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Appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation practices in South Asia

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Abstract

Appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation is a recent development in the evaluation realm. Though some evaluators have used this approach independently, it has been used partially to complement other evaluation approaches in many cases. Similar to other evaluation it measures the changes, develops programme logic model, clarifies the evaluation purpose, identifies the stakeholders, determines the evaluation key questions, develops indicators and develops evaluation plan. Dissimilar to other evaluation approaches that lay emphasis on finding out the root causes of programme not meeting the set results, the appreciative approach focuses on what worked in the organisation, why it worked and how it worked. Unlike other evaluation where the evaluator plays major role in designing, conducting, and interpreting evaluation results, this approach involves all stakeholders into the evaluation cycle. The evaluation is complete only when the evaluation results are used for refining vision/goal/objective, redefining strategy and refining plan of work of programme being evaluated. Since evaluation results are used right way to improve the programme, this evaluation is considered as user-focused evaluation. These are the findings of the review of the literature and the author's own experience regarding appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation.

Keywords: Appreciative, inquiry, evaluation, discovery, advantages, appropriateness

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Background

One of recently evolved evaluation methods is the appreciative inquiry which is gaining popularity around the world. With the increased use of the AI, its practitioners are now also using appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation not only for the projects and programmes that are developed with Appreciative Inquiry intervention (Odell, 2002; Ojha et al 2003; Kotellos, Rockey, Tahmassebi, 2005) but for general projects/programmes (Ojha 2006, Ojha 2009). It is therefore, an area of interest for evaluators.

Appreciative Inquiry approach to evaluation is important for evaluators to learn because it looks at issues, challenges, and concerns in a significantly different way. Instead of focusing on problems, participants of evaluation first discover what is working particularly well in their subject /project /programme /organisation of evaluation. Then, instead of analyzing possible causes and solutions, they envision what it might be like if "the best of what is" transpired more.

The AI approach to evaluation has been promoted by practitioners of AI mostly on individual basis providing consultancy to state and non-state actors mostly the NGOs/INGOs when it comes to the developing countries. Members of the self-started Appreciative Inquiry Networks, Imagine Projects have also used this approach while conducting evaluation of the projects/programme and assessing the performance of organisations. Though many agencies have used, there is not specific funding agency supporting this approach. This might have been one of the reasons why the approach is slowly getting momentum in the developing region.

Evaluation applying appreciative inquiry has been used sometimes partially complementing other approaches (Caro, Murray, and Putney, 2004; Grant and Humphries, 2006, Messerschmidt, 2008), whereas in some cases evaluators have used it independently (Odell, 2002) as far as its use in developing countries is concerned. The author of this article has used it as a mixed method in several occasions by triangulating several approaches so as to validate the findings and encourage stakeholders/clients to maximise the use of results.

Evaluation Design

Van der Haar (2002) argues that appreciative inquiry and its evaluation should not be understood as two separate and independent activities. Rather, they could be thought as an interwoven and ongoing process. This indicates that the use of evaluation results is inbuilt into the system of organisation/project being evaluated. Though more evaluative activities are carried out under the discovery phase of appreciative inquiry cycle, the evaluation is complete when the results of

the discovery phase are utilised to review the dream and refine the design and destiny. Below is briefly described the four phases of the appreciative inquiry from the perspective of evaluation.

A typical appreciative inquiry approach has a "4-D" cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

Discovery: "What gives life?" (the best of what is) - Appreciating

Dream: "What might be?" (what is the world calling for) – Envisioning Impact

Design: "What should be the ideal?" Co-constructing

Destiny: "How to empower, learn and adjust/improvise?" - Appreciating

Discovery Phase

The main task in the discovery phase is to identify the best of 'what is' and the reasons behind its being the best by focusing on high time of excellence that the people recall in their work place as the most important, effective and turning point— no matter how small event it might be. People share stories of the exceptional good, discuss the core life-giving factors and identify the organizational value that they want to bring to the future. People discuss organization's history as positive possibility with the assumption that empowering and hopeful conceptions emerge from stories that are grounded in organizing at its best. Positive inquiry, asking positive questions, seeking what worked, what empowered, "the best," seeking successes and their causes, what gave life to the organization are discovered during this phase.

In the discovery phase organisation members including general members, executives and staff of all rank and file search out what worked best in the organisation, why it worked best, what was individual contribution of each member and staff, and what would have been even better.

Results have shown that the four generic Appreciative Inquiry questions (peak experiences, personal values, core life-giving factor, and wishes for the future) yield much richer data than the more traditional evaluation questions and are most valuable in fulfilling the overall goals of the evaluation as noted by Watkins and Mohr (2001).

The process involves storytelling and interviewing. Participants tell stories of exceptional achievement in pair. It is then done in the larger group. The stories are then analysed immediately by the group members. That way the stories are still fresh in the participants' minds and the emotion associated with the story is present. While analysing the stories, categorisation, listing of values generated, listing and prioritisation of strengths and enabling conditions for all stories (group and individual) are identified, all stories are accepted for what they are and try to

find strengths in them and a deep analysis is done by asking probing questions to reveal the underlying values, strengths and factors that lead to the success.

The group members together develop an affirmative topic or a theme that captures commonalities of all stories shared. There might emerge sometimes more than one theme. The participants then jointly prepare an interview protocol specific to each theme. The interview protocol typically includes questions of the period being reviewed. A model protocol is given above in Box-1.

Box-1. An Interview Protocol
   – Reflecting on your tasks at this organisation over the period being reviewed, recall a time when you felt especially effective, engaged or energized in your tasks. Describe the situation. What did you value most about yourself in that situation?
   – When you are at your best in work, what about yourself do you value? What gives life to your organisation?
   – What is it about the organisation that you appreciate most?
   – What are the two or three most important contributions you believe you are currently making to this organisation?
   – Knowing who you are, who the organisation is, and the organisation's current vision
and expectations, where do you believe you should be focusing your energies over the next year or two?
   – What resources could the organisation offer that would make your future work here even more effective, meaningful and satisfying?
   – What two or three hopes or dreams do you have for the organisation in the coming year or two? What role do you believe you are called to play in helping to fulfil those dreams?
   – What are two or three goals you would like to work at in future? Longer term? How will these energize you and help the organisation live further into its mission?

Adapted from: Rob and Kim Voyle, 2006

Dream Phase

Based on the evaluation results, participants are engaged in program improvement and development. The results are reviewed along the line how they contribute toward achieving the envisioned dream. With these results, how can we go 'where we want to go', do we need to change our direction are some of the points that are created and shared during the dream/vision phase. It is generally

done by preparing and sharing of "Future Map." Participants relate their personal history with the organization's stories. A typical dream process could be reviewing of data and stories from the discovery phase by a small group of people focusing on the dream/ future/ the miracles questions. The dream thus refined is presented to plenary session for further improvement.

Design Phase

The evaluation reviews policies, plans, strategies, processes, systems, and approaches created in the beginning during the design phase for reaching the envisioned/refined future – the dream. It also examines whether the resources (human, physical, monetary, social, time frame and others) allocated for particular theme are still alright or need reallocation/readjustment. If relocation is needed, the participants either make the readjustment right there or make a taskforce to concretise the reallocations.

Destiny/Delivery Phase

During this phase, participants review previously made commitments and action plan and reaffirm their personal and organizational commitments so that the redesigned statements are realized. People co-construct their preferred future by defining "What Will Be" inspired by the evaluation results of discovery, dream and design. Members of the organization begin the planning and implementation process to bring their vision to life. Members are committed to do what is needed and plan accordingly as per the evaluation results. They start taking action now. Generating possible action, declaring for specific action, planning for next step are some of the activities carried out during this phase (Whitney and Cooperrider, 2000) while aligning the evaluation results.

Findings

Like any other evaluation, appreciative approach to evaluation also measures the changes over the time. To measure the changes, it develops programme logic model, clarifies the evaluation purpose, identifies the stakeholders, determines the evaluation key questions, develops indicators and develops evaluation plan (Preskill, 2006). Unlike other approaches, it encourages participants to tell stories and its focus is on what is working rather than what is not. Additionally, it goes beyond the conventional evaluation and integrates evaluation results into the future actions of the subject being evaluated. As suggested by Michael Patton, Appreciative Inquiry does successfully integrate inquiry and action (Patton, 2003). AI offers a powerful organizational tool that encourages individuals and or-ganizations to image themselves at their potential best.

Focus of the Evaluation

This evaluation process focuses on successes in any program's performance. By focusing on success evaluation participants engage in a process that is inclusive and consensual to unearth the best of what exists. Stakeholders then co-create a future that builds on these positive forces. During the process data, interviews, surveys, large group interaction, and summits are used and concerns and issues are addressed from a positive perspective. Appreciative Inquiry is a dynamic approach to evaluation practice (Cojocaru, 2008; 2010). The method offers excellent potential to engage people in participatory evaluation for continuous improvement and, importantly, sustainable implementation.

The goal of an evaluation or review process is to improve the organisation/ project of which evaluation is carried out. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to evaluation accomplishes this by focusing on "what is life-giving" or "what is working" rather than on determining "what is wrong" so we can "fix" it (Rob and Kim Voyle, 2006). It invites people to tell stories of their organisation/project at their best. It discovers the root causes of the success. By focusing on the root causes of the success, it creates continuous opportunities to look back on those moments of excellence and uses them to guide the organization/project toward a more positive future. It also builds capacity for learning and change within organizations and communities. In an evaluation using an appreciative framework, the first questions asked would focus on stories of best practices, positive moments, greatest learning, successful processes, generative partnerships, and so on. This enables the system to look for its successes and create images of a future built on those positive experiences from the past șWatkins and Mohr, 2001ț.

Theoretical Underpinning

Theoretically, AI approach to evaluation is close to social constructivism. It believes that sense making and meaning are achieved through dialogue and interaction. Therefore, asking questions and dialogue are important. It views inquiry as ongoing, iterative, and integrated into organization and community life. This approach reflects a systems orientation that includes a structured and planned set of processes. It also stresses that findings of the evaluation should be used for decision making and action (Coghlan, Preskill, Catsambas, 2003).

The AI approach to evaluation is more of formative nature rather than summative (Cojocaru, 2008) as it is oriented towards the future, seeking clearer vision and goals for the ongoing organisation, project, and programme (Rob and Kim

Voyle, 2006). It is conducted with the purpose of improving the programme. It is designed in a way that becomes the part of the improvement of programme. Despite that it is more suited for formative evaluation; cases are found that evaluators have used it also in summative, end of the project or impact evaluation (Ojha, 2006; Ojha, 2009). Preskill argues that the AI approach to evaluation can be used in entire evaluation system including developing a program's logic model, developing a method to focus the evaluation with stakeholders, designing effective surveys and interview protocols, and developing an evaluation system within an organization (Preskill, 2006).

Stakeholder Participation

The appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation is sometimes called the whole system or the large group approach as it intends to involve every person in the organisation/project to participate in the evaluation process. It uses the large group summit technique to involve as many as persons of the organisation in the evaluation. As many people in the organisations are involved in the evaluation process, there is a common results of the evaluation and therefore, has greater possibility of maximising use of results.

Converting Problem to Opportunity

It is sometimes criticised that AI approach to evaluation pays little attention to problems. In general, this is not the case. It does not seek to avoid problems, but rather looks towards what will elevate "success" as the goal of the evaluation is to improve the subject of being evaluated (Preskill and Catsambas, 2006; Rob and Kim Voyle, 2006; Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, Cojocaru, 2009). The problems are identified as the opportunities for improvement. The approach is particularly used to explore both strengths and weaknesses and based on the discovery, to develop future vision and strategies by expanding the strengths and mitigating the weaknesses while intentionally shifting the focus of the inquiry and intervention to those realities that are sources of vitality.

Advantages to AI Approach to Evaluation

The following advantages are drawn from the review of literature and the author's own experience.

- It facilitates the collection of real stories from real users for the development of scenarios that emphasize what the users want as opposed to what designers believe they need;
- It also focuses on developing the positive aspects of the program being evaluated, rather than simply identifying and trying to solve problems;
- With respect to user-centred design philosophies, it re-affirms the value of face-to-face social inquiry;
- It generates the information that has the potential of maximising use;
- It involves a large number of stakeholders in the evaluation process which maximises their ownership to the process and results;
- It empowers the participants as they are the ones who are deeply involved in and play decisive role in designing interview protocol, generating information, using evaluation results;
- It helps evaluation make more democratic, pluralistic, deliberative, empowering, engaging and enlightening;
- Faster data collection, because it allows structured, large group participation;
- Fully participatory even compared to other participatory methods because of its dyad interview structure;
- Respectful of diversity by preserving everyone's language, even those who do not fit in the larger themes and agreements;
- Increased comfort and openness of participants;
- Rich contextual information through the storytelling;
- Highly empowering in having participants collect, analyze and make meaning of own data in real time;
- Motivating and energizing evaluation process that spurs action because of the focus on studying successes;

Appropriateness of Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Evaluation

The AI approach to evaluation is particularly appropriate under various circumstances including, but not limiting to the following points as indicated by Coghlan, Preskill, Catsambas (2003). For many of these points, the author has also similar experience.

Box-2. Appropriateness of appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation

- Where previous evaluation efforts have failed;

- Where there is a fear of scepticism about evaluation;

- With varied groups of stakeholders who know little about each other or the programme being evaluated;

- With hostile or volatile environments;

- When change needs to be accelerated;

- When dialogue is critical to moving the organization forward;

- When relationships among individuals and groups have deteriorated and there is a sense of hopelessness;

- When there is a desire to build evaluation capacity - to help others learn from evaluation practice;

- Where decision-makers are interested in using a participatory approach to evaluation, they are committed to learning, and they want to build evaluation capacity.

Adapted from: Coghlan, Preskill, Catsambas (2003, 19)

Implications

There has been a growing trend in the demand of participatory and user-focused evaluation over the years. This means that evaluation process requires involving more number of stakeholders, designing evaluation to boost use, focusing on performance improvement, building evaluation capacity and completing the evaluation quickly and cheaply without compromising the quality. The appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation meets many of these criteria.

Reports are available from the empirical studies that projects/programmes using AI approach are about one-third more effective than non-appreciative projects/programmes even when comparisons were made using conventional methods (deficit-based). This means that projects/programme /organisations using AI approach to development would increase in future. With growing number of projects/programme/ organisations using AI perspective, a likelihood of demand of evaluating them from AI evaluation perspective would be greater globally including countries in developing world.

AI evaluation has worked well also as a mixed method approach. This has helped satisfy evaluators of both scientific and interpretive schools. The current funding sources that believe largely on the findings of empirical studies would be more satisfying with the blending of quantitative and qualitative methods that gives rich explanation of change. This implies that there is greater scope for use of AI approach in evaluation in future.

Several countries have been using appreciative inquiry for years in different areas including but not limiting to health, education, environment, agriculture, human settlement, security and so on with several state and non-state actors. More and more people are interested to use AI in the programme/projects. There is certain level of capacity already built in on evaluation from AI perspective amongst the evaluators. With the likelihood of increasing the use of appreciative inquiry in future, interest of the evaluators would further be growing in the AI approach to evaluation.

Capacity building of evaluators is a recent subject of development discourse. Structurally, many state and non-state agencies have set monitoring and evaluation units. As they are new, the structures are yet to be effectively functional. With funding and technical support from the external sources, likelihood of improving human capacity in context-specific evaluation is more where evaluators would get opportunities of learning different evaluation models including appreciative inquiry approach.

Recommendations

- Evaluators should know the use of appreciative inquiry approach to evaluation as its popularity is likely to increase as the AI approach is more effective paradigm.
- Though AI can be used in evaluation either independently or as a mixed method, better would be to follow the latter approach as it gives greater opportunity to make evaluation quantitatively and qualitatively balanced which provides richer explanation of change.
- While using AI evaluation, it is better that all stakeholders are involved right from the beginning to the end of evaluation so as to maximise the use of the results.
- Making a core evaluation team involving project/organisation persons would help other stakeholders understand the process when the process and theory behind it is described by their colleagues using the language that gives similar meaning to facilitators and participants. It will also help build the in-house capacity.

- Encourage state and non-state actors to use AI and other similar strength-based evaluation through awareness raising programme including publications and workshops.

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