Critical reflections on the use of participatory methodologies to build evaluation capacities in international development organisations

Jo Tacchi, Associate Professor, Queensland University of Technology
j.tacchi@qut.edu.au

June Lennie, Senior Research Associate, Queensland University of Technology
j.lennie@bigpond.net.au

Michael Wilmore, Senior Lecturer, University of Adelaide
michael.wilmore@adelaide.edu.au

I.   INTRODUCTION

There has been a greater focus on strengthening evaluation capacity building (ECB) within development organisations in recent years. This can be attributed in part to the growing appreciation of the value of participatory and collaborative forms of evaluation. Evaluation is increasingly seen as an ongoing learning process and an important means of strengthening capacity and improving organisational performance (Horton et al., 2003: 7).

While there are many benefits of using participatory methodologies in ECB projects, our experiences and a review of the literature in this area highlight the many challenges, issues and contradictions that can affect the success of such ECB efforts. We discuss these issues, drawing on our learnings from the ongoing participatory action research (PAR) project 'Assessing Communication for Social Change' (AC4SC). This four year project, which began in 2007, is a collaboration between communication and development academics and evaluation specialists from two Australian universities and communication for development practitioners and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff in the NGO Equal Access Nepal (EAN). The aim is to develop, implement, and evaluate a participatory methodology for assessing the social change impacts of community radio programs produced by EAN. It builds on previous projects that used ethnographic action research (EAR) methodology (Tacchi et al., 2007).

We begin by reviewing some of the trends and issues in the literature on evaluation capacity building and relating these to our learnings from the AC4SC project:

- The importance of effective planning and diagnostic work before beginning an ECB project.

- The value of adopting a holistic approach to capacity development.

- The need to balance the theoretical and practical aspects of ECB.

- The need to address the issue of staff turnover and loss of key leaders and change agents.

We then discuss the tensions, issues and power relations that were evident in the collaboration between the research team and EAN staff during the process of developing and implementing the participatory impact assessment methodology, building evaluation capacities, and improving M&E systems within

EAN. We firstly consider the issues of different forms of knowledge and power imbalances in the relationships between the academic facilitators and the NGO collaborators, before turning to the issues of how collaborative action can be made meaningful within the broader landscape of development, which operates with its own privileged knowledge and structures of power.

Finally, we summarise the many challenges, issues and contradictions that can affect the success of ECB efforts that use participatory evaluation methodologies. As well as the issues noted earlier, they include: the power relations between donors, outside evaluation and development specialists and internal M&E staff; cultural factors that can lead to dependency; the time required to build relationships and effective communication and engage stakeholders, and the challenge of working together to draw on both theory and practice to achieve results.

II.   EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING

Evaluation capacity building activities in development organisations have mushroomed in recent years. Donors are demanding greater accountability, including demonstrating the impacts and effectiveness of programs. It is also increasingly recognised that it is often more effective for organisations to conduct their own evaluations. Internal evaluators 'have a long-term commitment and can act in the capacity of change agents, increasing organisational performance' (Sonnichsen, 1999: 56). This greater focus on ECB is also connected to the growing interest in participatory and collaborative forms of evaluation, and to a increased awareness of the benefits of incorporating evaluation into organisations and programs to facilitate better decision-making and ongoing organisational and program improvement (Horton et al., 2003; Preskill & Boyle, 2008).

In our current era of rapid change, there is an increasing trend towards seeing evaluation as an ongoing learning process and as a means of strengthening capacity and improving organisational performance (Horton et al., 2003: 7). This is due to the need for people and organisations to engage in ongoing learning and to adapt to changing conditions. It is now recognised that the process of participating in an evaluation can often result in changes to an organisation, including to its capacity, processes and culture (Diaz-Puente et al., 2008; Horton et al., 2003; Patton, 1998).

Participatory evaluation is seen as very effective in building evaluation capacities in organisations and is particularly appropriate for ECB in complex settings where the context is 'impossible to manage', such as those in developing countries (Valery & Shakir, 2005: 87). Patton (in Horton et al, 2003: viii) argues that aiming for multiple levels and kinds of impacts from evaluation is crucial when resources are scarce, such as in the developing world. Horton et al. (2003, p.46-48) advocate the use of participatory, learning-oriented self-assessment processes for managing and improving organisational capacity development. Other benefits and strengths of using participatory and action research methodologies for ECB include:

- Adopts a 'learning by doing' approach, which is recommended for adult learners.
- Flexibility of the process and its responsiveness to change in the organisational context.
- Aims to create equal partnerships between participants, to use democratic and inclusive processes, and to produce empowerment.
- Can help to foster ownership of the evaluation process.
- Can generate mutual trust and understanding between participants and development of a shared vision and shared understanding of program objectives.
- Can increase utilisation of evaluation results and recommendations.
- Is seen as a way to ensure the quality of an evaluation.
- Can facilitate better decision-making, program improvement and sustainability.

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- Can provide rapid feedback about the success or failure of an ECB intervention.
- Can be a cost-effective method of ECB (Diaz-Puente et al, 2008; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Forss et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2009; Lennie, 2005; Mayoux & Chambers, 2005; Papineau & Kiely, 1996; Taut, 2007; Valery & Shakir, 2005).

However, participatory evaluation methodologies can require significant time, energy, resources and commitment to be effective. In the context of developing countries, their use presents particular challenges which we discuss further later in this paper. Developing, implementing and sustaining ECB initiatives also presents many challenges and issues, especially for NGOs working in developing countries.

Based on our review of the literature and our learnings from the AC4SC project, we have identified some important trends, challenges and issues related to ECB in the development context to that need to be considered:

- The importance of effective planning and diagnostic work before beginning an ECB project.
- The value of adopting a holistic approach to capacity development.
- Balancing the theoretical and practical aspects of ECB.
- Addressing the issue of staff turnover and loss of key leaders and change agents.

III. EFFECTIVE PLANNING AND DIAGNOSTIC WORK

Participatory approaches to evaluation and ECB require greater planning and higher levels of participation and engagement than other approaches to evaluation (Diaz-Puente et al, 2008). Time and resources are therefore needed for adequate planning, diagnosis of an organisation's strengths, weaknesses and capacity building needs, development of trust, and encouraging involvement (Diaz-Puente et al, 2008; Horton et al., 2003). An organisation's culture and the context of the ECB initiative clearly need to be conducive to success.

Prior to the AC4SC project there was a lack of leadership in evaluation within EAN. There was no M&E manager and only a small M&E team. Feedback systems were poor and a more coordinated approach to data management and analysis was needed. Indicators that were used to assess program effectiveness and impact were developed without community input and were often seen as unrealistic. M&E was mainly based on time-bound studies and 'success stories' derived from feedback that often came from literate listeners who were unrepresentative of the listener population.

There was a need to develop more effective communication, collaboration and feedback systems within EAN and between EAN and its stakeholders. The M&E team saw the program production team as resistant to changing existing M&E systems and reluctant to take account of negative feedback on their programs. However, this changed over time to some extent after the M&E and program production teams began meeting more regularly and M&E reports improved and became more useful to the program production teams, who started using this data to continuously improve their radio programs.

IV. ADOPTING A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Based on their learnings from a major international project on the evaluation of capacity development in research and development organisations, Horton et al. (2003) advocate adopting a holistic approach to organisational capacity development. Its principles include:

- Take ownership of your organisation's capacity development initiative.
- Focus on the needs and priorities of the organisation as a whole.
- Management of capacity development processes is crucial for success.

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- Prepare for monitoring and evaluation at the outset of a capacity development initiative.

- Capacity development is more than a one-off event.

- Engage stakeholders in the capacity development process.

- Establish an environment conducive to learning and change (Horton et al., 2003: 55).

As far as we could, we attempted to use this type of holistic approach in the AC4SC project. This included adopting a partnership approach to capacity building by, for example, encouraging EAN staff to take some responsibility for facilitation of workshops and meetings, and organising meetings that engaged various stakeholders in the project. We also encouraged staff to see participatory evaluation as an ongoing action learning and program improvement process that could facilitate the development of a learning organisation and research culture within EAN.

Organisational capacity building is a process that 'evolves over a number of years ... the development and maintenance of good working relationships between the various parties involved in a capacity development effort is crucial to its overall success' (Horton et al, 2003: 56). As part of the AC4SC project, training and other workshops were held with both M&E and program production staff and presentations on the project were regularly made to staff at all levels. Feedback on one training session, which involved small groups of program production, outreach and M&E staff practicing powerful listening, indicated that it had been effective in fostering closer relationships between these groups. Following face to face activities, we held regular Skype meetings to discuss problems and develop strategies to address them. We also developed comprehensive manuals and other information that enabled the M&E team to transfer their learnings to community researchers and other staff.

V. BALANCING THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

Simister and Smith (2010: 28) comment that much has been learned about the factors that enhance or inhibit good M&E of capacity building but this information is often inaccessible to practitioners because 'much of the debate is couched in academic language or deals with abstract concepts and theories'. They suggest a need to summarise key lessons in language that everyone can understand. Diaz-Puente et al. (2008: 499) also note the 'developmental complexity' of the use of empowerment evaluation to develop evaluation capacity, as well as the need to address practical concerns such as lack of time and interest in the process.

The AC4SC project was based on PAR and evaluation theories and methodologies related to assessing the impacts of communication for development programs. Development of the methodology and methods implemented in the project was based on reviews of academic and other literature and outcomes from earlier projects that used EAR. Proposed steps to implementing the methodology and developing indicators with community input were shared with EAN staff for feedback and refinement. Definitions of key concepts such as 'impact assessment', and 'social change' were also collaboratively developed with M&E staff.

Most of the EAN staff provided positive feedback on the initial capacity building activities in which some of this theoretical material was presented. However, shortly after this we received feedback that the level of complexity of the methods and impact assessment framework was leading to confusion and few staff could clearly articulate the project's aims and objectives. There was a preference for a methodology that was 'much simpler and practical'. M&E staff also raised concerns about how they could effectively manage and analyse large volumes of qualitative data gathered by the community researchers. In a recent review of the project an M&E team member commented: From the start, everything is new, new methods, new feedback, new ideas. ... we decide a certain thing and the academics will come with another issue or idea or thing we need to do'. What they needed was 'more practical guidance to show us the bridge between the academic and the practical'.

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This highlights a key challenge for projects such as AC4SC which have both academic and practical aims: the need to balance these aims in ways that reduce confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed by too many new ideas and methods at once. This may require spending more time in the initial planning phase on ensuring that the ECB objectives and process is clear to everyone involved and not too ambitions or unrealistic in its scope. The roles and responsibilities of everyone involved also need to be very clear.

VI. ADDRESSING STAFF TURNOVER AND LOSS OF KEY LEADERS AND CHANGE AGENTS

Employee turnover is a persistent challenge, especially in developing countries where there is often a shortage of people with good evaluation capacities. This can undermine ECB efforts due to problems with maintaining capacity and skills and varying levels of commitment to the ECB process from new staff (Atkinson et al., 2005; Napp et al., 2002). Horton et al. (2003) suggest that rather than focussing on building the capacities of individuals and parts of an organisation, it is more effective to focus on building the capacity of the organisation as a whole and to encourage the active participation of a broad range of staff and stakeholders in the process. This latter strategy can cushion the impact of staff turnover (Gibbs et al., 2009).

There has been a regular turnover in M&E Coordinators since the start of the AC4SC project. An M&E Manager who had the longest and most active involvement in the project and provided effective leadership on AC4SC activities, left EAN in February 2010. After each M&E Coordinator left it put pressure on remaining staff who then had less time to devote to the project, thereby affecting progress with key activities. Other key EAN staff (including program staff who received training) have also left or took maternity leave for several months. This created problems with continuity. The research team and M&E staff also had to spend time orienting new staff to the project. This proved difficult to do effectively, partly because of a reduction in project funds which limited travel our to Nepal, and due to the need to give regular support to the M&E team to maintain momentum on key activities, following the loss of key staff.

Loss of key champions and change agents has been identified as a barrier to capacity building (Lennie, 2005). Our experiences indicate that while it is important to involve a wide range of staff members in an ECB program, strategies are also needed to provide continuity of important leadership and change agent roles, otherwise it is easy for progress with ECB efforts to be rapidly lost. This requires strategies such as setting up mechanisms that enable knowledge, skills and changed attitudes to be transferred to others within an organisation, as Horton et al. (2003, p.55) suggest.

To be most effective, organisations need to buy into ECB activities at the management level as opposed to only the staff level (Atkinson et al. 2005: 63). Several studies demonstrate the need for leaders to support ECB and evaluation, and to be seen as strong models for learning (Forss et al, 2006; Taut, 2007; Valery & Shakir, 2005). In addition, senior managers usually sanction major changes in an organisation (Horton et al., 2003). We also found that it was important to the effectiveness of the AC4SC project to obtain the support of all management staff in EAN, to engage them in key activities whenever possible, and to maintain regular communication with them about progress with the project.

VII. COLLABORATION, PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES AND POWER RELATIONS

Participatory research is essentially a challenge to positivist research paradigms; it is built upon the ideas of democratic practice and transformative relationships (Hall, 1993). This kind of research relationship in AC4SC is posited through collaboration between development and communication academics and evaluation specialists in Australia, and communication for development practitioners and M&E staff in Equal Access Nepal. In extension to these two participant groups, and central to their shared research agenda, there are also community researchers, community groups and other stakeholders.

There are two levels of participatory research and methodologies being alluded to and applied here. Firstly, there is the development and implementation, though this collaboration, of the participatory impact assessment methodology for assessing the impacts of EAN's radio programs. This involves building a team of community researchers who engage regularly with their local community members and groups to

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understand local issues and the reception of radio programs and their impacts on individual and social change. The axis of this layer of research is the community researchers who are organised by and feed knowledge of communities into the EAN M&E Team, who in turn use this intelligence to increase the organisation's understandings and improve practices. This is done through the collection, organisation and analysis of data in two-month research cycles, and the production of research reports which are circulated within the organisation, with a particular focus on the interests of the radio production teams.

Secondly, at a more meta-level, and directing the development and implementation of the participatory impact assessment methodology, is the intended 'transformative relationship' between the university-based academics and the EAN staff. The axis here is the M&E team, who are in essence the focus of the ECB efforts, and for whom the difficult job of, on the one hand, engaging with, understanding and translating theory and ideas from the academics into practices that make sense and are useful to the organisation; and, on the other hand, influencing those theories and ideas through learning from practice.

It is on this second level of participatory research that this paper focuses. It is here that we can observe the tensions and difficulties that emerge as the project engages with and attempts to develop shared understandings of the theories of social change and the language and 'buzz words' of donor-influenced development evaluation, which can be in contradiction with the aims of participatory evaluations. As Schensul et al. (2008: 102-103) make clear, while critical by-products of PAR are 'methodological innovation favouring collaboration, and locally driven theories and models for change' this is in practice 'fraught with challenges and contradictions'. While the intent is that all partners in the collaboration bring knowledge to the table, along with social and cultural capital, in order to develop something that is capable of bringing about positive social change, there are severely limiting factors at play in the field of development where strong paradigms of participation exist in stark contrast to structures that tend to prioritise certain forms of knowledge and stifle or overwhelm alternative, local knowledge (Cornwall 2006; Cornwall & Coelho 2007).

While it is easy (and necessary) for us to implicate broader frameworks and structures of development and privileged knowledge as major limiting factors to the success of our project, it is equally fair to say that, as academics, we inevitably tend to privilege our own forms of knowledge and methodologies, and we bring with us our own (academic) project goals which can, however inadvertently, trump or distort alternative and emerging options (see Schensul et al., 2008). Below, we will first deal with the issues of different forms of knowledge and power imbalances in the relationships between academic facilitators and their NGO collaborators, before turning to the issue of how collaborative action can be made meaningful within the broader landscape of development, which operates with its own privileged knowledge and structures of power.

VIII. ACADEMIC AND PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIP

Like Schensul et al. (2008: 103), we take a particular approach to PAR which involves adapting the 'fundamentals of ethnographic inquiry' to engage in a process of 'mutual learning and knowledge co-construction' with a transformational intent. Our idea is to develop an approach for meaningful impact assessment, grounded in local understandings developed at the community level, through long term relationships. Yet the question of how both the PAR facilitators, and the groups we are collaborating with, who differ in various ways – in terms of cultural values, work and life pressures, background, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and so on – can build trusting relationships is an important 'gap' in 'the PAR record' (Schensul et al., 2008: 104). We explore this here through our experiences of AC4SC to highlight some of the main issues that we can identify and share, to contribute to the growing body of work that does explore these issues, to avoid having to reinvent PAR again, and again (Schensul et al., 2008).

Prior to AC4SC, EAN were interested in improving their understanding of their target audiences, with a view to improving their radio and outreach programs, and we had run three ethnographic action research (Tacchi et al., 2003; Slater and Tacchi, 2004) workshops with them over an 18-month period. EAN were

interested in making more of EAR, and exploring how it might most effectively be used by the organisation. AC4SC was the response, with the aim of developing EAR into a methodology that could be integrated into the M&E activities of the organisation as a whole, in a tailored way. The idea was to collaboratively build an embedded, ongoing, organisation-wide process for impact assessment. It would generate knowledge that would allow EAN to provide good quality evidence of impact to donors, and at the same time help them to improve their practices and their radio programs based on richer understanding and engagement with audiences.

We started this process by workshopping the aims of the project and the key participatory approaches. We conducted various training workshops and field visits where we practiced using data collections processes and tools, developed clearer definitions of key terms, and more specific understandings of organisational objectives and theories of social change. A network of local community researchers was developed since this emerged as a useful way of gaining insights and maintaining close connections with local communities. As data started to be generated, we built processes and systems for managing that data. There was a significant organic aspect to this process, since we did not predetermine the impact assessment methodology that would work, but rather followed participatory processes for its very development. If some aspect of the project did not seem to work well, we would try and improve it, or seek alternatives, learning from doing rather than imposing a preformed methodology. The idea was, explicitly, to produce both action and change in participants, communities and organisations, and to generate critical social theories about social practices, media and structures, and understandings about the effectiveness of participatory impact assessment methodologies. This involved at its core, a collaborative learning relationship between us, as academics, and EAN as practitioners.

Although power is a central issue in participatory evaluation, it is often ignored (Gregory, 2000). Vanderplaat (1995:85) suggests that even the more critical models of evaluation have failed 'to deal, in any meaningful way, with the concept of relative power, or more specifically the unequal distribution of discursive power, a central construct in empowerment-based social programming'. A study by Taut (2007) highlights the political nature of evaluation and the need to take the organisational work environment and the potentially negative effects of the self-evaluation process into account. Lennie (2005: 410) found that the ECB project she investigated had a number of unintended and disempowering impacts due to 'inequalities in power and knowledge, the different values and agendas of the participants and researchers, the pre-existing relationships and networks within the communities, and other complex issues'. Among these other issues was a perceived lack of ownership and control of some aspects of the project along with confusion and misunderstanding of the process.

Issues of ownership and control of the process have often emerged from our meta evaluation of AC4SC. Often we have moved along confidently assuming consensus concerning some aspect of the project, only to discover that there were in fact major misunderstandings or lack of clarity. Disagreement was far less often expressly communicated, but nevertheless present. A good example of this is the work that two of the academic team did with EAN staff towards developing theories of change for two of the radio programs, which involved working with teams that included program producers, management and M&E staff. This happened in year three of the project, after earlier work on developing theories of change had stumbled or become too complex for EAN staff to feel they were useful. At this time, we followed the Keystone (2008) approach to developing a theory of change (TOC), which involves creating visions of change and including multiple stakeholders. It was seen as a useful approach by members of the M&E team who had come across it, as well as by the academics, since it seemed to provide a clear process for gaining a high level of participation and agreement in terms not just of the social change goals of the programs, but also the indicators of that change, and the actions required by various stakeholders to achieve the vision of success.

Initially this worked extremely well, and staff from across the organisation invested time and energy. However, at some stage, this was followed by the realisation of the amount of time and work that would be required to complete the TOC with a range of stakeholders external to EAN. This was the thing that had

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most attracted us as academics to the approach, and ended up being the factor that made the M&E team the most uneasy about it, making it difficult to pursue. Already stretched in terms of the demands of the organisation on their time, the M&E team felt overwhelmed by the seemingly 'extra' work this task required, and were unable to weigh this positively against perceived benefits. While initially the TOC seemed to offer an ideal mechanism for joining up M&E work with agreed change objectives, it shifted to an additional task with ill-defined benefits. It seemed that, at times like this, the project itself became very much an externally owned and imposed set of tasks, rather than, when it was working well, a collaborative effort.

Indeed, within the academic team itself there emerged different opinions of how we should progress, with conflicting views between following a standard logframe or a more flexible theory of change approach. This reminds us that it is not only the relationship between academics and practitioners that needs to be based on shared understandings and objectives, but also relationships within both of these discrete groups (see Schensul et al., 2008). This can be understood as a manifestation of a pragmatic (work within the system) versus transformational (change the system) approach. In reality, we have found, it is necessary to accommodate both approaches, and hope for a good balance between working successfully within the development landscape, whilst trying to change it for the better.

IX. TRANSFORMATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE DEVELOPMENT LANDSCAPE

According to Paulo Freire (1993: ix), participatory research is a 'politico-pedagogic instrument for many women and men [toward] transformative action', the concept of PAR emerged as a form of study-and-action (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). However, Schensul et al. (2008: 104) feel that we are still uncertain about how, and with whom, 'collaborative action [can] be conceptualized in PAR projects to address the inevitable constraints of time, resources, and unsupportive political landscapes'. For example, there was an explicit intent in the AC4SC project proposal documentation to challenge inflexible program logic models. We proposed from the start to use new 'theories of change' approaches to evaluation and impact assessment (Sullivan et al., 2002; Weiss 1995), adapted to meet the needs of stakeholders and the development of the new impact assessment methodology.

A 'theories of change' approach was proposed since it would accommodate multi-sector activity (diversity), would be concerned with the relationship between process and outcomes (dynamics) and would emphasise wholesale change at individual, organisational and system levels (complexity) (Sullivan et al 2002: 206). It would also make explicit the values that underpin the perspectives of more and less powerful stakeholders (Sullivan et al., 2002). Chambers and Pettit (2004: 137) write about the way that development rhetoric has changed in recent years, to include new words like partnership, participation and transparency, that imply 'changes in power and relationships, but [which] have not been matched in practice', rather, power and relationships are governing dynamics that in practice 'prevent the inclusion of weaker actors and voices in decision-making'. The logical framework analysis (logframe) adopted by many donor organisations is considered by many to be an example of the stifling of participation, as it 'reinforce relationships of power and control... [and] enbodies a linear logic associated with things rather than people' (Chambers & Pettit, 2004: 145). Marsden (2004) shows how the logframe approach in a project in Far Western Nepal, played a key role in structuring and framing relationships between donor and NGO, reinforcing patters of exclusion. The structures and approaches that were put in place by the donors, through mechanisms like the logframe, did not give space for styles of communication and working that are more appropriate than Western styles, in this context.

X. THE CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF PARTICIPATION

Buchy and Ahmed (2007) write about the different definitions of 'learning' that academic and NGO collaborators worked with in a water management project in India. This made formalised learning difficult to achieve, despite the project's focus on Social Learning. They cite both structural and cultural issues, and stress the need to pay attention to collaborative and learning practices, which suit the local context. So here

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we can start to think not only about the relationships of power and knowledge between academics and NGOs, and between donors and NGOs, but also the cultural contexts in which these (differently powered) relationships develop.

This raises direct questions about the influence of cultural contexts on evaluation capacity building because participant's expectations of their own and each others' roles clearly vary, depending on their previous experiences and backgrounds. So, for example, the relative informality of the Australian academic institutions within which the authors work contrasts greatly to the expectations of deference that characterise the relationships of Nepali students to their teachers. This is a specific variation on cultural idioms characterised by hierarchy that are often taken as defining of Nepalese culture more generally, even as overt expressions of hierarchy are challenged in Nepal, not the least within 'modern' institutions like NGOs (Heaton-Shrestha, 2004).

These differences in culture and social interactions are so obvious that they can very easily become accepted as seemingly natural explanations for problems in the implementation of participatory M&E projects (see Sen, 1994). As such they easily become part of the 'common sense' that surrounds work in developing countries, providing simplistic answers when instead they should be raising questions about the organisation of working relationships within projects (Wilmore, 2007). Explanations that rely on a strongly deterministic theory of cultural influence and cultural psychology are ultimately unsatisfactory due to their reliance on a tautological analysis whereby the very problems that participatory research is designed to overcome are blamed for failures in project implementation. Bista's (1991) notorious diagnosis of the problems afflicting development in Nepal on the basis of the undermining influence of an ideology of fatalism rooted in the system of caste hierarchy has long been emblematic of such analyses, frequently referred to by foreign development practitioners in the course of their work (Wilmore 2008).

As Pigg (1992) notes, the discourse of development in Nepal often appears to produce in effect a transliteration and perpetuation of social inequality through the reification of social distinctions in development practices, institutional arrangements, and materials. However, as Pigg's own later work (1996; 2001) and that of other commentators on development culture in Nepal (Fujikura, 2001; Heaton-Shrestha, 2004) shows, we are clearly not simply seeing a replacement of one rigid system of culturally sanctioned, hierarchical socio-political relations with another that parallels it precisely.

The move within development towards participatory practice and discourse must be interpreted in the context of rapidly changing socio-political circumstances, both globally (Sparks, 2007) and in Nepal (Pigg, 2001). At the same time, whilst an emphasis on participatory approaches to the organisation of development may have been introduced in order to reflect these changed circumstances this does not mean that these solutions will always be easy to implement or have the consequences that were either hoped for or anticipated.

Determining the chances of success in participatory development projects cannot be done purely theoretically in advance of the process, but must be determined empirically through careful consideration of the contextual factors that might influence actors judgment of what is or is not possible 'on the ground'. There is no reason to assume that actors will produce a consistent 'performance' (Heaton-Shrestha, 2004) of culture at every point in time, particularly over the life-cycle of a development project that evolves to encompass new actors, new localities, and new practices.

Most employees of NGOs in Nepal, especially those with close links to INGOs, also face what Liechty (1995: 193) describes as the irony of affluence, As Kathmandu's middle class situates itself in the global political economy at the terminus of the 'development aid' pipeline it simultaneously secures itself a local position of class dominance (based on its control of local resources), *and* locks itself into a position of dependence and marginality *vis-à-vis* an external cultural metropole.'

It is this sense of being in an interstitial, mediating position (Liechty, 2003) that may also account for some of the difficulties that the workers in development organisations may face in the implementation of

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participatory projects such as AC4SC, especially those that build considerable reflexivity into their practice.

XI. CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the benefits of participatory methodologies for fostering the development of an evaluation culture within international development organisations, in ways that encourages continuous learning and improvement of both the organisation and its programs. We argued that a holistic approach to capacity building, such as the one we adopted in the AC4SC project, is a valuable means of reaching these aims. However, we have also highlighted the many challenges, issues and contradictions that must be more openly acknowledged and discussed in order to develop more culturally appropriate, effective and sustainable ECB processes in the development context. These challenges and issues include: addressing the issue staff turnover and loss of change agents, balancing the theoretical and the practical, the power-knowledge relations inherent in collaborative projects involving academics and development practitioners, and between donors and NGOs, and the complex cultural contexts in which these power relationships develop.

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