

Exchange of Outcome Mapping experiences

Introduction

During a meeting in Ottawa in April 2004 a group of IDRC staff met to exchange experiences on the use of Outcome Mapping (OM) by IDRC partners in Latin America. These notes collect key points discussed during the meeting.¹

Involving Boundary Partners in OM planning workshops

Several of the projects using OM have been incorporating Boundary Partners (BP) in OM workshops. By involving Boundary Partners in the development of Outcome Challenges (OC) and Progress Markers (PM), the value-added of partner participation is that partners can voice what they feel are accurate indicators of change, which in turn provides important input for the development of realistic Progress Markers for the project. It also helps to explore to what extent project staff and Boundary Partners are thinking along the same lines with regards to expected outcomes, etc.

A key lesson learned from those projects which have tried to involve Boundary Partners in the OM planning process is the importance of having clear expectations and objectives of the meeting. Partners need to know why they have been invited to participate and what the output of the meeting will be. Otherwise, the invitation can lead to unfounded expectations on the part of Boundary Partners that, for example, their ideas discussed at the workshop will be funded. Boundary Partners need to be clear about how their input at the workshop will be used and what they can expect from it. It is also important to be selective about which boundary partners are invited, to think carefully of which boundary partners can make a useful contribution to the process.

Our experience, after the workshop, is that it is important to define our priority direction before we engage in a [outcome] mapping workshop, in order to be able to use the methodology effectively. [1]

Regulation of Rights in the Water Law (Bolivia) (101423)

This project, which deals with conflicts in water in Bolivia, has involved BP in the planning process and different stakeholders were invited to the first project OM workshop in Cochabamba. The workshop was very helpful to actively involve all stakeholders of the watershed in the project. New activities were added by the project to respond to the outcomes identified by the Boundary Partners. At the same time the large number of participants (26), the level of conflict and their heterogeneity (researchers, grassroots, policy makers) made the facilitation of the workshop quite difficult. [2]

¹ Meeting participants: B. Bucio, D. Deby, H. Rajj, P. Wiens, R. Zelaya. April 22, 2004.

Defining Outcome Challenges and Progress Markers

Projects have had difficulty in defining outcomes in terms of behavioural change, and also in developing Progress Markers. Reaching a final set of Outcome Challenges and Progress Markers may take several iterations during the planning process. During the project implementation in some cases changes to Progress Markers are made as the project progresses (e.g. after six months of project commencement the project team will go back and make changes to progress markers).

The revision of progress markers reflects a difficulty in the project's understanding of how to develop Progress Markers. It has been difficult for researchers to shift their thinking to think research questions in terms of desirable behaviour change, and it has been difficult for project staff to express outcome challenges in terms of behavioural change. When implementing the monitoring framework and filling-in the Outcome Journals, researchers become aware of the need to revise their Progress Markers when reviewing the progress achieved by their Boundary Partners.

Progress Markers can be regarded as a reflection of a program's theory of change rather than as indicators per se. Therefore, it is valid that as you learn, and one's understanding of change changes, that Progress Markers also change.

Project monitoring using OM journals

Several project are using OM journals (Outcome Journals, Strategy Journals and Performance Journals) for monitoring. One of the problems facing projects is that project staff have difficulty in being able to determine precisely what monitoring information they need, and how they will use that information. There is a tendency to try to fill all journals for all Boundary Partners and all strategies. This generates a wealth of information that the project does not have the capacity to process and analyse. They find that they have too much information coming out of monitoring of each boundary partner.

The water project in Bolivia for the first interim technical report selected key BP and strategies to be monitored and on those the Outcome Journals are filled in and the information used for the preparation of the technical report for IDRC. [4]

When applying the method the first time in the 2002 workshop we did not take into account, or did not select appropriate [progress] markers. This problem is decreasing because we are trying to enhance this [behavioural] changes indicators. [3]

The Arracacha project

The project working on development of agro industries in the Andean countries developed an OM framework for monitoring project activities, working in three different countries. Due to the complexity of monitoring all boundary partners in each of the three countries, a decision was taken to select one boundary partner per country to monitor. Each country chose a different type of boundary partner. In Peru, the project chose to focus on an NGO working in education; in Bolivia, monitoring focused on a university partner; and in Ecuador, the focus was on the Ministry of Agriculture. Journal recording on each boundary partner was conducted every three months, and was found to be particularly useful for use in project reporting to IDRC. Sonia Salas (leader of Arracacha project) is now assisting an IFAD project in implementing OM. [5]

In the experience of the above projects, the information collected for the Outcome Journals has largely been done through project staff observation of boundary partner behaviour. The information is collected by researchers and usually presented at project internal meetings (done every 2-3 months, depending on the project). In using the information, researchers conduct an analysis of the information collected, in order to assess what has changed or what has not changed, and what might be factor leading to that change, which is captured in the Outcome and Strategy Journals.

Benefits of using OM

With regards to these experiences, it has been the case that partners using OM have made changes to their own programming as a result of the reflection which is taking place every three or six months (in filling out the Journals). The Journals exercise provides a key opportunity for project staff to reflect on their work, and to explore where there has, or has not, been progress/ change, and to understand *why*.

A benefit of OM in comparison to other M & E tools has included the usefulness of the information collected for reporting purposes, given that the information being regularly collected and reflected upon is immediately relevant as input into IDRC reporting or to other donors such as CIDA. In the case of the Nagaland project in India, in OM the project has discovered a particularly appropriate tool for capturing qualitative changes, which complements the quantitative data that was being captured (and continues to be captured) through more traditional M & E tools. [6]

Identification of Boundary Partners in networks / programs

With regards to working with networks, within the OM process, there is a risk that people will become confused between their role as a boundary partner and their role as project implementer. In the case of the Latin American Trade Network (LATN), in order to overcome this confusion, a diagram was drawn up to define exactly who was doing what. Who (names of people) is 'the project'? Who are the boundary partners? Who are the strategic partners? It proved very important to make this clear, given that this can be particularly confusing for networks where members may be both the boundary partner (for whom desired change is identified) and project implementers. OM helped them identify exactly what they want to see happening with different boundary partners.

The methodology proposes the identification of boundary partners for the project. This was the hardest part of the application of the methodology in the workshop in view of the large number and type of players that have various relationships with the project, the team and the Carchi Consortium. It is important that we clarify that the methodology really considers groups of similar partners. We deem it very important to consider the different types of individuals in these groups to be able to program actions or relationships jointly. [1]

In the case of the Honduras Program, similar confusion took place within Mark Lundy's CIAT Learning Alliances project. At the beginning of the project, the 'project' was conceived to be CIAT staff. However, this soon changed, as members began to question who exactly should be determining the vision, mission and activities of a project targeting their members. It was determined that it was not, in fact, CIAT who was 'the project' (as implementer of project activities), but rather the organizations of the network. But it was also the organizations of the network who are targeted as boundary partners whose behaviour will be influenced by the project. The member organizations thus found themselves playing the role of both 'the project' and the boundary partners upon which the project was to influence behavioural changes.

OM vocabulary and terminology in the LAC context

In the Latin American context, there has been some difficulty with the OM vocabulary and the Spanish translation. For example, partners inevitably ask to what extent there are 'non-direct partners' when speaking of boundary partners as '*socios directos*'.

With regards to OM terminology, it is helpful to introduce the concepts without necessarily referring to the precise OM vocabulary or terminology, especially where this is likely to be confusing. The Evaluation Unit has shifted their training to focus on introducing concepts and principles, and less on terminology and precise steps of the OM methodology.

OM methodology impediments

A key issue that has come up is the huge time commitment and resources needed for OM. In the case of Honduras, it was noted that OM is presented as a tool kit of which pieces can be taken out and used. For its own learning and monitoring of Boundary Partners, the Honduras Program itself is focusing on two of the tools (Outcome Journals and Strategy Journals).

References

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[6] Nagaland Environmental Protection and Economic Development Project: A Self Assessment Using Outcome Mapping. Kohima, October 18-20, 1999. http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-27916-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

June 2004