Plan UK Experience of Child-Led Evaluation in Zimbabwe PPA programme Executive summary

Introduction

In 2011 Plan International UK secured a Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA) with the Department for International Development (DFID). This strategic funding has been used to develop the Building Skills for Life Programme. The programme seeks to empower adolescent girls and address the unique challenges they face in accessing quality education across seven countries:[1] Cambodia, Mali, Malawi, Kenya, Pakistan, Rwanda and Zimbabwe.

After three years of programming, in May 2014 a new Outcome Monitoring System (OMS) was developed for the PPA programme. OMS combines quantitative with qualitative data sourced from all the programme's stakeholders on all the factors identified as key barriers to adolescent girls' education. The inclusion of more child-centred methodologies for collecting data is a key feature of OMS, which has helped to lay the foundations for piloting child-led evaluations (CLE) in three of the participating countries: Cambodia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. This report presents the methodology and findings from the second of these CLE pilots. This experience took place in Zimbabwe where the programme's progress was assessed against the five DAC evaluation criteria,[2] with the addition of equity.

The programme in Zimbabwe has the following objectives:

Support for quality education:

> *Parents and communities support education for girls and boys.*

SRHR:
> *Education on sexual and reproductive health and prevent early marriages.*

Reduce violence and abolish corporal punishment:

> *Reduce violence in schools and communities and reduce acceptance of violence and corporal punishment.*

Gender equality:

> *Increase girls' confidence and make them feel valued at home, at school and in the community.*

Participation and accountability:

> *More accountable and child-friendly schools.*

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[1] During the first phase of the programme (April 2011 to March 2014) the programme was implemented in nine countries and included, in addition to the current seven, El Salvador and Sierra Leone.
[2] http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm

Economic barriers to education:
> *Economic support for girls for school fees and uniforms.*

Support for household income:
> *Increase household income through saving groups (VSLAs).*

Extensive desk research into previous experiences of evaluations led by children revealed that despite many policies suggesting strategies for beneficiary involvement in monitoring & evaluation (M&E), children are rarely involved in evaluations. When they are, they are generally only asked to evaluate the level of child involvement rather than the entire projects or programmes. Conducting a full CLE therefore presented a unique opportunity to strengthen Plan's ability and capacity to meaningfully involve children in M&E, generating learning and recommendations for similar activities in the future.

Methodology

Ten child evaluators (CEs) were selected to lead the evaluation from among the programme beneficiaries – five boys and five girls. They received initial training in three after school sessions, familiarising them with each of the programme objectives. This process also enabled them to define the evaluation questions and select those they wished to use from a list of child-friendly data collection tools.

Six focus group discussions (FGDs) with girls and six with boys were conducted and entirely facilitated by the CEs. In addition, there were four FGDs with mothers and four with fathers. Key Informant interviews with three community leaders and three interviews with teachers also formed part of the evidence collected. As well as this qualitative data, the analysis and assessment process was also based on OMS data to ensure a broader base of evidence.

The choice to enable the CEs to take all the important decisions required the development of tools, methodologies and processes that would enable their full understanding of abstract and sometimes complex concepts. These can be broadly organised into:

1. Facilitation methodologies for training the CEs
2. Methodology to enable CEs to make evaluative judgements

1. Facilitation methodology for training the CEs

The one day training for the CEs included:

a) The problem tree and shadow analysis
The CEs were introduced to the programme objectives and logic, findings from the baseline and other learning using a re-worked version of the well-known **problem tree**. They were then asked to discuss the issues that cause children to drop out of school (or fail to enrol), and consider whether there were any other significant problems not tackled by the programme.

b) Ranking barriers to adolescent's education in order of priority
The CEs **ranked all of the problems** identified through the problem tree**,** including those they identified themselves, in order of their importance for keeping girls and boys in school. This exercise was also repeated during the FGDs to validate the weight of each problem from the perspective of the different categories of beneficiaries.

c) Who carries the biggest burden?
This exercise focused on equity and identifying those most vulnerable in communities.

d) Defining the questions

The CEs **developed questions for each stakeholder category** (adolescents, parents, leaders and teachers).

e) Selecting the data collection tools

The CEs selected **a method to collect information** for each of the questions they planned to ask the stakeholders, from a list of child-friendly data collection tools. These had been preselected for offering two advantages:
- A more visual and interactive format that would better enable engagement with children and less-literate adults
- Minimal requirements for note taking

This formed a package of activity-based debates for the FGDs that alternated questions with discussion-stimulating activities. A pilot was conducted where the CEs ran the entire exercise, followed by a reflection session. This focused on verifying the data collected satisfied the evaluation's requirement and on the CEs' application of the different techniques.

2. Methodology to enable child evaluators to make evaluative judgements

The CEs were helped to fully understand each DAC evaluation criterion and produce a modulated judgement with a series of tools, broadly falling into two categories: visuals and rubrics.

Visuals are essentially images or visual exercises used to represent concepts that might otherwise be difficult or abstract. Visuals also help to make the information more appealing for children.

Rubrics present different levels or degrees of achievement, clearly describing each level. For the entire evaluation thirteen rubrics were created. To make the process more child-friendly, the rubrics' levels were designated by an animal: the bigger the animal the higher the level of achievement. In ascending order the animals used were: lizard, goose, deer, cheetah and cow. Visual exercises were sometimes used to introduce concepts and ideas or to pre-select a starting level on a rubric. The CEs would then confirm or disprove this after examining the entire rubric, using evidence collected.

Once the CEs had examined each evaluation component in detail, they combined all the elements together into a global overview. This was achieved through the methodology of the Apodeixis Ornithorhynchus[3] - a fantasy animal with five body parts: head, body, front and back legs, tail; each corresponding to a DAC criterion. In addition, the head is adorned with a feature representing equity.

Limitations

The limitations of the study can be summarised as follows:
- The number of respondents consulted during the course of the evaluation was relatively small and selected only from the easier to access locations. This limits the possibility of generalising the results to the entire programme.
- The design of this study is primarily qualitative and does not follow previously used methodologies. Therefore, the findings cannot easily be compared to the baseline or previous evaluations of this programme.
- The fact that school principals were responsible for the selection of respondents for the adolescent FGDs could potentially have introduced a bias. However, they were asked to select participants at random, and frequently did so in our presence.
- The data collected by the CEs and the OMS data was collected in communities where Plan Zimbabwe and partners implement several projects and other NGOs

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[3] Evidence platypus

are present. Consequently it might be difficult for respondents to discern between providers for each activity, or directly link changes observed to the work of a precise programme.

Findings

Results

Overall achievement level for results: Between Deer and Cheetah
To evaluate the programme's results, the CEs considered the evidence gathered for each programme objective in turn, and assigned an achievement level using a rubric.

Quality of education – achievement level: Cheetah
The CEs supported this choice with evidence from group discussions of raised levels of awareness and commitment to quality education among the parents and adolescents. They also spoke of the efforts by the programme to bring girls back to school who had previously dropped out. Some parents also felt that the quality of teaching had improved in recent years.

Gender – achievement level for two CEs: Cow; achievement level for 8 CEs: Cheetah
Evidence from discussions with parents supported this conclusion – for example, fathers said they would never take a girl out of school if she was performing better than the boy and they could only afford to keep one child in school. Adolescents noticed that chores in schools were now shared equally between boys and girls. However, some boys said that if a girl was elected as a school representative they would not comply with her decisions.

Sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) – achievement level: Deer
Similarly to the Cambodia study, the CEs supported their conclusion with data from the OMS showing that high numbers of adolescents fail to answer three basic questions on the topic. The CEs felt that adolescents been exposed to the information but had not assimilated the message. This could be seen in the high proportion of students dropping out of school due to early pregnancies.

Participation and accountability – achievement level: Cheetah
The CEs found that students were more involved in school decision making and more opportunities to participate had opened up. However, they concluded that some work still needed to be done before declaring that all aspects of school life were now entirely participatory and inclusive.

Reduce violence and abolish corporal punishment – achievement level: an even split between Deer and Goose
Whilst all CEs agreed that progress had been achieved, there was also broad agreement that corporal punishment was still widely practiced. Most students reported that indiscriminate and disproportionate punishment had mostly stopped.

Economic barriers to education – achievement level: Cheetah
The CEs felt scholarships had been well received, although respondents also pointed out that not all those in need had received them, most notably boys. They also remarked that the support provided in this way was still insufficient for the poorest. The programme created several village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) to support parents with educational costs. The CEs reported that in most cases this had been a successful strategy. However, there was some evidence that not all parents were giving priority to education over other household needs.

To return their overall assessment for the programme, the CEs calculated an 'average' of all the animals. This was verified with the corresponding rubric.

Relevance

The CEs assigned differing levels of achievement for the relevance of the programme to each group they interviewed.

Achievement level for relevance to girls, mothers and fathers: Deer
Achievement level for relevance to boys: Goose

The CEs considered two elements of relevance:

- Alignment of programme objectives with the needs identified by beneficiaries
- Transparency and accountability

The CEs selected the overall achievement level for this criterion for each group by drawing an 'average animal' between the two elements of relevance.

Effectiveness

Again, the CEs assigned differing levels of achievement for the effectiveness of the programme for each group they interviewed.

Achievement level for effectiveness for girls, boys and mothers: Deer
Achievement level for fathers: Cheetah

To assess the effectiveness of the programme, the CEs looked at the depth of transformation and coverage in relation to the needs and aspirations expressed by the beneficiaries through the ranking exercise. This differed from the methodology used in the Cambodia study, adding a new layer to the understanding of the programme.

Efficiency

Overall achievement level for efficiency: Deer

A visual exercise, using a traffic light matrix, enabled the CEs to arrive at a general score for the efficiency of the programme. They compared the level of achievement from their evaluation of the programme results with the level of budget allocated for each result area.

Sustainability

Overall achievement level: Cheetah

To assess sustainability, the CEs considered three dimensions: people's motivation, means and ability to sustain the changes achieved by the programme.
- Motivation – achievement level: Cheetah
- Means – achievement level: Deer
- Ability – achievement level: Cheetah
An 'average animal' was drawn between these three dimensions to assign an overall level of achievement for sustainability.

Equity

Overall achievement level: Goat
The CEs' deliberations on equity were guided by a rubric with visual representations of various possible combinations of the effects the programme could have had on disparities within the community.

Conclusions

Finally, after assessing the level of achievement under each criterion, the 'apodeixis ornithorhynchus' was created, to the CEs' great amusement. As their assessment of the programme performance had differed according to the perspectives of the four stakeholders groups, three beasts were created.

The evaluation from the perspectives of girls and mothers had resulted in an animal with half the body (results) of a cheetah and half of a deer, the forelegs (effectiveness) and hind legs (efficiency) and head (relevance) of a deer, the tail (sustainability) of a cheetah and horns of a goat (equity).

Having found that the programme had been more successful at addressing the issues closer to the fathers' hearts, the resulting animal had half the body (results) of a cheetah and half of a deer, hind legs (efficiency) and head (relevance) of a deer, the forelegs (effectiveness) and tail (sustainability) of a cheetah and horns of a goat (equity).

Finally, as their assessment had revealed that the choice of intervention had been less relevant to the priorities of boys, they delivered an animal with half the body (results) of a cheetah and half of a deer, the forelegs (effectiveness) and hind legs (efficiency) of a deer, the tail (sustainability) of a cheetah, the head (relevance) of a goose and horns of a goat (equity).

The overall assessment of the programme is broadly positive, with the majority of the evidence platypus being a deer but with many features of the cheetah. This indicates an achievement level of approximately 3.5 points in a five point scale.

Learning and recommendations on the child-led process

The child-led process used for this evaluation has been a fascinating experience for all those involved and undoubtedly demonstrated that **children have the ability to deliver a credible and nuanced evaluation with integrity and analytical ability**. Of particular note is the very short training time that was required for them to fully perform their function. The total cost of this process was also very modest: approximately US$5000. All the methodologies developed for this research worked superbly and even beyond expectation, demonstrating the feasibility of involving children in evaluations.

However, the data collected by the CEs was entirely qualitative. Prior to launching the OMS, this exercise would have been limited in its scope. Several insights revealed by the OMS shaped the analysis in this evaluation. Some of the weaknesses in the programme's approach would not have surfaced with the exclusively qualitative research carried out by the CEs.

If intending to continue involving children in evaluation and M&E activities, the learning from this experience suggests the following considerations:

- Where there is no OMS equivalent source of quantitative data on programmatic outcomes, it might be more appropriate to have a mixed-team evaluation comprised of adults collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data whilst children conduct their evaluation in parallel.

- Where programme staff are not fully convinced of the validity and use of qualitative methods, there is a risk that an entirely qualitative evaluation conducted by children may not be regarded as credible. Therefore staff and donor confidence in qualitative evidence should be developed prior to routinely pursuing a child-led process.