The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks

“The Cumulative Assessments: changing expectations and process for grantee evaluation reports”

Rebekah Usatin, Manager for Program Evaluation at the National Endowment for Democracy

Part 1: Overview

About the Speaker: Rebekah Usatin is the Manager for Program Evaluation at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington, D.C., where she oversees all aspects of monitoring and evaluation for NED’s $100 million grants program. She is responsible for setting strategic evaluation priorities, providing evaluation training and technical assistance to NED staff and grantees, designing and managing external evaluations, and ensuring the integrity of NED’s M&E systems. She is the author of “The Ripple Effects of Process Change” in the forthcoming issue of the Foundation Review. Rebekah is a founding member and chair of the Democracy and Governance Topical Interest Group of the American Evaluation Association. Prior to joining NED, she worked as an evaluation consultant for a USAID-funded democracy and governance project based in Montenegro. Rebekah holds a Master’s of Public Administration and International Management from the Monterey Institute of International Studies and a BA in Politics and French Literature from Whitman College.

Presenter Remarks:

Rebekah began with an introduction of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). NED was established in 1983 as non-governmental democracy support system premised on the idea that American assistance on behalf of democracy efforts abroad would be good both for the U.S. and for those struggling around the world for freedom and self-government. NED’s creation was soon followed by establishment of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), and the National Republican Institute for International Affairs (later renamed the International Republican Institute or "IRI"), which joined the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI) as the four affiliated institutions of the Endowment. (FTUI was later reorganized as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, also known as the “Solidarity Center.”)

Most NED grants are made to community based grassroots organizations, with an average grant size of $50,000. NED’s grantmaking process is set up like a foundation, where 80% of NED’s grants are renewals with long term partners, and the renewal process is annual.
The Need for Cumulative Assessments:

Prior to 2010 all NED grants had the same reporting schedule, regardless of their mission or program. After a lengthy internal process, the reporting schedule and review process were readjusted. The new review process accounts for program evaluators levels of access to different projects; more remote, and therefore less accessible, projects have a greater need for quarterly reports to keep NED actively aware of their programming. On the other hand, programs in urban areas can be more “plugged in”, and ongoing monitoring may make quarterly reports unnecessary

A further review of reports revealed that programs and grantees were not learning from the reports being submitted, and that the regular reporting had become a pro-forma exercise.

In 2010 grant requirements were modified, cumulative assessments replaced annual reports to make reporting more reflective on how a program was advancing democracy. The change to cumulative assessments was not a prescriptive process. The move to cumulative assessment was based on engaging in evaluative thinking with NED’s more than 1000 grantees.

Democracy Development is not linear, and rarely will a program see change in the space of a year. So to keep projects engaged in ongoing evaluation, minimum requirements for the cumulative assessments were set. The minimum requirements created a space for conversations between all members of a project that answer the questions: What did they learn? How are they affecting their community? How are they furthering the mission?

Many grantees have gone above and beyond these suggested minimums and have engaged or are engaging with consultants and local evaluators to deepen their understanding of program impact.

Challenges:

2013 was the end of the “phase in” or “roll out” period to institutionalize the change in assessments. There were challenges in how to apply the change to all projects and programs globally, especially in communicating the change in expectations and the reasons behind the changes across cultures and languages. For the NED offices themselves, there were internal challenges for how to train NED officers for how to evaluate the new assessments.

Reports are coming in under the new system, but the transition has not yet fully taken hold. There is an ongoing process of continuous learning that must happen to change the country offices understanding of what’s being asked of them.

Benefits:

For both NED and grantees side, cumulative assessments provide a broader view of what grantees are accomplishing. And for NED officers, the process opens up more time to travel to the field and engage with grantees in different ways. The most important part of cumulative assessments is that they provide real opportunities for deep learning, but still act as a serious accountability mechanism.
**Looking Ahead:**

There remains room to improve the quality of the cumulative assessments by providing good examples and continuing training.

Using lessons learned from first roll out, this cumulative assessment system will be spread to CIPE, NDI, IRI, and the Solidarity Center.

**Part 2: Question & Answer**

**Melanie Kawanu Chiu (moderator):** How much development time did it take to make time and pool the resources to make this transition?

**Rebekah:** Beginning in 2009/2010, NED was developing and communicating guidelines for staff about what they should be communicating to the field, and what they should be looking for in the new assessments. It took a lot of time at the beginning, but that has tapered off.

**Jenna Capeci:** Could you provide more detail on how you guide the process of the cumulative assessment - are there guiding questions, long term outcomes etc.? Also how do you determine the length of the assessment process (3 vs 5 years)? Does it vary from partner to partner? I understand that grants are made annually but are partnerships presented as three or five year long?

**Rebekah:** The length of each assessment is dependent on each program’s context. For example, after the earthquakes in Haiti we had to extend the timeline and expectations of the programs there. At the minimum it can only happen every 3 years, and a grantee cannot go more than 5 years without an assessment. Grants are still made annually.

**Debbie Trent:** Do your narrative and financial reports and cumulative assessment process go into grantees’ pre-project expectations and compare them to their perceptions at the end of a program?

**Rebekah:** Cumulative assessments are retrospective, so NED does not ask grantees to report on current work.

**Serdar Bayriyev:** Could you briefly describe the system and processes used by NED to collect, store, and promote use of lessons learned from cumulative assessments.

**Rebekah:** Our focus is on how to pull out and lessons learned, but it is difficult because of context and questions of security. On individual grant basis, we encourage them to think about lessons learned, and follow up on why they are choosing certain paths based on what they report.

**Jonathan White:** What methodologies have been used in the cumulative assessment process?
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**Rebekah:** Common methodologies have included multi day workshops, meeting with field consultants, interviews, focus group discussions; depends on grantee context.

**Mirko Hoff:** How have insights changed thanks to the new format?

**Rebekah:** For some groups this has been a phenomenal opportunity to view and think about their work differently; grantees get out of it what they put into it, those who have been thoughtful about their process have had new opportunities.

**Sho Igawa:** In a cumulative assessment, you said the grantee might use a consultant or another evaluator previously involved in the grantee's project. Do you sometimes allow an evaluator who doesn't have wide-ranging certifications/credentials but certainly with lots of experience?

**Rebekah:** Grantees take care of that themselves, but if they approach NED to rebudget, there may be a conversation about the utility of an external evaluator. An external person can be helpful if an organization needs help facilitating interviews or collecting data.

**Rebekah:** Cumulative assessments are only one piece of the puzzle. When I train staff and grantees, I am clear that reports saying things are going very well are suspicious. Making things look perfect raises eyebrows, but also denies opportunities for learning.

*If you have any follow-up questions, please post them on the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum here.*