



DEVELOPING EVALUATION AND
COMMUNICATION CAPACITY IN
INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH

DECI-2: Research Study

**Building capacity among regional evaluation and
communication consultants**

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Table of contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	3
Regional consultants' understanding of capacity development before and after DECI-2	3
Regional consultants' understanding of mentoring before and after DECI-2	4
Lessons on Readiness	6
Organizational readiness.....	6
Mentee's readiness	8
Mentor's readiness.....	9
Lessons on Implementation and Capacity Development	10
Practical wisdom as a capacity development outcome in DECI-2.....	12
Experiences showing value in the intersection between UFE and ResCom	13
Challenges and suggestions for improvement.....	14
Conclusions	15
References	17

Executive summary

DECI-2 is a research project that provides capacity development in both evaluation and communication for IDRC research projects in the Information & Networks Program (I&N). One of the project's assumptions is that offering Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) and Research Communication (ResCom) mentorship not only enhances an internal learning culture within organizations, but helps develop capacity among the regional consultants who participate in the project as mentors. This paper explores the second part of this assumption and tries to determine the extent to which DECI-2 has helped develop capacity among regional consultants in terms of concepts and practices of both U-FE and ResCom.

A number of semi-structured interviews were conducted among consultants who have participated as mentors or as principal investigators in DECI-2. The findings suggest that mentorship has worked better in Asia than in Africa and Latin America - most likely due to previous mentorship experience - which highlights the importance of context. However, there is enough evidence showing that the DECI-2 mentorship experience has helped regional consultants develop a deeper understanding about the practice of U-FE and ResCom. In this regard, DECI-2's main capacity development contributions have been helping participating consultants:

1. Acquire a better understanding about the enabling factors for capacity development at the organizational level, particularly about the notion of readiness as a critical pre-requisite for engaging in learning.
2. Acquire an appreciation of the complexity of implementing capacity development initiatives as part of a project's strategy. Although U-FE and ResCom mentoring may seem attractive to project managers and to other participants, its implementation tends to be a complex process.
3. Learn about different barriers to organizational learning and acquire skills that can help overcome them.
4. Experience mentorship as a learning partnership through which the mentor and the mentee co-create knowledge as they try to achieve specific objectives.
5. Explore DECI-2's approach of learning by doing, which has allowed them to acquire practical wisdom to intuitively deal with emergent issues throughout different phases of mentoring.
6. Become aware of the importance of undertaking capacity development as an on-going process, rather than as a one-off activity. At the same time, the mentorship experience has helped consultants realize that most organizations tend to see the value late in the process, so it is critical to sustain interest and motivation in the early stages of the process. From this perspective, commitment from the top management level and organizational willingness to remain engaged in the learning process were identified as key success factors.
7. Acquire better understanding of the connection between evaluation and communication.

Introduction

DECI-2 is a research project that has provided capacity development in both evaluation and communication for IDRC research projects in the Information & Networks Program (I&N). One of the project's assumptions has been that offering Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) and Research Communication (ResCom) mentorship not only enhances an internal learning culture within organizations, but also helps develop capacity among the regional consultants who participated in the project as mentors¹. As part of the research, two participating consultants - Charles Dhewa (East and Southern Africa) and Joaquin Navas (South America) - inquired into two main questions: (i) To what extent has DECI-2 helped develop capacity in the concepts and practices of both U-FE and ResCom among regional consultants? (ii) What evidence is there to support the findings? While feedback was gathered from five other regional consultants who participated as mentors and the two principal investigators (PI) of the DECI-2 project, the authors also included their own perspectives on the extent to which DECI2 has influenced their practice.

Regional consultants' understanding of capacity development before and after DECI-2

Although most regional mentors mentioned that DECI-2 did not substantially change their overall concept of capacity development, they all concurred that it has strengthened and reinforced their understanding of capacity development as an important element that requires sufficient organizational buy-in. Organizations need to see capacity development as a long-term investment that generates value and in this process, trained staff should be willing to use the acquired capacity. From this perspective, commitment from the top management level of an organization is one of the key success indicators of whether a capacity development program will contribute to positive impact or not.

The mentoring experience to which regional consultants were exposed in DECI-2 highlighted organizational and individual readiness as the most critical pre-requisite for capacity building through sustained mentorship. Within the DECI-2 context, readiness was understood as the organizational willingness to engage in the learning process and the actual allocation of enough financial, human resources and time to support such engagement. The criticality of readiness - both at the organizational and individual levels - was perhaps the main contribution of DECI-2 to enhance the mentors' understanding of capacity building. While readiness has to be achieved and sustained, achieving it is a bit of an art.

Another key learning point raised by mentors is that capacity building seems to work better when it is not a one-off event but an incremental process that allows people to engage with it when they are ready. Accordingly, some mentors mentioned that their involvement in DECI-2 has helped them acquire a clearer perspective on capacity development as a continuous process that requires time to bring about outcomes or changes. This challenges the dominant training paradigm where training is often measured in number of days rather than in terms of the quality of the process of an on-going activity. Hence, the DECI-2 mentoring experience suggests that capacity

¹ By "mentor" we mean someone who provides training and on-going support to another person – the mentee – so that he or she can gain enough confidence to conduct an evaluation or develop and implement a communication strategy within the context of a specific project.

development should be integrated into the project's life-cycle. One of the regional mentors describes how this experience enhanced understanding of capacity development as follows:

“I have come across a very wide range of meanings attached to capacity development, from ‘knowledge’ to ‘tools’ to ‘means’ (resources) but working with DECI-2 has awakened me to fresh barriers to capacity development such as ‘readiness’, mentor-mentee relationships, extended capacity targets and outcomes (from immediately targeted hubs to their effects on others at the grantee level). This realization means that when developing capacity development indicators, we should be clear on what exactly was implied and targeted so that the right performance parameters can be used.”

Another regional mentor added an important dimension of DECI-2 as a capacity development initiative:

“What I have enjoyed about capacity building in DECI-2 is that it places equal emphasis on our learning as mentors. This strategy is contrary to conventional capacity building approaches where once one undergoes training one is considered an expert. By enabling and encouraging learners to reflect as they learn, the DECI-2 approach has positively changed my notion of capacity development.”

Regional consultants’ understanding of mentoring before and after DECI-2

Before working in the DECI-2 project, the regional consultants who have acted as mentors had different understandings about mentoring. For example, one mentor understood mentoring as accompanying an individual through a new process. While the objectives of such a scenario are learning and teaching, the learning is hands on (by doing) and the teaching is guidance. The DECI-2 experience has broadened this understanding by letting mentors experience it more as a learning partnership between the mentor and the mentee in order to achieve a specific objective. The mentor is also a learner due to the uniqueness of each mentee and of the programme's context. Another mentor used to understand mentoring as providing support to learners. What changed with exposure to DECI-2 is how that ‘support’ translates into action, from a reactive to a proactive support. A mentor engages and tries to understand circumstances within which the programme is being run and pre-empts the discussion based on the mentor's understanding and experience. One of the mentors describes this learning as follows: *“I learnt that a mentor has to be like an amoeba – your tentacles extend when needed and withdraw when the mentee is ready to take over - that is what a mentor has to sense”*.

For some of the mentors, trust also emerged as a key factor in mentoring. However, it has not been adequately explored or mentioned in on-going mentoring. The mentee goes through a rough journey of one step forward and two steps backwards. Trust - in the mentor as well as in the learning process and its value - is difficult to sustain, so there is an absolute need for face-to-face interaction periodically during the process in order to build not only trust, but also understanding. While some mentees have found virtual means such as webinars useful, these do not seem to have the potential to replace face-to-face interaction for building trust. Furthermore, face-to-face meetings - especially field visits - are most valuable in helping mentors better understand the

context in which a particular project is embedded (organizational, political, social, cultural, etc.). It also gives the mentor a chance to explain and elaborate more details about a particular programme's Theory of Change.

Another mentor mentioned that before working in DECI-2, he used to see mentoring as someone's development of a particular skill guided by someone else who is more knowledgeable or experienced. However, as a result of the DECI-2 experience, he now sees the trainee's growth as *"a co-development process in the sense that the mentor – who has more knowledge and experience - leads in introduction of a method or approach, but the trainee is allowed to add his/her views and adapt it to his/her context. At the same time, the mentor's learning is enriched by observing how different mentees adapt the process to their own reality"*.

One of the consultants said DECI-2 allowed him to better understand mentoring in the following words:

"Mentoring includes learning and partnership development between the mentor and the mentee to support achievement of specific and well-defined objectives of a programme or project. This process helps those who are mentored with intensive, one-to-one mentoring for a certain period of time. The mentors are those with knowledge and experience in specific areas of expertise that are relevant for the project (U-FE and ResCom in the case of DECI-2). The mentees are those who master the subject of the programme and are knowledgeable about the conditions and ultimate goals that the programme aims to achieve. While the mentee takes the leading role, the mentor guides the mentee through planning and implementation of key areas of the programme – like evaluation and communication."

Another mentor mentioned that her involvement in DECI-2 allowed her to enhance her concept of effective mentoring by connecting it with the concept of coaching:

"In my understanding, there is a slight difference between mentoring and coaching. Mentoring is a relationship built between the mentor (someone who has special expertise in a specific area) and the mentee (project implementer or practitioner who needs guidance from the expert of specific area to help implement a project more effectively). In this case, the mentor is usually an outsider while the mentee is the key actor or doer who implements the project plan. In coaching, the relationship between the coach and coachee tends to be collaborative where the coach and coachee are part of the team involved in designing and implementing the plan. They both work collaboratively to achieve their common goals. One way to describe the DECI-2 mentoring experience is by saying that it is a combination of coaching and mentoring, or as Dal would say, "moaching".

Another interesting contribution to the understanding of mentoring is the notion that mentoring is about raising the level of confidence of the mentee as s/he carries out different tasks with support from a mentor. In this sense, one of DECI-2 project leads suggested that when it comes to mentoring, it seems useful to think about the phases of confidence the mentee goes through.

Going back to the amoeba analogy, these phases give the mentor the sense of when to extend or withdraw the tentacles.

Mentors also mentioned coming across small organizations that did not have the capacity to absorb the mentoring being provided. This raised the importance of determining absorptive capacity in iterative ways while demonstrating the value of the mentoring process. In such situations, nudging has also become one of the softer skills of the mentoring equation. *“It is somebody who believes in it who actually nudges”*, added one mentor. However, a low organizational capacity to absorb what mentorship can offer could also reflect lack of readiness, in the sense that the organization could be unable or unwilling to assign additional human resources to the learning process.

Lessons on Readiness

Given that readiness has been identified as the most critical pre-requisite for sustained U-FE and ResCom mentorship, it is worthwhile dedicating a section to the topic. All the regional consultants who have been involved in DECI-2 agree that readiness needs to happen at three different levels: at the organizational level, at the evaluator’s level, and at the mentee’s level.

Organizational readiness

Organizational readiness happens when the organization sees enough potential value in the evaluation and communication learning process as a long-term investment and allocates financial resources, human resources and time to engage in it. Readiness should be part of project acceptance. However, people connect with readiness in different languages. Prior to the project, most participating mentors had a vague idea about the concept and related it to the idea of “eagerness” or “commitment from top managers”. DECI-2 helped find a more precise word to name the concept and made them aware of its criticality, as illustrated by the following statements:

“Before working with DECI-2, I understood that commitment from the top-level management team was important for an organization aiming to develop and implement a communications strategy. Although I had this understanding in the back of my mind, I did not consider it as an organizational readiness issue... However, one of my most important learning from DECI-2 is that organizational readiness is the key success indicator that makes capacity building able to bring about expected outcomes. It should be carefully analyzed, explicitly included in the strategy, revisited and improved over the time.”

Another mentor rightly suggested that there are two levels of organizational readiness, and she identified some important enabling factors:

“Level 1 is the organization’s desire to learn or get engaged, and Level 2 is getting support from management and assigning resources - this relates to the organization starting to ‘walk the talk’. Organizations also need reassurance from the donor regarding the freedom to set the evaluation agenda. This can help a lot to reach level 1 of readiness. IDRC is quite good at that because they are very committed to learning.”

Once the organization reaches level 1 of readiness, there are different things that an external U-FE/ResCom consultant or future mentor can do to effectively to help reach level 2:

- Explain U-FE and ResCom in the simplest possible terms and clearly lay out the organization's expected commitment in terms of time, resources, methods and level of effort.
- Be prepared to explain and review the key principles of U-FE and ResCom multiple times. One important *caveat* is not to expect organizations and their staff to understand U-FE and ResCom after the first presentation. It is important to go over the U-FE and ResCom principles several times. According to one of the mentors, *"when you rush, you don't do the introduction well"*.
- Explain the different roles and their respective responsibilities throughout the process. For example, *"in the case of U-FE, it is particularly important that the intended primary user role is understood well because it is something new to most organizations, which expect the evaluator to come in and do most of the work. Some of them are open to the role of the user when it comes to using the resulting product of the evaluation but they don't appreciate the role of the user as part of the process"*.
- Foster dialogue within the organization and make yourself available to explain the process to people other than those directly involved in order to support the decision-making process.

The following is an example of how a regional mentor helped the partner organization increase its readiness:

"Both U-FE and ResCom mentors explained clearly to a Country Director of Operation Asha, the team members of the Cook Islands Maori Database Project, and Nazdeek and Pajhra team in India about the scope of the mentoring. The explanation focused on what was required for this mentoring to work out, methods to be used as well as consequences and levels of commitment needed for this mentoring to be implemented. We also guided them to check again their resources available as well as who should be involved and to what level. The theory of change had to be revisited and time lines defined. When some decisions could not be made at their level, we guided them to talk to their bosses and offered our time to be involved in such discussions."

DECI-2 mentors also identified the following barriers to organizational readiness:

- Lack of openness, flexibility and innovation-oriented culture to accept new approaches and methods. *"When organizations ask for an evaluation, they often have a concept of what should be done, and they even include it in their ToRs. So when proposing U-FE, one has to assess the organization's willingness to rethink the evaluation approach."*
- Unforeseen institutional dynamics: The organization and the individuals may be prepared to engage but internal processes –such as restructuring or staff replacement - can put things on hold. Besides resources, there has to be something showing that the organization has an idea of what it is getting into.

- Limited face-to-face discussions and elaborations both at the level of donors and top-level management as well as implementers (communications specialist/evaluation person) about U-FE and ResCom and how these approaches will contribute to bring significant outcomes.
- Little encouragement from donor to engage in the process and pressure to deliver quick results in a short period of time. Most donor organizations are more interested in results than in efficiency and learning.
- Limited face-to-face discussions at the level of donors and of the organization's senior management, as well as implementers (communications specialist/person) about the U-FE and ResCom and how this approach can contribute to bring significant outcomes.

Mentee's readiness

In the context of DECI-2's mentoring model, the mentee's readiness is also crucial as the mentee becomes the main learner within the partner organization. The mentee's readiness is highly dependent on the organizational readiness in the sense that the mentee has to have full support from his or her managers before being able to commit to the learning process. In general, the most important readiness factors for the mentee are: (i) interest in learning about UFE or ResCom; (ii) willingness to take the risk of trying out something new; and (iii) having time to engage in the process. Other regional consultants who have participated in DECI-2 as mentors also mentioned other important enabling factors:

“In the case of someone who will engage as an evaluation mentee, readiness is very important. I think it has to do with knowledge or understanding of the process and being prepared to apply it. If this is not there, then it can affect the evaluation... The evaluation mentee needs to have some evaluation skills and while the person may not have to be an evaluator, analytical skills are a must! For instance, a marketing person worked very well in the ISIF project. The evaluation ended up generating useful inputs for her day-to-day work, which was to market the organization. I do a lot of interviews to select the right person but face-to-face really helps identifying the evaluator.”

“The communication mentee should not only have the background, experience and/or training in communications, but should also be involved in providing strategic decisions to ensure that the communications strategy and the implementation of the plan being developed are in line with the organization's Theory of Change”.

Some of the factors that can limit the mentee's readiness include:

- Lack of clarity on how U-FE and ResCom work together and how mentoring fits with the organization's “Theory of Change” and plan.
- Limited face-to-face discussions with the mentor to clarify expectations and whatever doubts the mentee may have.
- Competing priorities. In the early stages most mentees see U-FE and ResCom activities as an additional burden to their daily duties and not as something that can help them get their work better organized and planned.

- It takes time to understand the context of a project. Willingness is driven by usefulness, but usefulness usually emerges later on, once the organization discovers the value of what is being learned and of the learning process.

Mentor's readiness

The idea of “assessing readiness” comes from the U-FE approach, but Patton (2004) only refers to the readiness at the level of the organization and of the evaluator (in this case the mentee). Since the role of the U-FE and ResCom mentor is a DECI-2 innovation, the concept of the “mentor’s readiness” is something that also emerges from DECI-2. Mentor readiness refers to the willingness and the capability of a mentor to work with a mentee in the unique context of a particular project, which is mostly determined by political and cultural factors of the organization in charge of implementing the project, as well as by the socio-cultural context where the project is implemented. The mentor has to try and understand many dimensions of readiness. Mentor’s readiness is highly dependent on organizational and mentee readiness because that is what gives the mentor enough confidence to believe that the process is going to work. Therefore, most of the enabling factors of mentor readiness are related to enabling factors of organizational and mentee readiness. However, the DECI-2 mentors also highlighted other key elements that contribute to mentor readiness:

- Field visits: Face-to-face meetings in the field are most valuable because they help mentors better understand the context and the needs of the organization and of the mentee, as well as to get a sense of what is really going on in the project. In some cases, field visits also help understand the program’s theory of change.
- Previous U-FE and ResCom experience: For obvious reasons a mentor has a stronger sense of confidence to mentor someone when he or she has completed a U-FE or ResCom process.
- Being able to show the link between U-FE and ResCom early-on in the mentoring programme proved to work extremely well and helped develop strong collaboration in Asia.

The main factors that can limit the mentor’s readiness include: (i) limited understanding of the context (organizational, social, political and cultural); (ii) time constraints due to other commitments; and (iii) little face-to face interaction.

From DECI-2, it also became evident that mentor readiness and mentee readiness may not be enough for a meaningful mentoring experience. Mentor readiness is like a balancing rope walk. Even when the mentee and the mentor are both ready, there is an additional dimension that has to do with the dynamics in the relationship between them. Mentorship seems to work best when the mentor acts as a facilitator of learning that allows the mentee to follow her or his own style of doing things and explore new options, rather than as a rigid teacher or supervisor of tasks completion. Therefore, projects wanting to adopt mentoring models similar to the one used in DECI-2, should keep in mind the following traits² among potential candidates:

- Strong evaluation and/or communication experience (minimum 3 years);
- Be more process-focused rather than task-focused;
- Be very adaptable to make changes on the fly;

² These traits were identified by asking the DECI-2 mentors to reflect on the strengths that helped them in their mentoring experience.

- Have outstanding facilitation and active listening skills so that she or he can identify the needs of other people. The mentor needs to be able to understand the nuisances so that s/he can lead others.
- Have a learning attitude and be patient;
- Have enough time to devote to the mentee;
- Be perseverant in ensuring that the mentee completes the whole process so that she or he can really learn how to do U-FE or ResCom.

Lessons on Implementation and Capacity Development

DECI-2 was designed with the assumption that given their commonalities in terms of questions and objectives, U-FE and ResCom could be integrated into projects in a relatively simple way. However, such integration has proven to be complex due to a number of issues. Combining communication and evaluation is obviously important, but what happens when U-FE heads off in a direction and ResCom in another direction? Significant differences have been observed among the three regions where DECI-2 has been implemented. In Asia, DECI-2 seems to have reached the best results in the sense that the mentors have succeed in integrating U-FE and ResCom. In contrast, the integration of U-FE and ResCom has been very limited in Latin America. In Africa, DECI-2 has achieved intermediate results, achieving a very successful implementation with a partner organization called ROER4D but much slower progress with other organizations. For ROER4D, DECI-2 steps provided useful scaffolding for communication and evaluation activities. It has become automatic enough for team members to write a blog after every event. The mentees brought their own passion into the game. While the first phase focused on credibility and visibility building into a credible brand, the project eventually entered a second phase focusing on dissemination. Although communication was privileged in the second phase, U-FE became part of communication content.

Based on the observed differences, the main learning about the implementation of the DECI-2 approach is that the success factors seem related to at least three major elements: (i) readiness, (ii) previous DECI-1 exposure and (iii) encouragement from the IDRC's programme officer. The readiness issue has already been discussed in the previous section. Previous exposure to DECI-1 refers to the participation of regional mentors in a prior U-FE mentoring program in Asia, which made the implementation easier, especially in terms of getting buy-in from key actors. For instance, ISIF learned about the value of U-FE from DECI-1, so its representatives highly encouraged some of their grantees to get involved in DECI-2, and they have been quite supportive at critical moments throughout the process. Encouragement from IDRC's regional programme officer also seems to have played an important role at motivating organization or project leaders to partner up with DECI-2. The stronger level of encouragement to participate, the higher the interest of the partner organization to get engaged with DECI-2 mentors.

Some mentors referred to other key learning elements related to implementation and capacity building that has resulted from their participation in DECI-2:

- *“Acquiring a better understanding of the strong link between U-FE and ResCom and its application in projects with different contexts and designs has been such a meaningful experience! It is evident that the project’s context (social, economic, political and cultural) is critical for the design, methods, and strategies of capacity building programmes.”*

- Value becomes visible when people try things. *“We have to become good at sharing value. Some organizations worked at different levels. For example, Cyber stewards’s network level effort aimed to affect policy. They actually had a stance.”*
- For the mentor to do his/her job well, it is important to understand very well what is happening on the ground. So one really needs to visit and engage with the project team.
- Throughout implementation, *“program managers may have a passive role in U-FE and Rescom processes, but they have two critical things to do: (i) not to sabotage the process and (ii) be a source of encouragement to those involved in the process by showing interest in what they are doing. The organizational team must be willing to move away from traditional approaches and try something different – it is more like institutional acceptability. If this is not there, then it can become a significant barrier”*.
- *“Communicating evidence/research results generated from U-FE more effectively, explicitly and well-targeted is most likely to bring about outcomes or change if done properly.”*

The mentoring process itself has also been identified as very important for successful implementation of the DECI-2 approach. Most mentors identified lack of time and distractions due to other commitments as the main constraints for providing better support to their mentees. In some cases, they also mentioned that the mentoring process would have benefitted from more face-to-face meetings. Most of them highlighted their strong facilitation skills as a critical factor to contribute to the implementation of approaches such as DECI-2. According to one mentor, *“facilitation skills are critical because the mentor needs to be patient leading people through their learning and giving them a sense of confidence”*.

From a capacity development standpoint, the notion of the mentee going through increasing levels of confidence has been flagged as a very important learning from the DECI-2 experience. It was mentioned that the mentee goes through a learning process that is similar to the process of learning how to ride a bicycle, and this seems to be a good comparison. However, it is worthwhile mentioning that the mentor also goes through the process of learning how to help the mentee learn to ride the bicycle. This implies learning to know when to hold the bicycle and when to let it go if the mentee seems to be holding the balance. Therefore, as illustrated in the following statement from one of the mentors, the level of confidence of the mentor also increases as the implementation advances and with the number of mentees that she or he trains over time:

“I am happy to see how some people have been able to pick-up what I have shown them and have used it, like in the case of ROER4D. They have taken it up as their own, and I think that’s wonderful. I am excited that I was able to show them new ways of approaching evaluation, which they have adopted to suit their particular needs...After working in DECI-2 I think I am now prepared to mentor others. I have actually been able to apply my learning in other projects that are not related to DECI-2, so the mentorship has been very effective”.

The implementation of DECI-2 has also allowed regional mentors to develop soft skills and capacity in things like time management, working with people and managing the process remotely in an efficient manner, as well as networking through exposure to a broad array of ICT4D projects around the world. Additionally, DECI-2 has enabled regional mentors to uncover and appreciate the complexity of projects. One can come up with a very powerful evaluation

report or communication plan for a project, but plans and results cannot be generalized across projects. The understanding of complexity and the willingness to learn about it and from it has been an enriching contribution to most of the people who have been involved in the projects.

Practical wisdom as a capacity development outcome in DECI-2

In a recent paper³, Ramirez, Quarry and Guerin (2015) emphasize the importance of understanding the contexts of different partner organizations in order to “make the right decisions at the right time and for the right reason”. Based on the insights from previous authors like Bradshaw (2009) and Schwartz & Sharpe (2010), Ramirez *et al* (2015) call this ability “*phronesis*” or practical wisdom, and identify it as a capacity development outcome. In the context of DECI-2, the mentoring experience has helped regional consultants acquire practical wisdom in a variety of ways. Their exposure to different projects has allowed them to deepen their understanding about the fact that there is no ‘standard recipe’ for capacity development programmes to be successful. Ramirez *et al* (2015:1) mention that “practical wisdom emerges over time through trial and error”. From this perspective, the DECI-2 approach has allowed mentors to try different things in specific situations and to learn to adapt and adjust strategies according to different contexts. As illustrated in the following statement from one of the mentors, the aggregate of such attempts is what has resulted in practical wisdom within each regional consultant:

“The checklist is good to have as a reference. But in mentoring practice, I didn’t think that all steps had to be in line with the checklist. Some adjustment and modification to the checklist might also be needed.”

This statement highly resonates with what Ramirez *et al* (2015:1) say in their paper: “We hope to train practitioners who can [intuitively] find solutions from a menu of options, without having to follow a checklist”. The statement also reinforces the notion of “levels of confidence” at the mentor’s level. In reference to another “learn-to-ride-a-bicycle” analogy, one of DECI-2’s principal investigators rightly suggested that the checklists are like the training wheels for mentors:

The U-FE and ResCom checklists have been good for providing structure to various pieces of work. However, I now usually follow the U-FE steps, going back and forth, in a flexible manner. This process had enriched my instinct, especially when dealing with organizations that are locked into a traditional evaluation mind-set. The steps are not difficult but one can make them difficult. I have also adopted some of the slides to make my own presentations on U-FE, so they have been quite useful.”

In most cases, mentors have enjoyed the experience of building practical wisdom by doing, as expressed by one of them:

“What is uniquely different from this mentoring programme for me as a mentor is that this has been a learning and capacity building process for both mentor and mentee. Fortunately, the DECI2 mentoring process has also been

³ <http://journal.km4dev.org/index.php/km4dj/article/viewFile/286/369>

an action research process to field-test. That has allowed us discover the extent to which the approach is workable or not, factors contributing to outcomes and how to improve the mentoring approach and methods. It generates interesting findings for me as a mentor and I believe for DECI2 project as well. Such evidence can only be gained when we actually do it.”

Since increased levels of confidence have been observed in the cases above, it can be argued that practical wisdom is also developed in the mentor and in the mentee. However, it is worth noting that developing practical wisdom at the mentee level requires the mentor to have strong facilitation skills because in most cases it implies moving people from tradition to sense-making, which can mostly be done by letting the mentee go through a trial and error process, rather than by imposing. In this regard, it has also been an interesting learning experience that has challenged us as mentors, while contributing to the development of our own practical wisdom:

“I feel that the trainee’s understanding should not be allowed to be divergent from their knowledge and skill. But it is challenging to draw a strict line between ‘what the skill should be’ and the fresh views or innovation from the mentees... As a mentor it is challenging to see that I am not the evaluator. As such, one wants to influence the evaluation and sometimes it is hard to know when to pull back and say “let’s see how it goes” or when to push, so mentoring has been nice but at the same time challenging.”

A key part of practical wisdom has seen all mentors tailoring products to their needs and circumstances. Many organizations, particularly development ones, are not interested in learning or change but just doing stuff. Some do not see learning as a problem to be addressed since they think what they have learned is enough. Practical wisdom develops with practice. Exposure to different projects confirmed that there is no standard recipe. Capacity to adapt comes from practice. Once you are familiar with an approach you can skip some things or steps. Tailor-making indicators to your own reality as well as clarifying gaps and assumptions has been an important practical learning point. *“Sometimes it is important to become askers of questions rather than always providing answers”.*

Experiences showing value in the intersection between UFE and ResCom

One of the main research objectives of DECI-2 has been to understand how U-FE and ResCom can intersect with each other to generate value for partner organizations. One of the key lessons has been that organizations tend to discover such a value late in the process, so keeping the interest and the motivation of the participants in the early stages is a challenge. This experience may explain why the success rate of implementing U-FE and ResCom in tandem remains low. However, there are some success stories that prove the value of the suggested integration. Four cases from different countries - Cambodia, India, Cook Islands and South Africa - show how research results generated from U-FE were used for communications purposes. All three projects had sufficient evidence-based information communicated more effectively to the targeted audience groups.

For instance, Operation Asha in Cambodia was able to define clear communications objectives and to identify key audience groups. The Technical Working Group (TWG) in health issues, which plays a key role in the planning of the tuberculosis care programme in the country and donors were identified as their two main target audiences. DECI-2 support enabled their staff members to be successful at presenting the results of the U-FE to the TWG team and broader donors through an ICT4D Conference in Singapore and Evaluation Conclave in Kathmandu. Asha mentioned that the combined U-FE and ResCom approach will be integrated into their strategic planning.

Thanks to the DECI-2 approach, Pajhra was successful in developing a relationship with Indian government officials which did not exist at the beginning of the project. It was also successful in promoting the issue of Reproductive Health Rights at the international level. As captured in the ISIF Case Study in the DECI Case Studies directory, Pajhra's director became more confident at communicating stories from the field to national and international audiences (including government and media). They now have good and sound evidence for their advocacy strategy. Other case studies that shed more light on the impact of DECI-2 approach include the Cook Islands case and the ROER4D case in South Africa (currently being worked on). These cases have been covered in another strand of work by other DECI-2 consultants.

In these four cases, ResCom has helped use evaluation evidence to reach the organizations' target audiences more effectively. The ROER4D case is a more recent example. For the mentors involved, the connection between ResCom and U-FE has been natural and the mentees have really liked it. In other cases, the contribution has been less evident in the sense that the U-FE and ResCom integration was never reached, for instance, in the AFRINIC and Privacy International projects. However, in cases such as the Cyber Stewards Network, exposure of the project managers to the DECI-2 approach led to enriching discussions on research communication and evaluation within the network.

Challenges and suggestions for improvement

All the mentors have encountered a number of challenges, some of which seem to be related to emerging situations and others to possible design weaknesses of DECI-2. The mentors mentioned the following challenges:

- Lack of time due to competing activities - both for the mentors and the mentees. This factor was identified as the main limitation to achieve the expected results in many of the cases. In a few cases, one year of mentoring has been insufficient to contribute to expected impact.
- Another time-related issue is that time is too loose – in the sense that mentor-mentee interactions are not very continuous: *“On the one hand it is good because as a mentor I also have other commitments, but on the other hand it is difficult to keep track with the progress of the partner (sometimes even forgot where we were at).”*
- By trying to reach out to the grantee level, many of the mentors have been working with small organizations that are usually understaffed to engage in evaluation and additional communication planning. This lack of resources has been a major constraint in several cases.
- Nobody knows how U-FE and ResCom work together, so it has been difficult to explain it to others. Additionally, the PIs have observed that the organizations' “aha moment” – that is the discovery of meaning and value – usually happens quite late in the mentoring process.

Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to sustain their interest and engagement in the early stages. These two issues may explain why in some cases organizational readiness was never reached.

- Finding a user may be a challenge. The user may not be the same as the audience.
- Having consultants with little U-FE and ResCom training has made their learning curve quite steep, especially in Africa: *“Since I had no U-FE experience prior to DECI-2, I have found it difficult to be a mentor and a mentee at the same time. I see how the DECI-2 leaders have ended up training me - the mentor – and the mentee at the same time. This could be a design problem of DECI-2.”*
- In some cases, the low number of field visits and face-to-face meetings between the mentor and the mentee limited the contributions of the mentoring process.
- In a few cases, clarifying roles and getting people to understand that the mentor is not there to do everything has also been a challenge.

Based on these identified challenges, the mentors and the PIs have made the following suggestions on areas that they think where the work could have been done differently. These suggestions could help improve future similar mentoring experiences to the ones that DECI-2 has promoted:

- *“More resources should be allocated for field visits (i.e. more face-to-face mentoring at the location of the grantee). I would suggest that a field visit be done at least two times or in two stages: (i) at the beginning of the project, to place a good foundation in the mentor-mentee; and (ii) at key strategic moments of the planning process.*
- Sharing knowledge between mentors is very important. *“There should be more meetings like the conference in South Africa, in which mentors will participate as co-learners. This is critical to understand others’ trajectories and learn from them. This could ignite peer learning and knowledge exchange. This could be done maybe annually.”*
- In terms of dissemination, mentors think that the lessons learned from the implementation of DECI-2 in terms of capacity development should be promoted to a broader audience of donors/funders, research institutions, and international development agencies beyond IDRC.

Conclusions

Through its mentoring model, DECI-2 has helped develop capacity in the concepts and practices of both U-FE and ResCom among regional consultants in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In this regard, DECI-2’s main contributions have been helping participating consultants:

1. Acquire a better understanding about enabling factors for capacity development at the organizational level, particularly about the notion of readiness as a critical pre-requisite for engaging in learning.
2. Acquire an appreciation of the complexity of implementing capacity development initiatives as part of a project’s strategy. Although U-FE and ResCom mentoring may seem attractive to project managers and to other participants, its implementation tends to be a messy process.
3. Learn about the different barriers to organizational learning and acquiring skills that can help overcome them, such as time management, how to provide more effective support remotely, making the best use of face-to-face interactions, etc.

4. Experience mentorship as a learning partnership through which the mentor and the mentee co-create knowledge as they try to achieve specific objectives.
5. Explore DECI-2's approach of learning by doing, which has allowed regional consultants to acquire hands-on experience in the fields of evaluation and communication. But most importantly, it has allowed them to develop practical wisdom to intuitively deal with emergent issues throughout different phases of mentoring.
6. Gain awareness of the importance of undertaking capacity development as an on-going process, rather than as a one-time activity. At the same time, the mentorship experience has helped consultants realize that most organizations tend to see the value late in the process, so it is critical to sustain interest and motivation in the early stages of the process. From this perspective, commitment from the top management level and organizational willingness to remain engaged in the learning process were identified as key success factors. There is often a tension shown by how the 'aha moment' 'shows up later. If you push use too early you may lose it. It doesn't become magic until you step into it.
7. Acquire better understanding of the connection between evaluation and communication, as well as an enhanced appreciation of why evaluations should be use-focused and communication strategies should be based on clear purposes, and engage with audiences through their preferred channels and media.

The most obvious pieces of evidence that support the above findings are the many insights and reflections from regional mentors that have allowed putting this report together. But perhaps the most significant one is the fact that regional mentors have adopted some of their learning into their independent professional practice, as expressed by one of them:

“My DECI-2 experience has enriched my evaluation practice. It has allowed me to introduce the U-FE concept to different people and organizations. Now I try to incorporate U-FE concepts in my proposals. Organizations don't always accept them, but at least I try”.

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