

## Case study: SIRCA: Building Evaluation Capacity — A Review of Awarding, Mentoring and Conferences

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### 1. Utilization Focused Evaluation

“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 on 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 framework, as opposed to any other methodology. It can include any purpose of interest to the user: 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 have ownership of.

#### About the DECI Project

DECI stands for Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (Information and Communication Technology for Development) and it is an IDRC funded evaluation research and capacity development project. The objective of DECI was to build a utilization focused and outcomes oriented evaluation capacity among ICT4D project partners. Its purpose was to increase the quality and utility of evaluation. DECI provided training and mentoring to boost researchers' evaluation knowledge and skills. It was also to introduce regional evaluators to utilization focused evaluation concepts and practices. The DECI project also gathers evidence in order to examine the effect a focus on ownership, utility and outcomes actually affects the application of evaluation findings and learning within projects. DECI supported the five projects through a team of three regional mentors who accompanied each project over the 12 steps of UFE. In consultation with IDRC, the DECI project invited a short-list of ICT4D

projects in Asia to consider partnering. A final selection of five projects was done at the formulation stage. Attention was paid to projects that, among other things, expressed an interest in learning about UFE as a means to evaluate their progress.

This case study is one of the five UFE experiences supported by DECI. The project built an evaluation capacity among IDRC funded projects in the field of Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD) across Asia. The project provided researchers and evaluators with coaching and mentoring in UFE. This was done through a team of regional evaluation mentors. The mentoring team introduced the concepts and practices of UFE. They also facilitated the design and completion of evaluations across five ICTD projects. These five case studies show the mentoring team's experiences and reflections. In this way it is hoped what was learned by facilitating UFEs can be shared for the benefit of others.

## 2. The UFE Framework

The following are an abbreviated representation of the 12 steps of UFE:

1. **Programme/Organizational Readiness Assessment** — Those who want the evaluation conducted need guidance to understand utilization-focused evaluation (UFE). This requires active and skilled guidance from an evaluation facilitator.
2. **Evaluator Readiness and Capability Assessment** — Facilitating and conducting a UFE requires that both managers and evaluators review their skills and willingness to collaborate. The facilitators' effectiveness will be judged on the basis of actual evaluation use.
3. **Identification of Primary Intended Users** — Primary intended users (PIUs) have a direct, identifiable stake in the evaluation and its use. The facilitator assesses the characteristics of primary intended users and sustains a climate of openness.
4. **Situational Analysis** — Evaluation use is both people- and context-dependent. Use will be enhanced when the evaluation takes into account situational factors, which the facilitator reviews, such as timing, resources, culture, turbulence, power and politics.
5. **Identification of Primary Intended Uses** — Intended use by primary intended users is the goal of UFE. A number of evaluation options are reviewed, screened and prioritized.
6. **Focusing the Evaluation** — The focus follows the intended uses of the evaluation by PIUs who need assistance identifying and confirming the uses. The fine-tuning of key evaluation questions is a critical component of the UFE. This process is difficult, however, it is critical for the richest research results.
7. **Evaluation Design** — The selection of methods is based on data needed to respond to the key evaluation questions. The facilitator ensures that the methods will yield findings that respond to the uses as intended. This step calls for coaching and design support.

**8. Simulation of Use** — Before data are collected a simulation of potential use is done with fabricated findings to verify that the expected data will lead to usable findings.

**9. Data Collection** — Managed with use in mind. It is important to keep the primary intended users informed and involved throughout all the stages of the process.

**10. Data Analysis** — Accomplished in consultation with the primary intended users. This involvement increases their understanding of the findings while adding to their sense of ownership and commitment to utilization.

**11. Facilitation of Use** — Use does not just happen naturally — it needs to be facilitated. This action includes priority setting among recommendations. This step is central to UFE requiring that time and resources are allocated to this activity from the project's inception.

**12. Meta-evaluation** — UFEs are evaluated by whether primary intended users used the evaluation in intended ways. This step tells the story of how the UFE process evolved. It allows the users and the facilitator to learn from their own experiences. This case study is the product of Step 12.

### **3. UFE — Background**

The Singapore Internet Research Centre (SiRC) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, has been one of the five members of IDRC's Pan Asia Networking (PAN) program since August 2008<sup>1</sup>. SiRC wants to bring Asian perspectives and experiences to the global discussion about the impact of ICTD while conducting and promoting research for policy and development. SiRC was endowed with CDN \$1 million to establish a capacity building programme called *Strengthening ICTD research capacity in Asia* (SIRCA). In turn, SIRCA has selected and funded 13 principal investigators (PIs) and three graduate students until 2010. The time period for all SIRCA funded projects ranged from 12 to 24 months. A few qualified projects received a time extension with additional funding to enhance their research outputs. The researchers were further supported in the form of one-on-one discussion and were guided by a mentor. In addition, the project provides continued capacity (that is skills and experience) strengthening support sponsorship in the form of fully funded participation in workshops. As noted in the *SIRCA Evaluation* (November 2010, see <http://sirca.org.sg/about-sirca/sirca-evaluation/>, p. 8) SIRCA aims for an: "Enhanced research capacity in the region, demonstrated by the increased quality and reach of strong, methodologically rigorous, theoretically sound research findings". It also enables the "Creation of a space for discussions and knowledge sharing on ICTD social science research issues in Asia". SIRCA also works toward the "creation of linkages among emerging ICTD researchers in Asia, and among established and emerging researchers through the mentorship program". Additionally, it supports a "greater awareness of ICTD research published by Asian-based researchers through dissemination of findings in international peer-reviewed publications and conferences".

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<sup>1</sup> PAN brings together academic researchers, civil society, the public sector and the private sector to find sustainable solutions to development challenges in Asia using multidisciplinary knowledge, technologies, scientific evidence and policies in Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD).

The evaluation was a “formative one”<sup>2</sup>. It was started during the mid-course of the project. Its purpose was to build evaluation capacity within SIRCA through DECI. It was also to assist in the project’s improvement. In the initial stage of the evaluation the expectations of DECI varied among the major stakeholders of SIRCA. These included the management of SIRCA: the project manager (who became the primary user of the UFE process); the evaluator; and the program officer (PO) of IDRC. SIRCA was not clear about what the UFE approach that DECI proposed really required. SIRCA team had more clarity only after the visit by the DECI’s regional mentor to SIRCA in the beginning of the process and after viewing the presentation slides on 12 steps of UFE prepared by the DECI team. The project manager of SIRCA had limited practical experience in evaluation and was unfamiliar with UFE. The PO expected the evaluator and DECI to carry out the evaluation. She also expected the evaluation to set forth findings as to: what needed to be done; what was wrong with the project; and what was to be done during the course of the current project. In the beginning of the project the important role of the primary intended user (PIU) in the UFE process was not understood.

SIRCA expected the findings to be of use in requesting the next grant from IDRC or other donors. SIRCA’s project manager noted: “We knew that SIRCA would ask for [an] extension of the project and would like to bring the learning from the evaluation into the future project and use it for requesting a new grant from IDRC or other funding agencies”. IDRC’s expectations of SIRCA were that it was a high capacity organization. As well, the IDRC expected great things of UFE. It also assumed that the DECI process would proceed smoothly. SIRCA expected the whole evaluation process to be like an audit. SIRCA thought the evaluator would play the role of an auditor who summarizes and prepares the findings. When the process started SIRCA produced a list of evaluation topics. It expected that selection, mentorship, finance etc. would be included. However, in the evaluator’s contract there was a list of the evaluation areas that were part of her responsibilities. When the process of UFE started SIRCA realized that they had to reduce the scope of the evaluation. The focus was narrowed to specific and key evaluation areas. The evaluator commented: “I didn’t know that we were using the UFE approach. . . I learned about UFE from the PowerPoint slides that the mentor and consultants (of DECI) gave me”. The project manager of SIRCA realized at that point that the evaluator was new to the UFE framework. Neither SIRCA nor the evaluator expected to be given extensive mentoring support from DECI. At the end of the project the evaluator confirmed that the extraordinary support she received helped her throughout with the process.

Additionally, the evaluator expected that she would get to know about other DECI projects. She also expected to gain knowledge from the experiences of other projects. Additionally she thought she would get to read the evaluation reports of the DECI projects. This exchange did not happen. Each project and its individual process worked independently from the others. The evaluator anticipated gaining more evaluation skills through the work with SIRCA. She was not expecting a specific methodology (UFE). Nor did she realize how client centred the process was. According to the evaluator: “While it seemed like the client (SIRCA) stood to gain more from UFE than the evaluator as the clients had complete control of the core of the evaluation, the UFE process was a mutually beneficial experience”.

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<sup>2</sup> This formative evaluation was conducted between November of 2009 and November of 2010.

#### 4. UFE — The What

In organizational readiness (*UFE Step 1*), a great deal of time was invested in building a trusting relationship with the key stakeholders within SIRCA. The relationships had to be developed with the director; assistant director; project manager and other project staff members. Without this trust the UFE evaluation would not have been achieved. SIRCA also did an internal assessment concerning its readiness for the project's time and resource commitment. As a result, SIRCA's management and staff met early in the planning stage with the evaluator and the DECI mentor. They worked hard to assess SIRCA's readiness to do a UFE evaluation. Through that hard work a rough evaluation timeline was developed.

The evaluator was appointed by SIRCA at the very beginning (*UFE Step 1*) of the process. She stayed until the end of the facilitation of use (*UFE Step 11*). She had previous experience in evaluation in general, but not with the UFE process. In order to match her skills to the UFE framework the evaluator did a self-reflection of her own readiness and understanding of UFE during evaluator's readiness and capability stage (*UFE Step 2*). In doing so she familiarized herself with UFE's philosophy and skills (here the evaluation is judged by its "use" and facilitation skills). It was fortunate that the evaluator took it as her commitment to learn and develop a strong understanding of the UFE framework. This meant understanding its philosophy and its expectations of the evaluator.

When SIRCA stakeholders and the evaluator were ready the primary intended user (PIU) was identified. The choice of PIU was based on several qualities. These qualities included her knowledge of the organization and her commitment to the evaluation. It was also important to establish her decision making power to carry out recommendations during the identification of PIU phase (*UFE Step 3*). This first PIU was transferred to another department of the University (NTU) soon after her identification and initial orientation. The individual who then filled the position as project manager of SIRCA also became the PIU. In this way she assumed the responsibilities of the previous manager. The new PIU took time to understand her job in SIRCA and to appreciate the areas that needed focus for evaluation. The extra time and care helped her to realize the implications of being PIU. The evaluator had come in much earlier in the process and had been placed in SIRCA. She was able to play a facilitative role in the preparatory process of the PIU. While this was happening the evaluator was in constant consultation with the mentor.

Next, a situational analysis (*UFE Step 4*) was performed to examine the favourable factors as well as any possible barriers to the "use" of the evaluation's findings within the organization. These barriers might include administrative or political barriers. As already noted, neither SIRCA nor the PIU had any previous experience in the UFE framework. As well they did not have any experience with an evaluation methodology. Their experience came from a general theoretical knowledge of evaluation. There was a fact-finding search in SIRCA to find out the factors that were effective and areas that required improvement in the project. It was found that SIRCA had a list of areas for investigation that would benefit from the evaluation right from the beginning of the UFE process. The stakeholder's analysis looked at the grouping of stakeholders as well as their roles and their interests in addition to the expectations of the evaluation. The evaluator facilitated this analysis during UFE Step 3. This analysis helped to make an assessment of the different factors involved in the project. The analysis confirmed that the primary intended user, the project manager, represented

the major interests of management that was, in turn, an important stakeholder. SIRCA readied itself quickly. It timed the work of completing the evaluation (*UFE Step 1 to UFE Step 11*) to happen before the end of the first phase of the project. This first phase was to end in 2011. This would enable the findings to be used in the next phase.

Over several weeks of discussion the PIU identified and clarified the primary intended uses of the evaluation (*UFE Step 5*). The overall use of the evaluation was to ensure that the SIRCA programme would provide a foundation and support for the development of high quality, influential ICTD research work. For more specific use areas the PIUs identified three (use) areas of the SIRCA programme. It was in these areas where they thought it was worthwhile having an in-depth evaluation done. The grant review process was one area for evaluation. In this area the PIU had received feedback about the “short” time for the review period. It was felt that this might have affected the application screening process. The mentorship programme was identified as the second evaluation area because it was a unique part of SIRCA that went beyond a typical grant programme. SIRCA embraced a vision of professional support for its emerging researchers and their career development. It was hoped that this relationship addressed the needs of the PI as: a researcher; a collaborator; and a future contributor to the field of ICTD. The third evaluation area was the capacity building activities of the project. This was addressed in the workshops and conferences section of the *SIRCA Evaluation*, November, 2010, p. 9.

In focusing the evaluation (*UFE Step 6*), the key evaluation questions (KEQs) were based on the evaluation use areas noted above. As noted in the *SIRCA Evaluation* (November, 2010, p. 9) the first KEQ focused on: “To what extent did the Grant Review Committee select the most appropriate candidates for the SIRCA grants, given the time and resources that were available to them?” The second KEQ posed the question: “To what extent did the Mentorship Programme facilitate learning and/or collaboration between emerging and established researchers?” Finally, the third KEQ examined: “To what extent did the Workshops & Conferences facilitate the publication and dissemination of research findings?”

The PIU worked with the evaluator to make a workable evaluation design with relevant survey questions (*UFE Step 7*). A mixed method approach to data collection was employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data. To ensure that the survey questions yielded useful findings, the evaluator and the PIU conducted a simulation of use. This reviewed the simulated answers to every question for the different groups of respondents (*UFE Step 8*). This simulation exercise was extremely helpful in discarding unnecessary, biased or repetitive questions. It shortened the questionnaires and it increased their quality.

Data collection was done through electronic surveys and personal or telephone interviews (*UFE Step 9*). Electronic surveys were sent to all the respondents. They were given the option of returning the survey via email. The rest of the data collection was done through structured interviews both face-to-face and by telephone. There was also access to documentation and to records etc. The total response rate was 96% with 44 out of 46 primary investigators, mentors, trainers and SIRCA staff responding. Various types of data gathering took place to create a thorough and detailed understanding of the project’s findings. Observation by the evaluator and validation, which included surveys and

interviews, were used. As well, documentation was also used through a desk review of documents and literature. All of these methods supported the evaluation's findings, conclusions and recommendations. The PIU was not involved in data collection. She was, however, kept informed of the progress of the collection of data. The focus on "use" was always a guiding principle.

Data analysis, including interpreting findings and generating recommendations (see under Section 5 — Outcome), was done in a group effort between the evaluator and the PIU (*UFE Step 10*). The PIU was helped by the evaluator to get involved in the analysis of the data. This was done through reading the draft report and consulting regarding the interpretation and finalization of the data. The evaluation's findings were overwhelming. In total 27 recommendations for "use" were made from the analysis of the survey's data and findings. In facilitation of use (*UFE Step 11*) the evaluator helped the PIU prioritize the evaluation's recommendations to ensure the use of findings were more manageable. They were prioritized under the strategic and operational categories. These two categories were further prioritized into three levels of importance: "high", "medium" and "low". In total 27 recommendations for "use" were made. Of these recommendations 14 (52%) were identified for use in the implementation of the current phase. Another 8 (30%) were identified for use in requesting grants for the next phase of the project. Additionally, 2 (7%) were to be modified for use while 3 (11%) were not used.

The evaluator constantly involved the PIU in the entire UFE process to give a sense of ownership in the evaluation. This participatory process helped achieve the first evaluation's purpose. This purpose was to build evaluation capacity in the organization. It was also to equip staff and the PIU with the knowledge of conducting, managing and using evaluations. It also helped advance the second purpose of the evaluation. This second purpose was to inform the organization on areas for programme improvement.

## **5. UFE — The How**

Organizational readiness (*UFE Step 1*) was a challenge. At least a month was needed for the organization to understand the UFE framework; its philosophy; its different steps; and its implications. SIRCA was not aware of UFE beforehand this meant there was a steep learning curve involved in the process. The introductory UFE meeting in Penang, Malaysia, did not clearly convey UFE's potential and its requirements to the participants. Additionally, what was learnt from the session was not communicated to the other stakeholders in SIRCA such as the project manager and the team. From the beginning there should have been a more sharing and group oriented approach to share information on UFE and preparing for the 12 UFE steps.

Every step of UFE's 12 steps was difficult to implement in a real world setting. It should be noted that there was a tendency to skip over steps. Additionally, it was a challenge to ensure sufficient time was provided to deal with each. The book by Michael Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (2008), was useful. It especially helped the evaluator to appreciate the reasoning behind the steps. As well, it helped her convince management about the need to systematically cover the different steps. Patton's book brought credibility to the process. It was also a solution to questions posed by management regarding the process. Secondly, the evaluator's preparation was good. She maintained her commitment

during the process. The evaluator, using her strong communication skills, was able to do things that were a necessary part of the process. This included encouraging the user to be more specific in defining KEQs. It also required her read the final report generated by the evaluation. Face-to-face meetings, personal rapport, mutual trust and close interactions with those involved in the evaluation process helped the evaluator to overcome challenges. This all helped her meet the requirements stipulated in the evaluator's readiness (*UFE Step 2*).

A new PIU joined SIRCA after the start of the UFE process. She needed to familiarize herself quickly with both SIRCA and the UFE exercise. It is important to note that the PIU was also not aware that she was "primary user" in the process. This meant that she had to be involved in an ongoing capacity in the UFE process. This role remained a challenge for her. For example during the reporting period and during the report's finalization the PIU was surprised to find how many steps she was to be involved in. She was expected to be involved in reading, understanding, ratifying and finalizing the report along with the evaluator. She had had a different understanding of her role. She had expected the evaluator to present the outcomes to the team. The evaluator, in turn, expected the primary user to read and correct errors in the report. Consequently there was a huge challenge for the PIU in terms of assimilating the information and understanding it. There were also challenges to find the time needed to get involved closely in the whole process along with the evaluator as was required in the UFE step identification of PIUs (*UFE Step 3*). The PIU's receptiveness and adaptability helped to overcome this barrier. The evaluator's adaptability was also crucial to the process. Over time the primary user came to understand the need for her intense involvement.

Face-to-face meetings between primary user and evaluator were found to be more effective than email in addressing these issues. The evaluator used her strong interpersonal skills in a subtle manner while following UFE. She, for example, encouraged the primary user to be more detailed with the KEQ wording. She also encouraged more specific identification of the uses and users of the evaluation. "UFE is a participatory evaluation with considerable investment of time and effort by the PIU in the evaluation process. The PIU has day-to-day job priorities. Evaluation is another job imposed on the PIU and, therefore, the facilitative role of the evaluator is inevitable. Redoubled effort is required by the evaluator to obtain better participation of the PIU in each of the UFE steps. The evaluator noted the much patience from both parties helped to overcome the situation". The evaluator also stated: "UFE changes the role of the evaluator from a typically external, independent, distanced and objective person to a trusted facilitator and advisor. Key stakeholders commissioning the evaluation may at first question and resist this type of relationship with the evaluator as the notion of 'objectivity' is [set aside]. Evaluation findings and recommendations can be seemingly biased with direct input from stakeholders commissioning the evaluation. Gradually working with the PIU and gaining his [or] her understanding of UFE to instill a sense of ownership of the evaluation can allay the initial resistance to this approach".

The idea of developing a "theory of change" for SIRCA occurred during the UFE process as SIRCA did not have one. The idea came from the evaluator's exposure to the concept at the



workshop through IPDET in Ottawa<sup>3</sup>, Canada. This was an important decision point and innovation. Although a theory of change was not part of the 12 steps of UFE the evaluator introduced it at SIRCA as a means of fulfilling UFE Step 6. It was a useful addition. It helped in locating and finalizing the KEQs in regard to focusing the evaluation (*UFE Step 6*). It helped both the evaluator and the PIU in finding the differences among Outputs versus Short-term Outcome versus Long-term Outcome versus Impact. Without that distinction and understanding it would have been difficult for the evaluator to define the terms.

Many outputs were attained. First there was the grant administration process that looked at proposals with high quality ICTD research potential. Second, there was mentorship in which PIs (primary investigators) with strong fieldwork skills and research management capabilities were guided by the mentors' expertise and that introduced mentors and PIs with strong professional networks to the ICTD discipline and community. Many short-term outcomes were reached. The first was developing broad based, high quality, multidisciplinary social science research in ICTD in Asia. Second, was the recognition of the SIRCA programme and Asia based researchers through many settings and types of communication. These long-term outcomes influenced national, regional and global policy discussions in ICTD and, as well, facilitated making better evidence-based decisions by local, national, regional and/or global decision makers. Thus the project's overall impact was achieved — it improved livelihoods in developing countries through ICT for Development.

## **6. UFE — Outcomes**

SIRCA embraced the UFE evaluation process. Their feedback confirmed that the SIRCA team was very happy with both the process and the experience. The evaluation recommendations were taken very seriously. The UFE process helped SIRCA to produce 27 recommendations. The “intended uses” of the evaluation originate from the grant review process; mentoring process; and conferences and workshops project areas.

Some examples taken from the final report of the evaluation (*SIRCA Evaluation*, November, 2010) are noted in the following discussion and are based on the grant review committee's views about what worked and what still needs improvement. The selection was done on the criteria of interest by theme; interest by ICT areas; and country of study etc. The dropout rate was 20%. The committee observed that: “A large and diverse Grant Review Committee would ensure a fair assessment with different perspectives, while the Selection Committee/Matching Committee could come from current Mentors, Trainers, Secretariat staff, IDRC and other stakeholders”. The committee made many recommendations. It stressed, first of all, to: “Scrutinize the PIs' ambitions, motivations, and priorities to do research through more screening criteria in the written application or through personal interviews”. Secondly, the committee felt important to: “Have a large and diverse body of Reviewers — people from academia, government, private sector, think tanks, and civil society — as this diversity is also reflected in the topics and countries of applicants”. Thirdly it was recommended by the committee that it is important to: “Maintain the Grant Review Committee external to SiRC[A] and without overlap with the Selection Committee”. These recommendations point to an increased diversity in input from different points of view. It also showed the increased depth that was applied when examining the input from PIs.

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<sup>3</sup> The opportunity was provided by IDRC and SIRCA.

Regarding the role of mentorship the committee found the following results. The mentors came with different expectations of learning. They were keen on learning what "emergent researchers are up to". They also wanted to understand how SIRCA managed the mentorship programme since this institution is interested in initiating one. The committee observed, first of all, that: "The Mentor[s] guided and taught their PIs in a range of research issues such as ICTD theory and theoretical frameworks, research methodology, data collection". It was also noted by the committee that "Mentors understood better the project context after the Site Visit, virtual communication between the PI and Mentor improved after the Mentor had left the project site. Thus, the Site Visit had long-lasting benefits to the PI-Mentor relationship". Additionally, the committee recognized, that it: "was often during a one-on-one discussion with the Mentor that the PI understood how to do data analysis or how to inspect their research framework from a different angle. Most realizations occurred during the Mentor Site Visit, further attesting to the importance of face-to-face interactions at the project site". As well the committee discovered that: "Forty-five percent (45%) out of the 10 Mentors felt that the match between mentor and PIs could have been better". Recommendations from the committee included that action be take to: "Compile a Mentorship handbook to clarify roles and expectations for Mentors in the SIRCA program". Another recommendation was to: "Allow for at least 2 Mentor Site Visits to increase face-to-face interaction and support the project outcomes". A third recommendation was to: "Allow PIs to recommend their own Mentors for the projects or allow PIs to pick their top 3 Mentors if SIRCA posts the Mentors profiles on its website. SIRCA can also consider circulating awarded projects to Mentors for them to choose a project they would like to work with". An important area of improvement identified is in the area of increased in person interaction among participants and with the different mentors. The mentors, in turn, should receive additional and various types of support.

Regarding workshops and conferences the committee drew several conclusions. The first conclusion was that "Respondents including Mentors felt the topics needed more depth, and generally more time to interact with other participants. An option is to hold longer and deeper but less frequent workshops, such as a week-long course. Some topics in the list above are not 'hands-on' and can become themes in conferences". Another conclusion was that it was the mainly the PIs that presented the topics in the workshops and the limited time allotted, three minutes, for each presentation was felt to be too short. The committee also had recommendations regarding workshops and conferences. In addition the committee recommended to: "Consider deepening the workshops['] topics by allowing more time per topic. An intensive workshop can be extended to a 1 or 2 week course, perhaps adjoined with the Pre-Project Workshop". Their second recommendation focused on facilities such as computer labs, library resources and e-journals that could be made available depending on the topic. They also felt it was important to: "Allow Mentors to present their topic/region of expertise during a workshop". Additionally they stressed that: "Workshops need to include a session on presentation skills — speaking in public and creating visible and captivating PowerPoint presentations". Overall, in this area, added depth, breadth and time would improve workshops and conference lessons.

The facilitation of use (*UFE Step 11*) helped to sort out the recommendations under priority of use for the implementation stage of the current project phase. This step also helped to

evaluate three recommendations one of which was found to be of no use and two of which needed to be modified for use. Overall SIRCA used the recommendations and made reference to them in the next grant proposal to IDRC. This use indicated the weight and credibility SIRCA gave to the UFE findings. The evaluator's improved skills was another direct outcome of the DECI-UFE usage in the SIRCA process. These skills included: interpersonal skills; facilitating skills for UFE; data collection skills using electronic mail and telephone with recording; as well as skills that can be applied to the evolving use of the theory of change.

The remote mentoring from the DECI mentors was found to be successful and will be applied in future uses. It helped the internally placed evaluator to be open to learning new information and skills. At every step of the UFE process there was interaction and sharing between the evaluator and the mentor either by email or Skype. Such ongoing interactions and support helped the evaluator to be more confident. This meant that each step proceeded more smoothly and it allowed for quick corrective action during the UFE process with SIRCA.

The evaluator's and primary user's close involvement in the process created opportunities for knowledge development for both of them. They were able to understand the evaluation process and they had a deeper understanding of the UFE framework. The careful work at each step of UFE made the evaluation process systematic and rigorous. This learning also benefitted other stakeholders in SIRCA.

There were unintended outcomes from the UFE. First of all primary users and evaluators talked about the experience of the evaluation and its importance during the Delhi Evaluation Conclave 2010. Another unintended outcome was the awareness created within SIRCA, itself, about the importance of evaluation. During the process the project manager, as the "primary user" of the evaluation, and her team members (the project's staff) were constantly exposed to the steps of the UFE evaluation. The staff were able to participate in a majority of the meetings held between the evaluator and the primary user. They were also to be involved in the "use" of the evaluation findings. An unintended outcome was that they were "secondary intended users".

Some elements of the UFE process did not work well. SIRCA considered all the UFE steps as being of equal weight. In practice, however, the earlier steps (*UFE Step 1* through to *Step 8*) involved SIRCA deeply with more interactions and required a solid investment of time. In the data collection and post-data collection phase (*UFE Step 9* and *Step 10*), there was involvement of the primary users. The evaluator had a greater time commitment to the process of the data collection, compilation and analysis. Overall a key finding was that to ensure that the primary user maintains his or her involvement in the process a constant commitment and momentum must be maintained until the last UFE step is accomplished. SIRCA has built an evaluation stage into its next project. Best results will be obtained for the evaluation if this stage occurs at the end of the project and not at the project's mid-term. SIRCA found that leaving the project-end evaluation open, with no specific reference to any methodology, was problematic and would seriously challenge the learning and capacity built from the whole UFE process. SIRCA felt that the UFE was useful in reflecting the shortcomings of the programme. It was also felt that UFE helped tremendously in facilitating the stakeholders' thinking in the development of a more strategic plan for SIRCA's future.

## 7. UFE — Lessons Learned

This case study's readership would benefit from considering the lessons that follow in this section. The lesson might act as both a support and a caution regarding the UFE process. There was organizational readiness and cooperation within the management of SIRCA, team members and evaluators and primary users. The interpersonal skill of the SIRCA evaluator was found to be an important factor to the process's outcome. Commitment of the primary user and management of SIRCA was another important factor in creating a successful project. The "triangle" system set up between SIRCA and the evaluator as well as the regional mentor along with the participation of the consultants from Canada provided a supportive framework. This framework helped enhance communication. It also helped articulate and implement the UFE processes in SIRCA. Additionally, the book by Michael Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (2008), as well as the clearly described 12 steps of UFE helped contribute to the outcome.

The New Delhi Evaluation Conclave 2010 reinforced the importance of UFE. SIRCA provided funds that enabled the evaluator and primary user to participate in the Conclave. This participation was possible due to the importance SIRCA gave to the evaluation process. The training of the evaluator at the IPDET Canada workshop was another contributing factor to the outcome. The evaluator also believed that such an evaluation process in future should have a pre-planned training programme within UFE for the evaluator, as well as primary user. The evaluator participated in all the team meetings. This proved to be a useful contributing factor. SIRCA also valued the evaluator as part of the team and did not treat her as an outsider. The lesson learned from this experience is that it was important to ensure that the evaluator be treated as an "insider" of the organization who is also undergoing the evaluation. Free access to all information and personnel in SIRCA was a useful factor for the evaluator. This was an important indication of SIRCA's commitment to the evaluation.

SIRCA fully supported the UFE evaluation. The outcomes' usefulness and applicability were readily apparent. The process of implementation the UFE steps is well documented in SIRCA and by DECI through this case study. The UFE process also lends itself to future replication. There were many additional contributing factors. Patton's book as reference was very useful. The interactions between the evaluator and the mentor and the DECI consultants were valuable. Training opportunities such as the IPDET workshop to enhance the evaluator's skill were also helpful. It was also important for the evaluator to participate in and share information about the UFE experience at the Delhi Evaluation Conclave. It is also crucial to note that the preparedness in SIRCA based on a one-year timeline helped build the relationship between the evaluator and primary users. It also gave rigor to the UFE process.

DECI partners, including evaluators and primary users, missed out on opportunities to learn from the experience of the other DECI partners. Coming together in the middle or towards the end of the process to share each partner's experience in UFE would have been a significant learning opportunity for all stakeholders. The lack of initial systematic in-house orientation on UFE for the SIRCA team was an opportunity lost. There was also an opportunity lost for external training to build the capacity of SIRCA in a general evaluation. It

was felt by the evaluator that the primary user should have also received a similar training opportunity that the evaluator had in IPDET.

IDRC had an interest in the mentorship process in SIRCA. In particular, the PO of the IDRC felt that the learning from the evaluation could have been greater on this aspect: "If we look at the 3 evaluation KEQ areas (grant review committee, mentoring programme and international workshops), that SIRCA took on for the UFE process, we get (the evaluation findings provide) the breadth, depth tradeoff. We felt that there was a trade-off in the depth in the 'mentoring program' in the findings which we wanted SIRCA to go deeper into". As a result IDRC had to request that SIRCA go into further depth on the mentoring aspects of SIRCA through an additional study. An additional finding was that the time commitment required by the UFE process affected the lives and work of those involved in an unexpected way. The primary user commented: "If I had known how much to be involved and how long the evaluation would last, I would have planned and blended the requirement with my work well". The primary user felt that the evaluation findings would have provided useful input for SIRCA's second international conference of SIRCA. However, the report had not been finalized by the time the event took place in April of 2011. SIRCA did not realize that the findings would have been put into use already even though the report had not been finalized.

The UFE process broadened and enhanced the way evaluations can be conducted and the elements that can add depth to future evaluations. The evaluator noted: "Now when I approach an evaluation, I can't help looking for Primary Intended Users and Uses. I think this is very important and will increase the effect and impact of the evaluation. I wish all evaluations were like that. My only regret is that the approach to an evaluation is often dictated by the organization commissioning the evaluation and so the challenge is to incorporate UFE elements into this predefined way of conducting the evaluation. Organizations can have a predetermined agenda/approach in the evaluation TOR". Additionally, the evaluator felt that UFE reinforced the idea that the involvement and decisions of the client (the primary user of the evaluation) at every step of the evaluation has great importance. The significance placed on the primary user in UFE replaced traditional perceptions of the evaluator's voice as an "expert". In the past this would have meant the evaluator's opinions might have overruled the concerns and experiences of the primary user(s). The PO of IDRC noted: "I had my 'aha' moment about why UFE was considered as an evaluation framework in IDRC. When that finally clicked a lot of things fell into place. There is a buffet of evaluation approaches and picking amongst them without any logical direction is troublesome. I was trying to find what all this was about and understanding UFE as a framework revolutionized (his thinking in terms of how it approached evaluation)". The PIU emphasized: "I never knew that UFE is so systematic and structured evaluation and it has given me a new outlook on evaluation. Never knew there is a profession for evaluation as well. The participation in the Evaluation Conclave also provided further insights into the various evaluation methodologies and opened up my mind to the ocean of things happening in evaluation".

UFE is process oriented and it is very crucial in the evaluation process. When the evaluator was trying to get SIRCA to identify the specific PIU, the management felt emphasis should be placed on "the organization". On probing deeper it was found that it was actually just one

person — the senior manager — who did the implementation of recommendations. Senior management had an important role in overseeing the SIRCA programme. A discovery was made during the process of who the users really are. Members realized that there was a single person responsible and this was the project manager, not just the organization. This individual was recognized as the key person responsible for managing the implementation of the recommendations.

There was some tension between senior management, the PIU and her staff about choosing the evaluation area and identifying the KEQs. The tension was based on identifying who the users were based on who was going to implement the recommendations. It was also based on who was to implement the hands-on work. This tension was felt to be both positive and creative and that it would not have surfaced if the UFE evaluation approach had not emphasized the “person” as greatly as it had to that point. The main lesson gathered from the process was the realization that UFE is not a methodology. It is a systematic approach or framework to determine what is the right methodology. The “aha” moments for the project’s participants occurred when they realized that they had power over this process. It meant that they understood that they could do something useful themselves. It took a while for the project (SIRCA) to come to this realization. These “aha” moments were important factors in UFE’s achievements as they energized the participants. They also provided insight into the process beyond the theory of the UFE steps.

In the past it was felt that an evaluation meant that the evaluator would come and check what was happening in a project and would later write up the findings. UFE, in contrast, offers opportunities for all users to participate and to be involved from the very beginning. They thus have an emotional and professional investment in the process from its beginning all the way to the finalization of the report. In following the UFE evaluation process it is important for the reader to appreciate that UFE is a collaborative, collegial, and community enhancing project. It requires both time and emotional commitment. With this understanding the reader will find success in the UFE process.

#### **Appendix: Case Study SIRCA Acronym List**

ICTD: Information and Communication Technology for Development

KEQs: Key Evaluation Questions

NTU: Nanyang Technological University

PAN: Pan Asia Networking

PO: Program Officer

PI: Principle Investigators

SiRC: Singapore Internet Research Centre