



Evaluation and Learning at the Inter-American Foundation

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Evaluation and Learning at the Inter-American Foundation¹

The Inter-American Foundation (hereafter “the Foundation”) was established in 1969 as an independent agency of the U.S. government, charged with providing assistance to poor communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. It has carried out this mission through grants that promote grassroots development conceived as a process by which local communities initiate, learn from and sustain their own social and economic progress. The Foundation pioneered the field of grassroots development, many features of which have been adopted by major bilateral and multilateral agencies. Evaluation and learning have been important at the Foundation since it began, though it has changed over the years and now faces new challenges.

As an independent agency, the Foundation is governed by a board appointed by the president of the United States, and its budget is authorized and appropriated by the U.S. Congress. In 2010, it awarded \$16.8 million in grants and supplements to 121 projects in 21 countries. The Foundation’s grants support a range of local organizations – such as agricultural cooperatives and small businesses – as well as intermediaries who provide credit, training, and marketing services to poor communities.

The Foundation does not design or implement projects. Rather, it issues requests for proposals which are submitted by community organizations. Foundation staff review and assess proposals, visiting communities and working with them to improve their chances of success. Once a project has been awarded, the community is responsible for its implementation.

The Foundation’s staff are strongly committed to the Foundation’s mission of grassroots development. They consider improvements in a community’s capacity to address its own problems, to be of primary importance. Staff value success in helping communities, for example, to increase their incomes, achieve environmental sustainability, and obtain public services, but are comfortable viewing these as secondary to the overarching goal of community development.²

The Foundation’s evaluation system and the Grassroots Development Framework

The Foundation has a longstanding interest in evaluation and learning. *They Know How*, published in 1977, made a prominent case for community development, helping to articulate the concept and presenting lessons from the Foundation’s early experiences. Through its first three decades, significant efforts were made to contract external evaluators and researchers. These included internationally recognized scholars such as Judith Tandler and Albert Hirschmann. Many Foundation staff have also published articles and books from their research and experiences.

The Grassroots Development Framework (GDF), which the Foundation created in the early 1990s, is the core of an evaluation system that values both tangible and intangible impacts at the individual, organizational and social levels. The GDF and associated methods of gathering data

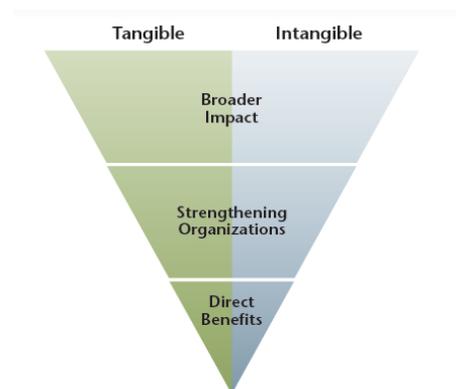
¹ This note was commissioned by the Inter-American Foundation (hereafter “the Foundation”) to explain how the organization evaluates and learns from its projects and performance.

² The terms “grassroots development” and “community development” will be used interchangeably in this document; although they are used to refer to different concepts depending on which literature is being consulted.

and reporting on projects is serving the Foundation quite well by providing information to key stakeholders (the board, the U.S. government) while engaging grantees in a positive fashion and without apparently being burdensome.

The Foundation has established an evaluation system that reflects its commitment to grassroots development in two ways. First, it uses the GDF – visually depicted as an inverted cone – to emphasize parity between tangible and intangible measures (the right and left halves) and between the individual, organizational and societal levels on which development impacts occur (three rows).³ This simple mnemonic helps to assure that the Foundation’s notion of development is not lost through excessive attention to a particular level or type of outcome.

Figure: Grassroots Development Framework



Source: Inter-American Foundation.

Secondly, the Foundation’s evaluation system relies on reports generated by its grantees, utilizing indicators chosen by them, and verified with the support of a local person contracted by the Foundation. In this way, grantees are directly involved in the evaluation process, determining the standards by which projects are measured. Thus, projects are measured in terms of the grantees’ objectives rather than externally determined ones. Grantees gain experience with measurement and reflection, creating capacity for analysis and learning when successful. They are valued as partners in determining how projects will be assessed and in providing the basic information that ultimately gets reported to the Foundation’s board and to the U.S. Congress.

The Evaluation Process can be summarized in the following steps (See Annex 2 for more details):

- Once an agreement has been signed with the grantee, a set of *indicators for monitoring* progress are discussed and agreed upon between the grantee, the Foundation Representative (FR) and a local Data Verifier (Verifier).
- The grantee submits a *report every six months* which is reviewed, in person, by the Verifier. Data and narrative information is entered into the Foundation’s database.
- Upon completion of a project, the Verifier reviews all the information, visits the project and drafts a *Project History*. This document is sometimes prepared with the collaboration of the FR and sometimes is simply reviewed by the FR for comment.

³ The GDF is presented in the methodological section of the Foundation’s *Annual Grant Results Report* (e.g. http://www.iaf.gov/publications/Evaluations/2008_1_en/resultsreport_2008_eng.pdf). For a perspective from one of its creators, see Marion Ritchey Vance 2009 (pp. 20-28) and a current IAF evaluation specialist, Rosemarie Moreken 2009 (p. 29).

- Five years after completion, a subset of projects is selected for *ex-post evaluation*. Foundation staff or others are contracted to visit communities and assess any lasting impact. Verifiers play a key role in assisting contact with communities.

The Foundation is currently expanding its work so that in the future about half of all projects will be the subject of ex-post evaluations. The Foundation plans to periodically conduct *meta-evaluations* once it has generated enough of these ex-post evaluations. Information gathered through the evaluation process is also brought together in two other ways. Key indicators are aggregated and reported in the Foundation's *Annual Grant Results Report*; and external evaluators are contracted to produce occasional *Thematic Reports* that draw lessons from clusters of similar projects (for example, McAnaney 2011).

The Foundation's evaluation process appears to be successful in a number of ways:

- It provides information that satisfies reporting requirements set out by the Foundation's board, by the U.S. Congress, and by the U.S. executive branch.
- It provides monitoring information that is useful for drafting Project Histories and establishing baseline data for ex-post evaluations.
- It does not appear to be burdensome or costly to grantees or staff, and some of the associated activities (e.g. contracting data verifiers, training grantees to collect data) are themselves inputs to community capacity building (e.g. learning how to establish goals, measure progress, and learn from experience).
- The Foundation's current plans to increase the number of ex-post evaluations and contract periodic meta-evaluations promise to provide valuable feedback with attention beyond individual projects to a perspective on the Foundation's portfolio of projects.

The Foundation's evaluation process differs from that of major bilateral and multilateral agencies in a number of ways. The Foundation as a whole is small relative to the major bilateral and multilateral organizations. This makes it difficult for the Foundation to take advantage of scale economies in evaluation. At the same time, the Foundation's relatively small size makes it easier to communicate knowledge and experience internally and to facilitate the development of shared messages for disseminating and promoting what has been learned.

The Foundation's evaluation work also relies methodologically on inductive reasoning at a time when major aid agencies rely heavily on deductive approaches. Current trends in impact evaluation favor deductive methods, which begin by articulating questions and hypotheses that are formally tested by reference to observed or constructed counterfactuals. By contrast, the Foundation's evaluation approach is strongly inductive, beginning with observation and only then identifying relevant questions, constructing explanations, and extracting lessons. Publications by Foundation staff and articles in *Grassroots Development* are rooted in this intellectual tradition and demonstrate that this is a rich and useful approach. However, the difference in evaluation approaches creates a challenge for the Foundation in finding ways to communicate the lessons it extracts from its inductive approach. At the same time, the difference represents an opportunity for the Foundation to complement its evaluation approach by incorporating deductive methods.

Promotion of community development is a key mandate for the Foundation and one for which it has few peer organizations. The Foundation can continue to play a leading role in this area by investing more systematically in understanding community development and finding ways to effectively disseminate it. This requires an explicit formulation of the Foundation's theory of change, defining the range of approaches it uses, and testing some fundamental assumptions about its work. Self-examination of the Foundation's approach to promoting community

development is one way to improve its performance and communicate what makes the Foundation unique.

Annex 1: Additional Resources

- *Research on participatory projects.* A good example is:

Barron, Patrick, Rachael Diprose and Michael Woolcock. 2011. *Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia.* Yale University Press.
- *Beneficiary engagement in evaluation.* On evaluation that aims to be useful for beneficiaries and participants, the following are good sources:

Øvretveit, John. *Action Evaluation of Health Programmes and Changes: A Handbook for a User-Focused Approach.* Radcliffe Medical Press 2002.

Quinn-Patton, Michael. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation.* Sage Publications, 4th edition, 2008.
- *Innovations in evaluation.* Two examples of using storytelling and video for beneficiary self-learning are:

Maxson, Marc, Irene Guijt, et al. 2010. “The ‘Real Book’ for story evaluation methods.” GlobalGiving Foundation (supported by Rockefeller Foundation) <http://bit.ly/jUTnqu>

Paul Barese (paul@quimera.tv) at www.quimera.tv
- *Impact Evaluations.* For policies and methods focused on impact evaluations and with a strong emphasis on thinking about impact relative to a random or constructed counterfactual:

Gertler, Paul J., Sebastian Martinez, Patrick Premand, Laura B. Rawlings, and Christel M. J. Vermeersch. 2010. *Impact Evaluation in Practice.* World Bank, Washington, DC.

Lucas, Sarah T. *Principles into Practice: Focus on Results.* Millennium Challenge Corporation: Washington, DC. February 2011.
<http://www.mcc.gov/documents/reports/paper-2011001052001-principles-results.pdf>

USAID’s new Evaluation Policy, approved in 2011, can be found at:
http://www.usaid.gov/evaluation/USAID_EVALUATION_POLICY.pdf
- *Enduring Questions.* The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie – www.3ieimpact.org) engaged in a global brainstorming, using the web, to identify enduring questions about development policy. The list of questions they identified can be found on their site at: <http://bit.ly/rtfIKn>.

Annex 2: Summary of Evaluation Process⁴

To understand the Foundation's approach to evaluation, its indicators and its data collection process, it is important to recognize that the Foundation does *not* design or implement its projects. Rather, it responds to proposals submitted by community organizations to its requests for proposals.

The data collection instrument designed by the Foundation is based on the Grassroots Development Framework (GDF) and includes some 45 indicators. These indicators reflect experience with monitoring projects in the past and expectations regarding results in new ones. The GDF records tangible and intangible results on three levels: individual, organization and society.

The GDF is **flexible** enough to add new indicators at any time. For example, in the past five years the Foundation has added indicators to measure results for environmental projects. The process for adding new indicators is also simple. New grantee's meet with Foundation Representatives or Data Verifiers to decide which results will be monitored. Measures are then chosen, applied and observed for two or three periods before being revised for incorporation in the instrument.

The indicators for each new project are **selected** based on 1) the project objectives, 2) the grantee's capacity to gather the information and 3) the resources the grantee has to collect the data.

In an **orientation** visit with a new grantee the Foundation Representative and the in-country Data Verifier discuss the GDF. Together they select the indicators most appropriate for the specific project. At this time the Data Verifier explores with grantees ways to collect the data and report on each indicator. Baseline data is also collected at this time. The outcome of the visit is an *orientation visit report*.

The Data Verifier visits the grantee every **six months** to complete and verify the information collected by the grantee. The instrument also calls for description of the context, additional activities not initially planned for the project, and intangible changes in the community and organizations involved. The output is a *biannual set of data items* for each project and a database that contains both quantitative and qualitative information. Ideally, Foundation Representatives and grantees will use these reports to reflect on what is or isn't working in the project and why.

Every year these biannual reports are aggregated and **results summaries** are reported to the Foundation's Board and OMB to meet the requirements of the Government Results Performance Act of 1993. In many occasions these biannual reports are the only systematic documentation that grantees have when visited after the grant has ended. They are very useful for impact assessments of project activities.

At the end of the project, the Data Verifier drafts a results summary or *project history* based on the biannual reports. Ideally, Foundation Representatives and grantees play a proactive role learning what worked in the project and why.

⁴ This summary draws heavily from an email received from Emilia Rodriguez-Stein received on June 16, 2011.

Data Verifiers are in-country contractors with diverse backgrounds and skills on data collection and analysis. The Foundation organizes conferences with all Data Verifiers to standardize procedures and improve the GDF. Currently, the Foundation is working with Data Verifiers to standardize the impact assessments of projects that ended five years prior.

The process of collecting this data is very **cost effective**. Data Verifiers live in the countries where they work, minimizing travel costs. They are also very knowledgeable about the local context and languages. They are hired on very economical five-year contracts.

Annex 3: People interviewed and documents consulted

People interviewed

- Robert Kaplan
- Emilia Rodriguez-Stein
- Rosemarie Moreken
- Steven Cox
- Kevin Healy
- Carmen Yolanda Perez Cadena (telephone interview)
- Luís Gonzalez (telephone interview)
- 8 Foundation Representatives and one project assistant in a focus group meeting

Documents consulted

“ALL OF THE VOICES: An Alternative Approach to Development Assistance.” n.d.
(document provided by Emilia Rodriguez-Stein).

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ME-460. “Desarrollo en Baja California: Historia del Programa” 2009.

Moreken, Rosemarie. 2009. “Update on Measurement” *Grassroots Development*, p. 29.

NC-262. “Asociacion Nicaraguense para la Integracion Comunitaria” Ficha del Convenio

Ritchey Vance, Marion. 2009. “Measures to match the Mission: How the Grassroots Development Framework Came to Be,” *Grassroots Development*, p 20-28.

Rodriguez-Stein, Emilia, et al. “Better Living Conditions, Temporary Improvement in Air Quality.” A note on the impact of an IAF grant to PROVAY “Making a Difference” March 2011

Rodriguez-Stein, Emilia, et al. Note on the impact of an IAF grant to GAMMA “Making a Difference” January 2011.