

## **THE BIG PUSH BACK MAKING SPACE FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

Donor governments and their partners have a responsibility to assess and report on how they are contributing to making a fairer world. They have not always been very good at this and need to learn to do better. Conceptual and methodological advances offer this potential but only some are found acceptable and many useful and relevant approaches are disregarded or rejected. Hence, many development practitioners and organisations are discovering their capacity to support the social transformation efforts of their partners in developing countries is being frustrated through an ever-narrowing understanding of impact - and how this is measured and reported – that funders are imposing on them.

In response to this situation, the present concept note proposes an action research project involving a network of practitioners to identify and shares strategies for convincing funders there are multiple pathways of change, requiring a variety of methods for judging results and assessing impact. The project will last for two years with the possibility of a one year extension at an estimated budget of €X.

### **Rationale**

Sustainable progress towards a fairer world requires people working together to change what is wrong with their society. International aid has helped. For example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in Bolivia used to fund a national confederation of people struggling to earn a living by running very small businesses. With DFID support they were able to win the right to tender for local government contracts. Results like this matter for people in poverty. But when DFID first agreed to fund them, it didn't know for sure what might be the result. The aim was to fund the confederation's work and let it decide for itself how best it could go about its policy advocacy and what specifically to aim for. What was important for DFID was to support a process of collective empowerment that came from the confederation members learning they could make their voice be heard on issues that mattered to them.

Donors like DFID have moved the goal posts. Increasingly they only want to fund projects for which the exact outcome of their support can be attributed to the donor and determined in advance. This ties the hands of organisations like the one just mentioned. It takes away their ability to consult with their members in response to a local context always in flux. It stops that process of empowerment which happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by tackling the injustices in their society.

Today, many donors are imposing extraordinary demands in terms of reporting against quantifiable achievements – what can be counted - that bear little relation to how social transformation happens. Some very senior officials are now waking up to this. The former head of the US Government's aid agency recently wrote that those development projects that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those projects that are most transformational are the least measurable. In order to be able to count exactly how each penny or Euro of aid money gets spent, donor governments are risking not making any difference at all. They can show how many kilometres of roads they have built or numbers of babies vaccinated as compared with before they started the projects. But development

practitioners learnt many years ago that without local people empowering themselves to change the less tangible factors that cannot be counted but that have been keeping them in poverty, then when donor money stops the roads will crumble away and the next generation of babies won't get vaccinated. If this lesson is forgotten, instead of securing 'value for money', donor governments risk wasting money.

These demands are having an effect on United Nations agencies that are funded by governments, on development research institutes and on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Oxfam International, all of whom pass donor

government demands down to the organisations they are partnering in developing countries. Some of the latter learn to play the game, going through the design and reporting hoops to get the money. Some struggle to continue to facilitate real change while pretending that they are doing what the donor expects. Other less adept at these games, get pushed aside and close down. Yet others are trying to be more selective about their partnerships, looking for those donors who have a more holistic understanding of how development happens.

Results matter but who is to decide what is a result and how to achieve it? Both donors and those they are funding need to have a voice in that decision. Yet, the inequities of power in aid relationships often make this impossible.

#### **Management is an issue**

Following the Big Push Back meeting, a small NGO in southern India e-mailed-

*Sometimes the big donors are themselves ok, but the systems they have set up and the people they have employed to manage their funding have put in a lot of "reporting" initiatives that takes up all the time. We have just had a big transformation within our organization -shifting from big to smaller donors so that we can focus better on the needs in the communities.*

A United Nations official e-mailed separately:  
*Results frameworks become relative when there are managers capable of managing for results. In the absence of [good] managers they become over-bearing frameworks.*

#### **The politics of methodologies**

Recent discussions at both the European and American evaluation meetings highlighted the importance of not engaging in methodology wars. The real issues are not about the details of one method over the other but about the 'politics of methodology' as Ian Davies, president of EES said in October. This was echoed by Dr. Schwandt at AEA in November in an expert panel on 'Rigor at Stake': "There is nothing wrong with rethinking evaluation rigor in view of assessing complex interventions but it is still a 'methodological response' to a 'non-methodological' problem."

The problem he argues is one of "how to behave rationally in the face of complexity." The problem is our mental mode of how things work – our interpretive frames and our assumptions about how change happens. Critically, over the past couple of years, the aid industry recognises that the world, and therefore change, is dynamic, evolving and increasingly highly interconnected. Simultaneously public trust in 'the aid system' has eroded, provoking a surge of interest by bureaucrats in so-called 'evidence based practice' (EBP). The interpretation of EBP in practice is often one of narrow, static and reductionist perspective of change – diametrically opposed to the first phenomenon of complex, emergent change. As Schwandt analyses: "EBP is guilty of the rationalist fallacy - believing that evidence alone is powerful enough to determine policy choices and that policy making is a purely intellectual undertaking."

An ever-growing number of development organisations are becoming seriously alarmed about these trends. Many cynically comply with the performance measurement demands, often with a nod and a wink from a sympathetic bureaucrat equally despairing of what is now required. Compliance is accompanied by secret resistance. People carry on doing what seems most appropriate according to their own judgement. But compliance and resistance consume energy and enthusiasm. The methods demanded to make organisations *more accountable* are actually having the effect of their becoming *ever less responsible* for making a serious effort to learn about development organisations can most usefully contribute to transformative social change and be held accountable for their actions in that respect. Narrow concepts of accountability and the methods associated with these lead to less not more rigour in assessing results and impact. They also constrain the design of development initiatives with very different approaches and objectives into a single implementation and measurement framework that distorts reality and undermines the initiative's quality.

Alternatives exist that enable understandings of change. Relative 'old timers' not yet institutionalised or mainstreamed are approaches such as IDRC's Outcome Mapping or methods such as Most Significant Change, developed by Rick Davies. The potential of Contribution Analysis, proposed by Mayne is leading to more exploration around this framework, while Social Return on Investment has recently been adapted for the development context. Innovations are emerging including PADEV (Participatory Assessment of Development) and CORT – the Collaborative Outcome Reporting Technique. Most recently is SenseMaker, with its first application in development just finalised. These alternatives value local voice and values, embed collective sense making in the analysis, and are explicitly based on emergence of unpredictable phenomena.

### **An action research project**

In September 2010, the Institute of Development Studies hosted a 'big push back' meeting of some seventy development practitioners and researchers worried about the current trend for funding organisations to support only those programmes designed to deliver easily measurable results, although these may not support transformative processes of positive and sustainable changes in people's lives. Following on from a major conference in May in the Netherlands about evaluative practices in relation to social transformation the meeting took the first steps in strategizing collectively in support of these practices. The meeting was reported in a number of development blogs and websites and the meeting organiser, Rosalind Eyben, has received numerous emails of interest and encouragement from all over the world and from a variety of development organisations, including from staff inside government agencies.

A number of these e-mails specifically expressed an interest in being part of a co-operative action research project which would identify and share strategies for breaking into the closed circle of results logic that is currently encountered in government development agencies and for creating space (outside that closed circle) for good quality evaluative practice. Possible strategies identified at the meeting included:

"Action research is a participatory process concerned with practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others in the pursuit of solutions of pressing concern to people". ( Introduction to *Handbook of Action*

- *Challenging dominant discourses* and disseminating alternative discourses and counter narratives that stress the significance of history and context and emphasize accountability to those for whom international aid exists.
- *Communicating* in more innovative ways the complex nature of development to the general public by collaborating with and drawing on the expertise of development communication agencies in facilitating debates and expanding spaces for voices from the South, while building knowledge of how the public in the North understands development.
- Developing *different methods of reporting*, so that the requirement for aggregated numbers at Northern policy level does not influence the character of programming in complex development contexts; building on already available methods for assessing impact and continuing to develop and test new approaches.
- *Collaborating* with people inside donor agencies who are equally dissatisfied with the prevailing 'audit culture' and want to make space for supporting social transformation.
- *Re-claiming 'value for money'* by communicating with donors and the public that some aspects of development work are valuable while irreducible to numbers; improve development organisations' own internal practices in terms of value for money, e.g. in procurement; and work together to develop more self-critical standards.
- *Enhancing organisational learning* and reflective practice, using professional training to nurture out-of-the-box thinking and approaches
- *Scrutinizing the role of big business* in development aid and its impact on discourse and quality.

Since then other ideas have emerged, including, for example, tackling the role of middle management in imposing 'over-bearing frameworks' and engaging in the politics of methodology.

#### **How we will do this**

Rosalind Eyben (IDS) in collaboration with Irene Guijt (Learning by Design) will convene a fuzzy international network of organisations and individuals working together on one or more of these or additional strategies they might identify. As an action research project, participants in the network will study the effects of their strategic interventions, consider what they have learnt and the implications for further strategic action and share this learning with the wider network.

IDS and Learning by Design will support this process for an initial period of two years with the possibility of a one year extension, by:

- Encouraging and supporting sub-networks clustered around these different strategies, helping them think through what they are doing and providing feedback;
- Putting people in contact with each other in relation to specific strategies and provide advice and feedback as requested;
- Maintaining a dedicated website for the network's mutual sharing;
- Preparing and publicizing summary reports of what we are collectively learning;
- Convening two face-to-face meetings for network members
- Playing an active role in communicating the big push back issues to a wider audience.

**How much it will cost [to be completed]**

- (1) Time – two convenors (30 days each per year);
- (2) Website;
- (3) Meeting costs (administrative support, facilities etc);
- (4) Convenors' travel;
- (5) Evaluation.

**Evaluating our effectiveness**

The very nature of action research is based on ongoing reflection so has a deep evaluative practice running through. We will assess the extent to which we are achieving our objectives on a case-by-case basis, as each action research project will seek to make unique changes within the systems in which they will be embedded. For each project, expectations of change will be agreed and used to track progress through discussions. The areas of change likely to be included in the diversity of projects include:

- a. *Informal discourse.* Were conversations in agencies and more widely in the public media more coherent ( i.e. reconciling how development happens with ways to understand this change)?
- b. *Experimentation for leveraging.* Did participants find new and more effective ways to, for example, communicate messages about the nature of social transformation and get approval for less restricted ways of evaluating change?
- c. *Policies and practices.* Can policy and practice shifts be discerned regarding measurement of change and its reporting, in ways that move away from the current dominance of a hierarchy of method that privileges (quasi)experimental approaches and other rigid quantitative measurements?

Six months before the end of the programme, the convenors will contract an evaluator to review with them and the action research participants what has been achieved and to help them reflect on the extent to which strategically engaged practitioners can influence organisational procedures in the international aid industry.