MAINSTREAMING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT CYCLES:

A Cambodian Case Study on Youth-led Evaluation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost we would like to thank the students that gave us their time to participate in the evaluation training. The insight offered by young people is so valuable to effective development, and this case study would have been impossible without their incredible contributions. We would like to express our gratitude to the staff and students at Peam Chikong High School who allowed us into their school and shared their stories with Oaktree and the student evaluators.

Oaktree is also indebted to our Cambodian partner organisation, Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE), who do such impressive and important work broadening the horizons of youth in Cambodia through increased access to education at all levels. In particular, thank you to Mary Hern, the Girls Education Initiative (GEI) Coordinator, whose support made this process possible.

Thank you to Oaktree’s development sub-committee for their guidance and feedback while creating this case study; Jan Cossar, Kate Horwood, Aiden Craney, Clancy Moore, Adeola Capela, and Victoria Kahla.

Finally to all of Oaktree’s supporters, thank you for being part of a movement to build the capacity of diverse young people both in Australia and overseas. Your participation in our campaigns help spread awareness and raise the funds to run programs such as this. Together we are creating change and building a world where all young people can thrive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oaktree recently facilitated a youth-led evaluation of our funded project the Girl’s Education Initiative (GEI) in Cambodia, with the help of our partner organisation Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE) who run the GEI. To evaluate the career and guidance counselling program within the GEI, Oaktree conducted evaluations at two schools, and facilitated a student-led evaluation at a third. The student evaluators not only came to the same findings as the Oaktree-led evaluation, but also discovered additional findings, leading to unique program recommendations and improvements. In addition to these evaluation outcomes, this use of participatory rural appraisal had a number of positive outcomes for participants, including increased confidence and building transferable skills. These outcomes all serve to further increase community capacity and local ownership of the program itself. This case study clearly demonstrates the value of mainstreaming youth participation into development projects. This is a position Oaktree strongly advocates for across the development sector, and demonstrates within our own practices. This experience also helped Oaktree develop its own skills in facilitating youth involvement at various stages throughout the program cycle, putting us in a strong position to facilitate more of these youth-led processes and to guide other organisations in doing the same. This case study was created with the support of a volunteer Peer Review Group of development specialists.
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this Case Study

First and foremost we would like to thank the students that gave us their time to participate in the evaluation training. The insight offered by young people is so valuable to effective development, and this case study would have been impossible without their incredible contributions. We would like to express our gratitude to the staff and students at Peam Chikong High School who allowed us into their school and shared their stories with Oaktree and the student evaluators.

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Audience

The primary audiences of this paper are development practitioners, and members of the broader development sector working in non-government, government, and private enterprises. It is intended that this paper will demonstrate to the audience the value and effectiveness of youth-led evaluation in projects.

‘Youth’ and Youth Participation

“Youth” is a construct that is conceptualised differently depending on the context. The term is generally understood as a period of time where a person makes different life transitions from dependence to independence.¹ The United Nations defines youth as being aged 15-24, while Oaktree defines youth as 16-26 years of age. In Cambodia, where the GEI project evaluation was conducted, youth is defined as being 15-30, as written in Cambodia’s National Policy on Youth Development.²

The term, ‘participation’ “refers to a stakeholder’s ability to influence a particular process, their power or authority in making decisions, and the collection and analysis of information.” In essence, youth participation is the notion that young people have the ability to influence processes, hold decision-making power, and analyse and interpret data.

“Participation refers to a stakeholder’s ability to influence a particular process, their power or authority in making decisions, and the collection and analysis of information.”

1. Oaktree, ‘ACFID Practice Note: Youth Participation in Development,’ (2016).
According to Oaktree’s framework, there are five different levels of youth participation:

- **Beneficiary**: Youth may benefit from a program but have no involvement in decision-making or implementation;
- **Tokenistic**: Young people are asked to contribute in decision-making and implementation, but are not provided adequate support or information for effective or meaningful involvement;
- **Consultative**: Young people consult and/or advise, but they do not hold decision-making power. They may play a supporting role in the implementation, but it’s mainly carried out by older adults;
- **Partner**: Both young people and adults play an equal role in the decision-making and implementing development activities;
- **Leader**: Young people have more decision-making power and carry out development activities. Older adults consult or advise and play a supportive role.

As explored in Oaktree and ACFID’s Youth Participation Practice Note, different levels of participation are appropriate for different projects, depending on a range of factors.3

### Background to Oaktree’s youth-led evaluation

#### Rationale behind youth-led evaluation

Recognition of the importance and effectiveness of beneficiaries contributing to and leading development projects has gained prominence within development discourse as best practice. Given that the beneficiaries of Oaktree’s development projects are young people, actively promoting youth-led evaluation is an important step in mainstreaming youth participation across our practice.

Oaktree recently created a practice note on Youth Participation in International Development, studying the importance of harnessing the knowledge and unique skills young people hold. Too often young people are left out of leadership and decision-making processes, because young people are stereotyped as being too unreliable, lacking in experience, and lacking in confidence to be involved in evaluation activities.4 Research has shown that this exclusion of young people can result in more people falling into poverty, with the added risk of youth disenfranchisement on an intergenerational scale.5 This is a significant issue, given that 90% of the world’s youth population live in the Global South, a region of the world facing many barriers that limit young people’s opportunity to thrive.6

Oaktree not only disagrees with the negative stereotype of young people, but insists that young people are afforded their rights to be included in decision making processes that affect their lives. When offered appropriately, young people embrace the opportunity to be involved in project evaluation and offer unique insights that can be used to strengthen programs. Beneficiaries of projects should not be viewed as passive recipients, but given opportunities to have meaningful input in projects, and empowered to participate in project evaluation.7

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4. ibid  
5. ibid  
6. ibid  
7. ibid
This case study showcases Oaktree’s mission, young people leading, demanding, and creating a more just world. This prioritisation of youth within development is incredibly important, as the world now has the largest generation of young people in history, with 90% of this population living in the Global South. Lack of opportunity is a large barrier affecting the youth bulge across the Southeast Asia and Pacific regions. Oaktree’s mission is to confront this injustice by empowering young people to create their own change, and contribute to shaping a more just world. Equipping young people with the skills required to carry out an evaluation generates increased self-empowerment and program ownership, contributing to a world where all people have the opportunity to thrive.

**Oaktree - an organisation well placed to run youth-led evaluation**

The centrality of youth participation to Oaktree’s workplaces places the organisation in a specialised position to lead youth participation initiatives. The organisation’s workforce is made up entirely of young people under the age of 27, who both experience and observe the importance of youth participation. Oaktree’s Youth Participation Practice Note highlights the organisation’s commitment to increase youth participation within its domestic and international activities. Oaktree demonstrates best practice in this area by empowering young beneficiaries to lead projects, and monitoring and evaluation processes themselves.

Oaktree recognises the need for improved youth participation across the development sector, and is addressing this gap by making youth participation its key organisational target. As this case study highlights, Oaktree has the capabilities and capacity to do extraordinary work for youth-led evaluation, and youth participation more broadly, across the sector.

**Kampuchean Action for Primary Education and the Girls Education Initiative**

Oaktree’s partner organisation in Cambodia, Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE), shares Oaktree’s passion for empowering children and young people. Their vision is for children and young people to be able to make the best life choices possible. This partnership with an organisation that also prioritises youth reflects Oaktree’s commitment to empowering young people across the Asia-Pacific.

9. Ibid.
Learning Areas

This case study had two learning areas and research questions:

**LEARNING AREA 1**

Learning about the contribution of youth participation within program evaluation to youth empowerment and capacity building

- Do the young people feel self-empowered and more confident to be involved with leadership and decision-making processes?
- What do young people gain when they are allowed to lead evaluation processes?
- What evaluation outcomes have resulted from the youth-led evaluation?
- Have there been any changes between students and teachers as a result of youth-led evaluation of the GEI school program?

**LEARNING AREA 2**

Learning about the contribution of beneficiary (youth) participation in evaluation to development evaluation effectiveness

- Was there a difference between the findings and recommendations of a student-led evaluation and an Oaktree-led evaluation?
- Is so, is this difference important?

**CONTEXT**

**Youth Bulge**

In recent years, Cambodia has experienced a ‘youth bulge’, due largely to the recovery in the birth rate following the Pol Pot regime. Almost thirty percent of Cambodia’s population today is aged between 15-29, while it is estimated that around two thirds of the population are under 30.\(^{10}\) Although Cambodia’s youth population may have peaked, this demographic will continue to constitute around a quarter of the population well into the next decade.\(^{11}\) The number of young people illustrates the importance of youth participation, as these people will continue to play a major role in the construction of Cambodian society into the foreseeable future.

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Education in Cambodia

The Cambodian Constitution recognises education as a fundamental human right for young people, however there is a substantial gap between this rhetoric and the reality. The Khmer Rouge regime also saw the decimation of Cambodia’s education system; institutions and resources were destroyed, while educators and the educated were systematically executed. Consequently, the public education system has had to be rebuilt from the ground up, and, as such, is of a relatively rudimentary standard.

Economic Barriers

Many economic barriers exist in Cambodia that limit education access and contribute to a significant school dropout rate. Sending children to school can incur many additional costs, such as school supplies or extra tutoring to compensate for the basic education received in school. This means the average Cambodian family, with five children, does not have the means to send all children to school. Children are often required to work on family farms or factories, sacrificing their education in the process. These challenges mean that while 95% of students attend primary school, only 30% attend high school. This disproportionately affects young girls, as it is arguably seen as more valuable to educate boys, and girls are needed to assist with domestic chores at home.

Importance of Youth Participation

As demonstrated in Oaktree and ACFID’s Practice Note, the size and potential of youth populations are significantly underrepresented in development and decision making processes, further entrenching intergenerational deprivation and poverty. If young people are not engaged in development, their interests are not reflected in decision making processes affecting their futures and the community’s potential for growth and success is subsequently limited. Youth participation, by providing young people with the tools to create change for themselves, can facilitate sustainable change that can help to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

Oaktree-KAPE Partnership (BSI and GEI)

Oaktree’s partner organisation KAPE is the largest education NGO in Cambodia. The KAPE-Oaktree partnership has had some significant successes, notably the Beacon Schools Initiative (BSI) (2010-2013). The BSI implemented innovative teaching models fostering greater student-teacher engagement, shifting from traditional rote-learning methods towards critical thinking. The success of this initiative resulted in its adoption by the national government, and implementation as part of the national education system as the New Generational Schools program. The successful mainstreaming of a previous Oaktree-KAPE program indicates potential for youth participation mainstreaming.

More recently, Oaktree has worked with KAPE on the GEI project, in collaboration with government departments and 12 local target schools, to provide scholarships and accommodation for students experiencing vulnerability, and livelihood support to students’ families to reduce the risk of students dropping out to financially support their families.

GEI Counselling Program
A key activity within the GEI programme is the provision of counselling to students, through training teacher- and peer-counsellors. Both KAPE and Cambodia’s Ministry of Youth, Education, and Sports (MoYES) identified student counselling as a critical area of improvement. The GEI counselling programs focus on academic, career, and personal support to provide a holistic intervention with potential for long-term success.

Each participating school has a designated teacher responsible for providing counselling. Reported lack of capacity of teacher-counsellors and student discomfort approaching some teacher-counsellors, particularly female students with male counsellors, led to the implementation of peer-counsellors. Selected students were trained in counselling to provide additional support to their peers. The peer-counselling programme also aims to provide students with soft skills to improve their personal wellbeing and employability.

2017 GEI Evaluation
The counselling activities within the GEI were the focus of Oaktree’s 2017 mid-term review evaluation of the initiative. Student participants were trained in evaluation techniques, with the aim increasing Oaktree’s insight into the successes and challenges of the GEI program, and equipping participants with soft skills in line with KAPE’s holistic focus. The implementation of students as peer-counsellors also demonstrated an understanding of the limitations that result from excluding youth from development programs, and the value of incorporating youth perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Learning Areas

Learning Area 1: Learning about the contribution of youth participation within program evaluation to youth empowerment and capacity building

A number of activities focusing on personal development were run with the evaluators to determine the contribution of youth participation, within the evaluation, to the empowerment and increased capacity of the youth evaluators. Scholars wrote personal goals for the experience before the evaluation training and participated in a debrief, reflected upon their initial goals and completed a survey about personal development after the evaluation.

Learning Area 2: Learning about the contribution of (beneficiary) youth participation in evaluation to development evaluation effectiveness

The knowledge and insights gained through the evaluations of the GEIs counselling activities conducted by Oaktree and by youth scholars would demonstrate contributions that the youth scholars had to their evaluation that Oaktree staff did not. Oaktree staff ran a series of workshops with the scholars selected to be evaluators to develop their evaluation skills and confidence.

Evaluations

The accessibility and appropriateness of counselling services offered through KAPE’s Girls’ Education Initiative program was evaluated at three of the program’s participating schools.

Oaktree evaluators conducted the first two evaluations and student evaluators conducted the third. Whilst all three evaluations were youth-led, as Oaktree is a youth-led organisation, only the third evaluation was student-led - run by youth beneficiaries. Supplementing the student-led evaluation with two Oaktree-led evaluations created a point of comparison to determine the evaluation results and outcomes that were unique to the student-led evaluation.

Evaluation frameworks for the Oaktree-led evaluations were created by Oaktree staff and informed by the organisations previous evaluations and feedback from KAPE staff. Oaktree prepared for the student-led evaluation by referring to previous youth-led evaluations conducted by other development organisations, such as Plan International Australia and Childfund Australia.

**Stakeholders**

**Oaktree**
Oaktree staff conducted evaluations of the counselling services at two GEI beneficiary schools and trained local students at a third beneficiary school to conduct an evaluation of their own school’s counselling services.

**KAPE**
KAPE staff were consulted with in the lead up to the evaluations, during evaluation framework planning and upon Oaktree’s arrival in Cambodia, to ensure the cultural and linguistic appropriateness of evaluation activities. The GEI coordinator assisted Oaktree staff to run a number of sessions within the student evaluation.

**In-country Evaluators**
Eight Year 12 students at a GEI beneficiary school were trained with evaluation skills and conducted an evaluation of the schools counselling services at the school. Student evaluators were selected by the GEI coordinator, largely due to their ability to participate during normal study periods. The students selected had varied exposure to the counselling program: two were peer counsellors, four had accessed counsellors and two had no exposure to the counselling program at all.

**Interpreter**
The interpreter translated between Khmer and English in all evaluation and evaluation-training activities. The interpreter was a teacher at a nearby school and had worked with Oaktree on a previous evaluation. She was included in pre-evaluation discussions with Oaktree and GEI staff about evaluation activities and interview questions, to ensure that details and words could be translated into Khmer and to provide her with a comprehensive understanding of Oaktree, GEI and the evaluation.
Methodology

Evaluation participants

Counselled students, peer counsellors, and teacher counsellors at the three GEI supported schools participated in the evaluations (table 1).

Evaluation training

Oaktree staff, supported by the interpreter and GEI coordinator, trained the eight GEI students on evaluation skills (see table 1). The training included contextual information, evaluation theory and evaluation skill-building activities.

Types of participation

Oaktree-led evaluations included group evaluation activities and one-on-one interviews. The student-led evaluation also included group evaluation activities and one-on-one interviews, however student evaluators were responsible for selecting the evaluation activities for each stakeholder group. See table 1.

TABLE 1 - RESEARCH EVALUATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation School(s)</th>
<th>Evaluation Trainers</th>
<th>Evaluators</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Type of Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation 1 and 2</td>
<td>Oaktree staff</td>
<td>Counselled students, Teacher counsellors, Peer counsellors, Teacher counsellor</td>
<td>Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity</td>
<td>Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support: Interpreter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation 3</td>
<td>Oaktree staff</td>
<td>Teacher counsellor, Peer counsellors, Counselling students</td>
<td>One-on-one interviews, Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity</td>
<td>One-on-one interviews, Group evaluation activity, Group evaluation activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support: Interpreter, GEI coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School students, of the school being evaluated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher counsellor, Peer counsellors, Counselling students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data analysis

Oaktree staff analysed the, largely qualitative, data obtained from their evaluations by conducting content analysis to derive conclusions on the accessibility and appropriateness of counselling services.
Student evaluators were trained by Oaktree staff on data analysis, before applying these skills to their own data. They presented their findings and recommendations to their peers, teachers, KAPE staff, and Oaktree staff.

**Ethical considerations**

Child protection and financial accountability checks were conducted in-country with GEI staff before the commencement of the evaluations.

A major ethical consideration for the trip was receiving consent for participants photos and words to be published by Oaktree post-trip. Oaktree staff provided a detailed explanation of the consent form and the importance of communicating consent correctly to the GEI staff, the interpreter and school directors before the evaluations commenced. Consent forms (in Khmer) were provided to the participants at the beginning of the session, and examples of photos used by Oaktree in communication platforms were provided to ensure understanding. Oaktree staff taught the student evaluators the process, and importance, of gaining consent from those that they interviewed.

**Approach to evaluation**

The evaluation was guided by a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) framework, utilising participatory action research (PAR) and empowerment evaluation technique, as methods intended to empower those who are most affected by the program being evaluated reflect best practice in development. Oaktree’s student-led evaluation intended to give the students affected by the program greater control and ownership by facilitating a process of “collective, self-reflective inquiry”, which has been found to lead to effective action. Oaktree’s facilitation of youth-led evaluation, based on principles of empowerment evaluation, prioritised community knowledge and ownership at every stage of the program. Oaktree’s use of PAR methods were expected to achieve a more effective evaluation, due to the more sustainable program improvements that result from the findings derived that differ to those found using non-participatory methods.

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FINDINGS

Learning Area 1: Learning about the contribution of youth participation within program evaluation to youth empowerment and capacity building

The evaluation training, and subsequent student-led evaluation, resulted in student empowerment and increased capacity. The analysis of pre- and post-evaluation data determined growth in evaluation knowledge, transferable skills, confidence, goal-setting, and understanding of, and interest in, the counselling program amongst student evaluators.

EVALUATION KNOWLEDGE
Student evaluators gained evaluation knowledge, skills, and experience from the process of evaluating the counselling program (table 2). A student now aims to become an evaluator in the future after achieving her goal of learning more about evaluation.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS
The student evaluators also developed a number of transferable skills through the evaluation process (table 2). One student explained that before the evaluation she “didn’t know how to solve problems, so would abandon them, but had learnt through the evaluation, and resultant presentation, how to work together and solve problems”.

CONFIDENCE
Growth in confidence was demonstrated amongst a number of students (table 2). One student reflected, after the evaluation, that the process had allowed her to lose her nervousness and achieve her dreams of speaking in public.

GOAL SETTING
Student evaluators gained evaluation knowledge, skills, and experience from the process of evaluating the counselling program (table 2). A student now aims to become an evaluator in the future after achieving her goal of learning more about evaluation.
Findings

Evaluation

Four students aspired to gain specific skills and experience, two set goals to better understand problems and new ideas, and one aimed to learn their strengths and weaknesses.

Outcomes area Pre-evaluation Post-evaluation

Evaluation
Four student evaluators made goals to develop in this area.
Six students noted gaining increased knowledge and skills of evaluation. Five reported feeling happy whilst conducting the evaluation activities.

Transferable skills
Four students aspired to gain specific skills and experience, two set goals to better understand problems and new ideas, and one aimed to learn their strengths and weaknesses.
New skills and experiences gained by students: note-taking, teamwork, presenting, and problem solving. All of the student evaluators noted that they will use their new skills in their future studies or job.

Confidence
Four students noted feeling shy and nervous about presenting their findings, more broadly observed by Oaktree staff. Two students made goals to increase their confidence.
Five students felt more confident, four students felt braver and four students felt happy or excited when presenting their findings. All students presented their findings in front of teachers and peers. Oaktree staff observed a transformation in the confidence of all student evaluators.

Goal setting
 Majority of goals voiced were short term in nature; only two students created long term goals.
Four students noted goal setting as an area of knowledge gained. Goals voiced by students were longer in scope, with four students creating goals for their future careers.

Counselling program
Varied understandings of, and exposure to, the counselling program.
All students improved their understanding of the counselling project and would recommend the evaluation training to other students. Many students wanted to get more involved in the counselling program, become a counsellor, or set up their own counselling centre.

TABLE 2 - STUDENT EVALUATOR DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OUTCOMES
Learning Area 2: Learning about the contribution of (beneficiary) youth participation in evaluation to development evaluation effectiveness

The student evaluators discovered findings that differed to those found by Oaktree staff, in addition to a number of consistent findings. Evaluation findings from all schools suggested that, when utilised, the GEI counselling services helped students:

- Feel supported;
- Set goals;
- Plan for their futures;
- Generally reduced dropout rates amongst vulnerable students.

Peer Counsellors

All evaluations found that teacher counsellors have relatively limited capacity to dedicate to their counsellor role. This challenge was successfully mitigated, within all schools evaluated, by the implementation of student-counsellors, as they were found to be more accessible, approachable, and appropriate for some students requiring guidance on certain issues. This success of the peer-counselling services led to recommendations that student-counsellors receive further training, support and clearer role expectations in order to fully utilise the strengths of this program. Furthermore, the students’ increased comfort approaching student-counsellors demonstrates one of the primary strengths of peer-based processes, such as student-led evaluations.

Unique Student-led Evaluation Outcomes

The student-evaluators also provided alternative recommendations and suggested program improvements not found by the Oaktree evaluation team. As a result of leading their own evaluation, the student-evaluators recommended that the student counselling services receive better promotion in schools, a recommendation not found by the Oaktree-led evaluation.

DISCUSSION

Learning Area 1: Learning about the contribution of youth participation within program evaluation to youth empowerment and capacity building

Oaktree’s decision to shift traditional power dynamics, by providing young beneficiaries with the opportunity to lead their own evaluation, resulted in increased capacity amongst student evaluators and strengthened the GEI counselling program.

Building Capacity of Individuals and the Community

The increased capacity and empowerment of young people when they are provided the opportunity to lead evaluations was demonstrated by the student evaluators’ growth in evaluation knowledge, transferable skills, confidence, and goal-setting. These outcomes are incredibly important, as students can use the confidence and skills gained from this experience to succeed within their studies and future life pursuits. The reported happiness felt by majority of the student evaluators whilst conducting the evaluation implies that they valued and enjoyed the opportunity to lead this process, and grow from
it, further reinforcing the importance of creating such opportunities for youth leadership within the program cycle.

Furthermore, students that led this evaluation can utilise the transferable skills and abilities they have gained in a range of situations and pursuits, bringing them back to their communities. Therefore, the value of these outcomes for student-evaluators is demonstrated further by the contribution they can have to building capacity and sustainable changes within the community.

**Increased Program Ownership**

The student evaluators’ ownership of GEI’s counselling program was increased through their experience evaluating the program. Their knowledge of the program, understanding of its importance and desire to become involved in the program were all increased post-evaluation. The students demonstrated their increased understanding and value of the counselling program when they made a final recommendation that the program should be better publicised and promoted within the school. Growth in these areas demonstrate an increased sense of ownership over the counselling program amongst student evaluators. Such ownership of beneficiaries over programs is the key aim of empowerment evaluation,\(^{20}\) as this builds capacity within the community that can strengthen the program itself and other community activities.\(^{21}\)

Oaktree’s decision to train young people to evaluate the counselling program thus increased the students’ ownership of the program’s outcomes. This positive outcome will likely be felt across the school, as peer counsellors better understand how their role contributes to the program and student evaluators will endeavor to communicate the counselling program, and recommend involvement, to other students.

**Learning Area 1 Discussion Summary**

The empowerment and increased capacity of the student evaluators and strengthening of the GEI counselling program that has resulted from this evaluation demonstrates that the value of running youth-led evaluations extends beyond the evaluation findings themselves.

**Learning Area 2: Learning about the contribution of (beneficiary) youth participation in evaluation to development evaluation effectiveness**

The valuable and different findings uncovered by the student-led evaluation demonstrate one of the primary benefits of allowing young beneficiaries to lead evaluation activities with their peers.

**Advantages of Beneficiary-led Evaluation**

As participants in the student-counsellor program, student beneficiaries are uniquely placed to offer insight into the successes and limitations of the GEI program during evaluation processes. The student-evaluators were able to offer a valuable perspective on the program and better understand participants’ responses when analysing their data.

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Advantages of Peer Evaluation

The students’ position as peer-evaluators allowed them to identify different evaluation focus areas to those addressed by Oaktree staff. The student-evaluators’ firsthand awareness of the counselling programs operation and potential limitations inspired different evaluation priorities and questions, findings and final recommendations.

These different results were likely due to the fact that the evaluators were young people interviewing their peers, as common language and shared understanding between peers contributes positively to evaluation outcomes. Students interviewed may have been more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with their peers, and subsequently provided more upfront and honest program feedback. Students may have been more comfortable in revealing their lack of knowledge about the counselling services, allowing student-evaluators to make the recommendation for increasing the awareness of the program within the school.

The suggestion that students felt more comfortable being interviewed by other young people is supported by the related evaluation finding that student-counsellors were found to be more appropriate and accessible to students regarding certain issues. This illustrates the unique ability of youth to identify “patterns, relationships, contradictions and disjunctures” amongst their young peers that adults often miss, inarguably an invaluable contribution.

Advantages of Youth-led Evaluation

Young people are more open to engaging with new ways of thinking and doing things, making them more receptive to new processes and challenging the status quo when placed in an evaluator position. This was demonstrated by the difference in attitude towards the evaluation process, between the students’ and the interpreter, a teacher who fell outside the youth age bracket. Whilst the student-evaluators enthusiastically adopted evaluation techniques and critiqued the program, the interpreter discouraged critical thinking as she was unwilling to adopt some of the evaluation methods, preferring rote-learning methods typical of older Cambodian education systems. The increased openness of student-evaluators was valuable to the evaluation as their enthusiasm to adopt new processes and critique the program allowed them to uncover findings both consistent with, and unique to, those found by Oaktree.

LA 2 Discussion Summary

The student-led evaluation resulted in different findings and program recommendations to the Oaktree-led evaluation due to their unique insight into the program as beneficiaries, their youthfulness, and their peer-relationship with participants.

The difference in findings between the two evaluation processes demonstrates the value of empowering youth beneficiaries to take the lead and conduct their own evaluation. The different perspective on the program being evaluated leads to more specific or relevant evaluation questions and procedures, and a different kind of insight. Additionally, the shared understanding between evaluators and participants offered more detailed responses, culminating in useful recommendations and program improvements.

Oaktree’s choice to facilitate a student-led evaluation thus resulted in a unique finding that led to a program recommendation that otherwise would not have been raised.

REFLECTIONS

The process of conducting a student-led evaluation presented specific challenges unique to a beneficiary- and youth-led evaluation that resulted in the following reflections and learnings:

Value of shifting traditional power dynamics

The transferal of traditional power dynamics in this evaluation, by allowing students to lead it, resulted in a number of benefits for the students and the program. Allowing the students to take control of the evaluation process increased their confidence, skills, and their sense of ownership over the project. Furthermore, their lived experience and strong relationship with their cohort allowed for trustful, respectful and open two-way dialogue between evaluators and participants within evaluation activities.

Value of Youth Facilitators and Peer-to-Peer Training

Key to Oaktree’s success in facilitating this process was the youth of the facilitators themselves. Seeing other youth carry out similar processes can help instill confidence in young people, who may otherwise lack faith in their abilities due to inexperience. The evaluation findings suggested an increased comfort for youth when speaking with peers, as students at GEI supported schools were more likely to engage with student counsellors than they were with teacher counsellors. Student evaluators were arguably more comfortable and engaged when receiving evaluation training from Oaktree staff than they would have been if the training was run by older adults. Students evaluators were likely able to relate better to Oaktree staff, as opposed to teachers, due to the shared experience as young people.

PAR & Empowerment Evaluation Learning Cycle

In line with PAR and empowerment evaluation frameworks, challenges encountered by Oaktree staff throughout the student-led evaluation served as opportunities to learn and continuously improve throughout the process. The cyclical processes of PAR and empowerment evaluation invite continuous reflection and improvement from all stakeholders, leading to program improvement in a number of ways. This PAR feedback cycle was evident within the student-led evaluation, as Oaktree trainers responded to obstacles and limitations by adapting and improving their methods throughout the process. When experiencing cultural and language barriers, the team were respectful and patient and were able to foresee and mitigate, where possible, future challenges of the same kind. This learning cycle is not confined to the duration of the evaluation, or Oaktree staff. By equipping young beneficiaries with the skills from evaluation training, they now have the potential to pass these skills on to their peers, extending the scope and reach of impact. As trainers, Oaktree staff have also learnt from this experience, and can subsequently implement these learnings to improve future evaluation and training processes.

Reflections

Importance of an Appropriate Interpreter

The barriers posed by cultural and language barriers throughout the evaluation were particularly evident with respect to the services of the interpreter. There were times within evaluation training and preparation when the interpreter did not effectively communicate information or provided incorrect directions to the students. The interpreter, a teacher in Kampong Cham province, was more inclined to treat the student-evaluators as her own students, rather than acting as an intermediary. This challenge demonstrates that youth-led evaluations processes require interpreters that are effective facilitators, as well as communicators, and closer in age to the evaluators being trained.

Realities of youth participation

Oaktree staff reflected that the intended level of youth participation within an evaluation may not always be entirely achievable within the context of the program and evaluation. Oaktree staff had planned for the students to create the overarching evaluation questions and framework to guide the entire process, in order to keep the whole process student-led. However, they were required to assist the students in creating these questions as they were unable to facilitate them to do so independently. Despite this initial difficulty, once the overarching questions were determined, the students were able to create and choose appropriate evaluation questions and activities themselves.

In hindsight, it was unrealistic to expect such un-assisted leadership from a group with no experience in monitoring and evaluation processes. Creating evaluation framework questions is quite a technical process that even for development professionals, with substantially more experience, find difficult. Oaktree staff used this challenge to refine their skills as facilitators of youth participation within development program cycles. Furthermore, this learning illustrates the valuable role that Oaktree facilitators played, assisting the young evaluators to reach a point where they were able to lead the remainder of the process.

KAPE Reflections on Benefits to Students

The many benefits of the youth-led evaluation were also observed by Mary, the GEI program coordinator at KAPE. She said that conducting the youth-led evaluation led to a transfer of knowledge between students and staff, empowered the students involved, and improved the confidence, planning, and decision-making abilities of students. Mary is confident that the skills these students gained from the evaluation process will be utilised to improve the school environment and community outreach. Due to the number of positive outcomes from the evaluation that she observed, she strongly believes that involving students in the project evaluation was, and is, really important.

Implementing Learnings in Future Processes

The challenges faced by Oaktree when conducting the organisations’ first youth-led evaluation have been utilised as learning opportunities, in line with a participatory action research learning cycle, to strengthen future youth-led evaluations. Oaktree has applied these reflections and learnings to evaluations of GEI and other programs conducted in 2018, and will continue to apply them when evaluating development programs.
CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates the value of youth participation, in the form of a student-led evaluation, to both evaluation and program outcomes and to capacity building for participants. The many learnings from this process have allowed Oaktree to continuously adapt and improve its capacity to further implement youth-participation within development programming, and advocate for youth-participation mainstreaming across the sector.

**Benefits of Student-Led Evaluation**

The student-evaluators offered unique insights and perspectives during the evaluation stage of the project, that resulted in unique findings and program recommendations. Student evaluators were able to reach a number of the same conclusions as Oaktree, whilst also offering unique findings and program insights. This contribution is undeniably valuable, and highlights the importance of active youth participation in evaluation, particularly of programs that directly impact young people.

Moreover, the evaluation training resulted in the development of confidence, knowledge, and a number of transferable skills amongst the student evaluators. Whilst the impact of this personal and professional development is unquantifiable, there is no doubt that equipping young people with skills such as these builds community capacity substantially. Furthermore, the youth-led evaluation encouraged young people to take ownership of a program that directly impacts them, empowering them to create their own change.

**Oaktree - a Leader of Youth-led Processes**

This firsthand experience of the multifaceted value of youth-led processes in development program cycles encourages the organisation to continue in this direction and to advocate for, and assist in, the mainstreaming of youth participation across the development sector.

Oaktree’s organisational prioritisation of youth participation, rapidly developing expertise in youth-led processes, and position as an increasingly prevalent youth-led organisation demonstrates the organisations ability to assist others within the sector, as consultants, to increase youth participation within their own program cycles. The youth of Oaktree staff is crucial to the organisations success in this area, as such youth-led processes benefit from young people working together, and empowering other young people, to create change. This peer-based model of evaluation training improves trainee receptivity, and mutual learning, while reducing power imbalances and hierarchical barriers often present in international development. Oaktree will continue to prioritise youth participation within development evaluation processes due to the valuable recommendations and program improvements, increased capacity within communities, and subsequently stronger, more sustainable development that is achieved.

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