Doing while Learning Project

Action research report

Reflections on a practitioner-centred application of developmental evaluation

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Executive summary

How do the implementers of successful projects think about scale differently than everyone else? Although there is a growing discussion around scaling social innovations, existing literature only skims the surface of the extensive experiences from South Asia. Nor are there spaces, much less networks, for innovators for collective problem solving, reflection, or advocacy on the challenges specific to effectively taking social innovations to scale.

BRAC's *Doing while Learning* project, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, engaged practitioners to understand real-time scale-up efforts, created a network to enable peer sharing and support intermediation and developed practitioner-friendly tools for scaling innovations as part of an effort to raise awareness and appreciation for its value. The key questions were how practitioners in South Asia work towards achieving scale under conditions of social complexity and what enables them to be successful at scaling up effective models.

The project brought together five organisations from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh that established records of going beyond the demonstration phase and getting to scale. All were in various stages of scaling up an intervention (in the case of BRAC, we followed two interventions). This was important because our objective was not retrospective examinations but rather to observe real-time how they thought about and progressed towards achieving scale. We also brought in diverse thought partners to expand our thinking about these issues.

We use developmental evaluation as our primary learning tool. Developmental evaluation combines the rigour of evaluation, being evidence based and objective, with a practitioner's perspective, which is change oriented and relational. It works well for the purposes of the *Doing while Learning* project since it a) enabled the learning network to identify and learn about the process of scaling up within each practitioner partner and in their activities; and b) used data in a meaningful way to inform the progress of the scale-up efforts. These facilitated each of our partner types in different ways.

How did we operationalise our developmental evaluation? There were a few important steps. First, we applied an enquiry framework called outcome mapping that defines a programme's theory of change and identifies specific intentional activities that bring about the outcome. This was done in collaboration with practitioner partners. Second, we devised a data collection strategy for each partner. It consisted of three tools: logbooks, monthly calls and analysis of routine performance data, sometimes called management information systems (MIS).

What did we really learn from our approach of Developmental Evaluation? All the tools were useful to some extent, some more than others. The outcome mapping was a useful tool to understand and analyse programme outcomes. The monthly logbooks and conference calls enabled senior managers to introspect in a way that they found rewarding. Logbooks helped as a communication and information-sharing tool between the senior leadership and field staff. Additionally, the monthly calls helped significantly to build relationships and create a deep, shared understanding between the BRAC Social Innovation Lab team and partners. Finally, the learning visits with participation from multiple partners proved to be a very effective and energising way to learn.

We have also identified areas for potential improvements. First, our methodology did not work as well for partners that had an existing and rigid structure. Second, logbooks that were filled by frontline staffs did not prove to be an effective strategy for all partners, especially when field staff did not understand the objective. Third, MIS data for most partners were not very useful in supporting logbook data and also understanding scale up. Finally, we greatly underestimated the time and effort required to communicate the project goals and methodology to all of our partners, particularly as their input was needed to develop the tools and to further transmit the ideas to field staff.

We think our experiences show that real time learning, even in the context of limited time and resources, can be valuable and even motivating for organisations.

Introduction to the *Doing while Learning* Project

Despite decades of global experience in development, far too few effective innovations make it to scale. At BRAC, we believe that "small is beautiful, but large is necessary," and we are constantly striving to find ways to empower more people to move out of poverty around the world.

As we reflected on the literature regarding scale, we note that it was incomplete. Little has been written analytically about the experiences from the global south, even from South Asia, home to many of the world's largest public and private development programmes. Documenting and sharing what's working, so that others can learn and emulate our successes, is also a form of scaling-up impact.

The BRAC Social Innovation Lab undertook a two-year project with two primary questions:

How do practitioners in South Asia work towards achieving scale under conditions of social complexity?

What enables them to be successful at scaling up proven ideas?

We brought together a learning network of organisations from across the region who appeared to have that innate ability to scale and spend a year watching what they did through a number of different learning strategies, including interviews, field visits, and logbooks. The outcome of the project would be a series of tools for practitioners, to help them better understand the paths to scale, potential strategies to consider, and other important things to think about along the way.

Our learning network

Academic partners	Principal academic partner Economics and Social Sciences Department, BRAC University	Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, Stanford University Judge Business School, University of Cambridge		
Partner organisations	Access to Information Programme, Bangladesh	Nidan, India	Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) Pakistan	Gram Vikas, India
BRAC Bangladesh	Human Rights and Legal aid Services Programme	Community Empowerment Programme	Social Innovation Lab	

Reasons for choosing developmental evaluation

The learning network would function to create a rich evidence base of scaling experiences in South Asia. And in order to capture that we needed a methodology that would draw on a range of different types of information, from varying sources.

Traditionally, evaluation is about critical thinking; development is about creative thinking. Often, these two types of thinking are seen to be mutually exclusive. The relatively recent methodology of developmental evaluation offers a way to hold them in balance. What developmental evaluation does is to combine the rigour of evaluation, being evidence-based and objective, with the practitioner's orientation to developing, piloting and scaling up social innovations, which is change oriented and relational. It assumes and in fact supports programme changes and improvements, and it also can be applied even when the path and the destination are evolving.

This suited the *Doing while Learning* project well on a couple of levels. First, it allowed the flexibility necessary to examine the very different interventions that each practitioner partner was scaling up; all of them were at varying degrees of progress and being implemented under very different circumstances. Second, the methodology itself is flexible and thereby provided the learning network the ability to focus on the key questions more efficiently rather than getting distracted by constraints imposed by the methodology. Third, because our questions approached scale with a wider understanding, developmental evaluation thus provided a methodology that could take into account changes to an organisation – to its structure, governance, relationships – in as much as they constituted an important context within which the scaling up took place.

We also believed that developmental evaluation could prove useful on multiple levels, for the various partners as well as the learning network itself.

The potential benefits of developmental evaluation to various stakeholders

Practitioner partners	Academic partners
Could receive support, from the academic partners in particular, to identify and articulate their processes and activities.	Since the key thing introduced by developmental evaluation was an element of rigourous analysis and discussion regarding the practitioner partners' work, it could give the academic partners a built-in entry point. They would not have to "sell" to the practitioners why they should be allowed to intervene.
Most practitioners had management information systems (MIS) but had limited ability to utilise them internally. The outcome mapping exercise could help them identify and organise performance indicators most useful to managing their work on the ground.	The learning network activities could give the academic partners the opportunity to see how they communicated with each other; helping them learn the practitioners' "language". Usually, they work with practitioners one at a time and in isolation from their peers.
Participation in the 'learning network' activities, such as field visits and conference calls, could give each practitioner partner the opportunity to compare their practices to others.	Since developmental evaluation warranted a close interaction between practice and analysis conducted on it, the academic partners could also have the opportunity to see how practitioners responded to their research tools allowing them to adjust their analytical lenses.

Operationalising developmental evaluation

We followed a step-by-step method to operationalise our developmental evaluation, very much similar to a traditional research project. First, a learning plan for each partner programme is designed. The learning plan involves an analytical framework for learning about the programme in question. We used outcome mapping in this regard. Briefly, outcome mapping helps to understand a programme systematically with a bend towards learning and analysng potential short-term changes applied by the programme. Second, a data collection plan for each partner is devised and then shared with the partners. This data collection plan is formulated based on the analytical framework brought forth from our outcome mapping exercise. Called "logbooks," these were designed to be flexible and open ended to allow for information to be collected from staff working a multiple levels within an organisation. As will be discussed later, the data collection plan was revised and adjusted for a few rounds, mainly to facilitate our learning objectives and to respect a few constraints.

Outcome mapping

Outcome mapping is a tool that helps to understand how programme activities contribute in bringing intended behavioural changes, termed as outcomes, in the ecosystem. One reason why we chose 'outcome mapping' was its focus on outcomes rather than impact. The learning network's objective was to learn about how each practitioner's scaling experiences unfolded in its ecosystem over a period of one year. It was very unlikely that the intended impact of the interventions would be visible within that timeframe. Outcomes - defined as changes in the behavior, relationships, activities, or actions of the people groups, and organisations with whom an organisation works directly – however, probably could be observed. Moreover, it addressed our interest in exploring scaling in relation to the complex, social ecosystem in which it took place.

Complex or 'wicked' problems such as developing and scaling up social development interventions ideally required the integration of diverse perspectives from different parts of a system. Frontline staff implementing the scale up of interventions often understand the challenge differently from the managerial team supervising them remotely. The ecosystem in which this takes place adds further layers of complexity with initiatives involving multiple stakeholers working in collaboration. Under such circumstances, outcome mapping provided insight into the dynamics of those relationships and by enabling the tracking of how ideas were shared and spread and where participants took joint actions, helped support the developmental processes.

We were motivated in part by a commitment to making this a useful exercise for the practitioner partners. The learning network thus adopted outcome mapping as primarily a method that helped incorporate and document reflection and learning into the practitioner partners' scale-up activities. Two simple tools were used to conduct the exercise, a) outcome maps; and b) logbooks.

Outcome maps illustrated:

1. What the interventions that were being scaled up by the practitioner partners wanted to achieve
2. Who they had to work with and influence to do that
3. What strategies they used
4. How they planned to implement the strategies

So, the outcome maps were used as a planning tool to help the teams implementing the scale-up efforts– both frontline and managerial staff– articulate and reach a shared understanding of the objective and how to achieve it. It also gave the learning network a peek "under the hood" of the practitioner partners' models.

Sample outcome map from a partner organisation

Outcome Map (Access to Information Programme)

Vision:
In urban and peri-urban areas of Bangladesh, citizens can access information and government services easily, cheaply, reliably and in a transparent manner.

Mission:
In support of the vision, the programme will work to influence local and national government to formulate policy guidelines in favor of decentralising information and services, and making the process of accessing them more efficient, user-friendly, transparent and accountable. It will contribute to identification and capacity building of entrepreneurs who can engage in partnerships with city corporations or *pouroshobhas* (urban, local government units) to jointly invest to create information and service access points (i.e. TISCs) that make innovative use of information and communication technology (ICT) to realise the shift of policy towards decentralisation. It will work with the Bangladesh Computer Council to build the capacity of entrepreneurs and elected city corporation and *pouroshobha* representatives. It will contribute to the development of active networks of policy makers, elected government representatives, entrepreneurs, and citizens.

Boundary Partners	Outcome challenges
Local government division	The programme intends to see a local government division that recognises the importance of efficiency, transparency and accountability in the provision of information and services. It has adopted decentralisation as a strategy and contributed to the development and implementation of policies and guidelines that facilitate the establishment and functioning of TISCs. It contributes to promoting the initiative among city corporation mayors/*pouroshobha* chairmen and ward councilors.
City corporation and *pouroshobha* mayors, ward councillors	The programme intends to see city corporation mayors/*pouroshobha* chairmen and ward councilors who see value in facilitating more efficient, reliable and transparent access to information and services for their constituencies. They are sensitised and have built up the capacity to understand, utilise and manage ICT based activities. They regard TISC entrepreneurs as partners and contribute to the successful operation of TISCs and motivate fellow citizens to take advantage of them.
TISC entrepreneurs	The programme intends to see enterprising citizens who have gained the recognition of and entered into partnerships with city corporations/ *pouroshobha*. They have the built up the capacity to understand, utilise and manage ICT based products and services, invest the majority of the funds required to establish TISCs and actively promote them. They participate in and take advantage of the programme's networks and call upon external technical support and expertise as appropriate.

Logbooks

Our next step was to collect real time data according to the outcome maps. We created logbooks that would work as a data and information gathering and sharing device with an objective of supporting the learning plan from the outcome mapping. The logbooks were designed to capture observations and insights from the actual work that the frontline team did to execute the scale up and the managerial team did to support that. We believed that learning about the ecosystems affects and responses to external unexpected shocks and how each practitioner mitigated the potentially adverse effects of expected shocks were emphasised in particular.

The logbooks were prepared in collaboration with each practitioner partner so as to make the questions they asked relevant and build a sense of ownership over the whole exercise. They were filled up by both frontline staff and managerial staff themselves and shared with the learning network on a monthly basis. The logbooks provided rich, documented information and data containing useful insights, learnings, good practices that could then be disseminated to all areas where the practitioners were operating. Monthly calls with focal persons from each practitioner partner – who were senior managerial staff also followed to discuss questions, observations and themes emerging from the logbooks.

Viewed in the context of the outcome maps, the information was contextualised so that anyone could understand and appreciate them. Viewed as complements to the MIS data that the practitioners collected and also shared with the learning network, the logbooks could help explain what the numbers said. Thus, collecting the logbooks on a monthly basis offered glimpses into not just the reactionary measures that the practitioners took to address challenges as they arose, but how they took preemptive steps to mitigate and neutralise potentially adverse things before they manifested.

Last, but not least, we were conscious of limiting the amount of time required of the practitioner partners to engage in this exercise. So, we kept the number of logbooks that needed to be filled up to one to two per partner. Just enough to allow the learning network to try out this tool and not more.

Sample logbook from partner, completed by entrepreneurs every month

Logbook (Access to Information Programme)
• What was the target and how many meetings were you able to organise?
• What activities did you undertake to organise coordination meetings?
• How did the meetings go? (Please rate the extent of success/effectiveness: Low/Medium/High and state the reasons behind your assessment.)
• Were there any obstacles faced during carrying out these activities? If so, please list them.
• What steps did you take to overcome them?
• Which stakeholder did you interact with the most? Why?

Management information systems

We have also made use of an additional data source that are generated by many organisational: The management information system. The MIS in an organisation typically hubs all the administrative records. These records often are indicative of programme activities and sometimes, outputs and maybe even outcomes. Since these data are collected anyway, we requested the practitioner partners to share it with us.

Why use an additional database when we are already gathering data through logbooks? There are basically three reasons. First, the MIS data will be covering all the field locations resulting into a more complete picture of programme implementation. This would allow us to see the averages as well as the extremes. Second, the MIS data can be used to look at it in terms of numbers with all the field-level data at hand and generate simple graphs to understand scaling-up efforts and as well as analyse it more rigorously using more advanced statistical tools, say, regression analysis. Third, since this data was already collected, we thought that was a better strategy than requiring a new set of indicators for our purposes.

We used the MIS to complement logbooks-based analysis as well as to do stand-alone analyses. The information on major activity changes collected from the logbook at different points in time can be combined with activities and outcome indicators in MIS in all the field locations to examine contributions of different activities on programme outcomes.

What we learned

When we went implemented our reserach plan, our experience was mixed. Whereas certain tools were really effective throughout, some were not so. Others could be handy, depending on few factors.

Briefly, there are a few general take-home learnings. First, it is extremely important to communicate effectively, at with the head office staffs and field staffs. Second, having a structure for systematic learning is good, but the structure may create obstacles for actual learning and adjustments need to be made to make room for learning purposes. Initially, we had planned for the outcome mapping process to yield key performance indicators that captured the scale-up efforts of the practitioner partners. They could then be tracked regularly over the entire time span of the real time learning phase. Some would be quantitative, some qualitative. The logbooks would capture what frontline staff experienced and the monthly calls with senior, managerial staff would capture administrative and high level measures to support the work on the ground. Thus, the learning network would have a full set of information at its disposal to learn from and draw on for the purpose of functioning as a peer support group.

Unanticipated challenges with the partners' MIS data, like the lack of information on key performance indicators, infrequency of data collection and narrow scope made us resort to altering the logbooks so that they could meet all of our information needs related to the work on the ground. However, the tool could only capture so many things at a time. Ultimately we relied on the monthly calls with

What worked

- The outcome mapping exercise proved to be stimulating for almost all of our partners. Several found it a helpful framework to share with their teams to help create a shared understanding of their objectives, theory of change, and the purpose of various interventions.
- For senior managers, the monthly logbook and discussion with our team members provided a rare moment for reflection and chance to take stock in their work. The discussion allowed them to better appreciate subtle characteristics or practices in their organisation that otherwise may have been harder to consciously notice.
- For those field staff who understood the logbooks, the monthly task represented a task to think critically and to share important insights with senior staff, with whom they may not have other forms of regular contact. This proved to be motivating for the field staff and also very helpful for the senior managers, who did not always have granular details from the frontline staff.
- Monthly calls between the researchers and the practitioner partners proved to be a productive, efficient, and enjoyable way to develop rapport and learn about the organisation's activities.
- Our practitioner partners were interested in learning from us and capturing the knowledge for their own uses as well. We began to create a monthly summary for them, synthesizing all the information we received from various sources. This format was short and designed for internal dissemination, so that they could share it easily with their colleagues.

managers to find meaningful answers to most of the questions we had.

However, there were examples of instances where partners were able to take good advantage of the developmental evaluation exercise. One such example came from the BRAC Community Empowerment Programme. Introduction to the methodology and the tools through which we attempted to implement it convinced the programme to use it to guide an important workshop related to scaling its model ward initiative. It enabled the participants – both frontline and senior staff – to articulate and reach a shared understanding of what BRAC wanted to achieve through the model ward initiative and how to implement it. The workshop not only helped identify the appropriate staff person to approach in order to scale the pilot – the core motivation behind the workshop - but, through the whole team learning about the concept, it also laid the foundation to scale it up broadly if and when the decision to do so was taken. The model ward pilot centred on communities identifying their own development challenges and then setting goals to overcome them. Discussion surrounding the outcome maps for the pilot – which contained the key indicators to track from a management point of view – also helped in soliciting ideas from the participants on how to incorporate the goals set by the communities into the MIS so that progress towards their achievements could be tracked as well.

What did not work

- Trying to force the developmental evaluation framework onto a mature model that's not changing, or predetermined for other reasons. Since the tools are designed to measure change, the activities quickly get tedious for the field staff. Other forms of evaluation are more appropriate for these cases.
- Requiring frontline staff to fill out the logbooks without proper orientation on their purpose. This is a different type of "reporting" than many staff are used to, and types of answers that you want won't be intuitive without support and good communication along the chain of command.
- Many programmes design their management information systems to comply with donors' interests, and the data are not particularly helpful for management decisions. Given that the MIS were already in place for most programmes when our project started, we struggled to conduct meaningful quantitative analyses in some cases.
- It is much easier to conduct developmental evaluation from up close than far away. We spent a disproportionate amount of time working with and learning from our practitioner partners here at BRAC. Due to connection problems, visa restrictions and other issues, building relationships with our partners abroad was much more difficult.
- Trying to map out the path to scaling up in just 12 months! We realised pretty quickly that many of the processes that contribute to organisational longevity and scale work on a much longer timeframe. There's only so much one can learn in a year.
- Going in with a totally open mind. In some cases, we were seduced by side projects, new opportunities, or other activities that were tangential to what we had set out to understand. We left our research questions rather vague to allow for flexibility to adjust based on partner activities and priorities, but at times that meant that our developmental evaluation also went off course. Keeping the research question simple and clear will yield deeper knowledge (though of course, sometimes there's value in "wandering"!)

Some concluding thoughts

It is clear that scaling up is a complex process. Developmental evaluation offers a flexible but systematic approach to understanding projects at a nascent scale, which enabled us to capture learning that would have been lost in more traditional methods. This methodology also facilitates a productive relationship between research and practice (or researchers and practitioners), creating valuable feedback loops.

Overall, we believe that the *Doing while Learning* project offers important insights about learning in the context of development organisations based in resource constrained settings. Overall, we believe that many of our practices can provide very efficient tools for organisations to capture and exploit learnings more systematically, whether or not an external researcher is involved.

For donors and others interested in promoting the practice of developmental evaluation, we hope that our experience elucidates some of the challenges practitioners may face. This methodology has the potential to mutually benefit practitioners and researchers, but only when properly resourced. We cannot overemphasize the importance of adequate lead-up time to develop common understandings and objectives. The current state of organisational information systems is also a huge barrier for the quantitative analysis; from our perspective, it would be ideal to invest and strengthen these systems versus resort to one-off research surveys.

A few final insights that we'd like to share with other organisations considering embracing developmental evaluation or the methodologies we describe.

Spend time building shared understanding across your own organisation and external partners. One of the greatest benefits of developmental evaluation is the reflective process that it essentially forces participants to go through. Many organisations lack an explicit shared vision or theory of change and can benefit greatly from the structured discussions that this methodology utilises. Involve many people to transmit the shared vision as far as possible.

Work together from the beginning. One of the biggest challenges we faced in trying to conduct the methodology across a range of partners was the fact that all were in various stages of scale. All had already set their management information systems in place. Practitioners may feel more comfortable saying "let us get everything set up, then we'll show it to you," but this precludes important opportunities to shape decisions and systems.

Constant change is a good thing. For projects at the early stages, priorities will change quickly. Tools like logbooks should reflect the current work, and will need to evolve alongside the project. Review them constantly and tweak—it makes the exercise easier for staff and yields better learning.

Engage frontline staff in the process. Yes, frontline staffs are very busy and this is another thing on their plate. Nonetheless, they like to know that someone values their insights and is listening to them. When properly conducted, they can find the task quite motivating. Leaders and researchers will also benefit immensely from the rich, grounded knowledge that they provide.

Just get started! Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Learning does not have to be complicated. Start with a discussion on theory of change, or integrate a few "logbook" questions into staff meetings. Once you get the ball rolling, you can decide if you want to intensify the efforts over time.

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