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Horizontal evaluation: Stimulating social learning among peers

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Horizontal evaluation is a flexible evaluation method that combines self-assessment and external review by peers. We have developed and applied this method for use within an Andean regional network that develops new methodologies for research and development (R&D). The involvement of peers neutralizes the lopsided power relations that prevail in traditional external evaluations, creating a more favourable atmosphere for learning and improvement. The central element of a horizontal evaluation is a workshop that brings together a group of 'local participants' who are developing a new R&D methodology and a group of 'visitors' or 'peers' who are also interested in the methodology. The workshop combines presentations about the methodology with field visits, small group work and plenary discussions. It elicits and compares the perceptions of the two groups concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology; it provides practical suggestions for improvement, which may often be put to use immediately; it promotes social learning among the different groups involved; and it stimulates further experimentation with and development of the methodology in other settings.

Introduction

The authors of this ILAC Brief coordinate Papa Andina, a regional network of the International Potato Center (CIP) that promotes knowledge sharing among R&D partners in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador in order to reduce poverty and foster sustainable development in the Andes.

For several years, we organized study visits for local professionals to exchange knowledge and experiences, and conventional expert-led evaluations to assess our work. The study visits were enjoyable and instructive for participants, but there were few clear outcomes and little follow-up. Evaluations by outside experts provided interesting results, but the implementation of their recommendations was patchy.

In view of the limitations of these two approaches, we developed the horizontal evaluation method with our partners as a participatory alternative that combines the best aspects of both. So far, we have organized four horizontal evaluations, improving the method each time. Further improvements are likely, so this brief describes work in progress.

Evaluation by peers is what makes the process 'horizontal', compared with the 'vertical' evaluation typically provided by outsiders of perceived higher professional status. This method differs from the anonymous peer reviews used by professional journals and research funders, in that horizontal evaluation is open and transparent, with all the participants encouraged to learn and benefit from the evaluation process.

Horizontal evaluation neutralizes the power dimension implicit in traditional evaluation, in which the 'expert' judge the 'inexpert' and the 'powerful' assess the 'powerless'. Because of this neutralization, a more favourable learning environment is created.

Most of those involved directly with Papa Andina have been specialists who work with potato R&D organizations. They come from broadly comparable social and professional backgrounds, with similar types of knowledge about potato R&D, and they see each other as peers. As stakeholders in Papa Andina they share an interest in the methodologies developed with support from the network. This gives them the motivation

to participate, learn and contribute. Another motivation for active involvement is that some of those who serve as peer evaluators during one horizontal evaluation know that their own work may later be evaluated by other peers within the network.

The method

Horizontal evaluation is a flexible method which can be applied in a range of settings to facilitate: the sharing of information, experiences and knowledge; the building of trust and a sense of community, which in turn fosters knowledge exchange; the social or interactive learning and corrective action needed to improve R&D methodologies; and the adaptation and wider use of these methodologies.

Experiences: To learn about and improve the R&D methodologies under development in our network, we have done four horizontal evaluations to date:

1. An evaluation of the Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA), conducted with the Promoción de la Producción Competitiva de la Papa Peruana (INCOPA) project in Peru (2003).
2. An evaluation of methodologies designed to articulate the demands of small-scale producers and match these with the supply of new technologies, conducted with the Innova project in Bolivia (2004).
3. An evaluation of the use of multi-stakeholder platforms to link small-scale farmers with markets, conducted with the Instituto Nacional Autónomo de Investigaciones Agropecuarias (INIAP) in Ecuador (2005).
4. An evaluation of the initial application of the PMCA in Uganda, conducted with the Programme Régional d'Amélioration de la Culture de la Pomme de Terre et de la Patate Douce en Afrique Central et de l'Est (PRAPACE), a regional network for the improvement of potato and sweetpotato (2005).

The box overleaf gives a brief description of the first of these experiences.

In 2005, we also used elements of the horizontal evaluation approach in an evaluation of the Papa Andina network itself.

Applying horizontal evaluation to the Participatory Market Chain Approach in Peru

We helped the INCOPA Project, which led the evaluation, to design and prepare for the workshop. The partners identified the following criteria for analysing PMCA:

- potential for developing new products for market;
- potential for empowering small-scale farmers and alleviating poverty;
- capacity to stimulate technological or organizational innovation;
- cost-effectiveness.

Local workshop participants included market chain actors from Peru, while visitors came from Puno in southern Peru, from Bolivia and from Ecuador.

On Day 1, local participants explained the PMCA methodology and activities and achievements in entering two new markets: yellow potatoes to make crisps and standardized bags of selected and classified potatoes for the Lima wholesale market.

On Day 2, visitors went to two sites:

- a factory where yellow potatoes are processed into crisps. Visitors interviewed the factory owner about his impressions of the PMCA process;
- the wholesale potato market in Lima. Visitors interviewed market authorities, intermediaries and members of the trade union who carry overweight sacks.

The evaluation found the following:

Strengths:

- rapid implementation using a participatory approach involving various sectors of the potato market chain;
- facilitation of shared investment and generation of a platform for future collaboration;
- empowerment of participants, who are active in the process and assume new responsibilities.

Weaknesses:

- need for complementary interventions to ensure impact on the poor.

Recommendations:

- training materials should be made available for those facilitating the PMCA;
- experiences of application need to be properly written up and shared.

The workshop stimulated a learning process about the PMCA as well as an exchange of relevant knowledge. After the workshop the visitors applied and further developed the approach in Bolivia and Ecuador. Papa Andina supported this process, and documented both the approach and the outcomes (Bernet et al., 2005).

We believe the approach can be applied in different types of projects and programmes, especially those that operate in a network mode.

Combining self-assessment with external review: The heart of a horizontal evaluation is a participatory workshop, typically lasting 3 days, involving a local or internal group (referred to as 'local participants') of 10–15 people and a similarly sized group of outsiders or visitors (referred to as 'visitors'). Visitors are peers from other organizations or projects who are working on similar themes and have a potential interest in applying the methodology under evaluation.

The role of the local participants is to present, and with help from the visitors, critically assess the methodology and make recommendations for its improvement. The role of the visitors is to critically assess the methodology, identifying its strengths and weaknesses and making

suggestions that will aid its wider application. The visitors may contribute to the formulation of recommendations, but the local participants must take the lead and actually propose and agree them, since their ownership of the recommendations will be the key to implementation.

Planning the workshop: We work with our partners to identify an appropriate methodology to be evaluated, select participants and prepare for the event. An organizing committee should be established and should include decision makers from among both local participants and visitors.

We have learned that it is very important that the topic of the evaluation should be clearly defined: it is the methodology that should be evaluated, not the project or organization that developed it. Defining and maintaining the scope of the evaluation is critical for its success.

Workshop organizers are responsible for:

1. Identifying an appropriate object for evaluation (in the cases we have supported, a methodology of regional interest).
2. Ensuring the participation of an appropriate group of local participants and visitors (the latter should have an interest in learning about and perhaps using the methodology).
3. Designing the 3-day workshop and finding a facilitator (who should be familiar with the horizontal evaluation method).
4. Developing preliminary evaluation criteria (these are often based on the criteria of the organization or project using the methodology).
5. Arranging field visits that will demonstrate application of the methodology.
6. Sending both sets of participants background information prior to the workshop.
7. Arranging a 'dress rehearsal' of key moments and presentations for the workshop.
8. Making provisions for writing up and using the workshop's findings.

Day 1 – Introducing the methodology: The workshop works best if professionally facilitated. At the start of the event, the facilitator should introduce the objectives of the workshop and the procedures to be followed. The facilitator should stress that the workshop is not intended to evaluate everything the organization or project is doing but just the methodology that has been selected. S/he should encourage the visitors to be critical but constructive, identifying the strengths and positive aspects of the methodology as well as its weaknesses. S/he should also encourage the local participants to be open and receptive to comments and suggestions.

During the morning of Day 1, local participants present the context and purpose of the methodology, explain the stages involved in applying it and describe activities and results to date. Our experience has shown that interactive ways of presenting activities, such as a knowledge fair with a poster exhibition, are more effective than Powerpoint presentations.

On Day 1, visitors should limit themselves to asking questions for the purpose of clarification and to requesting information that has not been presented. They should be discouraged from voicing judgments about the methodology at this point, and asked to wait until they have acquired additional information and insights during the field visits on Day 2. Our experiences have shown that even carefully prepared and rehearsed presentations usually provide insufficient information for evaluating an R&D methodology. Hence, field visits are a critical component of the workshop and the evaluation.

During the afternoon of Day 1, after the initial presentations about the methodology, the list of tentative evaluation criteria prepared before the workshop is presented in plenary for discussion and revision. These criteria are extremely important, as they will be used throughout the rest of the evaluation exercise. Many aspects of the methodology *could* be evaluated, but as time and resources are of necessity limited, it is of the

utmost importance to reach consensus on a short-list of criteria that are considered both to be good indicators of the methodology’s usefulness and to be practical in the context of the workshop. We have found it useful to select no more than four criteria, which can then be used throughout the rest of the workshop and can provide a logical thread that holds the whole process together. The evaluation criteria should be used systematically by both groups of participants to structure their analysis at each subsequent stage of the workshop, including the field visit. This is a key point, since it ensures comparability of analysis across the groups.

Examples of the evaluation criteria we have used include:

- effects on empowerment and gender equity;
- advantages compared to similar methods;
- cost-effectiveness;
- relevance.

At the end of the first day the participants divide into small groups (6–7 members), each of which includes local participants and visitors. These groups will visit different field sites and observe different aspects of the development and application of the methodology. In our cases, field sites have included communities, markets, local government offices, trade union offices and processing factories. Before going to the field, visitors in each group prepare a short interview on the basis of the evaluation criteria and make a simple plan (deciding, for example, who will introduce the group and explain the purpose of the visit, and what questions will be asked).

A ‘workshop process group’ should be set up and should meet at the end of each day to check on logistical aspects, assess how things are going and make any necessary adjustments for the next day. At the end of Day 3, this group should also assess how the workshop went as a whole and make recommendations for future horizontal evaluations.

Day 2 – Field visits: The field visit provides an opportunity for visitors to see at first hand the methodology under development and to talk with those whose livelihoods are directly affected by it. Visitors conduct semi-structured interviews, but should, in addition, carefully observe what they see and as far as possible try to triangulate different sources of information. For example, if farmers say that participatory trials have been set up at a number of sites in the village, these should be visited.

Within each small group, visitors take the lead in asking questions. Local participants may act as guides, but should only provide information if explicitly asked to do so by visitors. Above all, they should resist the temptation to answer on behalf of those interviewed or to influence their answers.

After the field visit, each small group synthesizes its findings in tabular form using the evaluation criteria. At this point local participants may make comments and provide their interpretations of what occurred during the visit.

The small groups then come together in a plenary session and each presents its findings for each evaluation criterion in a table (see example in Figure 1), so that the findings can be compared and contrasted across sites by the whole group. Using digital photos to show the most important aspects of each visit gives findings credibility and retains people’s attention during the session. The table is recorded and photocopied as a resource for participants on Day 3.

Day 3 – Comparative analysis and closure: Visitors and local participants work separately at the start of Day 3. For each evaluation criterion, the two groups identify strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. We have found it useful to work with 10 cm x 30 cm cards, which can be moved and grouped by evaluation criteria. The notes from the field visit help participants prepare the cards. To keep the exercise manageable, we have usually asked each group to limit itself to identifying

Figure 1. Table for comparing evaluation results across sites.

Evaluation criteria	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3
Effects on empowerment and gender equity			
Advantages compared to similar methods			
Cost-effectiveness			
Relevance			

no more than six strengths, six weaknesses and six suggestions for each evaluation criterion.

After this group work, visitors and local participants present their findings in plenary session. All participants, helped by the facilitator, then identify convergent and divergent ideas. Where the strengths converge or coincide, the local participants can feel confident that they are on the right track. In contrast, where weaknesses coincide for both groups, this probably indicates the need for corrective action. Where the groups’ assessments of strengths or weaknesses diverge, the reasons for the divergence need to be explored in order to reach a shared understanding of the issue (but not necessarily agreement on it).

For example, in one workshop local participants identified ‘a business plan’ as a strength, whereas outsiders identified it as a weakness. After some discussion the local participants realized that the farmers in fact had a ‘production plan’, with specific areas being sown each month, but that this was not the same as a business plan, which should instead deal with markets and profits. In this case the local participants changed their strength card to ‘production plan’ and the apparent contradiction was resolved. In other cases the divergence may be more deeply rooted, reflecting differing underlying values or mental models of the development process. In such cases the facilitator should not try to force a consensus, but rather to enable participants to reach a better understanding of the causes of differences.

After this plenary session, the participants again divide into two groups – visitors and local participants. Drawing on the previous plenary session, local participants synthesize recommendations and identify lessons learned as a basis for improving the methodology in the future. Visitors analyse the potential and requirements for applying the methodology in their own organizations and settings. Both groups then come together to present, discuss and modify their conclusions in a final plenary session. The workshop ends with the participants identifying specific and time-bound steps to improve the methodology and facilitate its wider use, if that is judged appropriate.

At the end of the workshop it is helpful to have each participant identify the positive aspects and outcomes of the workshop and what improvements could be made for similar events in the future. Such an exercise could be open, in plenary session, or it could employ a simple one-page questionnaire with two questions:

- What in your view are the most positive aspects of the workshop?
- What are your suggestions for making future horizontal evaluation workshops better?

The process group should also meet at the end of the workshop to analyse the event and its key outcomes and to suggest ways of improving the horizontal evaluation method for the future.

After the workshop: The organizing committee should establish clear responsibilities and deadlines for editing and distributing the workshop

report. It is important to distribute the report soon after the event, while participants are still interested in its outcomes.

Local participants use the workshop's recommendations to make changes in the methodology being developed. Horizontal evaluation promotes ownership of the recommendations, making implementation more likely than in conventional evaluations. In all four workshops that we helped organize, horizontal evaluation led to significant changes.

Where the horizontal evaluation forms part of a broader network, such as Papa Andina, network coordinators may follow up by facilitating the exchange of information and the application or adaptation of the methodology by visitors (for example, they may provide consultancy support for more in-depth training in the methodology, organize longer exchange visits, commission the development of training materials, etc).

Advantages and critical success factors

We have found that horizontal evaluation has the following advantages over traditional external evaluations and study tours:

- it is adaptable to different objects of evaluation (including fairly complex R&D methodologies);
- it is enjoyable for participants who, as part of the process, learn a great deal in a dynamic yet structured environment;
- local participants accept critical feedback and observations more easily from peers than from external evaluators;
- it fosters social learning, as local participants and visitors are actively engaged throughout the review process, which guides analysis and synthesis and generates new knowledge and proposals for action;
- it stimulates experimentation with and further development of the methodology elsewhere;
- it can be used in conjunction with a more traditional external evaluation, to generate additional information and insights.

We have identified the following factors as critical for the success of a horizontal evaluation:

- selecting the right moment for the workshop – one when the new R&D methodology is sufficiently advanced so that there is real substance to review but not so finished that there is little scope for modification;
- careful selection of visitors to ensure that they have diverse perspectives, possess adequate knowledge and experience, and are perceived as peers rather than superiors;
- good facilitation, so as to create an environment of trust, focus the attention of participants and manage time efficiently;
- identifying a limited number of clearly defined evaluation criteria;
- well prepared presentations and field visits that ensure the visitors have all the information they need to understand the methodology.

Conclusions

Horizontal evaluation has become a central element in our approach for developing R&D methodologies and sharing knowledge across the region in

Experts come and experts go

*Experts come and experts go
They leave a list of things to do
But the list's not ours, we weren't involved
We put it in a drawer 'til
They come again to test our skill*

*Visits are a wondrous thing
To go and see what's happening
But memory's frail and time is short
So on return we forget all heard
Except the warmth of good times shared*

*Experts come and experts go
But knowledge stays with us to grow
Horizontal 'valuation 's not a quirk or aberration
Try it out and you will see
The method works like one two three*

Graham Thiele

which we work. It is especially relevant for networks such as Papa Andina, that seek to bring together peers for social learning in ongoing processes. After each workshop we have reflected on and improved horizontal evaluation as a tool. We believe horizontal evaluation is now ready for use by others who are developing new R&D methodologies with partners in different locations and who are keen to learn from their experiences.

Further reading

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Papa Andina. 2005. Final Report – 3rd PMCA Workshop in Uganda, 13–15 December 2005. Lima, Peru: CIP.

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