

Item for The Communication Initiative – to go under ‘ICT for Development Network’

Researching, Monitoring and Evaluating Communication for Development: Trends, Challenges and Approaches

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Summary:

This report highlights a number of important trends, challenges and approaches associated with researching, monitoring and evaluating Communication for Development (C4D) within the UN context. It is a key component of a UN Inter-agency Resource Pack on research, M&E of C4D. This Resource Pack is being developed as part of a series of ongoing strategies that aim to institutionalise C4D within the international development agenda, demonstrate the contributions and impacts of C4D, and strengthen C4D’s institutional position within the UN.

As well as a wide-ranging literature review, this report was based on an extensive research and consultation process that was undertaken in collaboration with seven UN agencies and a 15 member panel of C4D experts from around the world. UNICEF funded this research work.

Following a detailed executive summary which highlights the key characteristics of, and the critical differences between dominant and alternative approaches to C4D and research, M&E for C4D, the report sets out proposed principles for effective, appropriate and sustainable research, M&E of C4D initiatives. These principles provide a foundation for the conceptual framework advocated in the report, which can be summarised as follows:

- A holistic, systems perspective that takes the wider context into account.
- A focus on gender, power and social norms.
- Evaluation is seen as an ongoing learning and programme improvement process.
- A holistic approach to evaluation capacity development that aims to develop learning organisations.
- A long-term, sustainable perspective on evaluation and evaluation capacity development.

Findings in relation to approaches to C4D included:

- Participation is an essential and intrinsic component of C4D.
- Participation in development is often only rhetoric, or implemented in top-down ways.
- Full and direct participation is often hard to achieve within dominant organisational cultures and research, M&E approaches.
- C4D can be a mechanism for achieving participation in development more broadly.
- Successful C4D challenges inequitable power structures.
- Across the UN, understanding and support for C4D varies.

The report suggests that a wider and more holistic perspective based on systems thinking and participatory approaches to research, M&E is increasingly important to address complex social problems. This is argued to have significant implications for the evaluation of C4D, which is seen as requiring more organic and flexible strategies and methodologies and methods that match the dynamics of the system in which they are implemented. The impact of wider contextual, structural,

institutional, and organisational issues also needs to be taken into account more in the evaluation of C4D.

The authors advocate the use of participatory, flexible, mixed methods approaches to the evaluation of C4D based on systems thinking, complexity theory and action research. These approaches are seen as highly effective in enabling evaluators to consider the multiple paths to achieving impacts and the contributions of interventions towards achieving impact, in relation to macro and micro contexts. They also encourage ongoing critical reflection and learning and, used effectively, can contribute to community empowerment and change. The authors point out that this new way of thinking has led to shifts away from the dominant focus on measuring and *proving* impacts, towards understanding of the actual process of social change and continually *improving* initiatives and practices. This implies a greater focus on program delivery, innovation, sustainable results, progress towards social change, the contribution of C4D to outcomes and impacts, and the impacts of evaluation processes themselves.

The report presents a detailed overview of the key approaches, methodologies and methods that are considered effective for planning impact evaluations and assessing the impacts of C4D programs. Participatory approaches to research, M&E are recommended that can actively engage key stakeholders in all stages of an evaluation, strengthen evaluation capacities and a sense of ownership of the process, and encourage greater utilisation of evaluation findings and learnings. However, given the greater planning, time and resources that is often required, the authors argue that a long-term view of the benefits of a participatory, mixed methods approach is required.

A methodological and reporting framework for research, M&E of C4D is proposed that includes the following components:

- An open, flexible approach to designing evaluations and selecting methodologies and methods
- Uses participatory approaches as appropriate
- Uses a mixed methods approach and triangulation
- Impact assessment includes assessing the *contribution* of C4D programmes to change, and uses a dynamic, moving theory of change
- Makes more use of qualitative and participatory indicators
- Evaluation learns from 'failures' and negative results
- Open communication and feedback systems are established.

Initial strategies for implementing both the conceptual and methodological parts of this framework are proposed which aim to effectively and creatively address the challenges and issues identified in this report.

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Web link: <http://www.unicef.org/cbsc/> (click on the link 'Inter Agency Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Resource Pack')