



Developing Your Project Evaluation and Learning

Follow up notes from the Evaluation Network Meeting in Dundalk, 26th May, 2010

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INTRODUCTION

The following notes are designed to help you develop an effective approach to evaluation. They begin from the work done at the networking event, which will give you the framework for developing a simple but effective evaluation which is true to your project. We then offer suggestions about how you can add indicators and ways of showing the difference made so that you can assess progress and monitor outcomes.

Please try out these guide notes and let us know what you think so we can develop our support to you as we go.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: WHY BOTHER?

Evaluation will help you and enhance the development of your project. First of all it invites you to be clear about what you are actually doing. A clear idea of what you are trying to achieve helps you to

1. Learn by doing - develop your skills and know-how to be able to do things better
2. Explain what you are doing and what you have achieved to others
3. Show what can be achieved to help convince funders and decision makers see why they should support community food initiatives in the future

Having a clear idea what you **want** to do and **trying** to do it can tell you a lot about the people you are trying to help. It can also bring to light any issues of community food initiatives you maybe had not realised were there. Remember, **there is no such thing as failure, only better understanding.**

Don't just react and panic, plan and learn!

Ok, so what was all that about with the Flip Chart sheets at the Network Meeting?

It was about building your project story, defining its aspirations, the work you are doing, the thinking you have behind it and clarifying its significance. The project story sets the scene for defining the indicators you use in the evaluation, but it also includes the assumptions you are making about what will work and why, which you can revisit in the light of experience.

Using the flip chart sheets we showed you how you can build up your project story. Doing this carefully, thinking about the words you use, you can become very clear about how the things you are doing or plan to do will add up to achieving the aspiration of your project (its aim). This means you then have a 'map' you can use to work out where you have got to and where you are trying to go over the coming years. You could change it or add to it in the light of experience and see how the story you write at the end of your project differs from the one you had at the start.

The different steps in the story and the words you use to describe them will be the basis for identifying outputs, outcomes and impact indicators which you can measure. They also help you to think about how you can report the significance of your work to HFfA and **safefood**.

REVISION: HOW TO THINK ABOUT WRITING A PROJECT STORY

There were five steps to writing the story which we worked on:

1. The Aim of the project
2. What achieving that aim could mean for policy makers and the public good
3. What the main Areas of Work are that make up your project
4. What Immediate Benefits each area of work can contribute
5. What longer term (Consequential) benefits they will provide, all being well

Using these guide notes and some exercises to help you revisit the words you used at the meeting and see whether you are happy with them.

An important Skill to Work on: **Being Clear**

The project story should be able to describe what you are doing in such a way that you (or anyone else) can easily decide if it has happened or not. A good test is to imagine yourself presenting your project to a class of primary school children – how would you explain it to them so they appreciate what you are doing?

Hints: Stick to one thing at a time – don't mix ideas together. Also, ask 'will I be able to tell if I've achieved this or not?' This is a good test of being down to earth in what you are describing.

Each time you write something ask:

- Will someone else be able to understand this easily?
- Am I talking about the same thing or are ideas getting mixed up?
- Will I be able to tell if I've achieved this or not?

STEP 1: BUILDING THE STORY & THE PROJECT AIM

Ok, so thinking about being clear as a key skill. if your **project aim** is

“To help everyone eat better”

Will you be able to tell if you’ve succeeded or not? Does it mean eat better food or be better behaved at the table?

How about this one?

“To provide healthy food to the people who use our services and support them to include it in their daily diet”

This one is clearer – it specifies who you are aiming at and what you want them to do. By the end of the project it should be easier for you to judge whether you did it or not

Look again at the aim you came up with at the meeting – is it possible to improve on it to be absolutely unambiguous?

STEP 2: THE PUBLIC VALUE OF YOUR WORK: LINKING WHAT YOU DO TO WHAT OTHERS HAVE DONE

It can be difficult for a small project to show how important it is. Policy makers usually only really sit up and take note when they think a project will address their priorities – for example, reducing heart disease or suicide rates, obesity, diabetes etc.

You probably can’t prove that you have done this yourself but you can show that what you do is likely to contribute. How?

HfFA can help you to identify research and evidence done by others that can show that by increasing access to healthy food there is a reduction in these major health problems. By referring to this work you can help people understand the significance of your contribution.

Next time you meet Georgina ask her to give you some suggestions. Or ask Jason or myself.

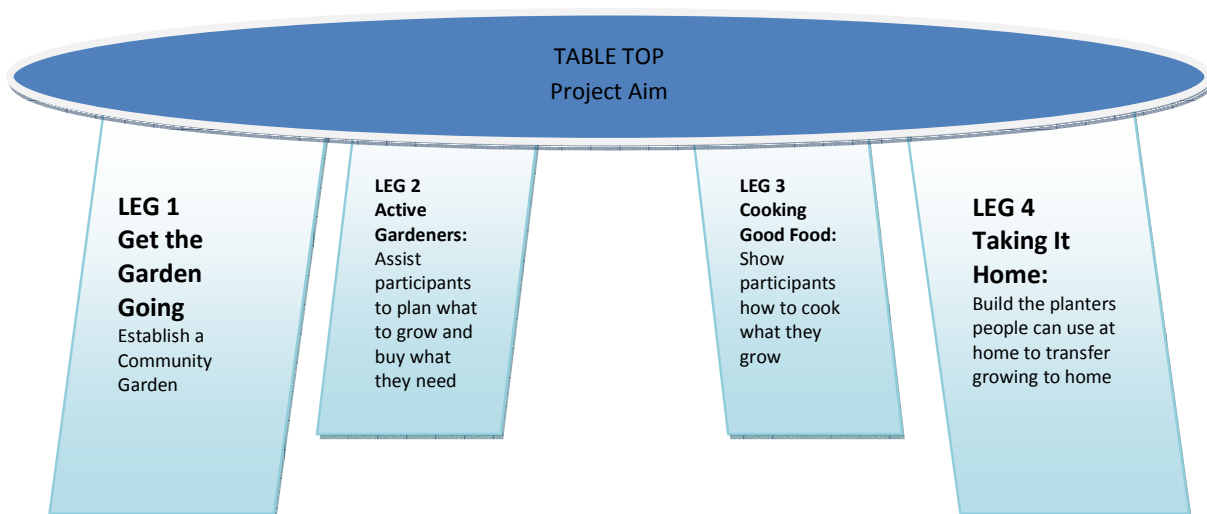
STEP 3: IDENTIFYING THE MAIN AREAS OF WORK.

In designing your project you have thought about what the important building blocks are that will achieve your overall aim; not just for today but in the longer term. To capture these key building blocks or Areas of Work (rather than thinking about all the small tasks you will be doing to make each one actually happen) think of a chair or table and its legs. Unless each leg is in place, the chair or table might wobble or

fall over when it is put to use, or not stand up in the first place! What are the legs on your chair? How do they support your target individual? (Hint: Imagine that person now – think of them in the community garden, cafe, community room). Note: you may have more of a bench than a chair, with perhaps 5 or 6 legs!! The main thing is there are no ‘strays’ – area of work which don’t contribute to achieving your project aim – strays could cost valuable time and energy so look out for them!!

Exercise: Describe each leg as a distinct area of work. It is helpful to give each area of work a title

An example taken from the Network Meeting included:



STEP 4: THE IMMEDIATE BENEFITS (RESULTS OR OUTCOMES)

Each area of work can provide some immediate benefits to participants. If you deliver a training workshop for example, it can immediately provide participants with a new skill, some new knowledge or insights, and maybe some increased confidence to go out and do things differently.

Hint 1: Testing the Story – Catching the Strays

Try converting your ‘Legs’ into a single story and telling it to someone else out loud.

Do your ‘legs’ come together to support the chair? Try telling the story of how your key actions work together. The immediate benefits of each one should come together to form the support of the seat of the chair, (the seat might be your project aim). Here’s an example from one of the Network meeting flipcharts:

A food audit (which is made available to everyone) ensures people in the target community or neighbourhood know where they can get healthy affordable foods or the knowhow and materials to

*grow their own. Training in how to cook healthy food encourages them to include it in their daily diet and to go out and buy it knowing it tastes good. Training them to grow their own food gives them another way to access affordable food if they have more time (and less money). A food charter builds support across the community to help everyone feel they are working together in building healthy food into their lives. **This all adds up to reducing food poverty in Knocknaheeny and Hollyhill (Project Aim)***

So, do your actions fit together easily into a logical story or do you find some seem to sit by themselves? Do you struggle to explain why an action is there? Alternatively, are there any gaps? This is a good way to spot them.

Do your actions and their benefits / consequences naturally lead you to your project aim? If the aim seems too abstract can you make it more concrete? If the aim is different from the outcomes do you have the right aim or the right actions?!

Hint 2: Being Clear

Remember that early plea to test your clarity? Here are a couple of examples – each will be very clear to the project leaders but less clear to the general public

Example 1

Area of Work: Put healthy eating on the agenda

Immediate benefit: awareness and knowledge

Comment: Who's agenda is healthy eating being put on? Who will have the awareness and knowledge? How will this all be done? This is a valuable objective but it isn't yet set out in practical terms to be able to evaluate it.

Recommendation: Look at your areas of work and see if any could be made more concrete.

Example 2

Area of work: **Healthy Eating Policies in Community Settings:** Put in place healthy eating policies in community settings / set up a steering group with relevant groups / agencies -

Immediate benefit: Reduction in consumption of unhealthy food / groups have the opportunity to engage in a partnership approach

Comment: In this case there are two 'benefits' achieved from one area of work which is fine – very good value! It would benefit from showing how each combine into one area (rather than two tasks) e.g. "Bring together community groups and agencies to draw up healthy eating policies which can be used in community settings"

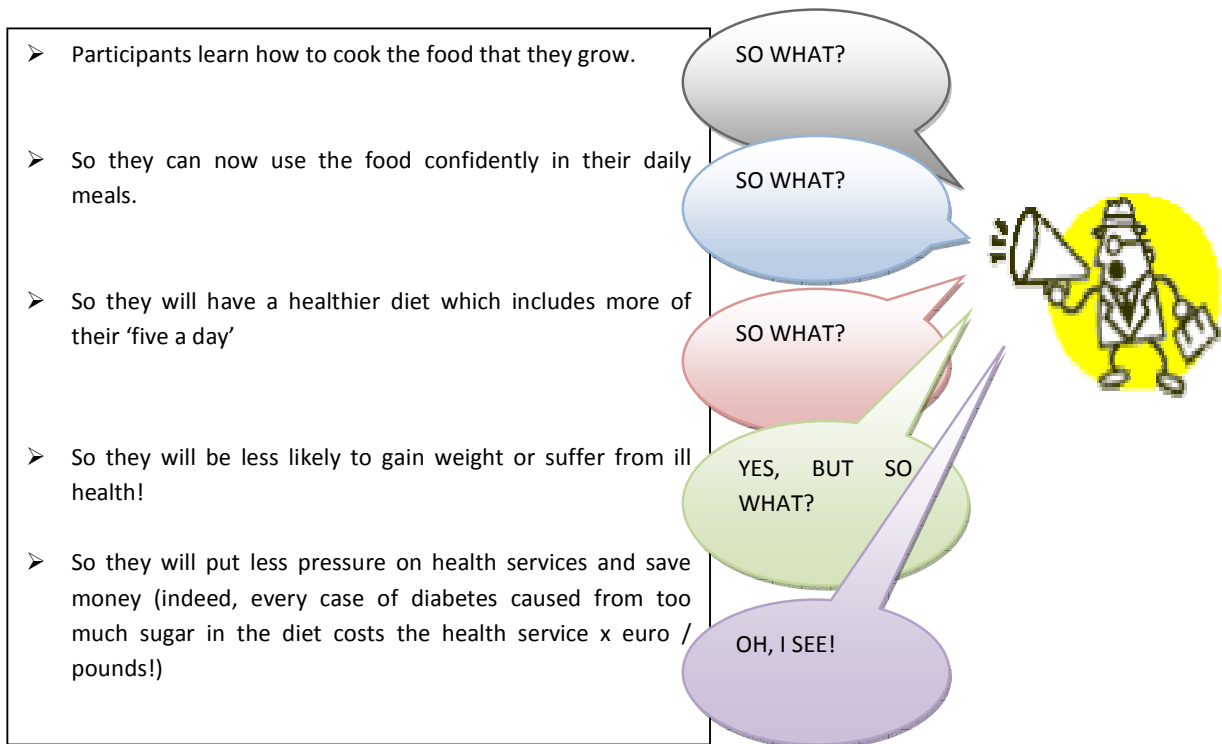
Of the immediate benefits, the first (reduction in consumption of unhealthy food) does not immediately follow – it may be more of an impact (longer term) – what about "groups are able to promote healthy eating more effectively and consistently in their settings with the people that use their services". The second benefit is fine.

Recommendation: Make sure to show how distinct separate parts to an area of work fit together and watch out for ‘Strays’!! :

STEP 5: THE CONSEQUENCES (IMPACTS) AND INTRODUCING THE ‘SO WHAT?’ TEST

Each of the immediate benefits you deliver across your key areas of work can have a longer term consequence. So for example, learning new skills in cooking can mean a person can go on to cook healthier food more often.

You can extend this thinking as much as you like by using the ‘SO WHAT ? Test. It goes like this



As you can see, doing the ‘So What?’ Exercise should at the end bring you to your policy implications which you looked at in Step 2. Taking the SO WHAT trail should bring you right through from your key Areas of Work to your overall contribution to the public good thus making your aims and objectives clear and focused.

Hint : Realising the longer term ‘consequential benefits’ of each step in the SO WHAT trail will quickly take you outside of your projects ability to influence – ok, so you taught people how to cook good food, but do they then go on to use it at home really? You might want to add in an extra action or two which try to ensure consequential benefits are realised – for example, setting up a cookery club so that people continue to support and encourage each other to cook in the longer term, until it becomes a habit.

SO YOU GOT YOUR STORY RIGHT, NOW WHAT? WHEN DO WE GET TO THE EVALUATION PART?

Your project story provides the frame to hang your indicators from – rather than have them sit on their own, you can now tie them to the beanpole of your project story so that they can bear fruit (or beans, whatever you like). Here’s how it works:

Take one area of work

Add a target number to turn it into an Output

For example, if the area is cook-it training workshops, decide how many workshops you hope to give, and how many participants you hope will attend each one, e.g.

6 workshops with a total of 50 people attending (about 8 different people attend each workshop)

Or

20 people attend all of 3 workshops on establishing, managing and then harvesting from a community garden

Next, Add your indicators

Look at the immediate benefit and consequential benefits you described for this area of work. You can use them as the basis for your indicator. Here’s an example:

| Area of Work | Immediate Benefit | Consequential Benefits |
|--|---|--|
| Joining Forces (Using the food garden to) Increase inter-generational activity linking youth and the elderly | Break down barriers between young people and older people | Reduces isolation for older people Allows young people to learn from older people Better relations between older people and younger people which strengthen community |
| Indicator : | Number of younger and older people observed working together (see descriptor scale below) | Number of older people who feel less isolated (use short questionnaire) Number of young people who have learnt something from older people Attitudes of young people and older people to one another |

Next, think about the best way to **test** your indicator. In the above example, how isolated people feel **before and after** the project can be tested by asking a short set of questions e.g.

1. How often do you spend time with people other than your family? (every day / once or twice a week, once or twice a fortnight, once or twice a month, hardly ever)
2. How often do you meet and chat with younger (Older) people? (as above)
3. Do you feel you can call on someone if you need to?
4. Do you ever feel lonely? (never, rarely, now and again, quite often, all the time)

Similarly, you can ask about attitudes to younger or older people, for example by using clichés

Do you agree or disagree with the following?

- Young people today do not have the same respect for their elders we used to have
- Young people don't know how to do practical things like repairs or making things
- I feel afraid of young people when I see them on street corners
- Most young people don't care

Repeat the exercise after the project and adjust the wording:

Thinking about the young people you have met during this project, do you agree or disagree with the following?

(as above)

A Descriptor Scale

Descriptor scales are a handy way to capture subtle changes in behavior that you can observe, and which can help show your work is making a difference. For the objective of encouraging interaction between younger and older people in the above example, look at the scale below. It describes a gradual improvement in the level of interaction that is being achieved by this area of work over the course of the project.

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Young people and older people do not mix at all | Young people and older people both attend training or gardening sessions but do not mix | Young people are willing to work with older people if paired up during formal training or gardening sessions | One or two young people and older people are seen working together outside of formal sessions | Young people and older people are frequently seen working together in the garden or in managing produce |
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

You can make observations periodically or after key events. That way you can begin to see which of the ideas you try out under this area of work make the biggest difference.

For example, you might have run two or three sessions but young people and older people are still pretty much keeping themselves to themselves. So you put on a Barbeque using produce from the garden and maybe a storytelling session and music as well – the barriers are broken and thereafter you see much more interaction – make a note to do that again next time, or to tell others!

THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT!

Here's another example to help you think about your own Areas of Work and indicators – here we have offered alternative ways of wording the benefits to make it easier to add indicators – it also continues our theme of 'being clear'!

| Area of Work | Immediate Benefit | Consequential Benefits |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Active Gardeners: Support participants to draw up plans on what to grow in the community garden and provide training in how to grow it</p> | <p>Learning how to grow produce (or) participants gain the skills and confidence to grow their own produce</p> | <p>Gain confidence in growing their own veg (or) participants take active responsibility for growing their own produce NB: there are other potential outcomes you might aim for in this sort of work, such as reducing isolation; building the capacity of the community to be self sufficient; or improving the local environment</p> |
| <p>Indicator :</p> | <p>Participants feel confident they have the skills to grow their own produce Participants intend to grow more produce in the coming year</p> | <p>Number of participants who produce plans and take forward production of their own vegetables (in the community garden?) NB: there is in some projects another area of work aimed at helping people to grow food at home – this might be important because it may be impractical for them to continue to use the community garden if others need the opportunity to learn - if you aren't doing this it might be worth thinking about the practicalities</p> |
| <p>Measures:</p> | <p>Ask participants to score how confident they feel either to grow food or perhaps break down the skills eg how confident would you be to plan / purchase / grow / harvest / cook - this set of questions can cover other 'Legs of the chair' and could be asked rather than expect participants to write.</p> | <p>Monitor / check in with participants to see if they have produced a plan / grown produce if at home, or monitor who does so in the community garden by getting people to 'book' a space NB: some sort of follow up might help ensure this happens</p> |

FINALLY...

Once you have your indicators and measures identified for your Areas of Work think about and plan when you need to measure. Ideas might be:

- Measure at the start to get a baseline (eg for changes in attitude or knowledge)
- Measure after key events
- Measure after an area of work comes to an end
- Measure every 3 months (eg health benefits or things which are achieved gradually such as weight loss or sense of wellbeing)