THE EVALUATION OF RESEARCH ICT-AFRICA (RIA)
A CASE STUDY

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Prepared as part of the DECI-2 Project[1]

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

In 2013, IDRC contracted the DECI-2 team to help RIA 'look back' and assess the actual impact of its research to policy work in order to look forward and prepare the ground for future activities. To do this, the team employed the evaluation decision-making approach known as UFE. In this process, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention paid to how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experiences. The focus of utilization-focused evaluation is on identifying the intended use of the evaluation by its intended users.

The purpose of this case study is to tell the story of the Utilization Focused Evaluation process, how it evolved and was adapted to the RIA reality. It is a reflection on the evaluation process with attention to what worked, what could have been done differently; and the actual uses of the evaluation products and process. This evaluation was a departure for the DECI team from it normal role of providing mentoring and advice to a team of evaluators. In this case, the DECI team itself moved from being mentors to being evaluators using the UFE approach. However, they retained the facilitation and mentoring approach characteristic of DECI-2 and UFE.

The evaluation report outlines the work of RIA that revolves around a determination to build an African evidence and knowledge base. Its goal is to support ICT policy and regulatory processes, monitor and review policy and regulatory developments and advocate for more inclusive policies across the continent. In so doing, RIA has reached out to ICT scholars and formed a network that has generated considerable evidence-based information for policy makers and regulators. Its advocacy activities have led to policy and some regulatory changes in Southern Africa.

This case study explains how the evaluation team covered the 12 steps of UFE with attention to the process and it points out the challenges encountered giving examples of how the process and findings were utilized. In short, the evaluation focused on the following uses: validation of RIA outcomes for IDRC; providing evidence of, and documenting outcomes and relevance for other funders; informing the RIA transition; charting outcome pathways; tracking communication strategy outcomes; and, informing stakeholders about organizational sustainability.

The evaluators organized the findings using two conceptual frameworks: Lindquist's (2001) typology (affecting policy regimes; broadening policy horizons, and expanding policy capabilities) and the ODI RAPID framework.

The evaluation confirmed the value of a decade of funding of the RIA network by IDRC. It noted that even though it has taken this long for RIA to establish a strong track record, it now has success. It became quite clear that research does not yield policy outcomes overnight and that the strategic elements that underlie this approach need time to work as a system. RIA's main contribution within the African context has demonstratively been its commitment to rigorous research in the public interest.

RIA initially perceived the UFE process as daunting with its structured twelve steps, an onerous undertaking for an organization constantly coping with multiple urgencies and deadlines. It took some time to get the process underway and considerable energy to sustain some momentum despite unavoidable stops and starts.

"Utilization – Focused Evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use."[2] It is by this yardstick that the RIA Evaluation process was assessed. Both RIA and IDRC have already used parts of the evaluation in recent briefings, planning and reporting. Their joint ownership of the evaluation process led to a shared understanding and trust in the findings. The Executive director of RIA and the IDRC primary intended user (PIU) noted that:

- RIA is now making use of the Theory of Change and the RAPID framework to frame new proposals (including the latest proposal to IDRC) and to address gaps. IDRC has shared the evaluation report with RIA's sister organization LIRNEasia and with DFID, a funder of the INASSA program.
- RIA found it useful to have the evaluation actually document its outcomes and it will use this material in its proposals. RIA is also pleased that the topic of communication was addressed and its strategy made explicit. IDRC underlined that "the story needed to be told". The evaluation was used to show RIA's funders that its success is tangible; and now well documented.
- RIA will use the evaluation findings to frame its triennial report; and IDRC will use it in its Prospectus Review early in 2015. IDRC commented that by one of its staff becoming a PIU, it obliged the team to be actively engaged, as contrasted to being a passive recipient of the report. By being engaged as a PIU throughout the process there were reportedly no surprises.

The report concluded that the key factor contributing to the success of the evaluation process and its potential replication appears to be related to the framework that UFE provides. The clarity delivered by shaping the KEQs and by contributing to the development of an explicit Theory of Change further validated the process. The willingness of RIA (supported by IDRC) to have its story told by a third party was a positive factor, as was the urgency RIA felt with regards to having an evaluation take place.

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[2] Quinn Patton, Michael, 2012, Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation, page 4.

1.   The Setting

We were a team of five meeting in Cape Town, three Canadians and two from East and Southern Africa – Zimbabwe and Kenya. While all had evaluation experience, each brought different worldviews to the task and only two had worked through the UFE approach in the past. We had all met briefly in Rio and had had a glimpse of the Executive Director of RIA at the same conference. Apart from these brief encounters, we were new to each other as a DECI-2 Team, largely new to UFE and definitely new to the organization, known as RIA.

The RIA offices are on the second floor of the renovated Old Castle Brewery in Woodstock, just east of the Cape Town city centre. Everything about the building and about the RIA office itself were a reminder that this was the future and that RIA itself was positioned to make the future as accessible as possible to a larger population across Africa. The four of us climbed the iron staircase in the RIA office to a crow's nest boardroom perched on the edge of a loft with a full view of the city and a glimpse of Table Mountain. How could we work here in this heady atmosphere? Well, we could and we certainly did. The whole premise of UFE is to work with, rather than for, the organization being evaluated. It was important to make it clear that RIA would 'own' this evaluation and as such, staff members would have to roll up their sleeves and decide for themselves who would be the main 'users' of the evaluation; what would be the intended 'uses' and how the key evaluation questions would be framed to make sure the data collected responded to RIA's intended use.

The board table was cluttered, loads of coffee mugs, papers, computers and computer cords plus three members of the RIA team (the Executive Director of RIA, one of the researchers and the person who was called upon to run everything in the office and then some) along with the four members of the UFE team and a potential user on Skype from Cairo. The steps in the process were not always clear, but worked well enough to get us through the determination of a roster of USERS (including the program officer from Cairo who decided to take off his IDRC hat and consider himself a USER). Next, we continued with a definition of the main Uses, and made a valiant start at identifying the key evaluation questions. The process was not easy and on later reflection was really the pivotal point of the evaluation. If you get these steps right, the rest usually falls into place. We weren't able to complete the process while we were there. We went back to our respective countries and used Skype and telephone (when Skype didn't work for our colleague in Zimbabwe). Fortunately, we were able to lean on the team member versed in UFE to get us through the final round of determining key evaluation questions. Once we had these in place, it was time to identify the evidence needed to answer them; where that evidence would be found; and through what data collection instruments we could obtain it. From there, we had to work with RIA to prepare a list (a long one) of people to be interviewed and documents to be reviewed. By this time, although RIA works across Africa, we had collectively decided that the focus for the evaluation would be on RIA's work in South Africa (home base), Namibia (a RIA staff member had been embedded in the government in Windhoek), Nigeria (some RIA success stories), Ethiopia, one of the original RIA four countries (but an example where success was elusive)

and Kenya, where RIA had long been active with some success (and was the home of one of the UFE team members).

Time was always our enemy. We held the first meeting in Cape Town mid-November, but had to have everything ready to go by early December so that our two African team members could travel back to Cape Town for an IDRC sponsored meeting which brought partners together from across the continent and beyond. This session, we saw, was a perfect opportunity to organize face-to-face meetings with some of the main interviewees. This material would provide the team with a basic platform of information that could be triangulated with other input through subsequent Skype interviews. But nothing is smooth when you run against the clock. To begin with, the evaluation was called for and needed by the RIA team as soon as humanly possible due to the imminent end of a funding phase and the need for evidence of RIA success to attract new funds.

It is a challenge for a busy research organization involved in policy change to control its agenda. One example came during the second day of our desperately crammed two days with the team in Cape Town. Alison Gillwald, the Executive Director of RIA was called by the Minister to come to Pretoria to help with the draft of South African's broadband policy and needless to say the Minister took priority. There in front of us, we had an example of the 'real time' hectic schedule of an organization that aims to bring research to policy. It was a good beginning to the RIA story.

2.   The Background on the Evaluation

In 2013, IDRC contracted the DECI-2 team to help RIA 'look back' and assess the actual impact of its research to policy work in order to look forward and prepare the ground for future activities. The approach we chose to employ was Utilization-focused Evaluation (UFE).

"Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use" (Patton, 2008: 37). In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention paid to how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experiences. The focus of utilization-focused evaluation is on intended use by intended users. UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method or theory. It is a decision-making framework, not a methodology. It can include any purpose of interest to the user(s). It is a process for making decisions in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation. It is based on the observation that intended users are more likely to utilize an evaluation that they own.

In UFE, the definition of primary users is open to different stakeholders: they may be the funders of a project, or its implementers or even its beneficiaries. This decision may be delicate and it calls for a review of **readiness** at the very start of the process. While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).

The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing evaluators' readiness; identifying primary intended users' identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and it needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others. Readiness has to do with having a team that is keen to be closely involved in all steps of an evaluation; having funders who are willing to allow partners' engagement in the design of the evaluation; having the time and resources to complete all steps; and a genuine interest in learning and applying the findings to improve projects.
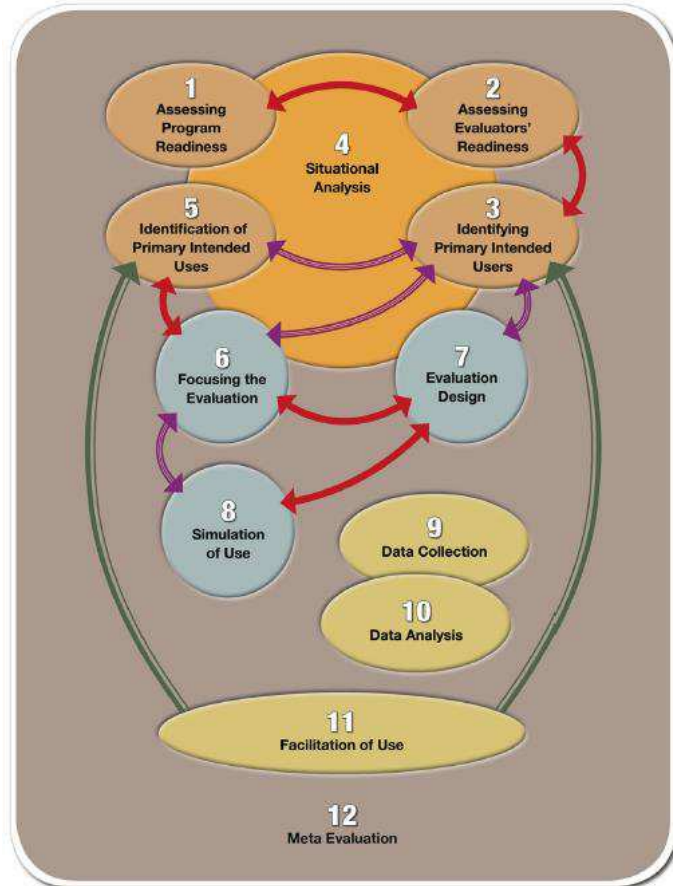
Focusing the evaluation takes place through the definition of **key evaluation questions** that in turn guide the design of the evaluation. 'Simulation' is about test-driving plausible data sets to double check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when it appears that some questions may not be as strategic as they first appeared.

A unique aspect of UFE is Step 11: facilitation of use, that ensures the findings and evaluation processes are fed back to the users. The closing step 12 captures the experience through a meta-evaluation, as exemplified by this case study.[3]

Our first meeting with the RIA team underscored all these points. The concept of 'readiness' was soon resolved given that it was RIA itself that had asked for the evaluation to be able to 'tell the RIA story' for the current donor, for future donors and to help them make the work

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[3] In the latest book on UFE by Michael Quinn Patton, five additional steps have been added – which we treat as optional.
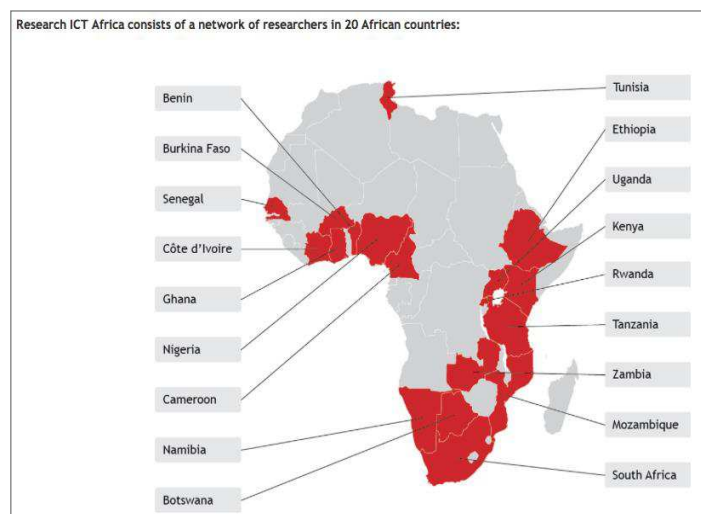
that they knew they were doing – visible. This clear cut 'intended use' informed the process and provided the basic platform, from which other 'uses' were identified.

The evaluation confirmed the value of a decade of funding of the RIA network by IDRC. It has taken some time to establish its track record, but then research does not yield policy outcomes overnight and the strategic elements that underlie this approach take time to work as a system. RIA's main contribution within the African context has demonstratively been its commitment to rigorous research in the public interest.

The evaluation presented the UFE team with an opportunity to dig into the possible consequences of the RIA research. We did this by listening to thoughts and opinions about the organization from its staff. We contacted fellow researchers in South Africa and across the continent; spoke to policy makers who had been affected by their work and ICT opinion makers in Africa and around the world. In effect, we came away with a broader vision of the impact of ICT within the development context and a firmer belief that good research can impact policy if it is packaged and managed in such a way that it actually does help governments change their rules.

3. The Organization – Research ICT Africa (RIA)

The work of RIA revolves around a determination to build an African evidence and knowledge base that can support ICT policy and regulatory processes, monitor and review policy and regulatory developments and advocate for more inclusive policies across the continent. By doing this, RIA has reached out to ICT scholars and formed a network that has generated considerable evidence-based information for policy makers and regulators.

Research ICT Africa consists of a network of researchers in 20 African countries:

Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia, Botswana, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa

As indicated in a case study by INASP:
"RIA provides African researchers, governments, regulators, operators, multilateral institutions, development agencies, community organizations and trade unions with the information and analysis required to develop innovative and appropriate policies, effective implementation and successful network operations that can contribute to sustainable development.[4] A central goal is the generation of evidence-based information for policy makers and regulators.[5] RIA

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[4] Deans, F. 2011. Supporting Acacia research partners in communicating for policy influence: Needs assessment report. INASP (p.33)
[5] Research ICT Africa, Evidence-based ICT Policy and Development and Innovation, Fourth Interim Technical and Financial Report for IDRC, February, 2013. (p.2)

embodies a crucial nexus between research, evidence, policy and advocacy in ICT through an active role in research communication.

4.   The UFE Journey – the *What*

As indicated earlier, the UFE process is guided by 12 steps that are adapted to fit the contextual situation. The steps are covered in an iterative manner and at the pace of the project being evaluated. However, the UFE framework emphasizes a logical order wherein **users**, **uses** and **key evaluation questions** (KEQs) are spelled out before choosing a methodology to implement the evaluation.

The IDRC Cairo office and RIA needed an evaluation to document achievements, identify gaps, and revise the proposal for the next phase of IDRC funding. It also needed the evaluation to support fund-raising from other donors for its next cycle. These requirements established the context for Step 1 (readiness).

This first meeting with RIA took place in Cape Town in October 2013 with the full five members of the DECI-2 team. Step 2, evaluator readiness was partially solved by having the entire DECI 2 team at the first meeting allowing the new mentors (2 African and 1 Canadian) to 'get their UFE feet wet' with support from the two with prior UFE experience. After a discussion on steps one and two, the meeting moved on to work with UFE Step 3 (identification of primary intended users), Step 4 (definition of uses), and Step 5 (focusing the evaluation) was initiated. Step 6 (evaluation design) was subsequently completed via Skype and email communications.

The Primary Intended Users (PIUs) identified by RIA included: Alison Gillwald, Executive Director; Christoph Stork, Senior Researcher; Ondine Bello, Coordinator and Administrator; Enrico Calandro, Research Fellow; and Khaled Fourati, IDRC Program Officer, Cairo[6].

Even though the USES had notionally been established right from the start, it took some discussion to find the exact wording to cover a meaning acceptable to both the RIA and DECI teams. In the end, the USES were identified as:
1)   To validate RIA outcomes for IDRC;
2)   To provide evidence of, and document outcomes/ relevance for other funders (e.g. OSI);
3)   To Inform RIA transition (leadership, skills, funding);
4)   To chart outcome pathways;
5)   To chart communication strategy outcomes; and,
6)   To inform organizational sustainability.

It was challenging to come up with a proposed set of key evaluation questions that everyone felt would be able to uncover the required data. The rudimentary questions were put together

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[6] Khaled Fourati's departure from IDRC in early 2014 meant the loss of a PIU from the main donor organization; we sought to replace him with Laurent Elder, Program Leader, though such a late change meant the new user had not been part of the early exploration.

collectively in Cape Town but not completed without subsequent Skype discussion between Canada, East and Southern Africa and RIA in the Cape Town office. This step was a pivotal point in evaluation preparation and worth the time spent to ensure that the wording of questions was suitable to all. Finally, we collectively came up with a set of focussed key evaluation questions acceptable to all parties:

1) To what extent did RIA influence policy at national, regional and international levels [outputs / outcomes]?
2) How does RIA use research to challenge dominant international policy and practice?
3) To what extent did RIA build capacity (generation and utilization of local knowledge) among: i) individual researchers; ii) universities; and iii) policy makers & regulators?
4) To what extent did RIA networking modalities support their outcomes (policy and capacity building)? a) RIA network (peer network) versus b) CPR conference (peer and mentoring review process – individuals)
5. a) What approach did RIA use to position itself to influence policy in different countries and through what processes and systems (tell the story) [outcomes/ process]?
5. b) How effective has RIA been in understanding the local context or taking up opportunities to influence local discourse?
6. a) What would be the funding modalities that best fit RIA's values?
6. b) What are the consequences, incentives, disincentives for RIA as an independent public interest research entity in pursuing a hybrid funding model?[7]

The evaluators then matched the KEQs with the type of data and evidence needed, along with the data sources and data collection methods. The following is a sample format:

USE	KEQ	DATA / EVIDENCE	DATA SOURCES / METHODS
To validate RIA outcomes for IDRC	1) To what extent did RIA influence policy at national, regional and international levels [outputs/ outcomes]?	1.1) Select 2-3 country policy contexts and one sub-region in Africa; explain the selection. 1.2) Identify policy examples that have shifted during the RIA lifetime; explain their selection.	**Website -** policy briefs/ policy papers/ blogs/ cuttings, policy papers/opinions/influence **RIA briefs, handbooks** (as examples of influence mechanisms) **Interviews** with policy makers and others to tell the story or illustrate policy change as it relates to a RAPID FRAMEWORK

Two members of the team travelled to Cape Town in December 2013 to coincide with the ICTD 2013 conference that brought together many RIA and IDRC partners that were key informants for the RIA evaluation. During some of these sessions, some refinement of the KEQs took place. In particular, the last KEQ was dropped. It focused on documenting the willingness to pay for services and/or support by some partners and clients. The users felt the question would be difficult to address and might not provide the evidence needed to satisfy the USE. This process

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[7] RIA is pursuing core funding from IDRC and funding from other sources for individual projects or programs.

of revision reflected to some extent the use of UFE Step 8 where a simulation of findings is used to review the merits of the KEQs and their use.

The main data collection methods included:
- Documentation review.
- Focus group discussions.
- Semi-structured interviews.
- Observation.
- An on-line survey.

A great deal of effort went into thinking about how to identify and synthesize important insights from masses of data, reports and all kinds of information produced by RIA. Sorting out which strategies had produced an impact was the focus of the search. The evaluators organized the findings using two conceptual frameworks: Lindquist's (2001)[8] typology (affecting policy regimes; broadening policy horizons, and expanding policy capabilities) and the ODI RAPID framework.

The period of data collection was short (six weeks) and intense. RIA had provided a long list of key informants along with email and Skype addresses where appropriate. Emails would quite often elicit no response. This inaction led the team to constantly consider whether it was appropriate to push further or to view the lack of response as an indicator of disinterest. In the end, the decision to push further through telephone or other means tended to win out. This effort helped the team glean a more rounded response to the KEQs. During this period, the two Africa-based team members travelled to Nigeria, Namibia, and interviewed partners in Kenya and Ethiopia. Two of the Canadian-based team members sought out interviews with contacts in international organizations and with regulators in Southern Africa. All interviews (a total of 20 interviews) contributed to a jigsaw of insights and findings. The evaluation team produced a draft report that was shared with the primary intended users (PIUs) ahead of a last visit to Cape Town in February 2014. The draft report and recommendations were reviewed during that trip to ensure relevance; in UFE this is Step 11 – Facilitation of use. The final report was revised with inputs from the PIUs and completed in April 2014. As indicated above, this case study constitutes Step 12: meta-evaluation.

5.   The UFE Journey – the *How*

As stated earlier, the RIA evaluation was a departure from the normal DECI-2 support role, in that the DECI-2 Team members changed from being UFE mentors to being evaluators using the UFE approach. This change provided valuable experience to both the evaluators and the staff whose project was being assessed. It illustrated the practical implementation challenges and potential for impact.

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[8] Lindquist, E.A. 2001. Discerning Policy Influence: a Framework for Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Supported Research. University of Victoria.

Initially, RIA's positive track record in Africa was somewhat intimidating for some members of the DECI-2 team who felt not much could be learned to improve an organization that was already doing well in the eyes of its partners. So a question arose: what more could be learned which could be of benefit to RIA?

The interesting (and beneficial) aspect of the diversity of the DECI-2 Team is that its members' perspectives and relative experience differed on several fronts. The differences were not only based on prior evaluation experience (and everyone had that) but on perceptions of the type of questioning needed to seek evidence, the knowledge of when to push and when to hold back and weighting of value of different aspects of the approach. As noted, the team consisted of two members experienced in using UFE and three others who were implementing a UFE approach for the first time. Although everyone had had previous evaluation experience, their expectations varied considerably, but all viewed the exercise as a real learning opportunity. Individually, those new to the approach looked forward to getting a handle on the application of this non-traditional decision-making framework and to adding this technique to their evaluation toolboxes.

There was also a shared anticipation in terms of how a UFE framework could be applied to a project at the network level with the involvement of over a dozen partners, as well as in the context of a multi-country situation. The organizational dimension was of considerable interest in that the project was ten years old, with established relationships and yet in the near future changes were expected inside RIA and in its networking strategy.

As a result of mentoring in other DECI-2 situations, it was expected that some RIA project staff might initially perceive the UFE process as complex and onerous. RIA itself reported that its experience of being a USER felt initially like an added weight since the evaluation came at a time when the project staff was under immense pressure and it followed a period of rapid organizational growth and imminent change.

Challenges

Fundamentally, UFE is about the key project stakeholders changing their perceptions of evaluation from an exercise imposed on them or done to them to one that engages them from start to finish. UFE calls for a sizeable mind shift and consequent change of role and responsibilities. Consistent with other UFE experiences, the DECI 2 team anticipated that helping the project stakeholders – the primary intended users (PIUs) – act differently, as the actual owners of the process would take some effort. The tension between the staff engagement necessary for the UFE process to work and the demands of their day-to-day responsibilities tested the flexibility of the process as time was limited. Appointments had to be shifted in line with the availability of the USERs in several countries. This juggling meant that although we were trying to support RIA in taking on unfamiliar evaluation roles and responsibilities (e.g., allocation of time for reflection, etc.); we were competing with the dynamic *status quo*. It was like trying to slow down a train that is already moving speedily in a different direction.

The organizational dynamics in, and pressures on RIA were mitigating factors during the rollout of the evaluation. There was a strong leader who played the major USER role with limited input from some of the other designated USERS. This situation was due to work pressures, locational positioning in other countries and RIA's operational style. There was also an early change of USER with the departure of the IDRC Cairo program officer and his replacement by the Ottawa based Program Leader.

It took some time to get the process underway and considerable energy to sustain some momentum, between apparently unavoidable stops and starts. Obtaining feedback on the draft findings from RIA took time, as did scheduling Skype sessions to jointly review and analyze the evaluation findings. Obtaining the involvement of RIA in shaping the draft recommendations proved harder than anticipated, but it ultimately happened in a mutually satisfactory manner[9]. Getting people to draft their own recommendations is like asking someone to mark their own exams. You are hesitant to be so rigorous as to give yourself 49%; however, neither can your humility allow you to give yourself a 95%.

The DECI-2 team wondered internally about interviewing persons not identified by the PIUs, although UFE clearly places emphasis upon the USERS shaping the process. Ultimately, the Team stuck to the legitimacy of USERS making the choices and in subsequent conversations it was pointed out by the Executive Director that RIA had expected some criticism, as well as accolades, from the respondents they had named. In other words, the list of stakeholders arrived at was comprehensive and included those with a critical view of RIA.

Within the DECI-2 Team itself with some of its members new to the UFE approach, an early challenge was how to clearly introduce and explain the UFE approach while they were learning on the job. RIA had been exposed to other approaches to evaluation such as Outcome Mapping, so it was important to help RIA understand the uniqueness of UFE and how to choose USERS, USES and to select clear KEQs. Furthermore, we clarified that UFE and Outcome Mapping can be complementary, as the former is a broad decision-making framework and the latter a methodology.

The role of a donor/donor representative (IDRC) as a Primary User of the RIA evaluation was interesting. In the original UFE texts (Patton and Primer), there is an indication that the involvement of a resource provider as an evaluation User might constrain the liberty project users would like to have for an evaluation process. The original IDRC PIU was present in the sessions (via Skype) when we developed the RIA Evaluation Uses. He contributed to refining the Uses and Questions, although his inputs were limited. His interest was to become a learner of the UFE process, as well as an un-biased supporter of the RIA project. This behaviour was emulated by his replacement. The fact that IDRC knows the RIA team rather well after ten years of engagement, and that the future funding was not in question, also meant that the IDRC PIUs adopt a learning mode.

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[9] The DECI team eventually drafted the recommendations and sent them to RIA for approval.

Implementation

The essential strength of the UFE framework is in its use as a decision-making tool. UFE encourages a learning process wherein those being evaluated participate actively in its design, delivery and ultimately the ownership of its findings and recommendations. Engendering a sense of ownership is integral to the implementation process and needs to be enabled at every step. Involving RIA in defining its Theory of Change, framing recommendations and reviewing the report was the climax of the evaluation. Since the donor (IDRC) was a key USER, its feedback gave RIA levels of comfort that could have been missing if an external evaluator had been doing his/her thing independently only to surprise RIA with his/her findings in a final report (damning or good).

One of the Africa-based DECI-2 team members contrasted the RIA UFE with another case he had experienced - he called it a story about ownership.

> *"An organization known as ZOIC had the habit of hiring consultants every year to evaluate it activities. Each consultant produced a report. When we sat down to read the reports we realized that they always made the same recommendations which were not implemented. In UFE, the very act of mentoring an organization can be regarded as implementation. It's a movement from reports to action and learning on the fly."*

As evaluators, we had to adjust our team approach to fit the RIA reality. Given the complexity of the evaluation in terms of content and implementation, two Canadian-based members acted as the Team leads and supported our regional mentors. This shift in responsibilities gave the regional team members, who were relatively new to UFE, more opportunity to learn through practice during the limited time available. The Africa-based mentors had to adjust to the intense schedules of many of the informants, especially those who are engaged in policy making or combining several jobs. The following case illustrates some of the challenges faced in the data collection:

> *"Due to the geographical spread of RIA's selected respondents, some of the informant interviews had to be carried out wherever the respondents could be located and engaged in conversation. In many instances, this meant telephone and Skype interviews. For Professor Tim Waema, a lecturer of Bioinformatics at the University of Nairobi, the conversation had to take place while he rushed to a lecture hall after our office appointment had failed due to the congested city traffic. Trying to understand his role in IRA and the effect that the network's research had on the country's policies, while quickly walking and running to class was quite interesting. He, however, continued to share information as he organized his class notes. Listening to his powerful voice some of the students thought he was already giving the day's lecture and they started to take notes. It was clear that many of RIA's achievements continued to be useful educational materials for his students, many of who may later become researchers or policy makers in the same ICT sector. This input was*

> *recognized as one of the ways RIA made impacts in national policies through capacity building processes."*

Another implementation challenge arose when defining a realistic USER role for RIA and in identifying the uses carefully. We found ourselves strenuously pushing RIA. At certain times, it felt as if we might have been going too far. We were informed by RIA later that the supportive pressure was understood to have been necessary and helpful. In reality, UFE had to fight for its place amongst competing priorities given the limitations of staff time and resources, and to do this the process needed to be flexible and able to adjust.

Distance and complexity also played a part in the roll-out of the evaluation. The challenge of undertaking interviews in Kenya, Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa in a relatively short space of time necessitated a division of the work. Each country was visited by one of the four of us and the Skype interviews were also shared amongst the team members.

Finally, the old adage that he who holds the pen guides the process did come into play. Given the distance and complexity noted above the Canadian team members took the lead in crafting the first draft of the report. This license allowed the team to explore the growing evidence that a great deal of the communication and advocacy work that RIA was doing actually fell into ODI's RAPID framework around research to policy implementation. Similarly the RIA change management strategy was drawn into focus by sketching out a Theory of Change that is included in the report. This exercise simply clarified what RIA was already doing implicitly and made its strategy explicit conceptually within some well-known frameworks.

6.   Outcomes

"Utilization – Focused Evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use."[10] It is by this yardstick that the RIA Evaluation process should be judged.

In terms of immediately identifiable achievements that speak to future uses of the UFE approach, there are a number. It is clear that the investment in time at the front-end in clearly explaining the UFE process, as well as the work on honing the KEQs and the crafting of their TOC, led to the effective buy-in of RIA. The process was an opportunity for RIA to listen to itself and to capture the story of its work.

Both RIA and IDRC report having already used parts of the evaluation in recent briefings, planning and reporting. Their joint ownership of the evaluation process led to a shared understanding and ownership of the findings. We interviewed the main USERS to confirm actual types of use which resulted[11]:

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[10] Quinn Patton, Michael, 2012, Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation, page 4.
[11] We used a framework that was adapted from Kusters et al, 2011 (table 1.1) which was in turn adapted from Williams (2009) and Mark (2009). It appears in Kusters' book: 'Making evaluations matter: a practical guide for evaluators' (http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/Publication-details.htm?publicationId=publication-way-343035343531)

In terms of use, the Executive director of RIA and the IDRC PIU noted that:

1. *Direct and Instrumental Use – internal & external*
   RIA is now making use of the Theory of Change and the RAPID framework to frame new proposals (including the latest proposal to IDRC) and to address gaps. IDRC has shared that report with RIA's sister organization LIRNEasia and with DFID, a funder of the INASSA program that is expected to provide funding for some of RIA's next phase.

2. *Conceptual Use*
   RIA is pleased to have the evaluation actually document their outcomes and it will use this material in its proposals. RIA is also pleased that the topic of communication was addressed and its strategy made explicit. IDRC underlined that "the story needed to be told". Some issues that were highlighted in the Theory of Change, such as the value of credibility and legitimacy, have now been picked up by the IDRC I&N team in highlighting the same issues at the program level.

3. *Symbolic Use*
   The evaluation was used to show RIA's funders that its success is tangible, documented - before we always used to talk about our outcomes, but now we can give them something concrete and in writing.

4. *Reporting & Process Use*
   RIA will use the evaluation findings to frame its triennial report; and IDRC will use it in its Prospectus Review early in 2015. IDRC commented that by becoming a PIU, it obliged them to be actively engaged, as contrasted to being a passive recipient of the report. By being engaged throughout there were no surprises.
   Alison Gillwald was pleased to have gone through the evaluation experience (sometimes painful) and is now using the findings, the recommendations and both the Theory of Change and the Communication Strategy to inform her work. This utilization can be attributed to the sense of involvement and decision-making in terms of how the evaluation was constructed, its purposes defined (uses) and its final recommendations drafted.

7.   Lessons

The evaluation of RIA, using a UFE approach, built upon the accumulated experience gained during DECI-1 and the current DECI-2 project. However, it marked a departure from DECI-2's normal mentorship and capacity-building focus, into one of direct implementation of an evaluation. It generated a number of useful lessons:

Relevance

The key factor contributing to the success of the UFE evaluation process and its potential replication appears to be related to the framework that UFE provides. Once understood, its potential to deliver a different type of evaluation, one associated with learning, project ownership and usefulness seems to resonate. The clarity delivered by shaping the KEQs and by

contributing to the development of an explicit Theory of Change further validated the process. The ODI RAPID framework helped the project look at itself through a new lens.

The willingness of RIA (supported by IDRC) to have its story told by a third party was a positive factor, as was the urgency RIA felt with regards to having an evaluation done. The fact that RIA's track record and credibility were already established did not hurt.

Replication

It appears that the UFE framework is replicable, in particular when a project has a definite evaluation activity planned within a specific timeframe. It may however be more challenging where a project does not have an evaluation plan or resources allocated and there is little urgency. Readiness to undertake this work, to allocate sufficient time and appropriate resources are key factors, along with the intent to learn. In the case of RIA, the limited availability of time was an issue, although the flexibility of the UFE process was helpful.

The development of a TOC as part of the process should be replicable if there is a willingness to make explicit the implicit strategies and organizational behavior.

Commitment

The passion of the project team is essential and RIA's will be hard to match. RIA did report that the past and present evaluators[12] had been people who were really interested in assisting and helping it 'find the gaps,' and that they understood the value of finding strong evidence for the work that has been done.

Ownership

Given the competing pressures that RIA was experiencing at the time of the evaluation (and likely at other times as well), RIA realized that it was not giving enough time to the UFE process. It understood that the process was only going to work if RIA gave it sufficient time. There is some disappointment that there was only a limited opportunity for more staff at RIA to take ownership. However, in actual fact, the Executive Director did take ownership to the extent possible – which was considerable – and the regret may simply be that more RIA staff members were not able to be fully involved.

Opportunities Missed

In following the UFE steps, it did not turn out to be possible to undertake a simulation of the data findings that might have been useful in clarifying the data requirements further. It was also not possible for all members of the Team to carry out face-to-face interviews that could have added additional depth to the findings. Some members of the DECI-2 team remain interested in the potential benefits of contacting persons outside of those designated by RIA in order to get greater insight into the policy-making process. When we mentioned this possibility to RIA, there was openness to this idea, although in their minds the original list of partners did include some contacts with more critical views of the project.

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[12] As far back as the GAMOS evaluation.

Conclusion

This UFE exercise has helped RIA and IDRC focus on what matters most in a planned evaluation. It has also shown the value of working together with partners, rather than having an external evaluator - who is not close to the situation - impose a methodology designed from afar.

Carrying out the RIA evaluation directly was an opportunity to learn through practice for the DECI-2 Team members. It emphasized clearly the good sense of involving those being evaluated in the process and the value of avoiding surprises at the end of the process.

It was an instructive learning process for all concerned. It was music to our ears (in UFE terms) that RIA concluded that they now have a 'comprehensive and powerful document' that tells their story 'in a way that is demonstrable.' If UFE evaluators' performance is measured by actual use, this assertion speaks to a positive result.

8.   Postscript

In February 2014, an opportunity came up to split the travel costs with another initiative for the team to be able to reassemble in Cape Town.[13] The draft report had been sent ahead along with tentative recommendations so that this time the USERS and the DECI-2 team could review the findings, correct any mis-information (there was a significant amount) and collectively decide on recommendations. It was another hectic time trying to cram all this work into a 2-day period while once again Alison was necessarily distracted by imminent changes within the organization, its staff, its structure and indeed its future direction.

At this time, RIA's other lead researcher and statistician (Christoph Stork) was leaving RIA to join with another (independent) researcher to form an arm's length independent consultancy arm of the RIA organization. The team once more sat together in the room with the crow's nest view and worked its way through the draft report – sometimes forming little sub-groups to rewrite parts of the text. The intake of information was fast and furious and it was a struggle to keep up and 'get it all done' within the allotted time. (The discussions were intense enough for Alison to postpone a high-level phone call in order to get the writing done.) In the end, the DECI-2 members did draft the key recommendations, but each one had been thoroughly discussed with the RIA USERS before committing them to text. A final write up and a Skype call with Alison ended the process in time to allow RIA to use the evaluation for their future initiatives.

For those of us who were first time UFE practitioners, the experience clarified a process that can only be learned through practice. We came away with understanding that probably key to it all is the focus on the USERS, USES and KEQs that allow the organization being evaluated to step up and own the process.

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[13] Only two Canadian team members and the two African DECI-2 members attended.