cprf Conflict Prevention & Resolution Forum

Evaluating Peacebuilding and Promoting Learning

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Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum Session

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Peacebuilding Indicators and Learning Initiatives Panel

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WASHINGTON, DC – A special session of the **Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum** (CPRF) was held at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on September 17th, 2010, followed by a Peacebuilding Learning Workshop. The event on **"Evaluating Peacebuilding and Promoting Learning"** was organized by Catholic Relief Service and Search for Common Ground. Interest for the event was overwhelming, with more than 200 people registered. Participants came from government agencies, think-tanks, non-profits and local universities.

"Is the participation in this event an indicator for how interested people are in getting more effective or for the worry about donor demands?" Speakers elaborated on the motivations for evaluation, the different approach and the development of particular tools. This report summarizes the discussion of the general forum session and the panel on peacebuilding indicators and learning initiatives.

Where are we today?

By the end of the 1990s, many people and organizations involved in peacebuilding began to ask how their activities could be evaluated. Today, among the peacebuilding practitioners there continues to be a great interest in evaluation and a broad agreement on the necessity of sound evaluation practices. Many institutions have made advances and real achievements. However, there have also been many real disappointments. The average evaluation is still of low quality and poor utility. A large number of evaluations are made only for the purpose of fundraising, justification and public relations instead of putting learning at the heart of the process. "

How comfortable is the average institution to ask the core questions?" Often a lack of transparency exists around evaluations. It is important that people feel safe to say what went well and what went wrong. "For practitioners, evaluation is like going to the dentist." Panelists observed a crisis of values in many institutions that are not truly engaged in learning and accountability. In order to improve this situation, it is important to identify and address the disincentives for good evaluations, to change the reward structures ("negative evaluations should not equal negative performance results"), and improve the evaluation tools. "We must demystify theory and reinforce practice."

The Obama administration's policies have become a positive driver for good evaluation practices. Senior members of the administration began to implement evidence-based decision-making across the board. Evidence-based decision-making intends to move evaluation from an exercise that only looks at how the money was spend to a stance that includes processes of learning. For example, USAID aims to build a sense of learning already into the design of project.

Why do we do evaluations?

Peacebuilding practitioners often feel an immense pressure from donors and executive leaderships to show results. Programs need to produce measurable evidence and success stories. Some audiences have more power than others: "There is a real cost if you are not accountable to donors, but there is no real cost if you are not accountable to your field staff." Hence, many evaluations are still tailored to fit the fundraising capacity. While donor relations and fundraising are certainly important, institutions must better balance external monitoring requirements with internal learning needs. Only strengthening the learning capacity will allow for the programs to become more effective. "Evaluations do not have to be perfect, but they need to get the feedback loops going." A good evaluation has an impact on future programs. "We usually learn the most from programs that do not work," as one panelist said. Learning is a key piece of accountability.

Evaluations are usually a snapshot of a particular program. For this snapshot to be accurate, it is important to be able to build upon good monitoring practices. "Good monitoring is a building block to good evaluation." Only about 20% of the evaluation practices are specific to peacebuilding, the standard ideas are much broader. Peacebuilding can learn from other fields, for example domestic preventive programs. Organizations must engage in a more continuous process of learning. In this regard, it is particularly important to create a safe space for learning.

Theories of change

Every peacebuilding program should have an explicit theory of change. Working with theories of change allows organizations to become more active players in shaping and evaluating their practices. "A solid theory of change is important to get the feedback loop going." Although the idea of these theories might seem very complex at the beginning, panelists argued otherwise: "We ask people to tell the story of how what they do will change something." Traditional logframes assume a linear world that allows pre-specifying success with static indicators. Nevertheless, the world is much more complex. Theories of change lead to a different form of evaluation, which looks at significant changes. Sometimes the issue of theories of change is pushed by the donors, sometimes by the implementer. However, most programs already work with an implicit theory or hypothesis of change. Several organizations try to categorize theories of change in order to see where they work and where not. "If people are used to working with theories of change, the evaluations become much easier."

Most peacebuilding programs are focused on changes on the micro level rather than the macro level. However, it might be that the program runs well at the micro level and the country goes down. "What do

peacebuilding programs do in terms of stability?" Often these outcomes are difficult to measure. A reduction of violence is somehow measurable, but an increase in stability is much more difficult. Panelists agree that measuring impact at the macro level is a huge challenge. What adds up to an effective country strategy? "As long as organizations still struggle to measure impact at the micro level, it might be too ambitious to go to the macro level." Nevertheless, there is a need to develop indicators for each level of analysis. Organizations should engage in a coordinated approach to work on indicators and to discuss how programs may cumulate to have an impact at the macro level.

Indicators

"Indicators have become a negative word in the peacebuilding community." Still, they are one important way to measure the impact of programs. In peacebuilding programs the casual effect is often difficult to measure. Attribution is a very complex issue when the context plays such an important role. "Sometimes it is necessary to have very limited indicators in order to be able to measure the impact." One panelist asserted that it makes more sense to look at contribution rather than attribution. Normally the proposals are strong on *output* indicators, but somehow weaker on *outcome* indicators. Yet, more and more donors prefer outcome indicators. "If indicators turn out not to be the right ones, [organizations] must have the courage to go back to the donor to explain the situation."

Currently there a significant efforts to catalogue and test different indicators. "The more people use and test [the indicators], the better." There is a discussion between proponents of quantitative and proponents of qualitative indicators. Sometimes the decision is made because of the availability of financial resources for evaluation, but the divide between the two categories of indicators is disappearing. Peacebuilding practitioners are getting better in the use of quantitative measures.

It is also important to conceptualize indicators. For example, self-esteem looks different in different cultures. While many proposals are written at the headquarter level, it is essential to have a back-and-forth dialogue between the headquarters and the field offices regarding indicators and means of verification. There is need to see what is doable on the ground.

There are different data collection tools, such as surveys randomized control trials, etc. Rather than having a bias towards one tool, organization should decide on a case-by-case basis which tool is the most appropriate.

Different Resources

Catholic Relief Services has an online library of indicators, which offers a number of templates with example on how to measure the impact of programs more objectively.

The George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution assembled a matrix of theories of change, including seven families of theories (inside-out peacebuilding, attitudes, healthy relationships, peace process, functioning institutions, reforming the elite, coming to terms with the past). Each family has subcategories with example indicators.

Search for Common Ground is working on a learning portal on design, monitoring and evaluation for peacebuilding programs. Among many other resources, the project will present several indictors with objectives and means of verification. This collaborative learning project will be launched early next year.

Conclusions

The discussion during the whole event proved that the topic of evaluating peacebuilding meets a lot of interest among academics and practitioners. Perhaps five years ago, such a mature debate on this topic could not have taken place. Panelists raised many important issues. Evaluation practices have made a lot of progress during the last few years.

Generally, evaluations must strike a balance between external constraints and internal learning needs. Organizations engaged in peacebuilding need to continue the reflection on professional standards and strengthen them. It is important to work more collaboratively, to learn from other field and to apply approaches that a relevant to the context. Appropriate indicators for different levels of analysis are important to approach the question of impact at the macro level.