Did we make a difference?

The On the Line project celebrated the similarities and differences of life along the zero meridian line, linking people in eight countries through a series of social, educational, sporting, and arts events. Hilary Atchison reports on how the impact of the project was assessed.

On the Line was an innovative project both in terms of its approach to public education and the unique nature of the partnership. Serious attention was therefore given to impact assessment (IA). We felt sure that there would be much to learn about the effectiveness of the approach and strategies adopted, as well as the impact of the partnership itself, which could be valuable to the partners and participating organisations and inform future projects.

Our Approach
Firstly we consulted with people who had experience of IA work in Oxfam Policy and Evaluation. There is an emerging IA methodology within development NGOs (Roche). They need to know not simply what is being done but what effect their work has, which interventions bring about change, which do not, and why. Equally, there is a need for them to be accountable to donors and for public money. We felt that we could learn substantially from this approach.

Rather than trying to evaluate all aspects of how a project is run, IA is focussed on outcomes, both intended and unintended, positive and negative, in order to answer specific questions. It is critically important to take account of the context of the project – the social, political and economic influences in the environment in which the project is taking place. Otherwise, how do we know what is attributable to our interventions and what would have happened anyway?

In public education work, trying to prove causality by measuring will always fail because it requires a leap of faith. We need to try to reduce that leap to a hop. By gathering evidence we can infer but we cannot prove. Sometimes we are better off not trying to measure but using other types of evidence – such as anecdotal evidence and judgements – then verifying these by using reliable sources and cross-checking different perspectives (triangulation). Subjectivity is important in IA; the issue is how to gather and represent views with as much objectivity and elimination of bias as possible. There needs to be a balance between quantitative and qualitative evidence; examples should be highlighted and disaggregated where appropriate. This will potentially provide more valuable learning than pages of statistics and generalisations.

We were seeking to make the process useful for all participants whilst not wishing to impose an extra assessment layer. Major partners would also be doing some form of evaluation upon which we could draw. We tried to incorporate the following principles:

- absolute transparency – no hidden agendas
- keep it simple, understandable and easy to use
- use the combined expertise of the partners
- trust partners to do it themselves.

What we did
A part-time IA manager was appointed in August 2000, with responsibility for developing a strategy for the whole On the Line Programme. However, initial work in relation to the education projects had already begun in October 1999. Through the good relationships already built by the education adviser, questionnaires had been introduced, advice provided and a booklet written (Atchison and Temple) which provided additional support to help project leaders undertake IA with their teachers/schools. A strategy was devised which developed a framework, a set of principles, a systematic approach and methodologies across all elements of On the Line.

A key learning point gained from studying the IA practice of development NGOs was the importance of defining the focus of the assessment and carefully selecting the key questions to be answered. Our key questions were:

- What difference has On the Line made to young people's attitudes, awareness and understanding?
- Which strategies have been most/least successful in achieving wide reach and why? What can we learn for the future?
- Which strategies have been most/least successful in achieving depth of impact and why? What can we learn for the future?
- What have been the unintended outcomes of the project? What can we learn for the future?

Consultations took place with all the staff responsible for elements of the programme in the UK and West Africa. Indicators were agreed which would provide the evidence for their area, establish how and when it would be collected, and allow for different methodologies. Staff members would write their own reports to a standard format. In addition, independent consultants were recruited for the case studies.

The following methodologies were selected to provide breadth and scale as well depth. We hoped they would also provide some degree of verification of data.

- questionnaires issued to all partners, to collect the key judgements arising from their own assessments of their contributions
GETTING IT RIGHT?

The whole is now ready to be assembled, analysed, synthesised and a full report written. This is still work in progress.

Initial Reflections

Planning in more detail at the beginning, and the earlier appointment of a manager would have improved the quality of the assessment. Working with partners rather than directly with the target groups brought up issues such as partner involvement, partner reliability and trustworthiness of data. The importance of transparency was confirmed – the fact that this project was de-linked from further funding encouraged partners to be completely honest about failures as well as successes. However, we feel that we made assumptions about the level of awareness of IA. Greater partner involvement at the beginning would have increased understanding and commitment.

Issues of aggregation, attribution and verification remained vexing, but multiple methodologies certainly helped and added considerably to the quality of the assessment. Case studies, meetings and interviews, as well as reports and questionnaires, were certainly invaluable in cross-checking and trying to disaggregate information. A little more resource would have gone a long way. For example, the project leaders’ meeting did not take place due to lack of time and money but it would have ensured greater verification of the results and may have helped in disaggregation. It would also have been useful to have been able to resource more participant and peer observation.

Although the baseline and project context had to be established retrospectively it was not impossible. It was not difficult to go back to the original proposals and research done at the time, or to track the major events and influences through the project’s lifetime, but it would have been more cost effective if done at the start.

Did we get it right?

If we continue to think there is a ‘right’ way of doing this, fear of failure will hold us back. This was a daunting task accomplished with comparatively little resource. Of course, it could have been better. However we think it marks a significant step forward in organisational learning and in helping to develop a better track record in evaluation and assessment.

Impact assessment is not a mechanical recipe. It depends on context, purpose and resources. There are a variety of methodologies for different contexts and we are still in the early stages of learning about IA for public education work. The only way we will improve practice is simply to do it and learn from it. We found it a fascinating process and are pleased to have been able to make a contribution.

References


Hilary Atchison is the On the Line Impact Assessment Manager. The On the Line Impact Assessment report summary will be available on the web at www.ontheline.org.uk

An evaluation framework for development education from the WEA Global Development Education Programme

How can the values of a global perspective be built into evaluation? Katy Newell Jones has explored existing evaluation frameworks and, together with Liz Cumberbatch and Dorothy Calvert of the WEA Global Development Education Project, presents a new framework which incorporates a global perspective.

The challenge

Evaluation is the process of making informed value judgements about effectiveness and efficiency. As practitioners working in development education we were already familiar with using a wide range of evaluation ‘techniques’ (questionnaires, focus groups, statistics etc.). However, we were struck by the need for an evaluation framework that in itself reflected a global perspective. We wanted a framework which could be used as a tool to inform the planning process onwards, and which would be equally
applicable at the micro level (evaluating a single training session or event), and at the macro level (evaluating the project as a whole). The framework needed to reflect the process of learning and the product, including both short term outcomes and the development of longer term sustainable practices. It also needed to explore the context of the programme in the current socio-political climate and consider local, national and global perspectives.

Finally, we were looking for a framework which could be used in a participatory way to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to engage with, and learn through, the process of being involved in evaluation. A tall order indeed!

**The framework**

The evaluation framework (fig 1) is an adaptation of Stufflebeam’s CIPP model cited in Sconce and Howard (1994). The four boxes of context, input, process and product are intimately connected and cyclical, with all contributing an essential element to the evaluation picture. Each can be considered at an individual, local, national and global level.

Under the heading of context come questions about how the programme related to people’s personal development, the overall strategy of the WEA and the wider national picture. After the pilot, participants expressed a strong feeling that the programme was timely as they had previously developed a personal awareness of a global perspective through the media, school curricula etc., but were unsure how to incorporate this adult learning. At a national level the programme fitted well into the WEA’s strategy. However, the WEA support available at a district level was patchy, hence success in implementation was dependent not only on the energies and creativity of the participants but also the commitment in the districts to incorporating a global perspective into the WEA programme.

Under the heading input come issues about resources and the relevance and quality of the content of the programme. Were the resources available adequate, relevant and appropriate? How effectively and efficiently were they used? Was an appropriate framework for sustainable development education used? Did the resources (facilitators and materials) themselves reflect local, national and global perspectives?

The questions relating to the process relate to the methodology used. How effective was the facilitation? Was the appropriate tutor support available, during contact time and also when the participants were incorporating a global perspective into their own programmes which they tutor? To what extent did the facilitation reflect the values of development education e.g. mutual respect and collaborative learning? How could the learning environment be improved?

Finally, we consider the product, both short term learning outcomes and the longer term development of sustainable practices. At an individual level all participants have increased their awareness and understanding of a global perspective in relation to adult learning. Almost all have incorporated a global perspective into at least one adult learning programme, and some are actively incorporating a global perspective across the full range of their work and supporting others in doing the same, i.e. developing sustainable practices. At an organisational level, some WEA districts have actively supported the tutors and allocated resources to the on-going development of a global perspective into the WEA curriculum. Others perceive this area of work as not having a high priority currently.

**The methodology used with the model**

Translating the framework from theory to practice is crucial to its effectiveness. The methods used have included formal questionnaires but focus more heavily on participatory activities, which have been structured to draw initially a wide diversity of opinion through brainstorming. This has then been clustered, analysed and prioritised by the group into a series of key points, usually upon which there is considerable agreement. For example, participants, who are tutors themselves, explored the concept of an effective learning environment, discussed criteria which they felt were relevant and then applied these to the programme, providing constructive and valuable feedback to the facilitators. This provided evidence under the process heading as well as a valuable learning opportunity for the participants. When considering the impact of the programme on their practice, participants have shared with one another their achievements, supported each other in evaluating them and made suggestions for further development. These activities serve both as learning opportunities and also as evaluation activities which inform the development of the programme.

**How has the framework been used?**

- As a planning tool to ensure that introductory sessions for the programme addressed each of the key areas of context, input, process and product;
- As a framework for a participatory workshop with tutors and tutor organisers to share perspectives, evaluate the project at one point in time and focus on future activities;
- For the analysis of the data collected from a variety of sources including questionnaires, personal interviews, tutor learning contracts, evidence and direct observation. Through these activities it is possible to identify weaknesses of events and highlight areas where a greater focus is needed in the future.

**Conclusion**

This model has shaped and informed the planning and evaluation processes for Bringing the World into Teaching and Learning. The participants have found that considering each of the four headings has enabled them to recognise and value much of their learning. They have provided constructive feedback, which has contributed significantly to the development of the programme.

Including the context has widened our perspective and highlighted the need for additional work within the WEA to raise the profile of a global perspective at a national and
regional level. Defining input and process separately has been a constant reminder about the need for a balance between the content and process. Considering both the short and longer term product has ensured we encourage the development of sustainable practices in addition to short term learning outcomes. Finally, throughout the whole process we have attempted to maintain a focus on the individual, local, national and global. The model is just one of many but behind it is the challenging question ‘Are we modelling a global perspective?’

References

Katy Newell Jones is a consultant and trainer in global education, with the DEA, WEA, and Education for Development in the UK and overseas. She is also a senior lecturer in Education at Oxford Brookes University. Email: katy.newelljones@btinternet.com

Liz Cumberbatch is the WEA Development Education Officer and manager of the WEA Development Education Tutor Training Project. Email: liz.cumberbatch@virgin.net

Dorothy Calvert has been strongly involved in the WEA Development Education Project as the project worker. She is also a Weaving Tutor who has successfully incorporated a global perspective into her teaching. Email: whitfieldcal@btinternet.com