Children in Distress

CINDI

Networking for children affected by AIDS

MINI-RESEARCH PROJECT
Current Understanding of Project and Programme Outcomes Amongst CINDI Members

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1 Introduction

When asked to describe their work, most programme staff would mention what they do (activities) and who they work with (target group). Few, unless pushed further, would think to touch on why they do what they do and what change their work will bring around. Until recently M&E trends also tended to focus on activities and outputs, neglecting the much richer field of outcomes (or significant changes) resulting from programme work. If one takes the view that M&E derives its value not from the availability of accurate fact but from the way in which it is being used, then outcomes become a critical tool in enhancing the quality and sustainability of our work through evidence-based analysis and decision making.

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation systems which include outcomes and outcomes assessment provide improved accountability and transparency in the the utilisation of donor funding. Indeed, increasingly funders are requesting evidence that the projects they fund will bring about change or make a difference in communities served.

In light of this, the CINDI Network M&E Forum decided to conduct a workshop focusing on different aspects of including outcomes and the assessment of outcomes in the work of organisations. In preparation for that workshop, a mini-research project was conceptualised to enable CINDI members to input into the focus and content of the workshop. This report details the aims, methodology and findings of this mini-research project.

2 Definition of Outcomes

A number of definitions exist for outcomes, however for the purpose of the research the following definition was used:

Outcomes are all the changes that actually occur when you carry out activities to achieve the aims. They may not be the same as the outcomes you planned.

When people use a project or organisation, they expect it will make some kind of difference to them. For example, if they have a problem with reading they hope the reading classes will teach them to read better. This difference "comes out" of the things the project or organisation "puts out". (This is why it is an "out – come".) Outcomes are all the things that happen because of the project's or organisation's services, facilities or products. This includes the bad and not so good, as well as the good; the unexpected as well as the expected. Outcomes can be for individuals, families, or whole communities. We can also talk about outcomes in organisations, or in other fields such as policy, law or the natural environment.[1]

3 Methodology

3.1 Aims
The aim of the research was to explore the current understanding and usage of outcomes and outcomes assessment amongst CINDI members, and to assess what the focus area should be for a CINDI workshop on outcomes and outcomes assessment.

3.2 Research questions
The following questions were posed in response to the aim:
  1. What outcomes are anticipated in your organisation's current projects?

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[1]Ashby, K & Nee, C. *Jargonbuster: Simplifying the language of planning, project management and performance improvement to increase understanding.* Charities Evaluation Services, UK, Issue no. 1, 16.

2. Have these outcomes been captured in a proposal/plan? Why?
3. Does your organisation use a particular model or method for establishing outcomes?
4. How do you plan to assess/measure these and does this process include outcome indicators?
5. How has the external environment affected your outcomes planning, if at all?
6. Have you been able to assess outcomes in past projects? Give an example.
7. Are you aware of unexpected outcomes? Give an example.
8. Has it been helpful to your organisation to capture outcomes? Explain.
9. What information did you collect to measure your outcomes against (e.g. baseline survey, intake assessments or mid-project assessments). Or how do you know that your outcome shows a change?
10. Would you be interested in participating in a workshop on outcomes and outcomes assessment?
11. Do you have any suggestions for the focus of this workshop?

3.3 Sample

The survey was undertaken through a cross section of members including those who receive funding through the CINDI Funding Conduit. Other CINDI members were also invited to participate via the eNewsletter, either by completing the survey on the website or contacting Liz Clarke or Suzanne Clulow. In total, ten members completed the survey. No surveys were received in response to the eNewsletter invitation.

The following table summarises the participating members and provides a profile of their organisation:

Organisation	Type	Location	Size
Ethembeni HIV/AIDS Ministry	Faith-based registered NPO	Mpophomeni	Small-medium
Masibumbane Mission	Faith-based registered NPO	Mpophomeni	Small-medium
Friends For Life	Community Based Organisation	Mpophomeni	Small
Mpophomeni Gender and Paralegal Centre	Registered NPO	Mpophomeni	Small
LifeLine	National Registered NPO	Pietermaritzburg	Large
Pietermaritzburg Child and Family Welfare Society	Registered NPO	Pietermaritzburg	Large
Sinani – KZN Programme for Survivors of Violence	Registered NPO	Pietermaritzburg	Large
Umvoti AIDS Centre	Registered NPO	Greytown	Medium
Kenosis	Registered NPO	Bishopstowe	Medium
CREATE	Registered NPO	Pietermaritzburg	Medium

3.4 Data collection method

The chosen method of data collection was a survey to be completed by means of an informal interview with the researcher or via the CINDI website. The survey was circulated to members prior to the scheduled interview in order to allow them to prepare. Combining the survey with informal interviews allowed for greater interogation of the information supplied.

3.5 Limitations to research methodology

The following have been identified as limitations to the research:
- Only a small sample of members were interviewed.
- The majority of these had received funding from the CINDI Funding Conduit. Whilst this ensured a certain degree of compliance in terms of agreeing to participate in the survey, the Funding Conduit has for some time placed considerable emphasis on the use of outcomes in its proposals and

reports meaning that some members may have been more familiar with outcomes than they would have been otherwise.

- Linking the survey to members funded through the Funding Conduit may also have caused members to have a sense of being 'policed' and therefore not feel free to respond honestly.
- Surveys completed without an interview may also not be wholly accurate due to differences of or difficulties in understanding of the questions. Indeed, this was often found to be the case upon further interogation of the answers supplied.
- Conversely, the use of interviews does lead to a degree of interpretation on the part of the interviewer.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Quantitative data analysis

Listed below are the findings of the research in quantitative format per question:

1 What outcomes are anticipated in your organisation's current projects?

Result	Number of organisations
Have identified anticipated outcomes	**10**
For projects funded by Irish Aid	3
For Irish Aid project and other projects	2
For CINDI Small Grant funded projects only	1
For CINDI Small Grant funded projects and other projects	2
For other funder	1
Independently	1

2 Have these outcomes been captured in a proposal/plan? Why?

Result	Number of organisations
Have captured outcomes in a plan or proposal	**10**
As part of the Irish Aid funding	3
As part of the Irish Aid funding and for other projects	3
As part of CINDI Small Grant funding	1
As part of CINDI Small Grant funding and for other projects	1
As part of another funding proposal	1
Independently	1

3 Does your organisation use a particular model or method for establishing outcomes?

Result	Number of organisations
Model in place	**10**
Results based management format	8
Other	2

4 How do you plan to assess/measure these and does this process include outcome indicators?

Result	Number of organisations
Have system in place for collection of data	**10**
System includes outcome indicators	**3**
Using this system for outcomes assessment	**3**
Database	2
Monthly internal reporting system	3
Client contact sessions	4
Immediate training evaluations	2
Follow-up training evaluations	2
Beneficiary feedback	4

5 How has the external environment affected your outcomes planning, if at all?

Result	Number of organisations
Significantly	4
A little	6
Not at all	0
Could quote an example	10

6 Have you been able to assess outcomes in past projects? Give an example.

Result	Number of organisations
Yes	2
No	8
Could quote an example	2

7 Are you aware of unexpected outcomes? Give an example.

Result	Number of organisations
Yes	9
No	1
Could quote an example	9

8 Has it been helpful to your organisation to capture outcomes? Explain.

Result	Number of organisations
Yes	5
Yes, they can see the benefit of this for the future and would like to put a formal system in place	4
No, will only do so if requested by funder	1

9 What information did you collect to measure your outcomes against (e.g. baseline survey, intake assessments or mid-project assessments). Or how do you know that your outcome shows a change?

Result	Number of organisations
Baseline information (intake assessment forms)	2
Baseline survey requested by funder	6
Nothing	2

10 Would you be interested in participating in a workshop on outcomes and outcomes assessment?

Result	Number of organisations
Yes, themselves	8
Yes, someone else from their organisation	2
No	0

11 Do you have any suggestions for the focus of this workshop?

Result	Number of organisations
Yes	10
No	0

4. Discussion of Findings

Further analysis and interpretation of the quantitative data was undertaken to determine potential areas of learning for the workshop. The following were considered relevant:

1 What outcomes are anticipated in your organisation's current projects?

- *Development of outcomes is donor driven* – The results clearly show that most organisations have identified outcomes as a result of donor requirements and not because they have understood or owned the benefits of this practice for their organisational development.

- *Confusion between activities, outcomes and outputs* - Having scrutinised the outcomes quoted by the participants, it is clear that a significant confusion exists regarding the difference between activities, outputs and outcomes.

2 Have these outcomes been captured in a proposal/plan? Why?

- *Capturing outcomes is donor driven* – Again, the main reason cited for the capturing of outcomes was as a result of donor requirements; however several participants commented that they felt they

would have done so independently given more time. A number of those interviewed also remarked that they are increasingly being asked for more outcomes-based proposals and reporting. It can be seen as a significant achievement for CINDI's M&E system that outcome identification and assessment is already included in the CINDI Funding Conduit.

3 Does your organisation use a particular model or method for establishing outcomes?

- *Preference of results based models* – Nearly all of the organisations were using a results based management model of some description for the capturing of outcomes and outcome indicators. This can be attributed mainly to the fact that eight of the ten organisations have been funded through the CINDI Funding Conduit which uses a results based management model.

- *Difference in results based model formats* - Some models flowed more fluently from inputs to outcomes whilst others did not. This could be another contributing factor in the confusion between activities, outputs and outcomes.

- *Existence of current planning system* – The fact that all of the participants have a system in place for strategic planning is encouraging as it provides a platform on which to build a more outcomes-based process.

4 How do you plan to assess/measure these and does this process include outcome indicators?

- *Lack of understanding regarding outcome indicators* – Few of the organisations showed evidence that they understood outcomes enough to establish suitable indicators.

- *Inadequate use of current system* - Although all the organisations have a system in place for the collection of data relevant to outcomes, few are using this for outcomes measurement or assessment.

- *Limitations of database* – Two of the participants are relying heavily on a database for the measurement and assessment of outcomes. This presents a number of limitations for the assessment of qualitative outcomes which is often beyond the scope of a database. This is a further contributing factor to the confusion between activities, outputs and outcomes.

5 How has the external environment affected your outcomes planning, if at all?

- *Caution regarding "over planning"* - All of the organisations had a good understanding of how the external environment has affected their work and their ability to measure this. Many of the examples quoted related to "over planning" (i.e. the organisation set higher outcomes than it was able to achieve). This could be mitigated by an increased understanding of how to identify possible risks and adjust outputs and outcomes accordingly during the planning of the project.

- *CINDI Small Grant Funding considerations* – An interesting point to note for CINDI is that the time demanded for the training and mentorship of Small Grant Funding recipients places considerable pressure on their resources. This needs to be better considered in the planning of these projects. Delays in the distribution of funding granted also caused a degree of under-achievement.

6 Have you been able to assess outcomes in past projects? Give an example.

- *Non priority of outcomes* - The results of this question clearly show that outcome planning, measurement and assessment are not current priorities for organisations. Of the two organisations that have assessed outcomes in the past, only one of them has been doing so as part of their organisational development, the other was funder driven and has not been repeated. This is in line with previous findings that donor requirements are the main reason for the development and capturing of outcomes.

7 Are you aware of unexpected outcomes? Give an example.

- *Good understanding of unexpected outcomes* – This was an encouraging result as even the CBO and smaller NPOs interviewed had a good understanding of unexpected outcomes and could quote a meaningful example. The one negative result could be attributed to the level of understanding of

the individual staff member interviewed and is perhaps not a fair reflection of the organisational understanding of this concept.

- *Lack of system to record these* – Few of those interviewed had a formal system in place to record and give value to unexpected outcomes meaning that an important element of project achievement is lost.

- *Some examples quoted include:*
  - The academic performance of learners training as Peer Educators improved significantly during the course of the project. As a result, they participated in and won a technology competition at local and then national level. They will now compete in a larger competition in Mauritius.
  - Providing a safe environment for people to share created a circle of trust which led to participants sharing incidences of abuse or rape. The project is now providing assistance to these people.
  - An ARV education programme developed for children has had to be extended to include teenagers as a number of their children have responded so well to treatment they have reached the teenage years. They had not planned for programmes which responded to the needs of teenagers.

8 Has it been helpful to your organisation to capture outcomes? Explain.

- *Value of outcomes recognised* - With the exception of one organisation, all of the participants could see the value of capturing outcomes for their organisation. Interestingly, a number understood how outcomes assessment can assist them to provide more developmentally focused programmes that will bring around real change and are not just output focused.

- *Barriers* - Most quoted time limitations and the lack of staff capacity as the major barriers to a formal organisational M&E plan including outcomes and outcomes assessment. This is particularly pertinent to organisations working in more rural areas. Two organisations have or are in the process of recruiting an M&E staff member to address this.

9 What information did you collect to measure your outcomes against (e.g. baseline survey, intake assessments or mid-project assessments). Or how do you know that your outcome shows a change?

- *Lack of understanding regarding collection of baseline information* – Most organisations performed a baseline survey as a result of donor requirements. As a consequence, several of the participants reported not fully understanding the reasoning behind this and the correlation between the information collected and the establishment of outcomes. This may severely affect their ability to adequately measure and assess their outcomes.

- *Overlooking of existing sources of information* - Unfortunately, due to the lack of understanding described above, existing sources of baseline information were overlooked. In some cases an outside consultant was used to conducted the survey when perhaps this could have been done internally. A greater understanding of the importance of baseline information in establishing outcomes may also help to clarify the distinction between activities, outputs and outcomes.

10 Would you be interested in participating in a workshop on outcomes and outcomes assessment?

- Without exception, all of the organisations interviewed would be interested in participating in the workshop. Two would like to use this as a capacity building exercise for some of their project staff.

11 Do you have any suggestions for the focus of this workshop?

- The following topics were suggested by the participants:
  1. To better understand what outcomes mean and how to measure/assess them.
  2. How to establish outcomes and outcome indicators.
  3. How to link outcomes assessment to staff performance in terms of monitoring that staff are doing what they are supposed to do.

4. How to make outcomes measurable, meaningful and applicable. SMART.
5. How to conduct a mid-project assessment or mid-term review.
6. More information on funder trends regarding outcomes.
7. What systems can be put in place to record and give value to unexpected outcomes.
8. How to carry out a baseline survey.
9. How to take the focus away from being number orientated and raise awareness around the quality of the intervention and how to measure this in a meaningful way.
10. How CINDI could integrate this into their M&E system for the CNO.

5 Recommendations for Consideration in the Workshop Planning

The discussion of the findings highlighted a number of key issues that need to be considered in the planning of the workshop, namely:

1. The confusion between activities, outputs and outcomes and the different types of information that feed into these needs to be addressed at the beginning of the workshop. Using a results based management model that flows from input to outcome is recommended to avoid further confusion.

2. A process for helping organisations identify current information systems and sources for both their baseline information and their outcome assessment would be highly beneficial.

3. A better understanding of the correlation between baseline information and establishing and measuring outcomes is critical and should preferably be addressed at the start of the workshop to help shape understanding within this context.

4. The richness of change resulting from unexpected outcomes is currently being lost as organisations are not capturing these. Ideas for routinely including unexpected outcomes in their M&E system could mitigate this.

5. The differences in the levels of understanding and usage of M&E systems and terminology between management and project staff needs to be addressed.

6. Incorporating practical learning exercises into the workshop using the the organisation's existing information is recommended where possible.

6 Conclusion

The research showed an increasing awareness amongst CINDI members of the value and need to include outcomes and outcomes assessment in their M&E systems. It suggests that there are a number of barriers to achieving this which could successfully be addressed through a workshop on outcomes and outcomes assessment. Given the identified confusion around outcomes, outputs and activities, and the different levels of understanding between project staff and management, the workshop should be kept as simple as possible so as not to exacerbate this.