



Case Study: RAPID Strategy 2005/06

Developing an operational strategy for a research team

Key features

This case study looks at the use of Outcome Mapping to help form the strategy of a research group within a development think tank in London, UK. This case study provides lessons that will be particularly useful if you are interested in:

- Introducing and implementing OM in stages over a period of time, or partially applying it
- Using OM as a practical planning tool
- Building an OM framework from your team's experiences and reflection on their everyday work
- Strengthening the strategy map and progress marker elements



Background

The Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) Programme works to understand and improve the contribution of research-based evidence to better policy and practice in the international development and humanitarian spheres, through a research, advisory services and public debate. The programme works on four main themes: the role of evidence in policy processes; improved communication and information systems for policy and practice; better knowledge management and learning for development agencies; and, approaches to institutional development for evidence-based policy. RAPID is situated within the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a London-based independent think tank working on international development and humanitarian issues. The ODI's mission is to inspire and inform development policy and practice by locking together high quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate.

Three central areas of RAPID's work include: looking at processes for knowledge and learning in development programmes and projects; assessing and using innovative PM&E frameworks; and, planning, monitoring and evaluating efforts to influence policy with research. OM is therefore highly relevant to RAPID's work, and when the opportunity arose in 2005 2 members of RAPID were sent to an Outcome Mapping training course in Europe. On their return, the decision was made to try to apply the framework. It was hoped that OM could help ensure RAPID makes a coherent and sustained effort at pursuing their overarching aims, across a number of different projects they are involved in.

Introducing and applying Outcome Mapping



Due to demanding schedules, it was not possible to hold a 3-day intensive workshop to develop the framework. Instead, the decision was made to formulate the sequential stages of the framework piece-by-piece. This involved the drafting of individual parts of the framework and then discussing these elements as a group across a number of workshops and meetings.

Email collaboration was used to develop the vision and mission statements but there was not a substantial amount of engagement in the process. It was not until a later workshop when reactions, critical comments and constructive ideas were received. The quarterly team meeting provided a suitable opportunity for team member to engage in the process. The Boundary Partners, Outcome Challenges, Progress Markers and Strategy Map sections of the framework were developed. These were provided as a list, then discussed and refined as a group, and roughly prioritised. There were some discussions about the progress markers for specific boundary partners, however on reflection some team members felt that they were



only covered at a superficial level. The strategy map and progress markers were started in the workshop, however they were not completed.

Team members were each assigned boundary partners, with the intention that after the meeting they would be responsible for designing strategies, and monitoring and evaluating activities with relation to their particular group. However, there was little

engagement after the workshop and the process petered out. In this way, the OM process was explicitly used for planning, to help inform the strategy, but not for monitoring or evaluation.

The introduction of OM in parts, with only two members of the team being involved in every stage, set a background against which its implementation was made quite difficult. A number of lessons about introducing OM can be drawn:

- Introducing new concepts and frameworks requires a substantial amount of ‘quality time’ – while it may be possible to engage with such processes over email and at the same time as a number of other projects, this is far from ideal. Face-to-face discussion and facilitation allows the context of the exercise to be more solidly set, and a richer debate about the meaning and relevance of new ideas can take place.
- Another factor that points to the importance of intensive workshops is that not everyone is used to taking a broad strategic view of their project. This can hinder some staff from easily applying the OM concepts in their context (some team members commented that the workshop exercise seemed “too abstract”, “too theoretical”, or “too hypothetical”). A great deal of value can be gained from incorporating the tacit knowledge of these team members, so it may be worthwhile involving many staff in an OM training session prior to the meeting.



Applying OM

Although the efforts to develop a full OM framework did not turn out as planned, there are a number of ways in which it has proved useful for RAPID. OM has contributed concepts and ideas to a number of activities in RAPID, such as in the communications strategy, in the M&E framework for one of its key initiatives, and various other projects such as COPLA. OM has given extra details, concepts and tools to help refine team members thinking around various existing ideas and goals. This is evidenced, for example, by the growing body of work on complexity theory, the fact that RAPID now champions OM, promoting it as a useful PM&E approach (among many), and the development and coordination of the OM Learning Community .

The client and contract-driven nature of RAPID's work makes implementing an overarching PM&E framework difficult: RAPID and ODI research staff in general tend to focus on learning within each individual project, and on satisfying the requirements of different clients and donors. Learning systematically across all of our work is more difficult, however there are two ways in which OM has contributed towards this task:

- RAPID's log frame (with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), for the CSPP) is infused with OM principles: the aims and goals focus on behaviour change, and it has been negotiated with DFID that it can be adapted and revised when needed.
- Following on from the team's exposure to OM, an 'impact log' was created, based on the OM journals , which has been used ever since. Any signs of uptake or influence of RAPID's work is recorded in the log. Over time this has built up to a useful resource for learning, as a large body of (often anecdotal) evidence contributing towards a picture of the behaviour changes we are contributing to.

This case generates a number of lessons about applying OM to different contexts:

- A number of factors combined to make it difficult to fully apply OM in this context: the task of monitoring and evaluating the influence of research is an extremely difficult task, there is no pre-existing 'culture' of systematic M&E in ODI, and the necessities of contract funding make it difficult to find space to put the required time and resources into these activities. In such contexts, it may not be fruitful to implement OM as a full PME framework, whether it is introduced in one go or over a number of workshops.
- The more fruitful route seems to be introducing it 'by stealth'. OM is not fully and explicitly applied, but rather staff look to use elements of the framework, and different concepts and principles where possible. This might involve giving new concepts and terms to staff already persuaded of an idea, for example RAPID staff were already

An extract from RAPID's vision...Civil society, in general is capable of influencing pro poor policy processes using research and evidence in the local and global levels. Policy makers in donor governments, international aid agencies and national and local governments in developing countries follow robust evidence based policy making processes. Researchers and Practitioners engage actively with policy processes in multiple spaces of participation...



convinced of the need to look at behaviour change as a key indicator in their line of work and the concepts of boundary partners, outcome challenges and progress markers added tools to apply this. It may also involve advocating for the framework and for its core principles where there is not yet full uptake or understanding, as is seen (for example) in RAPID's altered log frame.

- Having said this, OM successfully helped structure the the group's strategy. As well as other fruitful discussions and outcomes, important progress was made on prioritising potential boundary partners, for example the decision was made not to work with certain boundary partner groups (for example, the private sector), which had been part of RAPID's strategy before. Given the good fit between the structure of OM and the task faced by think tanks and research institutes in being systematic about influencing policy and practice, it is not surprising that the planning workshops held significant value. It could be worthwhile using OM as a tool to structure planning workshops, even where it isn't immediately possible to use the framework for full monitoring activities afterwards.

Concluding remarks

One suggestion was that RAPID should have chosen a different one of the three options initially on the table: 'All at once' was not possible, but also in retrospect 'piece by piece' might be too hard to apply effectively in this context. One team member remarked that perhaps the 'stealth' option would've been the most realistic option, and suggested that if they'd focused their efforts on doing that as well as possible, they could have applied OM principles by stealth throughout the whole of ODI. In order to have made the 'piece by piece' option more effective, it was suggested that more group preparation, or an OM training session before the workshop, would have helped in keeping people 'on board' and foster enthusiasm within the whole group.

Further information

Helping researchers become policy entrepreneurs. ODI Briefing Papers 53. John Young and Enrique Mendizabal. 2009.

Bridging Research and Policy in International Development. ODI Briefing Papers. John Young and Julius Court. 2004.

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A synthesis paper has been published by ODI and is available from www.odi.org.uk.

