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The Tough Realities Small NGOs Face When Evaluating Their Efforts: Observations from Guatemala and Mexico

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Abstract

Evaluation improves the quality of work completed by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to fight poverty and develop communities (Liebenthal *et al.* 2004). Even so, many NGOs do not conduct evaluations (Ferguson 1990). To the extent that NGOs evaluate their efforts, the evaluation results often do not affect the planning of future projects, making evaluation a static event instead of a learning process (Mebrahtu 2002). Thus, the relevant problem is how to make evaluation more useful. Mulwa (2008) argues that participatory evaluation bridges the disconnect between evaluation results and future development projects. Based on my experience, I emphasize the need for development evaluation to be practical; evaluations informed by all stakeholders create a climate of learning. Evaluations lead to improved development when the evaluation responsibilities and measurements are shared between all parties involved.

Author's Note

Jeffrey graduated from BYU in April 2011, spending time doing internships and on study abroad programs in Mexico, Guatemala, England, and Washington D.C. He has volunteered as a project evaluator for small NGOs in Central America for the past three years.

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1. Purpose of Study

In order to explain some of the realities that confront small NGOs in implementing evaluations of their projects, I draw upon various personal experiences in Guatemala and Mexico as a project evaluator for a small NGO. By looking at my experiences in the field, I highlight some of the barriers facing small NGOs when they implement evaluations, as well as what may prevent them from utilizing and applying evaluation results. In addition to identifying these barriers, I outline potential solutions, which point towards a need for evaluation to be practical. Though this study is particular to the NGO for which I worked (hereafter referred to as NGO1), its implications can apply to other small international NGOs, and appropriately to larger development organizations. The common barriers to evaluation for NGO1 are not exclusive, but principle-based.

Drawing from my personal experience as an evaluator, I examine Francis Mulwa's

theory of participatory evaluation (2008) in context of actual evaluation practices of NGO1. Through a close investigation of NGO1's evaluation rhetoric, practices, and application of results, I outline the need for all development evaluations to be informed by all parties and stakeholders involved. While Mulwa's repeated call for local people to be involved in evaluation is justified, he overlooks the importance involving outsiders—primarily NGO headquarters staff and project donors—in evaluation. The nature of the relationship between donors and local people creates a need to share evaluation responsibilities. In order for evaluations to be practical—so that the results can be applied and contribute to a greater learning process—they must be a shared responsibility between all parties involved.

2. The Evaluation Debate

Evaluations enable development agencies to improve their efforts and increase their impact. As World Bank researchers have observed: “the intent [of evaluation] is to give partners enough feedback to allow them to learn, and if necessary, to modify their initial plans” (Liebenthal *et al.*, 2004, p. 37). The initiatives and projects of large development agencies, such as the World Bank, are evaluated on a consistent basis; as a result, some are canceled and others are modified. Evaluation helps the World Bank to learn from its mistakes and practice better development. For NGOs, evaluation is equally if not more beneficial to their improvement as an organization. One NGO, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, explained: “Evaluation, when properly understood, developed and applied, can provide powerful knowledge throughout Indian Country...[leading to] stronger, healthier, and more prosperous tribal communities and increased participation in the U.S. workforce” (2008, p. 2). When NGOs apply the information gleaned from an evaluation, adjusting their efforts to overcome the weaknesses identified in evaluations, they increase their potential to make a significant impact and meet their goals (Mulwa, 2008).

Nevertheless, many NGOs face difficulties in conducting evaluations as well as in utilizing the lessons learned from the evaluation reports to change their practices. Meaningful evaluation requires a significant educational investment that some NGOs cannot make due to financial difficulties, a lack of staff, or pressure from donors. Moreover, those NGOs that can perform accurate and meaningful evaluations still struggle to incorporate the lessons learned from the evaluations into their actual practices. Evaluation presents the organization with problems; correcting those problems requires the NGO to undergo the “painful process of change” that includes theoretical, methodological, and practical challenges (Mulwa, 2008, p. 14). Additionally, evaluations uncover weaknesses with the practices of NGOs, information that could potentially be harmful to an organization's ability to attract and maintain donors. Despite these challenges, evaluation is necessary for NGOs to promote development and decrease poverty in all its forms; however, it is only a worthwhile activity when the knowledge obtained is applied.

Effective evaluations are not discrete, static events, but part of a larger process. The process of organizational progression for an NGO involves a continuous conversation between theory, practice, and evaluation (Rossi, 2008). This process is not merely deductive or inductive, but is a cycle, with each step leading to the next. Without evaluation, or the application of evaluation results and lessons learned, progression halts. A good visual representation of organizational progression is a mechanical spring. Each ring in the spring features a theory, an action, and an evaluation, which in turn lead to a higher understanding,

a new theory, a new action, and another evaluation; it is a process of continual progression. Accordingly, evaluation is productive when it foments new or modified theories that lead to new or modified practices.

Unfortunately, organizational progression is often only rhetorical. NGOs commonly implement the same development projects over and over again, regardless of the data obtained in project evaluations, if such evaluations are conducted at all (Ferguson, 1990). Even if NGOs religiously evaluate their projects, these measurements are only valuable if they influence the actions of NGOs. Why, then, do some NGOs invest the resources to conduct evaluations of their projects, but fail to apply the lessons learned? What are the social conditions that stop NGOs from applying the knowledge acquired by evaluations? On the other hand, why are some NGOs innovative, consistently updating their projects based on the data and conclusions of their evaluations?

These are difficult questions with complex answers. Mulwa contends that placing evaluation equally in the hands of all stakeholders (all parties associated with a development program), as opposed to solely in the hands of NGO leaders or evaluators (all of whom are community outsiders), increases meaning and ownership (2008). Liebenenthal *et al.* at the World Bank state that “the more perspectives on a situation that are considered, the better informed will be any conclusions drawn about that situation... I strongly recommend that stakeholders be encouraged to participate in the evaluation process” (2004, pp. 195-196). Additionally, Mulwa asserts that involving representatives from all stakeholding groups throughout the development process solves the common disconnect between evaluation results and their application to future projects.

Based on my personal experiences as an evaluator in Guatemala and Mexico for NGO1, I argue that the participatory approach to development evaluation, as explicated in the passage just mentioned, is ideal. Unfortunately, certain barriers—geographic, linguistic, cultural, and financial—complicate the complete involvement of all stakeholders to equally participate. Donors are rarely in the same geographic location as project beneficiaries, stifling communication between the two groups. Furthermore, even when they are in the same place, language barriers and cultural differences make basic communication extremely difficult, limiting agreement on project planning, implementation, and evaluation. The root of these difficulties is the difference in values in each stakeholding group. In fact, empirical evidence shows that perceptions regarding evaluation “vary considerably among hierarchical levels” (Mebrahtu, 2002, p. 501). If local people were to evaluate a project they would base their evaluation on their own values, which, in many instances, the donors or NGO staff would not understand. The same would be true if donors did the evaluation completely themselves. If, for example, the project was to provide transportation from the village to the hospital in the nearest city, the donors might consider how many people rode in the ambulance the past month. The local people, however, would point out that those people were actually the driver and his 10 children going for a joyride. Clearly, then, involving all participants in the evaluation process is crucial in order to formulate a full picture; allowing one party full judgment is not productive.

In sum, Mulwa is right to place power in the hands of local people—local ownership increases the potential for evaluation results to be applied—but there are additional indicators to take into account. In particular, the variables that influenced NGO1’s tendency to apply the lessons learned from evaluations were: (1) shared goals and (2) ways of knowing. The effectiveness of evaluation, at least for NGO1 and potentially for many other NGOs, rests on these variables.

3. Background of NGO1

NGO1 was founded in 1982. Over time, the organization expanded, working in fifteen different nations, including Mexico and Guatemala. Its mission is to connect communities to the necessary resources that advance local capacity and leadership, allowing the community members to bring themselves out of poverty. Essentially, NGO1 hopes to teach villagers skills with which they can better their lives. Arming villagers with skills, as opposed to filling their cabinets with donations, NGO1 shows a commitment to the practice of sustainable village development.

NGO1 identifies five dimensions of development: leadership and self development, access to education, access to living environment, access to healthcare, and access to markets. Accordingly, NGO1 supports villagers in projects that align with at least one of the five dimensions of development. Though projects are not stated in NGO1's mission statement, they are the means by which NGO1 attempts to accomplish its goals.

3.1 NGO1 Evaluation Methodology

NGO1's founders and later leaders experimented with various evaluation models over the course of the past thirty years, eventually settling on their current methodology, which focuses on the five dimensions of development mentioned previously. To measure progress in the five dimensions, NGO1 Methodology includes a qualitative ranking system. Within each dimension are 7-12 subcategories; each is ranked on a scale of 1-5 (see Appendix, Section 1). A ranking of one indicates the lowest level of development and a ranking of five represents modern society. A ranking guideline sheet helps evaluators determine what characteristics merit which numerical rankings (see Appendix, Section 2). Once a community reaches rankings of three, it is considered to be on its way to self-development and NGO1 withdraws. All rankings are averaged, though the leadership development dimension is weighted 400%. Ideally, all of this information is gathered in each village and then posted on NGO1's online database on a semi-annual basis.

The NGO1 Evaluation Methodology appears well-designed and functional. However, evaluations have been conducted inconsistently, if at all, and there is a lack of harmony within the organization regarding evaluation, dependency, and NGO1's mission in general. Consequently, there is room for improvement both in conducting evaluations and in applying the results.

4. Methods

In this case study, I examine the contributing factors in NGO1's evaluation methodology and its application of evaluation results. I draw my conclusions from participant observation as an independent evaluator for NGO1 in both Guatemala and Mexico. My particular role as an independent evaluator in Guatemala and Mexico granted me access to all aspects of NGO1's hierarchy, including personal conversations between project beneficiaries and the CEO, as well as the middlemen between them. Participant observation, drawing particularly upon Mulwa's use of the term, includes close contact between the researcher and the population under study, in this case with all NGO1 employees. The goal is to familiarize the researcher with the population's practices and

values (Mulwa, 2008). As an evaluator, I had private meetings and conversations with all NGO1 employees and participated in many NGO1 leadership meetings, including the Annual NGO1 World Conference for all staff. I also draw upon my experience living with local staff in Guatemala and Mexico, traveling with headquarters staff throughout Guatemala, numerous international phone calls, and a myriad of email exchanges. Throughout all of these endeavors I recorded field notes; they provide the basis upon which I formulate my experiences into cohesive conclusions.

In Guatemala, my primary method of data collection was focus groups. Accompanied by two NGO1 employees, local villagers themselves, I visited eight villages and held focus groups with village leadership. In each meeting, I asked the villagers pertinent questions about the state of their villages in order to accurately rank the villages' level of development according to the NGO1 Evaluation Methodology. Table 1 shows a sample of the NGO1 Evaluation methodology for the leadership indicator; Table 2 shows the portion of the NGO1 ranking guideline sheet associated with the leadership indicator.

phases measurements			page 2 of 3	
village	country			
	year:		year:	
	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec
family participation				
RDF or village leaders				
village organization				
leadership skills				
networking				
vision				
project management				
women leaders				
level of self development				
SUBTOTALS				

Table 1: NGO1 Evaluation Rankings for Leadership Indicator

	Ranking 1	Ranking 2	Ranking 3
Indicator			
Village Organization	Minimal to no village organization. If elected officials exist, they are not well respected and may not represent the interests of the whole.	Elected officials carry some respect. Natural leadership immersing to assist elected officials. Committees are formed around special needs or initiatives.	Village development committee (VDC) formed and active. Sub-committees formed as needed in health, education, water etc. Natural and elected leaders in cooperation
Leadership Skills	No clear leadership in the village.	Village leaders are guiding villagers to have a common vision. Leaders are sharing the leadership role with the NGO1 staff in community mobilization and project management.	Leadership has a clear understanding of how to use available resources in development. They can manage projects without NGO1 staff and keep the village motivated.
Networking	There is no understanding of available resources either inside or outside the village. NGO1 allocates up to 80% of the resources in the development partnership.	Leaders are learning how to find and negotiate support from NGOs, local government and other sources through NGO1 guidance. NGO1 investment is still more than 50% in the development partnership.	NGO1 is no longer a major development partner. It contributes less than 20%. Village leadership generates the rest of the resources through local contribution and new development partnerships.

Table 2: NGO1 Evaluation Ranking Guideline for Leadership Indicator

In Mexico, I worked with two other evaluators. Together, we began our research with semi-structured interviews administered to one representative of each home in the two communities being studied, Tamuala and Huaricho (Mulwa, 2008). We interviewed program participants using a set of questions addressing aspects of leadership, business, and culture, as well as questions regarding NGO1's implementation of the program. Finally, we analyzed our notes from two sets of interviews to ascertain the social impact of the project (in this case, goat cheese factories) in each village.

5. Findings

As previously stated, the key for NGO1 in terms of practical evaluation, connecting evaluation results with future development plans, involves three main indicators: (1) shared goals, (2) practicality of evaluation results, and (3) ways of knowing. Before discussing these indicators, however, I briefly discuss the findings of my evaluations in Guatemala and Mexico. The following table outlines the context that led to an evaluation initiative, the type of evaluation utilized, the findings, and how NGO1 used the findings (see Table 3).

Context	Type of Evaluation/Assessment Model	Evaluation Findings	How has NGO1 used the findings?
<p>The Guatemala staff was not evaluating the communities where staff members worked. I trained them to conduct evaluations as designed by NGO1 headquarters. We held focus group meetings in each village and utilized the villagers' responses to rank each community's development.</p>	<p>The evaluation was primarily top-down, but had participatory elements. NGO1 headquarters designed the evaluation strategy, but data were based on villagers' input in community meetings. Ultimately, NGO1 staff, not the villagers, ranked the level of the communities' development.</p>	<p>The Guatemala staff now consistently conducts bi-annual evaluations in this fashion. The communities are developing slowly, according to the measurements designed by NGO1 headquarters.</p>	<p>It is not clear whether headquarters staff consults evaluation results when planning new projects. The projects chosen since the evaluations began have all been based on community wants (such as the recent schools built in two communities) or tied donations (such as the medical clinic in one community). The evaluation data is used in NGO1's annual reports for donors.</p>
<p>The Mexico staff was not evaluating the development of the communities where staff members worked. NGO1 headquarters sent a team of evaluators, including myself, for a period of two months, to Mexico with hopes of finding out why evaluations were not occurring.</p>	<p>The evaluators acted as participant observers of NGO1's projects, conducting their own evaluation of the project while also conducting informal interview to accumulate important information about the Mexico staff's resistance toward evaluating.</p>	<p>The evaluators found that NGO1 Mexico staff had different goals than headquarters. They focused on "building <i>people</i>, not projects," while headquarters focused on creating self-developing <i>communities</i>. Consequently, the Mexico staff did not find the evaluation method designed by headquarters to be an accurate tool for measuring development.</p>	<p>Mexico has been under major deadlines to complete the project (implementing goat cheese factories) funded by the umbrella NGO and the IDB. As a result, no major meetings to reconcile the difference in goals between Mexico and headquarters have occurred. However, headquarters staff has discussed redesigning their evaluations.</p>
<p>NGO1 Mexico received funding from an umbrella NGO and the IDB to create small goat cheese factories to stimulate local economic opportunities for villagers. Under pressure by HIP to evaluate their efforts, NGO1 Mexico asked a team of evaluators to evaluate the impacts of the businesses.</p>	<p>The evaluation design was top-down; outsiders, not the villagers, had primary control of the evaluations methods. However, the data were gathered through in-depth interviews with local villagers, giving voice to beneficiaries. The evaluators also facilitated community meetings. These meetings were an effort to involve the locals, making the design somewhat participatory.</p>	<p>The villagers were not appropriately trained in business practices. Simply stated, the inputs outweighed the potential outcomes; the businesses would lose money. There were positive social benefits of the project, however, including increased educational expectations and decreased gender discrimination in the participating families.</p>	<p>As recommended in the evaluation, NGO1 Mexico staff began facilitating community meetings in order to train the villagers in business practices. At this point, the businesses are still financially dependent on NGO1 for business connections, but the villagers are learning ways to make their own business connections and to monitor their bottom line.</p>

Table 4: Evaluation Results and Applications

5.1 Shared Goals

“Shared goals” refers to the level of commonality between the goals of headquarters and those of local staff. For evaluations to be applied, headquarters and local staff must share development aims (Mebrahtu, 2002). In Guatemala, there was a lack of shared goals due to the hiring of new local staff. However, the new staff was humble and moldable, leading to moderate success in implementing evaluation results. In Mexico, local staff and headquarters staff operated under different development goals; as a result, evaluations generally served the interests of either local staff or headquarters staff, but not both.

In Guatemala, the former Country Director passed away in August 2008. His passing slowed NGO1’s work immensely, and the new Country Director had not learned NGO1’s evaluation methodology before I arrived in August 2009. Also, given his lack of experience in development, the new Country Director did not have strong opinions respecting evaluation theory or methodology. Fortunately, he was teachable and energetic; in fact he asked headquarters staff to allow me to come and teach the local staff, including himself, NGO1’s Evaluation Methodology. He wanted more training, and his desire to learn was reflected in the rest of the local staff in Guatemala as well. However, the new Country Director’s inexperience was problematic with respect to the goals and vision of the organization. He was only beginning to comprehend that NGO1 was focused on building on self-developing communities and he had yet to correlate this focus with related policy.

The NGO1 Evaluation Methodology, then, which I taught to local staff and which they regularly use to evaluate the progress of villages every six months, is only useful to the extent that local staff understands the goals upon which the evaluation data is based. More generally, it is therefore apparent that evaluation results must be meaningful to those who are engaged in the creation of the evaluation methodology.

In contrast to the Guatemala Country Director, the NGO1 Country Director for Mexico was extremely experienced; he had advanced degrees in development, had worked in the field for over 20 years and had worked for NGO1 for over a decade. He had strong opinions about what development should be and the goals of NGO1. He strongly supported the NGO1 motto: “building people, not projects.” Development, according to the Mexico Country Director, was primarily focused on the individual, and not necessarily on community development. The projects in Mexico reflected his goals, as opposed to the goals of headquarters for community-based development. Because of these differences in goals, there was a disagreement about evaluation methodology and neither party respected the evaluations that the other had completed in the past. The lack of shared goals stripped any current evaluation practices of both meaning and purpose.

Hoping to solve the disaccord between headquarters and local staff regarding evaluation, NGO1 headquarters sent me and two other evaluators to Mexico with specific instructions to work with the Country Director on the selection of a project to be evaluated and the evaluation methodology. After meeting with him and the rest of the NGO1 Mexico staff, we found that they had previously been evaluating the progress of the communities with whom they worked, but had stopped monitoring them within the past year. The Country Director and other staff members became extremely discouraged with evaluation due to a variety of factors and experiences. With respect to the NGO1 Evaluation Methodology, the Country Director reported that NGO1 headquarters handed him a new booklet on the NGO1 evaluation methods and told him to use it to evaluate his

communities, but never trained him on how to use the booklet. When the Country Director asked his three Rural Development Facilitators (villagers who serve as his liaisons in the communities) to use the booklet, two of them promptly quit. They felt that they could train people on how to complete projects, but felt uncomfortable calling and leading focus group meetings to collect data for the evaluations. If this negative situation were not enough, the Mexico Country Director had a negative experience with the independent financial auditor hired by the umbrella NGO that had granted NGO1 funding for the goat cheese project. The auditor spent a single day with the Country Director, wrote a report, and then charged an excessive amount. Most recently, the computer servers at NGO1 headquarters in Utah crashed and a variety of information that the Country Director had uploaded to the NGO1 online database was lost. (Though headquarters staff reports that they have restored the lost information, the Country Director insists that much of the information he uploaded is still lost.) All of these experiences contributed to NGO1 Mexico avoiding evaluation.

Nevertheless, NGO1 Mexico was still open to working with my team of evaluators given our independent position. In addition, they were happy to delegate this responsibility—that they felt pressure to perform—to us. The Country Director asked us to evaluate the social implications of the goat cheese project, which was designed to create local jobs and decrease the necessity of forced migration to the United States for employment opportunities. “Does the project develop individuals?” he consistently asked. After conducting in-depth interviews, we concluded that the project would probably fail to create a sustainable goat cheese business, but that unexpected social benefits resulted (see Table 4). Not only did the Country Director appreciate the evaluation results, but he also initiated the retraining plans as recommended by the evaluation. Local staff that participated somewhat in evaluation design were more likely to respect and apply the results.

Despite the success of our evaluation at affecting future development efforts and modifying project design, headquarters staff had less use for our evaluation results. Since other countries where NGO1 worked, such as Guatemala, collected evaluation data in a more systematic and homogenous manner, headquarters staff wanted Mexico to do the same. It was most useful for headquarters to be able to compare and contrast the development of communities across countries in order to demonstrate to donors the progress and effectiveness of their efforts. Communities in Mexico, however, could not be compared due to the lack of consistent evaluation collection or comparable data. Shared goals between local and headquarters staff, then, are imperative to maintain a sustainable balance between the demands of donors and the local people’s perception of their own needs across multiple projects and locations.

5.2 Ways of Knowing

Another factor influencing the likelihood that evaluation results are applied is the accepted “ways of knowing” NGOs utilize. Based on core sociological principles, it is accepted that reality is a social construction and relative to the particular culture in which it is created (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Ferguson, 1990; AIHEC, 2008). The “ways of knowing” for NGO1 are particular to its organization and its construction of reality and knowledge, and evaluation results are interpreted through a particular lens of reality. What forms of knowledge does NGO1 celebrate and how is crucial information, such as

evaluation results, communicated so that it is applied? Can different stakeholders learn other ways of knowing?

There is not significant evidence that NGO1 regularly consults and utilizes the evaluation data it collects in Guatemala and store on its online database. In actual practice, when an employee at NGO1 headquarters has a question, he/she calls the country director. When the country director has a question, he/she calls the local villager employees. When they have a question, they ask the villager associated with the subject under question. This process is equally true in the reverse direction, functioning up the organizational hierarchy as well as down. At times, steps in the ladder can be jumped. Most importantly, knowledge is disseminated on a personal level, face-to-face or by telephone or email.

The Mexico Country Director expressed his doubt in collecting evaluation data according to the methodology of NGO1 headquarters. Not only did he not agree with the method of measurements, but he also questioned the purpose: "The next time they have a question about the development of one of the communities do you think they will log on to the database and check out the stats? No! They will just give me a phone call, whether I do the evaluations and collect and post the data or not."

In the NGO1 work atmosphere face-to-face information is most highly valued and respected. Evaluation results for NGO1 should be communicated face-to-face; it is most likely to have a lasting impact. Though this method of communication can be highly informal and can leave later interpretation of evaluation results vulnerable to change depending on the contextual understanding and memory of NGO1 employees, it is nevertheless the practiced form of communication at NGO1. More formalized reports are less effective at changing actual organizational practices.

6. Practicality in Evaluation

NGOs should be flexible in their evaluation methods. As outlined throughout this paper, practicality in evaluation recognizes that the paramount purpose of evaluation is to improve development. Often the most functional, workable, and plausible evaluation method does not include fully equal participation of stakeholders, rather, it reflects the interests of those who proposed and implemented the development project. As seen in Mexico, if local staff is not committed to the evaluation framework designed by headquarters, then evaluations will not change development initiatives. As shown by my experiences in Guatemala, a willing staff is not enough; staff members must then use the evaluation results to plan future projects.

Ultimately, sustainable long-term change can only occur in communities when local peoples are empowered to the degree that they hold full responsibility for their own development. Realistically, however, NGOs often find it more efficient to help communities achieve self-actualization by proposing and implementing projects for the villagers rather than guiding villagers through the entire process. Though they are top-down, these projects generally meet the basic physical needs of local people. In these cases, evaluations may be designed by and primarily for donors and NGO staff, but must include the project beneficiaries, the local people, in order for the results to be applied. Practicality, then, includes the rational judgment of what degree all stakeholders can reasonably be involved so that ownership for the project is shared. Regardless of the balance of their respective contributions, the fundamental factors determining the implementation and use of NGO

evaluations is the substantive involvement of *all* stakeholders, and a basic measure of congruity between each party's values and goals.

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