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Learning From The Inside: Evaluating Human Rights Advocacy

Tuesday, July 22, 2008, 10:45 – 12:15pm

Facilitator:

Michael Quinn Patton, Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Panelists:

Steven Burkeman, Evaluation Consultant

Session Organizer:

Rebecca Rittgers, Programme Executive (Reconciliation & Human Rights), The Atlantic Philanthropies

The session opened with the presenters asking the audience to discuss what the single most important bottom-line evaluation question in human rights advocacy was

Michael Budlender based his evaluation from his work as a public interest litigator in South Africa, a country that has had a democratic constitution for 15 years but has seen relatively few social changes as a result of the law. Michael identified four strategies crucial for advocacy success:

1. public information campaign
2. provide advice outside of official litigation
3. social mobilization
4. litigation

Michael noted that in retrospect, unsuccessful advocacy efforts admitted that they had only employed one or two of these.

In terms of evaluation Michael identified four aspects that come into play:

1. Clear Mandate
2. Methodology – there is no full theoretical model for advocacy evaluation so practical experience is crucial. South Africa was a good learning ground because it had the background of both an apartheid and post-apartheid regime.
3. Case Studies allow you to examine information at a concrete level
4. Identity Approach- Michael noted that him and his partner were experienced litigators who had years of practical experience with constitutional and legal technicalities

The key with any advocacy related litigation effort is to do follow up work. Either way there is no one size fits all blueprint but he believes this should be helpful.

Seven Practical Steps to Litigation:

1. Organization
2. Have an overall long term strategy
3. Coordination and information sharing
4. Timing
5. Research
6. Characterization debate
7. Follow up

Steve Burkeman focused on the detailed aspects of evaluation. He said people need to open up their mindset and not become fixated on one outcome. He notes that funders should avoid target outcome fixation because long term outcomes are not always clear. Instead set interim goals to examine and provide some clarity. Steve said above all funders need to be patient, change occurs slowly. He notes that instrumentality is a key issue of evaluation. It is difficult to know if your funding is actually the reason for a change. It is nearly impossible to determine cause and effect relationships because there are so many variables in play. Evaluators have to determine what success is defined as for a funder and whether that is attainable. Evaluators are asked to answer several questions but it should be a learning experience. Many of these answers will be subjective judgments so nothing is absolutely definitive. Steve says that evaluation is a tool, not a punishment.

Question: What is the cost-benefit ratio of large scale evaluations especially for smaller funders?

It is noted that over evaluation is wasteful, funding collaboration for evaluation is sensible. It is inherently a costly business so smaller funders will have to be more selective.

It's important to think strategically about what you want before you undergo evaluation because it is not a simple and painless process. You may want to establish what is important to you individually for the evaluation; a team of topic specialists or experienced evaluators. There is considerable overlap but find a balance that fits your needs

Question: To what extent is it important to visualize evaluation templates prior to grant making and what role should program officers play in the evaluation?

It was noted that independent process is generally better but don't completely exclude internal capacity. Furthermore it is risky to be tied down to an initial framework that doesn't allow enough room for adaptation and one should aim to be flexible. It is difficult to frame an evaluation beforehand because things develop over the course of a grant that can't be exactly predicted.

Comment: Evaluation as it relates to fear, punishment, and strategy

There is no one set blueprint for evaluation so you have to balance the fear aspect versus the learning aspect. It should not be the definitive judgment to determine future funding but it should help determine if the strategy outcomes are changing. The evaluation should be treated as a trustworthy and primarily a learning experience to achieve the best results; fear about future funding should not overwhelm it.

There is no one single bottom-line evaluation question in advocacy.