Evaluation on a Shoestring: One International Development Organization's Experience Measuring Impact with Limited Resources

Abstract:

Evaluating the impacts of programs and efforts in developing countries poses numerous challenges. Such challenges include insufficient allocation of resources to conduct systematic evaluations, lack of internal evaluation expertise to draw from, and logistical impediments to implementing evaluation methods in remote regions with high levels of economic marginalization and low literacy rates. Sustainable Harvest International (SHI)—a non-governmental development organization focused on improving the well-being of Central American farming families through sustainable agriculture—overcome some of these challenges by capitalizing on the knowledge and resources of Board Members, drawing from expertise of Universities and institutions in the United States and Central America, and adapting new evaluation techniques that are context appropriate given the time and resources needed to implement them. This chapter illustrates how SHI strengthened its evaluation capacity and ultimately improved its programs, deepened its impacts, and made a stronger case to funders. This chapter also explores how a lack of resources can be overcome by innovation, networking and institutional collaboration, and underlines why systematic evaluations must not be eliminated from the activities of development organizations under the pretext of lack of resources.

By
Charlie French[1]
Ricardo Romero-Perezgrovas

[1] Charlie French is Associate Extension Professor and Program Leader for Community and Economic Development, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH. Correspondence can be directed to: charlie.french@unh.edu

Introduction:

This chapter documents how one non-governmental development organization, Sustainable Harvest International (SHI), grew its evaluation capacity of complex interventions in spite of a less than two million dollar budget, lack of internal staff expertise, and a large geographic area of coverage that spans on three countries. As a result of these and other limitations, SHI was forced to creatively leverage evaluation resources from outside of the organization in order to (i) measure and document its short-, medium-, and long-term impacts; (ii) understand the organization's intended and unintended impacts, and (iii) adjust the organization's methodology accordingly, on the understanding that impact evaluation is a dynamic process, and methodologies and program implementations are evolving and require regular improvement. Principally, SHI drew from the evaluation expertise maintained by the Board of Directors and Committee members—as well as US and Central American universities and institutions such as EARTH University in Costa Rica and Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá—to bolster its evaluation capacity. Of equal significance were the inputs from US researchers, including PhD and Master's students who contributed to the design and implementation of diverse evaluation tools and the analysis of data.

In order to provide a context for Sustainable Harvest International's (SHI) evaluation efforts, the following describes the work of the organization. SHI's core mission is to improve the livelihoods of rural farmers, while simultaneously protecting tropical forests and the ecosystem-sustaining functions that they provide, such as clean water, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat (Reed & Romero-Perezgrovas, 2015). In terms of its field operations, SHI's Central American staff is comprised of approximately 30 field staff based in Panama, Honduras and Belize. The core of the field staff consists of field trainers who deliver educational outreach and technical assistance directly to rural farming families to build their skills and capacity to grow healthy food, improve household nutrition, and generate income and savings. This

assistance enables farming families to enhance their quality of life, increase their resilience whilst also diminishing negative human impacts on their surrounding environment.

SHI's program efforts are largely directed towards rural communities that fall low on the Human Development Index (Salas-Bourgoin, 2014), but also have rich natural resources that are threatened by land use change and other human factors. SHI basic premise is that natural conservation can't be reached without the participation and economic development of local inhabitants.

The main threats to the local environment in Central America are overgrazing, rapid deforestation, open pit mining, flooding, development of inadequate infrastructure and watershed degradation (Carse, 2012; Ashwill, Flora, & Flora, 2011). In the particular communities where SHI focuses its efforts, individual families are identified and recruited to undergo a series of educational and capacity-building efforts aimed at enhancing their livelihoods and preserving the environment. These initiatives are implemented in five phases over a 3-5 year period.

All in all, SHI has worked with over 2,700 farming families since 1997, giving them the capacity to plant over 2,000 vegetable gardens, improve household nutrition, plant 3.7 million trees, and restore and preserve 7,500 acres of tropical forests. All this was done in a manner that resulted in a 23% average increase in household income through cost savings for food staples and development of agriculture-related microenterprises (SHI, 2016).

SHI's Five-Phase Program Model: A Foundation for Measuring Impacts

The main rationale behind SHI's educational and capacity building efforts is rooted in a broad global recognition that emerged from the United Nation's Sponsored Earth Summit that took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. That recognition was that environmental conservation cannot be achieved without first meeting the basic needs for food and shelter by those who base their livelihoods on sustainable agriculture systems (Sitarz, 1993). Such systems include use of diversified plots, agroforestry, and incorporation of cover cops that rebuild soils

(Altieri, Funes-Monzote, & Petersen, 2012). In addition to helping farmers increase production of healthy food, SHI's programmatic efforts seek to cultivate new sources of income for farming families by introducing them to microcredit options such as rural banks, nurturing their business development and management skills, and helping them to capitalize on opportunities to add value to raw agricultural products through processing.

In order to instill knowledge and skills in farming families—and achieve the organization's mission and goals—SHI incorporates its five-phase program model over a period of 3-5 years (Figure 1). In phase 1, the objective is to teach rural farmers to adopt farming and forestry practices that are compatible with local culture and serve to protect the environment. Such practices include organic production of fertilizer and repellents that increase production, reduce crop damage and preserve the environment, in addition to minimizing financial resources and time being dedicated to the purchase and application of external synthetic agricultural inputs.

Figure 1. Five phases of Sustainable Harvest International's program delivery model.

In phase II, farming families learn to protect forestland and increase forest cover in environmentally sensitive areas such as national parks and vital watersheds. In Phase III, they expand their fruit and vegetable production and learn to improve household food security by storing seeds, preserving excess produce, and preparing healthy meals. These nutrition-related efforts are critical in Panama, Honduras and Belize, all of which are experiencing a diabetes epidemic due to the consumption of low-quality processed food: the so-called 'double burden' of malnutrition, whereby both obesity and malnutrition are common problems (Rivera, et al. 2014). In Phase IV, families learn how to increase household income and savings by converting produce into value-added products and reducing reliance on store-bought staples. And in Phase V, families gain the confidence to complete projects, take on new challenges, and teach others in the community that which they have learned throughout the five-phase program.

By the end of SHIs five-phase program in a given community, the participant families are expected to be successfully implementing sustainable agriculture resource management, reforestation projects, and cultivation of food staples that allow them to live a healthy life and be more resilient in the face of environmental and economic changes. Moreover, SHI's five-phase program increases participant families' confidence and capacity to continue learning, adapting new technologies, accessing micro or community credit sources, and instilling pride in their work. These functions, albeit focused on the individual families, help to achieve and maintain a balance between human and ecological systems that is critical to enabling participant families and future generations to thrive (Reed & Romero-Perezgrovas, 2015).

SHI knows the above claims to be true mainly because it has system for assessing progress towards the intended outcomes. Each of the five phases is defined by a set of specific, desired action and/or condition outcomes which guide the programs and allocation of resources. The outcomes delineated in each of the five phases lay the groundwork for SHI's evaluation framework, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Imperative to Measure Impacts

There are varying notions of what the term "outcome" or "impact" means in the context of rural development. (Aspen Institute, 1996; Ames, 1993). For the purpose of this chapter, an impact is a change in peoples' quality of life, their community, or natural and physical systems (Guijt, & Woodhill, 2002). Examples of impacts include a reduction in poverty levels, increased household income, improved nutritional intake, and restoration of riparian forest.

Organizations, particularly those that operate internationally, are under increasing pressure to measure and document impacts. While the main reason for impact measurement to determine if an organization is making a positive difference in relation to its mission and goals, the drivers behind this push for measurement often come from external funders and supporters who want to know that their donor dollars or grant resources are being well-spent by the organization. In an age where one can click on an organization's charity navigator rating and in a matter of seconds compare the performance of any given organization with hundreds of similar organizations around the world —along a set of financial and other criteria—it is all the more important that organizations strive to clearly define, capture, and communicate their impacts (Starr, K. & L. Hattendorf, 2013).

Impact measurement, while most obviously critical to fundraising, has a number of other benefits to an organization. Foremost, measurement provides a baseline for documenting change over time, considering that many long-term impacts can take years to percolate. Further, if the desired outcomes or effects are not panning out, then this may signal that there is a need to either adjust the program/intervention, select an alternative intervention, or possibly even shift the efforts to another topic or arena where there *would* be a measureable impact. As evaluation expert from the Mulago Foundation noted, if an intervention "…can't demonstrate real impact, then it shouldn't be scaled up." (Mulago, 2013, www.mulagofoundation.org/?q=how-we-fund).

Another benefit of impact measurement is that it provides excellent fodder for the organization's communicators, enabling them to more effectively promote the accomplishments of the organization. Donors and supporters of an organization's work are each motivated by different aspects of the work and different ways of communicating the impacts. Some prefer the story, testimonial, or narrative that describes the impact of a program on one individual or community. Such stories give the supporter a feel and texture for the work and enable them to emotionally connect to the individual or community. Other supporters, including grant funders and Foundations, often want to see quantitative measures that show the organization is making a difference, such as the number of acres preserved, dollars saved, or enterprises established. Good impact measurement, and communicating impacts effectively, requires both qualitative and quantitative measures so that one can weave a narrative around a scaffolding of data points.

Impediments to Program Impact Measurement

For Sustainable Harvest international, as well as many development organizations around the world, the biggest obstacle to measuring and documenting program impacts is the lack of resources allocated towards securing evaluation expertise. With any lean organization covering a large geography, there is understandable reticence to commit resources towards impact studies, let alone hire staff to guide evaluation efforts. This reticence may be due to financial constraints, fears that evaluation results could reveal that the organization is not living up to its promises, or simply the organization's failure to recognize the importance of documenting impacts (Starr, & Hattendorf, 2013). In fact, it wasn't until 2014 that SHI hired a Program Impact Officer. Prior to that, impact evaluation was incorporated into the already unwieldy job description of the Field Program Director who oversaw all of the field operations in Central America.

Even when a development organization like SHI allocates resources towards impact measurement, navigating the many nuances of evolution can be daunting. There is a proliferation of evaluation instruments to choose from—both quantitative and qualitative—making it difficult

to discern which to use and how to implement them. Moreover, use of certain evaluation approaches or methods may necessitate specialized training in statistics, coding, interviewing, or other technical skills that organizations may not have in house; methods like paired comparison studies, Delphi studies, and focus groups, to name a few (Ames, 1993). Further, for organizations where field staff support the data collection, there can be perceived pressure imposed by supervisors, coworkers, and funders leading field staff to inflate numbers and exaggerate impacts. This can be addressed though validation of data by a third party who conducts field checks or independent analysis of the findings, although a culture of transparency within the institution is extremely important for reporting data and developing reports and indicators. Also, third party evaluation expertise helps ensure that methods are implemented with proper sampling and procedures, thus increasing validity (Rogers, Petrosino, & Huebner, 2000).

Another challenge faced by SHI, as well as other development organizations, is that there is often a lack of baseline data from which an organization can measure progress. In particular, new organizations, or those that have not previously invested in evaluation, are challenged to report on impacts if they have no basis of comparison. One has to have baseline measures—percent forest cover, acres in production, household earnings, and calories consumed—in order to document change. In fact, one of SHI's first investment in the evaluation arena was to establish baseline measures and a system to enable field staff to enter the data. Even when randomized control trials or similar evaluation approaches are applied, the organization needs metric points within comparable populations in order to make the baseline data a valuable information source (Elbers & Gunning, 2014).

The final challenge we will address in documenting program impacts is that of "attribution". Any claims that a development organization makes regarding impacts, particularly those that entail numerical data like dollars saved or earned, have to be backed up. And the case has to be made that the impacts are a result of the organization's efforts. In other words, were

there other factors that could have contributed to the change or impact? If so, then one has to be careful about how they attribute the impact to their efforts. There are numerous methods that can help to delineate attribution, including paired comparison studies, but most small development organizations lack the expertise to conduct those without external support. Instead, most turn to narrative attribution, or verification from a program participant that the program indeed led to specific impacts (Patton, 1987).

SHI's Evaluation Methods on a Shoestring

SHI has creatively leveraged resources and technical expertise from outside of the organization to implement a multi-pronged evaluation approach. The methodologies that SHI uses to evaluate the impact of its field-based programs include baseline assessments of participant families' current agricultural practices and behaviors, program participant testimonials, interviews of key informants, long-term evaluation studies that incorporate comparative impact analysis, and a cutting-edge narrative-based approach called Ripple Effect Mapping. It is important to note that each of these approaches is a component of a larger evaluation framework that seeks to evaluate the impacts of SHI's work throughout the course of the five-phase program. The baseline assessment alone incorporates well over one hundred variables that get measured at various points during the five years, including things like crop yield measurements, soil quality assessments, and household caloric intake counts.

Because of the expansive geographic area of SHI's work, and the fact that the organization maintains only one impact officer, these evaluation tools and methods have been incorporated into its programs and practices, as opposed to implementing them as stand-alones. This view of evaluation as a continuous process serves the organization's goal of receiving real-time feedback and adjusting its interventions and methodologies accordingly. The following is a synthesis of the primary evaluation tools and instruments that SHI uses, as well as a description

of how staff and external resources were leveraged to implement evaluation in the most efficient manner that it can.

Logic Model: The foundation for all of SHI's evaluation efforts is the logic model. This instrument, introduced to SHI in 2010 by a Board member, provides a framework for tracing the outcomes of the five-phase program back to specific resources and activities that would facilitate that outcome (Trezza, French, & Rice, 2010). In this sense, it represents the organization's theory of change: a way to back-cast to the necessary inputs, activities, knowledge, and behaviors aimed at catalyzing the desired goal(s) or condition(s) (Brest, 2010). As noted previously, SHI's logic model defines specific outcomes across the organization's five core goal areas, which correspond roughly to the five phases. Those outcomes are:

1. Farming and forestry practices are compatible with local culture and environment
2. Tropical forests and the life sustaining functions they provide are preserved
3. Better access to healthy food by families results in improved nutrition and health
4. Increased household income gives families' greater ability to purchase basic needs
5. Farming families are empowered to lead change and transfer their knowledge/skills to others

The logic model, while widely used by development organizations, was a foreign concept to SHI until one of the Board members experienced in program evaluation introduced the concept. The reason for incorporating the logic model was that it not only helps an organization be more intentional about its resource allocation and program efforts, considering what it is trying to achieve, but it also provides a litmus test to see if something is not working according to the theory of change. For the case of SHI, in such cases, either the logic from which the theory of change is based is flawed, or the actions and resources are not allocated effectively.

In actuality, it took six months of facilitated discussion with SHI staff across four countries it served to create logic models for each of SHI's five goal areas. Not only did

members of the Board of Directors play a key role in introducing the logic model, but they also led the facilitated discussion with field staff to engage input and buy-in by those charged with implementing programs and activities tied to the logic model.

Baseline survey: Once the logic model was created, it quickly became clear that SHI needed a way to measure its progress against the learning, action, and condition outcomes that were articulated in the logic model. Thus, baseline measures—which consists of a series of questions administered to participant families by field trainers and some direct measure of things like number of trees, garden size, etc.—were established to determine the degree to which participant families learned new skills, adopted practices, or met goals.

The baseline questions were crafted by a working committee of SHI that consisted of Field Program Director, several member of the Board of Directors, and at-large committee members with expertise in the fields of ecological monitoring, qualitative assessment, and agricultural economics. Implementing the baseline survey instrument became the role of the Field Program Director, who contracted with a data management firm to build an on-line portal whereby field trainers could enter the baseline data. The data entered can be queried by SHI communications staff and leadership in a manner that allows for aggregation of data by family, community, or country. While it is not an expectation that every family or community achieves the same baseline measures, the data has proven invaluable for gauging the progress of families and communities. It is also a great resource for helping donor staff convey to donors what their contributions have done; programmatic staff for adjusting programming and reporting against grants; and communications staff for painting a picture of the results of SHI's work.

While the logic model framework identifies SHI's activities—as well as the learning, action, and condition outcomes—the baseline survey is simply a tool that provides benchmarks or indicators linked to each of the activities and outcomes in the logic model. At the most basic level, the baseline measure captures participants understanding of key concepts, such as the

value of nutrient cycling in soils, the importance of vitamins in the diet, and how to calculate net profits over expenses. It also serves as a the field trainer can use to elicit from participant families at various stages throughout the five-phase program what specific, tangible outcomes or outputs resulted from the program. Such outputs or outcomes include how much land they put into production, the amount they reduced their use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, the number of acres of forest preserved or restored, and changes in household income resulting from food purchase savings or sale of produce.

In sum, the baseline survey simply provides data along a set of key indicators that speak to the elements of the logic model. For the most part, these data capture short and medium-term outcomes—knowledge and behavior change—but not change in condition.

Testimonials: While the baseline data provide a number of key data points that help the organization quantitatively better understand whether or not it is moving in the right direction based on a set of measurable indicators, there is still a deep need to paint a picture of how SHI's work impacts people and families. Thus, SHI collects testimonials from participant families in each of the communities that it serves. These testimonials, although they are one-case outcomes, demonstrate how SHI's programs and initiatives lead to new knowledge, better practices, and ultimately improve peoples' lives.

The Field Trainer is often the conduit for testimonials, as they are typically the ones on the ground who hear stories directly—often spontaneously—from participants while working with them in the field. However, efforts are also made in each community to methodically collect stories and testimonials from key informants in the community, including from participants and non-participants of SHI's programs. These key informants are not selected just to show the best successes or outcomes resulting from SHI's work, but rather, to understand how diverse participants perceive the outcomes of the work, whether positive or negative. The positive responses are often used in SHI's marketing materials and donor outreach. And negative

feedback helps the organization to reassess its educational efforts, often leading to significant changes to programming.

Because the collection of testimonials is a laborious process that requires significant input of time, not to mention an establishment of trust with those sharing their experiences, SHI often draws upon the Field Staff to be on the lookout for both success stories and participant challenges. Additionally, SHI has taken on a number of graduate interns from US and Central American Institutions to help conduct interviews and compile testimonials. Those interns are often guided by faculty members who have some level of engagement with SHI, if not Board or Committee Members. To date, interns have included Fullbright Fellows and volunteers from over a dozen International organizations like Engineers without Borders and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This support has not only added significant capacity to SHI's evaluation efforts, but many former interns have continued to engage with SHI both as volunteers and donors.

Comparative Impact Study: Because major international funding organizations like the Inter American Foundation require impact data if they are to provide programming resources, SHI felt a strong the need to quantify the extent to which SHI-supported programs influence learning, behavior, or living conditions among participant families. Specifically, SHI wanted to know if the five phase program has an impact on peoples' income, nutritional status, ecological well-being, and community connectedness.

Due to limited resources and capacity to implement complex quantitative instruments, SHI sought the help of a Professor from the University of Maryland (UMD), who serves on SHI's Field Program Committee, which advises the Board of Directors on matters related to program development, implementation, and evaluation. The UMD Professor opted to address the question through use of a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design, whereby the intervention group was surveyed before and after the implementation of the five-phase program. Because it is

recognized that one cannot attribute changes to the intervention alone without a comparison group, the evaluator chose to draw from baseline data collected from communities that were just initiating the five phase program with baseline data collected from communities that had completed the five phase program. The questions were the same, but the latter group had…

Because of limited resources and time, SHI chose to implement the comparative impact study in Panama in a manner that builds off of the baseline evaluation data and other existing data collection tools that have been incorporated into SHI's work. The advantage of this approach is that these same data and procedures can be used to conduct future impact analysis.

The researcher essentially drew from baseline evaluations of households that graduated from SHI's five-phase program, as well as initial baseline evaluations of households newly entered into the program. This baseline data, which is maintained in an on-line data repository, allowed for analysis that led to the generation of inferences regarding the extent to which SHI's programming contributed to specific outcomes. A technique called genetic propensity-score matching was used so that new households could serve as a control group in relation to those households that already graduated from SHI's program. Statistical tests—including multivariate regressions of baseline data, as well as other demographic variables—were used to identify significant differences between the two groups in relation to specific goals. Lastly, using exploratory hypothesis generation, indices of success were established for each SHI program goal and multivariate regressions were used to identify the what locational, demographic, and other factors characterize success at meeting SHI goals, irrespective of program participation.

Based on these analyses, households that had completed the SHI programs in Panama were significantly more likely to achieve "success" for all 5 SHI program goal categories, based on a series of indices. In spite the overall indications, however, there were some specific metrics for which no significant difference was found between graduated households and new households, which may be attributed to data collection issues that can be addressed. The study

helped to identify demographic and geospatial variables which could be further examined to increase the likelihood of success in relation to how SHI targets communities and implements programs. Note that the results of this study are currently under third party revision for submission as a peer-review paper in an agricultural-economics journal.

Ripple Effect Mapping: Program evaluation data reveals that families that participate in SHI programs indeed incorporate the skills they learn into their agricultural and other practices. While longitudinal measures against baseline data shows positive changes, including increases in forested area, enhanced household income, and nutrition, there is not a clear understanding of what participant families perceive to be the of SHI's programs on their lives after they complete the five-phase program.

To address that challenge, members of the Board of Sustainable Harvest proposed utilizing Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) to document both the intended and the unintended results of SHI's five phase program on participant families. REM is a participatory group method designed to evaluate the impact of programs on their intended audience. In essence, stakeholders are engaged in a facilitated process—2 to 3 years after having graduating from the five phase program—to visually map what outcomes they perceive to have resulted directly from the program. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry, mind mapping, group interviewing, and qualitative data analysis (French & Romero-Perezgrovas, 2015).

The purpose of conducting Ripple Effect Mapping is identify the intended and unintended impacts of programs or interventions, while also generating a deeper understanding of what led to those impacts. It is not to say that the impacts are entirely the result of SHI's work, but rather, were it not for SHI's work, the outcomes would not have materialized. The following case study will give a detailed characterization of how SHI implemented Ripple Effect Mapping using board members, private donor support and expertise from multiple institutions.

Case Study: Incorporation of Ripple Effect Mapping in El Cocal, Panama

The Ripple Effect Mapping process was piloted in El Cocal, a small, agrarian town in Coclé Province which recently saw 22 families graduate from the five-phase program. Because the community is close to Coclé Province's major metropolitan center, the agricultural practices were more advanced and the markets more established than in the more rural communities that SHI works with in Panama. As such, the community completed the five-phase program in three and a half years, which is significantly quicker than the normal five-year process. None-the-less, the baseline measures and anecdotal data suggested that the outcomes were comparable to those achieved in other SHI communities. To better understand perceived outcomes in the community, and identify core themes and successes, SHI chose to pilot REM in El Coclé.

The REM process began with the 22 people from the community/region interviewing each other: eleven were SHI program participants and eleven were non-participants who were aware of SHI's work. They asked each other what they perceived to be the impacts resulting from SHI's work, what relationships grew as a result, and what failures or obstacles were faced. The REM session participants then shared with the larger group their perceived impacts. For each impact identified, the session facilitator elicited information on what specifically led to those impacts.

Reported effects/outcomes shared by REM session participants were organized into common themes at the session. After the session, these effects were coded to determine accuracy of the common themes. Figure 2 below depicts the frequency by which reported effects related to coded themes, suggesting their relative importance. Out of a total of 93 reported effects, most frequently cited were effects related to sustainable agriculture.

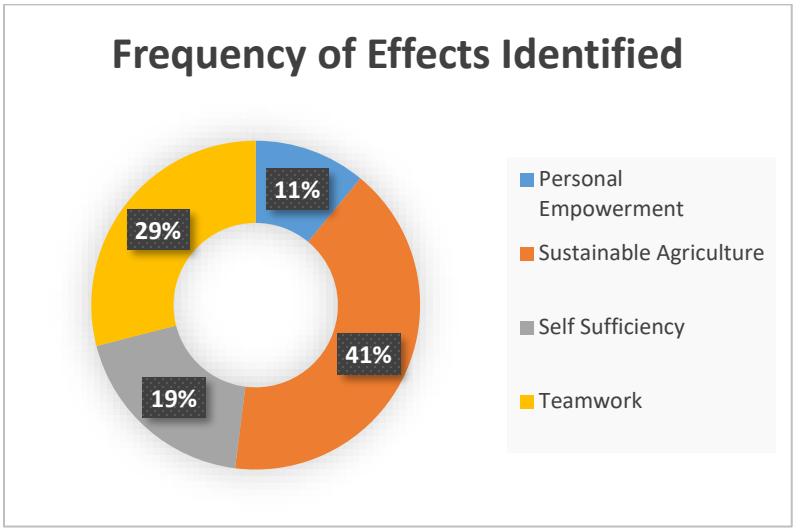

Figure 2. Measured frequency of topics identified during the Ripple Effect Mapping session in El Cocal.

The following is a synopsis of the findings related to each of these themes that emerged from the REM process in El Cocal:

Sustainable Agriculture: Participant input categorized under sustainable agriculture refers to the production practices that individuals gleaned from SHI's programming and the specific skills and knowledge that led to new or improved production practices. Participants spoke a lot about how the knowledge and skills they learned often ripples out to others in the community. Less frequently mentioned were the environmental benefits of sustainable production practices, which suggests that they are recognized as important, but not as important as what they produce and how they produce it.

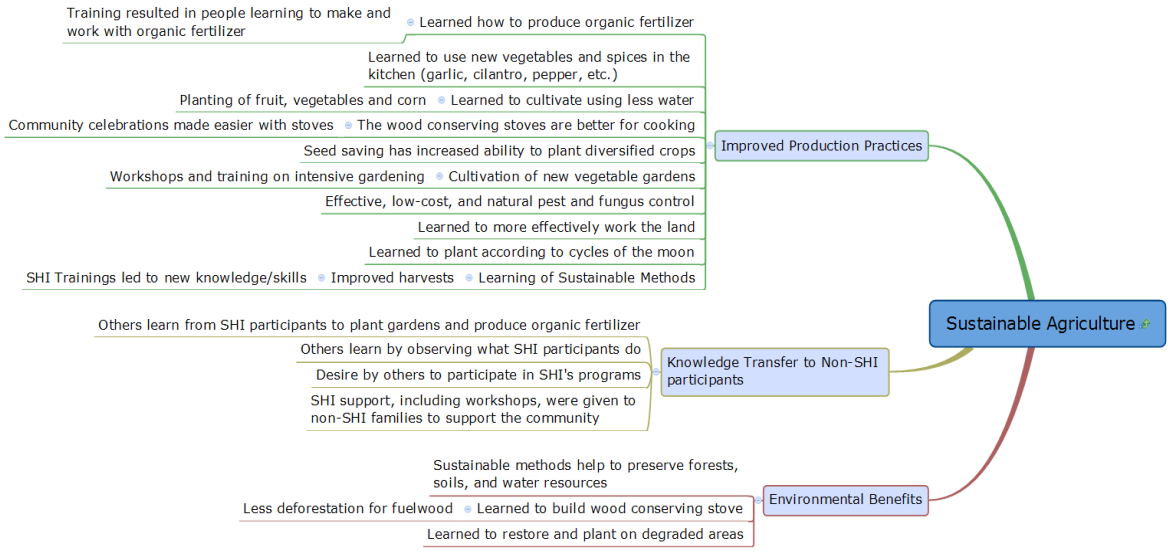

Figure 3. Ripple Effect Map pertaining to the emergent theme of sustainable agriculture in El Cocal.

Personal Empowerment: A surprising result of the REM process was the degree to which participants talked about personal empowerment as a major outcome of SHI's five-phase program. Participants discussed aspects of empowerment to include having a voice, the ability to organize others, improved self-esteem, taking on new leadership skills, and pride in one's (and the community's) accomplishments. The following section of the Ripple Effect Map outlines the specific outcomes individuals identified as they pertain to empowerment.

Self-Sufficiency: In the context of the REM exercise, self-sufficiency refers primarily to individuals' ability to generate income or save money or time for themselves or others in the community. You will note that there was a strong linkage between items related to personal empowerment and items related to self-sufficiency.

Teamwork: While similar in some senses to empowerment, teamwork was identified by participants as means to leverage each other's strengths, learn from each other, increase efficiency, and share knowledge and resources with others in the community.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Every development organization has to invest time and energy into impact evaluation. Securing resources from donors or grant makers would be difficult, if not impossible, without a way to demonstrate that the dollars invested meet a need, solve a problem, or address the issue(s) of import to the donor. This simple fact was the primary driver behind SHI's push to establish an efficient, effective evaluation framework that leverages both internal and external resources. That is to say that development organizations like SHI need not dedicate a quarter of their budget towards evaluation. Rather, they need to leverage resources and think creatively how to bolster their capacity.

The first lesson gleaned from SHI's experience with evaluation is that development organizations absolutely need to invest *some* resources and capacity towards dedicated evaluation capacity. Without a point person charged with implementing the evaluation framework, monitoring and evaluation can quickly be relegated to the 'nice but not critical' wish list. Garnering a point person lead an organization's monitoring and evaluation may mean hiring someone to coordinate evaluation efforts, or it may mean making the appropriate person within the organization responsible for—and accountable to—developing and implementing the organization's evaluation plan. In the case of Sustainable Harvest International, they were able to build evaluation as a core job criteria of the Field Program Director until such a point in which they were able to garner sufficient donor resources to hire a full-time Program Impact Officer. The Impact Officer, though they have considerable expertise in impact evaluation, has adeptly leveraged partner organizations, institutions, and Board members to assist with deployment of high-quality impact measures.

The second lesson learned from SHI's experience is that one need not measure everything in order to document and convey impact. The key is for the organization to design the evaluation approach and instruments in a manner that addresses the big questions: Do we

actually do what we say we are doing? Does our work make a difference? What was it specifically that led to x change? And is the investment worth the return? While specific funders may want hard data that speak to their funding priorities, honing in on a few quality measures that answer key questions is far more useful than lots of data vis-à-vis the shotgun data collection approach. That is, enough data points must be collected to weave a narrative around them in a manner that tells the organization's story in a compelling way and guides programs. As such, it is important that a range of data types feed into this narrative: baseline data documenting outputs, statistical data that demonstrates effects or differences resulting from program interventions, testimonial data that illustrates on person's or one community's success or challenge, and qualitative data that hones in on program participants' perceptions of program impacts.

SHI also learned that is important to consider building evaluation into the program delivery process so that evaluation is not an afterthought. Rather, evaluation should be woven into program planning, development, and implementation, as it informs what interventions are needed and if they need to be adjusted or modified. While one has to be careful to address potential conflicts of interest that are posed when program implementers are collecting data on the constituents they serve—such as perceived pressure to pump the numbers—the reality for most rural-serving development organizations is that field staff can be enormously helpful for collecting baseline data such as hectares in production, amount of vegetables produced, or trees planted. Systems need to be in place to check the data for accuracy. If implemented with integrity and ingenuity, the cost of quality evaluation can be dramatically reduced through savings in travel, time, personnel, and by the mere fact that field staff know their communities/families and have the best sense of what is happening on the ground.

Lastly, it is key to remember that the primary beneficiary of formal and systematic monitoring and evaluation efforts is the development organization itself. Not only does a systematic approach enable the organization to revisit and test its theory of change assumptions,

but it also provides insights as to how well program design and implementation activities contribute to the desired outcomes. Awareness of the importance of monitoring and evaluation must begin within the organization itself in order to build a transparent organization that is willing to use evaluation results to strengthen its program efforts. As development organizations fight to survive and attract donations, they can unintentionally exaggerate, inaccurately portray, or oversimplify impacts in a manner that ignores or minimizes unintended negative impacts. Donors want to see the most value for their donation, which puts a lot of pressure to build a narrative that conveys how positive changes are due to the organization's program interventions and ignore larger national and/or regional contexts.

As such, SHI has taken the above lessons to heart, recognizing that it is important to be transparent and honest with regard to characterizing the organization's impacts on farming families and tropical forests. This is manifest in SHI's willingness to use third party evaluators to implement evaluation methodologies, as well as use SHI's own data. Finally, exposing SHI's monitoring and evaluation efforts to periodic peer-review submissions, such as this, has helped the organization to build a transparency culture, whereby our impact numbers are meaningful and our assumptions, methodologies and implementation benefit from constant external exposure.

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