



Collaborative evaluation and market research converge: An innovative model agricultural development program evaluation in Southern Sudan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 4 January 2012

Keywords:

Collaborative evaluation
Economic development
Computer-skills

ABSTRACT

In June and July 2006 a team of outside experts arrived in Yei, Southern Sudan through an AID project to provide support to a local agricultural development project. The team brought evaluation, agricultural marketing and financial management expertise to the in-country partners looking at steps to rebuild the economy of the war ravaged region. A partnership of local officials, agricultural development staff, and students worked with the outside team to craft a survey of agricultural traders working between northern Uganda and Southern Sudan the steps approach of a collaborative model. The goal was to create a market directory of use to producers, government officials and others interested in stimulating agricultural trade. The directory of agricultural producers and distributors served as an agricultural development and promotion tool as did the collaborative process itself.

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1. Introduction

The value of collaborative evaluation as a model that promotes program learning can be found in both the words “collaborative” and “evaluation.” Much of the present document focuses on the second word, describing the evaluation context and activities. Yet reflecting on the value of the “collaborative” process, in and of itself in the context of what evaluation is, should not be ignored. The present study puts the focus on the use of the collaborative model in the context of evaluation research in a fragile, post-war setting in Southern Sudan to point to the value of both words in program evaluation.

The project described here occurred in a part of Africa, Southern Sudan, which was emerging from nearly 25 years of war. Evaluation efforts, even collaborative ones, face multiple challenges in such an environment. Market and social infrastructure in post civil war Southern Sudanese environment was virtually non-existent. The war destroyed the little infrastructure that existed, including traditional farming systems through village familial organization. During the war people fled to refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda. The countryside was covered with land mines, traditional life stopped, and traditional social mechanisms disappeared from the region (Scroggins, 2004).

As a result of the 2004 peace agreement between the north and south of Sudan, Southern Sudan had the opportunity of establishing a new civil society that offered economic and social opportunities for the people of that part of the country. There were massive problems remaining from the war, huge numbers of refugees, dangerous landmines still remaining in fields and near the roads. But for the first time in more than a generation, people could start thinking about building for a future.

The present project was designed to re-spark local economic life by assisting local producers' understanding of local market resources that would allow them to make economically rational decisions about what they should grow. These markets were growing rapidly, as people returned and re-established their lives in the region. New trade and political centers were established, such as the town of Yei, which had not existed before, and Juba, which was now the capital of the new Southern Sudan. Traditional African life had been destroyed by the war. New systems were creating themselves from pieces of the old and the new. Given the boomtown environment, food and other goods were arriving in Southern Sudan from Uganda in the south. Transporters would deliver goods to Yei and Juba, returning with empty trucks to Uganda.

The literature on rural community development in Africa is littered with reports pointing out the failures of anything but market responsive agriculture (Sachs, 2005). Certainly, the failures of state planning and socialist farming are there to see. Thus, there is general agreement that market signals and closer connections between producers and consumers can be shown to improve production decisions. Yet, there is an assumption that such market information is not found in less developed economies or that these

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mechanisms cannot exist in the types of situations where communication is less than ideal or even quite difficult. Markets, it should be understood, are complex embedded institutions by which societies connect supply and demand and social attributes for its food production is communicated through the actions of buying and selling (Hinrichs, 2000).

The U.S. Agency for International Development in partnership with the government of Southern Sudan thought to apply market responsive agriculture principles in funding the Agricultural Market and Enterprise Development (AMED). As part of this project, Winrock International gathered a team of three external evaluators to travel to Southern Sudan to conduct a market evaluation that would result in a trader/transporter/grain miller directory for the region. The evaluation effort was to identify wholesalers and transporters along the Juba, Yei, and Arua, Uganda, corridor, so that farmers could connect with them in order to support sound farm production decision-making. With this directory the project hoped that agricultural production could begin anew based on information about what markets might exist.

The external team for the market evaluation used a collaborative approach for the work. The purpose of this paper is to explain the contextual factors that supported the use of a collaborative approach, discuss how the collaborative evaluation was conducted, and then share reflections about the perceived strengths of the approach (Jordan & Constance, 2008).

2. Decision to use collaborative evaluation

O'Sullivan (2004) defined collaborative evaluation as an approach that engages program stakeholders actively in the evaluation process. When stakeholders collaborate with evaluators, their understanding increases and the utility of the evaluation is often enhanced. Over the years, two members of the external evaluation team have been refining their thinking around collaborative evaluation (O'Sullivan, 1991; O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 1998) as it has evolved in dialogue with colleagues at annual meetings of the American Evaluation Association and in training workshops focused on the topic. The authors have used the approach with programs focusing in on community development, sustainable agriculture, education, and leadership development with community-based program and other service organizations throughout the United States, as well as overseas.

Patton (2008a) recently published an article looking at agricultural extension outreach and program evaluation, which would endorse the use of a collaborative evaluation approach with the evaluation at hand. Of course, Patton's thoughts are contextualized by *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, for which he has been a long-time proponent (Patton, 2008b). Reflecting on his Peace Corps experience in West Africa many years ago, he argued for considerable continuity in the concerns and shared values between the program purposes of agricultural extension (under whatever title is appropriate) and the assessment of impact, which is the meat of proper evaluation. They both look for changes in behavior based on educational interventions. In addition, obviously, both collaborative evaluation and engagement with producers in these sorts of contexts requires collaboration so that there is, in fact, use-value.

Further theoretical support for the use of collaborative evaluation with the evaluation under consideration comes from Peter Senge (1994). In his major work on the use of information by "learning organizations," he provided the framework for understanding the value of market research and the direction of agriculture in responding to market signals. His book, *the Fifth Discipline Field Book*, described the steps of creating feedback loops as well as the value of these to any organization. Even a farm in Southern Sudan can benefit from knowing what its market options are or most basically that there is a market for production and where that market is.

Situationally, the evaluation posed a number of challenges that a collaborative approach might address:

- While all three members of the external evaluation team had extensive experience in other parts of Africa, they were new to Southern Sudan.
- The project was initiated by the Associate Director of the Agricultural Market and Enterprise Development Project but was not very well specified prior to arrival in country.
- In order to collect data from wholesalers, transporters, and grain-millers permission from local authorities was essential.
- Data collection would rely on sources at the local markets in the three towns and external evaluators needed local enumerators to gather data from individuals in the local languages.
- Availability of computers and software technology was unknown until arrival in country; similarly, the research skill of local enumerators was unknown.
- External evaluators were only there for a limited time period (three weeks) and there was no guarantee that data collection could be completed in the amount of time they had available.
- In the future, the directory would need to be updated periodically to be useful and so someone who was part of the larger project would need to be trained to carry on the work.

With all the unknowns and constraints surrounding the evaluation, it was essential to rely on the available expertise of the stakeholders to learn about the project context, what was important to collect, and how that information could be used. The external evaluation team needed to consult in depth with the Assistant Project Director to clarify the intent of the evaluation. Other local stakeholders would need to be identified to make sure that permission to collect data was granted as well as enumerators recruited. Once recruited, enumerators needed to share skill levels to establish what could and could not be done by them in the field. Logistics of gathering data in three towns had to be balanced with limited resources and local challenges. It's hard to imagine how a more traditional, distanced evaluation might have proceeded, although the annals of international development projects are replete with examples of such attempts ultimately fail to collect even rudimentary data.

3. Implementation of the collaborative evaluation

The cycle of collaborative evaluation (O'Sullivan, 2004) is shown below in Fig. 1. At each of these steps in the evaluation, it is essential to consult with program stakeholders and engage them to whatever extent is appropriate. This was particularly true for the market evaluation in Southern Sudan, given the constraints identified in the previous section (Letiecq & Bailey, 2004).

3.1. Clarifying an evaluation request

The external evaluators met first with the Assistant Director of the Agricultural Market and Enterprise Development (AMED) Project to better understand the program context and clarify what he hoped to accomplish with the market evaluation. During the clarification meetings the Assistant Director also was able to identify local resources that were available to support the evaluation. The Director of a local Crop Improvement Research Center (CIRC) was willing to assist with recruitment of enumerators and provide meeting space for the expanded evaluation team. The Assistant Director thought that at least six high-school prepared enumerators and two bachelor's-prepared evaluation assistants could be engaged locally with the funds available for the market evaluation. One of the AMED staff was assigned to assist with travel logistics for data collection. Both AMED and CIRC had

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