Applying the Lean Research Framework: A Program Evaluation of the Cambodian Scholarship Foundation.

An evaluation of one CCT program in rural Cambodia is strengthened through the principles of Lean Research, and finds that after fifteen years of support for girls' education, the program has been successful at keeping adolescent girls in school and contributing to a local culture of education.

Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) are known to be an effective intervention to increase school enrollment. Less well-known is the long-term impact: What are the effects, intended or unintended, of a long-term CCT program in education on a rural Cambodian community? Does it significantly increase the number of girls who complete secondary school? Are there other factors that contribute or detract from the program's success? A qualitative research study, based on the principles of Lean Research and conducted by an international development consulting group composed of Nadia Milanova, Julianna Nielsen, and Kari Sides Suva, examined the impact of CCTs provided to girls in the areas of Meun Chey and Doun Sa communes in Svay Rieng Province over the past fifteen years by the Cambodian Scholarship Foundation (CASF).

Since 2001, CASF has supported the education of girls from low income families by providing cash scholarships conditional on school attendance. In one area of Svay Rieng Province, primarily in Meun Chey and Doun Sa Communes, approximately fifty girls supported by CASF have graduated from secondary school. Furthermore, approximately twenty-five of these have completed a university education.

The Evaluation

In February 2016, the research group spent three days in Svay Rieng performing the first program evaluation in CASF’s history. We collected qualitative data by conducting interviews with the local staff member and eight focus groups (total of 125 participants) representing a range of stakeholders, to evaluate the long-term effects in this area of educating girls through CCTs, focusing in on the overarching program goals:

Empower the next generation of women in Cambodia, by promoting equal rights to education, eliminating the gender gap, and reducing the cultural and economic exclusion of women.

By increasing informed opportunity and choice, CASF is creating a virtuous cycle, in which women attain higher professional achievements and thus provide the next generation of girls with professional role models.

Lean Research Framework in Practice

The group recognized that the evaluation would be, of necessity for a small NGO, limited in scope, but wanted its impact to be significant, providing strategic information for the NGO and also informing best practices for CCT programs in general. As Fletcher School alumnas, we sought out contacts within our network that could offer best practices to inform the evaluation. That led directly to the collaboration between Fletcher, Feinstein, and MIT, and their work on Lean Research. Lean Research provided the ideal framework. By applying its principles of Rigor, Respect, Relevance, and Right-sized, we were able to carry out an efficient, cost-effective, and meaningful evaluation, demonstrating that it is possible to get actionable results in a manner that involves the stakeholders and deepens relationships with them.
The four principles were taken into account in an integrated manner throughout the process. The chart below outlines some of the most significant ways in which the Lean Research Framework influenced the CASF evaluation. It is followed by an elaboration on some of the most important points.

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<th>Rigorous</th>
<th>Respectful</th>
<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Right-sized</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research questions were developed from a Theory of Change and Hierarchy of Results</td>
<td>Informed stakeholder groups beforehand of purpose and logistics of field research and invited their participation</td>
<td>Conducted focus groups of varied stakeholder groups: Commune leaders and school officials, parents, alumni and current students, as well as non-affiliated community members</td>
<td>Used a TOC to guide the process and determine the most relevant questions to pursue</td>
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<td>Sought input from Fletcher School M &amp; E experts</td>
<td>Compensated participants based on local norms as defined by local university researchers</td>
<td>Fine-tuned our survey instruments to maximize open-ended questions that would elicit the most information</td>
<td>Excluded known facts about CCTs to further reduce scope and quantity of questions</td>
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<td>Recorded the focus groups for thoroughness</td>
<td>Carried out an informed consent process for all focus groups</td>
<td>Tailored the survey instrument to each particular stakeholder group and modified as needed during focus groups</td>
<td>The team included 2 bi-lingual interviewers, with one interviewing and one translating, as well as both written and oral recorders</td>
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<td>Used local contact to set up focus groups to ensure each stakeholder group was adequately represented</td>
<td>Provided food and drink and an informal, friendly ambience</td>
<td>Informed community members of how we would get back to them with the results of the study and announced a series of community meetings</td>
<td>Each focus group was limited to about 1 ½ hours in length</td>
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1 Before formulating our research questions, we sought input from two Fletcher School graduate students with expertise in Monitoring & Evaluation. Their advice led us to develop a retrospective theory of change for the CCT program, from which we formulated a comprehensive list of questions. The students reviewed our TOC and subsequent iterations of survey questions, to ensure that they met best practices in M & E.

2 We prepared a brief memo in Khmer explaining the purpose and procedure of the research. This memo was disseminated by our local Cambodian contact, CASF’s Educational Coordinator, to the entire community in Svay Rieng. Along with the memo, we sent them a preliminary list of the research questions, and asked for their input. For the commune leaders, we prepared a special printed invitation to convey a respect for their status, as we were advised to do by our local Cambodian contacts.

3 We were advised by Cambodian social scientists to give a small stipend to the community leaders for their time (the equivalent of $5-10, depending on their social status), and to provide school supplies to the teachers.

4 For the meetings with community members, we met in the open air public area of our local contact’s home (see photo on page 3). As is the tradition in this area, we paid local women to prepare a meal, and provided additional snacks and drinks. This created the feeling of a casual party, and left participants feeling comfortable and at ease.
For school and commune meetings, we met at the school or commune center (see photo on page 1), and provided drinks and snacks.

The overreaching question of our research was: What has been the effect of this CCT program on one rural Cambodian community? To ensure a comprehensive and objective response, we sought a wide range of voices in our research, from participants in the CASF program to the community at large.

At the end of each focus group, we let the participants know that we would get back to them with the results of our research. In February of 2017, a series of meetings were held to give community members a verbal account of our research findings and ask for their input. They agreed with our findings and gave their approval for publication of the report.

Faced with limited time and budget for the field research, we reduced our list of questions, in effect “right-sizing it,” to the essential ones. Questions were largely open-ended and served as guidelines for questioning. We left ourselves the freedom to modify interview questions on the spot, in order to follow up on interesting developments in conversations. We planned the focus groups to be 1 to 1 ½ hrs in length, which we felt was respectful of our participants’ time. In the end this worked well: Participants were happy to engage with us, and we got valuable information in a relatively short amount of time.

SUMMARY

One issue we grappled with was the inclusion of CASF staff members both to brief the community and invite participants to the focus groups, and to be present at the focus groups themselves. Would this approach curtail broad participation or lead some participants to withhold negative comments? Fortunately, the benefit of having participants associate the team with CASF appears to have outweighed any potential bias: The respect and trust accorded to CASF led both to widespread community participation and engaged, lively exchanges, which may not have occurred with outside researchers.

An example of the candor generated by our respectful approach was a significant moment in the evaluation when commune leaders expressed criticism of the CASF process for selecting students. As the team included staff, it was possible to immediately negotiate this difficult issue by suggesting changes. CASF has since worked further with the community to revise the selection process to address their concerns, and has implemented a new method that more closely involves community leaders.

Using the lean research framework encourages the researcher to look at the research process as one of continuous improvement. Not only did the framework pose questions that informed the design of this study, but it led to possible modifications in future studies. Keeping a log of lessons learned can be helpful to capture intended and unintended consequences.

In summary, the Lean Research Framework provided a lens through which our research group examined our research methodology, minimized the burden on participants, and maximized the impact of the evaluation process. Even given the constraints of budget and time, the methodology was adequately planned and implemented to yield meaningful and actionable results that will benefit the community where CASF works, provide CASF with critical data to better serve its mission, and inform best practices for other providers of CCTs.

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