



Plan UK Experience of Child-Led Evaluation in Cambodia

PPA programme

Executive summary

Introduction

In 2011 Plan International UK secured a Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA) with the Department for International Development (DFID). This strategic funding has been used to develop the Building Skills for Life Programme. The programme seeks to empower adolescent girls and address the unique challenges they face in accessing quality education across seven countries:¹ Cambodia, Mali, Malawi, Kenya, Pakistan, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. After three years of programming, in May 2014 a new Outcome Monitoring System (OMS) was developed for the PPA programme. OMS combines quantitative with qualitative data sourced from all the programme's stakeholders on all the factors identified as key barriers to adolescent girls' education. The inclusion of more child-centred methodologies for collecting data is a key feature of OMS, which has helped to lay the foundations for piloting child-led evaluations (CLE) in three of the participating countries: Cambodia, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

This report presents the methodology and findings from the first of these CLE pilots. This experience took place in Cambodia where the programme's progress was assessed against the five DAC evaluation criteria², with the addition of equity.

The programme has the following five objectives:

Quality of education:³

To increase the number of girls who enrol in school and reduce the number of girls who drop out, by convincing parents and the community of the importance of education and improving the quality of teaching.

SRHR:

To increase knowledge of the body's reproductive system and to increase recognition among parents and community members that it is important for girls and boys to know about their bodies.

¹ During the first phase of the programme (April 2011 to March 2014) the programme was implemented in nine countries and included, in addition to the current seven, El Salvador and Sierra Leone.

² <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dacriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>

³ Plan UK's Operational Definition of Quality Education refers to the quality of the schooling experience and not to educational attainment or curriculum content. The definition reads as: 'One that is grounded in respect for human rights and gender equity, that is accessible to all children without discrimination, and one in which all children are encouraged to fulfil their capabilities. It includes a learning environment that is learner-friendly, safe and healthy for all children with mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence. A quality education is accountable to children through the participation of children, families and communities in school governance and decision-making.'

Gender equality:

To ensure girls are valued as much as boys and given the same opportunities in school and in the community.

Accountability and participation:

To increase the willingness and opportunities for girls and boys to participate in taking decisions important for their lives and education by convincing school management and leaders to involve and listen to young people.

Economic barriers to girls' education:

To provide some material support to the most disadvantaged girls to enable them to go to school in the hope that they would become an inspiration to other disadvantaged girls and more would follow.

Extensive desk research into previous experiences of evaluations led by children revealed that despite many policies suggesting strategies for beneficiary involvement in monitoring & evaluation (M&E), children are rarely involved in evaluations. When they are, they are generally only asked to evaluate the level of child involvement rather than the entire projects or programmes. Conducting a full CLE therefore presented a unique opportunity to strengthen Plan's ability and capacity to meaningfully involve children in M&E, generating learning and recommendations for similar activities in the future.

Methodology

Ten child evaluators (CEs) were selected to lead the evaluation from among the programme beneficiaries – five boys and five girls. They received a one day training session, familiarising them with each of the five programme objectives. This process also enabled them to define the evaluation questions and select those they wished to use from a list of child-friendly data collection tools.

Facilitation of the process was delivered by the Enabling Adult Team (EAT)⁴. The EAT only made decisions in relation to: logistics (which villages or schools to target for data collection, the venue of meetings etc.), start date and duration of the process, compensation for the CEs' time and other administrative processes. The CEs, in addition to choosing the questions and data collection tools, took all decisions in relation to how information was analysed, the level of achievement under each evaluation criterion and how to present the findings during the final meeting with stakeholders.

Eight FGDs with girls and eight with boys were conducted and entirely facilitated by the CEs. They also carried out three FGDs with mothers and three with fathers. Key Informant Interviews with three community leaders and three interviews with teachers also formed part of the evidence collected. In addition to this qualitative data, the analysis and assessment process was also based on OMS data to ensure a broader base of evidence.

The choice to enable the CEs to take all the important decisions required the development of tools, methodologies and processes that would enable their full understanding of abstract and sometimes complex concepts. These can be broadly organised into:

⁴ The EAT comprised of Laura Hughston (author), Learning and Impact Assessment Officer at UKNO and Ky Heu Thap, PPA Monitoring & Evaluation Officer at Plan Cambodia.

1. Facilitation methodologies for training the CEs
2. Methodology to enable CEs to make evaluative judgements

1. Facilitation methodology for training the CEs

The one day training for the CEs included:

- a) *The problem tree and shadow analysis*
The CEs were introduced to the programme objectives and logic, findings from the baseline and other learning using a re-worked version of the well-known **problem tree**. They were then asked to discuss the issues that cause children to drop out of school (or fail to enrol), and consider whether there were any other significant problems not tackled by the programme.
- b) *Ranking barriers to adolescent's education in order of priority*
The CEs **ranked all of the problems** identified through the problem tree, including those they identified themselves, in order of their importance for keeping girls and boys in school. This exercise was also repeated during the FGDs to validate the weight of each problem from the perspective of the different categories of beneficiaries.
- c) *Who carries the biggest burden?*
This exercise focused on equity and identifying those most vulnerable in communities.
- d) *Defining the questions*
The CEs **developed questions for each stakeholder category** (adolescents, parents, leaders and teachers).
- e) *Selecting the data collection tools*
The CEs selected **a method to collect information** for each of the questions they planned to ask the stakeholders, from a list of child-friendly data collection tools. These had been preselected for offering two advantages:
 - A more visual and interactive format that would better enable engagement with children and less-literate adults
 - Minimal requirements for note taking

This formed a package of activity-based debates for the FGDs that alternated questions with discussion-stimulating activities. A pilot was conducted where the CEs ran the entire exercise and was followed by a reflection session that focused on verifying the data collected satisfied the evaluation's requirement and on the CEs' application of the different techniques.

2. Methodology to enable child evaluators to make evaluative judgements

The CEs were helped to fully understand each DAC evaluation criterion and produce a modulated judgement with a series of tools, broadly falling into two categories: visuals and rubrics.

Visuals are essentially images or visual exercises used to represent concepts that might otherwise be difficult or abstract. Visuals also help to make the information more appealing for children.

Rubrics present different levels or degrees of achievement, clearly describing each level. For the entire evaluation thirteen rubrics were created. To make the process more child-friendly, the rubrics' levels were designated by an animal: the bigger the animal the higher the level of achievement. In ascending order the animals we used were: lizard, goose, deer, cheetah and cow.

Visual exercises were sometimes used to introduce concepts and ideas or to pre-select a starting level on a rubric. The CEs would then confirm or disprove this after examining the entire rubric using evidence collected.

Once the CEs had examined each evaluation component in detail, they combined all the elements together into a global overview. This was achieved through the methodology of the Apodeixis Ornithorhynchus⁵ - a fantasy animal with five body parts: head, body, front and back legs, tail; each corresponding to a DAC criterion. In addition, the head is adorned with a feature representing equity.

Limitations

This study suffers from limitations that can be summarised as follows:

- The number of respondents consulted during the course of the evaluation was relatively small and selected only from the easier to access locations, which limits the possibility of generalising the results to the entire programme.
- The design of this study is primarily qualitative and does not follow previously used methodologies hence the findings cannot easily be compared to baseline.
- The fact that school principals were responsible for the selection of respondents for the adolescents FGDs could potentially have introduced a bias.
- The data collected by the CEs as well as the OMS data, is collected in communities where Plan Cambodia and partners implement several projects and other NGOs are present. Consequently it might be difficult for respondents to link changes observed to the work of a precise programme.

Findings

Results

Overall achievement level for results: Cheetah

To evaluate the programme's results, the CEs considered the evidence gathered for each programme objective in turn, and assigned an achievement level using a rubric.

Quality of education – achievement level: Cheetah

They supported this choice by recalling evidence from the various group discussions about the changes obtained by the programme, in levels of awareness and commitment to quality education for both girls and boys. They noted however, that the economic challenges faced by many students have not really been addressed permanently by the programme. Finally it was noted that, although enrolment has increased for both sexes since the beginning of the programme, dropout is still very high. This led the CEs to conclude that the scholarships alone may not be sufficient to keep all in school.

Gender – achievement level: Cheetah

The CEs reported that some interviewees felt the programme had fully achieved its objectives in this area, although noted not all respondents agreed and the great majority of respondents stated in favour of equal rights for girls and boys.

Sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) – achievement level for four CEs: Goose; achievement level for 6 CEs: Deer

⁵ Evidence platypus

This conclusion was due to the OMS statistic showing 96% of targeted adolescents fail to answer three questions⁶ on the topic. This can be explained by the type of messages promoted by the programme which focuses on morality, highlighting the risks associated with sex, but fails to explain in detail how the reproductive system works.

Participation and accountability – achievement level: Cheetah

The CEs concluded that opportunities for students to participate in school decision making had increased and were matched by increased confidence and greater accountability.

Economic barriers to education – achievement level: Cheetah

The CEs felt that the programme's strategy to tackle economic barriers through scholarship had been well received and well targeted affording some of the most marginalised girls the opportunity to continue studying. However, they also raised concerns in relation to the sustainability of such a strategy.

To return their overall assessment for the programme, the CEs calculated an 'average' of all the animals. This was verified with the corresponding rubric.

Relevance

Overall achievement level for relevance: Deer

The CEs considered two elements of relevance:

- Alignment of programme objectives with the needs identified by beneficiaries – achievement level: Goose; and
- Transparency and accountability – achievement level: Cow

The CEs selected the overall achievement level for this criterion by drawing an 'average animal' between the two elements of relevance.

Effectiveness

Overall achievement level for effectiveness: Cheetah

To evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, the CEs compared the ranking of the importance of each programme area with the results level achieved. They also considered how well the external environment had enabled the programme's objectives, and the extent to which the programme had capitalised on the external environment.

Efficiency

Overall achievement level for efficiency: Cheetah

A visual exercise, using a traffic light matrix, enabled the CEs to arrive at a general score for the efficiency of the programme. They compared the level of achievement from their evaluation of the programme results with the level of budget allocated for each result area.

⁶ The questions are:

- A woman is more likely to get pregnant halfway between two periods
- A girl can get pregnant the very first time she has sex
- A girl cannot get pregnant if she washed herself thoroughly after sex

Answer categories for all three questions are: true – false – don't know.

Sustainability

Overall achievement level: Cheetah

To assess sustainability, the CEs considered three dimensions: people's motivation, means and ability to sustain the changes achieved by the programme.

- Motivation – achievement level: Cheetah
- Means – achievement level: Deer
- Ability – achievement level: Cheetah

An 'average animal' was drawn between these three dimensions to assign an overall level of achievement for sustainability.

Equity

Overall achievement level: Goat

The CEs' deliberations on equity were guided by a rubric with visual representations of various possible combinations of the effects the programme could have had on disparities within the community.

Conclusions: *Acinonyx Cervidae Hircus*

Finally, after assessing the level of achievement under each criterion, the corresponding Apodeixis Ornithorhynchus was created, to the CEs great amusement: an animal that has the body (results), front legs (effectiveness), back legs (efficiency) and tail (sustainability) of the cheetah, the head (relevance) of a deer and horns of a goat (equity).

Their overall assessment of the programme was broadly positive, with the majority of the evidence being assessed as 'cheetah', indicating an achievement level of four points in a five point scale.



Learning and recommendations on the child-led process

The child-led process used for this evaluation has been a fascinating experience for all those involved and undoubtedly demonstrated that **children have the ability to deliver a credible and nuanced evaluation with integrity and analytical ability**. Of particular note is the very short training time that was required for them to fully perform their function. The total cost of this process was also very modest: approximately US\$5000. All the methodologies developed for this research worked superbly and even beyond expectation, demonstrating the feasibility of involving children in evaluations.

However, the data collected by the CEs was entirely qualitative. Prior to launching the OMS, this exercise would have been limited in its scope. Several insights revealed by the OMS shaped the analysis in this evaluation. Some of the weaknesses in the programme's approach would not have surfaced with the exclusively qualitative research carried out by the CEs.

The methodologies developed for this research also demonstrated children's ability, with the right facilitation, to deliver nuanced assessments that are not simply either positive or negative. Their insights greatly enhanced our understanding of the programme.

If intending to continue involving children in evaluation and M&E activities, the learning from this experience suggests the following considerations:

- Where there is no OMS equivalent source of quantitative data on programmatic outcomes, it might be more appropriate to have a mixed-team evaluation comprised of adults collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data whilst children conduct their evaluation in parallel.
- Where programme staff are not fully convinced of the validity and use of qualitative methods, there is a risk that an entirely qualitative evaluation conducted by children may not be regarded as credible. Therefore staff and donor confidence in qualitative evidence should be developed prior to routinely pursuing a child-led process.