Kenya:
from objective outsider to objective insider: an experiential case of give and take

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The author is Lead Researcher with the Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) in Kenya. In this article, he discusses his experiences in trying to hold the objective perspectives of an outsider researcher while recognising the need to go beyond psychometrical and methodological approaches. He argues that pragmatic and utilitarian considerations must be taken into account; and that researchers will often need to operate from within the project – to become 'insiders' – if they are to really understand what is happening in projects, and what therefore is helping to make them effective.

The MRC Regional Research Programme

Many intervention projects today are conscious of the need to include research as an integral part of their activities. This demand for research is derived from the need for project accountability to the stakeholders and beneficiaries, and the need for informed decision making processes. Emerging from these needs are questions about how the effectiveness of the research is affected by the nature of the placement of researchers in a project: are they to be 'insiders' or 'outsiders'? To determine this means reflecting on a number of questions, including: 'What are the mandates of researchers in an organisation?' and 'How does an organisation ensure that it maximises the utility of researchers?' and 'Isn't there a need for a balance between insider and outsider perspectives', and 'How can this be achieved?' Because of such questions, the whole subject of the merits and demerits of placing a researcher as an institutional outsider or insider is clearly a topic for consideration within the framework of the Effectiveness Initiative (EI).

In making decisions about the placement of the researcher, two conflicting schools of thought arise in relation to the utility, nature and requirements of research. One school of thought is oriented towards the scientific rigour of research (something that calls for quantitative justifications), and towards the need to retain the objectivity of research processes (something that gives validity and reliability to the research processes and outcomes). The quantitative research school of thought is more comfortable when the research design tends more to the experimental than non-experimental end of the research design continuum. The other school of thought (which is more oriented to management needs) focuses on the utility of research in giving answers to more immediate

they are an insider or an outsider. I also believe that researchers with an insider's perspective have more to contribute than do those with an outsider's perspective. This is because of their thorough understanding of, and integration with, the projects.

To set the context for my arguments, I start by looking at the practical and theoretical bases of MRC operations that gave rise to the operational philosophy of the project: working in partnership with everyone; and participation for all. Following this, I consider how the research programme relates to this philosophy. I then consider the process of integrating the research within the framework defined by the philosophy, before concluding with some thoughts about the lessons I learned in the process of transforming from an outsider to an insider.

MRC operations and their practical and theoretical bases

Research is one of the three technical dimensions of the operations of Madrasa Resource Centre. The other two are: teacher training and mentoring; and

managerial concerns. As such, it is more comfortable with the collection of qualitative information, information that is seen to be too subjective to the quantitative school of thought.

I found myself torn between the two when I began my work in the MRC. In fact, I found that I moved from the hard line stance of an objective

outsider to that of an objective insider. I want to explore this here, and to argue for the need to go beyond psychometrical and methodological perfectionism in determining researcher roles. I shall argue that pragmatic and utilitarian considerations must be taken into account, and that researchers need time and support well beforehand to

understand the background, objectives and operations of the project.

The central hypothesis in this article is that researchers must keep the scientific skills of an objective scientific research methodology separate from the implementation processes inside the project. In my view, this is a necessary skill acquired by a researcher whether

community development. The teacher training and mentoring dimension is concerned with the training and provision of technical support to the preschool teachers and other stakeholders and beneficiaries. The community development dimension is engaged in social marketing in the community, sensitising and educating community members, and mobilising them to support the provision of quality early childhood education and care. The research dimension is the most recent, dating from the conceptualisation of the second phase of MRC operations. It was designed to complete the structure of the project and contribute to greater synergy between the project's other two dimensions. As Lead Researcher, I was appointed in 1998 with an initial mandate to undertake a quantitative study on project impact.

MRC started out as an intervention project in a Muslim community in Kenya, and is based on needs and strategies identified by that community. It was founded on the principle of sensitising the community and mobilising its social and economic resources to address educational needs.

The project was initially conceptualised in Kenya and later expanded into Tanzania and Uganda. It responded to the fact that the children of Muslim communities had inadequate access to local primary schools and limited options for early education. This was mainly due to the low socio-economic status of the communities and to a Muslim religious educational system that – although highly valued and viewed by many as an good educational option – had limited secular coverage. This deficiency gave children a comparative disadvantage in securing places in the secular school system and, later, in the labour market.

It was clear that the community knew what its problem was, but principles and strategies had to be developed that would cater for these various contextual factors, and direct the operations of MRC. The operational philosophy and strategies of the MRC are therefore based on a number of contextual and theoretical factors. These include the need to integrate both cultural and religious values into secular education; the need to find and use community resources and strengths; and the need to

take into consideration known facts about child development. The communities saw the solution as lying in the establishment of quality ECD centres that would ensure their children's school and learning readiness while maintaining their cultural and religious norms. Further, given the learning deficiencies that were evident, a choice was made for a child-centred curriculum that included health issues, and the development of personality and of skills relating to learning how to learn. The curriculum was therefore based on the High/Scope* oriented active learning curriculum, but adapted to suit the local situation. The resultant centres use effective, community-based, and low cost approaches to early childhood education that promote educational excellence in Muslim children, and they aim to provide access to quality, culturally appropriate and affordable education. Strategies have been progressively developed over the years to achieve these ends.

So early childhood centres were established to be managed by the communities themselves, with backup support by MRC to facilitate technical,

organisational and financial sustainability. Teachers are trained and communities sensitised, educated and mobilised. Schools are supported in creating effective management structures and in providing a quality teaching and learning environment for children. To accomplish these goals, a working philosophy has emerged among the staff. This binds them together – something that is strengthened by frequent feedback and consultation sessions – and each individual contributes to the best of his or her ability. The philosophy of community empowerment calls, in a very special way, for the placement of research within the operations of the organisation, not only for the provision of information for decision making, but also to demonstrate what helps to keep the programme on track.

The research dimension was conceptualised as being crucial in informing stakeholders and beneficiaries on issues such as effectiveness, impact, accountability, planning and development. But it has had to be organised so that it collects and analyses data in ways that respond to the

requirements of those who will use the information.

Integrating research with the project's philosophy

Upon employment, my focus as researcher was on designing the research on impact, and implementing it in such a way that both process and outcomes were adequately objective and valid. To this end I visited other projects to study their research design and operations. One of the immediate challenges in the design was the realisation that it was relatively difficult to talk about a control group when dealing with human beings. For example, it was quite clear that the children with no preschool experience who comprised the control group, could not be kept out of preschool just for the sake of the research. This indicated that, as much as we wanted to have complete scientific objectivity, it was not possible. We therefore changed the language from 'control' to 'comparison' group.

It took some time and effort for me to understand the organisation in terms of its defining variables, history, objectives, mission, operations and structure. This was done through what I call the reading-talking-listening-meeting-visiting-writing process. I went through the documentation available in the organisation and, as a back up, interviewed the MRC staff on various aspects of the project. This was done on an informal basis, but with the underlying objective of testing the understanding of the project that I had gained from the review of documentation. In doing so, some issues were made clearer and knowledge gaps filled. I also used a strategy of joining staff members during non-working hours as they talked, and just listened to their discussions. I attended various meeting and workshops organised by the staff and from there got a better understanding of some of the issues; and I participated in workshops and meetings organised by MRC. In addition, I visited centres to observe their daily operations and talk to the school management committee members and other stakeholders – such as teachers – to hear their views on the programme. Through all of this, I came to understand the organisation. And the more I understood about the project, the more I appreciated it, and the more I felt the need to actively participate in it and contribute to its success. This gave me confidence and the feeling of being an insider rather than an outsider. However this was not a very smooth process. At first staff members were suspicious but this situation eased as the days went by and as they came to understand that I was not a threat to their livelihood.

Meanwhile, conflicting viewpoints on the issue of research objectives emerged from different stakeholders. The management expressed the need for the researcher to not only implement a high quality scientific study on impact, but also to work from inside so as to contribute directly to the decision-making process and to empower the staff on research skills. In other words the researcher was expected to operate from the inside so as to fit in the holistic framework of the organisational structure, a structure that is characterised by mutual support and empowerment. It was clear as well that the management wanted the researcher to include short term studies that would give quick information for decision-making processes. The MRC has created a strong monitoring and evaluation system which is used for active decision making without going into deeper statistical analysis. It was also felt that the researcher would need to use the existing data and work in such a way that the staff would recognise the data that they had collected. In addition, it was necessary to take into consideration the perspectives of staff as continuous observers, and this also helped to ensure that the researcher was also observed. They were 'observing the observer'. Overall, it was felt that the researcher being an insider would help to establish a suitable environment to reflect on the operational culture of the organisation.
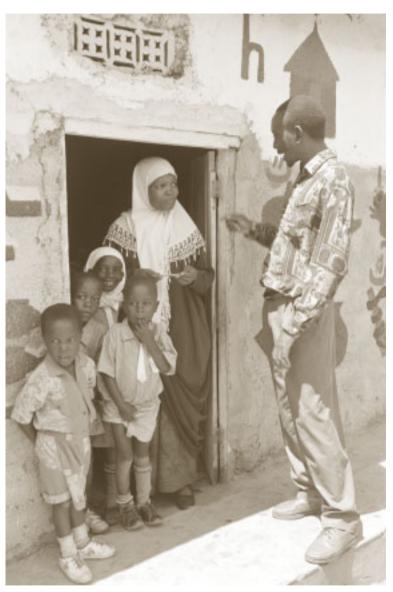
In relation to the definition of the researcher's roles, the reporting structure became an issue. There was a lively debate as to whether the researcher can report objectively while employed by the very organisation whose project is being researched. There was also the issue of balancing the carrying out of the study itself – which required a lot of time – and the capacity building that was required

from the researcher as an insider. Equally, the management-oriented school of thought accepted that objective reporting was crucial, but also stressed that useable information was crucial for decision-making in the organisation. It argued that research should be integrated into, and function within, the framework of the institution and its three complementary dimensions. But, at the same time, it accepted that the research programme needed autonomy in terms of objective reporting and the need to focus on programme impact. One outcome of this was that the administrative reporting lines had to be redefined.

The core question for me as the researcher was whether I could be objective enough in reporting my findings if I was working as an insider in the very project whose impact I was assessing. It was essentially a debate between the technocratic view of ensuring objective reporting and the policy makers' need to maximise the utility of the researcher. It was clear that the debate hinged on the objectives of the research, as seen by the various stakeholders. There was the

underlying issue of the reporting line, and also that of the ownership of the project. Whose interests is the researcher serving? Is it the administration, the staff, the financiers or the community? How could the researcher serve the interests of all stakeholders? The defining variables of the placement of the researcher were therefore outside the research design and implementation process. At the end of all these debates, it was agreed that the research should be understood as being by an *objective insider.*

Another significant aspect of the whole scenario was the relationship of the funding agency with the implementation of the project. While the administration saw a clear demarcation between the functions of the funding agency and the implementers, the closeness of the funding agency to the programme left it ambivalent about the outsider and insider perspective. This was an interesting phenomenon, because the distance between the funding agency and the implementation process can dictate the agency's stand in the insider/outsider debate.

Uganda: *A community development officer visits a nursery school*
photo: Jean-Luc Ray / Aga Khan Foundation ©

Lessons learned

These reflections are based on my own experiences in moving from a research philosophy based around 'working on' to one based on 'working with'. I feel that, with the decision that my research should take an objective insider perspective, my mandate expanded to include relatively short term and inherently crucial studies such as the Effectiveness Initiative, and also service roles. There are also indications that staff members appreciate the research programme and that I am no longer perceived as a threat. This can be deduced from consultations. It can also be deduced from the fact that staff have requested me to assist in developing a management information system; building staff capacity in monitoring, evaluation and research capacity; and supporting staff in revising monitoring and evaluation tools. I have also been involved in the task of defining the operational models of the project.

My own belief is that research should be seen as an integral part of the development processes of a project. Contributing to these requires an in-depth knowledge of the project, and it may take time to really understand the principles and operations of a project. Researchers who are insiders are better able to do this than are outsiders.

Social relationships with the staff and other actors, beneficiaries and/or stakeholders are also important. Talking with them and being open to them, as well as explaining your mission to them, creates a friendly relationship which, in turn, creates confidence and lessens any suspicion. It is important to remember that the beneficiaries, including the staff in the organisation, could easily view a researcher as an 'auditor' – and auditors are perceived as working on the principle of 'everything is wrong until proved not to be so'. So suspicions could arise and these could hamper the acquisition of adequate quality data. Creating rapport induces positive participation by stakeholders and facilitates access to information.

Overall, while there is no doubt that the methodology must be of scientific quality, well justified quantitatively and objective, and must produce validated results, the decision to hire a researcher as an outsider or insider rests on factors beyond the given of scientific rigour.

These include such utilitarian factors as the objective of the research, the availability of funds, and the extent to which the research objective demands collaboration with the staff. In addition – and perhaps more important – the operational principles and the philosophy of the institution may call for placing the researcher as an insider in order to maximise his/her institutional utility, and to ensure that the outcomes of the research are of maximum benefit because they have been generated by/with a researcher who is considered 'one of the team'.

In the case of my placement as an objective insider with MRC, it was a matter of 'give and take' and of receiving through giving: that was right in this situation. From the stakeholders' point of view, the question that lingers is 'What are we getting in return for what we are putting in?' In the context of the EI, what is being put in is considerable given the profound and searching nature of the EI, its approaches and its tools.   ❍

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