INTEGRATING LEARNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION INTO POLICY-ORIENTED RESEARCH

Lessons from CSVR's Urban Violence Project

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Introduction

In line with its commitment to incorporating learning into its monitoring and evaluation practices, in 2013 the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) introduced developmental evaluation based on facilitated learning exercises into one of its research projects. The Urban Violence project aimed to increase understanding of the role of the Community Work Programme (CWP), a South African public employment initiative, in reducing crime and violence, as well as to promote this role through evidence-based interventions and advocacy with community, government and other stakeholders. As the research involved engagement with diverse stakeholders at community, provincial and national level, in addition to being implemented by a team of researchers at six sites around the country, the project's learning, monitoring and evaluation (LME) agenda was complex.

This report reflects on the design and implementation of an LME plan for a policy-oriented and community-based research project, identifying the benefits and challenges of conducting LME in such a research context and sharing lessons learnt in the process. It discusses LME strategies, describes specific exercises and provides examples of occasions when LME shaped the course of the project. While the report discusses elements of the research methodology and findings,[1] it does so mainly to provide insight into the role LME can play in improving research and research uptake, from a practitioner perspective.

Project and Learning Goals

As a research organisation, CSVR has long generated new knowledge and high-quality outputs that inform public policy and discourse on violence prevention at the local and global levels. The Urban Violence project sought to deepen the impact of CSVR's research in two ways. First, the researchers strove to work with local, provincial and national government, state-sponsored implementing agents and other policy makers in a more collaborative fashion in order to demonstrate the value of local research and increase the likelihood of its uptake and implementation. Second, the researchers aimed to work with community members at CWP sites in a way that bolstered their local knowledge and encouraged their own uptake of the research findings. This combination of a policy orientation and a community focus required CSVR to adapt its research practices, going beyond data collection and analysis to a more collaborative approach that enabled relationship- and capacity-building.

This shift in approach created an opportunity for CSVR to integrate a learning element into its research monitoring and evaluation measures. While the quality and impact of the research would be measured by CSVR's usual means — including tracking the number of downloads of project publications from CSVR's website, the number of references to the project in scholarly publications, government documents and the media, and publication of findings in peer-reviewed journals (Méndez 2012) — the project's larger goals called for an evaluation method that took into account the complexity and diversity of the six sites, the different interests and capacities of the stakeholders, developments in relationships, the shifting needs of community members, and other variables, at times unforeseen and often intersecting, that would emerge as the project progressed. These goals also required a monitoring method that went beyond compliance to facilitating a continually deepening understanding of contexts and stakeholders as well as an awareness of new developments that might require adjustments to the project plan. The fact that the scope of the project introduced the logistical complexity of working in a team of six researchers, including two research consultants who joined for a limited time, in six sites across three provinces only highlighted the need for a monitoring and evaluation method that would not only capture developments in multiple sites but also ensure that the researchers were working with the same assumptions and information in a coherent manner across time. The project required flexibility of approach and, to some extent, outcome and output.

In response to these needs, CSVR opted for a developmental evaluation approach for the Urban Violence project. Designed to accommodate fluidity and enable adaptation in complex environments, developmental evaluation processes

> include asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering real-time data to inform ongoing decision making and adaptations. The evaluator is often part of a development team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design, and test new approaches in a long-term, ongoing process of continuous development, adaptation, and experimentation, keenly sensitive to unintended results and side effects. (Patton 2010: 1)

In this case, CSVR decided to have an internal 'evaluator' who was already familiar with the project from taking part in an organisational study group that provided input during the conceptualisation and planning phase. In this sense, the project incorporated the collaborative evaluation approach into its developmental evaluation (O'Sullivan 2004), with the evaluator termed an 'LME facilitator,' accompanying the researchers as part of the project team, working together to identify monitoring and evaluation needs, and regularly eliciting and feeding back their reflections to the team. The LME facilitator also collaborated with stakeholders, going beyond seeking assessments of project outputs to eliciting in-depth reflections on how CSVR could enhance its policy- and community-oriented engagements in the project and in future work.

By having a staff member in the LME facilitator role, engaging all the researchers in the LME process and including stakeholder reflections, CSVR embodied its commitment to being a learning organisation. Such an organisation

> actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency. (Aiken and Britton 1997: 163)

Over the past five years, CSVR has undergone a number of organisational processes to enable staff members to collaborate on identifying learning priorities and practices that help project and programme teams improve their work. This commitment to being a learning organisation requires ongoing engagement and adaptation, and the incorporation of LME into CSVR's research work was another step on this road (Patton 2010; Barefoot 2011). While maintaining its commitment to accountability through monitoring and evaluation, CSVR recognises the value of learning and of sharing this learning with colleagues and stakeholders, particularly in its role as a leading research organisation.

Learning, Monitoring and Evaluation Practices

Given the ongoing elaboration of CSVR's learning processes, the LME facilitator built on existing organisational practices in implementing the Urban Violence project's LME. Having participated in the project's conceptualisation and planning, the LME facilitator also brought a familiarity with the project goals, the learning goals and the researchers into the evaluation process. The process consisted of regular LME exercises that were designed in cooperation with the research team, particularly the lead researcher, as well as the project manager. Each monthly or bimonthly exercise was tailored to the stage of the project and responded to learning needs as identified by the team. It was usually linked to discussions in monthly team meetings and informed by the previous LME exercise.

The exercises created dedicated space for researchers individually or as a group to sit and reflect on what was happening in their component of the project, to articulate what they had learnt and to identify whether adjustments needed to be made. The exercises initially also included reflections from the CSVR study group members. The LME facilitator compiled the reflections and provided a summary of the main overlapping themes in an LME document, which was shared with the team, and brought the reflections into the discussion at the following monthly meeting discussion. In this way the reflections were channelled in an accessible way to the lead researcher and project manager, as well as fed back to the researchers as indicators of lessons and signposts for the way forward. The LME facilitator also drafted reports on the developmental evaluation process for inclusion in donor reports. Across the two years of the project, the team underwent a variety of exercises.

Individual written reflections

Based on reflections in the previous month's LME exercise and discussions in the monthly meeting, the LME facilitator collaborated with the lead researcher and other team members to develop two to four open-ended questions designed to promote reflection. Each researcher was encouraged to sit alone for 45 minutes and write out responses to the questions, which were then sent to the LME researcher to be summarised and shared. This method provided some of the richest reflections, although it is likely most effective with participants who, like researchers, are comfortable with writing.

Group written reflections

While these were designed in a similar manner as the reflections above, they were implemented during monthly meetings. The researchers were given two to three open-ended questions to answer one at a time for 10 minutes, after which the team discussed their reflections. While the researchers could capture their reflections in any form – drawing is one possibility – they were most comfortable writing their responses. The written reflections were treated as private from the beginning, and the LME facilitator took notes on and shared only the reflections provided in the group discussion. This exercise highlighted collaborative evaluation, offering space for individual reflection, immediate sharing, common understanding and cooperation on the next steps. It is not always practicable, however, given the necessarily limited time allotted for team meetings and discussions.

Individual LME interviews

Again developing the questions in a similar manner as above, on several occasions the LME facilitator conducted informal telephone interviews with the researchers and, later in the project, with stakeholders. Among researchers, this approach encouraged deeper reflection through conversation and a sense of collaboration, while allowing for comparability and more honed feedback to the team. It also allowed researchers to evaluate the LME process itself towards the end of the project. In the case of stakeholders, their responses were far more detailed and illuminating than they likely would have been on an evaluation form. The interview gave stakeholders more

of a stake in the evaluation and in CSVR's work, as suggested not only by the richness of the responses but also by the fact that these interviews lasted about an hour. The LME facilitator's familiarity with the project, which was arguably greater than an external evaluator's would have been, also contributed to the richness of these conversational interviews. This method may be particularly useful for participants who are more comfortable with talking than with writing, as well as for participants who need to be button-holed in order to provide feedback.

Guided group discussion

The LME facilitator actively participated in project meetings, on some occasions facilitating the discussion using prepared LME questions and ensuring that all researchers had an opportunity to provide input, and on other occasions simply participating actively in the conversation from an LME perspective and basing comments on feedback from earlier exercises. Having a team member who continually plays the role of LME facilitator integrates reflection, learning and evaluation organically into project discussions, allowing multiple researcher perspectives indirectly to shape the research.

Individual and small group debriefings

The LME facilitator was available for informal debriefings with team members. The lead researcher and project manager made use of this space to reflect on the project and on their role as leaders. Researchers based in the same location as the LME facilitator also sought out this debriefing space to talk through their research approach, developments in the field, their personal and interpersonal challenges within the project and ideas for adjustments to the research plan. While the debriefings were confidential, the LME facilitator was in a position to understand the internal and external dynamics in the project, indicate areas where researchers had different understandings of the project or of their role in the team and create safe spaces for individual and

group discussion of such issues. Proximity and a closer working relationship increased researchers' interest in this LME approach.

LME of community report-backs

In line with the community focus of the project, CSVR organised meetings for respondents and stakeholders at five of the research sites in order to report back on the project findings and receive feedback before formalising the findings in publications. The team implemented several different forms of LME in these report-backs, including before-and-after interviews with attendees on whether the report-back met their expectations, what they learnt and what avenues they see for uptake of the findings in their sites; written evaluation forms measuring satisfaction with the report-back meeting itself; a debriefing immediately after the report-back with the CSVR staff members in attendance; and an informal group discussion with attendees on the validity of the findings and uptake options. These interactions were documented, written up in summary and shared with the project team. In two cases the LME feedback was incorporated into the project publications, and in all cases both the report-back and the LME exercise were welcomed by the attendees.

LME on the LME

In addition to regularly checking in with the team regarding the relevance of the LME and what adjustments might be required, as the project came to a close the LME facilitator conducted semi-structured interviews with the lead researcher and the project manager on the developmental evaluation process to clarify what had been learnt. The lessons have been integrated into this report, which is itself a way to share the experience and the lessons within CSVR in order to inform discussions about future practices, as well as with partners, stakeholders and other practitioners tackling how to integrate LME into research, particularly research with a policy orientation and/or a community focus.

Project Crossroads from an LME Perspective

In order to put the LME exercises into context and highlight some of the lessons from the developmental evaluation process, this section briefly discusses three examples of occasions when the LME process showed a need for adjustment within the project and led the team to develop strategies collaboratively for addressing the issue.

The first occurred after the conceptualisation and planning phase, and just as the fieldwork in the project's pilot site was coming to a close. Individual written reflections on the lessons from the initial fieldwork and from stakeholder feedback at the pilot site's report-back meeting demonstrated that the research questions were eliciting information mostly on the operations of the CWP public employment programme itself, rather than on the extent to which it builds social cohesion and how this may impact on crime and violence prevention. This led to a guided group discussion not only about adjusting the interview questions but also about the extent to which the researchers had a common understanding of the aims of the research and the project's conceptual framework. Based on this discussion, the lead researcher developed a draft conceptual and methodological framework to share with the team, which was followed by a group written reflection based on the following questions: What has the draft framework clarified for you? What questions or challenges has it raised for you? What does this mean for your relationship building with stakeholders?

The responses regarding the draft framework were positive, with some of the outcomes that were afterward taken up by the researchers including: collaboratively identifying the team's definitions and common understanding of the concepts and terms to be used in the project going forward; placing gender more centrally in the framework and in the research; and reworking the interview questions in light of the new framework, which would also facilitate new researchers' induction to the project. This exercise contributed to the development of a final methodological

framework for the project, as well as a conceptual matrix that refined and defined the six terms the project used, namely, social cohesion, civic cohesion, social capital, power, gender and collective action. A subsequent guided group discussion elicited further team feedback on the methodological and conceptual frameworks. The interview questions were streamlined and aligned with the frameworks. In this instance, the LME approach helped identify a problem that needed to be resolved while also building understanding and relationships among the researchers and giving them a stake in the collaborative evaluation process.

The second example emerged from the first, as one of the outcomes of the above-mentioned group written reflection was that the team needed clarity around the extent of current and future engagement with site communities. The LME facilitator developed an individual written reflection that included a question on the way the researchers had done research with communities and what lessons there might be for CSVR going forward, particularly in terms of strategies for conducting research in communities more sustainably given capacity and resource constraints. The responses largely highlighted the extent to which the researchers had invested in building trust and relationships in each site. The researchers emphasised the need for community-based research to be viewed as knowledge exchange between the researcher and community members, in such a way that local knowledge is valued. They also suggested that such research should be viewed as a partnership with community members, which would contribute to community members buying into the research and increase the likelihood that they would use the research findings in advocating for their own interests.

As fieldwork at most of the sites was coming to a close at this point, the team had a guided group discussion on dissemination strategies for the research findings, with specific reference to opportunities for engagement with CWP participants and community members. The discussion, along with two individual

debriefings, demonstrated a lack of clarity regarding how long-term engagement with community members and outputs tailored to their needs and interests would look in practice. In a follow-up individual written reflection, the researchers recommended various activities, including involving CWP participants as co-authors in project publications; writing publications specifically for community-based audiences and in languages other than English; organising workshops and facilitated discussions to capacitate CWP participants and community members to advocate for improvements to CWP; advocating for increased governmental support for successful but under-resourced projects within CWP, particularly those that address crime and violence; and supporting communities in tailoring CWP projects to their needs.

As a result of these LME exercises, the researchers decided to include small facilitated group discussions in the report-backs at the remaining three sites, so as to enable participants to begin thinking about how they could use the findings, whether regarding site-specific operational issues, CWP policy or CWP's role in crime and violence prevention. A budget was also made available for small-scale community-based interventions. Based in part on feedback at the report-back meetings, the researchers in two sites held follow-up capacity-building workshops with CWP participants. One, conducted with support from CSVR staff members not associated with the project, focused on the nature of violence, its drivers and its effects, and included training in trauma management, supporting individuals affected by substance abuse and undertaking self-care. The other aimed to build participants' capacity to address violence and substance abuse by formalising existing ad hoc initiatives at the site into more targeted interventions. At this point it became clear that CSVR would likely receive funding for a second phase of the project, which allowed the researchers to agree that it would include further community-driven interventions and engagement with community-based stakeholders such as CWP participants and site management, local councillors, municipal government, community-based organisations, community leaders and others.

The third example emerged during this period, as the focus of the project shifted from data collection and analysis to finalising findings and ensuring research uptake by local, provincial and national government, implementing agents, nongovernmental organisations and other stakeholders with an influence on policy, who were identified at the beginning of the study. As the end of the project approached and time became short, the external research consultants completed their work and left the team, while meetings became brief. LME facilitation in this context was more challenging, and its focus shifted to ensuring that the researchers' publications re-engaged with the team's collaboratively developed conceptual frameworks and to clarifying whether the team had a common understanding of the project's policy goals. Based in part of feedback from individual debriefings, the remaining researchers undertook an individual written reflection asking them to articulate their findings on the six concepts and terms that guided the research, as well as to specify which findings needed to be highlighted in the policy briefs and which stakeholders might not have been given enough attention. These responses and a subsequent guided group discussion revealed that the researchers who had done the fieldwork felt to some extent left out of the policy work, which was being run by the lead researcher and project manager. The suggestion was also that the community focus of the project was being eclipsed by the policy focus. With this awareness, the team made more of an effort to integrate all of the researchers into the work, and the concerns of the researchers who conducted the fieldwork were among those foregrounded in the planning for the second phase of the project.

These three occasions, which occurred across the lifespan of the project and led into each other, show the role that regular LME exercises, developed collaboratively by a facilitator who is also part of the project team, can play in bolstering research. More so, they demonstrate the value of developmental and collaborative evaluation in strengthening a research team, clarifying shifting and multifaceted project aims and ultimately improving both research and policy work.

Some Lessons Learnt

The examples above illustrate the ways in which LME can strengthen policy-oriented research. It needs to be said, however, that the LME in the Urban Violence project came with its challenges. As noted above, the team consisted of six researchers and a project manager based in two cities and conducting research in six sites across three provinces. Two researchers left the project after finishing their fieldwork. Although the team held a monthly teleconference of four to five hours, including an hour dedicated to LME, there was a consistent sense of not having quite enough time to go into the substantive discussions that were needed to clarify all of the issues emerging from the research and from the LME. The time issue also applied to the activity-heavy planning for the project, with the need to do the fieldwork, write up findings, organise workshops and the myriad other tasks committed to by the team at times overshadowing the need for reflection and engagement with others' reflections. The researchers based in the same city as the LME facilitator arguably benefitted more from the process through greater access and informal engagements.

More important, while all the researchers recognised the value of the LME exercises, as demonstrated by their in-depth and generally timeous responses, the LME facilitator was required to pressure the team and particularly the lead researcher and project manager to fully engage with the information coming out of the exercises. While the facilitator could elicit reflections and feed them back to the team, the work of integrating them into the project ultimately, and rightly, rested with the researchers. The reality is that the LME could have had more of a positive impact, rather than being a useful add-on. In addition, while the project was innovative for research at CSVR in having more of a community focus and in collaborating with policy makers, the team at times found itself reverting to old ways of doing, for example in sidelining community engagement and capacity building as time began to run out and pressure to deliver to donors mounted, or in eclipsing the recommendations of researchers who had conducted fieldwork and painstakingly built relationships in sites with the recommendations of researchers who had more of a policy orientation and a 'big picture' view of the research and its intended impact. These are not uncommon challenges (Patton 2010; Patton 1994; O'Sullivan 2004).

Nonetheless, the team viewed the developmental and collaborative evaluation approach as a contributing factor in the success of the project, which generated high-quality knowledge outputs while building strong relationships and capacity in several sites and attracting enough buy-in from policy makers that the main government stakeholder requested a memorandum of understanding with CSVR. Noting that the LME facilitator's role in eliciting, summarising and feeding back reflections was effective, the researchers commented that the regular reflections helped clarify their thinking about the project and their individual work; that the tailoring of questions and exercises to stages of the project helped keep the LME relevant and fresh, which helped them buy

into the process; that they learnt more about their own strengths and limitations as researchers, as well as those of their colleagues, which deepened the relationships while also assisting with current and future planning; and that the LME enriched the project discussions and ongoing planning, particularly in terms of bringing out conceptual complexities and helping the team manage them.

The main recommendation for improving the LME process from both the researchers and the LME facilitator is that it be more fully integrated into project proposals and early planning, as well as into researcher work plans from the beginning. This approach would create more time in the early stages of the project for the research team to clarify conceptual and methodological frameworks. It would also allot time for substantive discussions on project goals, learning goals and team member roles early on, which would, for example, have eased some of the pressure the Urban Violence project faced in its later stages and left time for active discussion of LME outcomes. In addition, all members of the team would have had a clearer idea of how developmental and collaborative evaluation works and their own role in participating in the process and regularly applying its lessons to their work.

Clearly, the Urban Violence project LME had a number of enabling factors. The project was funded by donors that recognise the value of learning approaches in monitoring and evaluation (DFID 2009; Earl et al. 2001). CSVR also has committed to integrating collaborative learning and reflection into its work as part of being a learning organisation, which created an enabling environment for the project LME and researchers who already perceived the value of the process. In addition, the project's budget included the funds for a part-time LME facilitator, who was a staff member and researcher familiar with the project from its earliest stages. And the project will have a second phase, which gives CSVR the opportunity to apply the lessons from the LME process more effectively. At the same time, CSVR made an active decision to invest in processes that created these enabling factors, positioning LME as one of its strategic objectives and a cross-cutting theme for its programmes, which includes endeavouring to work with donors who support this type of LME.

The LME practices discussed in this report can be tailored to different institutional and project environments, and applied without the assistance of an LME facilitator. For example, a study group consisting of individuals external to the project could develop reflection questions for the researchers. In cases where research is being done by multiple researchers, the team members could take turns being the LME facilitator. In fact, the collaborative approach grants greater agency to various team members, allowing a team to design and implement an LME strategy together. The developmental approach, meanwhile, provides for complexity and evolving variables in such a way as to enable adaptability while fostering accountability. It is hoped that the experiences and lessons of this group of practitioners will offer some inspiration to others seeking to bolster learning in their work.

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Drawing on the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's experiences, this report reflects on the design and implementation of a learning, monitoring and evaluation (LME) plan for a policy-oriented and community-based research project, identifying the benefits and challenges of conducting LME in such a research context and sharing lessons learnt in the process.

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