Reflections on Experience: Towards More Effective Polio Communication Reviews

As Programme Director at The Communication Initiative and lead on our USAID-funded polio programme, I have had the very real privilege of being involved in the Global Polio Eradication initiative (GPEI) for the past 7 or 8 years. My vantage point has been somewhat unique as someone who sits outside the main implementing organisations but has nevertheless had an opportunity to see the programme close up. My participation in multiple reviews of national communication programmes and membership in the Pakistan/Afghanistan Technical Advisory Group has given me the opportunity to see the inner workings of these programmes - from senior government and planning levels to the frontline workers who are in many ways the real face of the programme for the caregivers who make decisions about their children’s health. I have also been able to watch these programmes evolve over time and to reflect on these experiences through related work coordinating research into polio communication issues and using online platforms to identify and distribute communication knowledge relevant to polio. What follows are some personal reflections on the importance of monitoring and evaluation as drivers in the programme’s evolving strategies, the changing role communication reviews have played in strengthening communication programmes, and lessons we have learned about what makes for an effective review process.

The GPEI has historically placed technical review and evidence-based decision making at the centre of its monitoring and planning. Whether that be in the form of campaign data, Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) surveillance, Lot Quality Assurance Sampling, independent monitoring, specialised research on epidemiology, or the socio-economic forces underlying demand, the polio programme prides itself on having built a culture of objective, evidence-based review and analysis. Technical assessments of the overall programme in the form of Technical Advisory Groups and Expert Review Committees have been longstanding features of this culture, as have traditional communication analyses of broad patterns of population awareness and attitude (knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) studies and the like).

However, it is also true that for many years, the programme focused its evidence-gathering more on epidemiology than communication and more on mass communication than localised social mobilisation. Recognition of the need to apply more analytic rigour to local communication and mobilisation efforts came late to the programme, but in recent years has come to be seen as essential to effectively responding to the resistance and poor coverage rates that now challenge the programme in shrinking but stubborn local sanctuaries. It is in this context of programme-wide commitment to independent review and analysis but slower recognition of the importance of ensuring the same culture for communication (and, especially, community-based communication) that today’s communication review has emerged.

The first communication reviews were held in 2005 and have evolved significantly over the ensuing 19 reviews and eight years. Initially modeled on the polio surveillance review in which a team of independent experts evaluated the state of a country’s polio surveillance capacity and made recommendations for improvement, polio communication reviews have become an important tool for providing oversight,
guidance, and direction to polio communication programmes. Organised by national polio programmes, UNICEF, and other partners, including The Communication Initiative, they have provided objective expert opinion on communication methods and initiatives, pointed out gaps where they exist, identified promising activities for scaling up, encouraged experience-sharing between programmes and partners, and made recommendations to improve programme impact and overcome challenges.

The reviews began as large multi-state events in which several countries presented their polio communication programmes to an independently chosen panel of communication experts, then evolved to broad-based national reviews in which panels reviewed country polio communication programmes in more detail, and finally expanded to issue-specific reviews, where panels selected in consultation with the country’s communication lead (UNICEF) reviewed a narrower range of select priority communication issues. While the overall trend was from reviewing communication programmes across several states, to focusing on individual country programmes, to zeroing in on sub-national issues and challenges, there was considerable national variation in areas such as review frequency and integration with ongoing programme monitoring, which came to be important for the relative success and impact of reviews.

I think there are important lessons to be drawn from looking at how the communication review has been adapted in each of the four countries where they have been held: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. However, I would like to begin by outlining what I have come to see as the critical components required for any effective review. These are that the review should be:

**Accountable:** recommendations and findings need to be incorporated into established oversight mechanisms and structures to ensure monitoring, evaluation, and decisions for further action.

**Independent:** the review panelists need to be independent of the programme being reviewed to ensure objectivity and to give the review legitimacy.

**Monitored:** implementation of review recommendations need appropriate milestones and indicators for monitoring and reporting by oversight bodies.

**Owned:** reviews should focus on priority issues and challenges as identified by government, the programme, and its partners and be conducted in such a way that the review process is seen to be relevant and constructive.

**Scheduled:** reviews should be incorporated into a regular schedule as part of an annual planning process so they become part of each programme’s normal planning culture.

**Supported:** reviews require considerable in-country support for logistics such as planning transportation, organising field visits, and preparing documentation.

These six components contribute to the effectiveness of each review and, through that, to improved evidence-based planning for communication. However, local contexts and realities have led to different weights being given to these components in different countries and over time. It is important, therefore, to take a closer look at the variations and their impact on review effectiveness.
Let’s begin with a more detailed look at India, where it is fair to say the communication review has been most integrated with programme planning because of the engagement of national and state governments supported by UNICEF with coordination, facilitation, and operationalisation. India’s communication reviews incorporate the six components outlined above in ways that have been extremely successful, along with notable adaptations related, in my opinion, to the central role UNICEF has played. This central role has been largely positive and in many ways necessary, but has resulted in a singular focus on UNICEF’s own polio communication programme and led to reviews having less relevance to, and impact on, some key areas of the programme for reasons such as:

- Sub-optimal integration of other significant polio communication partners such as the CORE Group Polio Project (partners are engaged in briefing and debriefing sessions but not integrated into review planning and monitoring);
- Less real or perceived independence of review team members, as international reviewers are approved by UNICEF and national ones are selected by UNICEF (there is considerable consultation with government but UNICEF leads and UNICEF staff often participate); and
- Internal rather than external monitoring and accountability for recommendations (recommendations are reviewed and prioritised by UNICEF and then added to UNICEF rolling workplans if accepted).

I want to underline that this is not to say India’s reviews have been ineffective. On the contrary, over the years they have contributed to the development of the SMNet (an extremely effective social mobilisation programme), uncovered and helped resolve gaps in the emergency response in West Bengal, identified activities for scaling up, provided insight into future programming requirements, and helped move important policy and operational programme initiatives forward. However, it is to say that focusing the reviews on UNICEF activities and programme priorities has created a context with strengths and weaknesses that I think are important to recognise.

The table below offers a quick outline of some of these:

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<th><strong>Strengths</strong></th>
<th><strong>Potential Weaknesses</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Accountable</strong> – reviews are integrated with UNICEF programme and work planning processes. This provides a structure for recommendations to be prioritised and a process for ensuring they are operationalised at the appropriate level.</td>
<td>Accountability is within UNICEF (and, to a lesser extent, government) and not linked to other significant implementing partners such as CORE. There is no transparent process for reporting on progress outside of UNICEF.</td>
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<td><strong>Independent</strong> – UNICEF staff outside of India but engaged in technical support to the programme are often involved as review panellists. This is done to ensure that some panellists have extensive knowledge of the programme. UNICEF also leads the approval process for other international panellists and the selection of in-country members to ensure that skills are matched with review foci.</td>
<td>Because UNICEF staff members are involved as panellists and in selecting review team members, the reviews cannot be considered independent. This has the potential to impact on the recommendations made and/or perceptions regarding their objectivity.</td>
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<td><strong>Monitored</strong> – the process of incorporating recommendations into work plans provides a structure for ongoing monitoring within UNICEF’s internal programme tracking.</td>
<td>Monitoring is internal to UNICEF, with no formal requirement to report back on progress to government (though government is invited to debriefings) or other oversight bodies such as the India Expert Advisory Group (IEAG).</td>
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<td><strong>Owned</strong> – the agenda is developed by UNICEF as communication-led, based on issues its programme faces and has determined are important. This ensures that the review is focused on issues of central programme importance to those who will implement recommendations.</td>
<td>The UNICEF focus can leave out or reduce the role of other partners - some of whom play a very significant community mobilisation and communication role.</td>
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<td><strong>Scheduled</strong> - reviews have been held towards the end of Being planned around internal UNICEF processes</td>
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each year at a point where they can be incorporated into other internal UNICEF polio programme work planning processes. The reviews have become a normal component of the planning process.

Supported – having the reviews led by UNICEF means that review teams can be supported by the infrastructure UNICEF has in-country (transport, offices, staff, relations with government and other key actors, security, etc.) and also through documentation such as up-to-date data, research, programme reports, and day-to-day operational experience.

UNICEF involvement in so much of the planning and support could lead to a perception of too much control over the review team’s agenda, who and what they see, and the documents they are able to access.

India’s approach to reviews has been extremely successful, though it is important to acknowledge that there has been some compromise in the areas of partner engagement and ownership, as well as independence.

Lessons from communication reviews over the past several years in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria are also instructive, though with greater weaknesses. One of the less salutary hallmarks of these reviews has been their sporadic and somewhat orphaned nature. They have tended to be nationally oriented affairs focused on taking a snapshot of the state of entire polio communication programmes at a particular moment in time. Because of their sporadic and infrequent nature, they have not been integrated into normal planning processes. Findings and recommendations have been perceived as validation or (more often) critique of programme activities but seldom internalised or acted upon. Reviews have, therefore, been marked by little follow up, limited accountability, and few linkages to other technical review bodies and processes such as the Technical Advisory Groups (TAGs)/ Expert Review Committees (ERCs).

The past two years, however, have seen some positive change. The three remaining endemic countries have begun to:

- design reviews with greater input from country-level staff;
- zero in on the most critical challenges faced by the programme;
- select review teams for their expertise in specific areas related to identified challenges; and
- link reviews (albeit informally) to oversight bodies.

This sharpened focus has resulted in more targeted recommendations and the beginnings of more accountability. However, progress towards greater accountability through planning processes to prioritise, operationalise, and monitor recommendations or efforts to create more formal links to oversight bodies has been slow. It is fair to say that while reviews in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan have improved by building on lessons from their own and India’s experience, a lot can still be done to make them more effective by paying attention to how each component is applied:

- **Accountable**: this remains one of the weakest elements of the review process outside of India (and, as noted above, accountability beyond UNICEF has been a challenge there as well). For the most part, review recommendations continue to be viewed as informal guidance.

- **Independent**: this has become a malleable concept as more people working within the global polio communication programme have become involved. UNICEF staff from New York and WHO staff from Geneva who are closely involved in providing ongoing technical support to communication programmes routinely participate in reviews. Independence is increasingly defined as independence from normal day-
to-day operations and not from the technical and strategic decision-making that has helped guide many programme decisions. While some involvement of extra-country technical staff is likely unavoidable, the potential downsides need to be acknowledged and ameliorated where possible.

- **Monitored**: this is increasingly discussed as an important element (see text box) for all reviews, but, for the most part, there is still little monitoring of the implementation of review recommendations.

- **Owned**: this has increased with greater involvement of in-country polio communication staff in developing review agendas and identifying priority areas of focus. However, without follow up planning, accountability, and monitoring, it is not clear how this increased ownership of agenda building will result in changes to programme quality.

- **Scheduled**: the ad hoc approach to scheduling reviews is one of the weaker aspects of review planning in the remaining endemic countries. While India incorporated reviews into a regular annual planning process, the remaining endemic countries continue to treat reviews as extraordinary events occurring outside of normal planning processes, not linked to other reporting or accountability structures and therefore more than a little bit ‘orphaned’.

- **Supported**: the reviews receive a significant level of logistical support from polio communication programme staff in UNICEF. UNICEF leads country discussions to identify priorities and agendas for the reviews, organises transport, arranges meetings, establishes itineraries, monitors and provides security, covers many in-country costs, and provides much of the documentation. This is a significant and essential contribution of resources and time. As noted, this necessary set of inputs carries with it the potential to impact on real or perceived independence. It is certainly possible to provide support in ways that minimise the impact on independence and maximise support to areas that allow the teams’ technical skills to be used most effectively, but the issue needs to be acknowledged.

While I feel strongly that every effective communication review has to be accountable, independent, monitored, owned, scheduled, and supported, I also feel that a modicum of flexibility is required to account for and accommodate different national and local realities and the evolving context of the programme. In this sense, each component exists on a spectrum. However, the right balance within and across all six components is essential to effective communication reviews. It seems to me that this balance is eminently achievable if we keep the following lessons in mind:

- **Reviews need to be held within a structure of accountability** that ensures reporting to and monitoring by bodies with a mandate for independent advice and/or oversight (TAGs, ERCs, Independent Monitoring Board (IMB), etc.) to provide government and the programme with reliable and objective insight and guidance.

- **Independence** (i.e. not having team members drawn from the partner organisations being reviewed) is important to provide a legitimate basis for objective analysis - this should not preclude arms-length participation from implementing agencies to support deliberations.

- **Reviews need to be an integral part of a process in which the review provides insight and recommendations for action**: the programme then prioritises the recommendations and develops indicators and an implementation plan to be used by programme and oversight bodies to monitor progress and outcomes.

- **While reviews need to be relevant to, and owned by, the programmes they are reviewing**: this should include ownership from all partners with significant polio communication programmes and with the ability for review team members to follow independent investigations and to be active participants in developing agendas and terms of reference for each review.

In May 2012, Pakistan’s review incorporated a plan for the review team to reconvene via teleconference to review progress against recommendations and in September 2012 Nigeria’s review recommended a meeting of relevant partners to prioritise recommendations and develop an operational plan for implementation.
• For reviews to be integrated into existing planning and monitoring structures and processes and for the review investment to be maximised, they need to happen regularly and be appropriately scheduled to fit within each country’s planning framework.

• In-country logistical and organisational support is essential and needs to incorporate identification and dissemination of pre-review intelligence and documentation and ensure that review team members are able to participate in setting agendas, comment on progress against previous recommendations, and have flexibility in field itineraries to follow evidence.

Communication reviews have already contributed significantly to the building of evidence-based responses to communication challenges and have the capacity to contribute even more in the future as the programme faces re-emergent or new challenges, such as increases in violence against polio workers, rapidly expanding social mobilisation programmes, the introduction of inactivated polio vaccine (IPV), and much greater emphasis on strengthening routine immunisation. However, for communication reviews to become effective enough to meet the programme demands of the coming years, we will need to work at better integrating them into programme planning and monitoring cycles, placing them clearly within a system of accountability, and ensuring they have the independence to be viewed as objective external reflection.