DECI-4 – LIRNEasia CASE STUDY

An account of how the organization elevated evaluation and research communication into its strategy

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DESIGNING EVALUATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR IMPACT

LIRNEasia
Pro-poor. Pro-market.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study is part of a series that describes how five organizations were mentored by the DECI project to actively involve themselves in the design of their evaluation plans and communication strategies. Since 2009, DECI has provided independent mentoring by a team of experienced international evaluation and communications advisors. Its support has emphasized just-in-time mentoring to help partners learn the steps of evaluation and communication planning through practice. The focus of this case study is on the mentoring process itself as summarized by the DECI team.

The partner in this case study was LIRNEasia, a pro-poor, pro-market think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka that was founded in 2004. In May 2019, LIRNEasia joined the second batch of projects in the CPC Initiative with the project title "CyberPolicy@: Enhancing organizational capacity to influence digital policies in emerging Asia". This project helped develop LIRNEasia's capacity in cyber policy, cybersecurity, and transformed its research agenda.

Most of senior management joined the primary evaluation user team. Two persons were identified as evaluator & communication contact persons (mentees) respectively to work with the DECI team. The PIUs eventually settled on a smaller number of broad uses (to improve policy influence, to improve strategy, to improve external communication, and to improve staff retention). The DECI mentors helped simplify the groupings and assisted the evaluator in translating 'remarks' from the PIUs into uses and key evaluation questions. The DECI mentors spent some time working with them to clarify the different terms used by the PIUs. The mentors also suggested that the gradient of outcomes outlined in the OM approach were very relevant to unpack outcomes for evaluation purposes.

The communication contact person developed the overall communication strategy and came up with project-specific communication strategies that could be measured. She

then developed an additional table with outcome indicators, and measurement tools, demonstrating that she had understood the concepts and was able to translate them into communication strategies for priority projects. Of the four purposes identified for UFE, one of them was related to Communication and dovetailed easily with the LIRNEasia's ResCom approach. Given that the IDRC technical reports already addressed accountability; the UFE & ResCom planning could address LIRNEasia's own priorities.

By late 2020, the UFE work had advanced. It focused on the following projects: Big Data Development – March 2015 (starting date); After Access – Nov 2018; and Digital marginalization: food, money and health under lockdowns - August 2020. The first two projects had been completed; the third one was just beginning (see below for further information). A fourth institutional evaluation topic was added that focused on attracting potential staff, both as a use and as a KEQ. For each LIRNEasia project, there was three common uses identified: 1. To improve impact; 2. To improve strategy; 3. And to improve external communication. The last use made explicit mention of the Research Communication strategy. Our mentoring practice with LIRNEasia focused on understanding where the organization 'was at' (its existing situation) and also working with the evaluation and communication contact persons separately. The DECI mentors helped simplify the groupings and assisted the evaluator in translating 'remarks' from the PIUs into uses and key evaluation questions. We offered to revise draft materials and add comments. Our efforts to clarify terminology exposed critical strategic assumptions and the debate continued during an intense all PIU meeting where differences in interpretation emerged – a healthy debate. The 'fly on the wall' DECI strategy where DECI mentors 'listen in" on PIU meetings where UFE and ResCom mentees present their ongoing communication and evaluation plans, has proved to be an excellent mutual learning and mentoring opportunity.

Among our lessons, we noted how much language matters and the importance of clarifying terminology and assumptions. We also witnessed how important it was that the PIUs included managers who were high in the organizational hierarchy, thus ensuring that the learning experience was shared and internalized. We also confirmed the value of trust in the mentoring relationship that was conducive to a sense of collaborative learning with mentees? The LIRNEasia team produced an extensive Powerpoint presentation about the process and how it is being institutionalized within the organization, which is evidence of further progress in capacity building. This advance was further confirmed by the competency self-assessment tools completed by the LIRNEasia team.

1. BACKGROUND

About this case study
This case study is part of a series that describes how five organizations were mentored to take over the design of their evaluation plans and communication strategies. The focus of the case study is on the mentoring process itself. The case studies were authored by the DECI team as a reflection of the mentoring process and they have been validated by the project partner. All of the organizations are research think tanks working on applied research on information society research, including topics of cyber security, privacy and digital innovation. The five organizations were part of the IDRC-funded Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) Initiative. The mentoring was provided by a capacity building project called DECI (Designing Evaluation and Communication for Impact) also supported by IDRC.

The Cyberpolicy Initiative
IDRC's Networked Economies (NE) program supported the improvement of governance of cyberspace in the global South over several decades. As part of NE, the Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) Initiative sought to strengthen independent policy research institutions through core support to build institutional capacity and sustainability; mentorship and skills building to strengthen research and policy capacity; and global knowledge networking and policy uptake. The first phase began in 2017 and the second in late 2019-2020 for a total duration of four years. The five CPC projects funded included Research ICT Africa (RIA) in South Africa, the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT) in Kenya, Derechos Digitales (DD) in Chile, Centro Latam Digital (CLD) in Mexico, and LIRNEasia in Sri Lanka.

The DECI Project
Since 2009, the DECI project (Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity for Impact) has provided IDRC partners with training in evaluation and research communication. DECI has been a component of IDRC's Network Economies' strategy to support capacity building among its partners. Many of DECI's partner organizations will be familiar to researchers involved with information society research.

DECI has provided independent mentoring by a team of experienced evaluation and communications advisors. Its support has emphasized just-in-time mentoring to help partners learn the steps of evaluation and communication planning through practice. The DECI Team includes regional mentors based in Africa, Asia and Latin America -as well as Canada-based mentors- that are assigned to work with the IDRC partners.

DECI is separate from IDRC's reporting processes. In addition to its training services, DECI is a research project: a learning lab in capacity building. The DECI website includes a searchable knowledge base with case studies of past experiences. Each mentoring experience is unique and the DECI team goes to great lengths to adjust to partners' needs and context.

2. BACKGROUND

Case study organization:
LIRNEasia is a pro-poor, pro-market think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Its mission is: *"Catalyzing policy change through research to improve people's lives in the emerging Asia Pacific by facilitating their use of hard and soft infrastructures through the use of knowledge, information and technology".[1]* The organization conducts in-depth, policy-relevant research on infrastructure industries including ICT sectors. The work extends to other sectors such as agriculture that can benefit the poorest citizens in Asia Pacific. It disseminates independent, actionable knowledge, to policy makers, regulators, service providers, and the media.

LIRNEasia was founded in 2004 with an emphasis on how ICTS and telecommunications affected those at the bottom of the pyramid. It is registered as a not for profit organization. It is governed by a board of directors that include members of private, non-profit sectors, academia. Research guidance is provided by an International Scientific Advisory Council as well several project and program level advisory boards. It receives funding from multiple bilateral and multi-lateral sources; the 2018-2019 Annual Report shows IDRC as the major donor with 6 different projects active, as well as with the Ford Foundation as the next most important funder. It has had a close relationship with RIA, the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP) and the DIRSI network in Latin America. It has 17 full-time employees and 30 part-time, of which 52% are women. Recent projects have included: the After Access Survey (a collaboration with RIA), Big Data for Development, many initiatives in capacity building including CPR South (which DECI-1 supported with the evaluation of its conference), working with People with Disabilities, the Future of Work and Workers, Inclusive Agriculture, Policy and Regulation. Their regional scope is significant with gatherings and events in 24 countries (including many outside the South and Southeast Asia region).

DECI team members Dal Brodhead, Vira Ramelan, Sonal Zaveri and Ricardo Ramírez had met the LIRNEasia team when they hosted a meeting of all CPCs in Sri Lanka in January 2019. The DECI-4 Inception Mission took place on 24-25 September 2019, with the presence of Phet Sayo, PO from IDRC's regional office in Delhi. LIRNEasia had placed considerable emphasis upon innovation (one of the three key pillars of the CPC Initiative and they had paid some attention to digital rights (privacy in Myanmar) and less on the issue of cybersecurity. It was a new topic and they were not yet sure how to address it. The CPC funding would serve as a core grant to build additional research competencies. Given that the IDRC technical reports already addressed accountability; the UFE & ResCom planning could address LIRNEasia's own priorities.

In May 2019, LIRNEasia joined the second batch of projects in the CPC Initiative with the project title "CyberPolicy@: Enhancing organizational capacity to influence digital

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policies in emerging Asia". This project helped develop LIRNEasia's capacity in cyber policy, cybersecurity, and transformed its research agenda. It used the CPC funding to conduct research (both deskwork and fieldwork), and to write reports and papers based on the research. Its members attended various conferences and panels to both disseminate the research and learn from other participants. To further build their capacity, they dedicated some of the sessions in their colloquia and journal club series to cyber policy themed topics. The findings of the CPC Evaluation indicated that the CPCs benefited from the Gender Action Learning and DECI resources provided under IDRC as part of the CPC grant to further evolve their research methods and to better measure the impact of their work.

3. STEPS IN THE MENTORING PROCESS

Most of senior management joined the primary evaluation user team. Two persons- one for UFE (Isuru Samaratunga) and the other for ResCom (Namali Premawardhana) - were identified as evaluator & communication contact persons respectively to work with the DECI team. (In early 2021 Namali left LIRNEasia and was replaced by Milindu Tissera.) Their first efforts focused on exploring a number of evaluation uses: Understanding the extent to which they achieved what was outlined in the mission statement[2]; gauging how well LIRNEasia met all the commitments; deciding if LIRNEasia needed to change their approach to designing future projects; identifying the most effective ways to build their brand. It also looked at whether LIRNEasia needed to be making any course corrections as an organization in order to reduce its employee turnover. These choices were complicated by internal debates on which projects to choose, and how to address institutional issues.   The PIUs eventually settled on a smaller number of broad purposes (to improve policy influence, to improve strategy, to improve external communication, and to improve staff retention. **The DECI mentors helped simplify the groupings and assisted the evaluator in translating 'remarks' from the PIUs into uses and key evaluation questions.** The UFE evaluator was encouraged to define terms used, fine-tune evaluation questions and prepare for a group session with PIUs. Earlier, the UFE evaluator had one-on-one sessions with each PIU and found that it was important to bring them together to build a consensus around the choice of key evaluation questions and purposes.

The DECI mentors spent some time clarifying the different terms used by the PIUs: "boundary partners" (BPs), "partnerships", "potential users", "relevant audiences", "participants", and "policy makers". In our exchange, we emphasized that the definition of 'boundary partners' is drawn from Outcome Mapping (OM). The mentors also

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[2] Catalysing policy change through research to improve people's lives in the emerging Asia Pacific by facilitating their use of hard and soft infrastructures through the use of knowledge, information and technology. See website lirneasia.net

suggested that the gradient of outcomes outlined in the OM approach is very relevant to unpack outcomes for evaluation purposes. Some high-level outcomes such as policy change are difficult to attribute and track, however initial and intermediate outcomes can be defined and evaluated. In the mentors' notes provided to LIRNEasia, they were described as follows:

In concrete terms, the outcomes could be described as follows:

- *Expect to see: Partners identified and collaborating in new project/region, BP identified and engaged, project completed to plan, communication targeted to the right audience in the right way, relevant policy makers identified and reached out to, relevant persons attend the event, awareness raised on issues*

- *Like to see: Partners continue good collaboration practices, funders seek further information about work, policy makers use and share, BP use own initiative for project*

- *Love to see: Partners consult LIRNEasia for further collaboration; funders actively seek LIRNEasia expertise; policy makers use research; Policy makers recognize LIRNEasia as a think tank – committee representation, seeking new information from LIRNEasia, recommend innovative topics for research, broker new partnerships (as an example); BP initiate and expand work, with policy makers, other funders, etc.*

In parallel, the mentors worked with Namali to review the overall strategy and come up with project-specific communication strategies that could be measured. **A table format that Gloria Mayne at CLD has prepared was circulated (a variation on the one in the DECI e-guide) and she ran with it.** In particular, she appreciated the hierarchy of outcomes and highlighted this in a slide in the presentation to their Board. **She wrote: *"In slide 12, I plan to explain how creating a hierarchy of outcomes allows us to FOCUS comms evaluation, and really come up with measurables. I'm really excited at the opportunity this opens for us to (even partially) address a perpetual problem - policy impact is nearly impossible to predict and measure. To me, being able to create this hierarchy really adds value."***

Namali then developed an additional table with outcome indicators, and measurement tools, demonstrating that she had understood the concepts and was able to translate them into communication strategies for priority projects. Prior to going on maternity leave, she left the strategies in an advanced stage and the agreement was that she will take over their implementation when she returns to work in September.

Of the four purposes identified for UFE, one of them was related to Communication and dovetailed easily with the LIRNEasia's ResCom approach.

Project UFE Approach
Relative to its communication skills, LIRNEasia has less experience managing

evaluations. The external evaluation commissioned by IDRC some years back was not a welcome experience (with disagreements on what was to be evaluated, what evidence was used, and the analysis of the evidence was problematic). This evaluation exercise left LIRNEasia with a negative impression of external evaluations.

There was an acknowledgement that LIRNEasia could use a more systematic process to capture change, as many events or indicators of early outcomes had been missed. **The DECI mentors explored the option of inviting Phet Sayo (IDRC Project Officer) to become a primary evaluation user. On one hand, a plus would have been his involvement in helping adapt the strategies for the next phase and his potential to influence IDRC as a result. On the other hand, if the CPC program ends, his role as a PIU might not have been worth his time commitment.** Isuru became our evaluation contact person (after Thavisha Perera-Gomez left the organization). The scope of the UFE could focus on LIRNEasia as an organization, with the CPC project as a component. There was also some discussion whether ongoing or completed projects should be the focus of the evaluation.

The process of selection of PIUs was negotiated by Isuru and Thavisha in late 2019 with the top management team. Although we recommended that ideally three to four PIU are manageable for the UFE process, a seven member PIU team was selected including the current CEO, the founder of LIRNEasia, and other project leads. In other words, with the top line management persons in the PIU team, the decision making was greatly influenced by them. Isuru as a researcher at LIRNEasia learned to facilitate discussions keeping in mind the principles and steps of UFE to finalize the key questions and uses through one on one first followed by group discussions with the PIUs. The group discussions with PIUs resulted in long, intense discussions about the focus and use of the evaluation findings and it was up to Isuru to advocate for the evaluation purpose, key questions and uses that were aligned to the UFE approach and manageable realistically.

As of August 2020, the UFE work had advanced. It focused on the following projects: Big Data Development – March 2015 (starting date); After Access – Nov 2018; and Digital marginalization: food, money and health under lockdowns- August 2020. The first two projects had been completed; the third one was just beginning (see below for further information). The DECI mentors recommended they consider adding a CPC-related project, something that could be discussed at a meeting between Isuru and the LIRNEasia's primary users. A fourth institutional evaluation topic was added that focused on attracting potential staff, both as a use and as a KEQ. For each LIRNEasia project, there were three common uses identified: 1. To improve impact; 2. To improve strategy; 3. And to improve external communication. The last use made explicit mention of the Research Communication strategy.

Isuru asked for advice about what needed to be added to the columns for "evidence needed" and "data collection". The DECI mentors emphasized that this step called for an

inventory of evidence, as opposed to collection of the evidence itself. **With permission from the Mexico-based CPC Centro Latam Digital (CLD), their UFE table for reference was shared, which helped him populate the table in preparation for the next meeting with the primary users.**

LIRNEasia chose to include two completed projects (Big Data and After Access) as well as an ongoing new one (Digital marginalization; food, money and health under lockdowns, nicknamed COVID+). This combination had interesting learning opportunities – completed ones having more evidence and new ones having better baselines and targeted data collection. Interestingly, LIRNEasia was experimenting with an E-diary for the COVID research that chronicles the journey of families through videos, posts and so on. This initiative provided an opportunity to use UFE with other evaluation approaches such as Most Significant Change, and Outcome Harvesting. Also, their ResCom strategy included the E diary for tracking communication in their plans.

For the new COVID+ project, the team chose to develop UFE and ResCom plans from the beginning and began to contact boundary partners to involve them in the project design and the definition of the audience for the research findings. **In Nilusha Kapugama's words, the combination of evaluation and communication was becoming 'formalized" and initiated at the start.**

The fourth issue of focus was not a project but was rather institutional in nature on the topic of attracting and retaining staff. There was much discussion on what to track.

The UFE plan was then ready for data collection and Isuru (as well as Namali for ResCom) were going to do a reality check regarding the scope of the research, as well as time and data availability. The team would develop realistic data collection times and frequency, keeping in mind that these timelines would differ across the projects and uses, allowing limited data collection for some as priorities became more evident.

The DECI mentors recommended that the team try the simulation step for both UFE and ResCom to tweak the KEQs and possible data tools. The LIRNEasia team would connect with DECI mentors for help as and when needed.

During calls with Isuru in March and in May 2021, we were able to mentor him in data analysis, reporting and facilitation of use. Isuru had completed all internal interviews, and data gathering to illustrate policy impacts, along with reports and news articles. He asked about how to formulate recommendations: where they were to be focused on process or on insights/findings? We suggested they cover both, as Step 11 in UFE mentions facilitating both the use of the findings and of the process. He mentioned a challenge with informants (a mix of LIRNEasia staff and primary intended users) not recalling project specifics and mixing up responses (e.g. different stages of a project or overlapping with other projects). We suggested this issue be mentioned under a Scope and Limitations section, as it is neither surprising nor unusual.

He wondered how to address various external factors that affected outcomes: changes in policy, changes in ministries, and changes in priorities among civil society organizations. We recommended this issue be mentioned explicitly, as it is a constant in any evaluation (and we referred to the ODI RAPID framework diagram as an example that flags the importance of context). It was unclear whether he needed / planned to produce one report or three, for the COVID+, After Access, and Big Data project evaluations. For COVID+, he has collected limited evidence, as the project is ongoing. He had sought suggestions from the PIUs on report formats, but they did not respond with clear answers. Helani was OK with the idea of a presentation. We emphasized that the reports needed to focus on the uses. We offered to be 'guinea pigs' for a draft presentation, and he was interested in this idea (but it did not materialize). We suggested that a presentation could trigger clearer ideas among PIUs in terms of formats, especially for the COVID+ project that is ongoing and where inputs for technical reporting may become handy.

Project ResCom Approach
LIRNEasia brought an established communication practice, although prior to working with DECI the strategy had not been documented. The existing approach focused on: a) products (Annual Report; regular blogs on the website, press releases, Greatest Hits), and on b) events (launch of the "After Access" report in countries across the region; as well as the Nepal presentation to stakeholders on disability research. In the past, the organization's competency in communication was recognized to the extent that IDRC invited the team to share its expertise with Mongolian partners. There has been a recent effort in rebranding that included a new logo for the organization.

Namali was the communication contact point; she brought a background in journalism and also took on a role of editor of Tweets and other external communication. As with other CPC projects, she was also involved in a number of other tasks that were complementary to communication.

Monitoring the number of published stories in the media was the main metric that they were tracking, and the team realized that this was not sufficient. Namali was scheduled to return to work in early September at which time Isuru would bring her up to speed with the UFE plans. Namali returned from maternity leave in September providing impetus to the ResCom plans. It also led to a rethink for greater alignment with UFE plans, especially regarding project selection.

At the meeting with the PIUs in November, Namali presented the gradient of outcomes – expect to see, like to see and love to see. There was much discussion on how much the ResCom should focus on past projects to get a sense of overall project communication strategy effectiveness Vs. specific activities or events.

Some loose ends for the ResCom plan related to what outcomes would be in the "like to see" category, recognizing the complex environment of use of evidence for policymaking and policy change. Some suggestions related to capturing the more informal routes of influence – e.g. chance meetings with policy makers and the need to have a process to document them.

During a February 3rd 2021 Skype meeting, Namali announced that she was leaving as early as the end of the month. LIRNEasia was in the process of hiring a replacement. Helani Galpaya (CEO) had told her to drop all things except for the DECI work. She would focus on the communication side of the Brand theme and the After Access Project. Her replacement was to cover the rest with Isuru's assistance.

Namali and Isuru asked about DECI requirements for a final report. We emphasized the reporting on projects is aimed at the PIUs and it should respond to their needs and preferences. Some reporting obligations for funders will influence what LIRNEasia may want to do with the findings. They did mention that Helani and Rohan Samarajiva– as PIUs want a unified output report. We added that for DECI, we would be keen on obtaining the presentations to staff on what they learned, also about the mentoring process, and any self-reflections from the experience. We emphasized that we would continue mentoring until end of the year and could help in developing the report outline (for PIUs), efficient work planning, analysis of findings, presentations, or any other support they needed.

In February and March of 2021, they were progressing with data collection for one completed project (After Access) and for the Brand component (staff retention). They were initiating activities for the Covid+ Project (some interviews with stakeholders about research design which sounded more related to implementation than evaluation). This project initiated UFE and ResCom from the design stage – quite different from the other completed or near completion projects.

In early March 2021, the DECI mentors had a Skype with Namali and Nilusha. We reviewed Namali's data collection and findings for the After Access project, the brand/ staff retention use, and the Big Data project. Our discussion about the significance of the findings with Nilusha present as a PIU, could be seen as a (UFE) facilitation of use. Our discussion included suggestions by Nilusha on who to package the findings for internal use.

During a second call in March, Namali mentioned a slide deck that covered the evaluation of communication activities for After Access and Big data. Namali was expected to do the hand over 19-20 April to the new staff person. We reminded her that a personal reflection would be valuable and worth including to look back at the learning journey; and even refer to her original personal goals.

During the May 2021 call with Isuru with regards to ResCom, he mentioned that Namali had indeed made a presentation to the team and was revising it based on feedback. She had not handed over the DECI work to her replacement (Milindu) but would be doing so. We offered to work with Isuru and Namali to brief Milindu (he/him). At the end of May, we had another call with Isuru and Milindu. As DECI mentors we suggested that he focus on a project or two to use as the subject matter to work with us. He was already meeting with different LIRNEasia researchers and was aware of the COVID+ project that Isuru was leading. While Milindu was receptive and brought his experience in communication, there was limited follow-up thereafter in the ResCom area, partly due to the fact that he inherited a design that was well advanced.

3. UNPACKING THE DECI MENTORING PROCESS

A feature of the DECI project has been its dual purpose: in addition to the mentoring support to partners, there is also a research component focused on how best to provide capacity building in evaluation and communication. This second purpose enables DECI to 'learn-by-doing' with partners and makes DECI a living lab to support the adaptation of mentoring practices and, incidentally - as we now understand – to grow practical wisdom. This case study is a research output of the DECI research component.

In UFE, "…The evaluator develops a working relationship with intended users and helps them determine what kind of evaluation they need." (Patton & Horton, 2009: 1). These authors noted that research on use has confirmed that: "...intended users are more likely to use evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings; they are more likely to understand and feel ownership if they've been actively involved; and by actively involving primary intended users, the evaluator is preparing the groundwork for use." What we have experienced within this negotiated process is that the **ongoing interactions are at the heart of the mentoring**.

Our mentoring places the primary users as decision-makers of the evaluation planning and communication design. The mentor asks questions for clarification, sometimes suggesting, or nudging the partners to consider aspects they had not attended to before. The degree of direction varies with the mentor's own style, the mentees, the stage of the process, and the context.

Each mentoring process is unique. The DECI team includes professionals based in several countries in four continents, each with their own unique background and learning style. Each project partner is mentored by a team of at least two DECI mentors which builds on teamwork and encourages complementarities and internal reflections.

In the DECI experience, UFE is learned through practice: experiential learning is at its core (Kolb, 1984). It requires an accompaniment that matches learning moments. This timing is one reason why the impact of standalone workshops is limited: people are often neither 'ready' nor able to absorb the information because they lack the knowledge of how to subsequently implement the learning in their project context.

Mentoring at the pace of the partner is fundamental in our work. In DECI, we have been experimenting with a combination of coaching (that follows an established but simplified set of steps associated with the UFE framework) with mentoring (that focuses on guiding, adjusting, and troubleshooting together). We have learned that we do a bit of both. (Brodhead & Ramírez, 2014).

The principles that have emerged from our practice and that guide our work are the following:
- Utilization-focused evaluation is a decision-making framework.
- Research communication enhances use of findings for influence.
- Attention is paid to readiness from the beginning and can be revisited.
- Training is demand-driven and provided through just-in-time mentoring.
- Course correction of project strategy is expected and planned.
- Utilization is the focus from initial project design to completion.
- A collaborative, learning, and reflective process is embedded.
- Participation and shared ownership are fundamental.
- The process builds individual and organizational capacity.
- Complexity and evolving contexts are addressed.

The process as it unfolded with LIRNEasia
Our mentoring practice with LIRNEasia focused on understanding where the organization 'was at' (its existing situation) and working with the evaluation and communication contact persons separately. We offered to revise draft materials and add comments. Our efforts to clarify terminology exposed critical strategic assumptions and the debate continued during an intense all PIU meeting on June 1st, 2020, where differences in interpretation emerged – a healthy debate. The challenge of focusing on a combination of research projects, CPC projects and a LIRNEasia institutional dimension has taken some time to sort out. We expected to have an advanced Evaluation Plan in place by August 2020, but it was delayed until the end of the year, with revisions early into 2021. The ResCom plan had not yet been discussed by the PIUs, although they were made aware that it exists.

The 'fly on the wall' DECI strategy where DECI mentors 'listen in" on PIU meetings where UFE and ResCom mentees present their ongoing communication and evaluation plans, has proved to be an excellent mutual learning and mentoring opportunity. The DECI mentors witnessed the growing confidence of Isuru to handle difficult questions over two such PIU meetings. At the last Fly on the Wall meeting (Nov. 11) with PIUs, the DECI mentors observed PIUs discussing impact pathways and engaged in the UFE and ResCom process and findings. The ResCom mentee Namali was back from maternity leave and she received good feedback as well. Clearly, "meeting their expectations" as flagged on Aug. 7 with Isuru had been met.

The PIUs basically approved the process and Helani (PIU and chief executive) mentioned that it was time to shift towards data collection. There was a question about ensuring

that evaluation and communication data collection efforts by Isuru and Namli be coordinated to avoid duplication and interviewee fatigue.

4. REFLECTIONS & LESSONS

- **Language matters.** We come from different cultures, relative ease of using English and varied academic backgrounds. In other words, clarification of terminology and explanation of purposes and KEQs either face-to-face or over Skype is critically important. This back-and-forth ping pong develops evaluative thinking. This step could be thought of as an additional UFE step or sidestep. Isuru needed to do it, not us. After all, our understanding of the words used and WHY were very different from what he was trying to convey. We noted that having a DECI mentor from the region has been helpful in decoding the connotations and use of colloquial language.

- **PIU hierarchy.** PIUs in LIRNEasia were from senior and junior management, with the senior managers dominating the discussion. The UFE approach requires both technical and political understanding and DECI mentoring helped the mentee to understand the implications of choosing the purposes, what data would be generated, about attribution versus contribution and looking for unintended outcomes. Discussions with the DECI mentors resulted in the mentee refining and updating the draft UFE plan. By discussing these and other issues in depth, we believe that the mentee was able to confidently steer the PIU group queries and comments. It is possible that increased understanding and confidence in the use of UFE enabled the mentee, a staff member, to respond to the senior management and to manage queries. This process was an important milestone for the mentee, as the UFE approach required further discussions and clarification of goals and questions with the PIUs.

- **Skillful facilitation & the importance of Trust.** The LIRNEasia evaluation point person was able to manage the diverse points of view, present the UFE related purposes and key questions in a succinct manner and was able to bring the PIUs to a consensus regarding the way forward. We attribute this skillful facilitation to patience (by mentors and mentee alike), offering support and discussion prior to the group meeting. Isuru mentioned after the meeting that although he has yet to understand the UFE approach completely, he "trusts" DECI mentors helped him navigate the process. What seems to be key in the mentoring process is the acceptance of the mentee's ideas and thinking in a non-judgmental way and opening windows for innovative thinking. While the 'mentoring' may sound flat to an outsider, what makes it effective is the quality of the dialogue, the trust, and the timing. The mentors catch unclear words and statements, give comments on them, perhaps also pre-empt tasks and issues that are around the corner, or elevate the meaning of some statements or providing 'triggers' for more questions. Much of this intangible dialogue process depends upon the practical wisdom of mentors and the investment in the mentoring process.

- **Gaining ownership over UFE design.** At the initial stages, the mentors encouraged Isuru to explore broadly all possible areas of research, akin to 'blue sky' thinking. The mentors then proceeded to narrow down through discussions with Isuru-about what evaluation issues really mattered at that point of time, the resources available and the timelines for completion, These decisions encouraged Isuru to systematically select (along with PIUs) possible projects for evaluation, thereby reinforcing their ownership of the evaluative process and decision making. Isuru reported some internal disagreements among the primary intended users about the choice of projects - those that were completed Vs projects just starting. We emphasized that both choices were possible, each with advantages and weaknesses. We also mentioned that this decision was up to the primary users, and that DECI-4 expects these choices to be in their hands, as opposed to being imposed by donors. This role speaks to the responsibility of owning the UFE design. There is evidence of ownership. For example, at the last PIU meeting, Helani assessed the progress favorably, and suggested next steps for the team (data collection). Another example: a different PIU recommended the advantages of some data collection tools over others: such as page ranking in Internet search engines, and report downloads instead of the conventional social media tracking.

- **Institutionalizing UFE and ResCom.** Isuru has already noted how the UFE process lends itself to adaptation to any project. (We mentioned to him the idea of him presenting this learning to the full LIRNEasia staff, following the RIA example with Enrico.) The same can be said about the overall Communication Strategy, where we asked Namali to adjust it to the selected projects. Having spoken to Wendy about RIA, and as part of mentoring DD with Joaquin, there are similarities emerging in terms of how these CPCs are beginning to see a way of institutionalizing these approaches. A few examples of institutionalization and therefore the value of the UFE and ResCom process, have emerged: The decision by LIRNEasia to include UFE and ResCom in the new projects (COVID+) from the design phase indicates real time application, and capacity transfer. Also, the PIU (Helani) has asked the LIRNEasia Team for an internal presentation be made to other researchers about UFE and ResCom. During the February 2021 call, we emphasized the importance of having Isuru present the UFE process to the staff and as well as Namali on the ResCom experience, even more important now due to the need for her to prepare the hand-over to her replacement. This practice of delivering an internal presentation to staff was initiated by Enrico, upon departing from RIA. We feel it has large potential and it could be a means of expanding on facilitation of process (Step 11 of UFE). Isuru presented the UFE and ResCom approaches, design and findings to the LIRNEasia team, where he noted in the Powerpoint under reflections, that the evaluation has led to 'intentional thinking", "thinking through assumptions" and "providing a framework within which to think of change and improvement". These observations imply an appreciation of evaluative thinking and use of findings. The 74-slide Powerpoint presentation entitled 'Utilization focused evaluation (UFE) of selected

LIRNEasia projects from March 2015 to June 2021' is a testament to the learning journey and its potential impact beyond the current CPC phase of funding.

- **Competency gains:** LIRNEasia submitted one evaluation competency self-assessment response that showed positive gains acrossfive specific domains. Two LIRNEasia communication competency self- assessment forms were completed, one from Namali (outgoing communication contact person) and another from Milindu Tissera (her replacement). When compared, the responses validate the self-assessment form itself by showing, higher scores for all but one of the competencies for the outgoing communication staff member who worked with the DECI mentors.

- **Discovering impact pathways:** During the second meeting with PIUs, the discussion explored impact pathways and the contribution of their work rather than attribution as a definition of outcomes. Clearly, there is evidence of greater internal reflection related to outcomes. A few examples illustrate such thinking: e.g. Rohan gave an example of a "home-run"-while in Delhi, after a LIRNEasia workshop, he came across an article in the newspaper that mentioned how, following the event, the government had sent staff for a training on the topic that had been presented. This constituted a direct attribution to the actions by LIRNEasia that is unusual. For the Covid+ project, Isuru underlined the value of introducing evaluation during the start of the project; and we see this realization as an achievement. Helani was supportive, indicating that this process would involve small iterations (something in line with a Developmental Evaluation approach). She said that this action would allow them to be better at tracking outcomes [an achievement] and that *intentionality matters.* The discussion on impact pathways, with examples suggests that they have realized that each pathway is unique to each project [making the ODI RAPID framework more relevant].

- **Increased buy-in from PIUS: During the March 2021 call,** Namali mentioned several times how invested Helani is in this work, and the presence of Nilusha (as chief operating officer) on the call was another indication of the importance that senior management is giving to the work with DECI. Ricardo was able to use some of this experience as an example during a subsequent call with the CLD project, especially the idea that you can focus a UFE effort on a specific event (e.g., After Access dissemination), as well as on the staff retention example for an institutional evaluation use.

- **Transferring knowledge by mentee to other staff members:** Namali agreed to share a draft set of slides outlining the ResCom process with the UFE presentation by Isuru providing a seamless transfer of knowledge. Before Namali left LIRNEasia, she also ensured that the transferring of the ResCom processes was underway to her colleague. Although we offered to support the transfer process, Namali did it on her own, another example of owning and confidence in one's own knowledge and ResCom. Namali's presentation was merged with the one received from Isuru.

- **Evidence emerging through regular dialogue and conversation.** The mentors regularly checked in with their LIRNEasia mentees. During the second call in March 2021, Isuru informed us that he had completed four interviews with LIRNEasia staff looking at specific aspects of the Covid+, After Access, and Big Data project. He mentioned that Helani wanted him to interview third parties (external stakeholders). He wondered about how to deal with the feedback he had received. For one thing, the staff he interviewed often did not address his narrower focus, and instead talked about broader issues like the changing environment, or how behaviours had changed in terms of technology use, etc. We commented that such responses are evidence and that often people will not recall a project or initiative in the same terms as one expects. He mentioned the example by Sriganesh where he had approached the Sri Lanka Dept. of Census (as part of the Big Data project) and the relationship did not seem to progress much. However, sometime later he was invited to join one of their committees looking at the modernization of the census process. We commented on how this constituted a positive, yet unexpected outcome. This observation prompted Namali to share the story of another project where they had collected data in India and Singapore and had decided to produce a brief for Sri Lankan audiences in the event that the topic arose and allowed LIRNEasia to respond immediately. We commented on how this related to the ODI Rapid framework with there being three overlapping themes and the focus on being able to respond to windows of opportunity.

- **Readiness evolves during the UFE process:** The DECI project over its years of experience has added a step zero to the UFE steps. This step Zero is the assessment of prior readiness to commit time and resources to the learning processes of UFE. It must be signed off by senior management staff so that mentees can meaningfully engage in the UFE and ResCom learning process. This initial project readiness usually morphs during the mentorship process into the acquisition of competencies, technical, political and personal, necessary to navigate the UFE evaluation process and use of findings. The nurturing of this readiness through just-in-time inputs has been shown to be likely to motivate evaluators to own, embed and independently use UFE (and other evaluation methods and tools learned during the mentorship) in the future. In that sense, readiness may be viewed as a continuum and not just an initial step in the UFE process, to be nurtured by promoting evaluative thinking and support for creating the evaluation design. All of this process is facilitated by a mentorship process that is the complete opposite of rigid, pre-planned evaluation capacity building models (trainings and workshops). Importantly, Isuru was supported from the start of the design process till the completion of the evaluation process, and addressed gaps in understanding and execution, as and when they occurred. Unlike the conventional training methods, such a process ensured that doubts and dilemmas in the evaluation design and execution were resolved in real time, leading, as we have seen, in this case study to LIRNEasia's independent and confident use of evaluation & communication processes.

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