QSA Notes

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Project evaluations: Essential to understanding the real impact of our projects

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Women participating in an evaluation focus group in Pursat, 2021. SOURCE: DWAP

It's hard to know if development projects achieve their goals, but we must understand our projects' effectiveness. Therefore, evaluations are a crucial feature of QSA's project management, collecting data and providing a window into whether, why and how programs achieve their goals and ensuring our limited resources are utilised for the most significant possible impact.

Evaluations pave the way for project improvements, helping to inform decisions that will maximise success for the most important people - the participants, benefiting the immediate project and enhancing future initiatives.

What is an evaluation?

Usually conducted at the close of a project or the end of a project phase, an evaluation is a systematic and objective assessment of the extent to which project aims were achieved while identifying circumstances that led to high and low success levels. They should be part of a constant cycle of reflection, introspection, innovation and improvement in development practice.

While monitoring will measure the efficiency and effectiveness of project activities, evaluations focus more on assessing the impact of those activities on participants. For example, QSA funds a project to empower poor rural women with various activities, including permaculture training. Monitoring by the project partner will tell us if the participants retain the knowledge of

permaculture techniques after project completion and if they successfully establish home gardens to support their families. In addition, QSA monitors the project with regular reporting and in-country visits to assess if funds have been used as planned and if various policies around gender equity and the environment have been implemented.

But this won't tell us whether these activities had a medium-long-term impact on the participants. Instead, we want to know if they changed these women's lives regarding their economic power/independence, level of domestic violence, family health, decision-making in the family and enhanced community participation.

This is where evaluation comes in, and it's often qualitative rather than quantitative data that we collect for this purpose.

Why do we conduct evaluations?

As part of its contract with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australian NGO Program, QSA commits to evaluating projects every three years. In addition, as a member of the Australian Council for International Development, QSA is bound by a Code of Conduct, committing to *"...invest in quality assessment of their work and to reflect, share and apply the results and lessons of their work with others."*

But the main reason why we conduct evaluations is that well-designed evaluations have tangible benefits for QSA and its development partners. Still, more importantly, they ensure our project participants achieve the outcomes they need and deserve. In addition, they deliver improvements to current and future projects.

Evaluation Example 1: *Empowering Women*, Pursat province, Cambodia

Chicken-raising by a participant in the permaculture training in Pursat. SOURCE: DWAP

An evaluation in June 2021 aimed to assess whether the program improved the empowerment of poor rural women participating in the Department of Women's Affairs (Pursat) permaculture training program.

It was undertaken by an independent consultant who facilitated a series of focus groups conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. These discussions enabled us to gather qualitative data about various issues, including how participants' situations had changed about decision-making within the family, decisions about spending, health, food and nutrition. They also discussed attitudes toward domestic violence and how their lives had changed since the start of the project.

Evidence gathered from 64 people in 8 focus groups showed that this program significantly impacts women's lives. Women are more confident, have new skills, feel they are contributing and feel more

valued. Importantly, children appear to be safer, and people with disabilities are more valued. Quotes from focus group participants:

"It changed, as after this training, men started to take care of women and the household. Women are now more involved in decision-making and are braver in terms of their rights."

"I am satisfied with life now as people in my family have the same equal rights, so they all get on better now - expect life to be better and better in the future."

Evaluation Example 2: *Improving Nutrition*, Kandal province, Cambodia

Khmer Community Development (KCD) delivers a program to ethnic Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese groups in Kandal province, Cambodia, to improve their living conditions in terms of nutrition, agriculture, gender role sharing, income generation and improved natural environment and climate change. An evaluation in June 2022 aimed to assess one aspect of the project - how well it contributes to improving nutrition amongst participants and their families.

KCD organised a series of focus groups (48 people in 6 groups) facilitated via Zoom by an external consultant. They involved ethnic Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese participants who'd recently completed the project and some who'd been engaged approximately five years ago. Issues discussed included knowledge of nutrition, eating habits, implementation of home food gardens and animal-raising, family health, decision-making about food, health and nutrition, and self-confidence on health and nutrition issues. Participants were also asked how their life had changed since the project.

Fish farming is part of the community development program in Kandal province. SOURCE: KCD

Incredibly positive changes had taken place for the ethnic Khmer groups in various health determinants, including learning skills to grow a range of health-supporting produce. Of particular note are learning and skills that resulted in an avoidance of chemical fertilisers, a significant improvement, and a direct impact on a health determinant, which the participants identify has directly led to improvements in their lives.

There are other positive outcomes for the ethnic Khmer group with a substantial impact on community partnerships, relationships and stability and, in some instances, changes in decision-making. Due to KCD's involvement, families claim they are more confident and courageous. Outcomes were different for the ethnic Vietnamese, where the program was less impactful on health and social determinants due to several possible factors, including location and cultural and social oppression, which negatively and directly impacted their standard of living.

Quotes from focus group participants:

"All the skills learnt are being used now and will be used into the future because it helps improve our health. We are also teaching our children these skills after we learn them from the training. We always share our learning with neighbours and the wider community."

"We do not buy from the market; we eat the fruit and vegetables around the house as they are healthy and do not cause our families problems."

"Less health problems than before as we have natural vegetables and chicken at home that makes us healthier than before and have less illness."

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