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Epilogue: Lessons Learned

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It is common practice at the conclusion of a major USAID project to offer some reflections upon the activities completed. The term typically applied to this exercise is "lessons learned." The implication is that a "lesson," as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, offers instruction through which some knowledge or wisdom is gained. The "learning" implies the dimension of comprehension joined with experience. The hope is that documenting the lessons learned provides "warnings" of what not do, in order to prevent future errors, as well as to accelerate startup time for new efforts.

The "lessons learned" offered in the following pages focus on characteristics of the Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project, which embodies the principles enumerated in the lead article for this issue of *Quality Link.* But they do not constitute "warnings." Rather it is our hope that the present description of these characteristics will represent a positive contribution for the design and implementation of other similar efforts.

As the first five-year contract of the IEQ Project (IEQ1) draws to a close, we join others in providing reflective insights which we hope will advance subsequent activities. This retrospective view treats the "lessons" as stepping stones upon which future activities may be constructed. Many of these ideas have been discussed at conferences and in other venues during the course of implementing the IEQ project. This brief article presents them as starting points for others, particularly our colleagues in the IEQ partner countries, whose wisdom and experience have enriched us.

> *Learning lessons is an ongoing process which must be integrated into the implementation of the project.*

Questions linked to lessons learned are typically reserved for end-of-project events. This sequence suggests (although I think few would admit to believing this) that the reflections occur after all is said and done. IEQ1 has been implemented as a work in progress[1], an ongoing and continual learning process for all participants. It is important to articulate what is being learned in time to use the knowledge either to build on successes, or to alter that which is already in place. This model accepts trial and error as essential for change and improvement.

During the implementation of IEQ, we built in several modes of self-assessment (internal feedback). One was to document country-by-country progress (intermediate accomplishments) toward results within each of the four major goals. Another was to dedicate time during each of the country visits to "reflection" with the team. This period was not always possible to schedule, but the more often it took place, the more we believed it was critical. A third

[1]A work in progress implies that there is an environment which facilitates ongoing change.

technique was to hold biweekly telephone conference calls with the Technical Review Panel to keep in touch with the country-by-country activities, hear problems and concerns, brainstorm options and plan together.

Shifting from a relationship based on technical support to partnership with host-country colleagues, and ultimately to "ownership," requires "letting go" and "taking on."

The story of IEQ reveals a paradigm shift away from technical support and towards ownership. It requires a shared recognition of classroom realities and cultivates a system which accepts responsibility for its own improvement.

We were surprised at the cautious response of our host-country educators to the notion of their status as partners in IEQ. Perhaps our mutual expectations were not explicit from the outset, or perhaps they were not examined frequently enough as the project unfolded. But it is clear that the collaborative process of our work required the equal attention and commitment of all. It was important and necessary for the US-based IEQ participants to demonstrate our own faith in the project by "letting go"; in turn, the host-country participants had to "take on" aspects of our work. From the outset, IEQ assumed this was a modus operandi; however, many host-country nationals wanted to be instructed "what do to" as we began. (This request revealed much about the donor/host-country relationships.)

In short, it became critical to set a tone of reciprocity among colleagues, but it was often challenging to maintain this balance. Moving toward ownership also required focusing on national priorities for the in-country efforts and engaging educators throughout the system in dialogue about the expected results of the IEQ project and its implications for action.

An element not "built into" the process was the amount of effort and time required to work together and to develop trust in the relationships. Moreover, it was necessary to recognize that mistakes do happen and that they can be transformed into learning experiences: this is an acceptable way of conducting business. It's often easier and more efficient to tell people what to do and how to perform correctly, than to allow them to find out for themselves. But this is not development. And it's not IEQ.

Research is supported by "non-researchers" in a system when it is experienced as a tool for educational improvement.

In IEQ, one measure of success is the way information is utilized. The demonstration of research as a tool occurs in several ways. It begins by focusing on national priorities in-country and by reflecting the concrete problems or concerns which the educational system is trying to address. It continues by engaging educators, e.g., teachers, assessment experts, teacher trainers, and others

within the educational system, in a discussion of the results of the research in order to gain insight into and understanding of the problems being examined. Materials summarizing the research findings are prepared in appropriate format and size to communicate meaning and stimulate discussion. Context and engagement are key ingredients. And hearing about others' experiences or reviewing the relevant professional literature can provide a framework for action and reform in a specific environment.

Dialogue about the reality of classroom experience, and its effect on both teachers and pupils, is a catalyst for those INSIDE the system to improve the quality of education.

There are two important factors here. The first is *who* is doing the talking. There should be a sharing of information across hierarchical lines within the system which moves toward a "democratic" process. IEQ has broken through barriers which traditionally isolate educators (often the "disenfranchised") by inviting them "to the table" through conferences, workshops, or seminars. An example is the inclusion of teachers in discussions of the findings about what pupils could and could not do in their classrooms (follow simple instructions, write their names, read from a "below grade" text). The discussions focused on how the teachers could improve their teaching by pinpointing learning needs and suggesting methods to address those needs. Many teachers requested additional help, and they shared what they learned with their school colleagues. They became more engaged with their teaching and, for some, the absentee rate declined.

The second is *what* is being discussed. The focus should be on the REALITY of teaching and learning in the classroom--for example, the use (or lack of use) by teachers of instructional resources, or the level of reading or writing by pupils in the primary cycle. The amount of dialogue about instructional resources, the extent of discourse between teachers and students, the classroom environment and other realities of classroom practice--all of these conditions can reveal specific needs of educators throughout the system. As a result of discussion about these needs, teachers can gain a clearer understanding of their own pupils' ability to perform; trainers can determine how to revise in-service and pre-service courses; and policy-makers can gain perspective on the national implications of, say, testing or textbook production and distribution.

Thus can the "experience of learning" about the classroom by both the policy makers and the practitioners provide the stepping stones to improving the quality of education.

Providing the connections between host-country colleagues and the broader professional community builds confidence and contributes to empowerment and participation within the country.

This outcome has been one of the most exciting for IEQ. Opportunities to travel outside the country, actively participate in international conferences, represent their own work and build their own networks are typically limited to the same small group of people in developing countries.

Such limited exposure restricts their own vision of themselves and their work. They often don't know how good they are and how much they have to contribute to an international forum.

One goal of IEQ has been to foster such linkages, *not only* at major conferences *but also* within the IEQ project, so that country representatives travel to member countries for specific technical agendas, e.g., development and use of curriculum-based testing. From the beginning, IEQ colleagues from host countries have presented the IEQ work in-country at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) meetings. It has been interesting and very revealing to listen to the response of donors and other contractor organizations to this participation. Recognition of the importance of such participation is mingled with surprise!

Outreach and participation within the broader educational system have also occurred within country. Members of IEQ teams have moved beyond their immediate professional circles, e.g., the university, to become engaged in basic education at both local and national levels. This has occurred at regional and national conferences attended by the educational stakeholders within the system where focused discussion on the implications of the findings takes place. Members of local research teams have been invited into the broader reform arena, usually at the national level, because of the methodology and focus of the IEQ process.

> *Establishing an institutional home within country is a solid beginning for sustainability.*

Notice I didn't say sustainability of the project! Housing IEQ within a local institution builds not only new individual professional skills, but it also strengthens the institution. IEQ does not measure its success by continuation of the "repeated events," but rather by a commitment to the process of assessment and "continuous reflection and adjustment." We view the skills, experiences and knowledge gained during the IEQ1 years as building blocks for this ongoing work.

IEQ residence in an institutional home facilitates the spread of the ideas it fosters and the methods it applies within the organization. But it also gives them currency for broader acceptance. What is sustained through IEQ team members is the organization's methodology in a widely respected and active educational institution. In two countries, the institution will assume operational support for IEQ. In a third country, a local office will relocate to an academic institution. In a fourth country, the IEQ team resides within the government, which has been continually absorbing IEQ technical principles and methods. In a fifth country, collaboration on the development of technical products has resulted in site-by-site adaptation of appropriate methods and procedures. The project supported by the IEQ1 five-year contract does not have to be sustained to be successful. Its success can be measured by the continuing utility of the methodological process through strengthened individual and institutional capacity.

Perhaps such reflections about IEQ1 may proliferate in other venues. IEQ1 has been blessed with participants who have an abundance of talent and energy. Each could offer a unique perspective of "lessons learned"; they are welcomed. Indeed, as I reflect on my own experience

of the past five years as Director of the IEQ Project, I am struck by the untapped potential for educational improvement which exists at all levels.

I believe that the principles and the process which IEQ has developed offer a promise for change that at once systematically determines and integrates the REALITY of the classroom. This approach moves abstract notions to concrete information about what is and is not happening within the school and how it affects a pupil's capacity to develop intellectually and physically. After all, the bottom line for determining if educational quality has improved should be whether pupils learn.

In order to achieve this end, IEQ obliges educators to consider first the CONTEXT of their national educational systems and to identify opportunities for and agents of change. To be sure, we've been privy to some hallmarks of change: teachers' increased interest in their own teaching; circuit supervisors' response to opportunities to be instructional leaders, the revelations and questions which arise from new knowledge about learning within the primary school before end-of-cycle testing; the growing commitment of university faculty to improving basic education.

The energy of and the interaction among IEQ1 participants anticipates educational improvement. We must never forget that the experience of working with this anticipation brings its own rewards and results. It is upon these that we build together.