

South Asia - Community of Evaluators (CoE)
A Regional Evaluation Organization for South Asia

By Shubh Kumar-Range, Shiv Kumar and Sandip Pattanayak

Background

The Community of Evaluators for South Asia (CoE) was started under the leadership of the Association for Stimulating Knowhow (ASK) in 2008 with support from IDRC. At the time, evaluation was steadily gaining prominence in the region, through different evaluations being commissioned by donors and the government. Despite a wide variety of approaches and techniques in use, there was limited exchange and interaction among the evaluators to discuss and learn from each other and outsiders. CoE started by establishing a network of evaluation practitioners working in South Asian countries -- to facilitate exchange of information and interaction. There was a distinct lacuna in the region for such platforms, and very few active national evaluation associations, with the exception of SLEVA in Sri Lanka. The CoE started as a 3-year project titled "Advancing Evaluation Theory and Practices in South Asia – Building a Community of Evaluators".

Launched in December 2008, its members were selected on the basis of an open call for interest from both evaluation professionals working in South Asian countries, as well as Institutions that were conducting or promoting development evaluation. There were initially 28 members selected based on a diversity of nationalities and backgrounds -- including independent evaluation consultants as well as evaluators with international or national organizations and NGOs. Countries represented in the initial membership included Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. It was expected that with suitable effort, membership from other South Asian countries could also be added. The size of membership was limited and was based on the cost of hosting regular face-to-face (F2F) meetings of the network during the 3 year period. It was expected that during this period this initial group would develop a range of initiatives as well as construct a vision and institutional framework for an ongoing and expanding community of evaluators in South Asia.

During the first three years – 2008 to 2011 – this group organized regular meetings at which a wide range of initiatives were started on themes identified by this group. Four priority 'Tracks' were identified : Capacity Development of Evaluators, Dialogue on the status of evaluation in South Asia, Evaluation research and writing, and Institutional Development for the CoE. Individual members volunteered to join in these tracks, and then developed each 'Track' with regular reporting back to the entire group, with the expectation that each member would take an active part in shaping some aspect of the agenda of CoE. Each of these four 'Tracks' produced significant results, including the Evaluation Conclave of October 2010, and an edited volume on Evaluation in South Asia that is forthcoming.

By 2011 the CoE network had grown to 37 members, and the addition of evaluators from Afghanistan was a big plus. However it remained difficult to draw members from other South Asian countries, namely Pakistan, Bhutan and Maldives. Progress had also been made in terms of increased group cohesion, but institutionalization and expansion of the Network had slowed due to the legal complexities of registration for a regional association in one of the South Asian countries. Restrictions on flow of funds, membership fees collection issues, as well as difficulties in ability of all South Asian nationalities to assemble in some countries, were problems that were identified. However, it was strongly felt that a virtual network was not the preferred option and that a membership-based association or organization was desirable. By now some legal options had been identified, but were likely to take time. Also there was generally a 2 or 3 year period for an association to become a legal entity before it could handle international funds from memberships or project funds raised for evaluation capacity building or other related initiatives. At this time, it was proposed that CoE would begin the process of National Chapter formation, and begin the process of strengthening national evaluation communities, and at the same time finalize its own legal institutional structure.

In 2011 a new 3-year Plan of Work was developed by CoE members, and this has received partial funding from IDRC. Since CoE did not have organizational status to accept or manage funds, another evaluation and research organization – Catalyst Management Services (CMS) that was also a CoE institutional member – was identified to host CoE and manage its accounts. During this Phase II, as we called it, we expected that the IDRC support would facilitate implementation of a significant portion of the 2nd Phase Workplan, including the 2nd Evaluation Conclave; and that CoE would raise additional funds to complement this.

Strategy and Implementation

Goal of CoE

The following goal was identified for the CoE during its conceptualization: “To promote and enhance the quality of the theory and practice of evaluation in South Asia and to contribute globally, particularly from a South Asian perspective.” The CoE seeks to provide the evaluators working in South Asia with a platform where they can learn from each other, and, in turn, contribute to the evaluation field-building globally. South Asia is home to a myriad of development projects and interventions, and the strengthening of evaluation in the region yields benefits for a variety of stakeholders.

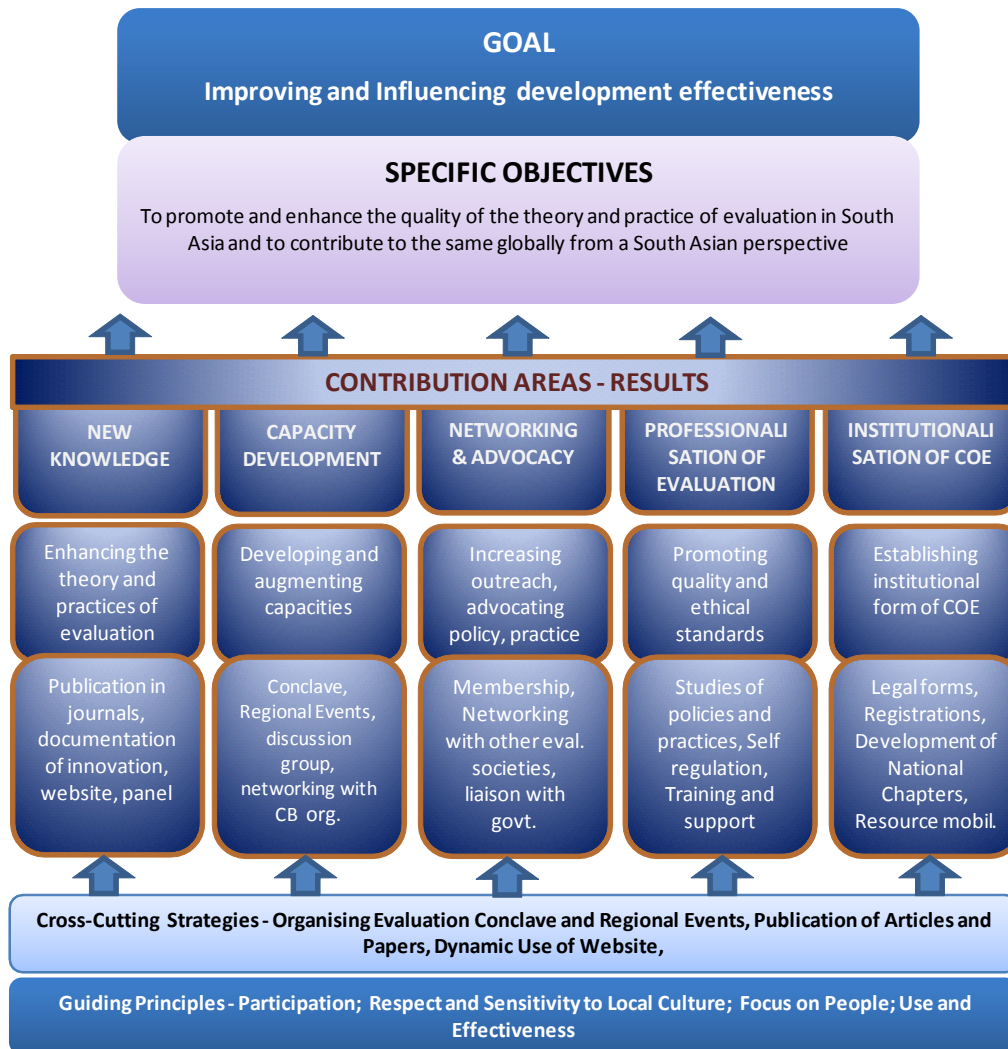
During Phase I significant progress was achieved on several fronts, and this is described further later in this paper. Based on this progress and experiences, the functional priorities and objectives were refined for Phase II activities. COE plans to build on activities that have a successful track record in Phase I, formalize its status by establishing a secretariat and creating a network of evaluation associations across the region. In order to achieve this intermediate goal, the following objectives have been identified:

- Promote and catalyse the use of **new knowledge** to promote the quality and practice of evaluation;
- **Build capacities** for Improving Quality of Evaluation;
- Build a strong **Network and Advocacy Mechanism** to improve theory, quality and use of Evaluation in South Asia;
- **Professionalize evaluation** through code of conduct, ethical standards and protocols for engagement; and
- **Institutionalize COE.**

The diagram below seeks to explain how this will be achieved:

Community of Evaluators - South Asia - Phase II of the Project

Programme Framework



Enabling Environment

As the only regional evaluation association in South Asia, and also faced with weak national evaluation networks that could facilitate national dialogue on evaluation and policy, an effort is being made to establish national chapters of CoE or work with existing evaluation organizations. Members from different countries – especially Nepal, Afghanistan and Bangladesh – have begun the process of setting up national CoE chapters/organizations and moving forward to establishing them as legal entities in each of their countries. This would enable CoE funds to be transferred for support of regional and cross-learning activities, as well as support the growth of the national networks.

In addition to encouraging the establishment of national chapters of CoE, we also started an ambitious study of evaluation practices and challenges in South Asia. The initial version was based on interviewing a large number of evaluators on how evaluations are being conducted and used in decision making in different types of organizations. It is expected that the findings from this study could help in identifying key gaps in the enabling environment to improve the quality of evaluations and their use.

Evaluators in this region still remain distant from engagement with national evaluation policy makers, and the weak evaluation networks and evaluation capacities make it challenging to engage with oversight and transparency of government programs. The main exception to this in South Asia is the Sri Lankan Evaluation Association (SLEVA), which in its initial genesis formed strong a partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Plan Implementation. It is expected that as the national evaluation networks in the region are strengthened, the possibility for greater engagement will emerge.

Enhancing Individual Capacities

There are several ways in which individual capacities have been strengthened. First, CoE members were able to network to avail of fellowship funds to attend international evaluation trainings (e.g. IPDET) and evaluation conferences – especially if they got papers or panels accepted. Second, an effort was made to include trainings along with the F2F meetings organized by CoE which were often scheduled along with other events, such as SLEVA's bi-annual conferences. Third, the Evaluation Conclave organized by CoE in 2010 was attended by over 350 evaluation professionals from the South Asia Region and beyond. It was the first such event in the region. Members also made contributions to other evaluation trainings and workshops both in the region and in other regions, e.g. at SLEVA, AfrEA and MES.

In CoE's Phase II membership has been opened and we hope to rapidly enlarge our engagement with evaluators and commissioners of evaluation in the region. As part of our organizational development we are now seeking to add a range of networking and knowledge access opportunities for members, as well as structured capacity building and mentoring activities.

Individual capacity enhancement was also part of the 'Writing Track' of CoE's Phase I. We identified early on that evaluators working in the local contexts of South Asia have a wide range of experiences and methodological adaptations that are not reflected in the evaluation literature. Guiding and supporting members to turn these experiences into publishable work has been successful and contributed to a Volume on Evaluation in South Asia which is now under consideration for publication by SAGE. At the same time, scholarly articles documenting evaluation experiences by members are also posted on the CoE website (www.communityofevaluators.org) under its Discussion Paper Series.

Equity Focused and Gender Sensitive Evaluation

A variety of participatory and empowerment evaluations that address economic, social and gender asymmetries have been strongly emphasized by South Asian evaluators. Also being emphasized by CoE is the need for strengthening participatory evaluation methodologies. These are justified given the gross inequities by gender, caste, class and region that are prevalent in this region. In addition, analysis by members has also shown that the governance indicators do not reflect strong demand for evaluation, and that social accountability-oriented evaluations, including those that are well designed and with strong community participation, are more likely to be impactful.

Evaluation practitioners who work at the community level, even if for a limited time, have to confront the tremendous variety of inequities that are present. When this reality is juxtaposed with the inability of prevailing power structures to pay more than lip service to evaluation, the choices available to evaluators are limited. Interestingly, we found that the majority of paper ideas that were developed for our writing project were oriented on equity, empowerment and gender issues and on ways of making evaluations participatory to enable the power relations to not cloud findings. Stay tuned!

Institutional Capacity Strengthening

As CoE started on its 4th year of operation in 2012, we can look back and identify the following aspects of institutional strengthening that have been fruitful:

- In the first phase activities were mainly managed by ASK in consultation with IDRC's regional office in Delhi, and members focused mainly on activities they were taking on in the four 'Tracks'. In the second phase with the community members having gained the confidence and group cohesion of working together, they are taking on greater responsibility in the strategic management and decision making. This seems to be a healthy evolution, and a step towards managing the network/association that is now in the process of being legally registered, and membership has been opened to all those who are interested. Though we have encountered delays in legal registration, the CoE members have decided to go forward with the election of its Board and Office Bearers. This is due to be completed by the end of 2012.
- As part of taking over strategic management and decision making in Phase II, the CoE elected a Strategic Advisory Team (SAT) at its F2F meeting of June 2012. This is an interim arrangement taking on most of the functions to be done by its Board. The SAT works in close collaboration with the CoE Secretariat at CMS and its leadership.
- CoE has been fortunate to have had the management of its Phase I by ASK and of Phase 2 by CMS. This support has been invaluable as the voluntary nature of contribution of time for all activities by its members does have limitations. We found that members who are independent consultants and those who work in institutions that support CoE as institutional members have contributed most of the voluntary time for activities.
- Institutional Development Track members contributed by helping develop the options for legalizing our Organization, as well as drafting our Constitution.

At the present time, the institutional capacity of CoE is still in a nascent form, and we are cognizant that key systems and structures need to be put in place for a strong, vibrant and sustainable organization to emerge.

Bottlenecks and Challenges

Starting as we did with a collection of individuals who were previously unknown to each other, and working our way towards a cohesive 'community' with mutual trust and knowledge about different interests and capabilities, was perhaps one of the major challenges. Working in teams, the four Tracks in Phase I were conducive to getting members together who shared common interests and commitments and helped a great deal in building us as a Community.

Another challenge was addressing the need for supporting national evaluation networks at the same time as we struggled to build this regional body. As mentioned earlier, with the exception of SLEvA in Sri Lanka there was no other active evaluation network in any of the South Asian countries. We needed to balance the strong need for and interest in our membership for supporting the weaker national systems, with building the CoE organization and membership. This is an ongoing challenge that we are working on.

Progress and Results

CoE has made good progress towards accomplishing its main objectives, but much work needs to be done to develop a vibrant organization, which will work on the broader evaluation field-building agenda in the region. Some of the key achievements are highlighted below:

1. **Recognition as an Organization in South Asia** - CoE has established itself as a regional platform promoting practices of evaluation. The first Evaluation Conclave ever held in South Asia was a highly successful CoE event in which over 350 evaluation professionals participated and over two dozen internationally reputed evaluation thought leaders conducted workshops and led cutting edge knowledge panels. In addition,

members have participated actively in many international events on evaluation, thereby, reinforcing the identity of CoE.

2. **Membership** – The initial 37 individual and institutional members are now being expanded as a result of opening up the organization for membership. As of September 2012 a web-based membership registration platform was established and we expect to rapidly expand our membership.
3. **Institutionalisation** - Clarity and agreement have emerged on the institutional form and efforts are being made to complete the formal registration process. As an organization, its status is as yet not formalized. It is currently in the process of registering as a non-profit company, which will attract individual as well as institutional members. Pending the legalization of its status, it is planning to elect a Board and Office Bearers that will work with CMS to implement Phase II and to finalize its institutional status, and operational plans for the future.
4. **Capacity Building** - The capacity building agenda has been relatively limited as the original ‘founder members’ were all selected from the most experienced applicants who applied to participate. For this group, most of the capacity development was through facilitating access to scholarships that the CoE membership facilitated – to attend international trainings, such as IPDET, and many evaluation conferences. Additional capacity building was through participating in projects, such as Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (DECI) that many members joined as a result of their CoE membership. Delivering capacity building was mainly through the Evaluation Conclave that CoE organized in 2010.
5. **Contributing to Evaluation Knowledge** – Members who were interested in honing their writing and publishing skills participated in the ‘Writing Track’ which conducted a series of ‘Writeshops’. Based on this work, CoE has compiled a collection of peer reviewed papers that is being published in an edited volume. The website of the community has been used as a medium for knowledge exchange in the first phase. The scope and nature of interaction will be improved further in the second phase. Members have improved understanding of different approaches, tools and techniques on evaluation.
6. **Partnership and Alliances** - CoE has established partnerships with EvalPartners and CLEAR, which are international initiatives focusing on capacity building on evaluation. CoE has developed a good working relation with the Sri Lanka Evaluation Association (SLEVA).

Key Enabling Factors

The most significant enabling factor has been the generous support of IDRC and the thoughtful, wise and creative guidance since CoE’s inception that we received from Katherine Hay, the Senior Evaluation Officer based in the IDRC Regional office in New Delhi.

A second and important mention has to be made of the institutional members such as ASK, who conceptualized and steered the CoE during its first three years (2008-2011). Also, Sambodhi has remained a strong partner taking on tasks that the scattered individual members could not accomplish, such as creating our website, liaising with donors and the regional evaluation community to enable us to conduct the first South Asian Evaluation Conclave.

As the CoE membership has matured and developed its own Phase II proposal and is taking on managing itself as an organization, the partnership of another CoE Institutional member - CMS - support has come to the fore. In their endeavour to help CoE grow into an independent membership-based organization, they have offered to manage the CoE funds and also facilitate and coordinate our Phase II activities. It is expected that CoE will continue to base its secretariat at CMS after it has achieved legal status.

Last but not least has been the passionate commitment of many of CoE's founder members to help build this organization and to enable the field of evaluation to become a force to reckon with.

Innovations and Lessons Learnt

Several innovative activities and ideas were tried by CoE as the small group of committed evaluation professional from four South Asian countries came together in 2008. These efforts marked a means of overcoming the dispersed and diverse set of backgrounds and experiences that we brought, and helped us to document and understand the larger evaluation context and its needs and challenges that we faced. These innovations included: i) organizing ourselves into four thematic 'Tracks' which enabled members to come together and work to develop outcomes that would not have otherwise been possible with such a small group we had; ii) a close partnership with IDRC and support from the Regional Office in Delhi was instrumental in building our capacity and enabled the success of our first Evaluation Conclave as well as the peer reviewed edited Volume on Evaluation in South Asia being produced.

Keeping the group small in the initial Phase of CoE may have helped to build cohesion within the membership and get more traction in achieving results than would have been possible otherwise. However, it may have also delayed the opening up to new membership as there was a high comfort level in working in the familiar terrain with existing members, and as a result diluted the energy and momentum to some extent.

Lessons learnt include:

1. Institutionalisation built on a sound foundation is important for long-term growth. CoE's main aim was to develop a regional platform in South Asia, and also to help build national evaluation associations. These dual objectives may have needed to be staggered, but we were in a hurry and wanted to do both, and conceptualized national chapters for CoE, even prior to the Regional CoE's membership taking off. Trying to do both could have slowed down our momentum in institutionalization the Regional CoE. As a result, four years into our endeavour and we still do not have a legal registered entity. A Constitution was drafted in Phase I, but still is not a 'living document' and By Laws as well as Board are still not in place.
2. Being a nascent organization, and still without legal basis, the CoE South Asia needs the support of another institution to serve as a formal Secretariat to deliver key functions related to financial management, coordination and communication. After the initial incubation period of Phase I, the current situation is one of transitioning of the Community to formulating managing its own agenda and priorities. Thus, the role of the Secretariat should be nuanced and the members should interact closely with the Secretariat to develop, guide and fulfil the CoE's long term strategy.
3. Creating a Community goes beyond membership and organizational and institutionalisation. It requires a common engagement, commitment and shared values and shaping a common vision. This is an ongoing process and cannot be taken for granted only because members come together from time to time and have common activities.
4. Membership-led organisations are run largely on voluntary inputs of members. However, there should be a clearly stated and acted 'Responsibility and Incentives Framework' with tangible and intangibles to ensure that members are having a clear idea about what they are expected to contribute to and what benefit will they receive in return. The members who see the value and importance of the CoE contribute the most time, but those who have busy and successful careers also have time constraints given their other commitments. The CoE needs to continue engagement with the successful members to leverage benefits and at the same time encourage and engage with other members who are also able and willing to contribute more towards the growth of the organization,

without taking those who give time for granted. Expansion of membership is again crucial for this to occur.

5. In the formulation of the Phase II proposal, a principle of token gratuities was made to motivate members to allocate time for substantive inputs required by the membership. Setting up clear and transparent operational mechanisms for this can be challenging. This can be further exacerbated when the organization is still informal in nature and does not participate in the budget allocation or reporting process.
6. Sustainability - Collective platforms cannot run endlessly on donor resources. Donor support provides a start-up capital. There needs to be a robust self-generating business model in place that is based on expansion of membership and provision of value. More complex business oriented income generation activities are likely to be too complex for membership organizations to manage and could be a drain on limited resources.
7. Attention to developing value for an expanding membership is key to long term sustainability. A range of options - online and offline - and technological solutions should be found out to ensure that the engagement and communication is ongoing and members are able to give their inputs.
8. "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together". While working in a collective, difference in opinion and friction is bound to arise. However, these should not be seen in negative light. We should aim for accommodation, diversity and common goal.

Next Steps

1. **Institutionalisation** - Extensive deliberation for over 1.5 years has led to key decisions on the legal identity of CoE. The CoE-SA is being registered under the Section - 25 Companies Act in India. This work will be completed in the next couple of months. CoE will select its board and its Executive Committee, which will have representation from the member countries. These structures will formally take responsibility of guiding the management of the affairs of CoE. Finalizing the Constitution and By Laws that will guide the organization and help to develop clear and transparent operational procedures will be completed.
2. **Expanding and diversifying the membership base** - The membership has been opened to all who are interested in evaluation in general and practice of the discipline in South Asia in particular. A membership drive is also being organised through regional outreach events across South Asia. The outreach events will focus largely on connecting the evaluators and other stakeholders at the national, state and grassroots level, and facilitating insights on the evaluation practices, policies, participation of stakeholders and utilization of evaluation. This will bring in the rich experiences on evaluation from South Asia.
3. **Identifying and building member services and value** -
4. **Capacity Development** - The regional events will have dedicated capacity building agendas, which will be planned for. These events will be paid events and the clientele will be the practitioners in South Asia. CoE plans to hire the support of international expertise on evaluation, who will work as Advisors to CoE and provide technical support and guidance. This Advisory Body will mentor a group of internal resource persons, who will be groomed as future trainers for CoE. This will be done to ensure internalisation of skills, knowledge and practices and enable wider application in the South Asian context.
5. **Professionalization of Evaluation** - Building on the desk research, which was done in the first phase of growth, the evaluation standards and protocols will be finalised through wider internal and external consultation and then published. These standards and protocols are expected to guide the planning, execution and management of evaluation.

6. **Sustainability Plan** – This is being developed and will be oriented to identifying and building membership as well as member services and value. International expertise to advise CoE and to strengthen organizational capacity and build up core reserves will be a focus. The CoE defines sustainability at two levels: professionalization agenda continues strongly, by evolving constantly to the requirements and, secondly, there is financial sustainability to the key actions of the CoE and its partners in each country, so that membership processes are robust.

CoE is young and is growing from strength to strength and hopes to steadily work to build an effective organization that will showcase the tremendous colour and strength of the region's expertise and experience, and work tirelessly to promote evaluation field-building in South Asia.