

Perceived Facilitators and Barriers to Evaluative Thinking in a Small Development NGO

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Abstract: *The Global Goals come with challenging implications for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development and their capacity for high-quality evaluation practice and evaluative thinking. NGOs are pressured to work efficiently, be accountable to donors and beneficiaries, and demonstrate impact. They must also critically examine the underlying assumptions behind their work, or else the sustainability of their work becomes jeopardized. Using previously collected evaluation data from a small NGO in water-based development, this paper highlights perceived facilitators and barriers to evaluative thinking and where they might occur in the evaluation process for an NGO constrained by time and resources.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, development evaluation, evaluative thinking, international development, NGOs*

Résumé : *Les Objectifs Mondiaux entraînent des défis pour les organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) en développement international qui souhaitent renforcer leurs capacités en évaluation. Les ONG doivent travailler de manière efficace, rendre des comptes aux bailleurs de fonds et aux bénéficiaires et démontrer leur impact. Elles doivent également analyser de manière critique les hypothèses sur lesquelles elles fondent leur travail, sans quoi leur pérennité sera compromise. Cet article porte sur les éléments qui favorisent et nuisent au développement d'une pensée plus évaluative au sein des ONG, à partir d'un cas d'évaluation particulier.*

Mots clés : *pensée critique, évaluation du développement, pensée évaluative, développement international, ONG*

Evaluative thinking is a key component of high quality evaluation practice and of building evaluation capacity within an organization (Buckley, Archibald,

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Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015). Though definitions vary, evaluative thinking for the purposes of this paper is “critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action” (Buckley et al., 2015, p. 378). In essence, evaluative thinking describes a way of contemplating how we go about understanding problems, programs, or policies through evaluation, from the planning process to the delivery of action-oriented recommendations.

The introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 was a pivotal moment for the international development community (Sachs, 2012). In 2015, 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be met by 2030, were established. The change in the SDGs’ framing of international goals and targets demonstrated greater consideration for addressing gender inequality, economic development, and the root causes of poverty (Sachs, 2012). The new goals have been influential in the next “wave” in evaluation history—a focus on social impact and putting values at the centre (Picciotto, 2015; Vedung, 2010). This new wave comes with new challenges for the evaluation discipline, and for development evaluation in particular.

In the past, development evaluation was limited to individual programs and projects, given their independent causes, operations, and structures. Yet, by providing commonly agreed benchmarks for the entire development enterprise, the MDGs and SDGs have shifted the main unit of account to the country level (as opposed to the organization level), called for a coordinated approach to programs and projects, meaning more joint evaluations of increasing complexity, and moved the ownership of projects from donor agencies to the developing countries (Picciotto, 2007). Consequently, the need for complex evaluation processes that are comprehensive, participatory, and adapted to society’s needs (Picciotto, 2007) has increased.

The MDGs and SDGs come with challenging implications for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and not-for-profit organizations (NPOs)¹ and their capacity for evaluative thinking. Without evaluative thinking and knowledge of development frameworks and models, NGOs are at risk of being insular; they may not recognize the underlying assumptions behind their work (Mertens, 2016) or weigh the risk of unintended consequences (Ofir, 2013). Furthermore, the sustainability of their work may be jeopardized by a lack of strategic planning or appropriate measures for determining impact. The potential consequences of unexamined work are only heightened in peace-precarious situations (Elkins, 2010), where NGOs are pressured to be non-political, limiting their ability to strengthen civil society (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015).

The barriers to evaluation in NGOs are complex. For instance, given the rising skepticism that surrounds the effectiveness of aid (Picciotto, 2012), NGOs are under tremendous pressure to demonstrate that the majority of their resources are dedicated to project work over administration or fundraising efforts. This

pressure to be accountable to both donors and beneficiaries can be detrimental to identifying intended outcomes, as the two audiences may have different motivations and definitions of success. The increased demand for accountability is particularly challenging for smaller, advocacy-oriented NGOs (Schmitz, Raggo, & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2012). Another source of pressure comes from government and granting agencies that run on short funding cycles, limiting NGOs to focus on short-term projects rather than long-term structural change (Banks et al., 2015). Evaluative thinking can help NGOs, small or large, reflect upon their vision as an organization, identify appropriate (short- and long-term) measures for their work, and make informed, action-oriented decisions.

Given these aforementioned challenges, evaluative thinking amongst NGOs in international development must be highly intentional, as thinking evaluatively is not synonymous with doing more evaluation (Archibald, Sharrock, Buckley, & Cook, 2016). For example, intentionality was evident in four case studies of large NGOs in international development where evaluative thinking was embraced (Griño, Levine, Porter, & Roberts, 2014). For each case study the authors highlighted enabling factors to evaluative thinking. Some of these factors included having designated monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff, establishing M&E working groups, using creative, inclusive approaches to data collection, creating forums for reflection on evaluation findings, and having pre-existing policies and strategic plans for evaluation (Griño et al., 2014). These activities were well supported with expertise from multiple evaluation experts, international agencies, and funding.

In contrast, this paper seeks to discuss our experience with a small NGO, highlighting the practical challenges of promoting evaluative thinking in an NGO when it is constrained by time and resources. We have documented our experience as a way to identify perceived facilitators and barriers to evaluative thinking, and where they might occur. By doing so, other evaluators working in similar contexts can anticipate potential barriers and plan for alternative strategies.

METHODS

For this case study, we evaluated a small NGO that specializes in international, water-based development. H2O 4 ALL (<http://h2o4all.org/>) was established in 2008 to address the need for safe water and sanitation in impoverished communities by offering expertise and support for building appropriate water-based technology (e.g., borehole installation and rehabilitation, water purification systems). The NGO lends its expertise through established partnerships with other local NGOs as a commitment to sustainability. The organization has completed over 35 projects in low-income countries in the Caribbean, South America, West Africa, East Africa, and South Africa. H2O 4 ALL currently has a governing Board of Directors, 1.5 full-time equivalent staff members, and an operating budget of approximately \$264,000 CAD in 2015 (Canada Revenue Agency [CRA] 2017). The NGO had no experience in evaluation, or evaluative thinking as applied to evaluations, prior to our work with them.

Figure 1 shows how we planned to promote evaluative thinking in H2O 4 ALL across two main spheres of influence. The first sphere of influence is the academic institution that surrounds the evaluator. The primary evaluator (first author) was a graduate student who led this project with the intent of using her experience with H2O 4 ALL as a case study. To gain formal work experience in an NGO setting, the evaluator also held a dual role as a project officer at H2O 4 ALL for one year, which was sponsored by a Canadian research internship program called Mitacs Accelerate (<http://www.mitacs.ca/en>). The evaluator was motivated to attain her degree, which required her to conduct and disseminate original research under the expectations of her academic institution. As a project officer, she was also expected to strengthen H2O 4 ALL's funding capacity by writing competitive grant applications.

The second sphere of influence consists of H2O 4 ALL's donors and funders, which surround their Board of Directors, Executive Director (ED), and staff. H2O 4 ALL is accountable to their donors and funders, without whom they could not exist. Therefore, H2O 4 ALL's primary motivation for undergoing evaluation was to gain evidence to support the positive contributions they have made in their project communities, and to ultimately raise more funds. Recognizing these spheres of influence helped us determine the different stakeholders involved in this project, their motivations for participation, and the flow of information that

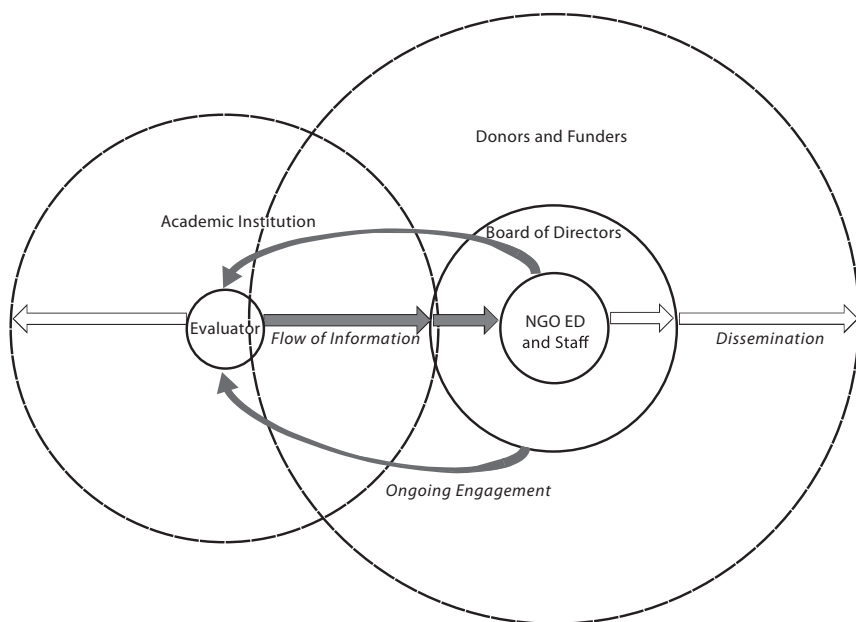


Figure 1: Planned approach to operationalizing evaluative thinking in a small NGO across spheres of influence

needed to occur. This figure was informed by our initial proposal to H2O 4 ALL, conversations with their Board of Directors, and their unanimous decision to proceed with the evaluation project.

Over a two-year period, we identified H2O 4 ALL's key evaluation questions and conducted evaluation activities as part of an evaluability assessment (Lu, Elliott, & Perlman, 2017) and process evaluation (Lu, Elliott, Majowicz, & Perlman, 2017). The activities, in the order in which we conducted them, are as follows:

1. environmental scan of other water-based NGOs working in low-income countries;
2. document review of meeting minutes, grant proposals, and reports from 2008–2015;
3. in-depth interviews with each of H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors ($N = 10$);
4. key-informant interviews with each of H2O 4 ALL's staff ($N = 2$);
5. focus group with H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors to develop a logic model;
6. development and distribution of an online survey for students who had worked at H2O 4 ALL as part of a co-operative education program;
7. development of an online survey for H2O 4 ALL's donors and volunteers;
8. pilot testing of an observational based checklist in Uganda for evaluating H2O 4 ALL's safe water system projects; and
9. non-participant observation of potential facilitators and barriers to evaluative thinking in H2O 4 ALL's office activities.

We received ethics clearance for these activities through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee.

To promote evaluative thinking throughout, we employed two main strategies: the creation and analysis of a Theory of Change model (Archibald et al., 2016), and a series of written reports and in-person presentations to H2O 4 ALL's Board and staff that were accompanied by an online feedback survey to gauge the usefulness of evaluation findings, lessons learned about the evaluation process, and communication preferences for further involvement in the evaluation process. Developing H2O 4 ALL's Theory of Change occurred during evaluation activities 3–5. During individual interviews, H2O 4 ALL's Board members and staff were asked to describe *how* they believed the NGO made an impact in the communities where they worked (Lu, Elliott, & Perlman, 2017). During the focus group, the linkages between inputs, outputs, and outcomes were challenged with assumptions (both preconditions necessary to explain each arrow on the resulting logic model and the broader environmental conditions that influenced the NGO [Archibald et al., 2016]) (Lu, Elliott, Majowicz, & Perlman, 2017). In these activities, the alignment of H2O 4 ALL's vision with Sustainable Development Goal 6 for the management of water and sanitation (United Nations, 2015) clarified the NGO's desired outcomes and signaled where measurement using recognized

benchmarks was needed. These activities were designed to be consistent with [Patton's \(2012\)](#) utilization-focused approach.

As a way to document our experience of attempting to promote evaluative thinking over a two-year period, we revisited all the collected data and coded for perceived facilitators and barriers to evaluative thinking. A general inductive approach to analyzing qualitative data ([Thomas, 2006](#)) allowed us to first code potential factors/themes related to evaluative thinking as they emerged from the data using *QSR NVivo 9*. Our list of potential influencing factors was then categorized into broader themes.

RESULTS

To code for potential facilitators and barriers to evaluative thinking that were identified by H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors and staff, we used data from evaluation activities 3–5, which resulted in 13 transcribed conversations. We have also expanded upon the most prevalent themes that emerged from these conversations using data gathered through non-participant observation (evaluation activity 9) and reflection upon our experience of implementing evaluation activities 1, 2, and 6–8.

Potential facilitators to evaluative thinking

[Table 1](#) summarizes the potential facilitators to evaluative thinking identified by H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors and staff. To develop appropriate categories for the themes that emerged from the transcripts, we drew from elements of [Buckley et al.'s \(2015\)](#) definition of evaluative thinking. Four categories emerged from the data: belief in the value of evidence (41% of mentions), informing decisions in preparation for action (27% of mentions), supportive organizational culture (17% of mentions), and attitude of inquisitiveness (15% of mentions).

In their interviews, Board members and staff were asked to share what they saw as H2O 4 ALL's strengths, their long-term goals for the NGO, and what they would like to learn from the evaluation project. Board members and staff spoke highly of the people behind H2O 4 ALL and the NGO's belief in the value of evidence—two qualities that drew many of the Board members to the NGO in the first place:

One of the things that I'd really like to see in terms of goals is being able to do set targets for ourselves, as a Board for the next year, and really use our meetings to benchmark how we're doing ... and then adjust accordingly... so that at the end of the year we can really see what we've achieved and what maybe we need to focus on next year ... I think that's super important for the organization to be able to move forward and to be able to kind of say, "Listen, like here is what we've done" and to really be proud of that! (Board member)

They were really receptive in terms of my involvement and input That for me is huge because I love to work with a group of people that like to challenge themselves

Table 1. Potential facilitators to evaluative thinking identified by H2O 4 ALL

Potential facilitator	Number of mentions (% of the total)
Belief in the value of evidence	17 (41)
Desire for increased transparency of financials, evaluation findings	6
Desire for measurement, goal setting, benchmarks	5
Valuing partnerships with Canadian universities	3
Organizational commitment to evidence-based development	2
Valuing lessons of failure	1
Informing decisions in preparation for action	11 (27)
Desire to have structured reporting processes for different stakeholders, including international partners	7
Desire for greater efficiency with financials and human resource management	4
Supportive organizational culture	7 (17)
Committed Board of Directors and staff	6
Valuing professional relationships	1
Attitude of inquisitiveness	6 (15)
Desire to learn what makes NGO unique and how it can be improved	5
Desire to learn about evaluation	1
Total	41 (100)

and the organization that they work for to achieve new things. I think all of the Board members are extremely passionate and motivated to do that ... It's really apparent and as a new Board member that really stuck out and resonated with me. (Board member)

Board members also expressed a strong desire to gain a better understanding of the evaluation process itself, what makes H2O 4 ALL unique, and how it can be improved. Specific suggestions were made on how transparency could be increased, how reporting processes could be introduced, and how having specific goals and benchmarks would benefit the NGO:

Things around communication, I think, could be a bit different—the way we report things to our donors, to our volunteers ... [For] most of these things we don't have any predetermined structure and I'm the type of person who, you know, even if it's a bad process, put a process in. (Board member)

I'm also really interested in the process of evaluation. How do we learn? What questions do we ask to elicit what we need to know? ... What makes us different? What are the characteristics of "sustainable," and if we're missing some of those, how can we insert them? (Board member)

These comments suggested that a number of individuals in the organization have already embraced evaluative thinking. They are keen to think critically about their

work in preparation for action. This was verified through non-participant observation, as we saw the same, small number of individuals offering input whenever requested to. While these individuals provided an impetus for the evaluation, the barriers described below often overshadowed any momentum that was gained at the beginning of the evaluation.

Potential barriers to evaluative thinking

Table 2 summarizes the potential barriers to evaluative thinking identified by H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors and staff. Six categories emerged from the data: limited funding (33% of mentions), overburdened staff (24% of mentions), transitioning out of the start-up stage (24% of mentions), strain on human-resource practices (9% of mentions), unbalanced organizational structure (8% of mentions), and negative perceptions of evaluation (1% of mentions).

When asked about the NGO's main challenges, H2O 4 ALL's Board members and staff stressed the difficulty of raising funds to support organizational growth. Any funding the organization had applied for and received over the years was

Table 2. Potential barriers to evaluative thinking identified by H2O 4 ALL

Potential barrier	Number of mentions (% of the total)
Limited funding	25 (33)
Not enough funding to hire more staff	11
Competitive fundraising environment	8
Donors prioritizing new projects over human resources, administration, or maintenance	3
Project-driven funding model	3
Overburdened personnel	18 (24)
Overburdened staff	12
Volunteer dependent	5
Staff turnover	1
Transitioning out of the start-up stage	18 (24)
Lack of strategic planning	7
Slow uptake and translation of ideas to action	6
"Stuck" in development stage	5
Strain on human-resource practices	7 (9)
Few mechanisms for feedback	3
Lack of orientation for new Board members	2
Gaps in areas of expertise on Board of Directors	2
Unbalanced organizational structure	6 (8)
Reporting relationship between ED and Board of Directors	3
Large Board of Directors	3
Negative perceptions of evaluation	1 (1)
Feeling misunderstood over value of work	1
Total	75 (100)

directly tied to project implementation. While the MDGs and SDGs have arguably helped to heighten awareness and support for water-based initiatives and organizations, a staff member commented on the challenge of securing funding to maintain already existing water projects:

It has been a challenge to keep funding for maintenance Because most people I raise money within Canada or the U.S. are all about the glorious part of doing the project—implementing it, taking pictures, posting on social media, [seeing] everyone clapping. But then the aspect of what goes on after the 1st year, 2nd year, and into the longer periods, becomes a challenge. Because most people don't want to know about that, other than if it's doing well. (Staff member)

Donor and granting agencies' disinterest in supporting operational costs or already existing projects has forced H2O 4 ALL into a project-driven model. Staff salaries, administrative fees, and operational costs have become dependent upon fundraising activities. Through non-participant observation it became apparent that H2O 4 ALL had yet to find a way to increase the size and reliability of its donor base. Given the financial costs associated with project implementation, which leaves little support for the rest of the organization, H2O 4 ALL's current funding model is unsustainable for growth.

For example, H2O 4 ALL is limited to 1.5 full-time equivalent staff members. Though the organization is reaching its 10th year, the organization has yet to break out of its development stage. To alleviate the problem of overburdened staff, H2O 4 ALL's Board of Directors has recently grown to its largest size to date with 14 members, including members with expertise in business and marketing. As a "working board," many Board members are involved in sub-committees to help play a greater operational role in the organization. However, Board members are also volunteers, creating a challenging work environment:

Generally, working with volunteers is never easy. They're volunteers—you can't make them do things that they don't want to do, make them follow instructions, or challenge them when they haven't followed through. (Board member)

H2O 4 ALL's Board members may be highly committed to the organization's cause, but since they are experts in their respective fields, their dedicated time to H2O 4 ALL is not without constraints.

Additionally, having a larger Board of Directors requires more management and, at times, has complicated the staff's reporting relationship to the Board, as staff have become greatly outnumbered. Some Board members recognized the new challenges a larger Board created:

There are so many different ways of organizing a board ... there have been trends and fads in what boards should do. I'm not yet sure that I understand the ideal board-ED relationship, for example. (Board member)

The complications of having an unbalanced organizational structure underscore the need for H2O 4 ALL to break out of its current project-driven funding model. As described by Board members and staff, the project-driven funding model had become a major barrier to hiring more staff, thus limiting the organization's overall capacity for growth.

In the beginning stages of this evaluation project, we anticipated that H2O 4 ALL's strong belief in the value of evidence would help overcome any potential barriers. There was widespread recognition that H2O 4 ALL had reached a pivotal point in its history and that the organization may have to make some significant changes to be sustainable:

[H2O 4 ALL] has the potential to break through the infancy [stage], which I still would consider us in. Maybe we're toddlers ... but [we] could be a very significant organization for years to come. There are times in the history of any organization where you have to make significant change and that's not easy to do. (Board member)

The evaluation project was designed to uncover *how* H2O 4 ALL had been operating and to provide evidence to guide any proposed changes. We also anticipated that using Patton's (2012) utilization-focused approach—to ensure that practical questions would lead to useful and actionable answers and to carry out decision making under real-world constraints—would facilitate the uptake of any evaluation tools that was created in collaboration with H2O 4 ALL. H2O 4 ALL's Board members, ED, and staff engaged in interviews and the development of a logic model. However, little to no feedback was received on the resulting logic model report, an online survey that created for donors and volunteers, or a project implementation checklist that was pilot-tested during a project trip to Uganda. Thus, we experienced a number of barriers to the uptake of evaluation tools—a precursor to creating an evaluative culture in an organization.

Though this evaluation project began with unanimous support from Board members and staff, we believe that the attitude of inquisitiveness was lost when the organization became overwhelmed by the level of engagement that was required of them in the evaluation process:

Generally NGOs resent the fact that they have to do any kind of evaluation of the work they've done. I mean, you're in the service of the interest of humanity ... why would you ever have to prove that this is a good thing to do? That you're doing it well, or that you feel so misunderstood because nobody else has been down there working on the ground, where it's really hard to work and it's really quite unpleasant. That's a general sense of NGOs—they're quite beleaguered. (Board member)

It is possible that evaluation became a low priority for the organization as a whole because its benefits seemed less tangible or immediate than the benefits of pouring resources directly to fundraising activities. Failing to convince the organization that evaluation is an investment into the NGO's sustainability proved to be difficult, given that the organization had sustained itself for years without it.

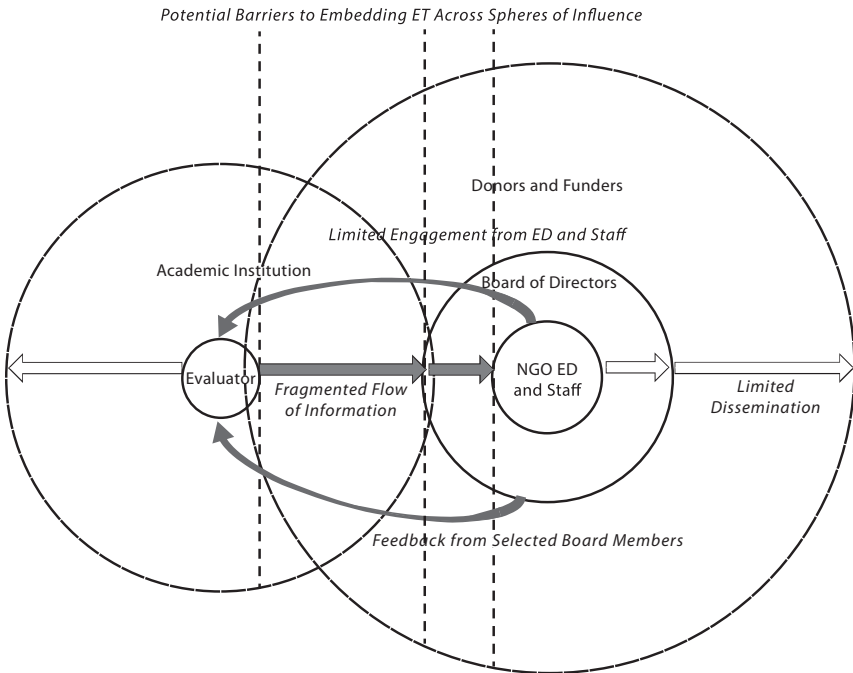


Figure 2. Barriers to evaluative thinking in a small NGO across spheres of influence

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the barriers encountered in this attempt to promote evaluative thinking across the organization. Although we had anticipated challenges to evaluation activities, such as differing sources of motivation and limited funding capacity, we had approached the project without thinking critically about strategies for mitigation. Given the level of interest in evaluation that was determined by an evaluability assessment (Lu, Elliott, & Perlman, 2017), we did not anticipate barriers such as limited engagement of staff and the ED in the evaluation process and receiving feedback from only a few Board members whenever feedback was requested, which became more problematic in later stages. These barriers, which occurred at each intersection between spheres of influence, resulted in a fragmented flow of information about the evaluation process and slowed the momentum needed to disseminate findings back to H2O 4 ALL and for the organization to translate these findings into action.

DISCUSSION

We worked with a clear definition of evaluative thinking throughout this project; however, promoting evaluative thinking in a small NGO is a very complex task. The spheres of influence surrounding our primary evaluator and the NGO's ED

and staff in this case study made it difficult to achieve intersectoral action—a partnership between organizations from different sectors, working together towards the same goal more effectively, efficiently, and sustainably than if alone (Glendinning, Powell, & Rummery, 2002). In short, changing organizational priorities as well as capacity on the road to evaluative thinking proved more challenging than originally anticipated.

Glendinning et al.'s (2002) model for intersectoral action identifies trust and extent of dependence as fundamental factors for joint action. For H2O 4 ALL, we observed that trust between the primary evaluator and H2O 4 ALL's ED and staff was strengthened through the evaluator's dual role as a project officer. In the end, however, the evaluation was commissioned by the Board of the organization, not the ED or the staff. As a result, there could have been a lack of co-dependency from staff and the ED on the evaluator, resulting in the inability to embed evaluative thinking in day-to-day organizational processes. This obviously had implications for engaging the ED and staff in data collection and participatory evaluation activities.

Another contributing factor to H2O 4 ALL's limited engagement could be that the NGO's organizational climate or "personality" felt threatened by the evaluation project and its ties to an academic institution. Being under observation may have hindered the NGO's openness to change. Every organization is based on a set of values and assumptions that have been formed over time; when these are held tightly, an organization may become resistant to change or stagnant in its development (Steckler, Goodman, & Kegler, 2002). Srinivasan (2007) states that NGOs at this stage in their lifecycle are vulnerable to growth. Unless organizational structure or management is changed, a founder will become burdened with administrative details and operational problems (Srinivasan, 2007). Furthermore, most decisions will be centred on the founder, who plays a key role in ensuring that the introduction of organizational procedures and processes are handled sensitively (Srinivasan, 2007).

The potential facilitators and barriers identified through this case study, and the aforementioned factors to intersectoral action, are not limited to NGOs in water-based development. NGOs are often keen to participate in an evaluation, but it is not uncommon for them to become burdened with the process. Therefore, it is unsurprising that evaluators have made similar observations in a variety of contexts, such as in the evaluation of two innovative programs for community change in the New York area (Baker, Bruner, Sabo, & Cook, 2006), through semi-structured interviews with policy makers and researchers working on health policies and programs in Australia (Huckel Schneider, Milat, & Moore, 2016), and through discussions with staff and partners of Catholic Relief Services who participated in evaluative thinking workshops in Ethiopia and Zambia (Archibald et al., 2016).

In this case study, however, barriers such as lack of funding to support the evaluation, limited time for stakeholders to consider evaluation work, differing motivations and conceptual separation between NGO and academic spheres, and

turnover in staff and Board members, were experienced simultaneously during the evaluation process, and were arguably heightened, given the unique pressures facing small NGOs in international development. Had time permitted, we could have been more explicit about creating a Theory of Change model or organized evaluative thinking workshops similar to those used by Archibald et al. (2016). In our original evaluation proposal to H2O 4 ALL, we included plans to run interactive workshops at a Board annual retreat using activities from Preskill and Russ-Eft's (2005) *Building Evaluation Capacity*, but again, our time was limited. We also recognize that alternative evaluation approaches may have been better suited to our case study. For example, instead of Patton's (2012) utilization-focused approach and traditional evaluation activities such as surveys, an appreciative inquiry approach may have increased engagement (see Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). By focusing on an organization's strengths to ask critical questions, staff and Board members could be empowered to learn, improve, and change.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our efforts to promote evaluative thinking in a small NGO fell short of original expectations, and although there are limitations to the transferability of any case study, there are valuable lessons to be learned from our experience with H2O 4 ALL. For evaluators doing similar work, we recommend pursuing an evaluability assessment first, which can be completed in resource-limited contexts (see Lu, Elliott, & Perlman, 2017). Evaluators should also take care to create a detailed MOU outlining expectations from both partners, including frequency and preferred method for communication and guidelines on participating in evaluation activities and for reporting and/or publishing evaluation findings. For the Board of Directors, evaluation (or "learning time") should be a standing item on meeting agendas for the duration of the project. Creating an evaluation sub-committee and providing opportunities to support evaluation training should also be pursued so that staff and Board members are equally invested in the process. If an NGO is uninterested or unwilling to invest time and energy into an evaluation, then they have also sacrificed any potential benefits from evaluative thinking.

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates the challenges to promoting evaluative thinking in a resource-limited and yet highly competitive setting. By putting a spotlight on water and sanitation issues, the MDGs and SDGs have helped to push the agenda for measurement and transparency forward. Greater accountability for NGOs who have the capacity to undertake complex evaluation processes is a positive outcome, but the increased demand for resources leaves little room for small NGOs with grassroots approaches. Therefore, these findings underscore the importance of reflective practice and the special considerations that need to be made when working with small NGOs, particularly those in international development. By

acknowledging potential barriers and facilitators to evaluative thinking, prior to undertaking evaluation work or even the formation of an NGO, evaluators and NGOs will be better prepared to create an organizational culture where critical thinking is applied and used to champion work that contributes to achieving the Global Goals from Day 1.

Furthermore, we encourage evaluators to consider the spheres of influence in which they work, how these shape each stakeholder's motivations (including the evaluator), and *where* potential barriers to the flow of information may arise. From our case study, we learned that different levels of investment in and knowledge of evaluation will result in different levels of engagement. Therefore, taking careful consideration of which evaluation approach to take and establishing an MOU at every point where two (or more) spheres of influence intersect may assist in achieving intersectoral action and the intentionality that is required for evaluative thinking to be embraced within any organization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE

1. In some countries, and for the purposes of this paper, “NGOs” and “NPOs” are used interchangeably. However, when they are not considered one and the same, the main difference is that NGOs do not allow government representatives to have membership in the organization and NPOs are exempted from income tax (Irvin, 2015).

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