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Challenges, issues and contradictions in a participatory impact assessment project in Nepal

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Introduction

This paper presents critical reflections on some of the main challenges, issues and contradictions in an ongoing research project we are conducting with Equal Access – Nepal (EAN). *Assessing Communication for Social Change: A New Agenda in Impact Assessment (AC4SC)* builds on previous communication for development research projects conducted in South and South East Asia, and the development and use of ethnographic action research (Hearn et al., 2008; Skuse et al., 2007; Tacchi & Kiran, 2008; Slater & Tacchi, 2004; Tacchi et al., 2007). The project involves designing and implementing a participatory methodology for evaluating the impacts of radio programs produced by EAN and related outreach activities. Our challenge was to design a methodology that is practical and sustainable but also innovative and rigorous, and produces realistic and appropriate indicators of social change. The project began in April 2007 and runs for four years (see Lennie & Tacchi, 2007).

Assessing the impacts of communication for social change projects

Strengths and limitations of the CFSC approach

Unlike previous top-down models of development communication, which make a linear connection between information provision and individual change, the participatory communication for social change (CFSC) approach (Figuroa et al., 2002) seeks to ground communication in local realities. The objective of CFSC activities such as street theatre, radio drama, and workshops, is to generate mutual understanding, agreement, and collective action on the issues that affect communities and to improve health and wellbeing. This shifts the emphasis from the individual to the community and recognises that most meaningful social change occurs within the bounds of what is permissible within communities and social and cultural norms.

However, the CFSC framework's strict focus on community-level interventions and the particularity of the objectives and indicators derived from community-based research makes the broader applicability of the CFSC framework problematic. Critiques of initial efforts to develop CFSC indicators has led to the promotion of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) as an effective methodology for assisting in the measurement of CFSC initiatives (Parks et al., 2005). This emphasises a community-based, context-specific, mixed methods approach, and qualitative and ethnographic methods. However, the question of how micro-level data generated from PM&E can best be used to inform national initiatives was yet to be answered (Parks et al., 2005, p.20). National initiatives must therefore adapt the CFSC approach to extrapolate findings to the broader context. This could be done through community-based research in representative case study sites.

Through the CFSC approach, broad recognition of socio-cultural constraints and the need to stimulate meaningful participation and horizontal communication have resulted in a significant ramping up of formative research and impact evaluation capacity in order to make the critical connection with communities and their needs, concerns and aspirations. Increasingly, longer-term ethnographic approaches are being adopted in both local and national communication interventions, as both a project development tool and a route to sustained qualitative evaluation (Tacchi et al., 2007; Skuse et al., 2007).

The potential of ethnographic action research

Ethnographic action research (EAR) was developed in 2002 in response to the need for an evaluation tool that could capture the often subtle impacts of communication for development initiatives (Tacchi et al., 2003). The idea was to use a rigorous

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qualitative approach to research, that borrowed many of the attributes and approach of ethnography. This involved adopting a holistic approach which saw the communication initiative as part of a larger ‘communicative ecology’ and required researchers to achieve a level of immersion in the research site, aiming for ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 2006) of the initiative, its activities, and the wider context. EAR was developed and tested across nine ICT for development centres in South Asia during 2003 (see Slater & Tacchi, 2004). The inclusion of an action research framework is important because it feeds research back into initiatives through the planning and development of new activities.

The concept of communicative ecologies helps to locate the activities of a communication initiative, and EAR research, within a larger ‘ecology’ of communication and information channels and flows in complex and shifting local contexts. This requires recognising and responding to differences in people’s access to media information, capacities to engage in CFSC initiatives, and to take action to facilitate positive change. In previous projects, an EAR researcher, embedded in the initiative, has been central to the successful application (or sometimes failure) of EAR. In the AC4SC project, we are developing and adapting the EAR approach further to assess whether it can become a whole organisation approach, rather than the responsibility of an individual EAR researcher. We are attempting to set up systems and processes that will integrate an EAR-like methodology into the operations of EAN, across a range of different people and roles, from community researchers to M&E staff, to program makers and management. This aspect of the project builds on previous training in and use of EAR by EAN staff.

Strengthening programs and M&E systems in Equal Access – Nepal

Equal Access–Nepal is supported by Equal Access–International, based in San Francisco, USA. EAN sees M&E as an integral element of its initiatives, and is used to provide a grounded understanding of both community needs and program impacts. This then informs program content creation and outreach activities designed to support its CFSC messages. The AC4SC project has sought to understand how EAN’s M&E work is integrated into their CFSC initiatives in order to collaboratively develop enhanced M&E systems and capacities. Equal Access collaborated in the AC4SC project as it wanted to improve the way it undertook M&E and its practices as an organisation. It was also keen to challenge existing M&E practices which are often top-down and donor-driven, and based on pressures to ‘prove’ impacts, rather than bottom up, participatory and based on ‘improving’ programs in ways that meet community needs and aspirations (Sankar & Williams, 2008).

An innovative youth-oriented radio program, *Sathi Sanga Man Ka Kura* (SSMK) (Chatting with my best friend) became the flagship of Equal Access’s work in Nepal in 2004. SSMK mixes drama, information and listeners’ feedback via letters to develop its themes of empowerment through informed choice and decision making. New programs, such as *Naya Nepal* (New Nepal), which is aimed at reconciliation and peace building, have been added to EAN’s suite of programs. A key aim of AC4SC is to assess the impacts of SSMK and Naya Nepal, which have spawned a vast network of listener clubs. There are now 1,276 SSMK listener clubs and 326 Naya Nepal listener clubs around Nepal. These groups of mostly young people meet regularly to discuss topics dealt with by SSMK and Naya Nepal, such as life skills, peace and reconciliation, and gender and caste discrimination. Many of these groups regularly engage in activities such as street theatre, community forums, and letter writing, in an effort to facilitate social change. However, while EAN collected ‘success stories’ and other data that demonstrated the positive effects of these programs, a rigorous assessment of their impacts that met the need for program improvement in response to community feedback, and the need to ‘prove’ impacts to donors, had not been conducted.

Our review of the role of M&E in EAN’s CFSC initiatives and the M&E team’s relationship to program makers, especially the SSMK program content team, indicated significant capacity and organisational challenges in attempting to integrate this methodology into their work. This included a relative lack of capacity in participatory evaluation methodologies and analysis of qualitative data. As well as Nepal’s mountain terrain, extreme poverty, wide cultural and linguistic diversity, and poor transport and communication infrastructure, recent political instability has had an inevitable effect on EAN and their work.

Developing and implementing the impact assessment methodology

An important aim of the AC4SC project was to develop an impact assessment methodology that was sustainable beyond the life of the project and would be supported by donors, as well as EAN management and staff and community members. We used participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation in an attempt to meet this aim. 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 seeks to identify the needs and priorities of people in local communities or organisations (de Koning & Martin, 1996; McTaggart, 1991).

The numerous steps and processes involved in designing and developing the impact assessment methodology included:

- **Building relationships and trust:** Relationship-building exercises, small group work and shared facilitation have been used to develop effective working relationships, mutual trust and understanding, and to generate a sense of ownership, interest and involvement in the project.
- **Critically reviewing existing M&E capacities, systems and practices:** Before the initial workshops we obtained critical feedback on the existing use of EAR within EAN and data on issues such as evaluation capacities and the challenges and issues faced by content staff in integrating M&E with program production work. One of the team also undertook a detailed analysis of the organisation and working practices of EAN as they relate to M&E activities.
- **Understanding the local context and audience:** The research team went on an initial fieldwork visit in April 2007 with EAN staff members. Further visits to various field locations were conducted in Nepal in late 2007 and 2008.
- **Reviewing literature and developing the methodology:** Based on a review of relevant literature, possible sets of steps to conducting the impact assessment and developing participatory indicators were created. A draft framework for the overall design of the project was also developed. These initial ideas were continually refined and revised, based on face to face and online feedback and discussion via the project website, teleconferences, and email.
- **Identifying program objectives and stakeholders:** EAN staff selected two key objectives for each radio program that would be the focus of the initial impact assessment process. They also identified key stakeholders who could participate in setting indicators of social change and the ways in which they could participate in the impact assessment process.
- **Developing and reviewing strategies to improve M&E systems:** Various strategies to strengthen and improve EAN's M&E systems were also collaboratively developed. The implementation of these strategies was critically reviewed on a regular basis, and new strategies and ideas were developed.
- **Developing theory of social change matrices:** The M&E and content teams also developed theory of social change matrices which aimed to identify their assumptions about the short-term, mid-term and long-term social changes that would result from program activities at various levels. This was seen as a valuable step in developing indicators of social change.
- **Building capacities and shared understanding:** An intensive series of workshops and training sessions were held in late 2007 to build capacities in using specific EAR tools, and to help EAN staff to better understand PM&E, and processes such as more effectively setting indicators and managing and analysing qualitative data. EAN staff practiced and gained more experience and confidence in facilitation and using EAR tools at various meetings with listener club members and others.
- **Identifying and scoping the case study sites:** Four case study sites in which the methodology would be trialled were identified. Two M&E Associates at EAN conducted scoping research in these sites to better understand the local context, generate community understanding about the project, and identify stakeholders and potential community researchers.
- **Developing and evaluating the initial toolkit:** An initial 'EAR Lite' manual and toolkit for community researchers were developed which included simple information on topics such as facilitation and using a range of participatory tools that would enable qualitative data to be collected.

- **Identifying and training the community researchers:** Once eight community researchers had been selected, they were given training in using various participatory tools so that they could obtain, manage and report on the data they collected.

Challenges and contradictions that emerged

The project has thrown up numerous challenges, issues and contradictions to date, including those related to:

Implementing a more engaged research process: Participatory and context-oriented models present numerous challenges to implementation, including the need to use more engaged processes that can identify community objectives and how interventions can support them. The AC4SC project seeks to establish an ongoing, contextually-situated and iterative approach to developing project objectives and indicators, which uses community researchers to help both identify initial objectives and indicators in a participatory way, but also to identify shifts in indicators as progress and social change occurs over time. However, we found considerable variation in the community researchers' initial abilities in using participatory processes.

Resistance due to the complexity of the approach: An initial problem arose in implementing the project with a mismatch between the Australian and Nepal teams over the complexity of the approach. The formative phase of the project involved processing a considerable quantity of literature and discussion about the potential of various techniques and approaches in terms of their applicability to EAN's M&E systems. The introduction of social change matrixes and the CFSC model itself presented challenges that were resisted by EAN staff due to the perceived complexity of the matrices and the model, and lack of applicability to existing M&E practices, which were less technical and theory-based.

Participatory ideals and the reality of responding to funders: A crucial constraint facing the implementation of CFSC projects is the slippage between the 'ideal' practice of setting participatory objectives and indicators and the realities of NGOs responding to funders' predefined goals and criteria and requirements of a standardised M&E approach. It has been relatively difficult for EAN to engage donors in a critical dialogue about the nature and scope of the emerging M&E systems.

Human resource problems: EAN's M&E team at the start of the project was quite small. Problems such as key staff involved in the project leaving EAN, have also had an impact on project implementation. In addition, the time that the M&E team has to commit to AC4SC work is limited. The cycle and burden of donor reporting is considerable and, at the start of the project, was mainly reliant on analysis of the many hundreds of listener letters that EAN receives each month in response to its programs.

Lack of connection between M&E and content teams: Analysis of EAN's M&E systems revealed that the content and M&E teams had few meaningful points of connection and were not well integrated. M&E was chiefly concerned with designing and administering surveys, entering listener letters into a database and analysing them, designing M&E frameworks, and producing donor reports, while the internal SSMK team was engaged in coding listeners' letters for later selection by the program makers. This meant that the content teams did not see a direct link between M&E and the content production process. Therefore, the M&E team did not play a strong role in content making or influencing changes or improvements to the content of programs.

Data management and analysis, and data quality issues: EAN handles a large amount of data, including notes in staff diaries, listener letters, statistical data for donor reports, and program scripts. This presents considerable challenges for all areas of EAN's work, not the least M&E. In addition, we found that the initial data provided by the community researchers was of variable quality and relevance and did not provide type of in depth qualitative data that was required for the impact assessment.

Hierarchical relationships and culture: The general culture within EAN differs from the extremes of formality and deference often found in Nepal. However, seniority issues, hierarchical rules of etiquette and association, and deference to those of higher status or caste, remain important despite several decades of social and political reform (Heaton-Shrestha,

2004). These issues present a considerable challenge to the implementation of CFSC and M&E systems and practices based on a participatory methodology and philosophy (Pigg, 2001; Pigg & Pike, 2001).

Communication: There are major communication and travel problems in Nepal. Political instability frequently takes the form of strikes that include disruptions to the transport network. These problems greatly affect EAN's outreach and field research work. In addition, internet access is fairly limited outside the Kathmandu Valley. This has a major affect on the ability of field-based M&E staff to communicate with others involved in the project. Finally, EAN has to deal with language-related issues. In both its general work and coordination with EA International, and with the Australian researchers, the majority of communication is in English. Research data and materials and certain meetings also require translation, which all takes time.

Strategies used to address the challenges and contradictions

As well as adopting a collaborative approach to planning and designing the project, undertaking regular field visits to better understand the local context and issues, and regularly conducting capacity building workshops, we also used the following strategies to address some of the challenges, issues and contradictions that emerged:

Conducting an ongoing meta-evaluation of the project and critical review of key activities: We are continuously undertaking a meta-evaluation of the whole project using multiple methods, including:

- feedback questionnaires distributed to workshop participants
- critical review and reflection workshops involving EAN staff and research team members
- holding similar critical review sessions with community researchers
- participant observation of project activities recorded in notebooks and a field work diary
- comments and feedback posted on the project's website.

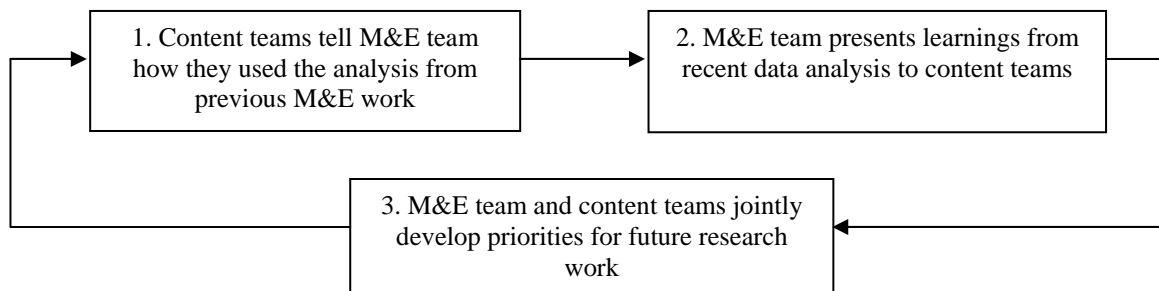
We have taken feedback on how various aspects of the project can be improved into account in planning future activities. We have also provided critical feedback on scoping reports on case study sites and initial reports from community researchers, and developed templates to improve these reports. Visits to the case study sites were also conducted to review and identify ways of improving the community researchers' activities and materials such as the EAR Lite manual. EAN plan to provide more advanced training to the community researchers in late 2008 in an effort to greatly improve the quality of the data they collect.

Reducing the complexity of the approach: Following feedback from EAN staff on the complexity of the approach, a compromise was made that sought to ground the project within existing EAN capacity. This involved developing an approach that was more streamlined, less technical, and more immediate in terms of outcomes, which included:

- a network of community researchers working in selected case study sites
- simplified training in qualitative data collection methods
- simple feedback mechanisms from field-to-centre for the transfer and storing of data
- a process of capturing that data in short monthly and quarterly M&E reports
- a proposal to focus the community research more clearly on one or two key program objectives.

We also aim to hold annual participatory critical feedback workshops to probe the extent of the data emerging from the community researchers, its scope, weaknesses and the impacts and indicators emerging from it.

Improving interaction between the M&E and content teams: Workshops with EAN staff helped to map the way in which the M&E and content teams work and identified new ways in which the two teams could interact to inform each others' work. While these systems are still evolving, the diagram below highlights the proposed steps that the M&E and content teams could take to draw each others' work into their respective spheres of influence.



Creating and analysing theory of social change matrices: This helped to increase the content teams’ understandings about how social change was likely to come about through the programs, and to think more critically about their activities. The process also enabled them to better understand how M&E could be more embedded in their program work. We plan to analyse these matrices and selected program scripts to investigate how the program makers are bringing key themes such as choice and decision-making into the programs, and how they conceptualise the process of social change. This will be compared with data on social change collected by community researchers, which could run counter to what the program makers anticipated.

Developing an ideal M&E model: The content teams were also asked to develop an ‘ideal M&E model’. This identified key staff and community groups involved in the M&E process, the linkages between them, and some of the main sources of M&E data. Further work on this model is currently being undertaken, including developing a flow chart showing the key tasks and activities that the M&E team and the content teams undertake over one year, and how they are interrelated.

Some learnings, critical reflections and ongoing challenges

EAN’s primary motivation for collaboration in AC4SC was acknowledgement of the competing and sometimes contradictory desire to present donors with M&E findings that ‘prove’ impact, while at the same time undertaking research that will ‘improve’ EA’s program and outreach work. We call this the ‘prove:improve’ dichotomy. This problem stems from requirements to present pre-determined objectives and indicators, and of having to fit into various reporting systems and practices that are biased towards the ‘prove’ rather than the ‘improve’ imperative. In addition, while EAN aims to adopt the CFSC approach, this presents a few challenges when the initiative operates at a national level. Community-level interventions have occurred through strategies such as the listener clubs and their local activities. However, the challenge remains that any community-based research needs to inform the national program rather than simply respond to listener club activities. This project seeks to find ways of navigating these obstacles, and challenging existing accepted processes and procedures for M&E reporting, while remaining grounded in local contexts.

These challenges are being addressed through AC4SC on a number of fronts. The ultimate goal of this project is to develop an effective, rigorous, useable and transferable participatory impact assessment methodology. This requires that we confront a number of issues, including the contradictions and difficulties in practice of meeting its ‘participatory’ aims, if we understand participation as more than a development ‘buzzword’ (Leal, 2007). Impact assessment in the conventional approach is often linked to project objectives, which implies that indicators of social change will also be based on these objectives, which were not necessarily developed at the community level with community participation. On the other hand, participatory impact assessment implies that indicators of positive social change are community generated.

Ideas, then, about what constitutes positive social change and where these ideas are sourced is one of the key issues to be addressed. In an organisation like EAN these are likely to mainly be generated from the widely accepted current ideas in the development community, informed by and grounded in larger global, regional and national debates, discussions and experiences. Given this, and the need to apply research findings to a national level, a key challenge for EAN is how, through its impact assessment work, to ground its M&E at community levels and feed learnings and insights back into and inform these

widely circulated and accepted ideas. This would mean that we are redefining, to some extent, what is meant by 'participatory impact assessment'. At this stage, our pragmatic view is that it needs to be multi-perspective (stakeholders, staff, community, donors and so on), themed (so that it relates to the work of EAN), holistic (taking local, organisational and national contexts, agendas and issues into account, and drawing on and triangulating many types and sources of data, using a mixed methods approach), and have the flexibility to be altered over the course of a funding cycle as situations change and progress is made.

We consider that M&E has the greatest untapped potential for adding value to EA's programs and have suggested that M&E needs to become a regular and essential component of program development. This will require that the M&E team takes a much stronger role in agenda setting regarding program content. They will also need to adopt a rigorously sceptical and more critical attitude in relation to what the program makers think the audience wants. The program makers will also need to think more critically about the type of feedback they currently rely on, and how well their programs match the diverse realities and experiences of their listeners and their aspirations of positive social change and a 'New Nepal'.

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