicate about their practice to motivate others and to support other organisations in their work.

CBM should continue to caution against trying to “do it all” at once and encourage partners in a more phased approach.

Monitoring and evaluation

Hard numbers can be powerful in demonstrating outcomes!

A number of evaluations had limited quantitative outcome level data to balance the qualitative findings. Qualitative data is extremely important and is needed to complement the numerical output data collected in CBM funded projects. However, there is a strong case for more meaningful quantitative data to be presented in evaluations to support findings. Partners collect a lot of information that could be used more to track progress and contribute to an analysis of outcomes. In one project evaluation it was calculated that the value of loans, grants, pensions and allowances mobilised through the project equalled the project budget of approximately AUD\$700,000 (EUR500,000). This information demonstrates a strong result and can be used to advocate for similar investments. This has led to a similar documentation process being used by other partners to track outcomes.

More routine consideration of baseline data is needed to track outcomes such as poverty reduction

There is a need for more tracking of poverty reduction in addition to the reporting on attitudinal and empowerment outcomes and more qualitative results that are the focus of many evaluations. Many projects involve an initial house-to-house survey to identify people with disability. This could provide an opportunity to also ask a small number of demographic questions that can be revisited later in the project and be used in an evaluation to track changes in economic situation. CBM can provide guidance on key questions to measure economic improvement by tracking changes around savings, access to loans and debts.

More specific indicators are needed to explain what success looks like

A number of evaluations highlighted a need for stronger indicators to more clearly define what achievement of outcomes would look like. For example, in one project evaluation there was an activity area focused on training of fathers, however

the indicators did not clearly specify the intended changes as a result of this training. Similarly, in another project it was suggested that it would have been helpful to have clearer indicators developed of what successful disability mainstreaming would look like in that specific context, assisting those working in the project to work towards relevant changes. Many projects also include government engagement, and clearer indicators of desired outcomes rather than outputs (such as number of meetings) are often still needed.

Evaluation processes can be transformative

The approach used in an evaluation can have a significant impact on dynamics in a project team and affect people's attitudes to thinking about change. The meta-evaluation highlighted examples where the use of appreciative, strength-based approaches that are participatory in nature have enabled people to engage with evaluation as something they can use, rather than something being “done to them”. In one case, strong engagement of people, including people with disability, at all levels of the project's organisation meant that evaluation findings and learnings could be addressed immediately and meaningful adjustments were made. This would have been very different if people were less engaged and needed to wait for an evaluation report that only a small number of people would read. By contrast, there have been examples of evaluations conducted in a less participatory, strength-based way that have led to partners being less open to exploring different ways of working.

Learning

Look for ways to promote cross learning between and even within partner organisations

There are some good examples of CBM facilitating sharing of approaches and learning between partners both within a country and internationally. At the same time, the meta-evaluation highlighted some examples where this could be improved. In one case, improved sharing and learning between project teams working on different projects within the same organisation could have had better benefits to each project, but this failed to happen. Although context can vary greatly in any country, more opportunities for sharing should be explored. CBM should be proactive about seeking and encouraging these linkages.

* The meta-evaluation was based on evaluations done between 2015-17. This paper on design, monitoring, evaluation and learning summarises one of four main learning themes identified. The other themes are inclusive eye health, disability inclusive education, and disability and gender equality. Separate papers are available.

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