

Tracer studies and the Caribbean Support Initiative

Susan Branker

The author is Project Director of the Foundation's Caribbean Support Initiative (CSI). This is a five year regional programme with a thematic focus on parenting initiatives in early childhood development. Its mission is to 'be an intermediary resource project that will bring people and resources together to enhance early childhood development capacity and knowledge in the sub-region'. The CSI began in December 2001. In this article, Susan Branker reflects on how tracer studies fit into the CSI as part of its built-in system of monitoring and evaluation.

The framework for the CSI was sketched against the background of insufficient knowledge and exchange of information on approaches to childrearing and parenting practices in the Caribbean region. There was also a dearth of knowledge about the impact of various interventions due to insufficient measurement and inadequate mechanisms to do so.

While there is a plethora of programmes both at the national and community levels, very little has been done to measure the impact or trace the outcomes of these programmes. In fact, very often, assumptions are made by

policy-makers and project planners that programmes are having the requisite impact on their target audience without testing their various hypotheses. As a consequence, both quantitative and qualitative data are lacking, resulting in very little documentation of experiences. Not only does this limit the opportunities for cross-fertilisation, but it also restricts the sharing of lessons learnt.

Given that one of the major objectives of the CSI is 'to introduce and support the implementation of good parenting practice in ECD at the community level, taking advantage of validated child

development programmes', we recognise that we need adequate evaluating tools and research mechanisms to assess the efficacy of various programme principles and approaches.

In its role as a facilitator for the development of new projects and programmes and the replication of existing ones, the CSI has placed a great deal of importance on the ability to measure/evaluate outputs and impact, and we have identified tracer studies as a useful tool and an important plank within some of its various strategies.

There are a number of possible benefits to the CSI in using tracer studies:

- they can allow for better planning of projects;
- they could help to inform and influence CSI advocacy at the policy level;
- they would promote important research and documentation;
- they would provide important qualitative data needed to measure the impact of various interventions;
- data obtained from the studies could serve as a guide in the replication and dissemination of experiences; and

- they could help to upgrade current understanding of various conceptual issues for both the CSI and its stakeholders.

The CSI is now in the first year of its workplan and, as such, is in the early stages of the project cycle with its partners. This means that the use of

tracer studies would provide the CSI with a unique opportunity to build in evaluation and research components from the very first conceptualisation and identification phases. The studies can be incorporated into a number of CSI core strategies: monitoring and evaluation; replication and dissemination; research and

documentation; and learning and advocacy.

Monitoring and evaluation

It is generally agreed that retrospective studies are more difficult and less reliable and, wherever possible, tracer studies should be included in both pilot

projects and long-term programmes from their inception.

Using our monitoring and evaluation model, various components of a tracer study could be built in at various points as outlined in the diagram on the left.

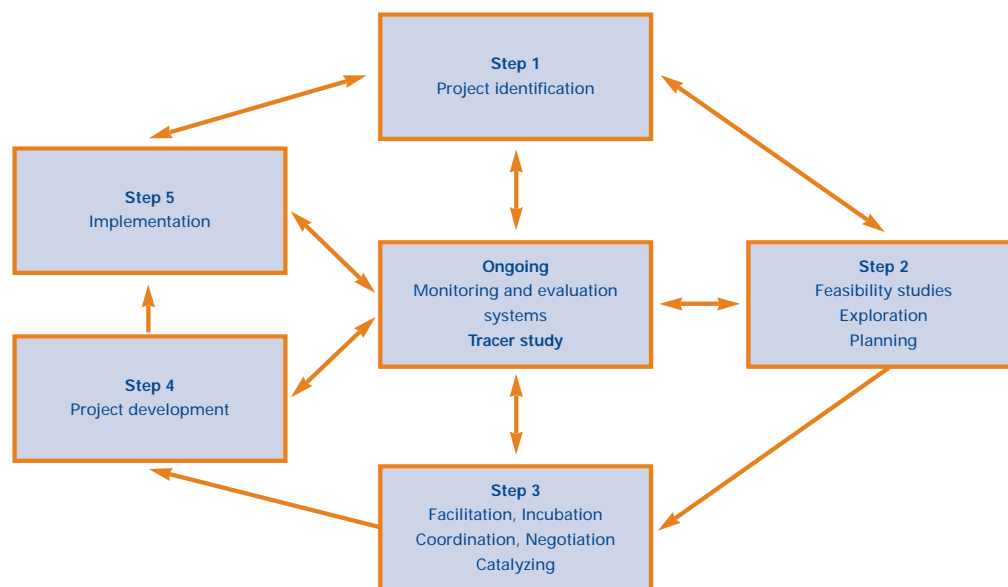
Step 1: Once the project has been identified, the strategy for the tracer study could be developed (including budgeting).

Step 2: During this planning phase, a baseline study could be conducted to document what exists.

Step 3: With facilitating support from the CSI, partners could identify the type of tracer study needed and the target audience(s).

Step 4: As the project is developed, the tracer study should be embedded in the project design and monitoring/research system and clear impact indicators would be identified.

Step 5: During the implementation phase, the indicators can be studied, assessed, adapted as necessary.



Using this approach we would hope to gather the requisite knowledge that our partners need in their attempts to replicate various working principles and adapt good practices. The approach should also demonstrate the value of investing in various types of programmes.

Replication and dissemination

The CSI is interested in assisting with the transfer of knowledge and experiences across the region. Based on feasibility study findings and recommendations, the CSI will facilitate the development of a number of pilot projects to test the working principles of support models from identified countries with 'well established' parent support and ECD programmes.

As part of the assessment of models being considered for possible replication, a tracer study could be designed to evaluate the impact of the assessment and also provide some insights into how 'transferable' the experiences and lessons are. Similarly, in the design of pilot projects based on the replication and dissemination of working principles, a tracer study could

be built in as a means of evaluating short-term impacts. This could help inform the future development of the project and influence the types of inputs needed by various stakeholders.

Research and documentation

Research and documentation are key instruments in the transfer of knowledge and the cross-fertilisation needed to build capacity at all levels in the region. Yet research, whether or not in the form of tracer studies, is often not conducted because it is viewed as too costly and burdensome for the agencies concerned.

However, from a regional programming perspective, tracer studies are worth the investment because they could help us increase knowledge and understanding about various approaches to ECD and the types of impact various interventions may have. These include approaches to childrearing and socialisation in the region and whether the projects and programmes established are 'in sync' with these approaches. Questions include:

- are they having the requisite impact?
- Is there consistency between

local/community realities and policy initiatives?

- Are programming initiatives only designed in response to 'perceived' needs rather than actual findings?

Learning and advocacy

In its role as an intermediary, the CSI will seek to leverage support from regional and international development and financing agencies to allow for large-scale buy-in and adoption of a regional framework for the replication and dissemination of knowledge on good ECD and parenting practices.

Data obtained from tracer studies can therefore play an important part in the CSI's learning environment. The successes and failures of various approaches, methodologies and models provide key lessons needed for any attempt to disseminate information or to advocate at different levels for greater buy-in or investments in the sector.

What the above demonstrates is that there is enormous scope for the use of tracer studies in regional programming and planning. The CSI's focus is on capacity building, the sharing and

exchange of knowledge, and ultimately assisting with the development of an environment which is more supportive of ECD and parenting initiatives. We see tracer studies as an important tool in meeting some of these objectives. ○