Case Study: Ceja Andina

Embedding learning and participation

Key features

- Ceja Andina was among the first applications of Outcome Mapping and paved the way for many others.

- OM was used to enable a participatory approach to M&E with responsibilities distributed among the team rather than a designated M&E person.

- OM was seen to be consistent with the action learning approach of the project and the need for adaptation and flexibility.

Background

The Ceja Andina project was a three year project focusing on the sustainable use of agriculture and forest biodiversity in the northern Ecuadorian Andes, in a cloud forest region known as the Ceja Andina. It involved research-oriented work (both traditional and participatory), as well as policy development, social learning processes and strengthening local government. It was funded by the Canadian-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and implemented by Corporación EcoPar, an Ecuadorian research NGO, and worked with a wide range of stakeholders, including farmer research groups, small and medium municipalities and provincial councils, state agencies, environmental NGOs and rural schools.

OM was introduced to the Ceja Andina project by IDRC. When funding a project, IDRC look to ascertain how the monitoring and evaluation will be carried out. EcoPar did not have existing M&E processes and staff had limited formal experience of frameworks. IDRC presented a number of options, and OM was decided upon as the most suitable framework for the project. As well as the fact that it had already been used in another project in Ecuador, OM was seen as particularly suitable for Ceja Andina because of its focus on learning and participation: the project faced a challenging problem and needed to be open to adapting activities based on lessons learned during implementation, and to harness local creativity and interest with a participatory PM&E framework.

Introducing Outcome Mapping

The Ceja Andina project first constructed the Intentional Design stage of their framework in a 3-day workshop in March 2003 involving all of their boundary partners. After the workshop, the project team met several times to tie up the elements that hadn't been finished, and to decide on a timeline for applying OM; it was decided that they should revise

their framework every 6 months in periodic meetings involving their boundary partners, to coincide with their progress monitoring reports.

6 months in, Kaia Ambrose joined the team as project manager. The framework as it stood was in need of substantial revisions, as it had been the team's first experience with developing an M&E framework and they felt they had misunderstood some key concepts, and not been grounded enough in the realities of collecting and using information. With the help of the new coordinator, they carried out a substantial 'reality check', using a variety of tools and techniques to reformulate their OM framework.

They revised many elements, reorganised and rationalised the framework to become more manageable and practical. They edited and summarised the vision, mission, and progress markers in order to make them more usable. They elaborated strategies each semester in line with their semester plan, and gradually gained a better understanding of the tool and its use.

This process of designing the OM framework generated a number of important lessons about introducing and applying outcome mapping:

- It took time to really embed their understanding of OM. The first 6 month period was quite challenging. With no existing experience or training they initially implemented the framework with just the manual for guidance. It was a particular challenge because of the team's more 'technical' background (they were trained in the natural sciences), OM required a shift in mindset, in their theories of change and theories of development. There were some language issues in translating from English to Spanish, but this provided a very good opportunity for boundary partners to understand and take ownership of the terminology. It was also challenging to explain new and complicated ideas to a number of boundary partners, and it took a shift in mindset to get communities into the habit of writing down information.

- At the same time, this meant that there was a 'blank slate' to develop an M&E process for the project: there was no externally imposed framework that had to be completed, and no previous framework that the team were used to working with. This meant that Ceja Andina had an exciting opportunity to experiment with and learn from OM, which all team members found greatly rewarding.

- In this context, the 'reality check' after the first 6 months was crucial for the uptake of OM in Ceja Andina. It can be very difficult to produce a really good framework in the 3-day workshop at the start of a project, as people sometimes can "bite off too much", and taking on board all inputs and fashioning them into just one plan can be a difficult task. It was necessary to come back to the framework as a team to embed their understanding and refine their framework, especially to enable them to be both creative and realistic in performing their monitoring activities and setting priorities.

Successful application of OM was also down to some key individuals. OM had a 'champion' in a leadership role, and the energy, knowledge and thoughtfulness of the project director was crucial. This meant that OM was used as a mainstreamed tool for project management and learning, not just an accountability device. Another important factor was the supportive project coordinator at IDRC's regional office, who had a good understanding of OM and encouraged the team to experiment with their M&E process and to learn as they go along.

Applying OM

The Ceja Andina project used the full OM framework, with all the elements. There were a number of occasions where additional tools were used to complement the framework in the intentional design phase and also throughout the monitoring. Some were used to stimulate discussion on particular topics: for example, stakeholder analysis was used to help better identify and collectively formulate their boundary partners, and 'SWOT analysis' (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) was used to encourage discussion during the monitoring stages.

Other tools were used to encourage a culture of monitoring and learning. Team members were given 'field diaries' to assist with M&E activities, which helped promote a culture of writing and recording observations for reflection. They also used an idea from the 'Most Significant Change' tool, where groups in monitoring workshops would write a newspaper front page and headline about the project's progress, which fed into their monitoring activities. A suggestion for further improving the monitoring going forwards was to formulate outcome journals as interview questions, and to perform interviews and a survey to inform the monitoring exercise, in which the team could then discuss the data.

Extra efforts were also made to involve partners. They also held 'monthly consortiums' and half-day meetings which provided an 'open platform' for debate and feedback on thematic areas. These gave the project team opportunities to share results with a wider audience (beyond the boundary partners and including strategic partners), to gather evidence of behaviour changes, and helped build the capacity of their partners and enhance their understanding of OM. They took care to avoid using actual OM terms, except in one consortium a year where they used the meeting to discuss the intentional design elements of their OM framework with a wider audience.

A number of lessons emerged about fitting an OM framework to your context:

- OM's focus on key actors and their behaviour change was felt to facilitate a shift in mindset that was crucial in the context of natural resource management. The EcoPar researchers came from a 'hard science' background, but were kept focused on people and their behaviour which lead to an improved understanding of human development as the project progressed, and a more socially-focused view of change. This was important for this type of project. While a more 'traditional' focus on outputs might just have them planting trees, a focus on behaviour change

> OM facilitated a shift in mindset that was crucial in the context of natural resource management

encouraged them to look at whether communities knew how to look after their resources, understanding why people treated them in the way they did, and so on.

- Although it doesn't 'do it for you', OM gives you an opportunity to take on, use and experiment with participatory processes. Although it was initially a major shift to take on, this helped the project bring about an organic process of social learning among the team, its partners and the local community. The team members felt this was the key to the project's success, due to having local communities and institutions 'on board' with the changes they wanted to help achieve.

Similarly, the framework facilitated a culture of learning in the project. The basic premise that <u>you can contribute to change, but not attribute it</u> was felt to be a more honest approach. This helped make the team feel more comfortable, enabling them to be more open with monitoring activities. This in turn contributed to a sense of energy and purpose in these activities, and heightened efforts to truly take on the challenge of learning.

Concluding remarks

it is clear from this case study that this shift in a project's paradigm for development can require the project team to undergo an intensive learning process as they work to understand OM and embed it in the way they work. The Ceja Andina project seems to be an example of where the team members have successfully gone through this process, which has in turn brought great benefits to the outcomes of the project. This case study should give someone beginning such a process a number of important lessons for how to approach it.

Further information

Constructing collaborative learning: Outcome Mapping and its multiple uses in the project cycle of a SUB initiative. Kaia Ambrose (2004) http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation/ev-66580-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Outcome mapping in Ecuador: Enhancing learning in the M&E process. Kaia Ambrose. http://www.capacity.org/en/journal/practice_reports/enhancing_learning_in_the_m_e_process

Acknowledgements