SWITCH

Learning Alliance Briefing No 6: Process Documentation

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Introduction

A project's life seldom follows a straight line. All kinds of events will happen and force a project to adapt its course. Change does not come easily, especially if change is targeted at empowerment, sector integration, stakeholder participation or improved governance.
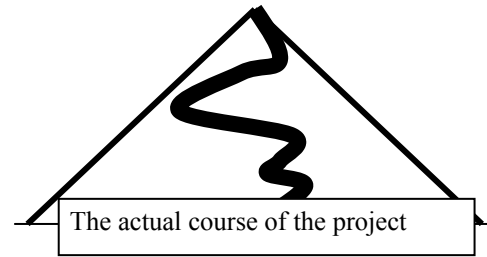
Projects often look at the stumbling blocks and barriers on their way as nasty things to quickly overcome, instead of seeing them as opportunities to learn from and to increase the impact of the project. Process documentation is a tool that helps project staff and stakeholders to carefully track meaningful events in their project. It enables reflection and analysis of these events in order to understand better what is happening, how it is happening and why it may be happening.

Recently, more attention is given to process documentation. Tools such as Most Significant Change[1] (Davies and Dart 2005), case studies, process monitoring (GTZ 1996) and participatory video are efforts to make the development process visible and learn from it.

Conceptual underpinning
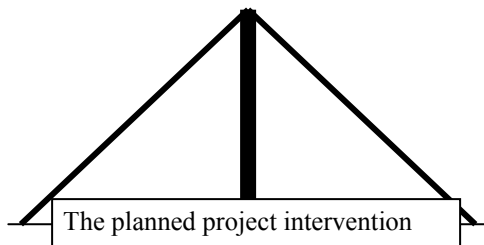
The planned project intervention

The actual course of the project

Often development projects do not go as was perceived in the logframe or the project proposal. The road to achieving project objectives is not straight but bumpy and curvy.

"*Intervention is visualised in existing models as a discrete set of activities that take place within a defined time-space setting involving the interaction between so-called 'intervening' parties and 'target' or 'recipient' groups. Such an image isolates intervention from the continuous flow of social life and ongoing relations …… intervention never is a 'project' with sharp boundaries in time and space as defined by the institutional apparatus of the state or implementing agency.*" (Long and van der Ploeg, 1989; page 228).

Process documentation aims to learn from the curves and the bumps on the project road – what happened there, how and why did it happen? Process documentation is a valuable tool in action research, learning alliances[2] and multi stakeholder platforms because it triggers reflection and debate on how the "*continuous flow of social life and ongoing relations*" has and impact on the course of the project.

Process documentation helps projects to be smarter, but also provides the outputs to engage a wider group of stakeholders in the debate about important social development processes such as the delivery of water and sanitation services.

What is process documentation?

Success is wonderful, but we learn the most from adversity and failure. That which makes us uncomfortable or is controversial gives us clues about how to be successful in a much deeper way. (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003)

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[1] MSC is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation, where the identification and collection of change stories is followed by a systematic selection of the most significant of these stories, a process that encourages reflection on impact of a specific project/ programme.

[2] "*Learning Alliances are about building the structures needed to bring people together to analyse and address problems … and jointly learning how to find solutions.*" (Smits et al., 2007; p.xiii) "*… learning alliances may be represented by sets of connected stakeholder platforms typically located at the different levels of administration (e.g. national, city, neighbourhood). Their structure and activities will be designed to optimize relationships, breaking down barriers to both horizontal (i.e. across platforms), and vertical (i.e. between platforms) learning.*" (Butterworth and Morris, 2007; p.3).

There are different layers of definitions and explanations of what process documentation is. They all add to a better understanding of process documentation.

Process documentation tracks what happened, how it happened and why it happened

Process documentation is a tool that helps project staff and stakeholders to carefully track meaningful events in their project, "*in order to discern more accurately what is happening, how it is happening and why it may be happening.*" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; page 1).

Process documentation is a systematic way to reflect, analyse and discover patterns that help or hinder change

"*Process documentation is a more systematic way to enhance the informal ways most people keep their "radar" up and the wheels turning in their heads during long-term or complex projects.*" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; page 1).

We all register, reflect and analyse the processes of our lives. We do it when we drive home after a difficult meeting or during a walk in the forest or other moments where we look back at what happened, how it happened and try to understand why it happened.

"*In many ways, process documentation of a social change movement serves the same purpose as an individual keeping a diary of his or her life. A diary allows daily reflection on events and factors framing those events in addition to creating a historical record. Over time, a diary, like process documentation, will reveal recurring themes and patterns that help or hinder progress towards transformation.*" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; page 3).

Process documentation looks beyond the project – into the context

Process documentation systematically looks at context, at history, at traditions. It does not only look at what is going on during the limited life time of a project and within the spatial and institutional boundaries of a project. It looks beyond the project into the 'real world' that the project aims to change, into history, culture and patterns of power and decision making. That is why process documentation is important for projects with social or political objectives such as empowerment, stakeholder cooperation etc. These projects have the ambition to change traditional patterns, attitudes, relationships, approaches and ways of thinking. They should therefore try to understand the context and background of these attitudes, relationships and approaches. Process documentation describes the context of a project and explores its impact on project objectives.

Process documentation captures the process, and organises, analyses and disseminates the findings

Process documentation involves:
1. a structured, focused way of capturing the change process that a project aims to bring about – activities, interactions between stakeholders, issues and contextual factors;
2. organizing the information in such a way that stakeholders have an opportunity to reflect and learn about the process;
3. analysing information by looking at common themes, trends and patterns and placing the findings in the context of the project and the project's theory of change;
4. and disseminating the information quickly enough to be most useful. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

Process documentation needs a theory of change

A change theory gives direction and focus to the process documentation. What is it exactly that you want to observe, what is important and what is less important to observe? The theory provides the window through which to observe and analyse the process.

All projects have a theory, most of them implicit, some of them in particular those with the aim to of social change have explicit theories. The theory could be that empowerment will improve access of poor people to water or that concerted action of all stakeholders will result in more sustainable and more effective solutions to water problems. Acknowledging the importance of a change theory and making this theory explicit also allows the stakeholders to participate in discussions on the basic assumptions of the project.

A definition of Process Documentation

Process documentation is a systematic way to capture what happens in a process of change and how it happens, to reflect and analyse why it happens, using a theory of change, and to organise and disseminate the findings.

Why do it?

From my experience, process documentation is something that folks in the field do all the time informally—it just isn't systematic or written down. Once people realize that this is something they are already doing, and that this is a tool that will help a community reach their goals, they are likely to embrace process documentation. (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003)

To improve the quality and impact of a project

- Because it allows those most closely involved in a project to step back far enough to reflect on trends, patterns, opportunities and warning signs.
- Because it contributes to the collection of qualitative information on results that are not easy to capture quantitatively. Who or what influences decisions? Do certain attitudes enable or hinder change? Process documentation provides the story behind the results.
- Because it encourages learning from mistakes and offers opportunities to celebrate impact.

To test assumptions and theories of a project

- Because it allows us to adapt the theory of change of the project and deepen our understanding of crucial processes in society.
- Because it provides a check for assumptions and tracks factors that otherwise might be overlooked as being relevant ("*we have always done it like this*").

To portray the local context and local stakeholders of a project

- Because it enables to capture important and unique local contextual, environmental and political factors.
- Because it gives people a voice and shows their lives holistically and not only as functional project beneficiaries.

To share, disseminate and encourage debate about important development processes in society

- To share with a wider group of organisations and individuals the learning process of the project – the successes and the failures.
- To put "hidden" factors related to politics, power constellations, relationships and attitudes on the public agenda and encourage that they are discussed.

To add a valuable element to the work of a project team
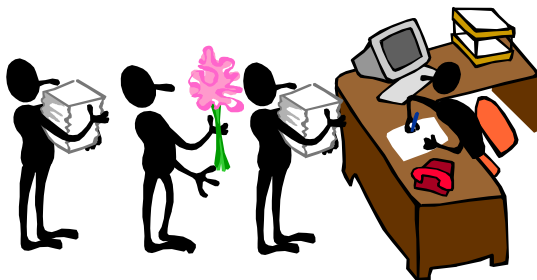
- Because making intimate relationships with the stakeholders (for interviews, case studies etc.) is rewarding and inspiring.
- Because story telling is a nice thing to do.
- Because giving people a voice is a good thing to do.
- Because process documentation is fun to do.

What to document?

Which paths does the process documentation specialist follow? Which smuggler trails or freeways does the process documentation specialist take? The events, people and places to track must have a relation with the theory of change of the project.

A clean window – a theory of change

Typical elements of the theory of change of a project are: integration between departments or disciplines or sectors, coordinated action of all stakeholders, joint decision making, participation, change of attitude and empowerment. These elements need to be built into project goals and key indicators to have a better understanding of what to document exactly. Increasing the depth of a theory of change is a valuable exercise for a project because it forces the project to explain what actually is meant by words that are often used too easily. What is empowerment? How does it show that people or groups are empowered, how does it show that they aren't? What is meant by integration of sectors and what does successful integration look like? Which attitudes should be changed? What are the indicators for successful concerted action? The theory of change provides the process documentalist with a window through which to observe the outside world; the indicators and key issues make sure that the window is clean.

Where the project life line makes the sharpest curves

Project teams know where the struggle of their project for change will be hardest. They know where the encounters of the project objectives with the "real world", with traditions, beliefs, attitudes and power constellations will cause tension and friction. These are the encounters the process documentation specialist has to track. It is where the project life line makes the sharpest curves.

Beyond time and space boundaries of a project

Projects have a short life. Three, maximum five years. Most of the structures, traditions, beliefs and attitudes that projects aim to change are of a longer date. That is why it is important in one way or another to document the context of the project, look beyond the project in time and in space. What is the history of the structures, the beliefs and the attitudes? How did it get to this stage? Is this restricted to the project area or can you find it in the whole country?
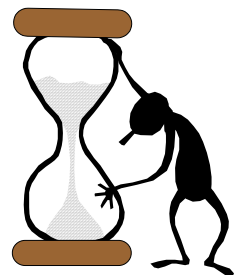
How to do it?

Principles of Process Documentation

- Go to the stakeholders, discover their perspectives and give them a voice by interviewing them and framing them in photographs and/or video.
- Go to the events where project objectives meet the traditional beliefs, relationships and attitudes in water management and observe the tensions and conflicts.
- Study and describe the context – read articles and books and talk to wise people (professors, teachers, older people, mayors, traditional leaders etc.).
- Organise moments, systems and ways in the project to step back far enough from daily project business to reflect and analyse on trends and patterns.
- Disseminate your findings, reflections, interviews, photographs and share them and use them to stimulate debate.

Tools

But principles are not enough. Tools are needed to help project staff to actually do the process documentation.

- Tools for capturing the process.
- Tools for organising the information.
- Tools for analysing the findings.
- Tools for disseminating the information.

Tools for capturing the process

For capturing the process a wide range of qualitative methods will be needed such as:
- interviews with individuals;
- focus group discussions;
- observation of meetings (formal and informal);
- documentation of anecdotes, jokes, stereotypes of attitude (the stories told);
- diaries (of project team members and/or stakeholders);
- photography and video;
- Most Significant Change.

Who to interview, observe etc? The actors (individuals and groups) that are identified in the change theory as the direct stakeholders. E.g. department heads, politicians, farmers, women, community leaders etc.

Apart from the direct stakeholders it is also good to talk to the people who look from the sidelines at the process of change and do not have a direct interest or stake in the process. These are for example teachers, church leaders, elderly people, children or youth.

Tools for organising the information

Organisation of the information has two components:
- filing the captured information;
- compiling the captured information and making products for dissemination.

Some simple filing is needed to avoid having a complete chaos of unsorted materials (video sequences, loose photos, interview notes). Notes on paper, sound cassettes, photos and video sequences must be described and put in a file with dates, names, subjects of interviews etc.

Compiling involves organising the information from interview and observations notes, photographs and video sequences into articles, photo books, video bites and films, case studies, columns, written portraits etc. For quick dissemination, one of the pillars of process documentation is that these products should not be complicated to produce. For example short memos, a diary, murals, photo briefs and video bites.

Tools for analysing the findings

For reflection and analysis of the captured information, time, methods and structures must be created in the project. Often in busy projects reflection does not get sufficient attention. There is a simple reason for that. Project staff thinks in terms of solutions; the intermediary steps between problems encountered and arriving at solutions, i.e. reflection and analysis, are not being valued. Tools, methods and procedures are therefore needed to reflect and analyse systematically in project teams.

Tools for disseminating the information

Tools for dissemination concentrate on the channels or the media for dissemination. Where will the case studies, the memos, the video bites, the photo books and columns be published? Which channels should be created by the project and which outside channels could the project try to mobilise (local TV, radio, newspapers, meetings, conferences). With new information and communication technology, channels have become available that can be managed easily by project staff itself in particular e-mail and internet.

Who documents the process?

Insiders – the project team

There are good reasons to put the process documentation tasks in the hands of the project team. In that way process documentation becomes an integrated project activity and reflection and learning will be systematic.

If process documentation is a project team task, then it is still sensible to appoint someone to do the process documentation job. Someone who is not involved in

daily project work, but can concentrate on capturing the process, organising the information, stimulating the reflection and analysis of the findings and disseminating the information. Combining process documentation with ongoing project work will be counterproductive for both.

For process documentation, distance from the project objectives is needed. The task of the documentation specialist is not in the first place to achieve the project's objectives, but to discover why the project is (partially) achieving its objectives or not. The process documentation specialist must get the opportunity to go her or his own way.

Process documentation should be done both in parallel to and as part of the project. That may sound potentially tense and conflicting. And in fact, that is what it should be. If the work of the process documentation specialist does not create some sound tension and the process documentation specialist does not challenge the work and assumptions of the project team, then she or he does not have sufficient distance to the daily, regular project work.

However, if the distance of the process documentation specialist to project objectives and project team is too big, the project team will not learn and if needed adapt the course of the project. The role of the process documentation specialist in the team is double: to follow the project process from a distance and to organise and stimulate the internal learning and analysis of the project team e.g. challenge the project team to have a critical look at its own assumptions.

Direct stakeholders

Not only project teams, but a much wider group of stakeholders are involved in action research projects, learning alliances and multi stakeholder platforms.,. Involving the direct stakeholders in the process documentation stimulates their learning and reflection.

District engineers going to communities to interview community people on the planning of water service delivery raises the awareness of community realities and perspectives and triggers reflection. Procedures and formats are needed to feed the personal learning back to the learning alliance and multi stakeholder platform. Experience shows that these techniques give concrete shape to the activities in action research projects and members in learning alliances and multi stakeholder platforms often appreciate these concrete tasks.
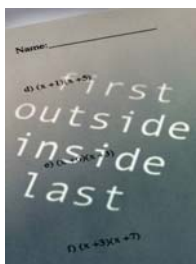
Outsiders

Involving outsiders in process documentation has a big advantage: outsiders already have more distance to the project objectives than the project team. That will help them to observe the process of the project

more clearly and more critically. Involving an independent documentary film maker, journalist or writer will give good results at least as long as they can work in freedom. Such professionals want to look behind the well-phrased project objectives, want to know what others think of the project, want to read between the lines and have the possibility to make good interviews and produce good information products.

The relationship between project and outsider must be organised well. Projects have more objectives than only documenting the processes they set in motion. Projects also want to have results. There is a delicate balance between the objective of achieving project results and the objective of documenting project processes, looking behind the scene and revealing power constellations and factors that hamper change. An outsider should not stretch the balance between the two objectives to the extent that project results or even continuation are endangered.

The process documentation specialist

 A good process documentation specialist is someone who is curious and who does not take every answer for granted. (S)he is an independent thinker. A process documentation specialist must appreciate working on her or his own, and taking her or his own decisions. The topic paper of the Annie Casey Foundation lists the following characteristics of a good process documentation specialist:

- is non-judgmental and can listen to many perspectives without an 'expert' hat on;
- can ask questions that stimulate critical thinking and dig below the surface;
- is able to stay objective while also seeing the big picture and placing learning in context of the larger vision;
- is culturally competent;
- understands the dynamics of human transformation;
- is trusted by the community, but can report findings without bias;
- can synthesise large volumes of information to identify key learnings;
- is skilled at communicating messages in positive ways.

Process documentation specialists must also have some specific skills. They should like to write and be capable to bring large amounts of information back to stories that people like to read. Writing is a key skill of a process documentation specialist. Other skills would be helpful but for these the support of outsiders may be called in e.g. making photographs and simple video sequences, making a newsletter, composing a website, making flyers, posters and murals.

Finally the process documentation specialist should also be willing to acquire good (conceptual) understanding of

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the processes the project is aiming to address or change such as concerted action, joint decision making or empowerment.

Internal project learning and outward looking communication

Process documentation can serve two purposes and outputs:

- Internal project learning and joint learning with the direct stakeholders in a project. Formats, methods and meetings are needed to enable and structure the internal project learning and learning with the stakeholders.
- Communication with the "outside" world. A communication strategy will be needed. With whom do we want to share which findings? What are the best formats and channels to reach out to these target audiences? Newsletters, books, academic articles, a small website, posters, message on TV or radio?

Can process documentation serve both purposes? Yes, it can very well, because for both purposes products are needed (interview protocols, case studies, photo albums, video bytes etc.).

The politics of process documentation

In process documentation we are looking for the factors that hinder or accelerate change. We look into context, into history and into how a project is rolling out. We will discover things that everybody knows but not everybody likes to be published and discussed out in the open: the blockages caused by power constellations, political interference, traditional beliefs, attitudes or lack of transparency. Although most stakeholders know about these factors nobody really likes to talk about them. And although most of the stakeholders also know that these factors will probably result in limited project success, personal and organisational interests may be too big to bring these factors in the public debate.

So what can a process documentation specialist say and what not, what can be published and what not? When will she/he harm the course of the project and when will she/he challenge the stakeholders and/or project teams in such a way that it will stimulate reflection and debate? Also: when will she/he endanger her/his own interests e.g. job security and career? There are no easy answers to these questions apart from the importance to be aware of these dilemmas and have the sensitivity or "Fingerspitzengefuehl" to know what can be done and what not.

Planning a process documentation effort

What are the most important steps in planning a process documentation effort?

- Discuss and identify the purpose of the process documentation.
  - o Is it for internal project learning and learning with the direct stakeholders? In that case the what, the how and the who must be identified.
  - o Is it for communication to the outside world? In that case a communication strategy is needed defining target groups and formats for communication.
- What is the theory of change of the project and how will the indicators and criteria derived from the theory direct and give focus to the process documentation? Which processes to trace, who to follow throughout the process, where and when?
- Which tools are needed for capturing the process, organising the information, analysing the findings and disseminating the information?
- Who will document the processes (project team, a process documentation specialist, direct stakeholders, outsiders)?
- Is it necessary to develop skills in process documentation (writing, video, photography, editing, website development)?
- What will the outputs be, the products – both for the internal learning and the communication strategy? For each output a short synopsis should be written – what is the content of the case study, video byte, photo album etc. and which specific objectives does it serve?
- How to monitor if the process documentation yielded success?

Final remarks

Process documentation may help projects to break through their sharp boundaries in time and space. It may help project interventions to engage with "*the continuous flow of social life and ongoing relations"* (Long and van der Ploeg, 1989)*. It may enable projects to raise issues of general interest and stimulate reflection and debate in wider society. It does not take external factors for granted or as the nasty assumptions in a logframe, but recognises them and tries to learn from them and respond to them. Process documentation may be one of the tools to make research projects more relevant.

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