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About Impact

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These briefs draw on the many and diverse experiences and learnings of our people and programs across the Asia-Pacific region.

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Valuing unexpected outcomes: a case study of an Indonesian training project

ABSTRACT

Unexpected, accidental, and serendipitous discoveries have a long history of assisting human society to progress and develop. However in international development, the natural pressures of accountability in development often tend to drive us to rigidly search for outcomes that we expect, rather than taking more open approaches to inquiry, learning and improving. Drawing on a case study of a training project in Indonesia, this brief explores and argues for the value of unexpected outcomes in improving development practice and impact.

Progress through serendipity

Some of the most important discoveries in science were made unexpectedly. While investigating flu bacteria in 1928, English bacteriologist Alexander Fleming accidentally discovered penicillin after noticing a culture dish of bacteria that had been invaded by mould. Another English scientist, William Herschel, was twice as serendipitous, accidentally discovering both the planet Uranus and infrared radiation while investigating other natural phenomenon.

Such events are in fact more common than one would first suspect. A quick trawl through the internet reveals a remarkably long list of men and women who unexpectedly made scientific discoveries and technological innovations while in the process of searching for something else. Advocating the recognition of the important role of unexpected discoveries, American wildlife biologist M.K. Stoskopf wrote that “serendipitous discoveries are of significant value in the advancement of science and often present the foundation

for important intellectual leaps of understanding.”¹

Lessons learned from unexpected outcomes

The notional value of unexpected discoveries is not limited only to the fields of science and technology. In our field of international development, the phrase ‘lessons learned’ has become a permanent part of the industry language, universally regarded by all as a meritorious concept and endeavor. But what exactly is a ‘lesson learned’? One way to define “learning” is the knowledge or understanding gained when we observe the variance between an expected outcome and what actually happens (which can be both expected and unexpected).² Thus, by this definition, unexpected outcomes are an important component of learning.

In development, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the discipline primarily responsible for systematically capturing and reflecting on lessons learned. There is arguably still a gap in

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the purported value placed on lessons learned, and the deliberate searching out, capturing and reflecting on unexpected outcomes as part of standard M&E practice. The accountability pressure on aid organisations to demonstrate effective and efficient use of aid monies to their public / donor constituents, while justifiable, creates a natural focus on ‘proving’ expected outcomes (as articulated in program designs / logic) rather than searching for unexpected ones. The ground does seem to be shifting however. In recent years, innovative new M&E methods such as *Most Significant Change*³ have contributed significantly to raising awareness of the value of unexpected outcomes (also termed ‘emergent’ outcomes) in helping us understand the complex dynamics of change in human systems.

The following case study looks at some of the unexpected outcomes emerging from a longstanding AusAID-funded training project in Indonesia, and some of the potential lessons to be drawn from these.

About IASTP

The Indonesia-Australia Specialised Training Project (IASTP) is an AusAID-funded project that commenced in 1995 and is now into its third ‘phase’, which runs from 2004 to 2008. The current phase is being managed by Hassall & Associates International.

The goal of IASTP is to support the Indonesian Government’s national human resource development priorities by providing specialised short-term training and capacity building initiatives at the central, provincial and district levels.

Specifically, the Project contributes to this broad goal by seeking to upgrade the knowledge and skills of mid-career, middle level professionals in the public, non-government and private sectors in the specific areas of economic management, selected areas of

governance, and the delivery of basic services. Between 1999 to the present (encompassing Phases 2 and 3 of the project), over 23,700 individuals have been trained under IASTP.^{4 5}

For more information on the Project, visit <http://www.iastp.org>

Expecting Kirkpatrick

As a project designed primarily to deliver training, IASTP’s design and underlying logic is a monitoring and evaluation framework based on Donald Kirkpatrick’s widely-used model of training evaluation. The Kirkpatrick model describes the ‘chain’ of outcomes to be expected by a training intervention at 4 levels:

Level 1 – Training Quality: The initial reactions and perceptions of the trainees on their satisfaction with the training.

Level 2 – Learning: The extent to which the training led to a change in the skills, knowledge or attitudes of trainees. This often involves some kind of testing method both before and after the training (ie: ‘pre’ and ‘post’ testing).

Level 3 – Behaviour: Whether the learning acquired in the training was applied in the workplace, or led to any changes in behaviour.

Level 4 – Results: Changes in organisational performance as a result of changes in behaviour due to the training.

While these four levels of the Kirkpatrick model define a specific ‘results chain’, connecting training interventions (Level 1) to organisational performance (Level 4) the result of the M&E tends to be output focused rather than outcomes focused. Furthermore, the Project’s M&E system seeks out and documents data on outcomes based on indicators that sit along this ‘results chain’. Although providing useful information to periodic evaluations of the Project that have led to ongoing, incremental improvements in the

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Project's design and implementation, all key actors (AusAID, GOI or IASTP III/HAI) saw significant room for improving the Project M&E system towards industry 'best practice' in M&E. This assessment was underpinned by independent reviews (Impact Study and Mid-Term Review). A mid-term review of the Project advocated that a new M&E Framework that captured more qualitative data on the broader impacts of IASTP III should be designed and implemented.

With the intent of implementing a new framework that addressed existing deficiencies and represented best practice, the Project supported by HAI's Development Impact Group commenced evaluating current approaches that would not displace the valuable quantitative data captured by the Kirkpatrick model, but overlay additional qualitative data that would allow more useful conclusions to be drawn about the impact and outcomes of over four years of short term training activity.

Other emerging outcomes

Concurrent with the ongoing review of suitable M&E models, Project staff noticed a growing body of feedback, anecdotes and stories from IASTP participants and stakeholders that supported the contention that training activities were having an impact beyond the training room. While this information has yet to be subject to validation as 'real' and not 'hyperbole', and hence has not been formally submitted as evidence of impact, the examples related below suggest that the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach, when combined with the Kirkpatrick Model, could be expected to improve significantly the quality of IASTP III's M&E:

- **Promotion of IASTP's training model as 'best practice':** Many Indonesian IASTP participants view IASTP's training model as 'best practice' and have actively promoted the model to other non-IASTP

stakeholders, including international donors and other Indonesian government agencies who have not participated in the Project⁶. Some other donors have even adopted aspects of the IASTP model in their programs.⁷

- **Adoption of the IASTP model:** A number of Indonesian agencies who participated in IASTP training have since gone on to adopt the training model (or aspects of it), particularly the use of mentoring and post-training Action Plans. Examples include the *Badan Diklat*⁸ in East Java⁹, *Badan Diklat* in Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi¹⁰, and the State Ministry of Administrative Reform¹¹.
- **Career / professional development:** Several Indonesian participants of IASTP trainings (including both trainees and their mentors) have reported successful career and professional advancement – typically promotions – citing the professional knowledge and skills acquired through IASTP trainings and experiences as a major reason.¹² In Nusa Tenggara Timur, IASTP training is officially recognised and certified by the Governor, adding further value to the training as a means of professional development for provincial participants.¹³ This positive experience has in turn reinforced their commitment to being IASTP mentors and to the Project more generally.
- **Network of mentor associations:** In at least four provinces where IASTP has worked (ie: East Java, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Nusa Tenggara Timur and South Sulawesi), IASTP mentors have decided to establish 'mentor associations'¹⁴. The Mentor Association in Nusa Tenggara Timur, in fact, has been formally recognised and supported by the provincial governor and local government.¹⁵ These associations usefully serve as a mechanism for peer-supported professional development amongst IASTP mentors, as well as linking



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mentors to formal training agencies external to their own agencies.

- **Creation of new institutions / partnerships:** Following an IASTP training course on conflict resolution and management in West Nusa Tenggara, participants (including representatives from the Provincial Training Centre, Regional Office of Justice and Human Rights, Regional Police and Army, and community and religious leaders) established an ‘agency for conflict resolution and peace research’ to further share the knowledge and skills acquired. This agency has since provided training on conflict resolution and management for over 100 other participants, and has quickly become recognised as a local ‘focal point’ for conflict resolution and management, attracting growing requests for assistance and support. IASTP has since committed to providing further assistance to help strengthen their capacity to meet this demand on an ongoing basis.¹⁶

Unexpected outcomes – what can they teach us?

Such unexpected outcomes can be useful in several ways.

Firstly, these examples are not necessarily representative of ‘mainstream’ experience of IASTP participants. Rather, they provide us with glimpses of unusual (positive or negative) outcomes that stand out from the norm. Such ‘outliers’ are useful in helping answer the questions: (i) what is working very well and can we do more of it? Or conversely, (ii) what is not working well and can we avoid doing it again?

Secondly, they also expand our awareness of the types of change that can occur from our intervention, (beyond just those expected by the project design/logic), and in doing so lead us to re-examine the criteria being used to judge the performance of a project. In the case of IASTP, for example, beyond the

‘goal posts’ of organisational performance defined by the Kirkpatrick model, the stories being collected by Project staff suggest that IASTP is also having an impact in terms of:

- Demonstrating and replicating the merits and benefits of the (Australian) IASTP training model, viewed by some participants as sound practice in Indonesia;
- Building and strengthening the cadre of skilled, competent mid-level and senior-level professionals within the ranks of the Indonesian public, private and non-government sectors;
- Facilitating exchange of knowledge and experiences within Indonesia (through the IASTP alumni); and
- Facilitating the creation of new initiatives and partnerships for change and knowledge sharing.

Reviewing the success yardstick

As the Project seeks to move from one M&E framework of sound but limited usefulness to a new framework that possesses the capacity to identify and report on outcomes related to aid effectiveness, the yardsticks by which such effectiveness are judged must also be open to reflection. For example – do we accept as an indicator of effectiveness the potential contribution of the Project to building a critical mass of individual educated and capable professionals, commonly regarded as a pre-condition for larger scales of capacity development and reform.¹⁷ The OECD notes:

“Educated and capable individuals are an obvious precondition for capacity development. The lessons of experience are that the spread of education and build-up of professional skills and knowledge are not sufficient to develop capacity, because of the importance of organisational and institutional constraints. However, they remain necessary.”¹⁸

“Ultimately, judgement about the relative merits of one outcome to another is for the key stakeholders of the project to collectively consider

... however such an option would not be possible without a conscious search for unexpected / emergent outcomes in the first place.”

Similarly, Australian scholarships to individuals from developing countries (which form a major aspect of the 2006 White Paper on Australian Aid) are partially based on a similar rationale:

“Other strengths of the aid program include its longstanding emphasis on scholarships. This pre-dates but fits in well with the recent recognition that reform and improved performance must be driven from within through a cadre of highly competent and educated leaders.”¹⁹

Against such an objective, there is evidence to suggest that the IASTP model is making a definite contribution, although the extent of this contribution is not fully known at this time. Ultimately, judgement about the relative merits of one outcome (eg: training to improve organisational performance, as defined by the Kirkpatrick model) to another (eg: training to build a critical mass of competent, skilled professionals, as a foundation for larger-scale change and reform) is for the key stakeholders of the Project to consider collectively. However, such an option would not be possible without a conscious search for unexpected/emergent outcomes in the first place. IASTP III and HAI seek to introduce a new M&E Framework that demonstrates sound practice and provides AusAID and the GOI will rigorous reporting on Project outcomes.

Conclusion

This brief suggests that deliberate efforts to search for unexpected outcomes can serve a valuable role in, for example:

- Gaining a broader, more fuller understanding of the impacts of any given project / program, beyond those specified by the design;
- Following on from this, reviewing the appropriateness of the criteria by which we use to judge the

performance of projects / programs; and

- Providing us with lessons on ‘stand out’ outcomes, so we apply them to do more of what works well and less of what doesn’t.

As we highlighted at the start of this brief, there is a long tradition making ‘break through’ scientific discoveries and technological innovations while searching for something else. In our field of development, the pressures of accountability, while serving as a useful driver of performance-orientated practice, can sometimes also blinker us from unexpected but valuable outcomes outside our search fields.

This need not be the case. We have the tools – *Most Significant Change* being a prominent example - to broaden our search for lessons learned. Perhaps what is more important is a ready mindset for open inquiry and learning. To quote Louis Pasteur, the great French chemist / biologist: *“in the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind.”*

About the Author

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Since joining HAI, he has worked on a range of proposal and program management activities. His roles have included Program Coordinator for the China Australia Governance Program, and HAI Manager for the Australian Development Gateway Project.

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ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

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