

A DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK IN EVALUATION AND COMMUNICATION: SUMMARY OF ACTION-RESEARCH

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Abstract

Broadly speaking, the communication and evaluation fields tend to be developed independently or at least sequentially: the communication of evaluation findings - or the evaluation of communication activities or programs. However, both disciplines share common elements at a theoretical and practical level. This paper summarizes action-research in communication and evaluation capacity development that has supported partner research projects at the global level. Two aspects are highlighted: ensuring early on that the partners have the necessary readiness to receive capacity development, and the mentoring that is provided at the pace of each partner's schedule, not the trainer's. The methodological integration brings together "Utilization-Focused Evaluation" and "Research Communication". The decision-making framework in evaluation and communication allows project managers or organizations to express their theory of change and adjust their intervention strategy.

Keywords

Communication, evaluation, capacity building, decision-making framework, action-research

1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, the communication and evaluation fields tend to be developed independently or at least sequentially: the communication of evaluation findings - or the evaluation of communication activities or programs. However, both disciplines share common elements at a theoretical and practical level. This paper summarizes action-research work that has been done globally between 2012 and 2017 to integrate communication and evaluation. The approach originates from a couple of research and capacity development projects called 'Developing Evaluation Capacity in Information Society Research' (DECI-1) [2009-2011] and 'Developing Evaluation & Communication Capacity in Information Society Research' (DECI-2) [2012 -

2017], both funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada). The objectives of these projects included: methodological innovation through action research; capacity development among regional facilitators (East Africa, Asia and Latin America); capacity development among staff of partner projects; and delivery of consulting services for the development of evaluation and communication strategies. The research project partners have been involved with IDRC's 'Networked Economies' program (formerly called ICTs for Development), which has addressed topics such as Open Development, Open Data, Open Education, Open and Collaborative Science, etc.

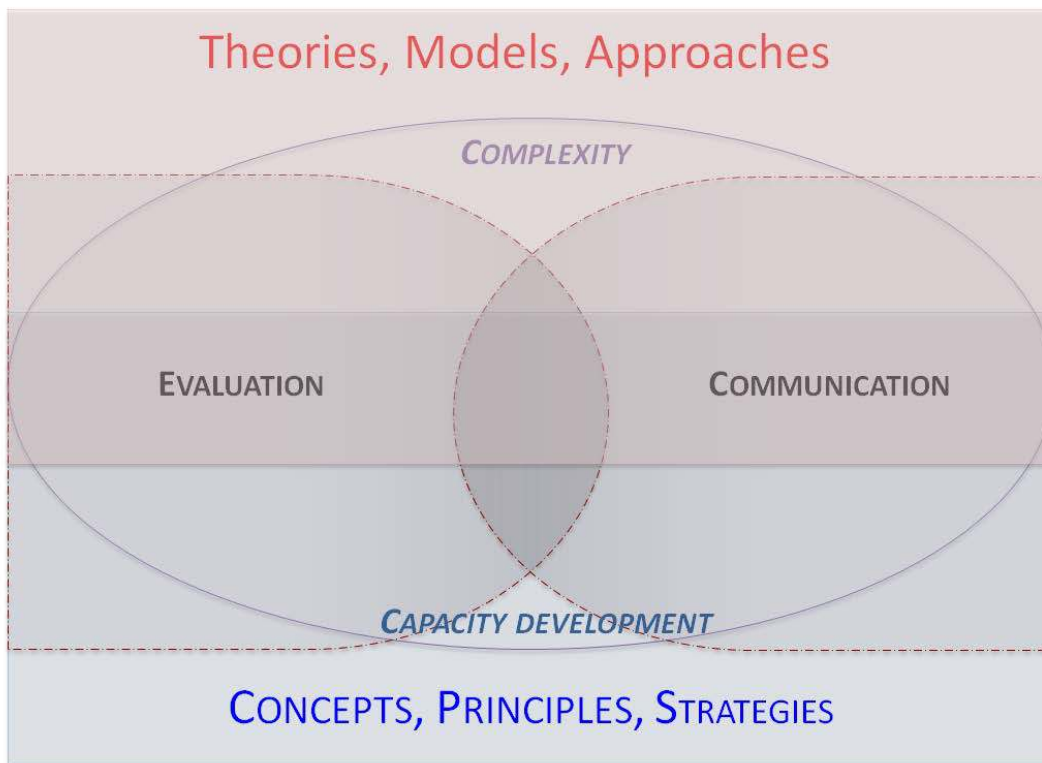


Figure 1: Conceptual structure

This presentation follows the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 that maps the context. It signals the complex nature of the research projects that have been supported along with the focus on capacity development. The framework flags evaluation and communication theories, models and approaches with emphasis on the overlapping elements between the two fields. Finally, the framework then casts

light on those concepts, principles, and strategies that have emerged from empirical work.

2. Theoretical framework – complexity & capacity development

2.1 Complexity

DECI-2 provides capacity development in evaluation and communication to a number of research projects in several continents. For instance, Research on Open Education for Development Resources (ROER4D) is a research project based in Cape Town that supports and funds open education researchers around the world. This network project supports field building among a community of interested researchers committed to influence evidence-based education policies. ROER4D started as an experiment as there was no existing research network on open education, especially in the global South. ROER4D, as well as many of the other projects DECI-2 supports, has faced a series of evaluation and communication challenges when it comes to:

- Defining specific goals and adjusting them- through a network of researchers;
- Achieving sufficient readiness by the implementation team to receive mentoring in evaluation and in developing communication strategies, especially during the initial phases;
- Building a shared understanding within the team of each project about what to measure, as well as a shared understanding of the level of attribution *versus* the contributions of the project's actions that lead to visible changes;
- Achieving a minimum level of engagement with policymakers at the beginning of the research, which is challenging, but also strategic for Research Communication efforts;
- Systematizing and disseminating the project's results among interested audiences through their preferred media and terminology; and
- Providing feedback on outcomes, results and processes in order to contribute inputs for future research projects and policy development.

These projects find the need to adjust their focus as their outcomes start becoming visible. The exploratory nature of the research topics, and the involvement a wide variety of people with different expectations and perspectives, means that oftentimes the findings are unpredictable. These projects embody complex processes, rather than complicated ones (Barnes *et al.*, 2003). As they develop, the different stakeholders begin assembling common appreciations of a new field; this happens gradually through agreements on the methodological parameters of the research (Bryson *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, it is often difficult to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Evaluating this kind of process requires evaluation approaches that embrace uncertainty; this goes beyond simply trying to adjust conventional tools (Ling, 2012).

Among the grantee projects supported by an umbrella network , some have tested new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and discovered that their implementation is complex at the social, economic and political levels. For instance, a project introduced a mobile application, as part of a contagious diseases' prevention campaign. The process turned out to be a good example of the complexity mentioned above. The evaluation of such projects needs to allow room for elements that have predictable outcomes and for emergent elements that cannot be defined at the outset (Britt, 2013). Kuby (2003) argues that within the current context, it is necessary to forego the false ideal of 'scientific proof' and, instead, seek a minimum level of credibility about the linkages between a project's actions and the outcomes.

Many projects struggle to demonstrate the impact of their research; this is especially true when seeking to influence policy because there is neither a linear nor predictable communication path. The utilization of the research findings is perceived as a complex process that requires linkages and multiple agreed actions (Douthwaite *et al.*, 2003; Morton, 2015). In the current era, where bureaucracies are in favour of schemes that provide a sense of control and predictability (i.e. logical frameworks, results-based management, etc.), there is a clash with the reality

of processes of social change, which are complex and have uncertain outcomes (Easterly, 2006). In this context, there is the need to come up with approaches that can encompass multiple change trajectories (Eyben, 2013).

2.2 Capacity building approach

In the context of applied research projects in developing countries, capacity development in evaluation is often offered through workshops during which participants are exposed to evaluation theories and methods. The same is the case with Research Communication with workshops that highlight a number of tools. Both fields have a considerable number of training kits and learning tools. In the context of DECI-2, the team decided to avoid the workshop format, based on prior experiences that yielded limited learning outcomes (Quarry & Ramírez, 2014). In contrast, DECI-2 has offered a mentorship process that provides support to selected projects at their own implementation pace. This approach is based on experiential learning, through which the staff members of partner projects learn by doing and reflecting (Kolb, 1984). The notion of mentoring is very present in the capacity development literature. It offers an experience tailored to each context in terms of timing and scenarios; instead of imposing blueprint recipes and standardized workshops (Horton *et al.*, 2003).

In addition to mentoring, “readiness” constitutes the second capacity development pillar. The concept of readiness comes from Utilization-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2008), which highlights the importance of verifying that there is: (i) available staff to be trained; (ii) enough buy-in from the organization’s managers to support the process and assign the required resources; and (iii) enough openness from donors to accept that the project’s team members themselves become meaningfully involved in the evaluation design and are also involved in determining the purposes and intended uses of the evaluation.

Readiness is not an evaluation tool, but rather an early check-up on the enabling context. When the donor opens the door to multiple users and intended uses, the evaluation becomes a learning process (Brodhead & Ramirez, 2014). Such processes enable projects to gain a sense of ownership over the evaluation, which can lead to evaluative culture within organizations (Mayne, 2009).

2.3 Overlap between evaluation and communication theories, models and approaches.

DECI-2 combines capacity development objectives with the methodological experimentation of integrating evaluation and communication. The research is carried on with the partner projects through a shared process of exploration. Action-research (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and participatory inquiry (Bessette, 2004; Chambers, 1997; White, 1999) are the foundations of this approach; they constitute the epistemological axis that brings together relevant evaluation and communication theories, models and approaches. Beyond knowledge democratization, their linkages represent a shared commitment to enhance projects' agency, reflection and learning opportunities.

In his genealogical tree of theories, methodologies and strategies of communication for development (Figure 2), Silvio Waisbord (2001) compares two large branches of communication: the dominant paradigm (social marketing, entertainment-education) in contrast with the critical response based on the dependency theory (participatory approaches, social mobilization). This dichotomy can be described in the following ways:

- An analysis of underdevelopment based on cultural explanations *versus* one based on contextual explanations.
- Psychological theories and interventions *versus* socio-political theories and interventions.
- Attitude and behaviour models *versus* structural and social models.
- Individual interventions *versus* community-based interventions.

- Message-focused hierarchical models *versus* horizontal and participatory communication models.
- Passive audiences and population concepts *versus* active audiences and population concepts.
- Approaches that perceive participation as a means *versus* approaches that embrace participation as an end (Waisbord, 2001: 2).

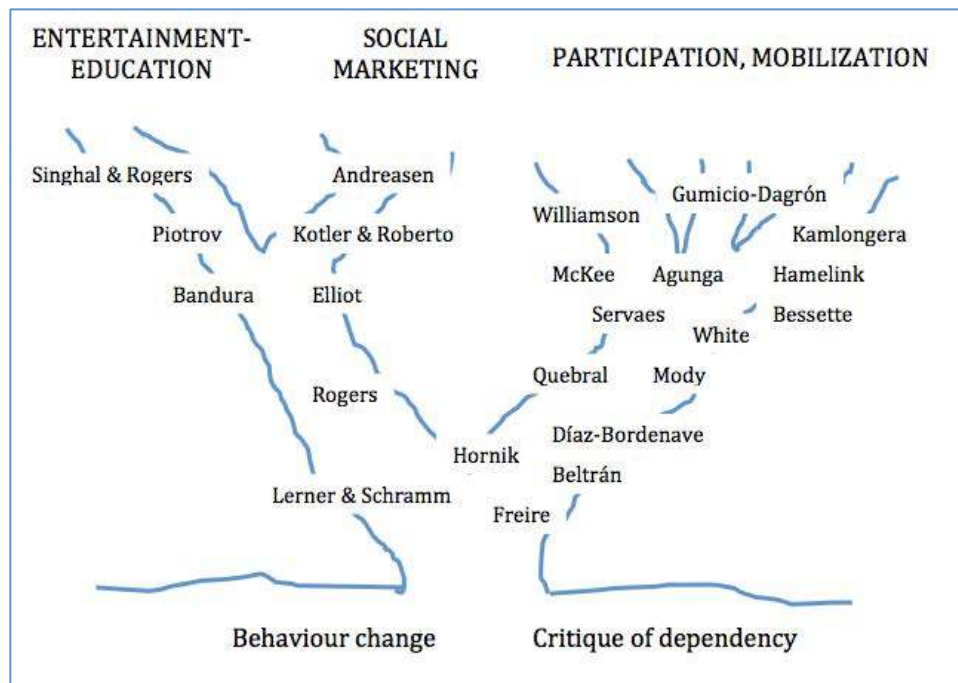


Figure 2: The communication tree (based on Waisbord, 2001).

Christie & Alkin (2012) summarize an evaluation theory tree (Figure 3) based on two foundational and contrasting themes: accountability and control *versus* social inquiry; which in turn leads to three dominant branches: valuing, methods, and use (Christie & Alkin, 2012: 12)¹.

¹ There is another evaluation classification that has other big branches: evidence-focused evaluation, realistic evaluation and complexity evaluation (Hospes, 2008).

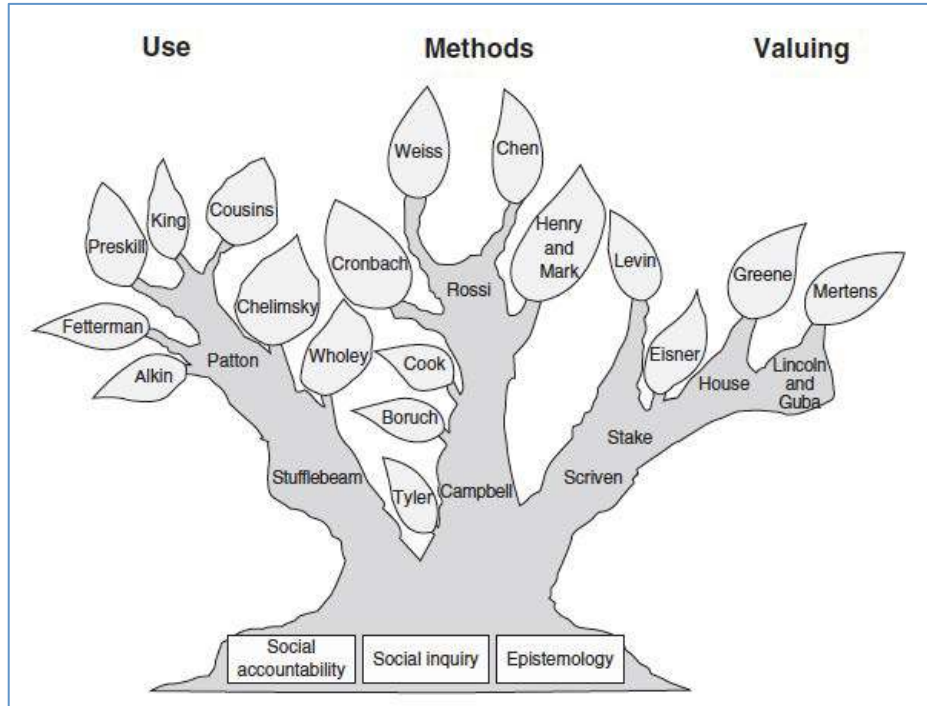


Figure 3: Evaluation tree (Christie & Alkin, 2012: 12)

The first branch privileges evidence, which is about verifying the achievements of a project. It often relates to accountability and it is a means to ensuring that funds have been managed responsibly and that the project has attained the intended goals. This is the predominant approach of most funding agencies and it is based on the assumption that the results of a project are measurable, predictable and can be attributed to the project's activities. In other words, this branch represents the conventional evaluation approach, which is often under the control of those who hold power and resources. Scriven is one of the protagonists of this approach. He suggests that the evaluator is responsible for coming up with a judgement or a value-based conclusion. According to Scriven, the evaluator should be the person who sets the evaluation objectives, regardless of the project's objectives, which is also known as 'goal-free evaluation'. In contrast, Guba & Lincoln argue that the project beneficiaries should be the ones who render judgement or draw conclusions over the results. They adopt a constructivist paradigm through which the stakeholders share insights and build shared perspectives about what constitutes reality.

The second branch emphasizes the investigative aspect of evaluation and focuses on knowledge generation. The focus is on methodologies, especially in regards to experimental or semi-experimental designs. Christie y Alkin (op.cit.) refers to Carol Weiss`s work, which is characteristic of the last branch, and emphasizes the political implications of evaluation. This perspective contrasts with the perspectives of many of the other authors in this branch who favour of hard science with data-extractive methodologies; and with some distancing from natural sciences.

The third branch promotes the use of evaluation for decision-making, with special attention paid to the people who will be the actual users of the evaluation findings. Among the authors of this branch, Stufflebeam`s work deserves especial attention. He suggests an evaluation model that requires choices about context, inputs, processes and products. From Stufflebeam`s perspective, evaluation is described more as a process than as a product. The authors who belong to this branch support these concepts and favour of an evaluation that generates practical outputs. They also highlight the fact that the evaluator`s responsibility should include a duty that goes beyond writing a report, as it should include ensuring that the intended use takes place.

In this same branch, Alkin and Patton open up the spectrum to assign the central role of designing the evaluation to a diverse group of stakeholders. Patton in particular highlights the importance of systematically identifying the evaluation `primary intended users` so that they can gain a sense of ownership over the evaluation and become interested in the findings` utilization. Fetterman goes further by suggesting that evaluation should be a process of empowerment. Cousins and other authors refer to participatory and practical evaluation, underlining the importance of organizational learning as the axis of this branch. Preskill reinforces this theme by referring to transformational learning.

In summary, from the theoretical work that has been mentioned as part of this branch, the following are salient themes:

- The importance of the stakeholder's participation;
- Collaborative work among the different stakeholders;
- Flexibility to suit each context; and
- Reflection and empowerment by those who receive the evaluation results.

To a great degree, these themes coincide with the ones Waisbord includes under the 'participatory branch' of his own communication for development tree. These links are mapped at the centre of Figure 1, representing the meeting point between communication and evaluation. It is worthwhile acknowledging that the lists of authors, theories, models, approaches and strategies that are summarized in both trees are incomplete. However, the sample provides a general characterization of both disciplines. The purpose is not to cover each discipline comprehensively, but to show the linkages between both of them; somewhat like *lianas*² between two neighbouring species of trees. The elements of this meeting point are compatible with the components of Lenni and Tacchi's (2013) framework on the evaluation of communication for development projects that includes: participation, a holistic approach, complexity, a critical approach, emergence, being realistic, and a learning orientation.

3. Methodology: principles and practices

Utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) isn't just one more methodology, but a process that begins by establishing who the stakeholders are that can take part in designing the evaluation. U-FE provides them with a decision-making framework. That is why in the DECI-2 project, defining the 'primary intended users of the evaluation' has been an indispensable step that has unveiled power patterns. In some of our partner projects, there have been donors that have not agreed to give up the control over the evaluation design, which is not unusual. However, when

² Woody vines that attach to tree branches.

there is openness regarding the selection of 'primary intended users', the evaluation process can include those who implement or manage the projects; they become the owners of the process. DECI-2 provides support to those who are willing to take on this role and helps them determine the purposes and intended uses of the evaluation. This decision is a key moment because it challenges them with the need to reflect on the 'why' and the 'what for' of the evaluation. It is not a simple process because it requires that the primary users take control of the process, which differs from conventional evaluation in which project implementers are merely passive subjects. Beyond defining the evaluation's primary intended uses, formulating 'key evaluation questions' demands clarity about processes, expected changes, non-verbalized assumptions and expected causality chains. This step constitutes a moment of empowerment and it brings along the challenge of clearly verbalizing what the project intendeds to accomplish, the 'how' and the 'what for'.

3.1 Weaving evaluation and communication

The process of defining the U-FE stakeholders is compatible with the process of defining the target audiences during the design phase of a communication strategy. This coincidence opens up the possibility of developing both steps at the same time. This integration, in turn, provides a pause to review the project's context, its reality, its location, its goals, its institutional setting, its linkages with other actors and its duration, as well as its historical and political background. As the evaluation 'primary intended users' start suggesting uses or purposes of the evaluation, it is common that the communication purposes also start emerging. Within this approach, communication can aim at one or more of the following purposes: engaging stakeholders to understand their needs and hopes; exchanging knowledge among stakeholders who come from different realities; disseminating project findings; influencing policies through evidence; promoting the initiative, etc.

In parallel to the formulation of 'key evaluation questions', this process demands clarity about expected changes from each communication activity. Both steps share

the challenge of describing a process of change, which as pointed out earlier, is not easy in innovative research projects. However, developing these plans helps establishing baselines that allow users, later on, to verify emerging adjustments and learnings on the go.

Figure 4 summarizes the steps that are covered during the mentorship process. The circular arrows highlight the iterative nature of the process.

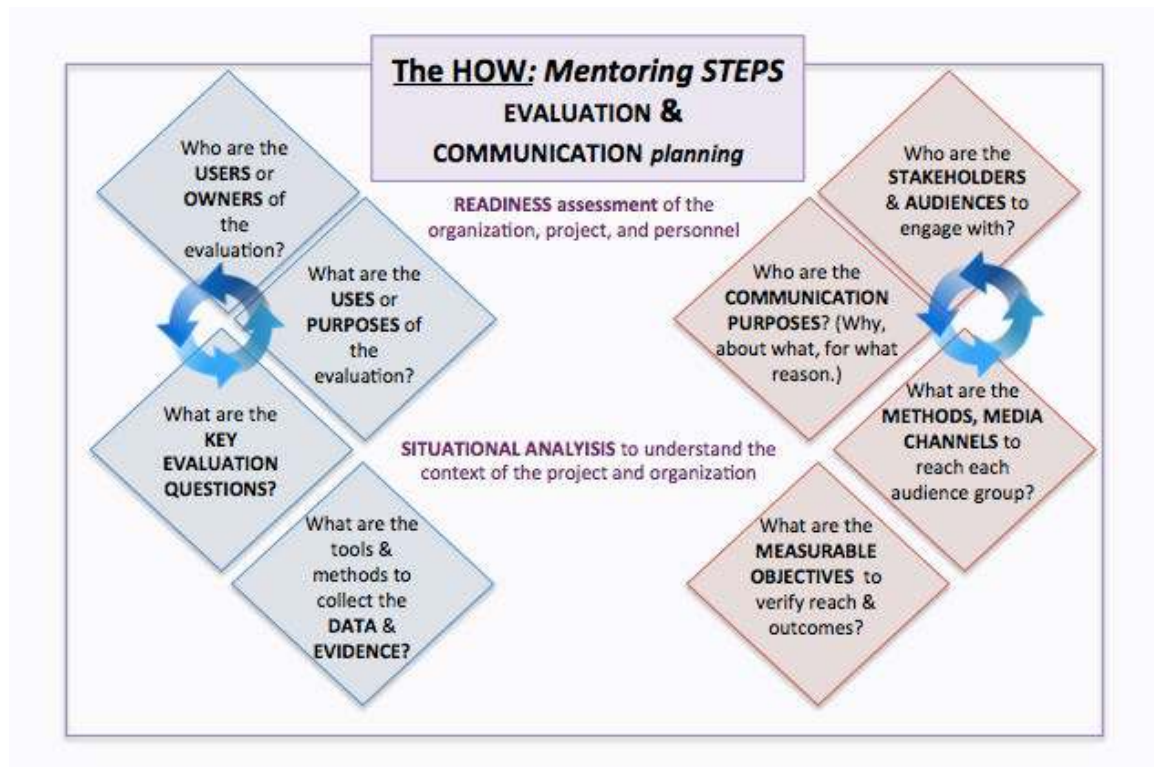


Figure 4: The steps of the integrated planning

The verification of the different audience groups' preferred channels and media is one of the communication planning steps – also known as audience analysis. Often times, policymakers are one of the target audiences of research projects, and as such, they get included in the analysis – which is normally programmed during the project's early stages. Engaging policymakers with this inquiry as a mere instrumental excuse [to confirm their preferred media channels and decision-making events] has proven to be an important step to create some sort of relationship that otherwise would not be possible.

Figure 4 does not include a very important step that happens towards the end of the U-FE process: facilitating the use of the findings, which ensures ownership over the results. Based on most of our partnerships, we have developed case studies that summarize the process; an exercise known as meta-evaluation. The partner projects have had the chance to review and make contributions to improve such documents. This process has resulted in significant reflection and learning for both mentors and partners.

3.2 Principles and practices

Based on empirical work, we have come up with the following principles and practices that now guide our strategy:

- U-FE has been validated as a decision-making framework that enables the use of an array of evaluation methodologies, which are defined according to the purposes and key evaluation questions identified.
- The communication strategies of research projects often privilege the use of findings for influencing public policies. Such communication processes are complex because there is no linear or predictable logic in the political world.
- The high interest in verifying the level of availability or readiness from the early stages of a potential partner project implies that DECI-2 only collaborates with those organizations that prove to have enough readiness conditions and commitment. If such conditions don't exist at the very beginning, DECI-2 provides support to help potential partners achieve them. Some key factors are having the time, the resources, and staff that is keen to learn about evaluation and communication. We have learned not to force the pace of a relationship when the conditions do not allow it.

- Mentorship provides ‘just-in time’ support and contributes to concrete learning because the partner project receives tailored support as opposed to pre-planned generic support, which is what happens with pre-packaged training workshops.
- As communication and evaluation steps become routine, a ‘practical wisdom’ emerges and empowers project implementers by providing them with tools for fine-tuning their strategies along the way. This process enables them to adapt to circumstances and move away from initial practices or implementation strategies that stop making sense as time goes on. This aspect is particularly important given the complexity of the research projects that DECI-2 has supported.
- The evaluation uses and the necessary planning are both defined at the beginning of the project and not as an improvised idea at the end of it.
- Both processes generate and depend on collaborative learning and reflection processes. They are participatory processes that generate a sense of ownership over them and reinforce individual and organizational competencies.

5. Discussion and contributions

In the context of DECI-1, U-FE was the starting point as a decision-making framework for evaluation (Patton, 2008). This approach prioritizes an initial evaluation-readiness assessment, which specifically seeks to answer the following question: Is there enough space and power-balance to incorporate additional evaluation users beyond funders and decision-makers? If the answer is positive, then the next step is engaging those users in order to explore the intended uses and purposes of the evaluation. This move is a typical participatory research step that requires reflection and resembles the foundations of participatory communication.

Patton’s U-FE does not promote a ‘participatory’ terminology. However, it has great potential for becoming a participatory approach when there are enough conditions

for the stakeholders of a process or project to be part of the evaluation's primary user group. According to our experience, when this happens, they become participants and owners of the process and its results (Ramirez & Brodhead, 2013).

5.1 Parallel agendas

The evaluation uses may also address several other purposes: the verification of achievements, a reflection on processes or methods, the verification of network operability, and/or the extent to which outcomes or results were accomplished. Communication can also address complementary purposes, such as: stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange through networks, promoting a given initiative, dissemination of findings among diverse audiences, knowledge management for influencing policies, etc. Immediate opportunities emerge to weave together both fields. For instance, evaluation can be used to support the verification of communication achievements (Balit, 2005; Barnett & Gregorowski, 2013; Hanley, 2014; Inagaki, 2007; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013; Lynn, 2014; Myers, 2004; Parks et al., 2005); or some communication steps can enrich the design of evaluation processes.

5.2 Integration: Utilization-focused communication

Beyond the shared agendas of both disciplines, there is scope for a deeper integration. The notion of utilization-focused communication proposes a shared vision of both fields (Ramírez, 2011). For instance, U-FE offers methodological contributions that would be useful in communication for development. One of the final steps of U-FE is about investing time and effort in facilitating the use of the evaluation's findings and process. In the communication area, this step calls for a systematic reflection on the extent to which the communication objectives were achieved, on the validity of the social and media processes that were used, and / or on the assessment of the internal systems and roles of the communication teams within the partner project or organizations. While this point constitutes an important moment of reflection that offers learning opportunities and awareness (Schön, 1991), it is rarely included in communication planning.

5.3 Capacity development: a second dimension of integration

Capacity development emerges as a second dimension of integration. The DECI-2 project experience highlights the fact that skill development in both disciplines is effectively achieved through experiential learning. We have seen that workshops and manuals yield limited outcomes. In the evaluation field, workshops often focus on explaining methods (such as designing a questionnaire). In the communication field, they also often cover methods and tools (such as making videos or using social media for mobilization). In contrast, U-FE and participatory communication are learned through practice (Ramirez *et al.*, 2015). Learning by doing and reflection allows pacing evaluation and communication at the right moments to fit the timing of each project and it requires timely follow-ups according to the project's pace (Brodhead & Ramirez, 2014). As people learn by doing, the mentor reinforces their capacity to act, adjust, improvise and avoid following blueprint recipes. Their confidence develops as the partner project adopts evaluation and communication principles and practices as part of its everyday practice/knowledge, and it constitutes an important outcome or achievement for the mentor. In order to attain such 'practical wisdom', it is necessary to explore, learn from mistakes, and acquire confidence for adapting processes and designs according to each project's context (Ramirez *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the linkages between these evaluation and communication branches show similar theoretical and methodological foundations. that come together in the capacity development approach.

The integration that has been developing through the DECI-2 project is coherent with the work of other authors who have pointed out the challenges of evaluation and communication for development. Lennie & Tacchi's (2015) highlight the importance of acknowledging creative and innovative approaches, using mixed and rigorous methods, respecting the long-term timing of holistic processes that are necessary to evaluate capacity development, amongst other elements conceptual framework (2013).

This integrated process has been relevant to researchers of both disciplines who have appreciated the theoretical and practical coincidences between communication and participatory evaluation. The methodological components have been of interest to managers of projects that seek social change, allowing them to integrate their communication campaigns and their action-research processes. Finally, this effort has offered project managers and funders an evaluation and communication decision-making framework that allows them to adjust their intervention strategies in complex and dynamic scenarios.

Biography

Ricardo Ramirez is an independent researcher and consultant based in Guelph, Ontario (Canada). His consulting and research work includes communication planning, participatory evaluation and capacity development. Ricardo is a member of the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES). His doctoral research focused on the social and organizational processes led by rural and remote communities to introduce broadband technologies for community development. Ricardo is co-author of 'Communication for another development: Listening before telling' (Zed Books, London 2009) and 'Utilization-Focused Evaluation: a primer for evaluators' (Southbound, Penang, 2013).

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