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OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGIES FOR THE EVALUATION OF CICAD PROJECTS

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1. Introduction

At its thirtieth regular session, held in Caracas, Venezuela in November 2001, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) asked the Executive Secretariat to present a proposal for the evaluation of CICAD projects. In response to that request, the present paper discusses:

- How the Executive Secretariat currently assesses the implementation of its projects
- The rationale for project evaluation
- Different types of project evaluation and their implications and cost
- The value of external evaluations compared to participatory evaluation
- Recommendations to the Commission.

2. Current situation

Some of CICAD's projects are already being evaluated in different ways: for example, the Inter-American Drug Control Telecommunications Network (RETCOD) was evaluated in April 2002 by outside experts from member states not involved in the project; it required site visits, with the Executive Secretariat serving as a facilitator. The project to train bankers and bank regulators in money laundering control was evaluated by an outside (commercial) firm as part of the agreement between the Inter-American Development Bank and CICAD. CICAD's alternative development program in Colombia has set up tri-partite machinery for evaluation of the activities at various stages in the life of the project: the evaluation will be done a team consisting of representatives of the Government of Colombia, the association of indigenous peoples that are executing the project, and the Executive Secretariat of CICAD. The alternative development projects currently under way in Bolivia on organic cacao and organic bananas are being evaluated by the Government of Bolivia, the research institutes involved, and the CICAD Executive Secretariat. CICAD's nursing school project has a built-in evaluation component, in which the assessment is conducted by the participants themselves. However, the foregoing does not constitute a systematic or complete approach to evaluation.

It should also be noted that CICAD project managers routinely conduct "exit evaluations" of participants in individual courses to ask them, by means of a questionnaire, whether the instructors were knowledgeable and up-to-date on their materials and were competent teachers, and whether the course advanced the participants' knowledge in a field pertinent to their work. Although this is a simple and inexpensive approach, and can yield useful information, it is generally a poor measure of the ultimate "success" of a training seminar, since most participants are pleased to have been selected and tend to give high marks to any course. The "exit evaluations" do not answer the question of the longer-term benefits of the course.

Finally, the Executive Secretariat writes regular progress reports on project execution, addressed to donors, who require both substantive and financial reports. These reports are usually summarized in the annual report of CICAD to the General Assembly, and in the Executive Secretariat's presentations to the Commission at its twice-yearly sessions. However, there are exceptions in completeness and a systematic approach, as noted above.

3. Financial management and auditing of CICAD projects

In 1999, the OAS installed a new computerized accounting and financial management software, which tracks in great detail all expenditures of OAS funds. The system allows for immediate financial reporting, and permits full financial accountability. OAS accounts are also audited by a firm of external auditors, and a Board of External Auditors. Internal financial and program audits are conducted by the Office of the Inspector General, who reports directly to the Secretary General. In the opinion of the Executive Secretariat, these mechanisms provide the full transparency required of a public international organization.

4. The purpose of an evaluation

The evaluations mentioned in paragraph 2 above are of some of CICAD's larger projects, and are driven by different needs: the interest of a donor, the Commission, or a participating country. In the case of the nursing school project, the evaluation was called for by the participants themselves, teachers and academics whose very profession demands evaluation and research.

The reasons for doing an evaluation are several: to provide donors with the assurance that their funds are well spent; to allow the Executive Secretariat to make course corrections if the project is not on track, or to adjust objectives; to satisfy member governments and non-governmental organizations that the time and effort they devote to CICAD activities is well justified, and to provide feedback to project participants.

Evaluations also help promote good management practices in terms of program documentation, observation of program personnel and participants in the program, questionnaires and interviews on participants' perceived benefits from the program, case studies of program failures and successes, and hard data on results achieved.

5. Elements of project evaluation

A project evaluation may contain all or some of the following elements, which are listed in ascending degree of complexity and cost. Some elements may be better suited to a specific project than to another, but all will have in common certain basic principles:

- to assure transparency, accountability and good "corporate governance";
- to be as objective as possible; and

- to determine whether the project achieved its goals and matched country objectives.

An ideal evaluation process is conducted several times during the life of the project: typically, at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. The evaluator examines the situation prior to the start of the project, accompanies its progress, and assesses the end-of-project situation. The evaluation generally involves a desk review of project materials, and usually interviews (site visits, or phone calls or e-mails) with project participants to gain their impressions of the effectiveness of the project and of the efficiency with which it was carried out.

6. Types of evaluation

a. Process Evaluation

The Executive Secretariat now carries out a “process” evaluation of its projects, which means that it monitors (tracks) all the project activities carried out, to determine whether the activities took place according to plan, whether there were delays and why, and whether the money spent in the way that was intended. Process evaluation does not address either the quality of the events, or their longer-term impact, but it carries the advantage of being low-cost and continuous during the life of the project.

b. Cost-Benefit and Cost-Effectiveness

CICAD projects are faced with increasing pressure to keep costs down and to justify expenditures. Both cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses can generate overall indicators of how well a program uses its resources to achieve its goals. Such analyses are intended to answer the questions: “How much did the activity cost; was the cost per capita reasonable in proportion to the outcome, and could the activity have been conducted more cheaply, to the same standard, by another means?”.

Opportunity cost is defined as the advantage gained or lost by carrying out this project as opposed to the next best alternative, and seeks to answer the question: “What would have happened had this project not been implemented?”. The drawback to opportunity cost evaluations is that they are difficult to measure quantitatively, because they depend on comparing a real result with a theoretical supposition, and therefore are not recommended in this paper.

Cost analyses require the gathering of hard statistical data in order to produce accurate estimates. This may be extremely beneficial, but it can add – sometimes significantly -- to the overall cost of the project. The time and resources used to generate cost benefit and cost effectiveness calculations may be better spent on the project itself. In the end, cost analyses may not add much to a common-sense, honest man approach to keeping costs down.

c. Impact Evaluation

Impact evaluation (sometimes called “outcomes-based evaluation”) is the assessment that is perhaps of greatest interest to national and international drug control authorities and donors. It tries to answer the question: “Did the project have the long-term effect

of controlling that particular aspect of the drug problem that was identified in the original project document?”. It seeks evidence, through statistics and research, for the long-term (5-10 years) success or failure of a particular drug control strategy. For example: a five-year CICAD project had the goal of stopping drug use and petty crime by street children in Bolivia and Ecuador by getting them into a structured environment, training them in job skills, giving them a basic education, and then placing them in micro-enterprises. In order to measure the impact of this project, one needs to know how many street children participated, for how long, how many actually got jobs, how many are still employed and what their earnings are. Such an evaluation means tracking the children’s lives over several years to determine the value of the project, and attempting to isolate the effects of this project from other factors that may have influenced the outcome, such as a general upturn or downturn in the overall economy, continuity of drug relapse prevention, new family situations, etc.

Longitudinal research like this is essential to the design and content of drug abuse prevention programs. Because it requires sustained gathering and analysis of information, it is generally best carried out by a university or a research institute, rather than a government department, international organization or NGO. It is also costly, which is why very little of this type of long-term impact evaluation is ever done, since most beneficiary organizations and project managers are reluctant to see resources drawn away from actual project activities.

7. Outside (third-party) evaluation vs. participatory evaluation

Third-party, external evaluations may be of high quality and may be perceived as being more objective or impartial, but there are drawbacks. First, and importantly for CICAD, they are expensive. Second, outside evaluators need time to familiarize themselves with the goals and workings of the project itself, which in turn draws on resources both in the member states and in the Executive Secretariat. Third, the very nature of their being external means that they do not have a commitment to or ownership of the project, and once their job is done, they have no further interest in it.

Participatory evaluation means that a broad range of interested parties (participants, beneficiaries, donors, consultants, representatives of member governments, as well as the Executive Secretariat) make their individual and joint assessments of the value of the project. This is not an easy process to manage, since it often involves a large number of people. Recent literature on project evaluation, however, suggests that it may be the most useful in developmental terms, by giving the immediate and secondary beneficiaries the chance to take ownership of the project, and perhaps therefore increase its chances of sustainability.

On balance, the Executive Secretariat recommends a participatory process of evaluation of its projects as described above.

8. Limitations on the evaluation of individual projects

“Projects” do not exist in isolation; rather, a “project” in, for example, demand reduction, is part of a broader program¹ that the Government, NGO’s and others, are carrying out over several years to prevent and treat substance abuse. Ideally, several demand reduction “projects”, organized by different entities (including CICAD) are going on simultaneously in a country, city or region, each possibly impacting on the other. It may therefore be rather difficult to distinguish between the effect of one project rather than another. For this reason, some donor institutions (notably, private foundations in the U.S.) have adopted the approach of evaluating the results of an overall program, rather than of a single project.

CICAD projects are of limited duration (1-3 years), and therefore have time-limited goals: for example, in one year, give training in the prosecution of money laundering cases to 400 prosecutors from 10 Latin American countries.

9. Recommendations

1. That the evaluation of CICAD activities take place on the project level rather than on the program level, and that the accumulated evaluations of several projects will provide the basis for evaluation of the program to which it belongs.
2. The Executive Secretariat recommends limiting the use of third-party consultants to those large projects having a key program role and for which the donor requires an outside evaluation and agrees that a portion of its funds may be used for this purpose.
3. Evaluations that require the collection and analysis of statistical data prior to and following implementation of a project (such as impact evaluations and rigorous cost analysis) should be minimized. These methods require significant financial investments that divert funds that would be better used to support the actual implementation of the project. Countries wishing such types of evaluation could conduct their own baseline and follow-up data gathering, thus providing CICAD with the tools to perform such an analysis without taking needed funds away from the project itself. When implemented, the CICAD program on the human, social, and economic costs of drug abuse will help provide member states with the tools to carry out their own cost analyses without additional assistance from other CICAD projects. Impact evaluations and cost evaluations would be most useful for long-term projects (minimum of three years) that are expected to have measurable results within a five-year period.

¹ A “program” refers to a coordinated approach to action in a specified area (alternative development in the Andean region, for example), and consists of several projects designed to meet the specific goals of that program. Therefore “program evaluation” determines the value of the collection of projects under the umbrella program, while project evaluation determines the success of a specific activity within that program.

4. The Executive Secretariat of CICAD will continue to include a basic process evaluation in both new and currently active CICAD projects, will conduct exit evaluations of courses, and will continue to track and report on project finance through the OAS system. As funds permit, the Secretariat will also institute review of selected projects by a focus group of participants.
5. Evaluation of a project begins with the specific measurable goals that have been set for the project, and compares the result against those goals. Therefore, the Executive Secretariat will henceforth adopt a new model of project design that incorporates from the beginning of the planning process verifiable or measurable indicators of progress; a statement of how those indicators will be measured, and the assumptions made by the drafters of the initial plan. This project design framework is used by, inter alia, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and sometimes by the United Nations, and thus is well-understood and well-tested.
6. The Executive Secretariat proposes that once a year, at the “technical” regular session of the Commission, it present a report on three evaluations conducted during the year of CICAD projects. These evaluations might be chosen by the Commission because of its particular interest in a project, or the Executive Secretariat could select three projects at random.
7. In conclusion, the Executive Secretariat wishes to emphasize that it is fully open to evaluation of the projects it conducts on behalf of the member states of CICAD. At the same time, it recognizes that an excessive emphasis on process and evaluation will detract from its ability to conduct project activities requested by member states.