

# Monitoring and evaluating capacity strengthening initiatives – defining the questions, considering approaches

This report provides a synthesis of the discussions held during a workshop exploring the monitoring and evaluation of research and higher education capacity strengthening initiatives. The first section explains the background to the workshop, the second outlines some of the key issues discussed during the workshop and the final section suggests some next steps.

## 1. Workshop background

There is an increasing number of funding initiatives aimed at strengthening the capacity of developing countries to undertake and use research to improve policy and practice, with the ultimate aim of achieving development goals and improving economic growth.

Effective evaluation can help to assess the impact of capacity strengthening programmes and improve the design and implementation of future programmes. However, capacity strengthening is messy and complex, making evaluation challenging.

On 21 May 2009, the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences convened a small group of UK stakeholders<sup>1</sup> who fund and manage research and higher education capacity strengthening initiatives, in Lewes, East Sussex. The workshop provided these stakeholders with space to reflect on their capacity strengthening programmes and discuss common issues relating to evaluating these programmes. It was also an opportunity to develop a shared understanding on which to develop future work on this subject.

Monitoring and evaluating capacity strengthening activities and programmes is not straightforward and can be problematic. There are no quick, easy or universal solutions, but the workshop showed that bringing together stakeholders grappling with similar challenges can provide valuable learning.

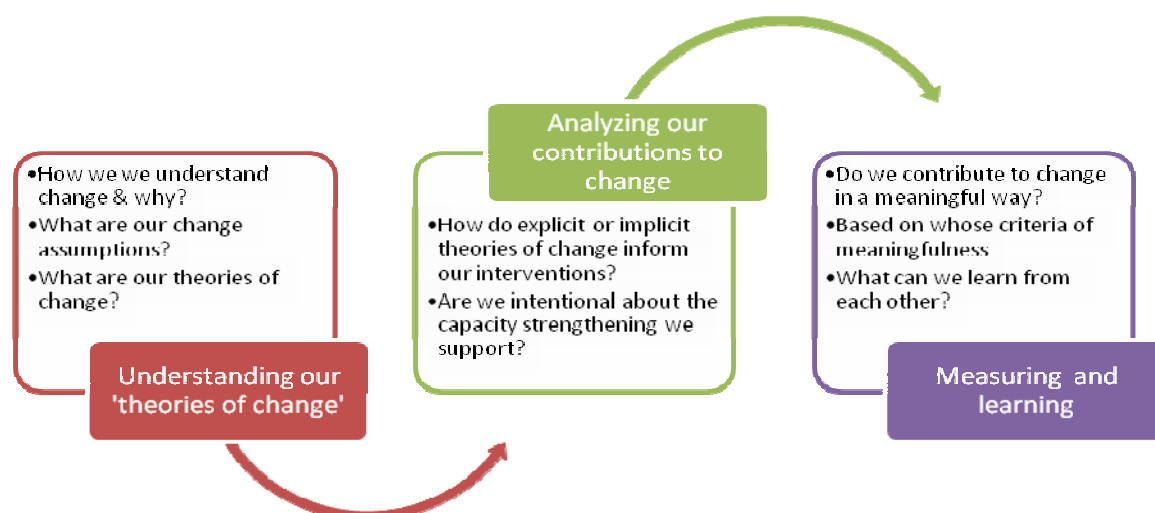
The purpose of this report is not to record all discussions from the workshop, but to highlight key issues that emerged, inform wider stakeholders of this work and enable others in the science and development communities to respond and contribute to an ongoing discussion, and future activities in this area.

The following diagram lays out the main conceptual themes that were covered in the workshop.

---

<sup>1</sup> Workshop participants are listed at the end of the document. Organisations represented were mainly funders of research and higher education activities rather than traditional 'donors.' The workshop was facilitated by IDS.

Figure 1—Key workshop elements



## 2. The discussion

### *Understanding capacity strengthening through a theory of change lens*

Making sense of capacity strengthening 'results' can be aided by generating a better understanding of the change that an organisation or programme is hoping to contribute to. Participants were encouraged to explore the 'theory of change'<sup>2</sup> behind their programmes and were challenged to be more intentional in the design phase about how the programme might support the broader change sought.

### *Visions of success*

In addition to aiming to 'do no harm', a clear idea of the change the initiative is aiming to contribute to is needed. Thinking through the 'theory of change' can help to make this explicit. Participants were introduced to theory of change concepts via the following questions, posed of their programmes:

- Towards what change vision is the programme in which you are involved working (i.e. what changes does your programme aim to support)?
- What are the preconditions or requirements that need to be in place for this change to be possible?
- What are the interventions/activities you undertake to support these preconditions or requirements?
- What are your assumptions on how these interventions contribute to these desired preconditions?
- What are the challenges you face in measuring the contribution you are making to these changes?

We reflected on the tendency that sometimes exists at early stages of developing a programme to involve those who are already known and only those that can attend a

<sup>2</sup> 'Theory of change' is just one model/ tool that was used in the workshop to illustrate the need to be Intentional- there are others. For more information on this tool visit: <http://www.theoryofchange.org/>

particular meeting; and to target activities at areas that are easier to reach or more familiar, rather than where there may be greatest need.

There are always practical constraints on funders developing programmes and no initiative will satisfy all stakeholders, but it can be useful to regularly consider **whose agenda is being pursued**, because different groups will have different perspectives and different change visions. **A particular programme change vision represents the world view(s) of those who designed it. By involving the groups at whom activities are targeted in developing and articulating the programme's vision of success, there is a greater chance that the programme will support outcomes that are meaningful to those groups.** Similarly, this can reduce the possibility of the programme being dominated by the funder's agenda and perspectives.

Programmes can be developed as a result of political pressure or a feeling that an organisation should be 'doing something on this issue'. Clearly thinking through what change is trying to be achieved should result in programmes that are more intentional and consequently easier to evaluate. Problems often arise when programmes that were developed with passion but with little documented framework are inherited by new staff, who then need to develop an evaluation process.

### ***Sustainability is key***

Participants strongly felt that capacity strengthening programmes need to initiate change that is sustainable. Capacity strengthening takes time and requires long-term support. The problem is that many funders operate on short- to medium- term time scales and are unable to commit to longer term funding. Funders therefore need to consider their willingness to support long-term initiatives and devise an exit strategy in advance. Failure in long term planning can result in wasted effort and resources, when initiatives fail after funding ceases.

Southern leadership is essential to sustainability and this should be enabled and encouraged from the start. If stakeholders in participant countries have a greater role in priority setting and shaping the programme to deliver what is needed, the activities funded by the programme may be more likely to be sustained after programme funding has stopped.

Some participants reflected that the immediate transfer of power and resources may be overwhelming for partners in some circumstances. They suggested a genuine transition of power needs to be managed appropriately to avoid establishing 'puppet leadership.' The funders' job is to reconcile the limitations they face in delivery with addressing the needs of those the programme is targeted at.

Encouraging and enabling the development of alumni communities of those funded by or involved in the programme was suggested as a way to build momentum, to promote ownership and continuation and to aid evaluation of the programmes. More exploration and learning of the best way to develop alumni communities is required.

### ***Complexity and coordination***

Also key to sustainability is striking the balance between supporting governance structures, institutions and infrastructure and individuals. Individuals are crucial to achieving change, but they can be frustrated by a lack of infrastructure or a supporting environment. A system-wide approach can help ensure progress is sustainable; however this is often beyond the capabilities of most funders. Participants agreed that there was a need for the range of

funders and implementers to work together better, to enable small scale interventions to add up to a more significant impact.

### ***Evaluation is more than accountability***

Stakeholders might undertake evaluations for different reasons, including:

- Publicising and raising the profile of their work
- Demonstrating the impact of funding to the governing board or funding source
- Learning and improving future programmes
- Proving that money has been spent as pledged
- Sharing learning with other funders
- Enabling successful projects to obtain further funding

There is usually more than one reason for evaluation and trying to please a number of audiences with the same evaluation can cause problems and result in less effective evaluations. The audiences need to be identified and methods should be used that are specific to the audience and purpose of a particular evaluation. In other words, there is not one gold standard – an evaluation should be fit for purpose. **The questions of *why are you evaluating?* and *who is the evaluation for?* are fundamental questions that need to be carefully considered before designing an evaluation.** These questions should be considered at the start of the design of the programme, not just before the evaluation is undertaken, so that the programme can include suitable measures for evaluation.

**Funders need to be accountable, particularly when taxpayers money is involved. However, if the purpose of the programme is to support and strengthen ‘local’ capacity, then ‘downward’ accountability—i.e. determining if the capacity strengthening is meaningful to the actors whose capacity is being supported—should be a significant part of the evaluation.**

### ***What is valid evidence?***

Different forms of ‘evidence’ are valued differently by different audiences. For example, the UK Government and the scientific community are often more interested in quantitative data. How much information or evidence is required to inform decisions? A clear idea of the purpose of collecting information will reduce the burden of collecting unnecessary information.

### ***Enabling learning and improvement***

**Learning lessons from activities and programmes is crucial – we need to know why programme are successful or not, as well as if they are.** Evaluations often highlight lessons but these are not always implemented. For real learning from evaluation, political will to utilise the results of evaluation and supportive institutional cultures are needed. Often learning can take place at the level of programme management; however decisions about future funding programmes may be implemented from the top, for political reasons, without recognising the lessons learnt from past programmes.

**The imperative to demonstrate impact to funders, governors or ministers can result in a focus on success stories. Successes need to be celebrated and they can provide opportunities to explore what activities or attributes contributes to success. However, institutional cultures and pressures to demonstrate impact can mean an unwillingness to recognise failure and to utilise valuable lessons from it.**

Related to this is the need for the evaluation to access genuine views of participants and not simply reflect what it is thought funders/ Boards want to hear.

In addition, evaluation needs to identify the historical and social context in which programmes are operating as this can have significant impact on outcomes. This relates to the need to understand why programmes are successful, not just if they are successful.

### **Range of methods**

As stated above an evaluation should be fit for purpose. Accordingly the methodology employed will depend on why the evaluation is being undertaken. A few methods were discussed, and the Most Significant Change<sup>3</sup> method was outlined as an example. This method aims to address both upward and downward accountability and is less concerned with measuring whether all the goals of the programme were achieved as initially planned, but focuses on capturing the significant changes that occurred. One of the benefits is that it does not assume that all stakeholders involved view the world in the same way and it aims to give those involved in the initiative a central role in determining what is judged as significant. However, the qualitative nature of the method—even though it uses several rounds of ‘validation’ of significant changes—may go against what some donors consider as ‘valid’ evidence.

### **How feasible is harmonisation?**

The Paris declaration on aid effectiveness<sup>4</sup> calls for development agencies to align their development funding with in-country priorities and harmonise their processes and activities with other agencies. Whilst organisations represented at the workshop are not development agencies, it was recognised that harmonising evaluation processes could reduce the burden on organisations that are involved in a number of programmes, and could enable funders to collate data and draw wider comparisons to further learning. The difficulty arises from the fact that most programmes have different objectives, and evaluation needs will differ across funding organisations. However, there is an opportunity for greater dialogue and sharing between funders in this area to work towards greater harmonisation where practical and appropriate.

**Funders can also help improve capacity of partner countries by utilising local evaluation expertise rather than employing northern consultants, and by embedding monitoring and evaluation in the systems they are helping to strengthen.**

#### **Summary of key points emerging from the workshop:**

- Developing a clear understanding of the change that an organisation or programme is hoping to contribute to, and the assumptions associated with this, will enable better design, execution of activities, and evaluation
- The vision of success for a programme represents the world view(s) of those who designed it. Involving groups at whom the programme is targeted at in developing and expressing the theory of change could improve the chances that the programme will support outcomes that are meaningful to those groups
- The question of *why are you evaluating* and *who is the evaluation for* are fundamental questions that need to be addressed before designing an evaluation, and preferable before designing a programme.

<sup>3</sup> For more information: <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/>

<sup>4</sup> For further information on the Paris declaration:

[http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_35401554\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html)

- Funders and programme managers need to be accountable, particularly when taxpayers money is involved. However, if the purpose of the programme is to support and strengthen 'local' capacity, then determining if the capacity strengthening is meaningful to the actors whose capacity is being supported should be a significant part of the evaluation.
- The imperative to demonstrate impact to funders or governing boards can result in a focus on success stories, neglecting the useful lessons that can be learn from failure.
- Institutional capacity and will is crucial for implementing lessons learned from evaluations.

### 3. The feedback

The participants found the workshop useful and are keen to continue the dialogue. The comments below are from a brief 'evaluation' survey after the workshop.

Many participants found that thinking through their theory of change and considering more closely what the programme was aiming to achieve was valuable, as often there is not the time or space in daily work life: *"Just going through the process is really important in that it makes you [be explicit about] what exactly you want to get from the programme and the underlying theory of change .....often we all assume (within the organisation) we have a shared understanding of what our theory of change is and at what levels the programme is hoping to intervene."*

One participant reflected *"most evaluation activities look mainly at the question IF a scheme was successful....there should be a stage where the question WHY the scheme was successful should be added"*. Another commented *"I have a better understanding of the wealth of knowledge and experience on M&E that we can use to improve how we do it – I will start to delve into some of the materials"*

It is important to build on this constructive dialogue and enable organisations to learn more from each other.

### 4. The next steps

There are many challenges associated with evaluation of capacity strengthening and a one day workshop was never going to address all of these. However, participants now have a greater understanding of these challenges. Some of these challenges need to be addressed individually by funders as they take forward programmes. Other challenges could be addressed more effectively by increased dialogue and cooperation.

Potential areas where working together could be beneficial were suggested. These were:

- A further workshop focussing on monitoring and evaluation methods
- Greater sharing of monitoring and evaluation cases studies amongst funders (including through the UKCDS Research Capacity Strengthening Group<sup>5</sup>)
- More dialogue on greater harmonisation of data collection or evaluation methods across stakeholders
- A synthesis of the academic and practical work on monitoring and evaluation of capacity strengthening tailored to research and higher education funders

<sup>5</sup>a forum for funders and programme managers to discuss issues relating to research and higher education capacity strengthening, and to share information and improve coordination and cooperation

- Work on developing shared visions of success for collaborative funding initiatives
- A larger international workshop on evaluation of research and higher education capacity strengthening.

The UKCDS secretariat will consider further activities in this area after further consultation with UKCDS members and other stakeholders.

The UKCDS secretariat would welcome any reactions or responses. Please contact Kate O'Shea on [k.oshea@ukcds.org.uk](mailto:k.oshea@ukcds.org.uk) or 020 7 611 8276.

### **Workshop participants**

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Colette Dean      | British Council  |
| Jo Duffy          | Economic and Social Research Council                   |
| Suzanne Gardner   | British Council  |
| Aulo Gelli        | UK Collaborative on Development Sciences               |
| Hans Hagen        | Royal Society  |
| Kirsty Newman     | Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology & INASP |
| Kate O'Shea       | UK Collaborative on Development Sciences               |
| Alejandra Palermo | Royal Society of Chemistry                             |
| Mark Palmer       | Medical Research Council                               |
| Liam Roberts      | Commonwealth Scholarship Commission                    |
| Val Snewin        | Wellcome Trust   |
| Ian Thornton      | Royal Society  |
| Kevin Van Cauter  | British Council  |

### **Facilitators**

**Peter Taylor** is Leader of the Participation, Power and Social Change Team at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.

**Alfredo Ortiz** is an Adjunct Professor at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) and a PhD student at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)--Participation, Power and Social Change Team.



The UK Collaborative on Development Sciences brings together key UK funders and stakeholders who support the development sciences research base. It aims to provide a framework for a more coordinated approach to development sciences research, in order to increase its relevance and impact to international development policy and practice. The UKCDS secretariat works with members and stakeholders to raise the profile of development sciences, add value to new or ongoing initiatives, identifies opportunities or barriers to collaboration and seeks to reduce transaction costs. [www.ukcds.org.uk](http://www.ukcds.org.uk)

***This document does not necessarily reflect the policy of UKCDS members or organisations represented at the meeting.***