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Thematic Brief: Measuring and Evaluating Agricultural Education and Training



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Introduction

The program logic or theory of change provides an underlying structure for evaluating a project and acts as a roadmap of the project's components (including its inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes, and impacts). Each of the project components can have associated indicators which allow for the regular monitoring of progress and achievement of program goals (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Most funding agencies have established a bank of indicators that project implementers can use when designing their projects or are required to report on based on the sector of the project.

Agricultural Education and Training (AET) is a unique sub-sector existing at a cross-section of the larger sectors of agriculture, education, and/or extension. In order to monitor progress towards goals, AET projects have utilized indicators from each of the larger areas, have reported on required funding agency indicators (such as USAID's Feed the Future indicators), and developed custom indicators as needed. Custom indicators developed for individual projects are typically specific to that project and its goals.

In response to stakeholder feedback, InnovATE commissioned a review of the indicators used to evaluate AET projects, as well as a study of approaches and strategies employed by USAID Missions to assess AET project outcomes and impacts. The results of the review and study are collectively summarized below.

Challenges and Issues

Individual projects usually report on required agency-level indicators, as well as project-specific indicators that aid in the improvement of program delivery and tracking towards the

project's goals. As previously mentioned, agency-level indicators tend to not focus on AET, but rather on components such as agriculture and education. Importantly, the development of custom indicators tends to be limited to an individual project, with knowledge of the process of their development limited to project staff and managers.

It is common practice to combine both required funding agency and custom indicators in M&E plans. From a survey of five USAID Missions that have implemented AET projects, all indicated that they have used a combination of USAID's Feed-the-Future indicators and custom project-level indicators; they also noted that the Feed-the-Future indicators were not very useful in terms of documenting the progress and impact of AET projects.

Custom indicators and the process under which they were developed tend to be temporary; they are not shared across projects, even within the same country, or with similar projects, and are not added to the bank of indicators maintained by the funding agency sponsor. Further, Mission staff are not generally involved in project evaluations; in fact, several Mission staff interviewed by InnovATE staff were unclear about the types of indicators being used by the AET projects they managed. Most projects use external evaluators, either US-based contractors, local evaluation providers, or a combination of the two, to conduct mid-term and final evaluations, placing knowledge of custom AET indicators in the hands of people outside of the funding agency.

Another issue regarding existing indicators used for agriculture, education, extension, and AET is the abundance of output and outcome indicators and distinct lack of impact, input and process indicators. While output indicators are

useful for tracking activities, they do not provide documentation of the processes and resources utilized to establish a project; nor do output indicators show a change in knowledge or behavior that most funding agencies want their projects to have. Outcome and impact indicators are important to show the desired effect of a project on its target population in both the short- and long-term (Parsons, Gokey, & Thornton, 2013). However, the impact of a project can take years to come to light, often well after funding has ended, which is beyond the ability of the project to track. Further, the AET projects themselves do not have a long enough timeline for the effects of the education/training to be measured by the existing Feed the Future outcome and impact indicators. Additionally, tools that can be used to measure the impact of a project within the project's lifetime, such as

the collection of baseline data and use of pre- and post-tests, are not commonly used. The vast majority of existing indicators are quantitative with very few, if any, qualitative indicators. The lack of qualitative indicators prevents projects from reporting on, to put it simply, the quality of the project and use the rich information that can show the desired change.

Solutions and Good Practices

Given the growing importance placed by funding agencies on tracking results for funded projects, there is a need to give meaningful attention to the development of M&E plans for AET projects, Missions, and agencies. This includes the development of custom indicators and integration of multiple types of indicators into the plans, including both process indicators to be used for project management and long-term tracking of outcome and impact indicators to determine sustained project impacts.

Beyond the M&E plan, training for local institutions and Mission staff will help build their capacity to provide greater input into the development and implementation of evaluation activities, to recommend best practices for evaluation, and align data collection with project and USAID needs more effectively. This is an area where U.S. universities (as well as other organizations like AAU, RUFORUM, etc.) can be a resource for funding agencies (such as USAID) and local institutions to help develop evaluation strategies.

In the past, sharing of information across Missions and AET projects has been limited to the happenstance of a Mission staff member with experience in AET project evaluation moving between countries. A system of improved communication related to sharing effective evaluation methodologies, best

Developing Custom Indicators

Who should be involved:

- measurement and content-area specialists
- project staff
- project managers
- funding agency representatives who are responsible for making decisions regarding the project (Horsch, 1997)

Indicators should be SMART:

- Specific – indicators should be clearly and well defined
- Measurable – indicators should be able to be measured, either quantitatively or qualitatively
- Attainable – indicators should be practical and reasonable given the goals of the project
- Relevant – indicators should be related to and appropriate for the project
- Time-bound – indicators should include a date or frequency for collection

practices, and results could assist funding agencies, Missions, and project implementers alike in improving AET projects, evaluation plans, and indicators. Funding agencies, such as USAID, will always have agency-level indicators that will have to be incorporated into a project's evaluation plan. However, the development of a suite of AET-specific indicators would be a step towards enabling consistent measurement across projects/programs. Further, indicators developed for AET should move beyond mere output indicators to include process, outcome, and impact indicators. The current Feed the Future indicators do not align with the needs of AET projects, but new indicators developed specifically for AET can and should be integrated into the Feed the Future framework and funding agencies' banks of indicators.

References

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Recommendations

- Develop a suite of AET indicators to share widely to enable consistent measurement across projects/programs.
- Integrate appropriate AET measures into the Feed the Future framework, particularly process indicators and indicators for outcomes and impacts.
- Use US universities and organizations like AAU, RUFORUM, etc. as a resource to assist USAID and in-country tertiary education institutions in developing evaluation strategies.
- Improve communication between projects, both within countries and across regions/globally, to disseminate effective evaluation methodologies and best practices, and share AET results.
- Develop local expertise in AET project evaluation through training and capacity building initiatives.
- Train Mission staff in AET project evaluation to enable them to provide greater input into the development and implementation of evaluation activities, to recommend best practices for evaluation and align data collection with Feed the Future indicators more effectively.
- Integrate long-term tracking and outcome evaluation needs into project design to determine sustained project impacts.