Giving Evaluation Away
Challenges in a Learning Based Approach to Institutional Assessment[1]

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The adoption of a learning-based approach to evaluation presents special challenges to a research-funding agency with a mandate to strengthen research and research capacity with partners in less industrial countries, or in the South. While the general practice has been to evaluate funded projects, there is increased recognition that the project may be the wrong unit of analysis. Projects are a way of organizing work, but they are not the end in development. They do not in themselves serve the purpose of building institutional capacity, and their implementation and evaluation may in some cases be detrimental to the strengthening of an institution. The adoption of a learning-based approach to evaluation within a granting agency leads to the realization that there is also a need and potential benefit for applying this evaluation approach within recipient organizations. This highlights a significant change in perspective on the use of evaluation for both the donor and the recipient. Such an approach presents significant challenges and opportunities to increase participation in the evaluation process. Giving evaluation away to those most directly affected calls for new approaches to evaluation, which both recognize the need for accountability and quality control and build the internal capacity of organizations for using evaluation for their own organizational planning and management purposes.

In 1995, the International Development Research Centre (Canada) published a framework for institutional assessment for research organizations (*Institutional Assessment*, Charles Lusthaus et al) which was originally commissioned to meet the needs of the Centre in assessing the organizations it funds. It was quickly recognized that this framework had considerable potential as a participatory self-assessment tool and as a mechanism to assist organizations in building evaluation into their planning and management systems. Trials were carried out in several organizations in West Africa and South Asia.

This paper will explore the background to the development of a model for institutional assessment at the International Development Research Centre, to support our interest in strengthening capacity with partner institutions of IDRC. I will focus especially on perspectives from a funding agency because that is where my experience lies, but also because funding agencies and granting councils have driven a significant part of the

evaluation agenda in development work for the past twenty years.

The International Development Research Centre (Canada) is a public corporation funded mainly by the Government of Canada. IDRC was established in 1970 and funds research and research capacity building in Third World countries, with a view to supporting local capacity building for scientific research in support of development. While in the early years of IDRC the primary focus was on building individual research capacity, there has been increasing emphasis on building strong research systems, organizations and institutions.

Background

The field of international development has a particular relationship with evaluation. Evaluation has been used primarily by the donors and granting agencies to assess the utility of their projects in countries they are assisting. In this context, donor agencies generally set the evaluation measures and establish criteria based on donor agency programs. This approach to evaluation remains an important dimension of accountability for any donor agency, whether in the public sector or as an NGO. From the point of view of recipient organizations, evaluation has thus been viewed largely as a policing mechanism, and in donor agencies its implementation has largely been on a compliance basis. What is assumed in this approach, is that good projects were selected to begin with and that these projects will lead to an overall beneficial effect. Evaluation of projects often serves as a proxy to assess executing agencies: if "good" projects are happening, then the executing agency is considered good (and vice versa).

Frustration with this donor control of the evaluation agenda and an early recognition by community groups and community voices, that there was an essential role for the

community in evaluation, has led to the development of a number of approaches to evaluation based in the community, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal, among others. While the donor community has been slow to deal with this issue, it is increasingly recognized that the current approach of project evaluation has not yielded the most beneficial results, either for the donors themselves or for their recipients. It has not been that helpful to donors because the focus has been primarily on individual projects, without recognising overall contributions to development. As we are pushed increasingly to demonstrate results, there is emerging realisation that the results are not evident solely in the projects, but also in the environments where the projects are implemented. Because results are generally translated into short-term measurable impacts of projects, the very nature of research for development to build capacity for the future is at risk. Project evaluation is also less useful to recipients because this approach remains focussed on donor funding agendas, without taking into account the local context in which projects are implemented. As Bajaj (1997) noted in a recent study, donors and recipients want very different things out of an evaluation. Recipients want to learn about how their objectives are being supported by this work, and what they can learn about their progress in evaluating a given project. Donors want to learn about the project itself, and then relate it back to their programming objectives. As the same study noted, the lack of involvement of recipients in the design stage of evaluation studies, or even the data gathering stage, means that the needs and interests of the donor dominate the evaluation agenda. As outlined in the table below, recipients only tend to be brought into the evaluation to help with the logistics and to hear the results. If they have not been actively involved in the design of the evaluation process itself, it is hardly surprising that most evaluation results are irrelevant to the recipient organizations.

EVALUATION STAGES/STEPS	DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION OF RECIPIENT ORGANIZATIONS		
	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Planning Stage			
Step 1: Identification of issues to be studied		*	
Step 2: Formulation of terms of reference			*
Step 3: Choice of consultants			*
Step 4: Timing of Study		*	
Step 5: Resources to be spent			*
Conduct Stage			
Step 6: Briefing of documents			*
Step 7: Travel and Logistic arrangements	*		
Step 8: Methodology planning			*
Step 9: Determining sources of information		*	
Step 10: Reviewing and interpreting information collected			*
Reporting Stage			
Step 11: Debriefing	*		
Step 12: Draft report		*	
Step 13: Final Report		*	

Source: Manjul Bajaj, Revisiting Evaluation, IDRC, 1997: 10

In summary, the project may be the wrong unit of analysis. Rather, the analysis should be more specifically focussed on the results we are trying to achieve, whether to strengthen a field of research or to contribute to a domain (such as health, employment, food security) in national development. In other words, instead of regarding projects as the end, they should be viewed more as the vehicle to achieve larger development objectives. That is certainly the intention in funding the work in the first place;

however, the evaluation process does not reflect that reality. If we move in this direction, results are then measured in terms of progress towards the objective, not only in terms of the (project) vehicle's successful performance.

That projects should be regarded only as a means rather than the end is not a novel concept. It is in the implementation that projects have become the focus and for many purposes, the end point. As Najam (1995) notes in a review of the literature on project and policy implementation, only when the actors are viewed as the unit of analysis and implementation is seen as a political process do we begin to build an understanding of the enabling and constraining factors in any initiative. In contexts where there are many actors, both individual and institutional, the process is even more complex; hence, a project-focussed evaluation approach will take one further away from a clearer understanding of the interactions and interests driving the success or failure of an initiative. Both the problem area and the project context are critical in the evaluation process, as are the roles and functions of implementing agents and those affected by the activity or project.

Viewing evaluation from this perspective has major implications for the evaluation programs of donor agencies and granting councils, where learning has been largely based within the funding agency and where the project has been the basic unit of analysis. With the focus on performance measurement and results based management, a project should be assessed in the context of how it is contributing to the larger goal of development. This means that there has to be learning both for the funding agency and the recipient organization. The unit of analysis changes -- and perhaps more importantly, it means that performance is measured against progress in a development context, not solely against achievement of the project.

From Project Evaluation to Institutional Assessment

The growing awareness within the donor community of the importance of institutional[3] capacity building as a critical part of development work in the South is part of moving away from a project model of development to a more systemic model. It is recognized that institutions and organizations play vital roles in how a community evolves and what opportunities it acquires. Institutional capacity building takes a variety of forms: some argue that organizational structures need to be created and reinforced; others argue that alternate forms of support such as networks of support among researchers in different countries are a more effective mode than building organizations. But in all cases, there is recognised need for a support structure so that strong and capable individuals do not operate in isolation (Bernard, 1996; Lusthaus et al 1995). There is a need for creating a space for consultation, a space for bringing along junior researchers and a space for action and influence on the policy-making process which extends beyond the individual reach of any one person.

The establishment of strong and capable local institutions- and not only strong projects- is necessary to effectively make decisions and implement programs. This need is part of the recognition that development agencies don't deliver "development" but rather deliver pieces of the development puzzle which countries, organizations, networks or individuals, can choose to use or not. Many different types of programs have been designed around this issue, both on the research side and on the development side. They include organizational support grants for research centres, the creation and strengthening of research

networks, support to government agency capacity building, support to NGOs and so on; they include specialized research area grants, core grants, and training programs. An issue that emerges is how to evaluate progress in this area. What constitutes institutional capacity strengthening? How does it differ from individual capacity building? And what criteria should be used and who should be involved in the assessment process?

In many countries where IDRC is working, individual research capacity has grown significantly over the twenty-five years the Centre has been operating. We find that we are working with an increasingly sophisticated research community (Salewicz & Dwivedi 1996). While many efforts are underway to expand research capacity both within the traditional university-related research community and outside, an increasing emphasis is on the institutional structures within which individual researchers operate. Strong researchers need institutional support structures to conduct their work and mechanisms through which to influence the policy process. This may mean the building of traditional research structures - university departments, research institutes - but it may also mean building other forms of institutional support, such as research networks. Whatever the strategy, there is a need to explore the most effective patterns for institutional support and to build a capacity to assess the organizations and institutions which are created or strengthened. As the Centre moved towards this direction, several requests were directed to the Evaluation Unit at IDRC to identify some appropriate tools for assessing institutional development, to complement the existing abilities of assessing individual research capacity.

The Evaluation Unit of IDRC undertook to develop a framework for the assessment of institutional capacity with a particular focus on research institutions. This framework was developed with the Universalia Management

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[3]In the development of this framework we have used institution and organization interchangeably; we have not attempted to differentiate the two. Webster=s Ninth New Collegiate, 1989) defines an institution as, a significant practice (viz., a legal system) and as an established organization.

Group (Lusthaus et al 1995) and was the basis for development of an approach to diagnose organizational strengths and weaknesses and provide a basis on which to determine potential and identify areas for support. What is unique about this framework is that it explicitly addresses several dimensions of institutional strengthening. While most institutional assessment work focuses primarily on capacity within the organization as the critical dimension, this framework looks equally at four dimensions of an organization:

- **capacity** (leadership, management, human resources) remains important, but balanced with

- **motivation** (history, mission, culture, incentives) and

- **environment** (legal, social, technical, etc.) These three key elements are situated in a

- **performance** framework, based on effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and financial viability.

The approach is based on the premise that performance demonstrates the results of the organizations work, in efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and financial viability. Performance is then the synthesis and result of the way in which the organization uses its capacities, builds motivation, and deals with its environment. In order to assess these areas of performance, the three areas of capacity, motivation and environment are assessed.

Since each institution or organization is unique with different capacities, environments and mission, this framework for institutional assessment is not prescriptive. Rather, this framework provides a set of guidelines around the key areas which need to be addressed. These factors are inter-related as illustrated below.
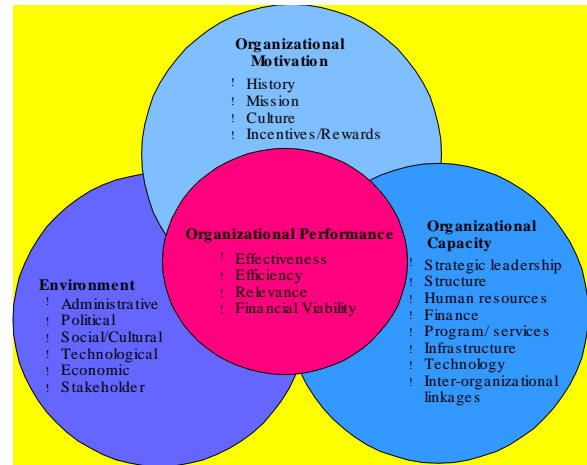
The framework can be used for external or internal review. It can be used for a comprehensive review of an organization, or to address a specific issue or problem. It was developed in the first instance as a tool for a funding agency to assess its partnerships. However because of the factors noted above (i.e. the importance of ownership in the use of results, and the relevance of assessment as part of the capacity of an organization), we tested the framework as a self-assessment approach. Several case studies based on use of this model were presented at the Canadian Evaluation Society meetings in Ottawa in May 1997. At that point, the work was just coming to a close in most of the organizations that adopted the self-assessment framework. Since then we have had the final reports which give us further insights into the areas covered, the problems encountered and the potential for this work. What I would like to do here is elaborate on the findings of testing this framework and explore their implications for applying the model and for strengthening future work in the area of participation in institutional assessment. Based on our experience, this model is not restricted to research organizations but is also useful for other types of organizations. While the cases presented here are all research oriented, they nonetheless provide useful insights more generally in the area of participatory institutional assessment. What emerges from these experiences is that a participatory-based

monitoring and evaluation approach should form a key part of any organizational assessment, as organizations are the platform from which actions and initiatives spring.

Experiences in Institutional Self-Assessment

I will present experiences as a synthesis of the self-assessment work undertaken in several research institutions in West Africa and South Asia, rather than by highlighting any one case[4]. First, I will outline what we thought would happen; then I will summarize what actually happened. I will next explore some of the lessons which emerge and what potential we see for ourselves, other funding agencies, and the recipients gaining more control of the evaluation process. Finally, I will raise some issues for future research which may be a useful complement to the research agenda this workshop intends to develop.

The Plan

The institutions involved in self-assessment were approached based on recommendations and suggestions from IDRC program officers. The concept was that this would be a joint assessment, involving both IDRC and the recipient, as both had learning needs about capacity of the organizations. The process was to be facilitated by Universalia Management Group, who would assist in the identification of terms of reference with each institution, identification of tools, support for methodology for data collection and analysis, and commentary on the final report. IDRC would remain involved in some capacity with the participating institutions with the expectation that the reviews could be of value to IDRC and could obviate the necessity for external review in some cases. It was also expected that IDRC would learn more about the potential of assessment as a tool in

building organizational capacity. Time frames were individually established; however, it was intended to have considerable overlap in timing amongst the three institutions in West Africa, in part to save on travel costs for the facilitators, and in part so that there would be some opportunity for comparisons and joint work by the organizations.

In South Asia the process was slightly different, with the integration of a strategic planning process into the self-assessment. This entailed a workshop following the assessment in which the members of the organization met for a week to discuss how the diagnosis influenced their strategic plan.

In both settings, an initial visit by IDRC to propose the institutional self assessment was followed by a consultation with the Universalia team to discuss a "readiness"[5] and begin the definition of terms of reference and a work plan, to establish a process in each organization, and to consider the resources (internal and external) which would be needed to conduct the assessment. Finally, the consultants were asked to provide a comment to IDRC on the external review, not so much in terms of conclusions of the team, but rather in terms of the quality and reliability of the data on which the conclusions were based: did they ensure full data collection; did they ensure access to reliable data; did they identify all relevant sources, and so on. The purpose of this comment was to provide back up to IDRC on the legitimacy and quality of the assessment so that it also had the potential to be used for IDRC purposes as well.

In West Africa, IDRC has a regional evaluation officer based in Dakar. She worked closely with Universalia to provide back-up for the institutions participating in the process. Her role was to keep the process moving, either by

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[4]The cases will be published by IDRC and can be obtained through the Evaluation Unit.

[5] @Readiness@ refers to [a] the clarification of the evaluation's primary purpose and the identification of the main [clients] actors to be involved in the process <?> [for the evaluation], through an examination of factors such as culture, leadership, resources, vision, strategy, and systems.

providing assistance herself, or involving a Program Officer the consultants or the Evaluation Unit as needed. She was involved from the beginning of the assessments and maintained a watching brief, assisting where appropriate.

It was anticipated that the assessment would result in a report that could be used not only by the organization in its own planning but also by IDRC as part of its accountability requirements.

What happened

These case studies were all within organizations that have received funding from IDRC, in West Africa and South Asia. They are all research/development organizations, but of somewhat different types, from regional institutions, to research institutes within a university. All engage in development research and all seek to influence development policy at the national and regional levels. All are engaged in work which is intended to create an "indigenous body of knowledge" in their respective fields of endeavour (economics, social sciences, rural development). That is, all are seeking to create or adapt models of research for local conditions.

There was initial scepticism in most of the organizations. This was based on previous experiences with evaluation and organizational assessment (where it had been used in other contexts to downsize, reduce funding, etc.), on concerns about the links between the assessment and ongoing IDRC support, and on the perceived commitment of resources to a process advocated from outside. Not surprisingly, scepticism was least pronounced where there was no direct link between the assessment and any projects, both in terms of timing and program officer involvement. In the process of implementation, scepticism was slowly overcome in all but one case, and the assessments proceeded effectively. Overcoming the scepticism was an incremental

process; it happened as the participants perceived the relevance of the process to their own needs. In one case, scepticism persisted and is, in my view, the primary reason that the assessment has not been completed to this date. Start-up was slower where scepticism was higher.

The work was carried out by providing facilitation support to design an institutional self-assessment process around the framework. The actual development of terms of reference, data collection and analysis were carried out by the organizations themselves, with some involvement of the facilitators and some external expertise commissioned in some cases. For example, in West Africa this emerged in a joint design workshop involving all 3 research institutes with IDRC and the facilitators. The workshop was called to outline the nature of the self-assessment, develop terms of reference for each study and begin to design data collection instruments. It was both helpful and a distraction to have the three organizations working together. To some extent they were able to learn from each other and strengthen the development of terms of reference and data collection. At the same time they each needed a very different process and needed to address different issues. On reflection, perhaps a one-day workshop together followed by individual organizational workshops would have been more productive. Data gathering by each organization was structured differently and teams to manage the self-assessments were set up according to the prevailing norms in the organisations. In one case, the Executive Director created a self-assessment team composed of several young professionals led by the Head of Training. The team was responsible for all aspects of the process. Their work was reviewed by the Executive Director. In another organization, the process was led by a team of two very senior managers who subcontracted external consultants to carry out specific aspects of the process such as data collection and analysis of

some issues. The team then integrated these external reports into their own synthesis outputs. In a third organization, the senior management operated as a Steering Committee responsible for the strategic aspects of the self-assessment and mandated various individuals inside the organization to conduct parts of the process.[6]

Different mechanisms were employed in the organizations, from placing the bulk of the work in the hands of relatively junior professionals, to actively involving senior managers throughout the process. The organisations themselves determined which mechanisms to apply. For instance, in one organization the Executive Director's role was intentionally minimal during the process of the self-assessment; however his role was crucial in ensuring that important stakeholders would provide needed data. He is influential and respected in his region and he personally called stakeholders both within and outside the organisation and encouraged them to respond to the questionnaire that the operational team was sending. The response rate increased significantly with his intervention. In another case, the organization involved a former executive director (the founder of the centre) as part of the evaluation team, and he was able to provide the historical perspective on many of the issues discussed. The individual became the "wise" advisor and his role was invaluable.

In all cases where the assessment has been completed, there has been strong support from management for the initiation of this process, and there have been human and financial resources dedicated to completion of the work.

In the one case where the process is not yet complete, there has not been strong support from the management of the centre: in the midst of discussions it became clear that the

director would be leaving his post and from that point he had no incentive to engage in the process. A new director may or may not make a difference to the process. Discussions have to be undertaken with the new director to determine whether or not the process could usefully proceed at this stage. What will need further clarification is how much the new director will see this as an opportunity to assess the structure and functions of the research centre, or whether he (or she) will see it as a compliance mechanism. To some extent, the new director's own views on his (her) own mandate will be a determining factor, as will be the role and position of IDRC in the process, as will be discussed further below.

The initial plan to maintain parallel processes among the organizations in West Africa was initiated with a joint workshop involving the leadership of all three centres and the facilitators to discuss the nature of the process, and the intent of the assessment. However, given the different starting points of each organization, it was not possible to maintain the same time frame on each process. This meant a slightly more expensive process and a slightly more significant time commitment by all parties concerned. It also complicated the start-up of the exercise: as the parties were at different points and held different views, a collective exercise was difficult to use effectively.

The role of the funding agency (in most cases, only IDRC) in the self-assessment process varied. In some cases, program officers from the donor agency were actively involved, and in others, assessments were undertaken without the involvement of the program officers other than awareness that the process was underway. The case work tells us quite clearly that it is possible for the granting agency to be involved in supporting this process, but that there must be some clear boundaries. Where a program of funding is coming to closure (whether a project or an institutional support grant), there are risks

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[6] The case examples presented in the following sections are taken from, Charles Lusthaus et al, Using Assessment to Improve Performance, in press, MS p 15.

that partial information may be used against the organization. This happened with one of the participating centres. In the course of the self-assessment, a number of discussion documents were prepared and circulated within the research centre. These documents were part of tentative ideas raised by different staff members, some of which were generally agreed to, while some of which were new issues coming up for the first time. Because IDRC was involved in working with the group on its self-assessment, the documents were also given to IDRC. In one instance, an IDRC staff person noted some issues in the report, and used the occasion to challenge what was being done in the research centre. This created concern about the use of information and a fear that openness could be penalized. It can be extremely difficult to draw the line between open engagement in discussions and raising issues from outside before the internal conclusions have been reached.

As has been noted in relation to other points above, the assessments generally took longer than anticipated (one is not yet complete). No one realized in advance the implications of a self-assessment process in terms of involvement of staff, members and other constituents. Overcoming some of the barriers outlined above had to be achieved with all the different constituencies. For example, in one case, a member of a self-assessment team had a difficult experience in the past with an external consultant who was involved in conducting a self-assessment exercise; as a result, this team member raised a lot of initial resistance to the process. The consultant facilitating the self-assessment had to acknowledge and deal with the resistance before the [self-assessment] the process could actually move forward. This was achieved primarily through dialogue, negotiation and persistence. In another example, a self-assessment was undertaken officially and everyone in the organisation was informed. In practice, however, the staff members

responsible for the self-assessment did not have enough time to simultaneously conduct the assessment and continue their normal professional activities. Ultimately the team brought the issue to management to resolve, and the staff member was allocated more time for this task.

In all cases, the self-assessment resulted in focussing around issues pertaining to the mission and direction of the organization - as Bajaj noted in her study, it is the organization itself, not the project, which is of most interest to those being evaluated. What emerged in all cases, was that there were fundamental changes, which should be considered in the mission or structure of the organization. For instance, one centre realized that in its efforts to be well funded and become a strong organization, it had started to compete with its members for donor funded projects. The Board and management realized that they had to change the nature of the projects supported, in such a way that they would complement and support their members' efforts, rather than take projects away from them. Instead of obtaining funding solely for project implementation, management identified a need to obtain support to provide training for their members, to explore new research areas their members could work in, and in general find ways to enhance their members' capacities so that they could carry out the work in their own countries.

This outcome of the self-assessment process which leads to a greater organisational focus is not surprising in the sense that as the environment changes, the discordance between any organization's structure and mission with the environment increases. The institutional assessment work creates a timely mechanism for addressing this issue. Since the extent of potential change was not realized at the beginning of most of the assessments, this meant that not enough time was allocated to consider these issues: it was generally

assumed that the assessment would lead to fine-tuning more than anything else. However, it usually resulted in revealing much more fundamental change, for which time requirements are more long-term.

What We Learned

- Each organization we dealt with in the process was unique. They were all at different stages in development and all had different issues as a starting point. This highlighted the individual nature of the process and confirmed for us that there is no single approach to advocate. Each assessment needs to be defined in the context of the specific setting, and each design has to be sufficiently flexible to adapt as the layers of the organization are peeled back. The experiences to date have suggested several important lessons, both as to the design and to the process of self-assessment. The main insights are highlighted here:

Those inside are not necessarily easier on themselves than an external reviewer would be.

In the cases conducted, the leadership has addressed and in some cases adopted, recommendations which fundamentally challenge the governance structures of the organizations. Because the investigation, analysis and recommendations were drawn from inside the organization, the potential for application is much stronger. The following shows examples of how results from the self-assessment have been utilised directly by those involved:

- One organization realized that it needed a much stronger capacity to provide training and technical support to its members. As a result of the recommendations of the self-assessment, they have since strengthened the training unit and given it much more prominence in the work they carry out.

- Another organization continued the self-assessment process with a 3-day strategic planning exercise, during which the self-

assessment data was used as a basis for the development of strategies.

- One organization used its self-assessment report to develop a special Board session at their annual meeting.

- However, one particular case illustrates that ownership over results may not always be achieved in the process. In this case, the organization never fully completed the exercise due to various changes. The director left just as the process was to begin. A new director was not in place for some time. There has been no follow up, and the draft report is likely to be shelved.

There is always the question in a self-assessment that the self interest of those involved will lead them to paint a rosy picture of the situation, either to maintain a view that things are going well or to present a picture to the outside which will lead to further funding. We did not find this to be the case. Difficult issues were raised and addressed in the course of the self-assessment in all the institutions. Challenges to mission were made and recommendations have included some quite fundamental changes. There are several reasons for this:

1) The nature of the self-assessment process involved a range of actors, not only one "level" of actor in the organization. This means that there are opportunities to raise different perspectives and issues. No organization consists of only one perspective; so by involving different actors in the self assessment, these different perspectives and concerns are brought out.

2) In addition, all of those involved have at one point experienced external reviews in which they had to deal with someone who never unravelled the layers of complexity in their organization, and therefore was not able to present relevant recommendations. Those involved in the self-assessment appreciated the opportunity to deal with the issues in depth with a group of participants aware of the complexities within the organisation.

3) In the end, it is the staff and membership of the organization which has to live with its successes and failures, not the external reviewers. They have therefore a stake in taking the opportunity presented to do everything they can to improve the organization.

The self assessment process is most effective when it is de-linked from the project cycle.

One of the first challenges in the self assessment process was scepticism about the motives: Was this simply an alternative way for the funding agency to get inside the organization to decide about future funding? This concern was exacerbated in those organizations closest to the end of their current funding cycle. Since most evaluation is conducted as part of determining whether or not to continue funding of a project or an organization, this remained a problematic factor in the self-assessment cycle. Thus, while the concept of self-assessment should make it part of institutional strengthening, there was a natural tendency to consider how the assessment will affect the project cycle. In instances whereby project funding was coming to a close, there was a strong tendency to expect the outcome of the assessment to lead into the next (potential) project.

In the one case where the process was de-linked most explicitly from the funding cycle, implementation was much smoother. In this case, the donor agency program officer was not actively involved with the self-assessment exercise. There was an open discussion of this issue between the donor agency program officer and the staff of the recipient organization in the beginning of the assessment; it was clearly agreed then that the assessment would not be linked to the project, and that the program officer from the donor agency would not be directly involved in conducting the assessment. This agreement was fully upheld during the implementation. The program officer was kept informed of events over the life of the assessment, as well

as of the outcomes of the assessment; but he was not informed of the details of the assessment as it took place. While it is possible to develop a collaborative approach to institutional self-assessment, and that the assessment can be useful to for both the organization and the funding agency, the parameters of that collaboration must be clearly spelled out at the beginning. The principles which would seem to apply are that:

1) the terms of reference should be developed collaboratively;

2) the process documents should be shared judiciously and their receipt by the recipient should be treated as a demonstration of trust and collegiality; the contents should not be used against the organization nor should their be a perception of use in that way; and

3) the purpose of the self-assessment needs to be kept clearly in focus. For the organization, it contributes specific change recommendations. For the funding agency, it is not so much the specific outputs which are at issue, but rather the identification of capacity building through effective assessment, followed by implementation of the recommendations.

Self assessment and external review fulfill different purposes

Both external review and self assessment are legitimate review processes. External review is often needed for accountability of funds received and also for quality control. But without some parallel review processes internal to the organization, external review does not necessarily contribute to institutional strengthening and capacity building. Self assessment fulfills that need, by providing the mechanism for an organization to look at its own progress and determine what changes should be made. It strengthens an institution's capacity for reflection, a key component of any learning organization and helps organizations deal on a more equal footing with external stakeholders (i.e. funding agencies). This means more capacity to negotiate with donors on the design of

evaluations, resulting in a stronger focus on the progress of the organization as a whole rather than the success of the individual project.

Lessons from the process

Aside from these key areas of learning, there are a number of elements of the self assessment process which proceeded differently in each organization. The successes and problems encountered suggest some adaptations to the process which should be considered by both implementing organizations and facilitators:

1) The self-assessment needs a 'champion', but the champion needs to put a system in place to ensure full participation and continuity if the process is going to proceed clearly and smoothly.

2) The self assessment needs the support of the relevant interest groups, both within the organization - staff and members - and in the surrounding environment - those affected, government departments, other funding sources, and so on.

3) The organization should be prepared to have discussions on both the mission and structure of the organization. While there was not an intent in most cases to move the assessment to this level, it happened in all cases.

4) The process often leads to an ongoing interest in evaluation as learning and organization building. In that context, the establishment of an ongoing monitoring and evaluation process, or a modification an existing evaluation role is sometimes an outcome. The concept of a learning approach to evaluation has major implications within the organisation in terms of human resources, time investment in evaluation.

5) While the self-assessment process may have been a more time consuming process than external review, the recommendations are readily understood when they are presented, and do not require the sort of review and internalizing which is required when recommendations come from an external

review. Time lag from recommendation to implementation, therefore, is greatly reduced. While we have not tested this idea, it would appear, if we look at time requirements - starting from the beginning of assessment to the implementation of recommendations - we would find that self assessment is no more time consuming than external review, and may be less so.

6) There is a need to determine the optimum relationship in a collaborative self-assessment when external actors are involved. While we still don't know what best defines such a relationship, an open exploration of the issues and potential conflicts would certainly be an essential ingredient in the design of a collaborative self-assessment.

The research agenda: operational considerations

Giving evaluation away to those most affected remains a strong research agenda in building the use of and capacity for evaluation within our organization and in work with our partners. The potential for learning from evaluation is much stronger in such a context, and the relevance of evaluation is more clearly demonstrated. The ongoing frustration of evaluators as to whether or not anyone actually uses their results is mitigated when the conclusions are reached by those most affected. As these cases demonstrate, when it is within their power to do something, the members and stakeholders in an organization will conduct an assessment which addresses fundamental questions. Several critical questions remain unanswered:

1) We don't know how sustainable the interventions for institutional self-assessment will be. Hence, follow up with the participating organizations over the next several years will be critical.

2) We are only beginning to work with these and other partners on the question of the design of relevant internal monitoring and evaluation systems which will assist them in such processes on an ongoing basis.

3) We don=t know if and how the process could be repeated in an organization: would there be reluctance to get so deeply into mission and structure again? Or is there potential for follow-up on a more ad hoc basis, dealing only with a few issues?

4) While we hypothesize that self assessment will be seen as relevant to the donors, we don=t yet know how true that is: will it help the organizations reduce the amount of external review to which they are subjected? Will the donor community begin to see this as a relevant demonstration of built capacity?

5) To date we have not distinguished clearly, between institutions and organizations . Increasingly we see an importance in defining the difference between institutions on the rules, and organizations - the structures to implement the rules. Thus, can the same conditions apply in institutions as in organizations? In the field of PM&E, there are some large challenges in this regard. While it is complicated to assess an organization in a participatory manner, moving to the level of an institution, such as the educational system, significantly increases the complexity of applying a participatory assessment approach: it will have to take into account the range of actors, the number of issues, the different organizations involved.

These are some of the outstanding questions which we will be exploring over the next few years. We got involved in this kind of process because of our own experience in IDRC in terms of its limited use of evaluation and the Centre's philosophy of engaging in collaboration with Southern partners rather than in simply providing expertise which they do not have. For that collaboration to be effective, our partners need to drive their own decision making and development, and our role is to engage with them in that capacity building. In the case of evaluation, it is very much a joint search for new approaches as we are only at the beginning of understanding a more effective role for evaluation in our own setting. Our partners, who have more often than not been the subject of evaluation, bring

strong direct experience to those issues which could strengthen our own use of evaluation as well as their control of the evaluation process in their own settings.

The research agenda: methodological challenges

The above experiences with institutional self assessment provide a number of important learning regarding operational issues which should be addressed in developing a stronger participatory basis for evaluation. In addition, there remain some key methodological issues which must be addressed if participatory monitoring and evaluation is ever to be seen as legitimate, rigorous and relevant, and if its results are going to be applied seriously beyond the boundaries of the community using the approaches. These methodological issues pertain to challenge the development of the field of evaluation itself.

A key challenge in this area relates to the notion of scientific rigour in evaluation. In its development and use in modern, capitalist societies, evaluation is valued for its scientific authority. Therefore those methods seen as "unscientific" will be marginalised. At the same time, House (1993) notes that concepts of validity, scientific method and objectivity are changing dramatically. The increasing recognition that science is value based and that even quantitative measures are based on what we think is important rather than any final authority, is leading us in the direction of a different approach to scientific rigour and validity. As Ernest House notes (1993:10), *Evaluation developed originally as a strategy to find grand solutions... but this proved to be a disappointing and chastening venture.* It was thought that if the methods for obtaining data were solid, everyone would agree, and would embrace the results. This has simply not happened and evaluators are beginning to realize that different interests are involved, that these are changing, and that pluralistic approaches are central to successful

evaluation. *How to synthesize, resolve, and adjudicate all these 'multiple multiples' remains a formidable question* (House, 1993:11)*.*

These changes are important to the participatory research community in general. If evaluation can be rejected because it is not rigorous, or "scientific", then the authority which goes with that evaluation is lost. It is therefore crucial that the PM&E community enter fully into the debate and engage in the development of new methods in the social sciences which are still rigorous, and yet which also explores/remains open to very different frameworks and perspectives which must necessarily replace traditional methods.

Next steps

The time is appropriate to address these challenges in the PM&E community. The strong and growing interest in participation amongst organizations of all types and sizes indicates an acceptance of the importance of participation for action. But there are still important steps to be taken to develop approaches which are both methodologically and operationally strong, and which will withstand criticisms and challenges. This workshop has provided the opportunity to identify the key opportunities and key points for action to develop a stronger approach to participatory evaluation.

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