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How to analyze the results of policy influencing: lessons from a new method under construction

On 25 Nov, 2014 By Leandro Echt With 0 Comments

[Editor's note: This post was written by Juan Fernández Labbé, researcher and coordinator of M&E Unit at RIMISP-Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural, a Chilean think tank.]

For some time, the Latin American Center for Rural Development (*Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural*, RIMISP) has been promoting processes of institutional change to achieve development and greater well-being in territories that lag behind in Latin America. One necessary and increasingly important question raised by this work is related to the outcomes of public policy influencing and the most significant processes for achieving those results.

In the past year, we have analyzed initiatives involving dialogue on policies and advocacy. Specifically, we have evaluated the results of advocacy by Rural Dialogue Groups (RDGs) in Ecuador, El Salvador and Colombia. RDGs consist of diverse stakeholders, always in the rural world, which is the area of interest, who are charged with organizing and conducting processes of political dialogue, policy analysis and technical assistance for decision makers. Their actions are part of the program, "Knowledge and Change in Rural Poverty and Development" (FIDA-IDRC, 2010-2013), which was designed to make rural poverty and rural development a higher priority on the policy agenda.

The evaluation method we used, known as "links of policy influence" was developed by Rimisp with the help of the consultant Vanesa Weyrauch based on two premises: i) policy influence outcomes are part of a causal chain involving diverse stakeholders, and programs therefore have different degrees of *attribution* and *contribution to these results*; and ii) the effects can lie in three areas: *stakeholders, policies* and their *processes.*

Implementation of this method assumed a series of methodological steps: a) reconstructing the objective and strategy of each RDG using trees of problems and objectives, along with their respective stakeholder's maps; b) identifying the action strategy; c) identifying the outcomes achieved; and d) describing the mechanisms and factors that were key for the achievement of those outcomes.

To do this, several methods were used, including a review of documentation and secondary material (RDG records, reports and documents about public allocations, etc.), personal interviews with members of the groups and relevant public stakeholders, and focus groups or ordinary meetings of the RDGs, at which their members discussed their actions and achievements. All of the resulting information was analyzed and triangulated.

The reports have produced interesting findings. Regarding advocacy outcomes, in Ecuador, they involved the preparation of inputs for the pilot implementation of Rural Living Well (*Buen Vivir Rural*) policies and collaboration on the design of Competitive Improvement Plans (*Planes de Mejora Competitiva*, PMC), as well as MAGAP's National Project of Seeds for Strategic Agricultural Chains. In El Salvador, the RDG has driven synergies between stakeholders and awareness campaigns to achieve common objectives, such as the approval of the Nutritional and Food Sovereignty Law and the organization of the 2014 National Family Agriculture Forum. It was also an important factor in the MAG-MARN inter-ministerial agreement on green harvesting, and MESPABAL's support, which inspired the creation of the Territories of Progress Program. In Colombia, the RDG has played a key role in the proposed Land and Rural Development Law, as well as in the historic negotiations between the government and the FARC, events that will shape rural issues for the country in the future, and which are already bearing fruit in terms of strategies and programs.

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Key factors that explain the outcomes include the importance of the selected strategies (flexible and attentive to opportunities), the makeup and modus operandi of the groups (pluralistic, with regular activities over time, high-quality input for discussion and ongoing analysis of the situation, and with dynamic issues and stakeholders), the ability to involve key stakeholders (either as members or as interlocutors in the State), and the role played by the technical secretaries (as legitimate conveners and conductors).

Implementation of the method in different countries has made it possible to learn lessons and adjust the evaluation strategy to make it more effective.

First, distinguishing the levels of advocacy (stakeholders, policies and processes) is useful in practice, and analysis shows that they reinforce one another. Second, contrasting and complementing the information gathered through interviews with official or technical documentation makes it possible to validate the scope and nature of the advocacy.

Third, because creating trees of problems and objectives and stakeholder maps is crucial, one good alternative is to prepare drafts based on secondary information—prior reports, minutes and records of RDG meetings—which can be examined and validated through fieldwork. This saves time and avoids resistance from high-level stakeholders who might be uncomfortable with participatory dynamics that take more time and appear to "start from square one."

Finally, one fruitful practice has been to leave room at the end of the fieldwork for presenting general impressions of the evaluation to raise critical aspects for the coordinating team of the initiative and to discuss the extent to which the team agrees with those findings and their implications for the project.

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