

EVALUATION **AND** COMMUNICATION DECISION-MAKING

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE



RICARDO RAMÍREZ & DAL BRODHEAD



DEVELOPING EVALUATION AND
COMMUNICATION CAPACITY IN
INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH



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This Guide summarizes lessons from DECI-2: Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research, an action-research project supported by the International Development Research Centre, IDRC, Ottawa and UKAid, London.

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We acknowledge the participation and committed engagement by project partners working under the IDRC Networked Economies program and of the program officers at IDRC.

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1 Origins & background

Development projects, research initiatives and innovative organizational efforts require **evaluations** that can confirm outcomes and inform their strategy. They also need to engage stakeholders, enhance relationships, and disseminate their lessons. Most often however, evaluation and communication have been added on towards the end of a project cycle. This timing limits their scope and usefulness. In addition, many projects have sought to train their staff in evaluation and communication, often times through one-off workshops and webinars. This approach to capacity development is weak in terms of the level of knowledge and skill uptake that is possible, as both fields are best explored through practice that is embedded in the needs and specific context of each project or institution.

Our partners are research projects supported by the Networked Economies Program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Ottawa). They are engaged in development research that is applied and all partners are encouraged to demonstrate outcomes and share them with stakeholders, especially those contributing evidence for policy development. Most of the projects are exploratory; some are focused on exploring new fields of inquiry, such as Open Education and Open Science. Their work evolves as findings from fieldwork emerge, and they often need to adjust their strategies during project implementation.

The DECI-2 project (Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research) has provided support to partners through mentors based in three continents (East Africa, South and South-East Asia, North and South America). Throughout the process, the DECI-2 team adapted the steps of Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) and Research Communication (ResCom). While we initially used the 12 steps of UFE (Patton, 2008), along with a parallel set of ResCom steps, we have since simplified the framework into fewer steps.

DECI-2 has been an action-research project that has combined three objectives:

1. Service provision to IDRC Research Partners in evaluation & communication.
2. Methodological innovation in the combination of evaluation & communication to positively influence development practice.
3. Capacity development of mentors and partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

A number of case studies have been completed to capture the process and outcomes. As a result, the Team has acquired a new way of thinking about evaluation and communication. Through this Primer, we are sharing experiences that have emerged from mentoring projects in evaluation and communication, a process we refer to as the hybrid approach.

Our experience confirms that many of these partners work in complex, emergent, exploratory areas where the outcomes are difficult to predict. We have learned that the introduction of evaluation and communication dimensions, early on, into evolving projects can play the role of a decision-making compass. The process helps project teams learn and adjust in a purposeful manner. It allows them to express and negotiate their assumptions about the objectives, the strategies, and the underlying logic – i.e. their Theories of Change.

Evaluation & Communication

We coach and mentor project partners to develop evaluation plans and communication strategies that are used and useful. We know, from earlier work, that utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) works as a decision-making framework within which numerous evaluation methods can be employed.

Utilization-focused Evaluation (UFE)

UFE is an approach to evaluation that emphasizes the use of the findings and the learning process itself.

The central premise of Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) is that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use. In UFE, evaluators facilitate a learning process with attention to how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experiences. In designing a utilization-focused evaluation -- the attention is constantly on the intended use by intended users. UFE does not prescribe any specific content, method or theory. It is a framework, as opposed to another methodology. UFE can include a wide variety of evaluation methods. It is a process for learning and making decisions in consultation with those who can benefit from the evaluation. It is based on the fact that intended users will more likely utilize an evaluation in which they have ownership. Users can include beneficiaries, project managers and funders (Ramirez & Brodhead, 2014a:1).

The research communication approach follows a comparable and complimentary logic: the planning sequence challenges project managers to be clear about their communication purposes, audiences and expected changes. We have emphasized 'Research Communication', as most of our partners have primarily



been research projects with a commitment to bridging research to policy. Practitioners of Communication for Development will recognize similar principles and steps.

Research communication (ResCom)

Research communication (ResCom) is about making research relevant and known by policy-makers, practitioners and other researchers. This process requires active listening, networking, and strategic dissemination mechanisms. Research-to-policy uptake benefits from the participation of stakeholders (researchers and policy makers) throughout the research process. Engaging stakeholders early in the research process and sharing findings is part and parcel of the research strategy. An explicit communication strategy is useful to support engagement efforts, to allow for the exchange of ideas, and to choose effective channels to disseminate findings.

By weaving evaluation and communication together, we are discovering that both processes create a space for project partners to express, clarify and agree on their assumptions, expectations, and outcomes. The dual combination creates a pressure to make the implicit, explicit; and this action helps teams clarify their Theories of Change. With experimental projects, this process can take time, as emergent outcomes will often provide feedback to adjust project objectives and strategies.

Utilization-focused evaluation and research communication share common participatory and hands-on principles and operational steps:

- ▶ purposeful engagement of stakeholders;
- ▶ attention to context;
- ▶ clarity in strategic planning;
- ▶ testing and course-adjustment during implementation;
- ▶ ongoing attention to ensure relevance and timeliness; and
- ▶ attention to documenting and sharing process and emerging lessons

There are times when both UFE and ResCom approaches work well together:

- ▶ When trying to understand the environment and situation of an organization or project combining both evaluation and communication dimensions;
- ▶ When selecting primary users for evaluation and audiences for communication, where both exercises can be combined into a single stakeholder analysis.
- ▶ Moreover, in a similar fashion, developing communication objectives often includes attention to tracking reach, or initial outcomes.

Utilization focused communication is not an oxymoron

*“It does not take much imagination to see the linkages between communication planning and UFE. While some UFE steps seem to confirm the communication planning process (communicators pre-test materials; evaluators simulate data collection), others augment it (the notion of including a meta-evaluation into any communication process is appealing). However, I turn to a couple of principles of UFE that have emerged as most relevant from our action-research project. The first one is about the **ownership of the process**: Patton emphasizes this principle and we have lived it in our project experience. Having control over every component of the evaluation has led the projects to assume a learning process that is reflexive and committed. The second is about **facilitation vs. external measurement: as evaluators we have become facilitators, as opposed to external judges**. We have engaged the project teams through many challenging steps. In the process, we observed that our coaching role shifted to a mentoring one: we were learning as peers. In my communication experience, this role is also the most effective.” (Ramírez, 2011)*

Like brother and sister, the relationship between evaluation and communication can be cordial, and at times challenging. We have learned that in complex and evolving projects, the evaluation and communication planning steps push the implementing team to make their assumptions explicit. This process encourages an open discussion on the emerging theory of change.

Two of the research networks we mentored focused on the Open Development agenda, one in [Open Education](#); the other in [Open Science](#). We are discovering that the principles that underpin learning-oriented approaches to evaluation, and transparency through communication are shared: **transparency on process and outcomes; participation of stakeholders, acknowledgment of errors as a means of course correction and learning; attention to broad, affordable access to information; clarity on who needs to be engaged, how and why; clarity of purpose, assumptions and expected outcomes**. This list confirms the notion that “openness is a complex process, not a state”(Smith & Reilly, 2013: 10). For us, the key concept is ownership by the stakeholders.



3 Guiding Principles

Through our practice, we have arrived at a set of guiding principles. They seem to be relevant across the wide range of project partnerships that we have experienced.

Table 1: Summary of guiding principles and their benefits

Guiding principle	Benefits
Utilization-focused evaluation: a decision-making framework	By focusing on evaluation uses or purposes , and on Key Evaluation Questions, partners discussed and refined their own ideas about why their own projects were being carried out and how – and their hopes for verifying their own outcomes
Research communication: enhances use of findings for influence	By focusing on evaluation purposes and stakeholders, partners discussed and refined their ideas about the different audiences for their research – who will use the research results, and how could they engage with them throughout their program of work.,
Attention is paid to readiness from the beginning	The mentoring was most effective when the projects had senior management buy-in, adequate resources allocated to evaluation and communication, and staff who were keen to learn about their approaches.
Training through demand-driven, just-in-time mentoring	Just-in-time mentoring allowed the partners to receive support at the key moments that coincided with their project schedules. The mentors were able to adjust the support to each specific moment and circumstance.
Course correction of project strategy is expected and planned	In research and other experimental efforts, the unexpected arose frequently, and by discussion and refinement, the partners were able to adjust the trajectory of their work for maximum impact.

Guiding principle	Benefits
<p>Utilization is the focus from initial project design to completion</p>	<p>The ongoing attention to actual use enabled the mentors and the partners to focus the effort on the purposes that were urgent and of interest to the primary evaluation users.</p>
<p>A collaborative, learning and reflective process is embedded</p>	<p>Person-to-person discussion was a mechanism by which ideas were refined and 'improved'. By embedding reflection, partners enhanced their work and took it forward - especially by clarifying assumptions about how change was expected to unfold.</p>
<p>Participation and shared ownership are fundamental</p>	<p>UFE and ResCom are participatory by nature: they enable the primary evaluation users and the project teams to own the design of their strategy.</p>
<p>The process builds individual and organizational capacity</p>	<p>When project teams 'owned' the decision-making process to design evaluation and communication, they gained capabilities in both areas, which in turn strengthened the organizations that hosted the projects.</p>
<p>Complexity and evolving contexts are addressed</p>	<p>Action research in the real world is based in complexity and changing contexts; by acknowledging this and embracing it as a reality, the partners' research remained grounded, evolving and changing to remain relevant.</p>



4 The Practice

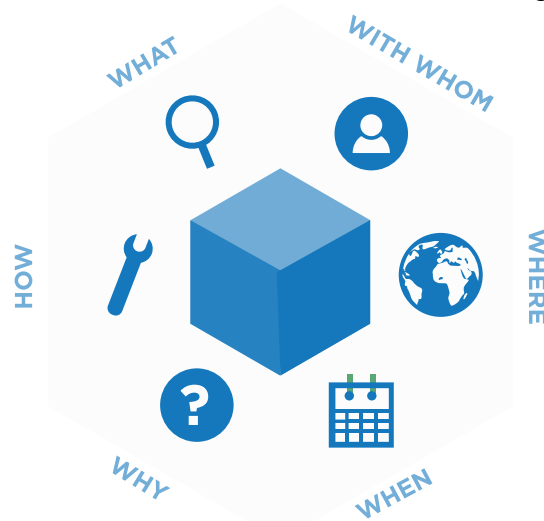
While it is useful to consider the conceptual aspects of the hybrid process that we have been using, “the rubber hits the road” during implementation. As practitioners, we are very conscious of the challenges of implementation, as one area which has been traditionally weak and which has often had less attention.

The following section speaks directly to the practice of implementation. We summarize six dimensions of our practice that are interrelated.

Six dimensions of practice

The following are six dimensions of our practice that summarize the hybrid approach we have used.

Figure 1: The six dimensions of DECI-2's mentoring model



WHAT

The DECI-2 Team provided mentoring in Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Research Communication; we combined these areas like Lego blocks - depending on the project needs. The evaluation mentoring helped projects clarify their outcomes, assumptions and their Theory of Change. The communication mentoring helped the project define its communication strategy to address: relationship building, networking needs, dissemination efforts, and policy influence. Our support helped our partners become adaptive and more able to manage complex issues or emerging change.





WITH WHOM

The DECI-2 team worked directly with our partner project staff. These people were professionals who managed research networks, as well as smaller grantee level research projects that were hosted by a wide variety of organizations including think tanks, universities, and advocacy groups.



WHERE

The Team aimed to do a site visit to the partner's location at least once, and ideally twice, in order to become aware of the situation and context of the project. Otherwise the mentoring was done remotely, often using Skype.



WHEN

The process was best when started as early as possible - beginning at the formulation stage of our partners' projects. The Team agreed with the partner to provide mentoring in UFE and Research Communication at a pace that was based on the partner's schedule of work. We called this approach just-in-time mentoring. This mentoring was iterative and earlier assumptions were often revisited to help the teams adjust to change.



WHY

Most of the partners supported by DECI-2 were experimental and learning-oriented projects; their outcomes often evolved during implementation. The DECI-2 project has provided mentoring that allows projects to clarify directions, collect evidence, learn systematically and course-correct.



HOW

The Team provided coaching and mentoring in evaluation and communication. We offered to work with projects from the formulation stage, during implementation and finally in reporting findings and utilizing results. Our skills transfer strategy was applied by walking with the partner through the steps for utilization-focused evaluation and research communication. The Team actively facilitated access to information resources and interaction with other partners. It also leveraged a projects' adaptive capacity through evidence-based learning to adjust strategies as conditions required.

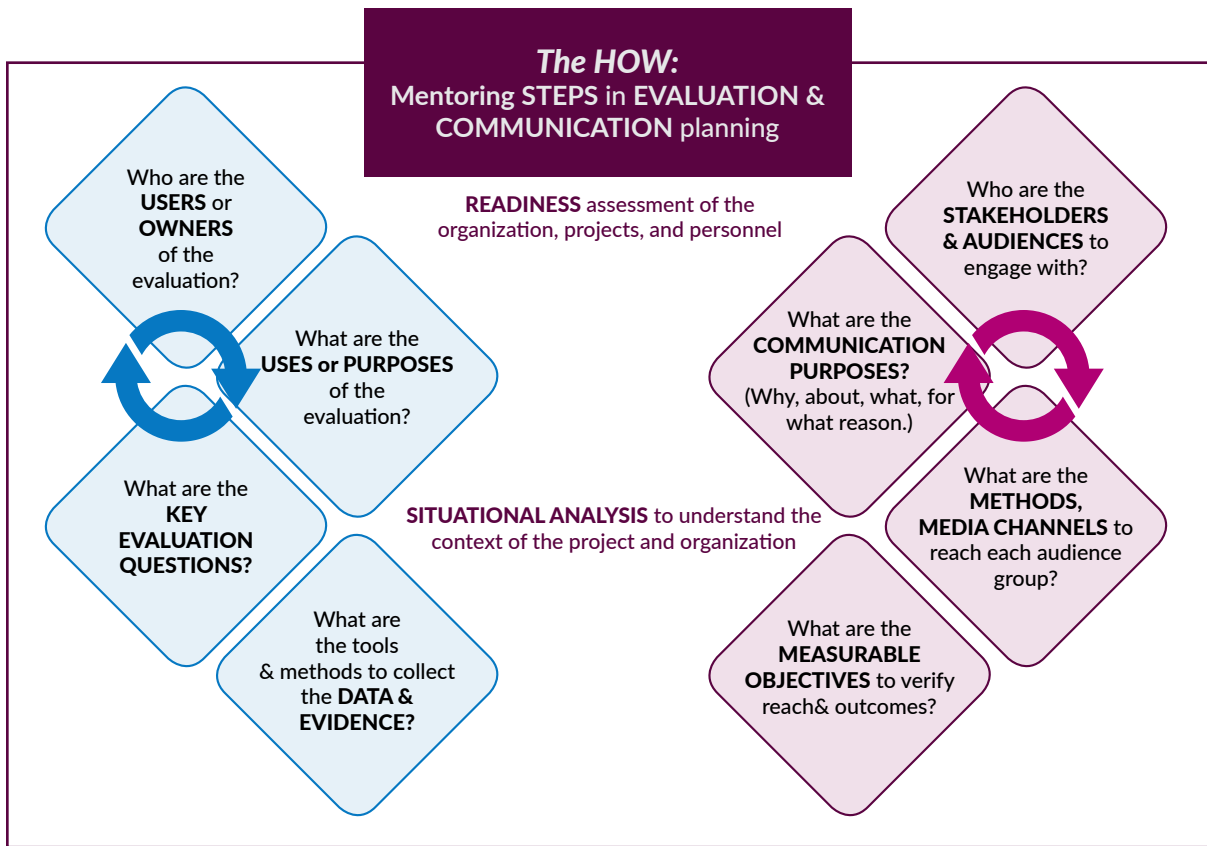


The steps we follow

Our mentoring offers the following steps, in a modular fashion – somewhat like Lego blocks that can be assembled in different ways:

The mentoring steps are summarized below, with emphasis placed on the iterative and modular aspects of this work. Later in the DECI process, the Team allocated time to work with the partner to facilitate the use of the findings and reflect on the process. A Case Study was produced to summarize the collaborative process and outcomes of each project partner.

Figure 2: DECI-2's Mentoring Steps



Evaluation and communication inputs: offered as Lego blocks to fit each project context. While evaluation can generate content to be communicated, communication can also be the focus of evaluation.

While simplifying the process, we have also simplified terminology as much as possible; the following are definitions that we now commonly use:

- ▶ **Evaluation users / owners:** a small team of individuals who are willing and able to co-design the evaluation. They are the ones who most invest and most learn from the process and from the outcomes. We also refer to them as evaluation owners. The original term in UFE is ‘primary evaluation users’; yet some of our partners felt this term was too similar to the idea of project users or beneficiaries.
- ▶ **Readiness:** refers to the extent to which the project team is empowered and committed to design its evaluation and communication plans. Readiness is about whether they are able and willing to create a learning agenda; whether the host organization and funder gives them space, resources and authority to design, implement, and learn from their evaluation and communication efforts.
- ▶ **Stakeholders and audiences:** we use both words to underline the importance of stakeholder engagement, where partners are actively invited to participate in a project. A communication strategy may include “active listening” as a purpose to ensure methods and media are used to gather stakeholders’ perspectives. In contrast to other approaches, here the reference to ‘audiences’ tends to be associated with recipients/targets of information dissemination.
- ▶ **Audience analysis:** we recommend a minimum amount of verification to confirm that each audience group is engaged via their preferred combination of methods and media. The term ‘audience research’ has been interpreted by some partners to require a rigorous, elaborate activity which in our experience is not necessary for most projects.
- ▶ **Evaluation uses or purposes:** these concepts are central to the UFE approach in that they establish why an evaluation is needed. A single evaluation often combines a number of uses, such as methodology review, tracking outcomes, cost-benefit, course-adjustment, accountability, future planning, etc.
- ▶ **Communication purposes:** in a parallel vein, this focus establishes the intent of communication. A single communication plan will often combine many purposes, such as active engagement of stakeholders, networking and exchange, dissemination, and advocacy.



Entry points

When engaging with projects –ideally during the start of their implementation - we hold initial meetings (both remotely and in-person) to introduce the approach, and explain the mentoring opportunities. We spend time reviewing readiness, appreciating their situation, understanding their needs, and developing a relationship.

We listen to their needs, and we explore whether evaluation is the entry point, or communication, depending on their own interests and priorities.

The Cyberstewards project was quick to begin working with UFE and one of its evaluation USES focused on its networking and communication with partners. Later on, when partners' findings began to emerge, their interest switched to ResCom. They subsequently asked for mentoring for some of their partners, those which were most ready to work with DECI-2, such as Asociación de Derechos Civiles, ADC (Argentina) and Justice Forum (UK).

For those projects more interested in evaluation, we mentor the USERS and we help them define the broad evaluation **uses** or **purposes**. We then help them narrow down a set of Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs), linked to each of the uses. This process can be time consuming; yet it is central to the users gaining a sense of ownership over the evaluation. The evaluation design is based on the KEQs as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Planning table for evaluation

	KEQs	Evidence/ Data sources	Data collection tools
EVALUATION USE or PURPOSE			
EVALUATION USE or PURPOSE			

The last column on Table 2 shows that a Data Collection Tool can serve the needs of several KEQ. While only two evaluation uses or purposes are shown, it is common to have more of them.

For those more interested in research communication, we mentor them to determine communication purposes, and help them develop audience-specific objectives. We encourage them to do some audience analysis, especially to verify the methods and media preferences of each group. Where possible, we help them define some outcome indicators, which creates an opportunity to link back to their evaluation uses or purposes.

Table 3 follows a comparable format to summarize communication objectives and specific target audiences with their preferred methods and media. The third column addresses timing, as often a communication activity works best when it is timed to coincide with an event or a decision-making moment.

Table 3: Suggested table to outline communication objectives, methods/media and timing

	Communication Objective specifying the audiences/ stakeholders	Methods and Media (confirmed via audience research)	Timing
COMMUNICATION PURPOSE			
COMMUNICATION PURPOSE			



As was mentioned earlier, the middle and last columns on Table 3 indicate that a Method or Media can be relevant to several communication objectives and/or audiences. Likewise, the timing may be relevant across audiences and methods. While only two communication purposes are shown, it is common to have more of them.

With those partners that have a high level of readiness in both evaluation and research communication, our mentoring can happen in tandem. This hybrid approach was the case with the project Research on Open Education Resources for Development ([ROER4D](#)), where both topics advanced together (see summary Poster in the next section).

We have found that the logic behind UFE planning creates a way of thinking that can be translated into ResCom planning: it is purposeful, sequential and moves from the broad to the specific. This complementarity was confirmed by the manager of [Operation Asha](#), an ISIF-2 partner in Cambodia, who felt that understanding UFE gave her the tools to grasp ResCom quite readily.

Only a few projects have been able to complete assessments of their communication activities at the outcome level; yet those that have, have used those findings to fine-tune their communication practices. This process was used by both ROER4D and Open and Collaborative Science for Development ([OCSDNet](#)). Several projects confirmed that the mentoring helped them experience a reflection moment that helped them to become more strategic, and at times adjust internal systems and structures as the organizations grew. This was the case of [Privacy International](#) (London) and ADC (Argentina).

The Outcomes

The 2017 external evaluation of the DECI-2 project (Hearn & Batchelor, 2017) confirmed the following outcomes:

1. The hybrid mentoring helped the project partners make their evaluation and communication plans explicit, and show the connections between them.
2. The process has helped partners adjust their strategies as they have witnessed emerging findings and changing contexts.

3. The hybrid approach led to changes in capabilities among DECI-2 mentors and some of the partners.

Outcome - Making evaluation and communication plans explicit

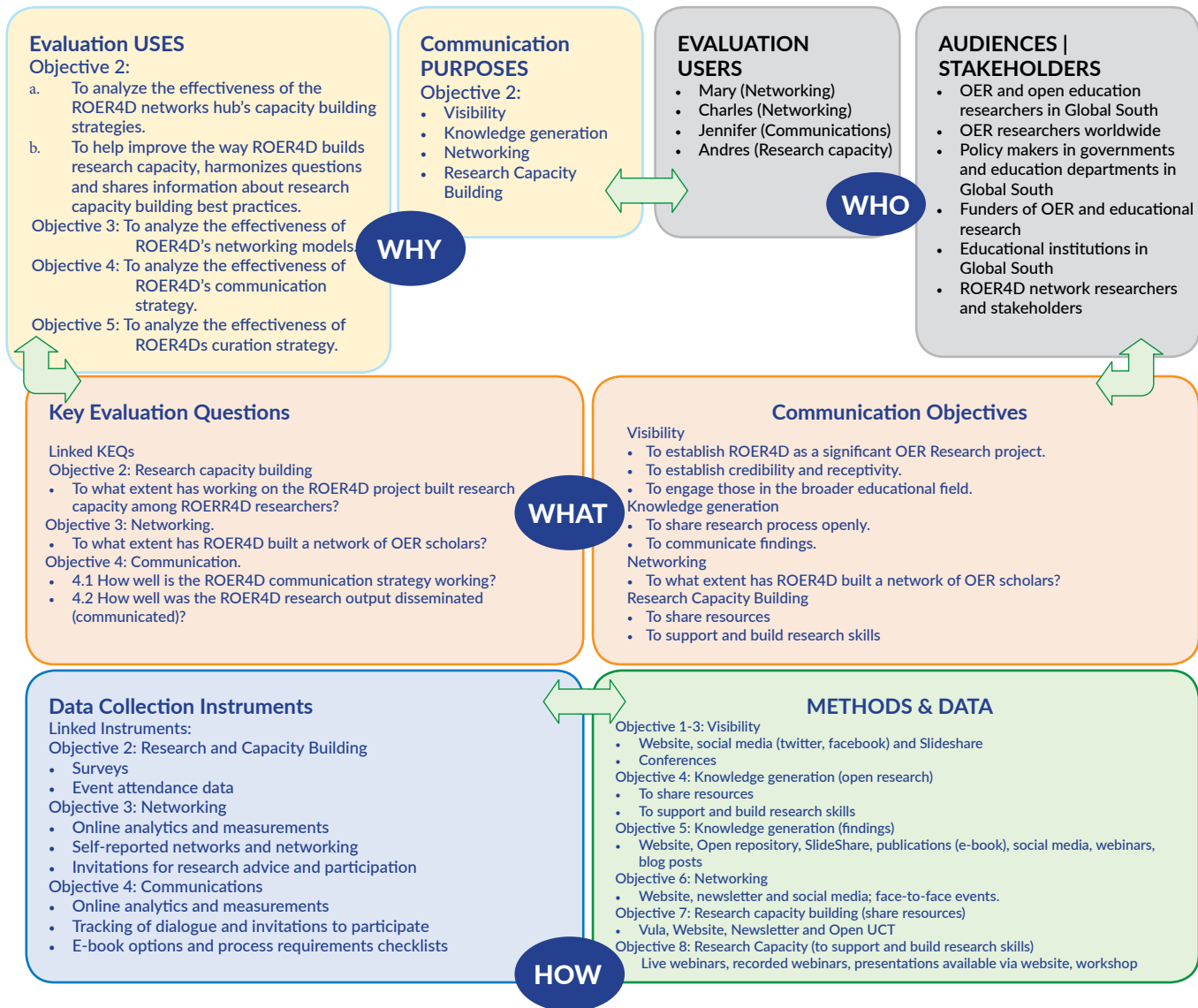
We realized at the start of DECI-1 that UFE was a decision-making framework (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2013). We knew that by adding communication, we were extending the decision-making to include dimensions that practically all projects “do”, but often with limited strategy. This process includes engagement, networking, knowledge brokering, producing and disseminating materials. However, making plans specific can be a challenge for projects that are somewhat experimental (research networks where partners’ proposals only emerge after a call for proposals) or that address complex issues (social & technological change). This means that it is useful to build in some flexibility and to adopt additional outcomes that may emerge along the way.

We have learned that projects often have a de facto communication “way of doing things”: they produce materials, they communicate with partners using different media, they disseminate information, and they seek to become noticed. **What is often lacking is a strategy behind their intuition.** In the case of the Open and Collaborative Science for Development ([OCSDNet](#)) project, the stakeholder analysis step in ResCom planning focused the team’s attention on how to cater to different audiences, and this contributed to the fine-tuning of the dissemination strategy for their Manifesto. Something similar occurs with evaluation: projects improvise data collection tools (e.g. a baseline survey), prior to identifying the USES of the evaluation. **What is often missing is clarity on what to gain from the evaluation; especially how the key questions are related to the intended USES or PURPOSES.** Our mentoring helps projects achieve clarity and avoid collecting data that does not have a clear, defined purpose.

We help projects reflect on the purposes that are behind their current evaluation and communication practices. Our contribution in the short-term is about making current actions explicit and strategic. **The resulting clarity is shown in the poster summary template (shown below) that we developed, which provides a snap shot of an existing evaluation and communication plan. Such a summary can also become a foundation on which to make such plans more strategic, focused and useful.** For example, the ROER4D Team found our poster template helpful to summarize the focus of its evaluation and communication strategies (see Figure 3). The project team added value to the template by developing their own variations of the template, and by designing multiple formats for different audiences and purposes.



Figure 3: Summary of ROER4D's evaluation and communication plan



The DECI-2 summary (Figure 3) challenges the projects as follows:

1. To define the evaluation users / owners, and the audience and stakeholder. This step covers the **why** and the **who**.
2. To settle on evaluation uses/purposes and communication purposes as a way to begin defining the **what**.
3. To draft and agree on Key Evaluation Questions, and Communication Objectives.

4. To choose data collection instruments on the basis of each Key Evaluation Question; and
5. To select the communication Methods & Media based on audience research to confirm their preferences.

The 'focusing' of evaluation and communication strategies becomes the means to express or adjust a project's theory of change.

Outcome - Strategic adjustment

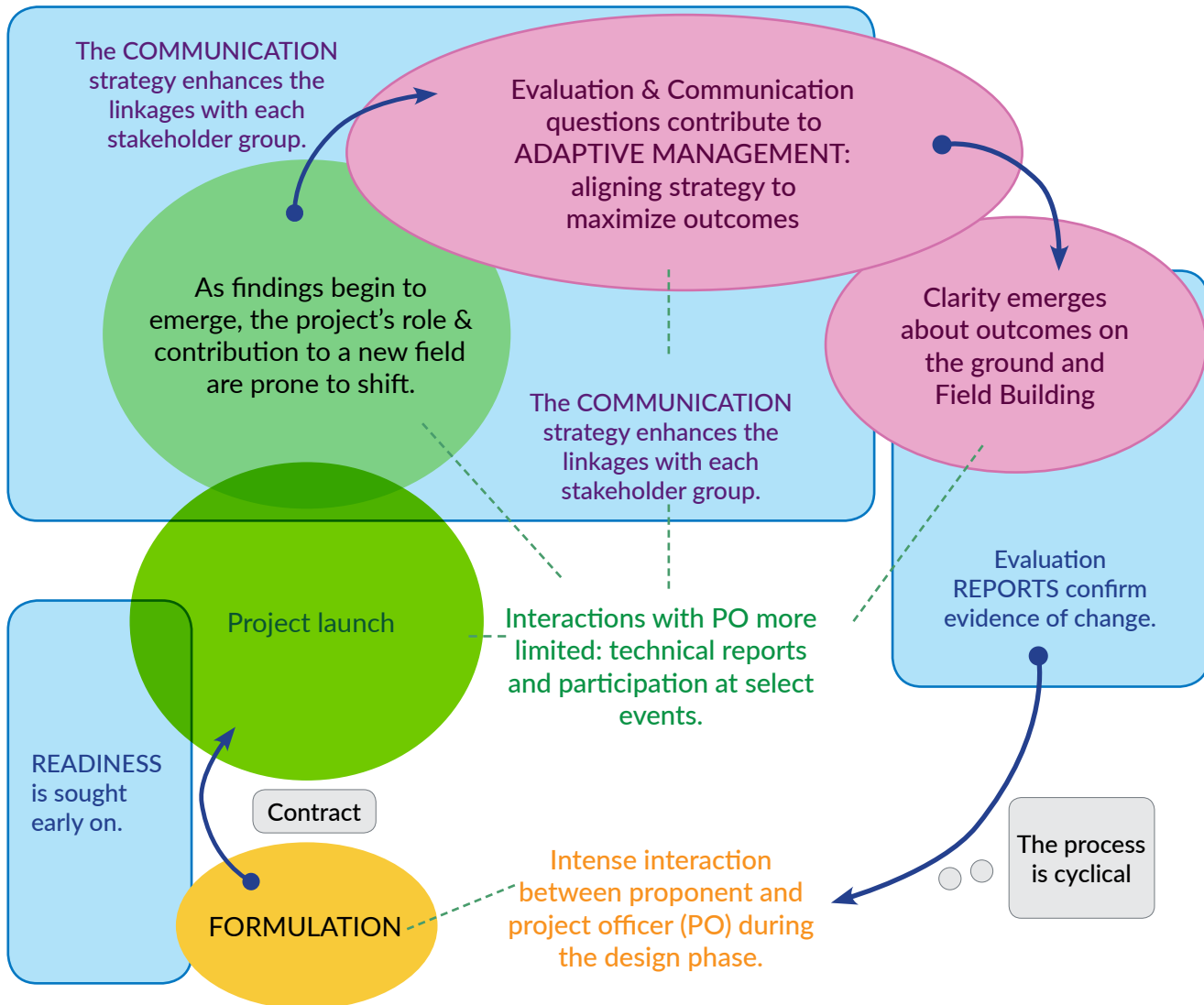
The DECI-2 process has helped partners adjust their strategies as they witnessed emerging findings and changing contexts. This hybrid approach is about being purposeful and taking time to modify strategy, clarify outcomes, and strengthen relations with stakeholders. The process is a means of inviting and enabling participatory-action-learning. The way UFE contributed to strategy adjustment was quite evident in one of the projects DECI-2 support in Assam (India).

Tea garden workers in Assam have insufficient access to health facilities and essential services. Existing facilities are severely underequipped and understaffed, and suffer high rates of maternal and infant mortality with minimal access to legal and advocacy resources to address violations. Nazdeek - a human rights organization - and the Center for Advocates Against Discrimination (New York) developed a mobile app for reporting and mapping health right violations through short message service (SMS). In partnership with a local organization called Pajhra, Nazdeek ran a pilot project in which forty volunteer women were given mobile devices to report health right violations related to maternal and infant mortality. DECI-2 provided UFE and ResCom mentoring to Nazdeek and Pajhra. Discussions on what needed to be evaluated and communicated led the project managers to realize that if they were to significant impact, they had to build partnerships and strengthen advocacy with the government. Furthermore, the evaluation findings revealed that the participating women were not reporting most of the violations because they did not perceive them as human right violations, but as something normal in their lives.

As explained in the ISIF-2 case study, the project's strategy shifted from training women on the use of the mobile app to offering human rights-based empowerment sessions and strengthening the identity of the community. Nazdeek and Pajhra project managers also started building relationships with key government authorities. Figure 4 summarizes this adaptive, strategic journey.



Figure 4: the UFE and Rescom Journey Experienced by partners



Annotations on the diagram:

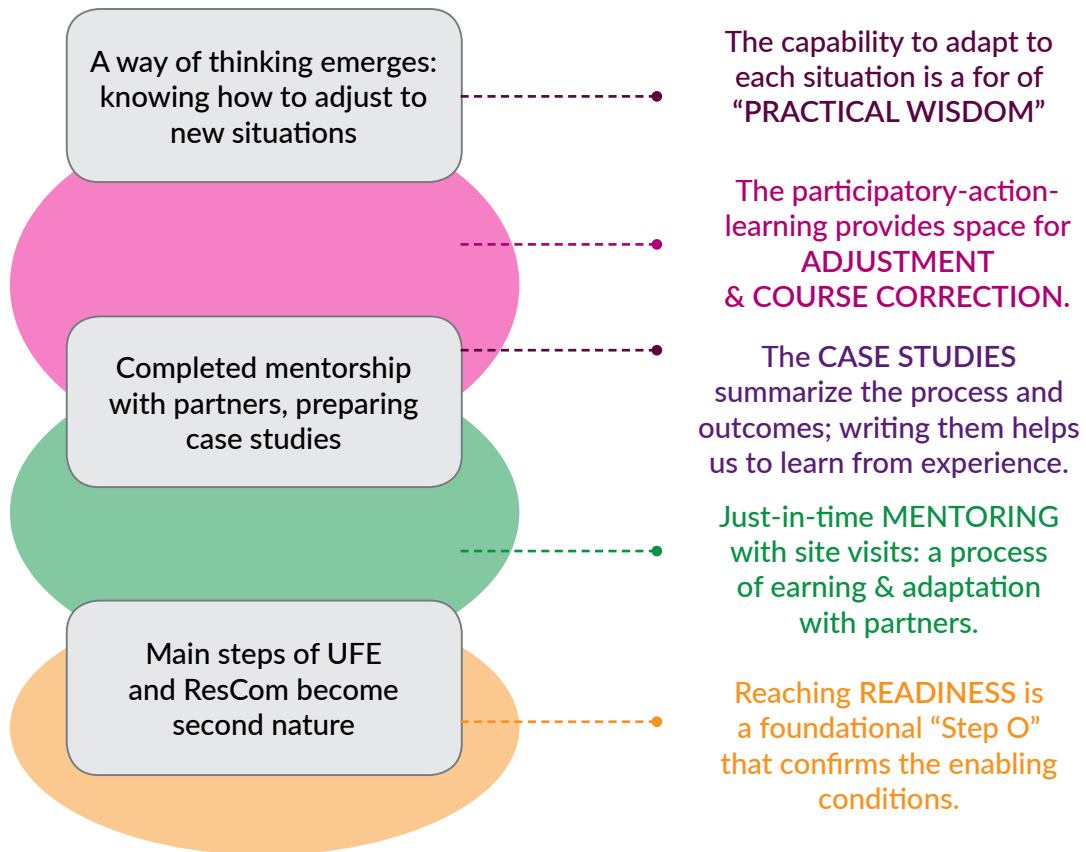
- By 'proponent', we referred to the group or institution that was seeking to work with IDRC and was engaged in a project design phase with an IDRC Project Officer (PO).
- The DECI Team has also learned that, beyond an early discussion about **readiness**, it was often best to stand-by during the Project launch which was a very intense phase and to begin mentoring in evaluation and communication soon after when the project partner was less stressed.

Outcome - Changes in capabilities

The MENTORING process has been an enabler, a place for DECI-2 mentors to learn and adapt. In some cases, we have also witnessed comparable gains in capabilities among some of our partners.

Figure 5 provides a visual depiction of the capability development changes experienced by the DECI Team.

Figure 5: Changes in Capabilities



Some of the capabilities listed below benefitted the mentors, as well as the partners. We have compared our DECI-2 team's capability gains with those in the literature (mainly Baser & Morgan, 2008) and we saw many similarities including:

- ▶ The capability to act and self-organize (Vision, Volition, Strategy, Agency).
- ▶ The capability to generate development results (Programmatic Outcomes, Achievement of Mission).



- ▶ The capability to relate (Networking, Collaboration, Advocacy Mobilizing Resources, Relevance).
- ▶ The capability to adapt and self-renew (Learning, Change Management).
- ▶ The capability to achieve coherence (Innovation, Flexibility, Resilience).
- ▶ The capability to ask questions that generate hidden answers.

Take away lessons

The DECI-2 journey, built on its predecessor DECI-1, a two-year pilot in the implementation of UFE in Asia. It adapted and simplified its practice to meet the needs of its Asian, African and Latin American IDRC project partners. From this experience, we have drawn a series of practical lessons which have emerged and while some are not new, they bear repeating.

Readiness and situational analysis

The notion of **readiness** comes from UFE and we have extended it to include communication issues as well. In our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreements with projects, we defined readiness and specified the following desirable readiness requirements of partners:

Readiness refers to a projects' willingness to allocate staff time, resources and management commitment to evaluation and communication. We have learned that some projects need support to build up and sustain their readiness and this support may include an early briefing session with management to sensitize them to the approach and its benefits.

We have learned to await readiness before signing a Memorandum of Understanding with a project partner and this process has taken up to a year in some cases (Ramírez, R. & Brodhead, D. 2014b). The interaction between the DECI-2 Team and the ROER4D Team illustrates how readiness occurs. The teams began this journey by establishing a relationship and learning about each other. The principal investigators of both teams had a number of exchanges between December 2012 and October 2013, which included face-to-face meetings and Skype follow-ups. These exchanges were helpful to clarify roles and expectations, as well as to review the principles behind UFE and ResCom. They helped the ROER4D Team understand

the resources they needed to bring to the table in order to confirm readiness and encouraged them to introduce the corresponding budget allocations. The two teams finally signed a MOU in December 2013. We refer to these initial interactions as “Step Zero” in that they provide an opportunity for partners to learn about each other and set engagement rules under agreed conditions.

We have also worked with projects where readiness was confirmed at the start, but waned because of staff changes, implementation activities and pressures from funders (especially, the sudden imposition of external evaluations).

We have found that early project site visits are a means of enhancing readiness while also doing some situational analysis. **Situational analysis** enables the mentors to identify the organizational culture, the team dynamics, and gain an understanding of the context within which our support will take place. Situational analysis is a shared step in both evaluation and the communication planning, and it includes complementary elements. We have developed a set of checklists for the early steps of UFE and ResCom that are available on [our website](#).

Just in time mentoring

We have confirmed that UFE is learned primarily through practice: experiential learning is at its core. It requires on-time accompaniment that matches learning moments. The same applies to research communication. This timing is one reason why the impact of many workshops is limited: people are often neither ‘ready’ nor able to absorb the information and consequently they lack the knowledge of how to apply the learning to their project context. The DECI-2 team offers workshops as an awareness-raising and orientation tool, rather than as a capacity development one. We also find that our webinars are good reference tools, but are not sufficient as a stand-alone training method. One needs to essentially ‘learn one’s way’ into the framework (Ramírez, R. & Brodhead, D. 2014b).

In DECI-2, we have been experimenting with a combination of coaching (that follows an established step by step process) with mentoring (that focuses on flexibly guiding, adjusting, and trouble-shooting together). We have learned that we need to do a bit of each. In addition, this supportive process in our project is delivered by regional mentors who are, in-turn, learning and refining UFE and ResCom themselves.



“Adapting to the timetable and pace of the partner project is something that the DECI Project consciously undertook and it was possible because our funder IDRC allowed adequate time for the process to be completed. In some cases, the UFE took nearly the entire time available, but in several, the work once commenced was completed within months to respond to a specific project need or reality.” (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2014a: 4)

Mentoring is central to facilitating learning and implementation. Mentoring is a pivotal concept in the capacity development literature, especially the common observation that blueprints tend to fail and that capacity development requires action-research-reflection. “We find that our touchstones are the principles of adult education and community development. We start with where the learner(s) are at; engage them on their terms; enable them to discover and own the learning process.” (Ramírez & Brodhead, 2014b: 4) The recent External Evaluation of DECI-2 confirmed the value of just-in-time mentoring.

As mentors, we often assist a staff person or contractor who is the designated project evaluator. The project evaluator in turn interacts with the evaluation user/owner team, and with the communication team. In small projects, the designated evaluator may be our communication contact person as well. In several research network examples, each task was assigned to a separate person; in the best cases they worked closely together. This differentiation of roles is project-specific and it requires a clarification of roles and responsibilities early on: who is a user versus who is the evaluator.

An outcome of our work is project teams and individuals who have gained an evaluation and communication way of thinking. This skill is learned from experience, combined with a reflection on the process. The reflection takes place through follow-up interviews by DECI-2 mentors, as well as by reviewing draft case studies that summarize each experience. An evaluation and communication ‘way of thinking’ can also be described as practical wisdom.

Practical wisdom

Practical wisdom is about knowing what to do in each unique circumstance, almost by instinct or intuition (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). The notion is far from the notion of 'best practices' that some bureaucracies are wedded to. Best practices are akin to recipes, where there is the assumption that many factors are known and predictable to the extent that similar responses are required. Best practices suggest replication, while practical wisdom suggests uniqueness and tailoring approaches/solutions to each moment and circumstance. One could argue that best practices have an important role to play in some circumstances (such as safety checklists in the health profession). However, best practices fall short of capturing the essence of experience-based ongoing adaptation, decision-making that is highly desirable for evaluation and communication planning (Ramírez et al., 2015).

Practical wisdom is an intuitive and rational capacity to make prompt and wise decisions based on experience. It requires that the unique character of the particular circumstances be immediately discerned and an appropriate determination or decision made. For trainers, having trainees that achieve this kind of practical wisdom is a desirable goal. We acknowledge that there are some individuals who seem to have been born with practical wisdom. We can think of a few colleagues with facilitation skills that emerge naturally, even in the most challenging situations. However, in most cases, we are talking about most people (ourselves included) who require a concerted effort to build their skill sets and gain confidence by experimenting to fine-tune them.

Desired traits of evaluation and communication mentors

We have learned to look for certain desirable traits within our prospective evaluation and communication mentors:

- ▶ A background in either the evaluation or communication field is helpful.
- ▶ Strong facilitation and communication skills are essential.
- ▶ Willingness to learn and contribute to a team experiment are assets.
- ▶ A commitment to document learning and reflect on the process is necessary.
- ▶ Flexibility in approach and availability are prerequisites.
- ▶ Strong project management and organizational skills are helpful.



Summary

This hybrid decision-making framework enables projects and programs to take ownership of their evaluation and communication plans. The framework is a hybrid of utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) and research communication supported by mentoring. The integration of UFE and Research Communication mentoring has resulted in a hybrid framework that also helps project teams clarify and update their Theories of Change. This result is significant as most of the projects we supported were research projects where some of the outcomes were difficult to define at the start, due to their evolutionary nature. The approach has been delivered as a capacity development effort with attention to partner's readiness to receive mentoring. The partners have produced evaluation plans and research communication strategies that they own and utilize. This approach grew out of two IDRC-funded capacity development research projects (DECI-1 and 2) that provided mentoring in evaluation and communication for information society research teams globally, between 2009 and 2017. The mentoring progress was tracked through debriefing and process documentation with some use of checklists. Case studies were produced to summarize the process and outcomes. While the project began with a focus on evaluation and communication, the resulting hybrid framework has wider knowledge management potential by enhancing reflective learning throughout the evolution of a project with the potential in some cases to update or adapt project's Theories of Change.

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