The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks
“Evaluating Justice and Peacebuilding Practice: Lessons Learned from Catholic Relief Services”

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Part One: Overview

Carlisle Levine opened the discussion with the following question: “Why do organizations decide to undertake evaluations as a sector wide practice? What are their motivations to look at an entire portfolio?”

Broad organization wide, sector wide evaluations don’t happen often. It’s a big investment for everyone. Most of the time it is done because either the donor asks, or the organization is looking for more funding for an ongoing program.

Carlisle conducted an external evaluation for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) regarding where CRS stood vis-à-vis its peers and competitors. The evaluation was a commissioned at a time when a new CEO took over, and a new organizational strategy (2014-2018) was announced in which peacebuilding and justice sector was designated as a core competency. The question was, “How are we doing?” Therefore, the impetus for this evaluation did not come from the outside, it came from the executive level management.

One challenge faced at the early stage when drafting the TOR was what evaluation questions to include? Once the evaluator was selected, CRS was looking at how to strike a good balance between breadth and depth given monetary and time constraints? Tom was part of the internal management team, and wanted to take advantage of the request from executives to explore a variety of issues that went beyond the reputation of CRS in the field and the overall results of CRS’s practice.

They wanted to ask about the relevance of the work, its strategic alignment with the organization’s mission and principles; how CRS was internally collaborating; how good the project designs were; how useful learning products was etc. The initial draft TOR that the internal management team shared with Carlisle, the selected evaluators therefore, was ambitious to say the least.

Carlisle being aware of the time and budget constraints knew that it was a project that could not be done solo and so decided to put together a team. She partnered with Ruth Allen, the former Mercy Corps Lead on Governance and with Maureen who is a land tenure specialist in the peacebuilding field. As a team, they then consulted with CRS to find out what the priorities were. Given the time and budget constraints, it was important to figure out what areas they really needed to concentrate on. Following the conversation with CRS, the team ranked the questions in the TOR on the basis of “most important” to “least important”.

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When it came to the breadth versus depth question, there was also a question of evidence: what kind of evidence could the evaluators rely on? The evaluators requested CRS for evaluations of their programs and reviewed a sample of them; they asked for their proposals in order to look at project design, and conducted various interviews to capture perceptions. They also wanted to conduct a survey but did not have enough time. They of course also reviewed internal documents, as well as reports external stakeholders conducted of CRS’s work.

Both the external and internal evaluation management team faced challenges during the process: making sense of the acronyms used by CRS; understanding the organization structure, the various relationships between different departments etc. It was also important for the evaluation team to understand that CRS approaches peacebuilding as related to social justice and equity (equity with respect to management of services, distribution of services and public goods etc.). Even though it helped that Carlisle had worked with CRS before, there was still significant back and forth. There was also some grappling of the definition and parameters of an entity created in 2009, the Africa Justice and Peace Working Group. It was difficult to see what its initiatives were, and what were the initiatives of the technical directors who were part of the working group. It was important to know in terms of attribution what was an Africa Justice and Peace Working Group initiative, or not.

The next challenge was to determine CRS’s external reputation in the field. If Carlisle wanted to get an honest response from INGOs, donors, academics, and experts in the field, Carlisle could not open the conversation with “I am evaluating CRS. What do you think about their peacebuilding work?” since it would not result in an honest answer. Instead, Carlisle opened the conversation with “I am undertaking an evaluation for an organization of its peacebuilding work, and I would like your thoughts about the peacebuilding field and this organization in particular. People are generally busy and do not want to take the time out to answer questions where the organization being asked about is anonymous, however, Carlisle received a much better response than she expected.

Another challenge was to assess effectiveness of programs without primary data from the ground. While CRS provided 28 evaluations to the team and they studied a purposive sample of 15, it would have been helpful to have more available. Part of the problem for CRS was that like many organizations it had decentralized systems and not one centralized repository for data on justice and peacebuilding. As a result, the evaluation team had to mainly rely on perceptions, from both internal and external stakeholders. The other challenge with this part was the range of quality of the evaluations. The team found that while 1/3rd of the evaluations were very good, 1/3rd were somewhat reliable and 1/3rd were just basically end of project reports. This brought up the question of whether the team rely upon the data from these evaluations?

Carlisle conducted interviews on effectiveness and the perceptions of effectiveness. This was a challenge because how do you interpret “perceptions”. How do you
interpret passions anger, joy, and separate that from “truth”. To make sense of this, the team triangulated data sources and collectors, consulted with teammates, and got feedback from CRS acknowledging that there might be tendency to emphasize the positive.

The speakers concluded their presentation with the question of use and utilization, acknowledging that this is really what evaluations should be about. How can these broad evaluations be used to improve organization performance?

To be most useful to decision makers, it is important that they see the evaluation as objective. This is not just about the way the findings are stated, but also the credibility of the external evaluators and the internal management team. It’s also important to present the findings through the proper protocol and channels, and through a very tight executive summary with a short list of priority recommendations. For utilization, the internal management team is still waiting for the executive team to complete its review, but the recommendations can be used to shift focus, improve efficiency, help ensure adequate resources, and build greater capacity if needed.

Part Two: Question & Answer

1. What was it like to iron out the truth as an interviewer? What does this process look like? What’s the type of conversation that you need to have?

Carlisle: The challenge for the interviewer is that when you are undertaking a whole series of interviews, certain ones will stand out in your mind. These are the interviews of people who were articulate, emotional or passionate. It important to remember that just because words were expressed in that way, does not mean that it was the truth or the widely held perception. That’s why it’s so important in qualitative data analysis to go back, look at your notes and see that this person said this, but does it resonate with what others said about the same question, and was it an outlier?

2. So you are not just looking at the interviewee’s bias, but also addressing your own?

Carlisle: Exactly. With another client, I came back with a few key findings, and when I went back to my notes, I was just picking out segments that favored my own interpretation. When I realized I was doing that, I had to go back and quantify and categorize, “how many people said this?” etc., to find out whether what I was perceiving to be true was accurate.

3. During the note taking process, do you have a specific process, like noting in interview specific emotions, might be helpful?

Carlisle: Taking note of the emotion is helpful but I normally don’t since I mostly remember when emotion is involved.
4. What type of criteria do you use to access the credibility of the answers in an interview?

Carlisle: I look for resonance among the different data sources. I normally would have more than one data point for a question – it could be other interviews, or documents. I would then make my own assessment, and share it with the evaluation team, and then the internal management team at CRS who would provide input regarding whether it made sense or not.

5. How did you rank the evaluation questions? And does it matter?

Carlisle: We ranked them on the basis of what was more important to the internal management team at CRS. It mattered because effort was allocated to those questions accordingly.

Tom: From the way the request came, it was quite clear that at the executive level the primary concern was how CRS stacked up vis-à-vis others in the field so it was very important that the evaluators answered that primary question. How were we perceived when it came to our peacebuilding work? Carlisle then had her own way of ranking the questions. We also wanted to underline some other important issues. For instance, CRS does not go after counter-insurgency funding. We wanted the evaluator to look at how consistent CRS’s own vision was, and how strategically aligned it was. We were also concerned with the decline of resources allocated to the peacebuilding and justice work. We wanted to be clear that a certain level of peacebuilding and justice work could not be undertaken without the adequate resourcing and staffing.

6. What are the internal or external obstacles you see in ultimately implementing the evaluation's recommendations?

Tom: There are a number of challenges. Externally, there is the economic environment and the paucity of funding for these kinds of initiatives. Also CRS is a multi-mandate NGO where 75% of the funding goes to emergency (humanitarian, livelihood, agriculture) where the size of possible grants is huge. This is not the case for justice and peacebuilding work. Therefore, adequate resources are a big challenge. There is also a lot of pressure on country directors to watch their bottom lines, and pressure on staffing for justice and peacebuilding work. If they do a cost-benefit analysis, you have to look beyond the sheer economic benefit. So what kinds of resources are available internally and externally to improve CRS’s work and implement some of the best recommendations is a big question. Also, at the same time that the evaluation was released, CRS is launching a new strategy for the entire organization, “From Hope to Harvest”. And this means at the same time that we are going through this evaluation and looking to the next few years, that’s true of all the other sectors including CRS’s signature programs (emergency, health, agriculture, water, education etc.). Everything is being rolled out at once, and it’s difficult to predict the degree to which we will get the buy-in we need to up our capacity, to increase our staffing etc. in the justice and peacebuilding area.
Carlisle: It’s a question of prioritization at the organizational level. Where do justice and peacebuilding fit? Various elements of the new strategy are being rolled out at the same time, and people in the field are overwhelmed by all the changes coming from headquarters. Another challenge of implementing the evaluation’s recommendation is timing. How do you roll out the actions recommended by this evaluation at the same time all these other things are happening? What’s the absorption capacity at the country level? How do you facilitate that?

Tom: Yes but at the same time you don’t want to step back till the other things get done. However, we are getting positive indications. It’s certainly on the radar screen of the executive team. It’s also a question of data. One thing in the new strategy that we are trying to focus on is that we have good enough context analysis for conflict, gender, and governance issues. We are working on a simple set of questions around each of these things that ought to be attended to in any proposal, in any kind.

7. During the presentation, you had mentioned the ambiguity between the work that the Africa Justice and Peace Working Group was doing, and what CRS was doing? How did you resolve that?

Tom: The evaluators went after the broader definition of the working group. It’s also important to note that the Africa Justice and Peace Working Group is still a CRS initiative. Since 2009, the working group allows regional personnel to cross regional boundaries and work across Africa on priority issues. The question that arose was that if peacebuilding advisor works for the East Africa region, and is a member of the working group, whose work is that? And how do you then evaluate the work of the working group? It was basically an in-house issue.

Carlisle: In the evaluation report, we would mention the titles i.e. indicate all the information they did as a working group member but also acknowledging the hat they wore at that time.

8. When reviewing evaluations, what criteria did you use to assess them? What were the quality measures?

Carlisle: We looked at clear theoretical pinnings and contextual knowledge that fit under the project itself; investigation of context changes, limitations, and how the projects responded to them. We also looked at the different methods used, and how well they were used; data sources; the quality of theory of change, how it was articulated; and analysis presented with key findings.

9. Will the report be publically available?

Tom: I hope so but cannot give a definite answer at this point. Among the results found, it’s important to note that the evaluation found that CRS’s work was broadly
effective especially at local levels, around ethnic sources of conflict, and in certain countries where we had a sustained presence. 

**Carlisle:** It was also especially successful when they were able to broad in a variety of resources to bear upon a situation.

*You can also listen in on the complete talk here.*