

Expectations about identifying and documenting “Lessons Learned”

Rick Davies, Wednesday, 26 August 2009

Purpose

This guidance note is intended for the use of GTZ and UNICEF during the final IMET reviews of the SISKES, IMHI and WCHPP projects. It is proposed that both organisations (along with their Indonesian partners) will make presentations on Lessons Learned from these projects, in IMET facilitated workshops to be held in October 2009 (SISKES) and February 2010 (IMHI and WCHPP).

In the October 2009 workshop a half day has been allocated for the presentation and discussion of “Lessons Learned” by the SISKES partners (GTZ and Gol in NTT and NTB). The provisional structure for that session is as follows:

- § Presentation by GTZ and partners on the Lessons Learned from the SISKES project. This could involve a PowerPoint summary supported by a “takeaway” handout that describes the lessons learned in more detail. A copy of the PowerPoint summary will not be enough, because it is likely to be a very abbreviated description.
- § Short plenary discussion, with a focus on questions seeking clarification.
- § Sub-group discussions of the presentation, each involving a different stakeholder groups, with the aim that each stakeholder group identifies the “lessons learned” that they found the most useful.
- § Plenary discussion, where sub-groups report back their choices and the reasons behind them, and the facilitator identifies commonalities and differences in their views.
- § Sub-groups may also be asked to recommend how specific “lessons learned” statements could be improved.
- § The issue of how the Lessons Learned will be disseminated may also be discussed, although dissemination issues are scheduled for discussion in the final session of the workshop on the SISKES knowledge products.

In order to obtain the maximum possible value from this session the IMET team would like GTZ to forward draft copies of the “lessons learned” statements to them prior to the October workshop, so that they can provide feedback on possible improvements. Drafts should be provided by Monday 5th October. Similar arrangements will be needed with UNICEF for the February 2010 workshop.

Scope

A total of six Lessons Learned statements will need to be presented. Each of these could be up to half a page in length. Ideally the six lessons would range across the areas listed below, and not be concentrated in one or two only:

- § Result Area 1: Integrated health planning / budgeting and M&E system in place in all districts
- § Result Area 2: Improved response by health service management systems when handling cases of referral, including harmonising response between different levels of the health services
- § Result Area 3: RH/MPS related clinical services correspond to agreed national quality standards and complement effective health promotion activities - in focus MPS districts
- § Result Area 4: Communities develop and maintain means of enabling community members to access appropriate RH services in selected MPS districts.

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- § Purpose level: Changes in the use of maternal and neo-natal health services in NTT and NTB
- § Assumptions made about how the project design and how it was expected to work
- § Alignment with government policy at province and or national level
- § Harmonisation with the policies and practices of other aid agencies
- § Monitoring and evaluation of the SISKES project and/or GoI MNH services

What is a Lesson Learned

There are many definitions, but this one from the OECD Development Assistance Committee provides an introductory explanation:

Generalizations based on evaluation experiences with projects, programs, or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact (OECD-DAC)

What will a Lesson Learned statement look like?

Answer: A headline statement, explained by a paragraph

The headline statement will at least have this type of structure:

- **If** you do...X....**then**...Y...will happen

Ideally it will have third part to it, describing the context:

- **If** you do...X....**and** these ...Z...conditions are present **then** ...Y....will happen

The same kind of simple logic statements should be found in a well designed Logical Framework description of a project design: ***If these Outputs are delivered, and these Assumptions are correct, then these Outcomes will happen***". While in the Logical Framework this type statement describes a plan, a Lessons Learned statement should describe what actually happened. There is also a correspondence here with the approach taken by Pawson and Tilley's school of Realistic Evaluation, where evaluations try to identify and test hypotheses about significant combinations of *context, mechanism, and outcome*".

The paragraph can take the form of an explanation or *story*, which describes the context, what happened there and what were the consequences. Lessons learned told via stories are likely to be remembered, and passed on. Good headlines will help people remember the gist of the story.

As stated above, a half page per lesson should be sufficient.

Some criteria for good Lessons Learned statements

1. **They are owned** (by people who are ready to talk about them)
2. **They are based on experience** (which may be positive or negative)
3. **They are verifiable** (because the events involved are documented)
4. **They are useful to others** (who read or hear about them)
5. **They make a difference** (when acted upon)

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6. **They have wide applicability** (wider than recommendations)
7. **They are interesting, not boring** (because of the above)
8. **But they do not have universal applicability** (like physical laws or moral truths)

Examples of Lessons Learned

Finding good examples of Lessons Learned is not easy. UNICEFⁱⁱⁱ and FAO^{iv} examples found online seem indistinguishable for small general purpose documents on subjects of concern.

Since 2006 the IMET team has been required to identify Lessons Learned from the SISKES, IMHI, and IMHEI projects, as part of their annual reporting to DFID. These reports provide some examples of lessons learned. They are not however examples of ideal Lessons Learned, a quick scan of the examples below shows they all could be improved upon.

1. Encourage informal engagements: *The formation of an informal "Think Tank" of interested participants from partner organisations has provided an extra and possibly more enduring dimension to the relationships within the project. It has provided an opportunity for interested stakeholders on the Gol side, where they may not have had official opportunities to engage, and it has provided some continuity of engagement for others, when their official roles have changed, moving them away from any official interaction with the project.*

This example from a review of SISKES uses a headline to capture the main message, in the form of an imperative^v. It says what to do, but not what the consequences are. These also need to be captured. Fortunately the paragraph underneath does provide more detail about what happened, and the consequences. If this Lessons Learned is to be of any use to people not familiar with the SISKES project then it will need to provide more contextual information, about the project and the setting.

2. Where possible, use NGOs for community level work. *The experience of using Govt in NTT and NGOs in NTB to do Desa Siaga implementation confirms the views the IMET team has previously expressed about the potential usefulness of NGOs in this role. According to GTZ, "NTT works through government structures. This slows down the process as implementation is done using local subsidies and district health offices - DHO still have problems with the accountancy. For this reason the targeted 50 villages in NTT are only partly ready to cover all aspects of the projects DS concept and will need further support in 2009."*

This Lessons Learned statement has evidence about what happens when one approach is taken, but only an assumption about what will happen when the other approach is taken. It might have been better to say something like "Using government agencies to do community mobilisation around Desa Siaga leads to significant delays in implementation".

3. Successful computerisation of the Local Area Monitoring system is a significant achievement *in two respects: (a) computerisations of records systems can be very difficult, so ways to doing it well will be of wide interest, (b) the availability of complete data on all pregnant mothers will increase the likelihood of all deliveries being "skilled attended" deliveries national information requirements are not the main determining factor in HMIS design.*

This headline from the IMET review of IMHI has the same problem, not spelling out the consequences. However in the text it is a bit clearer. The consequences of successful computerisation are likely to be a lot of interest by other districts in this was done, and increased likelihood of deliveries being attended by skilled staff. What the paragraph lack, for want of space, is evidence and arguments supporting these two propositions.

In 2008 "most significant change" stories were collected from the staff of the African Development Bank, as part of an evaluation of their decentralisation strategy. Almost all the story headings had if...then structures. For example:

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- § Presence of Field Office staff leads to reduction in project conditionalities
- § Closer supervision leading to quicker implementation
- § Supervision making a difference to quality and timeliness
- § Participatory design encourages confidence in ADB supported projects
- § Government policy on concessional loans drives ADB lending to the private sector
- § Action Plans enabling better follow-up of implementation decisions

How to find possible Lessons Learned

Catholic Relief Services have provided the following advice on Lessons Learned^{vi}:

One can simply think of a lesson learnt in this way, "What would we do differently next time? And what would we do the same?"

The core question in the Most Significant Change technique may also be a useful means of identifying potential Lessons Learned. That question takes this form: "*In your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place inover the last ... (period).*" Here the interviewer is trying to find out (a) what change happened and (b) why was it significant, what difference did it make or will it make in the future? Clear answers could be converted into generalisations with an if-then structure. If there are many competing candidates for Lessons Learned statements then try the second MSC question: "*Which of these SC stories do you think is the most significant of all?*" [describe the change and explain why you think it is significant]

Paul Crawford has suggested a related way of identifying Lessons Learned, by focusing on the sense of surprise, as is captured in this quote:

"Learning results from being surprised: detecting a mismatch between what was expected to happen and what actually did happen. If one understands why the mismatch occurred (diagnosis) and is able to do things in a way that avoids a mismatch in the future (prescription), one has learned." (Gharajedaghi, J. (1999) *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos And Complexity*, Oxford).

There is some opposite but related advice: look for signs of boredom, when reading a proposed Lessons Learned. Boredom may indicate that there is a lack of concrete and verifiable evidence (criteria 2 and 3 above). Or it may indicate that the lesson has been identified many times in the past, but has not yet made any difference (criteria 5 listed above).

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/29/21/2754804.pdf>

ⁱⁱ See Nick Tilley's overview of Realistic Evaluation at http://evidence-basedmanagement.com/research_practice/articles/nick_tilley.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/index_40904.html

^{iv} <http://www.fao.org/participation/lessonslearned.html>

^v Imperative statements are also used in the FAO website on lessons learned at <http://www.fao.org/participation/Neighbourhoods-lessons.html>

^{vi} See Catholic Relief Services "WHAT IS A LESSON LEARNT???" available at <http://mande.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/what-is-a-lesson-learnt.doc>