

# DECI-AM

DESIGNING EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION FOR ADAPTIVE  
MANAGEMENT

<https://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net/>

Project number: 109874 NEDG

**Final Report and lessons from the DECI Project:  
Enhancing organizational learning and adaptive management**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AI	Artificial intelligence
AUC	American University Cairo
BZU	Birzeit University, Palestine
CCE	Centre for Continuing Education, Birzeit University, Palestine
CIPIT	Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law, Kenya
CLD	Centro Latam Digital, Mexico
co-PI	co-Principal Investigator
DECI	Designing Evaluation and Communication for Impact
DECI-AM	DECI for Adaptive Management
DIG	Democratic Institutions and Governance (IDRC program)
ED	Executive Director
FIRN	Feminist Internet Research Network
ICT4D	Information communication technology for development
KT	Knowledge translation
MENA	Middle East and Northern Africa
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OH	Outcome Harvesting
PI	Principal Investigator
PIUs	Primary interested evaluation users
PO	Program Officer (IDRC)
POEV	Policy and Evaluation Division (IDRC)
ResCom	Research Communication
RIA	Research ICT Africa, South Africa
SecDev	SecDev Foundation, Toronto
ToC	Theory of Change
UFE	Utilization-Focused Evaluation
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees
xLOBs	Experiential learning program, Birzeit University

## Executive Summary

This report captures the more than a 15-years of experience by the DECI team composed currently of eight experienced evaluators and communication specialists, half of whom are based in the south. It tracks the five sequential phases of DECI and draws from the 25 case studies which grew out of the work with IDRC-supported projects. All five phases of DECI have combined a capacity development component with a research component to learn from practice. This combination of training and research has been valuable especially as it has allowed mentors and mentees to engage in intentional, collaborative, action-research partnerships. The focus of this report is to identify and better understand the linkages between the mentoring support and the adaptive management outcomes experienced by the partner projects. Attention was also given to the enabling conditions that have encouraged project institutional change and adaptive management impacts. The DECI team of eight experienced evaluators also strengthened their own expertise through continuous reflection and learning impacting the quality of our mentoring. The team developed a backstopping model where global south and north evaluators dialogued to share the best mentoring and learning approaches.

The main objective of the last phase of DECI (DECI-AM) was to help strengthen research institutions in IDRC's Democratic and Inclusive Governance (DIG) portfolio with their evaluation, research communication and adaptive management capacity. The overall goal has been to enable their work as change agents and ensure that the research is used for positive policy change. This work has been implemented through a mentoring approach in support of individual research project teams. This report addresses the third specific objective of the project: to document and analyze the mechanisms by which project partners improve their adaptive management processes through mentoring in evaluation and communication.

This report also deals with this subject by referencing literature on evaluation and organizational learning prepared by Brad Cousins & Jill Chouinard (2024), complemented by reporting on the DECI hybrid approach to combining evaluation with communication. This internal assessment also used steps from Outcome Harvesting (OH) as a learning-oriented evaluation approach. The data and information came from two sources: a review of all reports available from DECI-supported projects and direct interviews with project respondents associated with and familiar with the DECI mentoring support. The data collected was analyzed based upon five themes that were derived from the Cousins and Chouinard research paper, which are similar to the categories of outcome statements used in OH. The five themes include: direct capacity development; indirect capacity development; complexity-responsive and systems thinking; evaluation policy, evaluation & learning systems; and learning from communities of practice. These reflections are summarized in the first section of the report. In the second section, the analysis focuses on the underlying factors that evidenced DECI as a contributor to organizational learning.

The DECI experience with direct capacity development emphasized face-to-face on-site meetings to explore mentee readiness and understand context. Readiness refers to a project or organization's willingness, resource allocation, and management buy-in, and a commit to a mentoring process. A major gain from these events was relationship building, especially as explaining the nature of the DECI project was not simple given the lack of precedents. During these visits, introductory workshops were delivered to introduce the basics of utilization-focused evaluation as a decision-making approach, and research communication (often referred to as ResCom in this report). Beyond those visits, the main training method was just-in-time, remote mentoring.

Indirect evaluation capacity development was delivered in five different ways: engagement and coproduction of evaluative and communication knowledge; collaborative and participatory approaches; developmental evaluation; relationship building and collaborative meaning making; and, as well as staff member-produced summaries of what they had learned. A challenge in producing these summaries was that several of the examples also illustrated outcomes from the direct capacity development actions. This overlapping was the result of DECI being a capacity development project that works using a collaborative approach to evaluation that emphasized experiential learning.

Complexity-responsive approaches and systems thinking have been described as ways to understand and navigate complex systems by recognizing interdependencies, emergent behaviours, and dynamic interactions within various contexts. Because UFE is flexible and adaptive, it was possible to address strategic changes, new evaluation priorities and organizational change. In the DECI context, the ways complexity and systems thinking were addressed was through the situational analysis, the readiness assessment, and the process of evaluation planning and communication strategy design. The examples illustrate how both the internal and external challenges require that the capacity development process becomes complexity-responsive; the same can be said about timing and supporting a project's changing priorities. This flexibility in timing characteristic of DECI was unusual and contributed to the capacity development needs of the partner.

With regards to changes in evaluation policy, as well as evaluation & learning systems, examples are included that show a gradient of outcomes in organizational learning in evaluation and communication ranging from changes in procedures, strategies, policies and products. However, not all of these changes are sustainable; especially when the staff members who became champions leave the organization. A major challenge was frequent staff turnover and consequent loss of capacity.

A major advantage of DECI was its long duration. Relationships were built with some partners spanning 15 years and more. These connections gave the team a big picture view and mentors were able to share lessons across projects that had similar needs and learning objectives which is an effective way to enable peer-to-peer learning. It was not clear, however, how such links developed or supported shared organizational learning. There are many the instances where members of the DECI team have worked together to undertake evaluations using the DECI experience with non-IDRC clients. This teamwork is evidence of how a capacity development project created a community of practice that applied its experience into a wider set of organizations and contexts

The DECI approach embodied a collaborative, participatory approach to capacity development in evaluation and communication. Its organizational learning outcomes included changes in practices, in strategies, and in policies. These changes led to improvements in how projects bridged the research to policy gap, especially where there was staff continuity, the process led to organizational learning.

The DECI project's dual role of trainer and reflective learner is a model worth replicating, especially for organizations seeking to try out new ideas within an experimental evaluation umbrella. An additional and key dimension was that the DECI team did not represent the funder. This independence from the funder enabled a significant level of trust to be created with the projects.

Establishing and maintaining readiness was key to the approach. In several cases, early readiness was reported to be high, only to wane soon after. Since the UFE process was taken on voluntarily by the partners project, there was often insufficient budget allotted from the start making the investment difficult to sustain. Readiness was eroded by mentees' busy workloads or worse by their departures from their

organizations. This staff churn happened within the projects on multiple occasions. In other projects, the partners could not continue the mentoring due loss of funding, internal organizational crises, or becoming immersed in a war zone. However, the preparation of the case studies often led to the partners indicating gains that had been witnessed, even when a mentoring process had been interrupted.

The just-in-time mentoring approach enabled a flexible and timely adaptation of U-FE and ResCom. The flexibility of the just-in-time mentoring process had several dimensions: adjusting to project schedules and staff availability, supporting new staff after mentees departed the organization, adjusting language and minimizing jargon, finding ways to make the approach meaningful in the context of existing and evolving organizational priorities and procedures. It also allowed communication or evaluation to inform the process and then await opportunities for their integration. From a capacity development perspective, this flexibility is central to the approach developed by DECI and is encapsulated in DECI's third Primer.

Finally, there were two different examples of the use of evaluation findings: lessons from taking ownership and completing an evaluation, and developmental evaluation procedures where evidence was used on a regular basis to inform project adaptations. In addition, in several cases the very project strategy was adjusted because of the mentoring process that revealed project design flaws that were subsequently corrected.

## **Recommendations**

- **EVALUATION FOR LEARNING:** It is recommended that funding organizations move beyond evaluation as primarily an accountability exercise and expand its goals to add learning supplemented by communication and knowledge translation.
- **DEDICATED BUDGET ALLOCATIONS:** It is recommended that projects funders demonstrate a recognition of the vital role of evaluation and research communication by building into project budgets designated budget lines its critical activities. A proposed indicative figure would be between 8-10% of the budget for both evaluation and communication, or the equivalent of 2 full time staff positions.
- **EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION AS INTEGRAL TO STRATEGY:** It is recommended that both Evaluation and Communication be understood as an essential part of any important project initiative and that their effectiveness is maximized if grantees are included as active participants. This participatory approach works best if planned for, financed and initiated from the very beginning of a project.
- **TRAINING AND RESEARCH AS A DUAL STRATEGY FOR EXPERIMENTAL INITIATIVES:** It is recommended that the dual role of capacity development and research for innovation (demonstrated by DECI) is worth replicating as it creates a safe place for funding organizations to experiment, and it provides the funders/mentors with a living lab for research and professional development.
- **THE VALUE OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SUPPORT:** It is recommended that the use of both internal and external technical support mentors/advisors throughout the duration of project funding be considered to maximize the potential for capacity development, learning, adaptation and impact.

- **ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT:** It is recommended that enabling project partners to learn while doing be recognized by ensuring ongoing research into their development strategies while maintaining a focus on their content objectives are accepted as complementary activities.
- **FEMINIST EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION:** The DECI hybrid approach can embrace a gender focus. Utilization-focused evaluation invites a feminist lens that in turn can help projects pause and reflect on gender dimensions of their strategy. Communication strategies differentiate methods, media and communication functions across genders (women, men, non-binary people) and intersecting identities (age, class/caste, ethnicity, disability, sexuality).
- **PARTNERS' OWNERSHIP OVER EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION:** It is recommended that funders encourage project stakeholders (particularly users) to engage in evaluation and communication planning to promote their ownership of the processes and results. The opportunity to pause and reflect on project goals and communication inputs as the project progresses enables projects to adapt and adjust to changing conditions.
- **TWO MAJOR TYPES OF COMMUNICATION:** It is important for funding organizations to see communication initiatives as composed of two types of activity: front of the house initiatives (website, social media feed etc.) and back of the house (audience research, relationship building etc.).

## Introduction

In this unique IDRC supported Project ‘Designing Evaluation and Communication for Impact’ (DECI), the original challenge posed was to pilot-test and research Michael Quinn-Patton’s Utilization-focused Evaluation (U-FE) concepts in IDRC funded information society research projects in Asia. U-FE was not a new idea; it was first presented by Michael Quinn Patton in the mid-1980s. Its core thesis was that “UFE begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use”. (Patton, 2008: 37)

The focus of this report is on the lessons from the DECI project that started in 2009, originally entitled Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD<sup>1</sup>. In subsequent years, its title and focus evolved from primarily evaluation to include reference to communication. In its fifth and last phase, it reflected this dimension in its title - Designing Evaluation and Communication for Adaptive Management (DECI-AM). In addition to capacity building in evaluation and communication, it became evident that its work encouraged organizational learning aimed at strengthening policy impact.

Brad Cousins and Jill Chouinard (2024) are among the few evaluation scholars to analyze and promote evaluation as an organizational learning (OL) system. They sought to identify support for organizational learning as a theoretical basis of participatory evaluation and reviewed 26 evaluation empirical studies, predominantly in educational settings. They found support for OL as justification for participatory evaluation and its potential to enhance evaluation use. In discussion with Cousins, the DECI Team discovered a mutual interest in linking developmental evaluation to OL with a shared focus on the importance of the “use” and the building of organizational capacity and adaptive management.

## The DECI Project

The origins and evolution of the DECI project are important to understand. All five phases of DECI have combined a capacity development component (through mentoring) with an action- research component to learn from practice. This combination of training and research has been valuable especially as it has enabled mentors and mentees to engage in intentional, collaborative, action-research partnerships.

DECI’s project partners have been research projects supported by two IDRC programs which were engaged in development research that has been mostly exploratory and was applied in that there was a commitment to translate research findings into policy. Given the field-building nature of the projects, many were dynamic and had to adjust their strategies during project implementation.

The first phase of DECI was focused on testing Utilization-Focused Evaluation with five Asian network projects that were coming to an end, coupled with the goal of creating regional capacity in the UFE approach. The emphasis was placed upon testing Quinn-Patton’s basic 12 steps of U-FE and simplifying its process from those outlined in his 2008 book. As a consequence of an externally led evaluation of DECI, not only did IDRC obtain “proof of concept,” but it found the reports prepared by the grantee projects useful and confirmed the value of the approach. The DECI project team in its initial UFE Primer<sup>2</sup> wrote that “professional evaluators using UFE for the first time require mentoring support... (DECI supported) a team approach where evaluator mentors coach and mentor project-based evaluators and implementors – and everyone learns together.’ (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013: v)

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<sup>1</sup> Information and Communication Technology for Development.

<sup>2</sup> Ramirez, R. and Brodhead, D. (2013). *UFE – A Primer for Evaluators*, Penang: Southbound Press.

In its second phase, DECI-2 stood for 'Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research'. The mentoring support was expanded geographically to include research projects in East-Africa, South and South-East Asia & the Pacific, and Latin America. It also added mentoring in Research Communication (ResCom) alongside U-FE (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2018). The title of DECI-3 shifted to 'Designing Evaluation & Communication for Impact', while DECI-4 was 'Designing Evaluation & Communication for IDRC's Cyberpolicy Centres (CPC) Program and Project Impact'. Both phases focused the support on five CPC's with the goal of enhancing institutional capacity in evaluation and communication.

In its fifth phase, the focus of DECI was on adaptive management (DECI-AM). This change came from the realization that the evaluation and communication mentoring process had a positive "Trojan Horse" effect by facilitating projects to pause, reflect and adjust their strategies. Free of an accountability focus, its decision-making framework enabled project partners to set time aside to become more introspective, to reflect on their learning and to raise critical questions concerning their strategic assumptions, their evaluation and communications objectives and their Theory of Change (ToC).

This report captures the more than 15 years of experience by the DECI team of eight experienced evaluators, half of whom are based in the south. It also tracks the five sequential phases of DECI and draws from the 25 case studies which grew out of the work with IDRC-supported projects. In its most recent publication, the DECI team reminded its readers that "*Development projects, research initiatives and innovative organizational efforts require evaluations that can confirm outcomes and inform their strategy. They also need to engage stakeholders, enhance relationships, and disseminate their lessons.*" (Ramírez et al., 2022: 4)

Increasingly, DECI is being seen by its global team of mentors and its project partners as a way of facilitating institutional adaptation and strategic change. In its final stage, DECI-AM moved into more explicitly seeing its work as contributing to learning and adaptive management.

The main objective of the last phase of DECI (DECI-AM) has been to help strengthen research institutions in IDRC's Democratic and Inclusive Governance (DIG) portfolio with their evaluation, research communication and adaptive management capacity. Its focus has been to enable their work as change agents and ensure that research is used for positive policy change. This work has been implemented through a mentoring approach in support of individual research project teams (see Dhewa, 2024 for a full description). This report addresses the third specific objective of the project: to document and analyze the mechanisms by which project partners improve their adaptive management processes through mentoring in evaluation and communication.

### **Conceptual framework, methodology and data collection**

This report addresses this challenge by combining literature on organizational learning as a conceptual framework (Cousins & Chouinard, 2024), supplemented by the experience of the DECI hybrid approach to combining evaluation with communication (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2017), and Outcome Harvesting as a learning-oriented evaluation approach (Wilson-Grau & Brill, 2012).

The paper by Cousins and Chouinard (2024) brings together a comprehensive literature review on evaluation and organizational learning. It signals points of connection between evaluation and organizational learning (OL) domains, noting that both OL outcomes and the approaches and strategies designed to foster OL are intertwined. Their analysis highlights the importance of revisiting evaluation as

part of an organizational learning system (OLS). They propose a working hypothesis: integrating evaluation into the organizational culture, particularly through the effective use of data, which leads to an increased valuing of data. The hypothesis posits that as organizations experience successful outcomes from evaluation, both in terms of process and findings, they are more likely to embed evaluation within their OL culture. They call for ongoing research and practical initiatives to test this hypothesis, with a particular focus on framing evaluation as a contributor to their OL.

As noted by Archibald et al. (2016), organizational learning is very much associated with the evaluative thinking and internal reflection that leads to adaptive management, thus suggesting the connection with the focus of the DECI projects from phase 2 onwards.

The DECI hybrid approach introduces the added dimension of communication as a complement to evaluation (Figure 1). Throughout most phases of DECI, this hybrid capacity development approach has helped partners to make explicit their goals, their partners, and the mechanisms to integrate evaluation with communication. It has created a space for pause, reflection and adaptation. The hybrid approach goes beyond most evaluation capacity development approaches that only focus on evaluation (Buckley et al., 2021; Konjore, 2024). Examples of the two fields combined are few and far between as most focus on either the evaluation of a communication initiative, or the communication of evaluation findings.

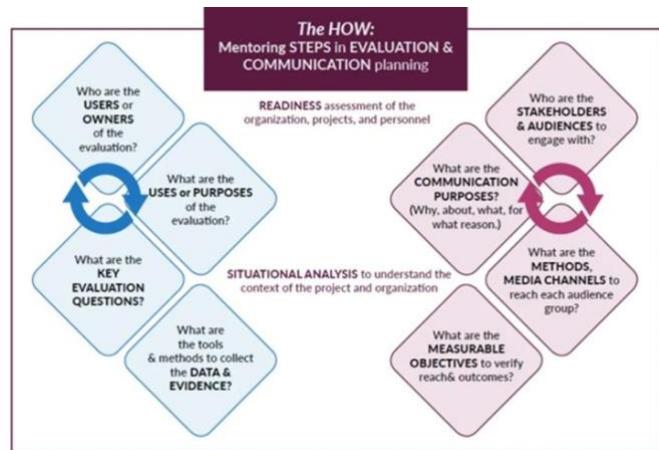


Figure 1. DECI's application of U-FE Steps and Communication Steps in parallel

Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012) is an evaluation approach in which evaluators propose, verify, analyze and interpret 'outcomes' especially in situations where the factors of cause and effect are not fully understood (Better Evaluation, 2024). In Outcome Harvesting, one looks for evidence of what has changed and then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention contributed to these changes. The outcome(s) can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, direct or indirect, but the connection between the intervention and the outcomes should be plausible. Information is collected using a range of methods to yield evidence-based answers to useful, actionable "harvesting" questions.

Outcome Harvesting begins by establishing 'outcome statements'. "These consist of:

- The outcome: the behavioural change in a social actor;
- The project's contribution: the project's influence on that change; and
- The significance (of the Outcome): why that change is important." (Nyangaga, 2021; 2024)

Essentially, this investigation used OH to determine the extent to which the described or observed outcomes and the project's contribution were aligned with the Cousins & Chouinard OLS themes.

Data collection for this report took place in 2024 and ended in early 2025. The sources of data and information came from two sources: a review of all reports available from DECI's supported projects (especially, the case studies produced after each mentoring process with a partner). In addition, direct interviews with projects' respondents associated with and familiar with the DECI mentoring support were held. Due to the over 15-year lifespan of DECI, many staff in partner projects had moved onto other

organizations and could not be reached, so a total of 13 current and former staff members of past projects were interviewed. It follows that the main source of data was the collection of DECI publications and 25 case studies. The case studies were prepared following phases 1-4 of DECI; no case studies were available from phase 5 (DECI-AM) due to the timing of the projects and a reduced number of partners (an additional one was completed in September 2025).

Annex 1 presents the list of projects the DECI team supported, Annex 2 lists the persons interviewed, and Annex 3 includes the interview guide.

The data collected was analyzed based upon five themes<sup>3</sup>. The themes were derived from the Cousins and Chouinard (2024) paper:

1. Direct capacity building
2. Indirect capacity building
3. Complexity-responsive and systems thinking
4. Evaluation policy, evaluation & learning systems
5. Learning from communities of practice

Subsequently, the analysis focused on the underling factors that supported DECI as contributor to organizational learning.

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<sup>3</sup> A sixth theme on the utilization of evaluation and communication technology is not included as it was not sufficiently relevant to the DECI experience.

## DECI'S CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

### 1.1 Direct capacity development

Cousins & Chouinard (op.cit.) present direct evaluation capacity development as planned training and learning opportunities intended to foster individual, team, or organizational growth in the capacity to do and use evaluation. These planned opportunities include graduate programs, courses, workshops, lunch hour seminars, and similar options. Direct capacity building refers to efforts aimed at enhancing the skills, abilities, and resources of individuals or organizations through immediate, hands-on training to strengthen competencies directly related to a task or goal.

For the DECI project, direct capacity development took the form of in-person orientations (where possible), and primarily just-in-time, remote mentoring (Ramírez et al., 2022). During most phases of DECI, a team of 1-2 mentors visited each partner organization to get a sense of their context and readiness. An important outcome of these visits was establishing a relationship that often created a trusting partnership.

The project site visits were invaluable. The DECI team were able to interact directly with project teams and their stakeholders. Discussions enabled clearer presentation of project realities for target evaluation and communication planning. Those face-to-face learning processes also enabled the DECI Team to observe and guide the learners in how to use and customize the DECI decision-making framework.

Since the start of DECI, there was an explicit attempt to engage regional mentors into its team. Throughout the different phases of DECI, its team members were based in many countries besides Canada: Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Jordan, India and Indonesia. Having regional mentors was critical to establish relationship building and reduced travel costs. As has been reported elsewhere, this created a *de facto* community of practice (Dhewa, 2024).

In some instances, locally based mentors were able to have follow-up face-to-face meetings with some projects. This contact enabled them to understand the complexity of the projects, what they were trying to achieve, and their constraints as well as the capacities of the mentee staff. While the project documents explained details, the face-to-face meeting enabled the mentors to understand the context in which the organizations were working, staff capacity and interrelationships as well as the political environment in which they worked.

The direct interactions were valued by project staff. In the DREAM-IT (Mongolia) case report it is indicated that project client team “*was better able to understand U-FE during a face-to-face capacity building workshop*” (Zaveri, 2011).

Identifying Users, linking them to Use and Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) proved to be challenging for all three organizations. E-mail exchanges, Skypes and webinars provided the ‘how to’ – what are the criteria to identify User, how do you help the User identify the Use of the evaluation and how to develop KEQ to support Use. However, this theoretical understanding using remote mentoring was inadequate to finalize User, Uses and KEQ. As the OpAsha Country Director for Cambodia stated, she: “*...got stuck on some components of Users and Uses – I tried so hard to pin it down. What are the KEQs – asked myself 10,000 times. Once that was sorted out, everything quickly fell in place.*”

A face-to-face meeting proved to be critical in breaking the deadlock of identifying Users, Uses and KEQ. (Zaveri et al., 2016: 14)

A DREAM-IT (Mongolia) board member responsible for facilitating the U-FE process noted: *“I like U-FE 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 U-FE’. 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 U-FE to anything else.”* The project manager also expressed that U-FE is “not judgemental”, not “fake” and very real!. (Zaveri, 2011: 16)

In the DECI context, beyond the on-site visits, the prevalent direct-capacity development approach was remote, just-in-time mentoring. This process involved coaching delivered to individual projects at their pace to align with internal schedules and decisions. At the heart of mentorship is a participatory, experiential processes of learning. Target project staff developed skills by actively engaging in all phases of evaluation and communication—from design and planning to implementation. This hands-on involvement transformed practical experiences into valuable learning opportunities, allowing mentees to build capacity through direct participation. The DECI-2 team witnessed this process during an all-partners meeting in Cape Town in May 2016 where partners presented their lessons (for example: Hillyer, 2016)

*“U-FE is (best) learned through practice: experiential learning is at its core (quoting Kolb, 1984). It requires an accompaniment that matches learning moments. This timing is one reason why the impact of workshops has been found to be 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 U-FE framework) with mentoring (that focuses on guiding, adjusting, and troubleshooting together). We have learned that we do a bit of both.”* (Brodhead & Ramírez, 2014: 3)

In summary, the DECI experience with direct capacity development was a combination of face-to-face on-site meetings to explore readiness and understand context, as well as online mentoring to support utilization . A major gain from these processes was relationship building, especially as explaining the nature of the DECI project was not simple given the lack of precedents. During these visits, introductory workshops were delivered to introduce the basics of utilization-focused evaluation as a decision-making approach, and to research communication (often referred to as ResCom in this report). Beyond those visits, the main training method was just-in-time, remote mentoring.

## 1.2 Indirect capacity development

Cousins & Chouinard present four distinct forms of indirect capacity development:

- Engagement and coproduction of evaluative knowledge: whereby participants gain learning by engaging directly in the coproduction of evaluation knowledge rather than just receiving it passively. This process helps them appreciate the capacity of evaluation to drive program and organizational change.
- Collaborative and participatory approaches (CAE): when members of a program work together with evaluators using collaborative or participatory approaches. By planning, implementing, and disseminating evaluative knowledge together, they build their capacity without relying on formal training.

- Developmental evaluation: In developmental evaluation, the evaluator works closely with program staff to generate ideas, pilot interventions, and adapt approaches to meet complex challenges. This hands-on experience in testing ideas, decision-making, and iterative learning contributes to a nuanced understanding of evaluation.
- Relationship building and collaborative meaning making by emphasizing relationship building and working together to interpret and act upon evaluation results, the process itself becomes a method for indirectly developing capacity. The focus on collaborative meaning making helps stakeholders internalize evaluation principles through shared experiences.

The above categories are differentiated by Cousins & Chouinard) from those listed as direct capacity development (previous sub-section). This distinction is possibly due to their academic backgrounds, where courses, seminars and workshops are the hallmark of training. However, in the DECI context, all four pathways could be seen as integral parts of the mentoring process. In addition, given the DECI hybrid approach, the above list has been modified to include reference to communication.

An additional form of indirect capacity development delivered by the DECI team was that provided during feedback sessions when individual and partner feedback on the case studies created a moment for reflection, that in turn, contributed to individual and organizational learning.

Several examples of the four types of learning noted above follow:

*Engagement and coproduction of evaluative & communicative knowledge*

The DECI case study of the DREAM-IT project (Mongolia) describes how the project board members recognized that, though they were not evaluation experts, they were able to understand U-FE, participate and use the evaluation findings. The DREAM-IT project manager observed that they learned enough to apply the same method to the other evaluations being commissioned by the Mongolian government, as well as incorporating the U-FE checklist into what they were using to review funding proposals for projects. (Zaveri, 2011) In a [video statement](#), the project lead stated that they had lost their fear of evaluation, suggesting a gain in evaluative knowledge.

An example of coproduction is evident in the mentoring work with Derechos Digitales (Chile). The communication and evaluation contact people worked together and developed a U-FE table. A contribution from the DECI mentors was to suggest a smaller number of evaluation uses (from 3 to 2) and fewer key evaluation questions (from 10 to 6). The intention was to ensure the evaluation was not too demanding for the team. The communication officer was involved in the final revision of the UF-E table where communication questions were integrated with other project priorities (Navas & Ramírez, 2022). Helping projects adjust their evaluation design as it is being developed is an example of coproduction leading to enhanced evaluative knowledge.

*“I feel like that work really helped us think about how were we talking about this and how were we talking about this in a way that is it too technical or too impenetrable surveillance is such a hard thing to talk about... And a lot of it was really about thinking through a communication strategy for the organization to have it be more deeply connected to the broader advocacy strategies so instead of communications kind of being separate from our overall strategic direction making sure it's very much embedded in like all of it. ...” (PI Interview)*

In May 2020, the CLD (Mexico) communication mentee developed a Communication Strategy for the project's Phase 2. Among other things, she was able to track the reach of the first two blogs in their series and confirmed a following by the civil society organizations they were targeting. The ResCom strategy

included: communication purposes, audiences, outcomes, media and annotations. She was planning to prepare similar templates for the other five themes of CLD's research program, a step that for the DECI mentors *"felt like a breakthrough"*. She had been able to make the new format work for her, as it listed activities that were in their strategy, and it was practical (Ramírez & Navas, 2022).

A notable example of production of evaluation and communication knowledge is the [ROER4D](#) project (South Africa). Beyond having produced and operationalized their evaluation plans and communication strategies, the team published a collection of toolkits including one on evaluation and another on communication. While the DECI team provided the underlying capacity development through mentoring, the production of the toolkit was done independently by the ROER4D project team. In the case of the CyberStewards Project (Toronto), the evaluation mentee went as far as to produce a summary of the process that was presented at a conference in Toronto (Phillips, 2014).

### *Collaborative and participatory approaches*

The DECI hybrid approach is rooted in participatory methodology and belongs to what is referred to as collaborative approaches to evaluation (Archibald et al., 2016; Cousins, 2020; Ramírez & Brodhead, 2020). The first LIRNEasia case study notes that the team *"...welcomed a "self-driven" evaluation that put them in charge and that would address questions that they felt were relevant to the organization's future development. (There was) an apparent interest in "learning by doing" in the process."* (Kumar-Range, 2011: 3-4). The LIRNEasia evaluation mentee (during DECI-1), found the role of the DECI mentor critical in guiding the U-FE process and providing resources and information on practical evaluation approaches and methodologies. This support helped to build her capacity in a *"learning by doing"* mode which proved to be an adaptive and innovative response to changing needs. This same person subsequently left the organization only to return to it as a senior manager and was supportive of further mentoring with other staff members during DECI-3 and 4 at LIRNEasia.

In several mentoring cases, the U-FE plans & ResCom strategies did not reach completion. In other words, there was no opportunity for the partner to learn from the use of evaluation findings, as emphasized by Cousins and Chouinard (op.cit.). Nevertheless, the process was still appreciated as a great learning opportunity. The CyberStewards Project did not complete the evaluation plan and yet the staff reported finding "significant value in the process as a means of reflecting on the activities that they were undertaking and on the program's goals" (Navas & Ramírez, 2016: 11). Formulating evaluation KEQs helped them understand that dimensions of the CyberStewards Network: they came to realize that it was not yet an established network, allowing them to adjust their strategy. This action was an example of adaptive management.

*"I would describe it as a structural mentoring which was kind of like, how do you develop the communication strategy of the organization? How do you bring people on board in the organization to think about Comms? And you know, taking on a different approach to communications more kind of like a developmental approach to communication versus the standard pr style communicating.... Your communications approach has to cater for different audiences, and also really thinking about the tools that people can make use of that sometimes can be overlooked,"* (RIA Interview)

Mentoring the evaluation of the Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC Argentina), was also incomplete, but the mentee described experience as follows: *"We already had the reflective experience that we had acquired from working in U-FE, we were able to design the event [a one-day internal workshop] along a set of objectives. The meeting was a success because it gave the PIUs the opportunity to share all the achievements, doubts, mistakes, and new ideas that had been emerging but had not been discussed. We*

*observed that some of these ideas could be included in a new strategic plan. It's important to remark that this was the first meeting of this kind held in many years, and it was really significant for all participating staff members of ADC's FEP [Freedom of Expression and Privacy] unit.*" (Navas, 2017: 7) In other words, part of the process became embedded in an internal collaborative planning workshop within the organization; a further example of adaptive management.

#### *Developmental evaluation to improve communication*

During DECI-3 and 4, support was provided to the CIPIT Project, in Kenya. In this instance, one of the evaluation uses focused on the effectiveness of their communication practices. When asked how useful the process had been, one staff member said: *"If we hadn't done the ResComm, we would not have known that we have not been collecting data for blog posts for a really long time. We were also shocked by that information. We have been writing all these blog posts and not following up. For policy response, we realized it has not always been seamless. We learned that some people did not know (we had developed) a SOP [Specific Standard Operating Procedure] to follow. (The evaluation) has been useful in reflecting on how better to respond to the requests"* (Nyangaga & Quarry, 2022: 6-7). The modification of an internal tool like the SOP is a form of institutionalization, and the process is very much aligned with Developmental Evaluation: to help course-correct the strategy during project implementation.

The LIRNEasia U-FE mentees told the DECI team that *"(they) started using findings even before the U-FE was completed"* and *"it became useful as a whole"* (Kumar-Range, 2011: 11). The gained U-FE knowledge increased the value of the evaluation to the extent that the findings were used for decision-making even before the report was completed. While the term 'Developmental Evaluation' was less known at the time, this experience constitutes an example.

#### *Relationship building and collaborative meaning making*

When the CyberStewards Project (hosted by Citizen-Lab in Toronto) worked with DECI to design the project evaluation and develop a communication strategy, the evaluation contact person found the DECI mentorship to be a "most important enabling factor for successfully conducting U-FE". According to her, *"It was incredibly valuable because (the mentoring) made the process come to life and more do-able."* (Navas et al. 2016: 11)

During the mentoring period of DECI-2, the size of the staff at Privacy International (PI, London) grew from 6 to 20 people, yet there was no parallel expansion in the communication staff. The DECI mentoring provided significant support and was valuable for the communication mentee in embedding communication within the organization's overall strategic direction. He reported that the initial material felt theoretical, but its practical application helped him translate the principles into effective strategies. The work involved thinking critically about how to communicate sensitive issues, such as surveillance, in an accessible and relatable manner. A great deal of the progress achieved resulted from the relationship of trust with the DECI mentor (Quarry et al., 2016; interview with Privacy International, 2024). As another example, in 2024, CLD decided to strengthen its foundation by creating a communications tool *"that strengthens relationships"* with the support of DECI (CLD interview).

During the mentoring with the Resisting disinformation in the Global South project, hosted by the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, the prolonged mentoring support led to a collaborative meaning making process. Even when neither a formal UFE design nor a ResCom strategy were achieved, the relationship that was built helped the team reflect and explore strategic directions (Al-Zatari, 2025).

### *Internal training by mentees to the organization*

After mentoring Derechos Digitales (DD, Chile), the evaluation mentee acquired a good understanding of utilization-focused evaluation. During the organization's annual retreat, he presented the U-FE process, which was well received by his colleagues, demonstrating his increased understanding and commitment to the approach. In his own words, he described the experience as "*a highly thoughtful process in terms of approaching the evaluation for the entire DD team involved.*" (Navas & Ramírez, 2022: 7)

In a number of instances, mentees who were exiting the organization, extended their gained knowledge to their colleagues, partners and stakeholders. This sharing happened with the communication mentees at LIRNEAsia and CLD, and with the evaluation mentee at RIA and CLD, among others. The DECI team noticed how the presentations to their colleagues gave the mentees a deeper sense of their acquired skills. In addition, these sessions appeared to connect well with staff as the message was coming from within. It was also evident working with projects such as CLD that DECI mentors were also needed to periodically update staff on UFE and ResCom concepts due to a loss of organizational memory brought about by frequent staff turnover (CLD Interview).

*As a one-person team it was kind of my goal to train all staff on pre-basic communications as advocacy stuff so that, as a way to help build up the overall organisational capacity. (PI Interview)*

*"I got a lot of support holistically in terms of like thinking about how you, how I could approach team members and, like, you know, also support capacity building of other team members in the organization to become their own comms leads but then also kind of like individual mentorship, where it was kind of like, how do I think about comms, and also just reflections through the sticky parts, because I think there were a lot of sticky parts introducing comms and evaluations into RIA" (RIA Interview)*

In summary, in this sub-section, practical examples have been described of how indirect evaluation capacity development was manifested through five forms or mechanisms: engagement and coproduction of evaluative and communication knowledge; collaborative and participatory approaches; developmental evaluation; relationship building and collaborative meaning making; and, when the project team was provided with a summary of what they had learned by one of their staff.

### **1.3 Complexity-responsive and systems thinking**

Cousins & Chouinard point out that most programs operate in complex environments or processes. They make reference to Bamberger et al. (2016), Gates, et. al. (2016), and Patton (2011) to explain that complexity thinking requires evaluators to embrace systems-thinking, to be open to innovative evaluation, and to use evaluation findings to describe and recommend system level changes. They refer to the relevance of systems thinking and complexity going beyond personal/individual project experience to the heart of how an evaluation is understood, organized, and conducted.

Cousins & Chouinard refer to Gates et al. (2021) who has provided a comprehensive review of systems thinking and complexity analysis as they relate to evaluation. They identified a range of perspectives and practices that include: the way evaluators see their work, the use of systems methods approaches and theories to guide evaluation; as well as the use of these approaches to foster innovation, system change and transformation, or ongoing learning and adaptation. Complexity-responsive approaches and systems thinking have been described as methods designed to understand and navigate complex systems by recognizing interdependencies, emergent behaviours, and dynamic interactions within various contexts.

Cousins & Chouinard refer to a checklist for assessing the complexity of a given program by Bamberger et al. (2016), that has four dimensions of relevance: the nature of the intervention, causality and change, embeddedness, and the nature of the system. The tool can be used collaboratively with program or organization community members to assess intervention complexity, help frame the evaluation and learn about the intervention operating within its context.

There are some overlaps between these four dimensions and the DECI emphasis on situational analysis and readiness assessments. In the DECI context, the way complexity and systems thinking was addressed was through the situational analysis, the readiness assessment, and the process of evaluation planning and communication strategy design (DECI, n.d.). Several of the case studies emphasize the difficulty of adapting to organizational challenges including evolving strategies such as networking (CyberStewards), political and pandemic turbulence (Derechos Digitales & ISIF-APNIC), and changes in institutional structure (CLD). These changing circumstances meant that the organizations were operating within complex environments and the evaluation and communication plans had to adjust to such external factors. In the subsequent subsection, the examples refer to internal challenges, namely internal decisions driven by funding concerns (LIRNEasia), staff turnover, and changing mentee availabilities and workloads. Both the internal and external challenges required that the capacity development process become complexity-responsive, and the same can be said about timing and supporting project's changing priorities.

#### *External project and organizational complexities*

Several times, the DECI mentors and project mentees had to revise their plans to adapt to changing contexts. The changes required innovation in how best to apply evaluation and communication plans, and in the process adjusting the training provided to the mentees. "Adaptive management will be appropriate in circumstances of uncertainty and ongoing unpredictable change". (Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020:3)

When mentoring the CyberStewards Project, the project staff realized early on that they wanted to evaluate a network that was central to their strategy. The project was based in Toronto with research partners spread over three continents, each facing unique circumstances and research experiences. As the mentors asked questions to focus both the evaluation and the communication strategy, it became clear that the network was still in its infancy. There had simply not been enough interactions with the partners for them to discover shared goals and find the opportunity to work together. In this situation, the mentoring process provided a space to pause and question basic assumptions that had not been addressed. Among other outcomes, this reflection informed the design of the communication strategy with more emphasis placed on actions that would give substance and relevance to the network they sought to create among various research teams (Navas & Ramírez, 2016).

Two DECI mentors visited Santiago de Chile in October 2019 for the inception visit before beginning their mentorship with Derechos Digitales (DD). While the visit was effective in creating a relationship and understanding the organization and its context, a week after the trip, riots erupted leading to the closure of the DD office. The DECI mentors were only able to reconnect with DD staff in January 2020, when they signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) committing them to develop the evaluation design by May of that year. However, soon after, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, causing further delays of the project once again. Later, the mentoring began to regain momentum, with the confirmation of the evaluation and communication contact persons. Despite continued challenges, mentors and mentees adapted and progressed as effectively as possible. The closure of the DD office and the cancellation of several projects could have easily led to the mentorship's discontinuation. However, both mentors and

mentees were able to continue interacting, although these discussions were not as fluid as they would have liked. In this context, flexibility and perseverance proved essential. (Navas & Ramírez, 2022).

Mentoring the CLD (Mexico) team faced similar challenges due to the disruption caused by the departure of Centro Latam Digital as a project housed by a university. CIDE then established itself as an independent think tank. This transition resulted in a significant loss of momentum in evaluation and communication planning as the CLD team became more occupied with establishing a new organization without the administrative and structural support previously provided by the university. The DECI team became a sounding board as the CLD team set out to establish a new independent organization. *"So, when we separated and became autonomous in 2018, I believe DECI was very helpful in creating the organization in general." (CLD Interview)*

These challenges for engagement were further compounded by the COVID-19 lockdown. The DECI team had to remain patient, seizing moments when CLD staff could refocus on the mentorship. In response to these challenges, an unconventional approach was proposed; a temporary shift of the DECI mentor roles from supporting CLD to tracking their transition using a developmental evaluation framework. (Ramírez & Navas, 2022)

In the context of an ISIF-APNIC project in the Pacific, project staff intended to include a government representative of the Cook Islands as one of the primary evaluation users. The project was hoping to use the findings of the evaluation to engage donors attending the organization's anniversary celebrations in early 2015. They held multiple meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister's office and Ministry of Culture representatives. However, election stalemates led to changes in ministerial positions and loss of continuity. These circumstances forced the project team to revise their evaluation design with the support of the mentors (Zavery et al., 2016).

#### *Internal evaluation and communication process complexities*

During the first LIRNEasia mentoring experience (DECI-1), once the project team was aware that they had the opportunity to take ownership over evaluation, they initially focused on exploring a number of evaluation uses. They considered: assessing alignment with the mission statement, evaluating LIRNEasia's commitments, refining future project designs, strengthening brand-building strategies, and organizational adjustments to reduce employee turnover. However, management was more interested in focusing the evaluation on the CPRsouth conference, especially with a view to improve fundraising strategies (Kumar-Range, 2011).

Internal organizational and project dynamics played a significant role in shaping organizational learning, particularly when the mentoring had to be delayed or extended due to unavoidable internal factors. A good example is the RIA (South Africa) team's experience with the U-FE process, which initially seemed overwhelming due to its structured twelve-step approach for an organization that was constantly managing multiple urgencies and deadlines (RIA Interview, 2025). Getting the process started required time, and sustaining momentum demanded considerable effort despite unavoidable interruptions. A key challenge was balancing staff engagement in UF-E and communication planning processes with their day-to-day responsibilities, testing the flexibility of the approach given the limited time available. Meetings and milestones had

*"I think what really was introduced to me in reflection that was unique was how researchers have the actual power and can be held accountable, and can also be transparent through how they communicate, and that oftentimes that communication is focused on a particular outcome, which means that the work is policy orientated." (RIA Interview)*

to be adjusted to align with the availability of evaluation and evaluation mentees and users. The DECI team supported RIA in adopting new evaluation roles and communication responsibilities, with the staff having to compete with other existing internal priorities.

A common disruptive project dynamic affecting mentor-mentee arrangement was project personnel changes which often led to interruptions, restarting with new mentees, or redesigning content based on new interests. In CLD (Mexico), the departure of the evaluation mentee in late 2020 required the DECI mentors to onboard and train a new U-FE mentee; the same occurred with the subsequent departure of the communication mentee (Ramírez & Navas, 2022). Staff turn-over was also challenge with RIA with much momentum lost (Quarry, 2022). In mentoring CIPIT, the DECI mentors worked with visiting and recruited interns whose participation was tied to short academic programs and schedules. In addition, the team's interest shifted from evaluating the program *per se* to exploring how best to use their research to influence policy. This change temporarily shifted the focus away from U-FE, with greater attention given to strengthening research communication capacity. Despite this shift, the project team remained committed to addressing their U-FE interests, and decided to continue with an evaluation framework that had effective communication as one of its key uses (Nyangaga & Quarry, 2022).

An important aspect of complexity learning was the flexibility required in DECI mentoring to adapt to what mentees found most valuable. This flexibility allowed projects to work with case-specific challenges. For example, the Derechos Digitales (Chile) project team was eager to learn about U-FE to apply it to three different projects, though two were unrelated to IDRC's Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) Initiative. While the DECI team emphasized the strategic importance of focusing on the CPC projects for IDRC's programmatic evaluation, they ultimately agreed to provide mentoring for the non-CPC projects as well. The intent was to encourage organizational learning by applying the methodology to a wider number of initiatives.

#### *Adjusting to partners' timeframes*

The DECI team encouraged projects to receive mentoring spread over a calendar that worked for them. Most notably, the DECI-2 project duration was longer than that of the projects supported. This duration allowed the DECI team the flexibility to wait for readiness if it was not there at the start of a project. This flexibility in timing of support was unusual and was a contributor to the capacity development needs of the partner.

The DECI-2 mentoring for ROER4D (Cape Town) started slowly due to the project's initial challenge of readiness: staff to work on evaluation and communication had not been hired, and many project launching priorities required attention. The DECI team happened to have a second trip to Cape Town and was able to postpone the start of the mentoring until a second visit when readiness was higher. Mentoring in communication started in mid-2014 with the evaluation component catching up by the end of 2015. For the first phase of the project, the focus of the communication strategy was to put the project on the map of the global open education community. At an Open Education Conference in Banff, Alberta (April 2015), the DECI-2 mentors noted the project has achieved widespread recognition, with grantees presenting research findings demonstrating they had addressed several of their original communication objectives. The project's communication strategy began to shift away from establishing the project *per se*, to ensuring the findings were disseminated to its key audiences. The group agreed that the ResCom and U-FE mentoring needed to be adapted to this milestone change, with a focus on knowledge translation and dissemination. The ROER4D case study underlines the importance of the capacity development responding to calendars and shifting priorities as a project evolves (Dhewa et al., 2017).

In summary, complexity-responsive approaches and systems thinking have been described as methods designed to understand and navigate complex systems by recognizing interdependencies, emergent behaviours, and dynamic interactions within various contexts. In the DECI context, the ways complexity and systems thinking were addressed was through the situational analysis, the readiness assessment, and the process of evaluation planning and communication strategy design. The examples illustrate how both the internal and external challenges require that the capacity development process becomes complexity-responsive; the same can be said about timing and supporting project's changing priorities, as illustrated in the ROER4D example. This flexibility in timing characteristic of DECI was a helpful contributor to the capacity development needs of the partner.

#### **1.4 Evaluation policy, evaluation & learning systems**

Cousins & Chouinard describe how evaluation advances have supported policy reforms favouring the learning function of evaluation. They also refer to evaluation policies that encourage organizational capacity building that emphasizes learning.

The DECI mentoring helped and supported project teams in developing or refining their evaluation plans and communication strategies. During DECI-3 and 4, the focus was on influencing internal procedures and strengthening organizations. The following examples provide evidence of a contribution to organizational systems and policies, such as establishing ways of thinking in evaluation and research communication.

##### *Changes in procedures*

The DREAM-IT (Mongolia) project managers decided to use the U-FE checklist as a tool to analyse funding proposals. They assessed project innovativeness based on how the related issues were addressed. For CIPIT, the mentored staff strived to develop a Standard Operating Procedure. This process was based on their functional need to quickly produce required policy advisory outputs (Interview with CIPIT, 2024). Institutionalization therefore meant establishing a system where use of that knowledge or approach became part of the organization's fabric sustained beyond the DECI mentoring, if staff turnover did not limit its use (Nyangaga & Quarry, 2022).

*"So, what we did in terms of evaluation was to help us holistically look at the organization in terms of, what does CIPIT actually do? What does it want? What space does it occupy in the tech space? And in sort of identifying that it helps us build out or bring out what our objectives are, generally as an organization, not just within the particular period within the particular year, but holistically in such a way that it is something that we can always refer to and go back to when we want to find a grounding of what CIPIT actually does as a research institute." (CIPIT Interview)*

##### *Changes or updating of organizational strategies*

The LIRNEasia evaluation mentee reached out to DECI in November 2022 to consult on the design of U-FE for a Ford Foundation project, and again in 2023 to consult on a bid for an impact evaluation. Both instances demonstrated that the organization had adopted U-FE as part of its evaluation strategy.

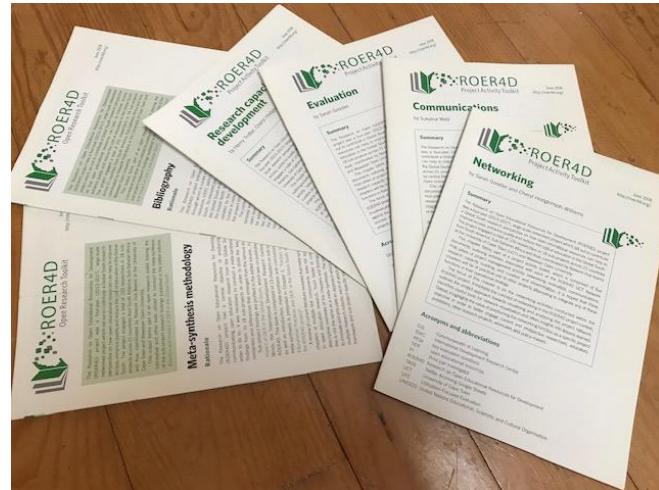
- The communication mentee at Derechos Digitales (Chile) produced a Communication Strategy document in January 2020 for the whole of DD that had broad themes covering activities and products, target audiences, and objectives. In March 2020, he began working on a new format that focused on DD's Artificial Intelligence (AI) project (Navas & Ramírez, 2022).
- The communication mentee at CLD developed a Communication Strategy for the program's Phase 2. It included added attention to internal communication, especially among research partners with plans

to bring them closer and create a community of practice. During 2024, the DECI mentors were in touch with the latest communication officer who has updated the organization-wide communication strategy.

- Also with CLD, UFE was perceived as relevant as follows: *"I would say that one of the biggest influences was identifying to evaluate impact, yes, and that was from the very beginning, and it keeps on being useful today, because, as you know, it's very difficult to pinpoint when you have impact and incidence."* (CLD Interview)
- As mentioned already, Privacy International embedded communication within its overall strategic direction as it grew in staff size but without expanding the communications team.

### *Organizational policies and products*

- The evaluation mentee at Derechos Digitales developed an internal project entitled Internal Project to Develop Evaluation Capacities that culminated in a new position in Evaluation & Methodology just before the evaluation mentee left the organization (Navas & Ramírez, 2022).
- The ROER4D project produced a set of toolkits including guidelines on communication strategy and evaluation design. This step was not a requirement of DECI, but it constitutes evidence of potential significant organizational learning.
- The IDRC's Policy and Evaluation unit requests for proposals now use U-FE concepts; UFE was included the RFP for an externally commissioned evaluation of DECI-2 (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017).
- According to Laurent Elder, the IDRC's then LIRNEasia Program Officer, *"When partners are good at evaluation, they are not afraid of it and this is useful when IDRC does its own larger evaluations that involves them; U-FE is perfect for building that capacity in organizations"* (Kumar-Range, 2011: 12)



The examples above show a gradient of outcomes of organizational learning in evaluation and communication ranging from changes in procedures, strategies, policies and products. Not all these changes, however, are sustainable; especially when the staff members who became champions leave the organization – staff churn is an important continuing challenge. However, even here, the evaluation framework was seen to have an advantage: *"...for example, I was to leave because I was the first one who was here, somebody else will come back and look at the monitoring and valuation framework, or look at the U-FE framework, will still look at it and be like they can be able to apply this just based on how it is structured, and not much will change from it, unless they themselves would pretty much want to either add or change certain elements of it."* (CIPIT Interview)

### **1.5 Learning from communities of practice**

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of individuals who share a common interest or profession and engage collaboratively to deepen their knowledge and expertise in a particular area. These communities play a pivotal role in facilitating learning through social interaction, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving. Cousins & Chouinard postulate that a community of practice is part of an organizational learning system. A professional community of practice consists of members within a niche industry who

want to support and learn from each other. The members typically have different levels of expertise and often work within different organizations.

A major advantage of DECI has been its long duration. Relationships were built with some partners spanning 15 years. During DECI-3 and 4, the partners were five Cyber Policy Centres funded by IDRC that have already been mentioned in this report: Research ICT Africa (RIA) in South Africa, the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT) (Kenya), Derechos Digitales (DD) in Chile, Centro Latam Digital (CLD) in Mexico, and LIRNEasia in Sri Lanka. The DECI team was able to notice shared interests among the partners and created opportunities for them to interact, especially by sharing lessons and documents – an example of south-south learning collaboration. Some examples are:

- The CLD (Mexico) team spent some time exploring ways to frame its research priorities and connect with relevant researchers in the region. In November 2018, the DECI mentor linked them with the principal investigator of ROER4D (Cape Town) to share her experience with launching and coordinating ROER4D.
- A similar experience took place when the DECI team connected the PI from ROER4D with the Disinformation Project in the Global South (Stellenbosch, South Africa) supported by DECI-AM. The two PIs were able to connect and learn from their experiences in managing networks of researchers spread over several continents.
- In August 2020, the communication mentee at CLD (Mexico) produced a ResCom table that listed planned communication activities, purposes, audiences, outcomes, media and annotations for one research theme. She planned to prepare similar templates for the other five themes of CLD's research program, and the DECI mentor asked permission to share the table with her peer at LIRNEasia.
- ADC (Argentina) contacted DECI-2 following advice from the CyberStewards research network that had received DECI-2 mentoring at the hub level. The network had found working with DECI-2 in evaluation and communication with DECI-2 mentorship had responded to their needs, and as a result this network member requested and received mentoring.
- When mentoring RIA (South Africa), the DECI team sent the communication mentee a communication matrix by sending her the communication strategy prepared by Derechos Digitales (Chile). The DD strategy offered an excellent example of a comprehensive communication strategy with a gradient of outcomes derived from Outcome Mapping that made it possible to measure change. It was hoped that seeing this strategy might trigger the mentee's interest in preparing a similar document. This idea paid off. The communication officer did an excellent job of producing a communication template (like that of DD, but different enough to bear her own stamp).
- During the end-of-project gathering for DECI-2 held in South Africa (May 2016), several project partners were able to participate in the face-to-face event (see agenda in the text box) – at the time.

While DECI did not start off with the goal of establishing a CoP, an objective of DECI-1 was to create regional capacity in U-FE (at the time only in Asia). While subsequent DECI projects did not share this objective, the formation of the DECI team provided the foundation for an arrangement that is very similar to a CoP as it is made up of independent consultants in evaluation and communication. There are many instances where members of the DECI team have come together to implement evaluations using the DECI experience with non-IDRC clients. These examples are evidence that a capacity development project created a community of practice which took its experiences to support a wider set of organizations and contexts (Annex 4 provides a summary).

**Purposes of the workshop**

- a. **Capacity Development - mentors:** Capturing process and impact and consolidating learning among the regional mentors especially as they have contributed an array of experiences but lack a shared sense of the Team's accomplishments. (Note: the DECI-2 Team has never met face-to-face).
- b. **Capacity Development – institutions/networks:** Examining the processes at the national and/or regional levels, as well as within networks and projects which have been documented in case studies, articles, presentations, etc. in order to synthesize those experiences.
- c. **Innovation in knowledge sharing:** to share the draft e-Primer & VeriCom(\*) frameworks, case studies and our outcomes internally *and* with a selection of partners (ROER4D, OCSNet) who have tested the combined approach.
- d. **Strategic dissemination planning:** for practitioners: facilitating the use of the VeriCom approach (e.g. on-line on-request mentoring of the e-Primer); for researchers and policymakers: review of conference presentations and papers delivered and planned at regional events.

(\*) 'VeriCom' was a tentative term for the DECI hybrid that was later discarded in favour of ResCom.

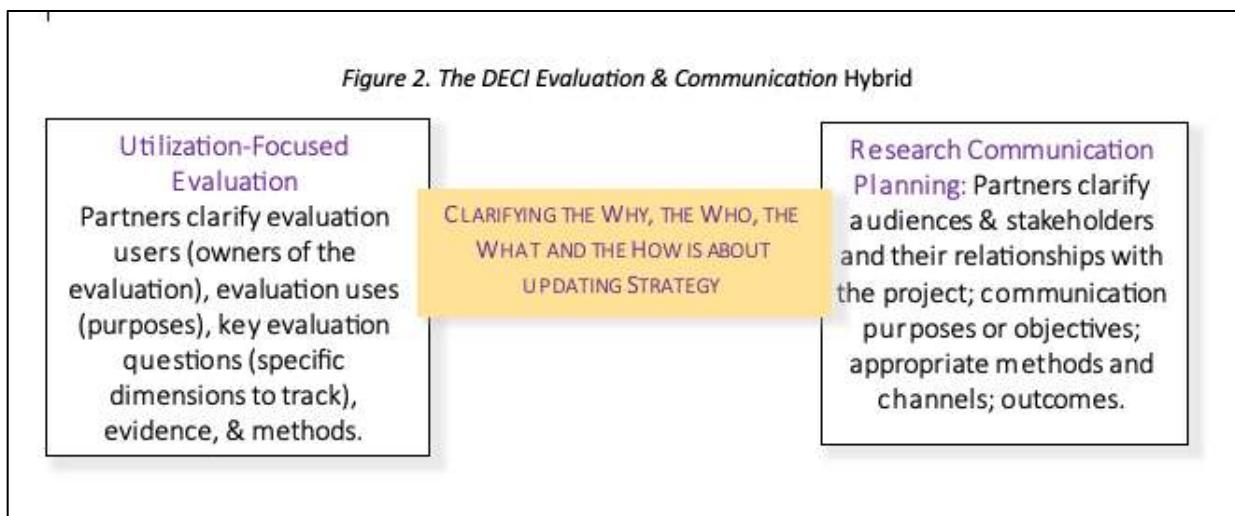
In summary, a major advantage for DECI has been its long duration. Relationships were built with some partners spanning 15 years and more. This longevity gave the DECI team a big picture view and mentors were able to share lessons across projects that shared similar needs and learning objectives. It was an effective way to enable peer-to-peer learning.

## FACTORS THAT SUPPORTED DECI AS A CONTRIBUTOR TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

### 2.1 DECI's integration of evaluation and communication

As indicated earlier, the conceptual framework underlying this inquiry combines the concepts in the Cousins and Chouinard's paper that focuses on evaluation, with DECI's hybrid approach. The hallmark of the DECI hybrid approach is the integrated application of both evaluation and communication processes, specifically U-FE and Research Communication, that was delivered through just-in-time mentoring. The hybrid approach is essentially a structured decision-making process to help partners take ownership of their evaluation plans and communication strategies. The ultimate goal is to improve the linkages between research and policy outcomes. It is through the experiential DECI learning process that organizations acquired evaluative and communication thinking. Although the mentoring experience with the xLOBs project during DECI-AM (hosted by Birzeit University, Palestine) was short, the at BZU team mentioned that this was "their project" and they owned it and felt committed to writing the ResCom plan for it. This process helped them confirm their level of ownership over the project.

The structured steps in the hybrid approach allowed the mentors to query partners in order to clarify expected goals, the mechanisms to achieve them, the partners to engage with, also the details of how to communicate with each and for what purpose (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2017). Figure 2 summarizes the main elements of the hybrid approach.



The value of the integration of U-FE and ResCom processes was witnessed by the communication mentee in LIRNEAsia as follows: "*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.*" (DECI, 2013: 2)

A major finding of the external evaluation of DECI-2 was that the mentoring process had the added value of creating a space for projects to pause and reflect (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017). When attempting to evaluate work that is dynamic and changing, DECI often opened the door for internal discussions within a project team that revealed different assumptions or interpretations about the project and its strategy. In the text box below, there is a statement from the implementers of the ICT project in schools in Colombia

(EAFIT). It suggests that the integration of U-FE and ResCom resulted in a process akin to Developmental Evaluation.

*“Adopting U-FE into our evaluation system to assess the use of ICTs in schools has led us to understand the importance of better communicating findings in order to maximize their use and support decision-making. This has encouraged us to find more efficient ways and media for presenting results to different audiences. As a result, our evaluation team has explored different data visualization tools. Prior to the DECI-2 mentorship, our system delivered monitoring-related information on a monthly basis because it took us a long time to put the data on paper, analyse it and share it through reports. Based on our U-FE experience, we now collect and share data in real time by using visualization tools such as Powerbi. This has made our communication processes more effective and efficient. Therefore, I can say that on-going communication with intended users is a new practice that has emerged from EAFIT’s exposure to U-FE.” (Navas, 2018: 13)*

There are several cases where the hybrid process led to early realizations about gaps in the design of an activity. One example was the mentoring for the CONDATOS conference. *“As the evaluator guided the primary users into the formulation of the key evaluation questions (KEQ), it was necessary to revisit the objectives of the conference to make sure that the KEQs would be relevant. To most people’s surprise, CONDATOS did not have any written objectives, so the U-FE process encouraged the primary users to write down whatever they understood the objectives of the conference to be. To the advantage of the group, most of the primary users had played a key role in launching the conference, so they had a clear idea about its original purpose. ...The discovery that explicit objectives were lacking shows the emerging nature of the Conference, but also the need to formalize some of its basic elements, so this clarification became an early contribution of the UF-E process.” (Navas, 2016: 6)*

In summary, the DECI approach embodied a collaborative approach to capacity development in evaluation and communication. Its organizational learning outcomes included changes in practices, in strategies, and in policies. These changes led to improvements in how projects bridged the research to policy gap, and especially when there was staff continuity, the process led to organizational learning.

## 2.2 DECI as a research project

In addition to being a capacity development instrument, the DECI project also included a research objective. The following is a summary of the wording of this component during each phase:

- DECI-1: To develop an approach to M&E capacity development with possible uses in other regions or thematic areas.
- DECI-2: To develop an approach to integrate U-FE and ComDev/ResCom mentoring (that included producing: methods and media summarizing the DECI-2 project methods, findings and training approach for select audience groups including practitioners, researchers and policy makers).
- DECI-3: To learn from the action-research experiences and share understanding of the theoretical and practical dimensions of improving the effectiveness of research to policy initiatives.
- DECI-4: To evaluate the CPC program as an approach and a research capacity building modality to help IDRC understand the value of the pilot program.
- DECI-AM: To document and analyze the mechanisms by which project partners improve their adaptive management processes through mentoring in evaluation and communication.

This evolving research agenda opened the door to learning-by-doing, to exploring how best to provide capacity building in evaluation and communication. This process enabled the DECI Team/mentors to ‘action-learn’ with partners, turning each mentoring partnership into a living lab for adaptation of mentoring practices. It is noteworthy that during DECI-1, IDRC used the project as an experiment, where the funder gave up control over the design of 5 end of project evaluations. In DECI’s first U-FE Primer, several IDRC officers wrote a short chapter entitled “What Benefits Does U-FE Bring to Commissioners of Evaluation?” (pp. 81-82). It is recommended reading for donors and grantees alike. It summarizes the gains and the challenges faced by a funder of projects.

DECI’s status as a research project meant that the team was fully aware of the kind of IDRC contractual and reporting obligations that the partner research projects were facing. The required interim technical and financial reports were not only familiar, but the DECI team was aware of IDRC’s evaluation requirements. This understanding enabled DECI to focus on the learning aspect of evaluation as a balance to the accountability requirements that were in place. This flexibility is an example of the balance that Cousins and Chouinard advocate for in evaluation.

As a research project, the DECI research outputs were case studies summarizing each mentoring experience. These case studies are examples of Step-12 of U-FE, meta-evaluation. The case studies were written by the DECI mentors and then shared for validation with the partners. This process of validation became an opportunity for the partners to reflect on the process, and more than once, the feedback included lessons and outcomes that were otherwise unknown to the mentors and mentees

An additional key aspect of DECI was that it did not represent the funder. At each introductory session with a potential project partner, the DECI team emphasized that DECI was not a backdoor conduit for feedback to the funder. This independence from the funder, plus the fact that the mentoring was recommended but not required, helped build a significant level of trust with the projects. A further takeaway from this experience is that DECI mentor’s dual role of trainer and reflective learner is a model worth replicating, especially for organizations seeking to try out new experimental ideas.

As mentioned earlier, in the big picture, the DECI experiment led IDRC to further integrate U-FE into its own policies. During 2024, IDRC and DECI held a few sessions to find ways for the hybrid approach to also contribute to its developing Knowledge Translation Strategy; although the impact so far appears limited.

### **2.3 Establishing and maintaining readiness**

Cousins and Chouinard wrote that effective OL requires senior management buy-in to support the process. This buy-in includes a commitment by parent organizations and funders to invest both human and financial resources. Furthermore, it means that management needs to be committed to participate in designing and using evaluations, as well developing communication strategies and associated materials (Zaveri et al., 2016).

In the context of DECI, the availability of these resource requirements and commitments, are part of what is established during readiness. Evaluation and communication may not be priority issues for senior decision makers, but the U-FE and ResCom processes are successful only if the organization commits not only to learning, but also to systematically following the decision-making framework outlined in both U-FE and ResCom. The DECI team first came across the notion of readiness as the first two steps of U-FE (Patton, 2008).

- “Assessing and building program and organizational readiness for utilization-focused evaluation” involves determining whether the organization has the necessary commitment, resources, and culture to support an evaluation aimed at practical use. Without organizational readiness, the evaluation may face obstacles that hinder its effectiveness and utility. Building this readiness includes fostering an environment where stakeholders are engaged and supportive of the evaluation process.
- “Assessing and enhancing evaluator competence to undertake a utilization-focused evaluation” refers to the evaluator’s preparedness. Patton underlines that evaluators should ideally possess the appropriate skills, knowledge, and disposition to conduct a U-FE. This knowledge includes understanding the specific context of the program, effectively engaging stakeholders, and being adaptable to the dynamic nature of utilization-focused evaluations.

A lesson from DECI is that some of the best evaluators are characteristically humble, have excellent facilitation and communication skills, and are willing and able to learn new approaches that contrast with conventional roles that they may have experienced in their careers. Through trial and error, and guided by a checklist developed by Michael Quinn Patton, the DECI mentors learned that it was critical to establish project and organizational readiness prior to mentoring the application of U-FE, and later also in communication (Ramírez et al. 2018).

Starting with DECI-2, the notion of communication readiness was added. The team also learned that readiness is rarely fully present, and that with sufficient time, the team can help nourish the partners’ readiness. Readiness sometimes took time and once achieved, it required continuous nurturing (Dhewa et al. 2017). As mentioned earlier, having the time to await readiness was a definitive advantage for the DECI mentors.

The DECI team sometimes encountered high levels of readiness early on. The EAFIT (Colombia)'s research unit was highly receptive to the U-FE approach and the project managers were very engaged and supportive from the beginning. They were the ones who approached the DECI-mentors because they were interested in "test driving" U-FE. In their case, their readiness was illustrated by the extent to which their research unit (the mentee unit) was willing to share the evaluation agenda with other stakeholders (Navas, 2018).

Figure 3 shows the readiness self-assessment form that potential DECI partners were asked to fill in; it became the basis for a discussion and for a Memorandum of Understanding.

Having been through the U-FE process in DECI-1, the ISIF-APNIC grant manager became a champion for U-FE (and the added component of ResCom) and at the start of DECI-2, she played an important role in promoting the *value* of the mentoring with other potential grantees (Zaveri et al., 2016).

In the case of DREAM-IT (Mongolia), initially there were no funds available (for U-FE learning). It took several months for various procedures to be completed before the U-FE evaluator (*U-FE Step 2*) was appointed in July 2011.

When mentoring the CyberStewards Project, the usefulness of the U-FE & communication mentorship was evidenced by the result of the combination of at least the following three elements: the practical knowledge of the mentors; the background and interest of the person receiving the mentorship; and the organization's buy-in to try U-FE and ResCom. The mentors did their best to make the hybrid approach less overwhelming by presenting it as a collaborative learning initiative. This approach reduced resistance from participants and helped build support from many of the people who were involved in the process.

This instance is an example of nourishing readiness once the process was underway and the mentees were feeling overwhelmed. It became evident in the APNIC project that the early buy-in of senior management was extremely helpful at the outset and the consultative process used (the UFE framework/checklist) became a reality check. It did result in changes to the project approach and funding – and contrasted what the funder thought was needed versus what the community really needed (Zaveri, 2011).

In summary, in several cases early readiness was reported to be high, only to wane soon after. Readiness was eroded by mentees' busy workloads or -worse- by the departure of staff from the organization. A high

**Figure 3. Organizational Capacity/Readiness Form/(DECI-AM)**

Readiness	Current Organizational Capacity/Readiness
1. Senior management buy-in to work with DECI as a learning partner	Comments  1 low    2    3    4    5 high
2. Designation of staff persons/team available for mentoring in evaluation and research communication	Comments  1    2    3    4    5
3. Allocation of a budget to cover evaluation and communication plan development	Comments  1    2    3    4    5
4. Commitment of time by relevant staff to learning and/or strengthening evaluation and communication capacity	Comments  1    2    3    4    5
5. Openness of staff & management to adaptation of structures, strategies and Theory of Change	Comments  1    2    3    4    5
6. Interest in sustaining organizational engagement with DECI Team	Comments  1    2    3    4    5
7. Willingness to learn, share, document and report with DECI	Comments  1    2    3    4    5



rate of project staff turnover took place on multiple occasions. In other projects, the partners could not continue to receive mentoring due loss of funding, internal organizational crises, or being affected by war. In one instance, during implementation a partner obtained additional funding from a new donor that imposed a top-down accountability requirement that led to a total loss of readiness and the end of the DECI mentoring. However, as mentioned earlier, the preparation of the case studies often led to the partners indicating gains that had been witnessed, even when a mentoring process had been interrupted. In the case of ROER4D, an unexpected boost to readiness was the internal, flat organizational structure. Both the communication advisor and the evaluation mentee were researchers in their own right and were regarded as professionals by their management team. The DECI team witnessed their commitment to sharing within the team that was a contributing factor to their learning and ability to adapt to change.

#### **2.4 Just-in time mentoring: flexible and timely adaptation of U-FE and ResCom**

Central to DECI's just-in-time mentoring approach was the notion of tailoring the support to each partner's unique circumstances and timing. The situational analysis and readiness assessments provided the foundation of the timing. This flexible teaching and learning approach helped provide a flexibility that standardized workshop formats cannot match. DECI mentors often commented on how each mentoring experience was unique, which speaks to the need for flexibility, and this was especially the case when the mentoring needed to adjust to changing circumstances in the life of the partners' project and organizational settings. Explaining both U-FE and ResCom clearly from the start, with an attempt at minimizing jargon, and introducing each step when the time is right was welcomed. The case studies and interviews provided evidence of the appreciation of the overall DECI approach.

When mentoring RIA (South Africa), there was staff turnover and the new Communication Manager came with a great deal of communication competency and 'know-how' to fulfil the role. The same was the case with CLD in Mexico and ROER4D in South Africa. In these cases, the mentors found ways to adjust the approach, by fine tuning the ResCom steps so that they would become a relevant addition or complement to the communication mentees experience and approach. For example, introducing audience research as a planning step in communication was a contribution that helped the managers adapt their communication strategies.

When mentoring EAFIT (Colombia), evaluation efforts had been going on for a significant amount of time, so what made most sense was to focus on the steps that seemed most relevant to add value to EAFIT's evaluation team. It meant adjusting the process and not necessarily trying to cover all the U-FE steps (Navas, 2018).

In DECI, U-FE and ResCom work was an integrated approach. However, when mentoring the Citizen Lab (and in other cases), the team was flexible enough to accept that U-FE and ResCom processes could work at different paces and that it was acceptable to have different readiness levels for each to move forward. An alternative attitude could have been to demand the same readiness level for U-FE and ResCom to move through the steps at a similar pace, but this stance would have hindered the U-FE process as valuable windows of opportunities would have been lost.

In Derechos Digitales (Chile)'s case, the project staff were keen to learn about U-FE and wanted to work on three different projects, two of which were not related to IDRC's CPC initiative. Although the DECI mentors reminded them of the IDRC programmatic evaluation and the strategic importance of selecting a project within the CPC mandate, they agreed to also support the DD staff on the non-CPC projects. This move was consistent with the DECI-3 and 4 mandate to create institutional capacity that would last beyond the IDRC funding.

An important aspect of flexibility influenced the pace of implementation and time adjustment. One ISIF-APNIC trip report described how the just-in-time mentoring that was based upon their need which led to pacing its application so that partner organizations could better embed the approach through experiential learning (Ramelan & Zaveri, 2015).

For CIPIT (Kenya), the integration of U-FE and ResCom took time as the team needed to understand the DECI approach in their own project and organizational context. The mentors helped this process to unfold at its own pace. This flexibility enabled the partner to adapt U-FE uses and communication purposes into a single (merged) evaluation and assessment framework, and to integrate it into their own ways of collecting and using data, as opposed to inventing new procedures.

*DECI came to us at the perfect time for engaging and organization at this time in our development. We were struggling but at the same time the DECI framework was very permissive – they allowed us to do things our own way! ... When we got funding from SIDA we were made to look more at 'results.' They went hard on making us focus on RBM. This made us think back to how DECI had allowed us to do things our own way and this was CORE to our own way of thinking – can we achieve the kind of change we want to see in this world and do things our way? (PI Interview)*

In summary, flexibility possible within the just-in-time mentoring process has several dimensions: adjusting to project schedules and staff availability, supporting new staff after mentees depart the organization, adjusting language and minimizing jargon, finding ways to make the approach meaningful in the context of existing organizational priorities and procedures, and allowing communication or evaluation to take the lead and then awaiting opportunities for their integration. In addition, mentoring has been documented as an effective way to create relationships that enhance evaluation competence (Goodyear et al., 2024; Jones, 2014). From a capacity development perspective, this flexibility is central to the approach developed by DECI and is described in its third Primer: *Capacity development in evaluation and communication: Prompts for practitioners* (Ramírez et al., 2022).

## 2.5 Use of evaluation and communication processes and results

Cousins and Chouinard describe how learning outcomes emerge from the use of evaluation processes and findings. In the context of DECI, there are two types of examples: the five case studies from DECI-1 where the partners took ownership of their evaluations, where summative evaluation reports were completed, and when the funder used its findings to confirm the value of U-FE, and the lessons learned by the project.

*I would say, in the recent past I had to work on a certain number of proposals which had [an] evaluation component. So wherever required, I could go back to my learnings from the DECI team. And also I could use certain... templates, that I used to use at the training... even when we were coming to... research design, I think the identification of audiences and all those things that actually helped us on designing the research because we were told to, think of the end of the project as well... how we are trying to have the impact on based on the research findings and all those things. So in the early stages of the research design... we could think of relevant audiences, stakeholders, boundary partners, all those things that we could work on. (LIRNEasia interview)*

In one of those instances, the DECI team was able work again with a partner during subsequent phases of DECI and built on that foundation (LIRNEAsia). The second type of example were those where a Developmental Evaluation process took place, where findings were put to work as part of an ongoing process of adaptive management. In other words, there was utilization of evidence before there was a final evaluation report. In some cases, the early use of the findings led to changes in project strategies during the project implementation.

The case of DREAM-IT (Mongolia) includes both types of examples: not only was there a final report produced, but there were also developmental outcomes that emerged during the mentoring. One of U-FE uses here focused on analyzing the effectiveness of sub-project management styles. During the project site visit, during a day of discussions with a project Board member, the project manager and the U-FE evaluator, it was apparent that there was little difference in the management of all four of its projects. Yet the sub---project performances had been dramatically different. A deeper analysis indicated that there were fundamental differences amongst the projects. Those that had not performed so well were innovative on many fronts such as by their use of technology; the nature of their multi---sector partnerships; and their objectives. The discussions helped the board members realize that they would need different styles of management depending on the amount and type of innovation taking place within a project. This analysis was a breakthrough for the DREAM-IT PIUs. It led to an unintended but vital new use for the findings. The use of the U-FE checklist to review proposals for projects, was an additional example of an unexpected outcome from the mentoring process (Zaveri, 2011).

*"I am not going to lie... the process was time consuming. But the part that helped was how everything seemed to link to the Theory of Change (TOC) – it forced us to think about projects in a different way and it was almost like evaluating what we were doing from the very beginning." (RIA Interview)*

In the APNIC project, it was stated that doing an external evaluation without taking into consideration who is going to use it and for what and – if it was going to be used for decision making and change – was seen as unproductive. (APNIC Interview). With ROER4D (Cape Town), their combined evaluation and communication plans made possible regular updates, an ongoing process of adaptation, and their growth. This experience contributed to a new internal way of thinking about evaluation and communication. This project was one of the ones with the most evidence with examples of organizational learning exemplified by the creation of the toolkit that was prepared without any DECI direct support. (Dhewa et al, 2017).

A reflection by a former member of RIA emphasizes how the process led to internal reflections: *"This engagement with DECI made us realize the importance of evaluation and communication – what we found very good was the scale of the focus on these two issues – we realized that evaluation and communication was never an afterthought, but part of the thinking required right at the beginning of the project. What I think this focus did for us was make us take the idea of readiness around evaluation and communication – we gave it attention – it made us think – it was a form of 'intentionality.' The process was not arduous – it was something for which I had to take agency – it was a new way of thinking – we had to engage in learning and make sense of it."* (RIA Interview)

With several of the ISIF-APNIC projects in Asia, the mentor and the project leaders became aware of project strategies and challenges that had not been identified during U-FE's early stages. This example underlines once more the findings of the external evaluation of DECI-2 which noted the value of creating a space for pause and reflection. Perhaps, this finding might be the most important take away in terms of the DECI capacity development approach.

*"The UFE mentor assisted both Nazdeek and Pajhra to review their **theory of change** and in the discussions about KEQ, Users and Uses – a program audit happened quite naturally. This was immensely useful to the team. On return, this is what the mentee emailed: It was great to meet you and get so much work done in such a short time. Although it was all completely new to us, we are now in the right place to get the UFE moving. (August 8, 2014)*

*The result of the situational analysis also shed light on an opportunity for a communication intervention. Having known that Nazdeek was on collision course with the government, DECI-2 team strongly suggested Nazdeek and Pajhra to focus their project communication on building a good communication with the government in order to get their attention on the urgent need to stop violations of health right of women labours at tea garden. The underlying assumption was while a government might be part of the problem, but they are also part of the solution, and that change – in this case is support from the government, will be less likely to occur if organizations had an open and strong confrontational political stand." (Zaveri et al, 2016: 18)*

The above points at two key examples of the use of evaluation findings: the lessons from taking ownership and completing an evaluation, as well as developmental evaluation procedures where evidence was used on a regular basis to inform project adaptations.

## **2.6 Unexpected outcomes**

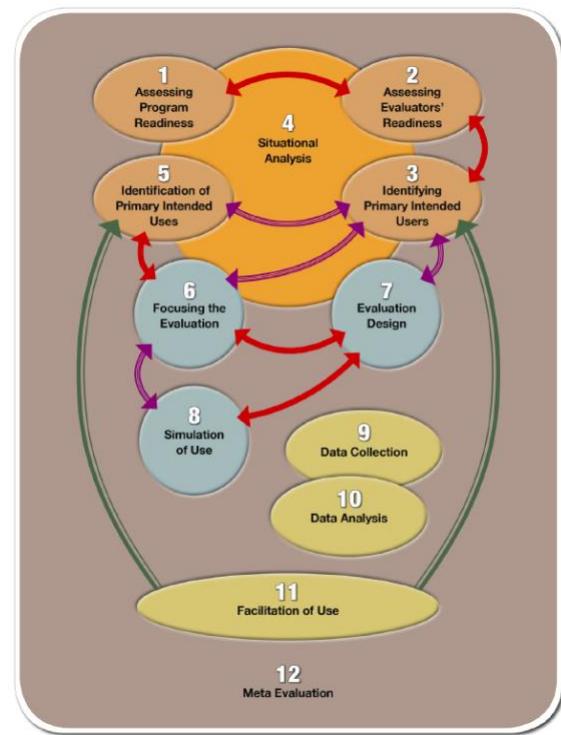
In UFE, there is much attention early on to situational analysis (step 4). However, several of the case studies indicate the importance of letting context drive the work throughout the mentoring process. The Nazdeek and Pajhra example is a case in point, where the gender dimension of the project became a strategic turning point. It may not have happened had the DECI mentor (Dr. Sonal Zaveri) who visited happened to be an evaluation and gender specialist; and yet it was the context that drove this emphasis on gender. Dr. Zaveri went on to produce materials on UFE as gender transformative evaluation (see Annex 5). As a founder of the Gender and Equity Network South Asia ([GENSA](#)), Dr. Zaveri has pioneered the Masterclass on Feminist Evaluation and engendering various evaluation approaches (including UFE).

A second unexpected outcome has been the community of practice that has emerged among the DECI team members. Not only has the team stayed together for close to 15 years, but they have also collaborated on multiple other evaluation and communication assignments (Annex 4). While DECI-1 had the explicit objective of creating a regional UFE capacity among evaluators in Asia, the other phases did not include this objective. And yet, DECI as a learning lab created enough interest and commitment for the team to remain connected, even though work-wise the last phase (DECI-AM) only provided limited paid time for a fraction of the team.

As a decision-making approach, UFE lent itself to a disciplinary expansion to include research communication – the hybrid approach- and later integrating Theory of Change, gender, and adaptive management.

From a methodology perspective, the DECI team concluded that the learning led to the following nuggets:

- UFE as an approach: the added notion of a 'step zero' (the review of all the conditions needed before launching the mentoring); the inclusion of gender (see the Nazdeek case study in Zaveri et al., 2016); and highlighting the causal loops in the UFE diagram (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013).
- The hybrid approach that brings together UFE with Research Communication.
- A process which integrates the theory of change - the why and the how.
- Renewed attention to the notions of readiness
- Developing evaluative thinking in the process as a capacity development outcome
- The reflection space among the mentors that helped to surface these changes; thanks to the DECI project's research agenda.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is challenging to summarize the important findings of dozens of project interventions over a fifteen-year period. It is near impossible to rank them in any sort of order. However, what is clear is that they are relevant to a range of different audiences – project designers and managers, project leads, funders, evaluators and communicators, as well as community participants/partners. At its heart, the DECI process and its adaptations are participatory and inclusive, as well as, above all, learning focussed.

The principles that have emerged from DECI's mentoring practice and that guided its work have been summarized as following (Ramírez et al., 2022):

1. Utilization-focused evaluation is a decision-making framework.
2. Research communication enhances use of findings for influence.
3. Attention is paid to readiness from the beginning and can be revisited.
4. Learning is demand-driven and provided through just-in-time mentoring.
5. The trainer and learner are conscious of and strive to manage complexity and evolving contexts.
6. Course correction of project strategy is expected and planned.
7. Utilization should be the focus from initial project design to completion.
8. A collaborative, learning, and reflective process is embedded.
9. Participation and shared ownership are fundamental.
10. The process builds individual and organizational capacity.

The evidence of the five phases of DECI is primarily a record of a practice-based experience with a heavy initial reliance on the theories outlined by Michael Quinn-Patton twenty or more years ago. This report is an effort to connect those concepts supplemented by the DECI hands-on UFE and ResCom practice and process to recently produced research by Cousins and Chouinard on organizational learning.

### ***Conclusions***

There are a number of common conclusions from the DECI experience which can be applied to a range of audiences, and they include the following messages.

1. **READINESS IS A CRITICAL FACTOR** – each of the key stakeholders in the project needs to be open to the DECI approach/process in developing capacity. Including, especially, project managers, evaluators and communications staff and ideally supportive funders. It is rarely present at the start and does wax and wane so needs to be sustained over time. The list of projects in Annex 4 that were offered mentoring support shows several projects that did not accept or were unable to continue the work with DECI, even after MoUs had been signed. As one interviewee suggested, the main cause of this lack of continuity was the limited funding provided for evaluation.
2. **CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IS A VITAL INVESTMENT** – learning from hands-on practice is effective and efficient, especially, when participatory evaluation and communications lead to learning and adaptation.
3. **SUSTAINABILITY OF CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT** – There is evidence that the gains in evaluation and communication at the individual level among DECI mentees and mentors have endured over time, but there is less evidence that this continuity also applies at the organizational level once the mentees leave (Derechos Digitales, Citizen Lab, EAFIT are clear examples of this).

4. JUST-IN-TIME MENTORING IS AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORTIVE PROCESS which allows adjustments to evolving project timetables, changing contexts and needs. Experienced external mentors can build trust and provide effective and timely advice to supplement limited internal funders staff inputs.

5. MULTI YEAR PROJECT FUNDING IS ESSENTIAL – for a collaborative, developmental approach to difficult issues and contexts to succeed and have a chance to have policy impact, so that institutional capacity can be built, supported and sustained. Having a longer project duration relative to the partners, as was the case with DECI-2, allowed the mentors flexibility to wait for readiness to develop or increase, and to work at the pace of each partner. Designated, substantial project budgets for evaluation and communications are vital.

6. RELATING EVALUATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS PROVED FAR MORE VALUABLE – for more than just accountability and reporting upwards. Both evaluation and communication planning lead to collaborative learning, resulting in improved capacity development and institutional adaptation. The hybrid mentoring process became a Trojan Horse to create shared spaces and moments for pause and reflection.

7. DUAL DECI ROLE UNIQUE – the opportunity to deliver training/mentoring informed by ongoing research into the practice led to augmented learning and adaptation during the project implementation.

8. EXTERNAL TECHNICAL SUPPORT EFFECTIVE – as an outside technical support, DECI created a trusting relationship separate from and complementary to the internal accountability reporting requirements and the knowledge translation strategy. With DECI, the challenge is to find a space inside IDRC for continued internal support.

9. A SPACE TO PAUSE AND REFLECT: The external evaluation of DECI-2 (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017) concluded that the mentoring approach provided partners with a valuable space to pause and reflect, something that is often not built into project strategies, and that allows for learning and reflection.

### ***Recommendations***

In drafting a set of recommendations, it is important to keep in mind that DECI was a unique experiment for the funding organization - IDRC. It was both a technical assistance support project for IDRC grantees, as well as a research project into the application of UFE. Subsequently, it evolved into UFE and ResCom combined and finally focussed on Adaptive Management. It also provided spaces to include various complementary evaluation approaches such as developmental evaluation, outcome mapping and harvesting and feminist evaluation. It was unique in that it also encompassed five stages lasting a total of fifteen years.

Within IDRC, DECI was itself a grantee, initially as part of the ICT4D Program and the Evaluation Unit; in its later phase it became part of the DIG program. Consequently, within IDRC its long duration meant that its Program proponents moved on and changed. Yet the demand for its support continued and when its raison d'être was independently evaluated, there was proof of concept reported.

The following recommendations are meant to be seen as relevant to IDRC - as well as other funding organizations which support complex projects in rapidly evolving contexts

- **EVALUATION FOR LEARNING:** It is recommended that funding organizations move beyond evaluation as primarily an accountability exercise and expand its goals to add learning supplemented by communication and knowledge translation.
- **DEDICATED BUDGET ALLOCATIONS:** It is recommended that projects funders demonstrate a recognition of the vital role of evaluation and research communication by building into project budgets designated budget lines for its critical activities. A proposed indicative figure would be between 8-10% of the budget for both evaluation and communication, or the equivalent of 2 full time staff positions.
- **EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION AS INTEGRAL TO STRATEGY:** It is recommended that both Evaluation and Communication be understood as an essential part of any important project initiative and that their effectiveness is maximized if grantees are included as active participants. This participatory approach works best if planned for, financed and initiated from the very beginning of a project.
- **TRAINING AND RESEARCH AS A DUAL STRATEGY FOR EXPERIMENTAL INITIATIVES:** It is recommended that the dual role of capacity development and research for innovation (demonstrated by DECI) is worth replicating as it creates a safe place for funding organizations to experiment, and it provides the funders/mentors with a living lab for research and professional development.
- **THE VALUE OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SUPPORT:** It is recommended that the use of both internal and external technical support mentors/advisors throughout the duration of project funding be considered to maximize the potential for capacity development, learning, adaptation and impact.
- **ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT:** It is recommended that enabling project partners to learn while doing be recognized by ensuring ongoing research into their development strategies while maintaining a focus on their content objectives are accepted as complementary activities.
- **FEMINIST EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION:** The DECI hybrid approach can embrace a gender focus. Utilization-focused evaluation invites a feminist lens that in turn can help projects pause and reflect on gender dimensions of their strategy. Communication strategies differentiate methods, media and communication functions across genders (women, men, non-binary people) and intersecting identities (age, class/caste, ethnicity, disability, sexuality).
- **PARTNERS' OWNERSHIP OVER EVALUATION & COMMUNICATION:** It is recommended that funders encourage project stakeholders (particularly users) to engage in evaluation and communication planning to promote their ownership of the processes and results. The opportunity to pause and reflect on project goals and communication inputs as the project progresses enables projects to adapt and adjust to changing conditions.
- **TWO MAJOR TYPES OF COMMUNICATION:** It is important for funding organizations to see communication initiatives as composed of two types of activity: front of the house initiatives (website, social media feed etc.) and back of the house (audience research, relationship building etc.).

Funders and grantees alike will gain from the above recommendations especially when there is a **commitment to institutionalizing UFE**, or at the very least, mentoring in UFE and ResCom for internal reflection to enhance innovation and adaptation.

An understanding of the value of assessing readiness of funders, grantees, evaluators and mentors is essential when planning or allocating resources, provision of mentoring support or other inputs is an unrecognized and undervalued step in the developmental process.

Lastly, the unique fifteen-year practice and research investment in the DECI experience is available to funders and project stakeholders as a reference which supports the recommendations listed above. On offer is its library of DECI publications/database, including the toolkits, case studies, and blog posts. It is available to share as part of a learning approach with projects wishing to learn more about UFE and ResCom and to apply it to their work early on<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The DECI website will remain available until June 2028.

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## Annex 1. List of projects mentored by DECI

DECI-1 Partners: Regional Asia network projects	Reference acronym
The <b>Singapore Internet Research Centre (SiRC)</b> at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The evaluation focused on a review of their awarding and mentoring process	SIRCA
The <b>ISIF-APNIC, Brisbane, Australia.</b> ISIF (Information Society Innovation Fund) is a grants and awards program aimed at stimulating creative solutions to ICT development needs in the Asia Pacific region. The evaluation focused on the management of their grantee projects.	ISIF-APNIC
<b>LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka.</b> A pro-poor, pro-market think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The evaluation focused on the CPRSouth Conference.	LIRNEasia
<b>DREAM-IT, Mongolia.</b> This was a program titled Development Research to Empower All Mongolians through Information Communications Technology in Mongolia. 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	DREAM-IT (Mongolia)
The <b>PAN Asian Collaboration for Evidence-based e-Health Adoption and Application</b> was a network of health researchers and institutions that conducts collaborative research on e-Health applications in the Asian context. The UFE came at a timely moment for evaluating both the Projects and the network, although PANACEA later decided to evaluate only the network.	PANACEA
DECI-2 Partners: Information & Networks projects	Reference acronym
The <b>Operation Asha (subproject of APNIC), Cambodia.</b> This was a healthcare delivery services project funded by ISIF and aimed to serve 8.9 m million people in India & Cambodia.	APNIC-Asha
The <b>Nazdeek (subproject of APNIC), India,</b> The project was “End Maternal Mortality Now”, funded by ISIF – Asia and implemented by Nazdeek (Delhi), PAJHRA (Promotion and Advancement of Justice, Harmony and Rights of Adivasis, Tezpur), and ICAAD (International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination) , New York	APNIC- Nazdeek
The <b>Cook Islands Maori Database (subproject of APNIC).</b> Cook Islands Internet Action Group. The aim of the project is to develop a database of Cook Islands Maori Words	APNIC-Cook Islands
The <b>Research on Open Education Resources for Development (ROER4D)</b> was based in Cape Town, South Africa. It was implemented by the Centre for Innovation in learning and Teaching (CILT) at the University of Cape Town (UCT)	ROER4D
The <b>Privacy International (PI), UK.</b> PI was founded in 1990, and has a deep breadth of knowledge on current and historical privacy and surveillance issues. At the time of the mentoring PI had network of over 20 partner organisations in 13 countries around the world.	Privacy International
The <b>Open and Collaborative Science OCSDNet, University of Toronto.</b> The aim of the project was “To understand whether, and the conditions under which, a converging set of open practices based on networked collaboration, collectively called “Open and Collaborative Science” (OCS) in the Global South.	OCSDNet
The <b>Research ICT Africa (RIA), South Africa</b> work revolves around a determination to build an African evidence and knowledge base that can support ICT policy and	RIA

regulatory processes, monitor and review policy and regulatory developments and advocate for more inclusive policies across the continent.	
<b>EAFIT, Colombia</b> is a private university based in Medellin and has a research unit called “Línea I+D en Informática Educativa” (I+D unit) that has conducted applied research on the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in school education.	EAFIT
<b>CyberStewards, Citizen-Lab, University of Toronto.</b> The CyberStewards Network (CSN) was an IDRC-funded initiative aiming at providing support to cyber security scholars, advocates and practitioners of the global South in order to help them articulate a vision of cyber security in which rights and openness are protected on the basis of shared research and empirical knowledge.	CyberStewards
<b>Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Argentina.</b> An NGO that seeks to contribute to establish a judicial and institutional culture that would guarantee the fundamental rights of people based on the values of the national constitution. In 2015, ADC created the Freedom of Expression and Privacy Unit.	ADC
<b>The Latin America and the Caribbean Open Data Conference (CONDATOS)</b> was first launched in Montevideo (Uruguay) in 2013; and there have since been annual conferences hosted by different countries. The mentoring focused on the Chile conference in March 2015.	CONDATOS
<b>DECI-3 &amp; 4 Partners – CyberPolicy Centres – Institutional strengthening</b>	<b>Reference acronym</b>
<b>CIPIT (the Centre for IP and IT Law) in Kenya</b> is an evidence-based research and training Centre based at Strathmore University, Nairobi, Kenya. Its mission is to study, create, and share knowledge on the development of intellectual property and information technology, especially as they contribute to African Law and Human Rights.	CIPIT
<b>Derechos Digitales, Chile</b> , is an independent NGO based in Santiago de Chile. Its main objective is to develop, protect and promote digital rights in Latin America in three particular domains: (i) sustainable and inclusive technologies for social justice, dealing with the impact of digital technology on structural exclusion and inequalities; (ii) autonomy, dignity and control in the use of technology, addressing how public and private practices related to technology can impact the exercise of fundamental rights; and (iii) technology policy from Latin America, responding to the need to promote the inclusion of diverse Latin American voices and perspectives in regional and global debates on technology governance and human rights.	Derechos Digitales
<b>Centro Latam Digital (CLD) Mexico.</b> At the time of DECI mentoring CLD focuses its research on three main subject areas: artificial intelligence (AI), threats to privacy and security, infrastructure deficit and the digital divide. During the mentoring process CLD became independent from CIDE, a public university.	CLD
<b>LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka – follow-up mentoring</b>	LIRNEasia
<b>RIA, South Africa - follow-up mentoring</b>	RIA
<b>DECI-AM Partners – Democratic Institutions and Governance</b>	<b>Reference acronym</b>
<b>Resisting disinformation in the Global South, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.</b> This network project focused on researching the drivers of disinformation with research teams in South Africa, Jordan, Sri Lanka and Brazil.	Disinformation
<b>xLOBs Project, Birzeit University, Palestine.</b> The project was hosted by the Centre for Continuing Education and aimed at introducing an experiential learning curriculum to UNRWA-managed schools in Palestine.	xLOBs
<b>Centro Latam Digital (CLD), Mexico – limited follow-up mentoring</b>	CLD
<b>CIPIT (the Centre for IP and IT Law) in Kenya – limited follow-up mentoring</b>	CIPIT
<b>Open Tecnology Lab, New York- – mentoring was offered, but discontinued</b>	SecDev

<b>MENA AI Observatory, jointly hosted by the American University, Cairo (AUC) and Birzeit University, Palestine.</b> – mentoring was initiated, but discontinued	MENA AI
<b>Open Technology Lab, New York-</b> – mentoring was initiated, but discontinued	OTL
<b>Feminist Internet Research Network, APC</b> - mentoring was offered but rejected	FIRN
<b>Data for Development Network</b> – mentoring was initiated, but discontinued	D4D

## Annex 2. People interviewed

Date	Organization	Person interviewed
5 Sep. 2024	Privacy International (PI) London	1.. Mike Rispoli (no longer with PI)
8 Apr. 2025		2.. Gus Hosein, ED
12 Sep. 2024	LIRNEasia Colombo	3.. Helani Galpaya 4.. Nilusha Kapugama 5.. Isuru Samaratunga
18 Sep. 2024	APNIC Brisbane	6.. Sylvia Cadena (left APNIC soon after)
24 Nov. 2024	Centro Latam Digital (CLD) Mexico City	7.. Judith Mariscal, ED
5 Dec. 2024	CIPIT Nairobi	8.. Catriona Akinyi Onyango 9.. Kendi Murithi 10.. Florence Ogonjo
27 Jan. 2025	Research ICT Africa (RIA) Cape Town	11.. Chenai Chair (no longer with RIA)
15 Apr. 2025		12.. Naila Govan
12 May. 2025	ROER4D	13.. Sukaina Walji (stayed with host university)

### Annex 3. Interview Guide

#### 1. Respondent details:

- Name/project/organization

#### 2. DECI interaction (contribution)

- Describe your interaction with DECI (how does or how did DECI relate with you, your project, and your organization)?
- What other influences (other initiatives, factors, etc.; positive, negative) have contributed to the OL changes you have described?
- To what extent was the DECI interaction influential (when compared)? (1 = not significant, 5 = very significant)

#### 3. The outcome(s)

- In what way did you use our interaction (EvalComm knowledge, U-FE and Comms guides and tools), reflection/thinking, ...etc.)
- What to your best knowledge and memory changed/is changing? What do/did you, the project, and the organization do (are doing) differently?
- Describe any persisting change/transformation as a result of the DECI interaction.  
*These changes may also include the use of the same knowledge/skills/thinking in other projects/organizations beyond the first (when you first interacted with DECI).*
- Provide factual examples or evidence of this change/these changes, if available.

#### 4. Significance

##### From the respondent:

- To what extent would you relate those changes to organizational learning (OL), if any? Describe.
- **Recommendation(s):** What would you recommend that would enhance OL in projects interested in learning from the DECI project (or a DECI-like project)?

#### Annex 4. External consultancies by the DECI team as a Community of Practice

##### Mentoring contracts / events

- **Canadian Lutheran World Relief:** UFE for the interim evaluation of the Gender Transformative Climate Adaptation Project in Cameroun and Chad (2 DECI team members, 2025-2026)
- **InnoVet-AMR:** mentoring in research communication for an IDRC global initiative in anti-microbial resistance (5 DECI team members, 2024-2025)
- **University of Guelph:** mentoring in UFE for the IDRC-funded project on Gender transformation in STEM research, education and innovation in Cuba (1 DECI team member, with a second on stand-by, 2025-2026)
- **DeSIRA LIFT** - European Commission's program in agricultural innovation systems: 3 DECI team members; mentoring approach; sharing training resources (Wageningen University & CIRAD-€370M, completed May 2025)
- **Canadian Department of National Defense Evaluation Division:** 3 DECI team members mentoring in Developmental Evaluation (2023-2024)
- **Mongolia Evaluation Association:** Introductory webinar to U-FE (2 DECI team members, 2024).

##### Completed evaluation contracts using U-FE

- **Canadian Foodgrains Bank**, SUCA Program Evaluation: 1 DECI team member with another colleague (2020)
- **Ignatius Jesuit Centre**, Guelph, two program evaluations, 1 DECI team with another colleague (2018, 2019)
- **IICA Guatemala**, Mid-term evaluation of the CRIA (agricultural research) program, 2 DECI team members (2019) and Final Evaluation 2025)
- **Law Society of Ontario**, Access to Justice program evaluation; 2 DECI team members (2018)
- **CAP Yei**, youth capacity building evaluation, Kenya, 1 DECI team member with another colleague (2018); follow-up evaluations led by our Kenya team member
- **FORUT Norway**: 4 DECI team members (2017)
- **Langs Hub**, Cambridge, 1 DECI team member with another colleague (2016)
- **Research ICT Africa**, Evaluation for IDRC, 5 DECI team members (2014)
- **Aflateen Curriculum**, Amsterdam, 1 DECI team member with another colleague (2013)
- Various U-FE training contracts for **non-profits** in Ontario (USC Canada, ONN, EFAO)
- **Equal Community Foundation India**, program evaluation targeting boys to prevent gender violence, 1 DECI team member (2015)

##### Instances where IDRC partners engaged DECI team members directly

- CIPIT
- Apnic

##### U-FE influence over evaluation policy

- IDRC
- FORUT, Norway
- Canadian Foodgrains Bank
- MasterCard Foundation

## Annex 5. Utilization-focused, Gender Transformative Evaluation

Sonal Zaveri, Ricardo Ramírez & Dal Brodhead, 2019

### Main points about UFE

- Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that no evaluation should start unless primary USERS have been identified, and they have determined the expected USES.
- UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method, or theory. It is a guiding framework, as opposed to a methodology.
- UFE follows a set of well-defined steps that ensure rigor and relevance.
- Users take ownership over the evaluation purposes, the selection of methods, the analysis and the utilization of findings.
- In UFE, the evaluation professional plays the role of a facilitator, not of external judge.

### Main points about Gender

- Gender<sup>5</sup> refers to the socially constructed roles and relationships between men and women. Gender intersects with various social cleavages such as race, class, sexuality, caste and religion and shapes the exercise of power in different contexts (Hay, 2012). The central concept of a gender lens is that power relations must be changed (in favour of the marginalized) to attain social justice.
- Gender equality, though contextual, is critical to ensure an inclusive society that benefits all peoples. It refers to the equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards.

### Background

“Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention to how people might apply evaluation findings and experiences. In designing a utilization-focused evaluation attention is constantly placed on the intended use by intended users. UFE can include a wide variety of evaluation methods within an overall participatory paradigm.

Decision making, in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation, is an important part of the process. As important is the fact that intended users will likely utilize an evaluation in which they have ownership. UFE belongs to a push in the evaluation field for evaluations that get utilized. As simple as this notion may sound, its application is mired in organizational and management challenges.

Many evaluations (and program designs) are gender neutral and only assess the interventions. They assume that the interventions impact men and women equally, in spite of structural gender and social inequities. Many such evaluations do not question the *inherent* structural inequities that exist, missing an opportunity to question gender roles and relationships - which is critical if we wish to promote gender equality. Some evaluations do disaggregate data by gender but this is *not enough*, as it should also be disaggregated by the intersectionalities that create complex power dynamics. Further, projects may not be ‘gender neutral’ and specifically target women and may be “gender instrumental” such as educating women about their children’s health or “gender responsive” e.g. self-help groups for women to raise their

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<sup>5</sup> Gender may be defined beyond binaries, to include LGBTQI. In this summary note, the binary examples of men and women are illustrative.

economic status. However, evaluating such projects in terms of their effectiveness, is *not enough* if we wish to engender evaluations. To be gender transformative, we would need to ask, what is the role of men, did additional income lead to further exploitation of women's earnings and so on.

Only if we use a *gender transformative (also called a feminist)* lens – which addresses the differential and complex power relationships between men and women, can we truly evaluate gender equality.

An evaluator using UFE has an added responsibility to enable users to question the presence of implicit and explicit gender differences and apply this understanding while defining the USES of the evaluation.

### **Gender transformative principles that guide an evaluation design**

- Have a central focus on inequities
- Recognize that inequities (inequalities?) are structural
- Recognizes that evaluation is political
- Recognizes and values different ways of knowing
- Proposes to add value to those who are marginalized and to those implementing programs (Hay, 2012; Podems, 2010)

### **Challenges in UFE**

In UFE, the definition of primary users is open to different stakeholders: they may be the funders of a project, or its implementers or even its beneficiaries. A gender lens will remind the evaluator to engage men, women and excluded groups to ensure their unique perspectives and situations as included in the evaluation design. The definition of users can be delicate as it is affected by power relationships. It calls for a review of **readiness** at the very start of the process – not just to apply the method, but to do so with attention to possible gender inequalities.

Challenges to use a UFE approach would include:

For Key questions: Do the KEQ address gender and structural inequities?

For User: Is the User open to challenging power asymmetries for gender transformation? Understands the intersectionality of gender with other inequities (class, age, religion and so on)?

For Uses: Is use available to and benefits the marginalized?

While UFE is summarized into a series of steps, the process itself is not linear (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013). The first five steps are interrelated: assessing program readiness; assessing evaluators' readiness; identifying primary intended users' identification of primary intended uses; and situational analysis. This process may require several iterations of one or more steps and it needs to be anticipated and planned for, given that changes in one step will impact others.

Focusing the evaluation takes place through the definition of **key evaluation questions**; that in turn guide the design of the evaluation.

‘Simulation’ is about test-driving plausible data sets to double check that they respond to the questions. This step ensures course correction is possible, especially when it appears that some questions may not still be as strategic as they first appeared.

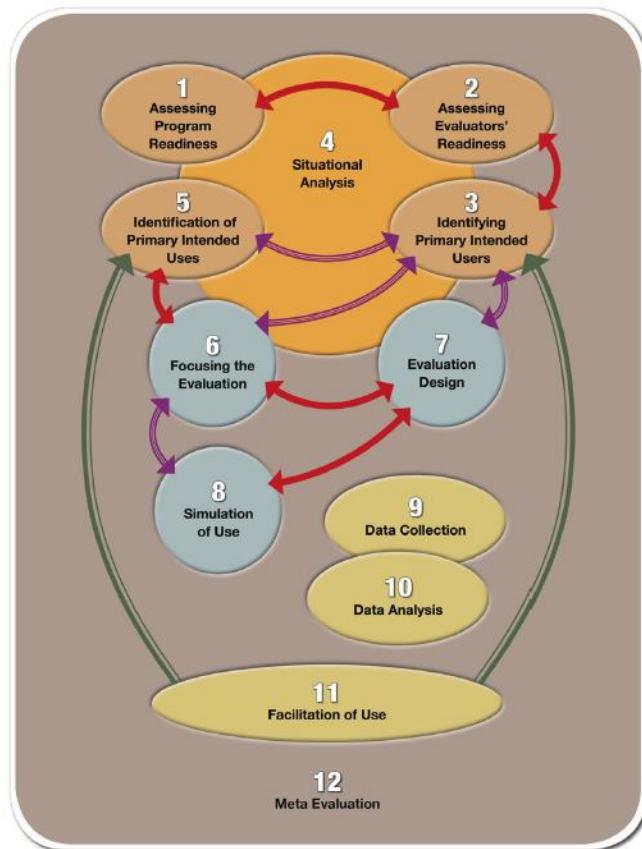
A unique aspect of UFE is Step 11: facilitation of use, that ensures the findings and evaluation processes are fed back to the users. The closing step 12 captures the experience through a meta-evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

### So, how does one use a gender lens in the various UFE steps?

Ideally, a gender analysis should be included in the situational analysis, in the formulation of key questions (and by doing so, automatically review the ToC and its gendered assumptions), in choosing data collection methods and in doing a gendered analysis. Often, gender is an add-on in evaluations (and therefore quite superficial) but in UFE it can be a process / learning oriented evaluation approach that will provides an opportunity for weaving gender through all the UFE steps.

### An example of a gender transformative evaluation

The project: “Using a Mobile Application and Mapping Platform to Increase Accountability in the Delivery of Maternal Health Services for Tea Garden Workers in Assam”. The evaluator went beyond the non-judgmental role of a UFE mentor to help the implementing organization discover the gaps and assumptions. During the situational analysis, a gender lens indicated the social and cultural exclusion of the tea garden workers. They were mostly women, who belonged to marginalized tribes imported by the British from neighbouring states in pre-Independence India to work on the labour-intensive tea gardens. Isolated and disempowered, the women were not able to claim their maternal rights. The context analysis enabled a review of the theory of change. The SMS platform to report violations was considered to be gender neutral and training the women to report on maternal health violations was gender specific (related to their reproductive roles). However, in spite of the best efforts to train the women in the technology, the reporting of maternal health violations was low. The feminist lens used in the UFE approach unearthed the disempowerment of women, led to a revision of the key evaluation questions, data collection methodology and analysis. The findings were used to revamp the training program to include gender empowerment sessions rather than learning the use of technology. Later, the reporting role of women morphed to include para-legal training to litigate for their rights, Zaveri (2018).



<sup>6</sup> In the latest book on UFE by Michael Quinn Patton, five additional steps have been added; see the Recommended readings and websites.

## Analysis

UFE has been test-driven through several evaluation capacity development research projects funded by the International Development Research Centre (Canada) (see reference list). Regional evaluation mentors were trained through practice. They were supported throughout the process by the two project leads; who coached them and provided trouble shooting support. They facilitated all steps of the UFE process with research projects around the world.

This approach to capacity development is effective because partners receive the mentoring *at their own pace* and *according to their schedule*. It contrasts with the more conventional training workshop where a great deal of material is condensed into a few days with little opportunity to contextualize it, let alone absorb it. As shown in the example, using a gender transformative lens in UFE brought added value to achieve gender equality, anchored in values of equity and human rights.

## Conclusions

UFE is learned through practice. Not only do evaluators quickly appreciate its potential; the primary intended users emerge with **evaluative thinking**. Some elements for success worth repeating include:

1. Mentors with a strong background in evaluation need to be selected, they need not be familiar with UFE. What is key is that they have outstanding facilitation and communication skills, as well as a willingness to learn. They can be partnered with project evaluators (on staff or contractors) who are invited to do the same: to test-drive UFE. A capacity development objective creates a safe environment for experimentation.
2. The evaluation mentors themselves need to learn to bring in a gender lens into the UFE process. This requires a gender-inclusive capacity or teamwork, and an ongoing awareness of how different evaluation USERS are situated in each context, and how their own evaluation USES and questions need to address gender inequalities.
3. Work with a project funder interested in experimenting with this approach to capacity development in evaluation. The IDRC team allowed the mentors and the project partners the freedom to become users and define uses.
4. When first learning the process, evaluators and mentors can follow the UFE checklist systematically as a guide. While one quickly realizes that it is not linear and calls for more iterations, it is useful to tackle each task in order. An analogy would be how one learns to drive a standard shift car: you begin with the first gear and move on to the second and so forth. Only later, with experience, you realize that when starting on a downhill road you can begin in second just as well; you also begin to learn to use gears to slow down, but this action comes from experience.

## Recommendations

Recommendations for other projects and funders of projects interested in introducing UFE to a project:

- Confirm a commitment by funders and major stakeholders to explore the approach (in our case Utilization-focused Evaluation) through an action-research process.
- Apply gender principles when helping users define evaluation uses and evaluation questions, as well as data analysis and recommendations.
- Clarify expectations early on with regards to the role of UFE relative to other possible evaluation and accountability needs. Is UFE a replacement or a complement to other evaluation needs?

- Work as a team, with mentors who are able to trouble-shoot, and with support from other members who can backstop as questions arise.
- Create an environment of trust where learning from mistakes is embraced.
- Acknowledge that the process takes time, and that the ‘aha’ moments will come once the approach is being implemented.
- Make use of the training modules and feel free to adapt them to each circumstance.
- Ensure that there are funds and dedicated time to complete all the steps of UFE, especially the last one that calls for a reflection on the overall implementation of the approach; this is the point at which much learning happens.
- Encourage evaluation mentors and users to regularly check that a gender lens has been applied – in programs, policy and organizational structures and guidelines.
- Carry out a mid-term self-reflection to course-correct and also to celebrate progress.

### **Recommended readings**

Hay, K. 2012. ‘Engendering Policies and Programmes through Feminist Evaluation: Opportunities and Insights’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 19:2, 321-340

Patton, M.Q. 2012. *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage.

Patton, M.Q. 2008. *Utilization-focused evaluation, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Sage.

Podems, D. 2010. ‘Feminist evaluation and gender approaches. There is a difference?’ *Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation*, 6(14), 1-12

Ramírez, R. & Brodhead, D. 2013. *Utilization-focused evaluation: A primer for evaluators*. Southbound: Penang.

Zaveri, Sonal (2018) "Using a Feminist Lens for Utilization Focused Evaluations: Lessons Learned" in Ratna M. Sudarshan and Rajib Nandi eds. "Voices and Values: The Politics of Feminist Evaluation", Zubaan: New Delhi  
ISBN 978 81 85932 39 7

### **Recommended websites**

Designing evaluation and communication for impact

<http://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net>

The Better Evaluation website includes a section on UFE:

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/utilization.Focused\\_evaluation](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/utilization.Focused_evaluation)

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