Case Study: DREAM-IT — Development Research to Empower All Mongolians through Information Communications Technology in Mongolia

Sonal D. Zaveri
601-602 Shreeniketan, St. Anthony's Rd. Chembur, Mumbai 400 071
India

Email: sonalzaveri@gmail.com

This case study provides a summary of the Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) experience that DREAM-IT completed in collaboration with the DECI Project.

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 will more likely 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. 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 through a team of regional evaluation mentors. The mentoring team introduced the concepts and practices of UFE and

facilitated the design and completion of evaluations across five ICTD projects. These five case studies capture the mentoring team's experiences and reflections as a way of sharing what was learned by facilitating UFE.

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

Mongolia continues to transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. It is still challenged with several problems that include: a widely dispersed population across a vast country; extreme climactic conditions; and limited infrastructure. These conditions pose great challenges. Access to affordable, timely and quality access to essential services such as education and health care is still a challenge. As is access to critical processes such as citizen engagement and ensuring livelihoods for citizens that are stable. Mongolia also faces major environmental problems. Increasing deserts, inadequate water supply as well as air and water pollution caused by extensive mining explorations are among those problems. Governance is also problematic. There are bureaucracy and service inefficiencies and a lack of transparency. Access to public information is also limited.

Mega Mongolia: DREAM-IT (http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-140054-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html) was a programme of projects. It was developed to address policy, infrastructure, development, innovation, capacity building and other challenges faced by the country's ICT sector as it deploys ICT-based activities and initiatives. DREAM-IT stands for Development Research to Empower All Mongolians through Information Communications Technology. The project was designed to develop researchers' abilities. It was also designed to help research managers to achieve their objectives. An additional goal was to strengthen the various projects' strategic linkages and opportunities to share knowledge. DREAM-IT represented a group of committed stakeholders in Mongolia who recognized opportunities to conduct ICT4D research that would help with solutions to some of Mongolia's developmental problems. Today, with a much-improved ICT infrastructure, Mongolians are able to work on coordinated ICT research that will help to meet the country's development needs. This work would not have been possible in the last two decades when Mongolia did not have Internet and when it was not open to a market economy.

DREAM-IT drew on the three main points of the Pan Asia Networking (PAN) Prospectus: (1) policy; (2) technology; and (3) socio-economic effects of ICT. The project posed the following research questions. First, it looked at "What are the strategies and processes needed to allow research findings from this project to influence the policy-making process?" Second it reviewed "What is the role of ICTs in achieving socio-economic outcomes that are sought by the development sectors (e.g. health, education, governance)?" Next it examined "In the Mongolian context, what specific technologies and systems would be appropriate to achieve developmental effects in the sectors of health, education, governance, and environment etc.?" It also evaluated "How is the success of an ICT4D project defined?" Finally, it explored "How do we ensure that learning about success and failure is transferred and integrated for future ICT programming in the country?"

There were six sub-projects included under the umbrella Mega Mongolia: DREAM-IT project. They were designed and proposed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs); government organizations; research and education institutions; and researchers (mainly research teams). The selected projects include six ICT-related projects in education, health, environment and governance. The first, Sub-project 1, focused on *Online psychological service for health professionals*. The second, Sub-project 2, centred on *Blended Technology Education Project (BTEP)* using technology to level the education playing field in Mongolia. The third was Sub-project 3, which examined *Curriculum development of university computing and ICT education in Mongolia*. Next, Sub-project 4, concentrated on *GES information system to motivate reliable business relation for Gobi eco-system*. Sub-project 5 looked at *Improving the responsiveness and efficiency of public sector's information services provision in Mongolia*. Finally, Sub-project 6, reviewed *Engaging citizen participation in the parliamentary legislative process*. The sub-projects worked over 18 months on specific ICT problems and issues in ICT research and development. Each had a research component that would supply support to both practice and policy.

A DREAM-IT board and a management team governed the sub-projects. A team of recognized specialists in the Mongolian ICT sector lead the DREAM-IT umbrella project. The board was chaired by a member of the Mongolian parliament. The project was managed by Datacom Company, an established ICT data services enterprise in Ulaanbaatar (UB), Mongolia. The board's primary roles and responsibilities were: management, coordination, co-operation and oversight of the sub-projects. The board was also responsible for generating new ideas, research and studies. It also helped create capacity, meaning the skills and experience, buildingof stakeholders who were involved in the project. The board also influenced policy making processes at both regional and national levels. Each board member was responsible for one sub-project. In addition to managing these sub-projects, the board reviewed new project proposals before sending them for approval at IDRC for funding. The DREAM-IT project manager reported to the board and managed the projects.

The DREAM-IT project had several outcomes. First, that policy and decision makers would have more knowledge about the specific issues of the sector and research results. The second outcome was that they would have up-to-date information about technology's influence in the field of development problem solving. Outcomes for project stakeholders included that they would have opportunities to improve their abilities in research and in implementation through their use and piloting of ICT. Another outcome was that project stakeholders would gain a better understanding of the advantages and weaknesses of ICT use in Mongolia. IDRC offered an opportunity to all its partners, including DREAM-IT, to understand and use the UFE approach supported by the DECI project mentors to guide them through the process. This opportunity showed IDRC's support for future research projects. IDRC's support also enabled DREAM-IT to learn about how evaluations could be created so that they are actually used.

Two DREAM-IT board members attended the Penang Conference 2009, in Malaysia. At the conference they were introduced to the UFE concept. They were also introduced to the DECI project and the three available South Asia based mentors as well as two international experts.

Several board members missed an important introduction to UFE. At the time the DREAM-IT project manager mentioned that the word "evaluation" created stress. As members thought that their performance would be evaluated. But the understanding that emerged from the Penang introduction was that UFE was "different". It was an approach to evaluation where DREAM-IT would be involved and be able to contribute to the analysis of their work. However, at the time it was not clear what DREAM-IT's role would be. One the board member, later appointed as the UFE Facilitator by the DREAM-IT board, expected that since DREAM-IT had no expertise DECI would train and be closely involved in *doing* the evaluation. In fact, it was expected that DECI mentors would not only "come and do" project evaluation but also train and support DECI in carrying the evaluation out. DREAM-IT would manage time allocated for the work; the UFE facilitator and the required budget. The topic of the evaluation was also expected to be an overall review of the sub-projects or the oversight role of the DREAM-IT board. This view was strongly influenced by previous external donor driven evaluations. The expectations of the IDRC manager for DREAM-IT were different. What was important from her viewpoint was that in UFE the evaluation would be possible without an external person's involvement. She also felt that the importance placed on using in the evaluation, which is the hallmark of UFE, was a "given". She did not feel that it was to be debated at all since once DREAM-IT knew what they wanted to evaluate. It was natural and obvious for them, therefore, how, where and for what to use the evaluation for.

Following the Penang meeting mentoring was provided via Skype. It was important to have an assigned "evaluation facilitator" from DREAM-IT to implement the UFE. The board of directors decided to appoint one of their members for this position. Some time elapsed before this appointment was finalized as roles and responsibilities had to be revised. The plan was to select the UFE area of research during Skype calls followed by the DECI mentor's visit to provide details about the research design. DREAM-IT found the UFE book and the 12 steps of UFE difficult to understand and requested a formal training on UFE during this visit. To summarize, DREAM-IT's initial expectations were unclear. They voiced a mere expression of "interest" in the process. They expected the evaluation to focus on their project and to involve them but they were *not* expecting they would be in control of leading the UFE process.

4. UFE — The What

The DECI mentor's first visit was six months into the DECI project. She trained individuals involved in the sub-projects on UFE. She also interacted with the DREAM-IT team and in doing so came to understand their challenges. She also reviewed their selection of the research topic for the UFE study. It was evident that the project evaluation facilitator, as a board member, would not have the time for the UFE research process. The process involved designing the question; collecting data; analyzing it; preparing the report; and involving all the primary intended users at each stage. It was the mentor's recommendation that a "UFE researcher" be appointed full time. However, there was no line item in the budget for this position. Approvals, therefore, had to be given by IDRC. The researcher was appointed eight months after UFE started. This meant that the UFE researcher missed the initial training by the DECI mentor. That training had included the 12 steps of UFE; the development of key questions; and how to select and engage primary intended users for use of the findings. The UFE researcher's expectation

about her role was that she was to learn about UFE guidelines and how to use them. She expected continuous collaboration from the DECI mentor ranging from data collection to report writing *(UFE Step 1* and *UFE Step 2)*.

The purpose or the use of the UFE was to understand how DREAM-IT could better manage its projects so that it could fulfill its management oversight role. The users were all the members of the DREAM-IT board. The link to them would be through the UFE facilitator as well as the DREAM-IT project manager who reported to the board *(UFE Step 3)*. Four sub-projects were selected for the UFE. Two of the projects had been able to complete their objectives within a stated time frame and two had not *(UFE Step 4)*. By comparing these two sets of projects, DREAM-IT learned how to develop guidelines for better results based management for new projects. This was the intended use of the UFE. The board would be able to redesign its management structure to better support new projects based on the UFE findings *(UFE Step 5)*.

The projects that were behind schedule included Sub-project 1, *Online psychological service for health professionals*, which provided online psychological counselling for health professionals to reduce job related stress. The baseline study and overall management was assigned to an academic institution. The counselling implementation was handled by an NGO. The innovative project had difficulties on many fronts. The baseline took up two thirds of the project period of 18 months and there was reluctance to participate on the part of health professionals who were not familiar with online counselling. The second "late" project was Sub-project 4 *GES information system to motivate reliable business relation for Gobi eco-system*. Its innovation was implementation at the *soum* level (second lowest administrative level). It worked with a three party cooperation model that included herders, a mining company and local government. The sub-project sought to introduce herders to 21st century technologies such as ICT with the support of the local school as a centre for Internet communication. This project had many roadblocks. A severe winter called a *dzud* prevented herders from being available for consultations. There were also delays due to the software and hardware setup for the three party communication. At times the mining company was not available to participate as well. Additionally, the project location's remoteness affected the project's schedule.

Two of the projects selected were "on track". The Sub-project 2 *Blended Technology Education Project (BTEP): Using technology to level the education playing field in Mongolia* used three technologies: Internet, mobile phones and television to provided a more comprehensive distance learning experience. This project piggybacked on a new educational TV channel that was broadcast nationally (only one of two channels had this coverage at that time). This channel provided an opportunity to broadcast the innovative DREAM-IT education programme nationwide. The teachers were exposed to this blended educational technology for the first time as well. The project evaluated how well children in a rural setting were able to learn using this technology compared to children in urban schools. The project also evaluated the differences in learning between the schools and made recommendations to the Ministry of Education. The project was completed on time.

The second sub-project selected was Sub-project 5 *Improving the responsiveness and efficiency of public sector's information services provision in Mongolia*. This sub-project introduced the use of ICT for government. Its purpose was to efficiently and effectively provide information to its citizens. It also allowed citizens to give feedback directly and instantly to the government. This project enabled two way communications between government and citizens. It also helped the government understand citizens' demand for different types of information. In one year the project completed its objectives. The project recommended that all government ministries and the UB city governor's office should set up appropriate information databases (e.g. land rights) to be made easily accessible by the citizens. It also recommended that brochures and handbooks be developed that should provide information to answer citizens' frequently asked questions. These brochures and handbooks were to be made widely available for citizens. It was also recommended that a citizen information center be established at government ministries *(UFE Step 4)*.

These two sets of projects represented the part of UFE that analyzed differences in: (1) planning; (2) capacity building; (3) management practices; and (4) the sustainability and policy influence of the projects. The following key questions guided the data collection during UFE *(UFE Step 6)*. The first question was "To what extent were the projects planned realistically in terms of activities, time, budget and staff?" The second question asked "What was the role of the DREAM-IT board members during the planning process of the sub-projects?" The next question posed this question "To what extent were the roles, responsibilities and tasks clearly defined and followed by the: sub-project leader, sub-project team members, DREAM-IT designated board member for the sub-project, and DREAM-IT project leader?" The final question addressed "What do we do better next time?" The qualitative design used included interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews and discussions involved 25 key stakeholders; project leaders; board members of the DREAM-IT project; sub-project leaders; and project team members. The findings were collected and analyzed *(UFE Step 7)*.

5. UFE — The How

Mentoring in the DECI project was planned via Skype with a maximum of two field visits. It was important, therefore, to structure the mentor's onsite visit at the best time to respond to the stated needs. The first field visit was scheduled after the selection of the UFE research area to facilitate the development of key questions and research design. The second field visit was intended to support the data analysis and report writing. Both field visits to DREAM-IT had unintended outcomes that altered the UFE process. In hindsight these visits strengthened the UFE process.

The first two steps of the 12 step UFE process involved the organization's and the evaluator's readiness and capability. DREAM-IT was ready to spend time and resources after the PAN all Partner meeting in Penang, Malaysia. A board member was chosen for UFE facilitation (UFE facilitator). He had some evaluation experience in outcome mapping. Challenges, however, soon emerged from the onset of the UFE process. DREAM-IT's first challenge was the selection

of the UFE topic. It took time and reflection. It would also need revision[1]. The UFE steps then required identifying the users at *UFE Step 3*. This step was followed by a situational analysis about possible use *(UFE Step 4)*. The next step was the identification of use *(UFE Step 5)*. The following step involved focusing the evaluation on key questions *(UFE Step 6)*. DREAM-IT was committed to the UFE process, however, it found it difficult to identify *what* to evaluate. DREAM-IT was new to the project evaluation process. It needed time to understand the UFE and its 12 steps.

The UFE is driven by the needs of the person(s) or users. It is the users who will determine how they will use the findings. This process is never straightforward. However, within the Mongolian context there were unique challenges. Determining what to evaluate; who will be the users; and how the findings will be used are difficult questions for grantees. Usually evaluation is conducted by the donor. As this project was set in an Asian culture there were additional factors involved in the project's operation. In Asian cultures there is a top-down social structure. This structure supports acceptance of what persons in authority propose (in this case the donor). In this situation, with the projects based in Mongolia, there was another important factor at work. The country was emerging from a socialist, typically top-down, form of governance. The UFE's stress on having the users decide what to evaluate was unusual. It required an out of the ordinary focus on the self and self-determination.

The first UFE topic was the evaluation of Sub-project 1 *Online psychological service for health professionals*. The UFE facilitator, in his role as a board member, was responsible for this sub-project. He knew the project's activities; its problems; the setting of the sub-project; and the staff of the sub-project. He felt confident about managing users and uses for the UFE. In his words, UFE was "unknown". However, the Sub-project 1 was "known" and it was better to work with at least one "known" situation *(UFE Step 4)*. The second challenge was related to who would do the evaluation. The Penang meeting had recommended that one person from the project team should be responsible for the UFE process. The DREAM-IT board appointed one of its members to take additional charge of UFE, along with the responsibility of managing one of the sub-projects. This action would be supported by the DREAM-IT project manager. Later on in the project this arrangement had to be adapted to include an additional full time UFE evaluator. Although DREAM-IT understood that the UFE designated board member would need to spend time on the UFE, the amount of involvement needed to complete the UFE research became clear only when the DECI mentor visited DREAM-IT in Mongolia for the first time in April of 2011. In an earlier evaluation that used outcome mapping, the involvement of the board member had been one of oversight with the sub-project taking the lead on the research process. In selecting the first UFE topic, that is the evaluation of Sub-project 1, DREAM-IT was expecting the same process with additional funds being sourced from the sub-project budget.

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[1] UFE requires a state of readiness prior to *UFE Step 1*. The 12-step UFE process assumes that if the organization and researcher are committed towards the UFE evaluative process, they would naturally be able to identify or know their evaluation needs. This theoretical *Step 0* helps to decide *what* to evaluate. *Step 0* was accomplished through discussions over Skype for three months. This helped to pin down the evaluation topic although eventually it was altered six months into the UFE process.

However, the UFE topic changed and the need for an independent UFE researcher was recognized as a necessary solution. In the case of DREAM-IT, there were two persons involved in the UFE implementation. The first was the UFE designated board member who provided overall guidance and oversight. The second was a UFE evaluator on temporary appointment to conduct the UFE. This work included interviews, analysis and report writing.

The third challenge was finding resources for the UFE process. Human resources were needed. As well, compensation was needed for time spent by the UFE designated board member and the UFE evaluator as well as the data collection costs. There would also be costs related to use. One board member is a member of the Mongolian parliament who is also a businessperson. This board member did have evaluative experience and was chosen to be the board member responsible for the UFE process. Without this help it would have been difficult to understand the basics of evaluation and its subtleties. The UFE research area is not pre-determined. As a result it is difficult to plan for both the human and financial resources needed. In DREAM-IT's case, IDRC (the donor) was flexible. It was able to respond to the need for additional financial resources.

The fourth challenge was learning about UFE itself. Remote capacity building (over Skype) and reading Michael Patton's book, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (2008), on UFE was not sufficient for DREAM-IT. The book was voluminous. It was difficult for a non-researcher to understand the book. The occasional discussions via Skype discussions, even when lasting an hour, could not clarify basic concepts of UFE. Guidelines, modified modules and notes were specially developed by the mentor to help with understanding the process. These were discussed with DREAM-IT to increase UFE understanding. It was clear, however, that this remote learning was inadequate. It was clear that face-to-face meetings were needed. DREAM-IT, being an umbrella project with an oversight role, was also interested in increasing capacities across all its sub-projects regarding UFE. To respond to all these challenges it was decided that the DECI mentor's first face-to-face meeting in Mongolia with DREAM-IT would include discussions with the UFE DREAM-IT board member about the UFE key questions and research design. The meeting would also include a capacity building workshop for all, board members and sub-project recipients. The purpose of these efforts was to ensure the opportunity available for UFE skill building was taken by all involved.

The one-day UFE capacity building workshop in April of 2011 involved all six sub-project recipients and board members. It was very useful in making clear basic concepts. This included the development of key questions, which had been difficult to explain over Skype. Discussions with the Sub-project 1 team and the board member responsible for UFE continued after the workshop. At these sessions it became clear that Sub-project 1 could not be evaluated at that time. This was because only the baseline had been completed and implementation had not begun. At this point almost two thirds of the project timeline had passed.

The rejection of the UFE research topic was unusual. It likely occurred because of the poor understanding of UFE's meaning, despite the information given out at the Penang meeting. As well the selection of Sub-project 1 was based on incorrect assumptions such as UFE board

members' familiarity with the sub-project. There was also an assumption about the presence of research capacity within the sub-project staff. Additionally it was assumed that the project's timeline would parallel UFE process as all the other projects were nearing completion and so would not be available for the UFE. This led to a discussion regarding the status of other projects. As a result of this discussion another project was identified that had similar problems with delayed implementation. DREAM-IT also pointed out that other projects had had no difficulty in completing their objectives within their timelines. This led to a discussion with board members about how useful it would be for an umbrella project to analyze the reasons that might explain why some projects perform better than others. By reviewing a selection of delayed and on-time sub-projects, DREAM-IT sought use findings to learn how to manage projects better so that objectives could be achieved. The solution was to revise the UFE research topic accordingly *(UFE Step 4* and *UFE Step 5)*.

The DECI mentor's field visit also helped to clarify the role of the UFE researcher. DREAM-IT realized that the board member responsible for UFE would only be able to provide oversight as he is a businessperson with other responsibilities. DREAM-IT also realized that a full time UFE researcher would need to be appointed. There were no funds available, however, and it took several months for various procedures to be completed before the UFE evaluator *(UFE Step 2)* was appointed on 15 July 2011. This experience illustrated that although the UFE steps are listed in order, in reality they are practiced and repeated as needed. This meant advancing to the next step but returning to previous steps to confirm, complete and review the UFE process. The evaluator's appointment was approved for only three months. This created additional challenges for the UFE evaluator. The evaluator had to go beyond writing the report and had to be actively involved in promoting use among users. The UFE evaluator missed out on the capacity building workshop. Therefore the evaluator had to be mentored remotely. The evaluator also had to be supported extensively by the board member responsible for the UFE. It was also difficult to find a competent researcher in Mongolia to take on the UFE evaluator role. However, the use of an independent, external UFE evaluator worked out well according to the UFE designate board member. It was found that those individuals who were being interviewed for the UFE were comfortable responding to a neutral person.

The UFE process *(UFE Step 6* and *UFE Step 7)* of focusing the evaluation and developing the research design were well underway after the "new" UFE research topic was confirmed and after the UFE evaluator was appointed. Key questions were discussed and revised with the help of the UFE evaluator and with comments from the board and the PIUs. Although it was initially decided to include one "on track" project and one "not on track or delayed" project, the board added one more project to each category. This increased the sample size to enable comparisons within categories. The qualitative evaluation design included interviews with key stakeholders in the board as well as at sub-project levels and in focus group discussions.

The simulation *(UFE Step 8)* was very useful. The UFE evaluator produced mock feedback for the interview questions and used a worst case and best case scenario. As a result of the simulation, questions related to policy influence were added. These questions included: "To what extent were the sub-projects able to use their findings for policy recommendations or to

influence other developmental programs?" Also included were: "What are your recommendations for the DREAM-IT management?"; "How sustainable are the projects? and Why?"; and "What measures should be taken?" Data collection *(UFE Step 9)* included about 25 interviews with board members, sub-project team leaders and team members. This step took longer than expected since long distances had to be travelled for some interviews. At times a few appointments had to be rescheduled. Throughout the process the UFE evaluators and the board member responsible for the UFE provided continuous updates to the PIU i.e. the board. Data analysis *(UFE Step 10)* was also time consuming. This was especially true with regard to processing the qualitative data. The UFE evaluator completed the data collection, analysis and report in six months. The contract was actually to last only three months. The additional time spent by the UFE evaluator was not compensated. The DECI mentor assisted with the analysis discussions and also reviewed several drafts of the report.

Several challenges emerged at this phase of the UFE. One of the challenges was the poor translation of the report from Mongolian to English. A budget was available but the external translation was difficult to understand. After two attempts and the personal involvement of the UFE board member (who also found the task daunting), it was unclear what the findings were and how they would be used. Other challenges existed that related to the analysis, organization and presentation of the data. Over several Skype calls, the DECI mentor assisted in the data analysis and finally settled on a tabular format. This format enabled busy board members to easily interpret the findings and take action on them. It was clear that the long distance support was not enough to resolve the various difficulties in data analysis and generating a usable report. This indicated a need for an additional site visit by the DECI mentor to DREAM-IT in Mongolia.

During the site visit, a day of discussions with the UFE board member, the DREAM-IT project manager and the UFE evaluator, it was apparent that there was little difference in the management of all four projects. Yet the sub-project performances had been dramatically different. A deeper analysis indicated that there were fundamental differences among the projects. Those that had not performed so well were innovative on many fronts such as use of technology; the nature of multi-sector partnerships; and their objectives. The discussions helped the board realize that it would need different styles of management depending on the amount and type of innovation in a project. This analysis was a breakthrough for the DREAM-IT PIUs. It led to an unintended but vital new use for the findings. DREAM-IT extended the analysis to the development of a checklist. This was an innovation and an adaptation to the various projects' management styles and innovations. It placed a special emphasis on the degree and type of innovativeness proposed. This would help to assess the new proposals that requested funding. The checklist raised pertinent questions for new project applicants about planning and implementation of innovative strategies. These strategies might include piloting very new technologies and applications. The strategies might also include working with target populations not familiar with technology or managing partners from different sectors. The checklist could be used to review how realistically new applications dealt with: innovation in their objectives; implementation strategies; and expected outcomes. The checklist was intended to also help the board to systematically and critically review proposals for criteria,

based on UFE research findings. These criteria would enable successful completion and management of such innovative projects as well as assessing if outcomes could contribute to policy changes.

6. UFE — Outcomes

A significant achievement of the UFE process was the confidence it instilled in DREAM-IT. DREAM-IT realized that it could do evaluation. The UFE board members recognized that they were not evaluation experts. They did understand, however, that with the appropriate mentoring they were able to understand UFE, conduct it and use its findings. The IDRC project manager observed that UFE helped DREAM-IT to work as a team. It was also able to focus on an evaluation issue. Both the DREAM-IT UFE board member and the new applicants who used the checklist were considering the introduction of the UFE concept. This might occur, perhaps in the next year, and might be applied to the numerous evaluations being commissioned by the Mongolian government. The checklist was an unintended and innovative outcome. The board was excited about what they had discovered. The UFE checklist was to be used in addition to the general checklist to review proposals for projects. Although most of the new proposals had already been submitted by DREAM-IT to IDRC for the second round of grant making, the checklist was used to work with an applicant who was being considered for funding. Interviews with this applicant and the DREAM-IT team found the checklist to be very useful. The checklist provided specific criteria for innovative projects to strengthen the implementation design. The new applicant team reported that they were experienced researchers. They stated that they were at first wary about using the checklist. It had actually helped them address many points that had been overlooked. This was an unintended outcome and an important achievement. They were particularly impressed that it was based on findings based on Mongolian experience. They were pleased that the checklist was not developed outside Mongolia or downloaded from the Internet. This was another important and culturally sensitive achievement. They felt that the checklist was a work in progress. They recognized that it could be used and modified by sub-project teams during implementation — another important achievement. DREAM-IT's intention is to use the checklist as and when the opportunity comes. The checklist will be changed to reflect challenges that are specific to each setting.

DREAM-IT had used the usual proposal review guidelines to recommend project proposals to IDRC, the donor, in the earlier round. In the current round, several proposals had already been sent. However, the experience with the checklist, and with the remaining applicant, had helped the board to think clearly regarding reviewing project proposals. They also thought about when reviewing the innovativeness of a proposal and if a project's implementation strategies took into consideration related issues. The checklist also helped make realmanagement's requirements to support the innovations. The DREAM-IT board understood the need for more time for concept development. It also understood the time needed for solutions in very innovative projects. It was also recognized that there was a need for greater support for the project team. This was an important achievement and outcome. DREAM-IT developed a checklist with 13 questions. The checklist was easy for the board to use. As a research product, it is proof of what implementers, and not researchers or evaluators, wanted. It is a simple, concrete and usable checklist using the language of an implementing organization. The

ownership of the product was self-evident. Also, the board was willing to use it. The UFE designate mentioned that the checklist provided the board with a "lens" to assess project proposals. This changed their attitude regarding their role as reviewers. It is interesting to note that when the checklist was forwarded to the IDRC project manager to demonstrate the outcome of the UFE process, it was revised to include a question on the strength of the research component — a priority of IDRC. In addition, it was reorganized using conventional management and researcher language and typologies. The IDRC project manager made many changes to the checklist and DREAM-IT has incorporated a few suggestions, but not all. This experience indicates that "uses", in this case the checklist, is a working document. It provides an opportunity for a close collaboration and dialogue between grantees and the donor.

7. UFE — Lessons Learned

A number of lessons have been learned in the UFE process. During its inception, the DREAM-IT project received training from IDRC on the need to innovate and to research its outcomes. Most of the emphasis had been on the benefits of innovation and the need to encourage it in the sub-projects. Experience with their projects demonstrated, however, that innovative projects require added support. It was shown that there may be unexpected roadblocks. The UFE research highlighted many of these issues and articulated them in the form of a checklist. This provided a framework to assess the implementation, support and management of innovative projects. One of the findings was revealing. It was found that policy influenced activities, a key issue for IDRC, did not take place. There was, among other reasons, neither a budget nor a strategy to engage policy groups. This gap was addressed in the checklist with the following questions: "Is there a plan and budget for policy influence?" and "Does the work plan include regular and early dialogue with the policy makers?" The capacity building workshop introduced UFE to all the sub-projects. This meant that when data was being collected by the UFE researcher, cooperation and understanding was high. It was high as those individuals being interviewed knew how the findings would be used and by whom.

DREAM-IT has designated board members for each sub-project. There is also a project manager who worked with all the sub-projects. However, the intense UFE process brought a new level of involvement. Some board members visited the projects, along with the UFE researcher, and they learned a lot about each sub-project and how to support them. A key lesson was the importance of mentoring. The projects benefitted both from offsite (remote) and onsite mentoring. The PIU stated that patient and expert mentoring was instrumental for learning. It was also important to recognize what could work and what would not work. It was also helpful to think creatively about the outcomes of the UFE. It was the mentoring process that helped DREAM-IT to select the topic for UFE — no matter how long the process became. The process also helped DREAM-IT have the confidence to change the topic when the earlier topic could not be used and to choose another topic. Mentoring enabled DREAM-IT to appoint a UFE evaluator and analyze findings. Mentoring was also helped produce the checklist that proved useful to choose new proposals. The checklist was created in response to the analytic and self-reflecting experience that is so important to the UFE process. The new checklist was important to the projects' overall achievement. What also was critical was ability of the UFE process and that of the sub-projects' participants to adapt to and work with the new checklist. Although the UFE

was time consuming and needed a lot of work that included consultations and a few roadblocks, DREAM-IT noted the process as all "worthwhile". The DECI experience showed that a mix of remote and onsite support was important for the project to move forward. This mix eliminated continual onsite handholding. It also forced the DECI mentor to be both flexible as well as helpful. As well, UFE implementers were encouraged to take more ownership, even though it was difficult to do so at the start. The experience also showed that at certain points in time all that was needed was a "light touch". This light touch helped remotely but at other times, face-to-face meetings, especially early on, were very helpful.

Capacity building is critical in UFE as is its timing. DREAM-IT was better able to understand UFE because of the face-to-face capacity building workshop. The Penang workshop was merely an introduction to the UFE. Perhaps a better understanding of the UFE process could have been achieved if a site visit with capacity building was planned early in the UFE process. Face-to-face interactions and dialogue were more helpful to understanding the subtleties and fundamentals of UFE than were the remote discussions. There was also a language barrier regarding fluency in English. Face-to-face interaction provided opportunities for the DECI mentor and the UFE evaluator to meet and understand each other. From DREAM-IT's experience it was clear that the UFE evaluator should have been appointed at the beginning of the UFE process. This would have allowed her to attend the UFE capacity building sessions. This was an opportunity lost.

The theoretical and practical inputs received from an international team of mentors, from South Asia and Canada, was important to build local expertise. The capacity building workshop by an expert made many concepts clear. Similarly, the DECI mentor's help with user reflection and analysis were valuable. It ensured outcomes and use. The UFE process demands reflection, critical thinking and analytic ability. These are "research" skills that are commonly found in a researcher or evaluator. These skills, however, may not be available among those who implement an evaluation or those who have never been involved in evaluations. It was fortunate that among the board members there was someone who had some background in evaluation and understood these "research" skills. It is also important to have "advocates" among the PIU. The UFE process is long, awkward to work with and its immense value is recognizable only when the findings are put to use. Although a UFE researcher is important to conduct the research, the "advocate" plays an important oversight role. The advocate acts as a "bridge" between the researcher and the PIUs. One of the lessons of the process is that DREAM-IT could not visualize what the UFE process would require in terms of roles of the different participants as well as the time and resources needed (UFE Step 1). Perhaps case studies, such as this, will inform future projects. Future case studies may help their managers "visualize" how the UFE process actually works in practice. The diversity the UFE processes can work with is also important for potential users to understand. This will ensure that they be open to adaptation and use. At the same time, the structured UFE 12 steps are concrete and systematic to use and make the research process clear.

Choosing a research topic was not easy. DREAM-IT strongly felt that considerable facilitation was needed. There are many areas that could have been researched. For non-researchers choosing and understanding how to use findings as well as the research design requires expert

mentorship. The effect of setting is a key factor when adapting the UFE steps. The initial steps, the theoretical UFE Step 0, are important milestones to cross before progressing to the 12 steps of UFE. This may be a unique situation or may be typical in an Asian context. Either way it is important for the mentor to recognize and adapt according to the situation. Planning and budgeting human and financial resources can be tricky. It is difficult to predict what research area will be chosen, how it will be changed and used. The DREAM-IT experience indicated the need to have dedicated human and financial resources for evaluation. How much would be needed was difficult to estimate at the beginning of the process. DREAM-IT decided, the second time around, to compare one project that had completed its objectives as planned and one that had not. The board, who were the PIUs, expanded the scope to include two more sub-projects. This extended the time and resources needed for the UFE.

The role of the donor agency is a critical factor in UFE. Providing the space for selection of the UFE topic, even if this is not a priority for the donor, and patience for its process was important for DREAM-IT. This enabled the participants to "learn while doing" UFE. Donors — and IDRC is no exception — are interested in impact. Impacts include what difference have DREAM-IT projects made and what have they achieved. In contrast, the topic selected for the UFE was fairly limited in scope. The IDRC project manager was optimistic that having gone through a "small" UFE research, DREAM-IT would be confident to use it for larger strategic issues. These issues might include evaluations related to impact and policy influence. The DECI mentor was able to work directly with the DREAM-IT PIUs, creating a more efficient and effective working relationship. IDRC's role in providing this freedom to dialogue was very important. It indicated their faith in the UFE process. It also showed clarity in DREAM-IT's role. DREAM-IT was able to take responsibility and had confidence in their ability to take it forward. What must be addressed is the involvement of the donor once the product of the UFE process is available. Questions such as: "To what extent should donor needs be expressed?"; "How much should the donor be involved in revising or recommending how UFE is used?"; and "When should such feedback be given, if at all?" need to be addressed. The UFE 12 steps do not address these issues but they are critical ones since the UFE operates under the backdrop of decision makers and funders.

It should be noted that there were opportunities lost related to the number and timing of the face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face meetings were vital in the beginning. Having one at the start of the project, followed up mid-way through the process and then at the end of the process would have saved time. The budget permitted only two visits. One visit soon after the research topic was selected and another during data analysis. A third one was possible if it had piggybacked on the DECI mentor's personal consultancy work and contributed greatly to the development of the case study.

DREAM-IT's role in the UFE process was critical. It was open to learning, willing to change and adapt and was patient during the process. A very deep commitment was required for UFE. The support given by the UFE's PIUs was critical for its success. A high degree of trust and transparency was also needed. The UFE evaluator was given a free hand to collect data and time was allocated to discuss the research design, data collection and analysis with her. There

was also openness to both intended and unintended outcomes. Any replication of this process would require that the UFE PIUs show the same sense of commitment and dedication. The UFE process involves many stakeholders. It was the opinion of DREAM-IT that it could be replicated. However, for it to work it needs the right mix of like-minded people who embrace open communication and who want to learn. They must also not be skeptical of the questions asked of them. They must act with trust and have an overall positive attitude for all concerned. These were all vital elements of DREAM-IT's achievements. The board member responsible for facilitating the UFE process noted: "I like UFE because it is different from other evaluations I did — it is useful to what we are doing and it is used. You can really say 'I have *done* UFE'. Also one evaluates what *you* want to learn about and *not* what you are not interested in. . . I learned the whole journey — selecting the right topic, the interviews, the report and the translation, too. I can now apply UFE to anything else." The project manager also expressed that UFE is "not judgemental", not "fake" and very real!

Appendix: IDRC Case Study DREAMIT Acronym List

BTEP: Blended Technology Education Project

NGOs: non-governmental organizations

UB: Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia)