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The value of participatory action research for managing a collaborative ICT impact assessment project in Nepal

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Introduction

This paper outlines our use of participatory action research (PAR), meta-evaluation, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and online collaboration tools to collaboratively plan, manage and evaluate the research project: *Assessing Communication for Social Change: A New Agenda in Impact Assessment* (ACSC). The main aim of this project is to develop, test and rigorously evaluate a participatory approach to assessing the impacts of communication for social change and development programs conducted by our project partner Equal Access in Nepal. This project is being undertaken by a research team from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the University of Adelaide from 2007-2010 in collaboration with Equal Access - International, a non government organisation (NGO) based in San Francisco, and Equal Access – Nepal, based in Kathmandu.

We begin by outlining the rationale for and background to the project, including our adaptation of ethnographic action research in the project, the objectives of the project, the aim of Equal Access's work, and the community radio projects which are the focus of the project. We then provide an overview of the methodologies and methods we are using in the ACSC project, our current and planned activities, and our use of ICTs and innovative new media tools. Next we describe our initial project planning, management and meta-evaluation activities. These include initial fieldwork and planning workshops in Nepal, and the use of email, teleconferencing and web-based collaboration tools. We then outline the initial findings from our ongoing meta-evaluation of the project and critically reflect on our use of online collaboration tools to facilitate ongoing dialogue, decision-making, planning and information-sharing between the various groups involved in the project.

A new approach to impact assessment

Community media initiatives such as community radio programs are playing a key role in positive social change in developing countries around the world (Girard, 2003; Dagron, 2001). However, many ICT for development projects have failed due to a lack of effective participation and commitment from key stakeholders, the use of strategies that do not take the local culture, language and context into account, assumptions that poor people lack 'knowledge', and other factors (Parks, 2005: 4). In addition, insufficient attention has been paid to the ongoing and embedded evaluation of the impacts of new ICT initiatives (Feek, 2003; Tacchi, 2006, 2007).

Communication initiatives in important fields such as HIV prevention often have over-ambitious goals and use unrealistic indicators of behaviour change that demonstrate a lack of understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, and the gendered power relations, and other factors that inhibit decision-making and social change (Skuse & Power, 2005). In addition, funding agencies often require traditional forms of evaluation that use mainly quantitative indicators, focus inappropriately on individual behaviour change, and do not take the wider context and local communication processes sufficiently into account.

This situation has led to calls for more holistic and participatory evaluation methodologies and more subtle indicators of change that focus more on community participation, dialogue and alliances and broader social change, and less on individual behaviour change (Gray-Felder & Deane, 1999; Skuse, 2004). This suggests that a new approach to impact assessment in this field and the development of new indicators of change are required that involve the active participation of relevant stakeholders and community members in designing and conducting local ICT initiatives, defining more appropriate and realistic evaluation indicators, and in assessing their impact. Designing and implementing such an approach is one of the key aims of the ACSC project.

As well as addressing the need for locally-defined indicators of social change, the project also responds to calls for greater use of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) in development projects (DFID, 2005; Parks, 2005). The PM&E process can be likened to the action research cycle. Indeed Byrne *et al.* (2005: 5) describe this process as a 'spiral of key learning moments' that involves continuous reflection on 'what is being monitored and evaluated, how, by whom, where the process is leading, and the lessons learned'. However, project staff and others involved in communication for social change initiatives often experience many

challenges with conducting PM&E and effectively assessing the impacts of these initiatives. They often have limited skills and experience with monitoring and evaluation methods, few opportunities for effective capacity building, and face problems with effectively building PM&E into their everyday program development and production work. The ACSC project aims to address these issues.

Building on the use of ethnographic action research

The ACSC project builds on several major ICT projects undertaken in South and South East Asia, including Nepal and India, which have used ethnographic action research (EAR). EAR was originally designed for the monitoring and evaluation of community multimedia centres in South Asia (Slater, Tacchi & Lewis, 2002; Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003). Taking a participatory and ethnographic approach, EAR is a valuable methodology for building the capacity of media initiatives to monitor and evaluate and then improve practices as part of their ongoing development. Since it was first developed in 2002, EAR has undergone continuous refinement via projects conducted in several South and South East Asian countries. The ACSC project is adapting this methodology for use in project management, participatory indicator development, and impact assessments of community radio initiatives.

EAR is similar to participatory action research with three key distinctions. Firstly it integrates an ethnographic approach which, in this context, relates mostly to its embedded and ongoing nature. Secondly, it involves focusing on the wider context of information and communication flows and channels, using the concept of 'communicative ecology'. Finally, the media itself are used as a tool for action research, for exploring issues in a community, as well as for managing and collecting data, and facilitating online networks of EAR researchers. In the ACSC project EAR research is being conducted by the media initiative teams, within the initiatives themselves over a period of four years.

Overview of the *Assessing Communication for Social Change* project

The ACSC project will develop, implement and rigorously evaluate a participatory approach to assessing the impacts of communication for development programs. A key outcome of the project will be a practical, user-friendly toolkit on the impact assessment methodology for use by Equal Access project staff and community organisations and groups who participate in Equal Access projects in Nepal. This will be based on the existing EAR Handbook (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003) and CD-ROM (Tacchi *et al.*, 2007).

Other aims of the project are:

- To critically assess the 'new agenda' in impact assessments of communication and development initiatives and the potential contribution of ethnographic action research.
- To develop EAR into a more sophisticated yet functional project development methodology that addresses the requirements for impact assessments of communication for development initiatives, including the blend of qualitative and quantitative assessment.
- To develop more appropriate, locally-defined indicators of social change in the context of development communication for use by development and media organisations, government and donors.
- To increase the evaluation skills and capacities of local staff and community members in observing, recording, analysing and reporting on the impacts of two community radio initiatives at the community level.

The project is being conducted in close collaboration with our project partner Equal Access. Equal Access is an international organisation that works to create positive change in the developing world by providing 'critically needed information and education through locally produced and targeted content, the use of appropriate and cost-effective technology and effective partnerships and community engagement' (Equal Access, 2007). To achieve these goals it creates and distributes innovative media, particularly radio programming, using a collaborative methodology that works from the ground up to meet community needs. This involves an interaction between teams in the areas of content production, community outreach, and monitoring and evaluation. The ACSC project builds on previous and current research involving Equal Access in Nepal in which collaborative relationships have been developed.

Staff of Equal Access Nepal research, write, and produce development content for radio. This content is transmitted via existing radio networks, digital satellite technology, and other technologies to reach areas with poor telecommunications, little electricity, and high rates of illiteracy. The Australian research team will work closely with Equal Access staff, local stakeholders and community participants to assess the impacts of two popular community radio programs: Saathi Sanga Manka Khura (SSMK) (Chatting with my best friend) and Naya Nepal (New Nepal). These programs have spawned a vast network of discussion groups (often called

Listener Clubs), and, as of June 2007, there were over 1000 self formed SSMK listener clubs in five development regions of Nepal, most of which involve young rural people. These groups meet regularly to discuss topics dealt with by the SSMK and Naya Nepal radio programs, such as HIV prevention, life skills, peace and reconciliation, human rights, discrimination against women and certain castes, relationships with family and friends, and other social and political problems and issues. Many of these groups are very active at the community level, and regularly organise and engage in awareness raising activities such as street theatre, interaction meetings, clean-up campaigns, letter writing and cascading trainings, thus facilitating positive social change and empowerment at the grass roots level. However, while Equal Access collects data that demonstrates the positive effects of these programs, a rigorous assessment of their intermediate and long-term impacts that meets both their internal program needs, and those of donors, has not yet been conducted.

Project methodologies and methods

Participatory action research is being used in the project as the overarching research management process. The aim of using PAR is to ensure that the research closely matches the plans, objectives and needs of the people and organisations involved, and addresses the goals of community and stakeholder participation, inclusion and empowerment. While there is no single agreed definition of PAR, its key principles include: participation, action and reflection, the empowerment and emancipation of individuals and groups and the improvement of their situations, changing the culture of groups and organisations, the production of various forms of knowledge, and engaging in ‘the politics of research action’ (McTaggart, 1991: 177). PAR seeks the participation of all stakeholders in the whole research process, adopts a critical perspective, legitimises the knowledge of local community members and the disadvantaged, and aims to identify the needs and priorities of people in a local community or organisation (de Koning & Martin, 1996; McTaggart, 1991). PAR researchers also make an authentic commitment to ‘genuine collaboration’ and ‘democratic values’ (Reason, 1994: 328), and aim to transform both theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000: 598).

The main features of action research that recommend it as methodology for ICT projects include: its grounding in actual processes of change; the primacy it gives to the lived experiences of participants; its flexible, open and eclectic process of inquiry; and its cyclical, experimental character (Hearn *et al.*, forthcoming). Action research ‘focuses on simultaneous action and research in a participative manner’ (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001: 7) and involves constant cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Findings and theory building are balanced by the phase of planned action, which benefits participants by giving them a solution to their problem, or at least by making a step towards a solution (Hearn *et al.*, forthcoming).

However, we recognise that the use of PAR and participatory forms of evaluation and impact assessment presents several challenges and issues. They include: ensuring stakeholder representativeness and the participation of the less empowered, the potentially conflicting agendas and perspectives of those involved, and the significant time, energy and resources that are required to build research capacity, plan and conduct projects, and develop relationships based on trust and open communication (Lennie, 2006: 29-30). In ICT projects, other issues and challenges include effectively building capacities in the numerous skills that are required in ICT-based research and evaluation, equitable community access to ICTs, and designing and using technologies that meet the needs, interests and goals of all participants (Hearn *et al.*, forthcoming).

The use of PAR and the more specific ICT-oriented EAR methodology aims to ensure that the ACSC project is actively planned and conducted in close collaboration with Equal Access and local participants and stakeholders. Action-based methods such as workshops and participatory techniques will be used to generate new knowledge about the impacts of communication for development initiatives and the most appropriate and effective methods and indicators for assessing these impacts. A rigorous meta-evaluation of the various processes, activities and outcomes of the project is also being undertaken over the life of the project to increase the effectiveness of these processes and the impact assessment methodology being developed and tested. In keeping with the overarching research framework, this involves the use of a participatory evaluation methodology, multiple methods such as participant observation, feedback questionnaires, fieldwork diaries, online discussions, individual interviews, and annual critical reflection workshops, and triangulation of this data to ensure rigour. The critical reflection workshops will include an ongoing review of the indicators of social change identified in the project. Our use of participatory evaluation is congruent with the project’s view of evaluation as an ongoing action learning, program improvement and capacity building process.

Other previous, current and planned project activities include:

- A search for and review of relevant literature on participatory impact assessment and indicator development, and PM&E methodologies and methods used in development projects.
- Collaborative development of definitions of key concepts used in the project.
- Workshops, meetings, teleconferences and online discussions to plan initial project activities.

- Regular fieldwork trips to the communities involved in the project.
- Documenting detailed information about Equal Access programs and existing M&E activities.
- Collaborative development of the impact assessment methodology and indicators of change.
- Regular training workshops, building on EAR training already conducted in Nepal. The first of these workshops will be conducted in Nepal from late September – early October 2007.
- Providing ongoing support, information and resources to participants.

Use of new media tools in the project

For earlier research projects using the EAR methodology, and spanning several sites of investigation as well as locations of research teams, we used a range of online and offline mechanisms and tools for communication, planning and collaboration (Foth & Tacchi, 2004; Hearn *et al.* forthcoming). Those projects variously used a combination of face to face workshops and field visits, email, online chat and messenger tools along with a website for storing and discussing research data and for the location of streamed or focussed discussions. For ACSC, we have attempted to learn from these previous experiences and have developed a project website which we describe later in this paper. This website is a key component of our communication strategy which also involves email, teleconferences, field visits, and workshops.

The basic rationale for using such a mixture of communication tools can be explained by two main factors: 1. the geographical spread of the participants across Nepal, in two Australian cities and in the USA; and, 2. the need for a central location for data storage and analysis, for project planning and development discussions, and for access to information and resources. This is especially relevant in the context of the meta-evaluation of ACSC – that is, we are not simply designing and applying a new approach to the evaluation of communication for social change initiatives, we are at the same time evaluating the processes we are using to both develop and implement it.

Initial project planning, management and meta-evaluation activities

Since January 2007, we have undertaken several project planning and management and meta-evaluation activities, which are briefly outlined below.

Planning the first fieldwork trip and workshops in Nepal

An initial teleconference involving members of the Australian research team and the Director of Programs in Equal Access, San Francisco was held in January 2007 to begin planning the first fieldwork trip and workshops which were conducted in Nepal in early April 2007. The Director of Programs proposed holding two days of project planning meetings to develop a four year workplan, outputs, field research and training plans, and to discuss the basis for the research and its goals. A half-day input workshop with relevant Equal Access staff, most of whom had previously taken part in EAR training, was also proposed to enable them to provide input into the project and give critical feedback on their current use of EAR. Finally, a full day workshop was proposed with key local stakeholders to formally launch the project and allow their input into the project. It was proposed that a larger number of staff would attend the initial half-day input workshop and a smaller number of relevant staff, including the Country Director for Equal Access Nepal, program managers, and outreach support workers, would attend the planning workshops. This basic program was agreed to by others involved in the project. More detailed planning and consultation related to the initial field visit and workshops was then undertaken via email over several weeks. Final planning for the workshops was conducted face to face during the fieldwork visit.

The workshop designs took into account feedback from an EAR workshop with Equal Access staff in Nepal in 2006. The aim was to make the workshops as interactive as possible and to begin developing trust and good working relationships among everyone involved in the project. The proposed agendas for the input and planning workshops were seen as flexible and able to be altered, based on negotiations with participants.

Pre-workshop questionnaires

A pre-workshop questionnaire was designed with input from Equal Access staff and team members. This was distributed by email two weeks before the first workshop in April to fourteen staff who would be taking part in the workshops. Some of the questions were based on significant issues that emerged in previous projects involving the use of EAR in Nepal, such as managing time for radio production work and M&E work. These questionnaires aimed to obtain feedback and some baseline information from the forthcoming workshop participants on a range of topics, including:

- What they hoped to gain from participation in the workshop
- Their understanding of their main role or involvement in project
- What challenges or issues they had experienced with devoting sufficient time to M&E projects
- Their level of experience with email, internet, PM&E and EAR
- Their knowledge of various M&E methods
- The M&E methods they use most often and those they would like more skills in
- How well they thought EAR was being used in development communication projects in Nepal.

Fieldwork trip to Makwanpur district, Nepal

Just prior to the initial workshops, four members of the Australian research team (2 women and 2 men) and five Equal Access staff members (3 women and 2 men) participated in a two-day fieldwork visit to the Makwanpur district in Nepal. The Director of Programs in Equal Access saw the purpose of this field trip as being to allow the Australian research team 'to see all our program components, warts and all and really understand our program before they begin planning and research implementation'. This field visit included meetings in a rural town and two small villages with members of the SSMK District Coordination Committee, an SSMK listener club, a Naya Nepal listener club, and two female community reporters. The SSMK groups involved young women and men, while the Naya Nepal group were all young women. The research team also attended part of an interesting 'Interaction Program' organised by a SSMK listener club. This meeting aimed to begin the process of facilitating peace and reconciliation between local community members groups and Maoists who had taken part in the eleven year conflict in Nepal, which ended in May 2006. In addition, the team visited Hetauda FM, a new radio station which broadcasts several Equal Access programs and collects feedback from listeners.

Detailed notes on each meeting were taken by the research team and Equal Access staff. The first author also kept a fieldwork diary which included observations about the local people, culture and context, and the various groups we met with.

Input and planning workshops

A half-day workshop with fifteen Equal Access staff (8 women and 7 men) was held to inform them about the project, critically review the use of EAR, identify how the use of EAR and the EAR toolkit could be improved, and to identify strategies to more effectively build M&E into participants' everyday work. The workshop began with a relationship-building exercise, and included presentations by the research team, and small group work to review EAR.

Two days of planning workshops were also held with nine Equal Access staff, including the Director of Programs based in San Francisco. They involved the following activities:

- Discussing Equal Access's expectations for the project.
- Identifying the objectives of the SSMK and Naya Nepal programs from the perspective of the staff members who work on these programs.
- Discussing the development of the impact assessment methodology and indicators of change, and reviewing existing indicators used by Equal Access in Nepal.
- Developing a detailed workplan for the project for 2007 and planning specific activities such as training, identification of relevant tools, and the formation of a Research Management Group.
- Clarifying each person's role in the project, how much time they would commit to it, and who would take responsibility for particular activities.
- Developing a communication plan and discussing collaboration and communication issues.

Detailed notes on the input and planning workshops and the project launch and stakeholders' workshops were taken and reports on the workshops later disseminated to all participants.

Project launch and stakeholder workshops

After the first day of input and planning workshops, a half day project launch workshop was held with twenty-one local stakeholders (17 men and 6 women) and nine Equal Access staff. Nearly half of the stakeholders were from NGOs, just over 20% were from aid agencies, while the remainder worked in media or research organisations or for the Nepalese government. The majority of the stakeholders (56.5%) were Directors, Deputy Directors or Managers, while 26% worked as Project Coordinators, Program Development Officer or Team Leader. One was an Under Secretary in the Ministry of Information /Communication, one was a UNESCO consultant, one was a program assistant, and one was a journalist.

A key aim of this workshop was to develop an understanding about and support for the project, and to encourage the stakeholders to collaborate in the project. This workshop included formal presentations about the project, the challenges of evaluating communication for development projects, and the use of EAR in Nepal; screening of short videos and a digital story about the SSMK and Naya Nepal programs; and a session where stakeholders shared their M&E experiences and models.

After lunch, a smaller, more interactive workshop was held with nine stakeholders and five Equal Access staff. This workshop identified areas in which evaluation and impact assessment on communication for development is lacking, relevant M&E activities in Nepal, and opportunities and strategies for involvement in the ACSC project. A 'World Cafe' style process was used which involved small groups of participants discussing one key question then some members of the group moving to another table to discuss other key questions. The main points from each group were presented to the whole group on butcher paper after each question was discussed.

Process used to evaluate the workshops

Two feedback questionnaires on the workshops were collaboratively developed. It was originally intended that they would be distributed after the first input workshop and the final planning workshop. However, for various reasons, feedback on these workshops from both Equal Access staff and the research team was obtained via a single questionnaire distributed by email four days after the final workshop.

We did not originally plan to collect formal written feedback on the project launch and stakeholders workshop from stakeholders. However, we later decided that this would be useful, particularly for obtaining feedback about the stakeholders' level of interest in collaborating on the project and continuing the discussions at the workshops, and what form these discussions should take. Following consultations on the design of the questionnaire, it was eventually distributed by email three weeks after the workshop, along with a report on the workshop discussions. Some additional feedback and clarification of responses to both questionnaires was obtained by email. A detailed report on the evaluation was sent to the Research Management Group and summary reports were disseminated to all participants.

Use of ICTs in project management and planning

The ACSC website includes a forum for discussions on topics relevant to the management and planning of the project, wiki spaces for collaboratively authored documents, resource spaces for relevant literature and links to other projects, and a blog feature for posting of news on the front page. Building up to the data collection phase of ACSC we are preparing templates for the uploading of various forms of data, through a blog feature. This data will be in the form of interview notes, group discussion notes, audio diaries, written diaries and so forth (including text, audio and visual data). Included in the uploading process will be key words and terms (some predetermined, some open) which will help to make the data more easily searchable, and will assist us in our coding and analysis work. We are also working to build a chat facility into the site to both allow for 'live' discussions for planning, management and analysis, and archiving of those 'live' discussions so that they can be captured and included in our meta-evaluation and critical reflection processes. As we move into the phase where data is uploaded, the forum and wiki functions will be used to discuss the data and its analysis. The three key purposes of the website are:

- To keep data in one central location that is accessible and searchable by all.
- To enable dialogue among members of the research team in Australia and Equal Access staff in Nepal and San Francisco.
- To enable access to information and resources such as a bibliography of relevant literature.

These in turn are designed to help us both in our project planning and management, in the analysis of data, and in our meta-evaluation of the ACSC project itself.

The website alone is insufficient for project planning and management, and should be seen as one key part in the larger communication strategy. It is used alongside email, teleconferences, field visits and workshops. Through a combination of these various communication mechanisms, the project is managed and information is shared and stored.

Process used to gather feedback on the website

The website is in its early development and feedback is being collected in a range of ways. A forum has been created specifically for feedback on the website and requests for additional functionality. The website developer has met with members of the project team both in Australia and in Nepal to discuss and demonstrate

various features and receive feedback on how the website is working and what additional functionality it might require. We are encouraging feedback by placing this on the agenda of teleconference meetings involving Equal Access staff. In the upcoming workshop in September/October in Nepal, the website will be further explored with users, and detailed feedback received. Changes and improvements to the website are ongoing, and will be made throughout the project. We anticipate that within two years there will be publicly accessible areas of the website for involving stakeholders and others interested in this project, and for disseminating findings, reports and other publications.

Some outcomes from the initial project activities and the meta-evaluation

Outcomes of the fieldwork trip

The fieldwork trip to the Makwanpur district was extremely useful as it enabled the research team to meet local community members and gain some first-hand insights into the local context of the project, and the current cultural, social, political and economic issues in Nepal, which is one of the poorest countries in the world. We gained a better understanding of the roles and activities of various groups and organisations involved in Equal Access's projects, particularly the listener groups, community reporters and the radio stations. We also obtained valuable information about how the listener clubs emerged, how they are organised, the information and training club members receive, the key issues they discuss, the activities they engage in, and the often empowering effects of participation in these activities.

Our meeting with the community reporters highlighted their potentially key role in gathering information about the social change indicators and impacts of the community radio programs, given their skills in interviewing, observation, gathering formal and informal feedback from the community, and writing reports. We could also see that listener club members could collect very useful data on impacts from the community, following appropriate training. Most of the young people we met with were enthusiastic, confident and eager to further build their capacity to undertake effective action on key issues such as HIV, trafficking in women, democratic change, and peace and reconciliation. Many of them appeared to be quite committed to and passionate about the issues they were engaged with.

Findings from the pre-workshop questionnaire

Thirteen pre-workshop questionnaires were returned from Equal Access staff (7 women and 6 men). Not surprisingly, time for undertaking both M&E and program production was a key issue for eight respondents, while two nominated not seeing M&E as integral to communication for social change programs as a challenge. All respondents had access to a computer, internet, phone and fax. The majority (11 respondents) considered that they had a high level of experience with using email and the internet. Most (8 respondents) indicated that they had a moderate level of experience with participatory M&E. Two assessed their level of experience as high, while three assessed their experience as very low to low. Respondents also had diverse levels of experience with EAR, ranging from high (1 respondent) to very low (4 respondents), with most (8 respondents) assessing their experience as moderate or low.

The majority had a working knowledge of a wide range of M&E methods, including participatory techniques, ethnography, action research, interviewing, facilitating community meetings and surveys. However, they were less experienced in coding and analysis and writing research and evaluation reports. Respondents were using a wide range of M&E methods, with surveys, focus group discussions and interviews being the most commonly used methods. However, they wanted more skills in a wide range of M&E methods, including group discussion, facilitation, interviewing, and coding, analysis and interpretation of data.

Respondents provided a mixed assessment of how well EAR was being used in communication for development projects in Nepal. Of the nine respondents who gave an assessment, just over half (5) said that EAR was being used 'not at all well', while two said 'reasonably well'. However, the two respondents who used EAR most frequently thought that it was being used 'very well'.

A summary of these results was presented at the initial input workshop.

Feedback on EAR and strategies for building M&E into activities

Valuable feedback was received from the input workshop participants on things that were working well with using EAR such as 'the increased capacity of researchers to document information' using innovative methods such as photo essays and writing magazine features, and to write field diaries and reports. However, we also heard about several problems with using EAR such as the limited time Outreach Workers have to visit field sites and the significant time involved in 'research, documentation and interpretation and information collation,

especially if you're not a dedicated EAR researcher'. Language and literacy problems due to some rural communities not understanding Nepali were also identified, as well as a lack of coordination among field researchers and lack of feedback from head office.

Participants suggested that more effective training in EAR for regional staff was required, as well as capacity building of youth volunteers. They thought that if these volunteers were trained as EAR researchers this would encourage their participation. They also suggested engaging more community reporters to collect feedback. Strategies identified for more effectively building M&E into participants everyday communication for development activities included:

- Develop a research culture within the organisation
- Develop mechanisms and space for regular sharing of information
- Develop stronger links with local line agencies at the district level
- Improve coordination between Equal Access and external organisations
- Link the M&E department and content department - M&E should not be seen as only a function of the M&E department, but also of the outreach department
- Make EAR more streamlined and easier to use, particularly around the time-consuming nature of writing up fieldwork notes – M&E staff should assist with this. EAR also needs to be integrated more with the work of the content team.
- Enhance outreach support.

Findings from the evaluation of the input and planning workshops

Completed questionnaires were received from fourteen Equal Access staff and three research team members, making the response rate 85%.

Most respondents thought the input and planning workshops were useful and met their expectations well. They enabled them to meet and get to know others involved in the project and to better understand the project and everyone's role in it. The majority thought the processes used in the workshops were either quite or very effective, including for building trust and good relationships. Most also thought they had enough time and opportunity for discussion and input. Several commented that the small group work and the interactive sessions worked particularly well. The workshops were also effective in increasing participants' understanding of PM&E.

However, the respondents also identified some things that did not work very well. One Equal Access manager thought that some staff who did not take part in all the workshops 'did not feel that included'. Similarly, two of the research team thought the facilitators should have made more effort to ensure that all staff 'voiced their concerns or opinions'. A few EA staff also thought that some of the planning sessions were too long, 'too heavy' and 'monotonous' or that more time could have been spent increasing understanding of EAR for those without this knowledge, and hearing their views about EAR. Other suggested improvements to the workshops included: holding more interactive sessions, allowing more time for discussion, and providing some pre-reading materials.

Findings from the evaluation of the stakeholder workshops

Despite an intensive follow up, the response rate for the stakeholder questionnaire was fairly low at 43%. This was partly due to some stakeholders being in the field or on business and not having internet access. A short list of questions about collaborating on the project and engaging in further activities was later sent by email and five replies were received, making the response rate for these questions 65%.

The majority of the ten stakeholders who responded thought the workshops were very useful, that the processes used were effective, and that the group work and information sharing worked well. Most reported that they had gained useful information about the M&E practices of other organisations, the challenges of doing M&E in development communication projects, or ideas about social change. Similar feedback was given by Equal Access staff and the research team, who also thought the workshop processes were effective in generating support for the project from stakeholders. However, there were some things that did not work so well. They included the lack of M&E staff from stakeholder organisations to share their views, and only a small number of stakeholders being able to speak about their experiences in the time available at the project launch workshop. Suggested improvements to these workshops included:

- Ensuring more M&E staff take part.
- Allowing more time to share experiences and for small group work.

- Distributing success stories before the workshop.
- Presenting examples of and learnings from the implementation of EAR in other countries.

A high level of interest in collaborating in the project was expressed by representatives of various stakeholder organisations. All but two also wanted to continue the discussions held at the workshops on a regular basis. Most preferred to do this through informal gatherings held every quarter. A third were also interested in taking part in an email discussion list set up by the project. Equal Access is currently planning further activities with interested stakeholders and is establishing a small stakeholders group through ongoing consultations with interested organisations. This will lead to the informal gatherings held every quarter mentioned above.

Critical reflections on the use of ICTs and new media tools

Our early reflections on the use of the project website tell us that while it takes some time to encourage people to use the website rather than email or other forms of communication, there are clear benefits from doing so and thus this early effort is justified. For example, the planning for the first workshop and field visit in Nepal that included participants from San Francisco, Australia and Nepal was conducted by email, before the website was established. A result was that everyone tended to get copied into every email, covering all aspects of the planning from logistics to workshop programs. Participants reported that either they felt obliged to read all emails, some of which were not relevant to them, or read only some which meant they risked missing emails that might have been relevant to them. Planning for the September-October workshop and field visit has been undertaken largely through the website, allowing a range of discussions to happen concurrently, and inviting people to select discussions that are of relevance to them, whilst having all information and discussions available should they require. While all discussions and aspects of planning are therefore available to everyone at any time, critical reflection and feedback has identified that we need to work out better ways to access discussions on the website. This requires making them more easily identifiable and searchable. We also need to find better ways of presenting discussion threads. This can partly be addressed through training in the use of the website, and partly through further web development and the addition of features.

Conclusion

The outcomes of numerous PAR projects, including previous projects involving the authors, demonstrate that it is a particularly valuable methodology for developing, researching, evaluating, and managing ICT projects and building a research and evaluation culture within organisations (Lennie, 2005; Hearn *et al.*, forthcoming). As a democratic and participatory approach that focuses on practical problem solving, Hearn *et al.* (forthcoming) argue that action research is especially appropriate to new media initiatives that ‘involve constant innovation and change, have unpredictable outcomes, and require flexibility, creativity, and an inclusive, user-centred approach’. Used effectively, PAR can also facilitate inclusion, capacity building and various forms of empowerment (Lennie, 2005).

Our preliminary outcomes from the ACSC project indicate the value of PAR, ongoing meta-evaluation, and new media tools in collaboratively planning and managing ICT projects in challenging and complex development contexts such as Nepal, and which involve collaborators who are spread around the world. Our use of these methodologies and tools should also ensure that the project is effective in meeting the diverse needs and objectives of Equal Access and the local community groups involved in the project.

While the feedback on our initial activities has been generally positive, we acknowledge that there are many challenges and issues involved in using participatory research and evaluation methods and building PM&E into communication for social change programs. Several of these issues emerged in our initial workshop discussions. They include the significant time required to effectively engage with project participants and stakeholders, build M&E capacity and undertake participatory research and evaluation activities. We also identified a number of issues related to our use of online collaboration tools in the project, including the ability to more quickly and easily locate discussions and decisions. However, we believe that our ongoing meta-evaluation of the project, and our learnings from previous PAR projects and the literature in this field, will help us to identify practical and realistic strategies to address these challenges and issues.

The high level of interest from various stakeholders in collaborating in the project clearly demonstrates the importance of participatory forms of M&E for communication for social change programs and the significance of the impact assessment methodology to be developed and tested by the project. As one stakeholder commented: ‘In [the] present context, social inclusion and social change are very important for us and so I feel this type of program is extremely important’.

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