

## **Learning from programs when they finish**

### ***Piloting an organisational learning initiative in the Kingdom of Tonga***

Aid programs can accumulate a wealth of useful experiences, knowledge and lessons by the time they finish. The question of how to 'capture' and share this knowledge beyond the standard reporting mechanisms presents a major challenge.

Our **Development Impact Group (DIG)** faced this question recently, in regards to the Tonga Fisheries Project as it approached the end of its 5 year span. The Project, funded by AusAID and managed by GHD Hassall, supported communities, industry and government in developing a sustainable fisheries sector in Tonga.

In early 2008, the DIG designed and funded a pilot initiative to better capture and share useful knowledge and lessons from the Project as it finished. This initiative aimed to complement and supplement the knowledge and lessons gathered through AusAID's standard formal *Completion Report*.

The Project's Team Leader was commissioned to reflect upon and document key lessons, supported by specially-designed guidelines developed by the DIG. The aim was to capture lessons in two areas: (i) project management, and (ii) changes facilitated by the Project. In doing this, the Team Leader was encouraged to draw on perspectives from other key informants, such as Tongan counterparts and other Program team members.

A key challenge in the process was how to capture knowledge so that it would be usefully 'transferable' to programs in different countries and sectors. To address this, the DIG developed a simple 'theory of change' framework that the Team Leader used to structure and organise the knowledge gained.

Underpinning the framework was the notion that change in the world occurs when people (or groups of people) take certain actions. This fundamental concept of people-centered change underpins all aid programs and thus provided a way of distilling lessons on effective approaches to change that could be 'transferable' between different programs.

The pilot was completed in February 2008 and generated rich and valuable insights on project management issues, as well as changes achieved by the Project, the approaches used to achieve these changes, and why they did or didn't work. Some of the key themes that emerged included:

- The relative impacts of strengthening capacity of a individual stakeholder versus strengthening the collective capacity of stakeholder groups
- Harmonising science-based and technical (hard) interventions with cultural and socio-political (soft) norms and influences in Tonga
- Distinguishing between strengthened capacity, and motivation to apply that capacity
- Matching expectations and timeframes against the scale of change being attempted (including, for a fisheries project, an appreciation of the natural 'lifecycles' of certain marine species)
- The relative influence of the 'enabling environment' vs individual agency in driving change
- The importance of raising awareness, education, participation and developing 'soft skills' (for example, in facilitation, consultation & presentation) as critical enablers of change

This organisational learning initiative was itself a rich learning experience, as it involved a range of practical and conceptual challenges. For example:

- Creating adequate ‘space’ for people to reflect and learn during what is typically a very busy time for program teams
- How to complement rather than duplicate the knowledge documented as part of formal reporting requirements
- Keeping the ‘end’ in mind - how and why would lessons be disseminated and used
- How to capture the rich, tacit and hard-to-document lessons about the Project that reside in the minds and experiences of Project staff and stakeholders
- How to capture lessons in such a way that they are transferable between programs in different sectors or countries

The end of a program marks a natural ‘gap’ in an organisation’s ‘action-learning’ process, where valuable lessons can be easily lost. Initiatives such as this one in Tonga are critical to bridging these gaps, and enabling aid organisations to continually learn from experience and improve their impacts.

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*Our thanks to Marc Wilson, former Team Leader of Tonga Fisheries Project, for his invaluable contribution to this initiative.*