Revisiting Evaluation: A Study of the Process, Role and Contribution of Donor Funded Evaluations to Development Organizations in South Asia

Manjul Bajaj

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Introduction

The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) function has long held its place as a standard procedure in the field of international development. Almost all agencies disbursing aid follow some kind of guidelines and procedures for a periodic review of projects and organizations supported, whereas most agencies who are recipients of such aid are frequently the subject of donor funded evaluations and reviews. While considerable resources, staff time and external expertise are devoted to the conduct of these evaluation exercises, little is known about the efficacy of the evaluation function in the arena of development aid and the extent to which evaluation contributes to achievement of overall developmental goals and objectives.

This study examines the practice of evaluation across a range of development agencies operating in South Asia, the main mechanisms and methods in place, their relative merits and drawbacks. In particular, the study looks at the issue of recipient participation in donor funded evaluations, i.e. the extent to which recipients are involved in the design and conduct of the evaluation, the extent to which recipients are able to use the evaluation results, the perception of value added by the evaluation exercise to the work of the recipient organizations and the changes that recipients would like to see in donor approaches to evaluation. The study is based upon a series of personal interviews with representatives of selected donor agencies and development and development research institutions in South Asia, conducted by the author between February and May 1997 (see Annexes for details of persons interviewed and interviewing schedules used). It draws upon the insights, experiences and perspectives of a broad range of actors in the field of development to construct a picture of the state of evaluation currently in practice, to highlight the main issues of contention and debate and to distill out some lessons and learning of a general nature.

1. A Brief Review of Prevailing Practices

While the type of survey carried out does not lend itself to numeric reporting or statistical analysis it is nevertheless possible to summarize the main trends and the most common practices vis-à-vis donor funded evaluations. These are encapsulated below in a series of basic questions regarding donor funded evaluations, i.e. *why* evaluations are undertaken, *what* is being evaluated, *when* and *how* as also *whither* the process seems headed.

1.1 Salient Objectives

Evaluations in some form or other are mostly written into the design of donor funded projects. The two major reasons cited by donors for commissioning evaluations were as follows:

- requirements of accountability - i.e. supervising the disbursement of aid to determine if money is being spent as agreed upon.
- to improve performance through mid-course revisions.

Other reasons mentioned included:

- to push for the adoption of new ideas or approaches.
- to make a case for enhanced support (e.g. to make a case for a second phase, to leverage support from other donors).
- to document and publicize achievements and approaches used.

Recipient agencies, while not the prime initiators of evaluations, did find that evaluations were useful to them in the following ways:

- regardless of whether or not the final recommendations are useful, evaluations do create a space and opportunity for staff to go beyond their routine tasks and think on broader

issues and to take stock of their progress, as well as to update records and monitoring systems.
- external evaluators sometimes bring a fresh perspective and provide an exposure to new concepts and recent thinking in the field and help put the agency in touch with others in its line of business.
- evaluation reports provide an independent documentation of the agency's work which can be used while canvassing support from other donors.

A brief analysis of the reasons listed above may be pertinent here. It is interesting to note that for the donors the chief objectives of commissioning evaluations relate to *better project management* (i.e. supervising aid disbursement and improving and streamlining on-going projects) while for recipients the chief benefits seem to be those relating to *learning* (i.e. reflection by staff and learning inputs provided by external experts). The role of evaluations in achieving better documentation and dissemination of information and their *strategic use* to influence funding decisions were recognized additionally as a benefit from evaluation exercises by both donors and recipients alike.

1.2. Evaluation Types

The most common form of evaluation reported to be in use was the *project evaluation*. For larger projects, especially if bilateral aid is involved, evaluation components are invariably built into the design of the project. For smaller projects some sort of formal monitoring and reporting system is in place which is drawn upon by funding agency staff for overall appraisal and evaluation of the project. *Institutional evaluations* were less commonly reported and used mostly in the feasibility assessment or pre-project stages or where large endowment grants to a particular agency were under consideration. Donors also take periodic recourse to *sectoral* or *program evaluations* to judge the efficacy of their approaches, during which the projects or support to recipient partners indirectly come up for review.

1.3. Evaluation Timing

The single most important timing reported for conducting an evaluation was the *mid-term evaluation* undertaken three to four years after the start of a project. This is a widely used mechanism for reviewing progress to date against original objectives, identifying bottlenecks, making mid course changes and re-allocating budgets. Contrary to their name, mid-term evaluations typically take place in the latter half of the project cycle, closer to the finish of the project than to its start. This is because most projects have a start-up time of about one year, in which time staff are positioned, vehicles procured, premises found etc., a fact of project life, curiously but universally, overlooked at the project planning stage. Given then their timing in the project cycle, mid-term evaluations frequently double up as a run up to second phase funding or as a justification for terminating the partnership, as the case may be.

Final evaluation, though written into the design of many large projects, is less frequently reported in practice. Final evaluations that do take place are those situated in the middle of two successive phases. Since there is an implicit competition for resources (for donor staff time and attention, even if budgetary allocations are provided for) it is perhaps understandable that these are invested in projects which have a future rather than simply those with a past! Almost all projects, however, do have some form of *project completion report* to be compiled by the officer in charge but the emphasis on quality, timeliness and degree of learning shared from these reports varies greatly across agencies.

Ex post or *impact evaluations* of interventions a few years after termination of the project, while widely agreed upon as important and necessary, are not in practice being carried out. Lack of baseline data, the inability to convert the baseline data collected to any usable form, lack of resources and organizational preoccupation with current and new initiatives were cited as some of the main reasons.

1.4. Evaluation Mechanisms

The mechanism of *external consultants* commissioned to undertake a specific evaluation was the most commonly used means of conducting evaluations. Larger agencies (especially bilateral) have specific norms and rigid tendering procedures for identification and hiring of consultants while the consultant identification process is somewhat more ad hoc, flexible and consultative for autonomous and/or smaller donors. In a few instances periodic *appraisal by donor agency staff* according to pre-set procedures constituted an important element of an on-going monitoring cum evaluation exercise. In only one or two cases, *joint review teams* comprising of external consultants, donor representatives and recipient agency staff were cited as a norm.

Almost all evaluation exercises follow a fairly standard pattern in terms of their duration and conduct. Evaluators typically expend 2-4 weeks divided between travel and site visits, consultation with concerned officials and stakeholders and a preliminary presentation of findings - either written or verbal. The detailed report is finalized and sent later (this may vary from anywhere between one to eighteen months).

1.5. Whither Evaluation?

It is possible from the foregoing description to sum up the main features in current evaluation practice and to highlight some of the perceived lacunae and areas of concern:

1. *While donors tend to lay emphasis on the summative (i.e. accountability) and formative (i.e. inputs into program implementation) aspects of evaluations, recipients recount the chief gains in terms of organizational learning* . This would imply that donor funded evaluations have a considerable potential for furthering organization development objectives in supported organizations, something which is currently taking place in an incidental and unplanned for manner. If donor funded evaluations more consciously took organizational development goals into their ambit, much larger gains can possibly be achieved.

2. Donor funded evaluations are to a large extent confined to the project evaluation mode : This, while it adequately meets the donors' immediate objective of being in control of the aid given, is not necessarily as efficacious if broader developmental goals are considered. Circumscribing evaluations within the confines of a narrow project boundary tends to lead to a compartmentalization of learning by recipients and to limit its application to specific projects. Most significantly, issues of *process*, critical to the effective delivery of development aid, are more meaningfully addressed at the institutional level but are projectized due to the choice of evaluation mode (e.g. a recommendation to pay greater emphasis to gender dimensions may result in the hiring of a WID specialist on that particular project, instead of a more pertinent organization wide re-appraisal of how the agency works with women and affects their lives). Thus the potential, inherent in the evaluation exercise, for positively influencing the way an organization works is lost or seriously curtailed.

In cases where the donor funded project is a very large part of the recipient organization's programs, the chances that learning from a project evaluation are integrated into the agency's work are higher. However, where the recipient works with a range of donors (which may be more desirable from other perspectives), *project evaluations tend to either lead to a neglect of process-related recommendations or their implementation in a truncated, add-on fashion with a marginal impact.*

3. *Learning and resultant change from donor funded evaluations is further circumscribed by the adoption of time frames concurrent with the project cycle*. Thus there is undue emphasis on short term project management goals via an overriding predilection for *mid-term evaluations*. *Mid-term evaluations, by their very nature, work within the overall scope and design of the existing project and rarely result in the revaluation of basic approaches and premises*. Thus the relative neglect in practice of *final* and *ex-post evaluations* can seriously hinder the evolution of development learning. In the absence of mechanisms that abstract learning over longer time periods, old strategies couched in new terminology tend to be repeated frequently with little real progress taking place.

Two mechanisms which attempt to redress this lacunae and which were reported in use were the *project completion report* and the *lessons learnt workshop*. Different agencies reported different variants of the project completion report. Effective use was reported where i) the mechanism is well integrated into the functioning of the agency and is accorded a high degree of priority by management; ii) the responsibility is shared between donor and recipient (e.g. recipient fills report and shares with donor or donor agency staff write it in consultation with recipient agency); iii) the exercise is completed soon after the project ends and is undertaken by the responsible staff themselves; and iv) a mechanism exists for sharing the appraisal with peers and seniors across the organizations involved. At its worst the PCR can become a travesty of original intentions.(2)

The lessons learnt workshop mechanism comprises of a post project meeting involving donor, recipient and other stakeholders in a reflective exercise. Its chief disadvantage from the view of long term learning, the oral format, can be mitigated by some sort of written presentations or meeting records. The chief advantages are that it is less likely to be organized several years after the termination of the project and may be more difficult (though not altogether impossible) to attend by remote proxy.

2. The Conducting of Donor Funded Evaluations:

A Step by Step Exposition

While the preceding section focused on the types of evaluation being conducted, this section examines how evaluations are carried out.

2.1. Why is Recipient Participation Important and to What Extent is it Taking Place?

Recent research (Cummings (1996), Salewicz (1997)) emphasizes the positive relationship between stakeholder involvement in evaluations and their use. Greater participation is also advocated on grounds of achieving contextual relevance for the study and a better understanding of the implementing agency's compulsions and constraints. Further, recipient participation in and control of the evaluation process is seen as an important step in the direction of empowering and strengthening developing country institutions (Carden 1997).

An important objective of this study was to explore the extent to which participation is presently being sought and achieved in the conduct of donor funded evaluations. An understanding of this was separately sought from donors and recipients and there were no sharp differences in perceptions found on this account. Different aspects of the evaluation exercise were probed. For clarity of presentation these have been divided below into the three different stages of evaluation - *planning, conduct* and *reporting* (following Cummings (1996)):

1. Planning

With respect to planning of an evaluation study, the degree of participation vis-à- vis five aspects was examined and the general practice pertaining to these was found to be as below:

a. *Identification of issues to be studied*: No standard procedure exists for this step. In some cases the issues are inherent in the nature of the evaluation (e.g. mid-term project evaluation) and comprise of measuring progress against original objectives. In other cases issues/study foci are identified through formal or informal consultations between donor representatives and recipient agency staff or between donor agency staff and identified consultants (with or without consultation with the recipient). In yet other cases, this step is skipped altogether and subsumed in the next one, i.e. formulating the terms of reference.

b. *Formulation of terms of reference (TOR*): Almost without exception, the primary responsibility for this rested with donor agency staff (who in occasional instances delegated it further to the consultant themselves!). Once drafted, the TOR are sent to the recipient for comments and inputs. In some cases, in particular when the counterpart agency is a government department, donors reported difficulty with getting feedback on the TOR in which cases these are finalized after allowing for a decent interval of time to elapse. Only in one case was the recipient agency asked to draft the TOR but it declined the responsibility.

c. *Choice of consultants*: Though different donor agencies have differing degrees of flexibility in their norms for identification and hiring of consultants, the decision invariably rests with the donor. Forms of eliciting nominal participation include sharing of CVs with recipients for approval, asking the recipient to suggest names of local consultants and, in rare cases (e.g.

where the recipient is an important government ministry/department), resting a veto power with the recipient. Exceptions to this rule were found in Nepal where the general practice for all bilateral project evaluations is to have a government nominee on the team and in the case of one NGO which was asked to nominate staff from its M & E cell as a full fledged member of the evaluation team.

d. *Timing of study*: This aspect is invariably decided after a requisite degree of consultation between both partners.

e. *Resources to be spent on study*: These are in all cases decided unilaterally by the donor.

2. Conduct

a. *Briefing of consultants*: This is an important step in that it introduces the evaluators' to the different stakeholder perspectives and lays out the expectations and requirements of the study. In a majority of cases the recipient institution had an important role to play in this respect. Sometimes, in addition to briefing meetings, recipients also exercised the option of preparing briefing notes and background documentation for the evaluation team.

b. *Travel and logistic arrangements*: This step too is worked out via consultation between the evaluators and the recipient agency, with or without inputs from the donor. Of all the steps relevant to the conduct of the evaluation this is the point at which the recipient agency has a determining influence on the course of the study. Sometimes, in the absence of clear criteria for deciding the choice of sites to be examined, communities to be interviewed, officials to be met etc., logistic arrangements made by the recipient regarding travel and meetings/appointments set up can become the *de facto* methodology.

c. *Methodology planning*: In the bulk of cases, this function rested with the consultants themselves. The degree of participation reported varied from nil, to an explanation of the methodology, to a minimum level of discussion with the recipient before finalization.

d. *Determining sources of information*: This is done in a majority of cases with due inputs and guidance from the recipients. Sources of information generally include files, internal reports and personal interviews with stakeholders, officials in the relevant government departments and representatives of other agencies working in the same area.

e. *Reviewing and interpreting information collected*: In almost all cases the responsibility for this was vested totally with the evaluation team. A certain degree of consultation with donor agency staff working on the project was reported but very little, if any, with the recipient agency takes place. Perhaps the risk of undue influencing of the results is the main reason for this low level of participation elicited. However, on the flip side, it also means a lost opportunity for testing hypotheses, refining ideas and probing their practicality before formulating recommendations.

3. Reporting

a. *Debriefing*: The debriefing to the evaluated agency usually takes place in the presence of donor agency staff in the form of an oral presentation of findings by the evaluation team. In a large number of cases it is mandatorily supplemented by an aide memoir detailing the major findings and chief recommendations. Most agencies invest a great degree of seriousness in this step and the level of discussion, dialogue and participation is generally high.

b. *Draft report*: At this step the balance of power shifts firmly into the consultants' court. More than one organization reported being faced with unwelcome additions and previously un-discussed recommendations in the draft report. While comments from the recipient are invariably sought they are not always accommodated while finalizing the report. If the issue is a particularly contentious one it results in the delaying of the final report beyond a time frame of relevance, as no mechanisms for re-examining or re-visiting issues are provided. Donors are aware of this lacunae and one agency reported to have a countervailing mechanism in place - a requirement that the draft report be submitted before the team leaves the country of study.

c. *Final report*: Decisions at this level relate to the sharing and dissemination of the final report and the recipients wishes are generally taken into account. Some donors also have in place mechanisms for following up on recommendations. One such mechanism is a *follow-up report* which culls out the key recommendations, spells out the action to be taken, assigns responsibility for the action and monitors progress against recommendations on a periodic basis. Another mechanism reported in use was a *follow-up mission* comprising of perhaps one member of the larger evaluation team who revisits the area and helps the implementing agency with working in the major recommendations in its functioning. Both these measures assume a high level of commitment to the evaluation results from the two partners and were found to be in place where the donor-recipient have a long standing partnership of considerable mutual importance.

It is possible to tabulate the above discussion to present a summary picture of the degree of recipient participation currently the norm in donor funded evaluations. This has been done in Table 1 by dividing the evaluation exercise into 13 distinctive steps spread over the three stages and rating participation in each step as either high, moderate or low. The picture that emerges suggests that the *evaluation process is by and large donor managed* with recipient participation in most activities ranging from medium to low. Further, it would appear that *participation sought is lowest in the planning stage and increases progressively and is highest towards the reporting stage*.

Table 1: The Degree of Recipient Participation in Donor Funded Evaluations

A Summary Representation

Evaluation Stage/ Step	**Degree of Participation**		
	High	**Medium**	**Low**
1. Planning Stage			
Step 1: Identification of issues to be studied		o	
Step 2: Formulation of terms of reference			o
Step 3: Choice of consultants			o
Step 4: Timing of study		o	
Step 5: Resources to be spent			o
2. Conduct Stage			
Step 6: Briefing of consultants		o	
Step 7: Travel and logistic arrangements	o		

Step 8: Methodology planning			o
Step 9: Determining sources of information		o	
Step 10: Reviewing and interpreting information collected			o
3. Reporting Stage			
Step 11: Debriefing	o		
Step 12: Draft report		o	
Step 13: Final report		o	

2.2. Towards Greater Participation: First Steps

Even simple modifications and interjections in this basic conventional external evaluation model can serve to incorporate a much higher level of recipient participation into, and enhance the final utility of, the evaluation exercise many times. Some of these are suggested below, sub-divided again, for ease of presentation, into the earlier identified three stages of evaluation:

1. Planning Stage

- Let recipient do the first draft of the Terms of Reference - it forces thinking about the evaluation. Donor agency staff can always input into the process later.
-

Where Terms of Reference are drafted by the donor, finalize these only after discussion with the recipient. Where recipient inputs are not readily forthcoming a special meeting can be arranged for this.

- Make the process of consultant selection as interactive and transparent as possible.

2. Conduct Stage

- Require consultants to build in adequate consultation with and participation from the recipient into the design of the study and to report on the specific measures taken by them in the final report.

Ensure methodological transparency - the recipient agency must understand the means and process by which certain conclusions have been arrived at before it can respect the recommendations.

3. Reporting Stage

- Instead of planning for one debriefing session at the end of the fieldwork - break the debriefing into several, smaller sessions. This will allow the consultants to take the recipient along by stages while developing a hypothesis, refining their owns views as they go along and developing more practicable suggestions.

- Where there is a difference of opinion (e.g. between team members, between evaluation team and recipient agency) require the report to make a record of dissenting opinion.

- Set an outer time limit for the finalization of the report and ensure that it is adhered to.

Thus, the effectiveness of donor evaluations can be enhanced by greater attention to a few basic caveats outlined above.

3. Pushing the Frontiers: New Approaches to Evaluation

While the analysis in the first two sections above is representative of general practice, it would only be fair to point out that both donors and recipients are aware of some of these lacunae and have together been experimenting with newer and more innovative approaches selectively. Instances of these were provided during the course of the study and these can best be described as four broad modes of integrating recipient participation into the evaluation study.

3.1. Some Examples from the Field

1. The Pre-evaluation Mission Mode.

This approach is currently being tried out by the Aga Khan Foundation in India vis-à-vis a forthcoming mid-term review of a very large grant channelized by the agency to two NGOs, the Aga Khan Rural Support Progamme (India) and the Sadguru Water Development Foundation, Dahod. The basic mechanism is to field a three member pre-evaluation team comprising of one representative each of the donor and recipient agency, with an internally identified local consultant as the third member. The brief of this mission is to go over the issues and areas to be covered by the mid-term review in detail, examine issues of methodology and sources of information and initiate the recipient agency staff into thinking about and preparing for the evaluation. The work of this pre-evaluation mission is dovetailed to the mid term evaluation exercise. The possible advantages from the mechanism are greater involvement of the recipient in the planning stage, consultation across a wider cross section of recipient agency staff and a higher degree of perceived control (and therefore ownership and utilization of the evaluation results) on the part of the recipient.

2. The Self Evaluation Mode.

This model was reported in use, with a few variations, by two salient community forestry initiatives in Nepal viz. the Nepal - U.K Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) funded by the British Overseas Development Administration (recently renamed the Department of International Development) and the Nepal - Australia Community Forestry Project, managed by ANUTECH, Canberra and funded by AUSAID. The basic approach consists of a series of self-evaluation exercises and events (e.g. thematic studies, process appraisals, interactive workshops with user groups) undertaken by the project team. These are then presented by the project team to a team of external evaluators, comprising of outside experts as well as representatives of the government and the donor, which then summarizes the findings into a report and draws up recommendations on their basis. Thus, the mechanism works by vesting the scope for learning (and impetus for change) via the evaluation exercise with the project team, but retains a measure of objectivity by leaving the final report and formulation of recommendations to a team of independent evaluators.

3. The Participatory Evaluation Mode.

This approach was used by the USAID in India for the final evaluation of its Private Voluntary Organizations - Health Project Phase II, an initiative covering a total of 33 organizations (26 involved in outreach activities and 7 as support organizations) across the country. The exercise was carried out in cooperation with the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a New Delhi based facilitating NGO. It was carried out over three regional workshops organized by PRIA introducing the organizations to the concept of participatory self evaluation, collectively working out the methodologies and drafting the Terms of Reference. In keeping with the spirit of the exercise, the agencies were allowed to choose between the conventional external evaluation and the participatory evaluation, with all but 6 opting for the latter. The actual evaluations were then carried out by 15-20 members of the agencies' staff facilitated by a resource team comprising of a PRIA representative and a medical doctor (technical expert) over a period of about 21 days, the first two weeks being devoted to data collection and the final one to an analysis of the information and the presentation of findings. This mode is distinguished by a high degree of methodological transparency, as well as a large element of capacity building of local evaluation expertise.

4. Joint Review Team Mode.

This mode consists of the inclusion of representatives from the recipient agency as full-fledged members of the evaluation team. BAIF, an Indian NGO, was invited to nominate members from its Monitoring & Evaluation Cell by its German partner, German Agro Action, for an evaluation of a project funded by the latter. In addition to enhancing a sense of responsibility and ownership towards the evaluation, the mechanism was also appreciated by the recipient for its contribution to capacity building in the internal M & E cell.

3.2. New Approaches: Experiments in Team Composition

The choice of evaluators is perhaps the most critical input into any evaluation exercise. Throughout the study this was the one component which generated the most discussion. Recipient satisfaction with an evaluation was by and large found to be intrinsically linked with their perception of certain attributes of the evaluators viz. understanding of local context, relevance of technical expertise and open-ness of attitude/empathy with the organization's goals and work style. In the majority of cases cited by recipients where the evaluation results had not been found meaningful or recommendations very applicable, the diagnosis pointed to a perceived lack of either one or more of the above three attributes in the evaluator(s).

The single member evaluation mission is more an exception than a rule and most donors work with a 2-5 member evaluation team format, within which they try to combine the different attributes required, e.g. one technical expert, one social scientist, one local expert and one organizational/administrative/financial expert. Additionally, a few donors mentioned that they took care to maintain a gender balance (e.g. two women, two men) in the teams fielded. Disciplinary and gender composition of the team were seen as important determinants of the final direction the recommendations could be expected to take.

While donors have paid considerable attention to the issue of *expertise* on evaluation teams and worked out different permutations and combinations of technical, social science and organizational expertise as well as of local and international experts, relatively less attention has been paid to the issue of *ownership*. For our purposes we may describe ownership as the sense of identification with the goals of the evaluation and the resultant commitment to the utilization of its results by the user organization. Recent efforts at integrating recipient participation into the evaluation design are aimed at fostering this sense of ownership. Donors have traditionally been negligent of the ownership dimension as it carries with it the risks of co-option, i.e. too close a recipient involvement with the evaluation goes against another basic requirement of evaluations viz. *objectivity*.(3)

Figure 1: Trade-offs and Choices Involved in the Selection of Evaluation Teams

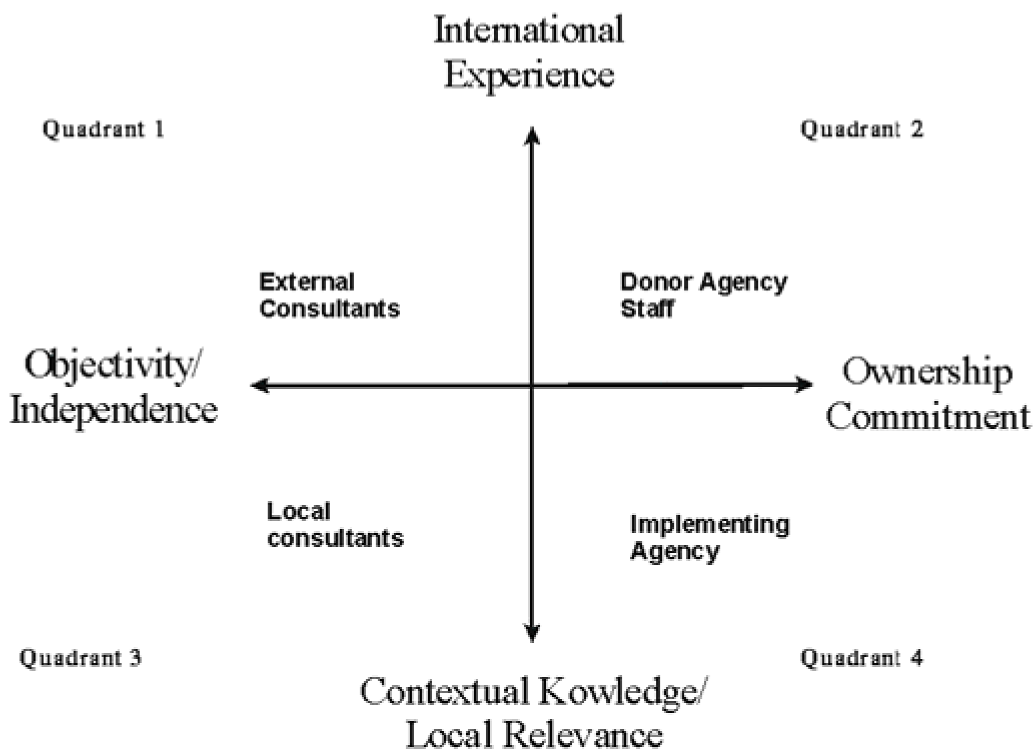

Figure 1 attempts a simplified representation of two key trade offs involved in the composition of evaluation teams - on one axis we have expertise ranging from international to local and on the other axis degrees of objectivity versus ownership, dividing the area of choice available into four quadrants:

Conventionally donor evaluation teams comprised of external consultants and were based in Quadrant 1. Increasing criticism of their lack of contextual knowledge and local relevance lead to the inclusion of local consultants on evaluation teams and currently most donor funded evaluations work along the left side of the picture comprising Quadrants 1 and 3. (By virtue of its nature, a certain degree of participation from donor agency staff, occupying Quadrant 2 is inescapable).

Thus, current team composition practice leaves untapped the combination of ownership and contextual knowledge inherent in the implementing agency occupying Quadrant 4. If we reexamine the four modes of integrating recipient participation in evaluations described in the preceding section, it emerges that each of these tries in different ways to redress the balance between these four quadrants in the conduct of the evaluation. Mode 4 works in the most direct fashion by co-opting recipient agency staff on the evaluation team. Mode 1 (pre-evaluation mission) retains the basic external consultant model but ensures requisite participation from the other three quadrants by organizing them into a feeder mission. Mode 2 (self-evaluation) shifts the evaluation function to Quadrant 4 but makes it accountable to an external team representing the other three quadrants. Mode 3 (participatory evaluation) again shifts the responsibility for evaluation to a combination of Quadrant 3 (local experts) and Quadrant 4 (implementing agency), accountable to Quadrant 2 (donor agency). In this last mode Quadrant 1 (External Consultants) has been done away with.

Recent thinking in the area of evaluation team selection thus seems to favour a model of constructive collaboration between recipient agencies and other constituents of an evaluation team in place of the prevailing paradigm which gives pre-eminence to the risks of co-option through greater recipient involvement. Another aspect of the *co-option versus collaboration* debate relates to the role of the external evaluator. Conventional evaluation practice stresses the independent nature of the evaluator/consultant but certain agencies have found that a more collaborative and longer term relationship between the recipient and the evaluation consultant in the form of smaller but more continuous evaluation inputs works better, as repeat missions lead to a building up of trust and understanding on the part of the recipient and of empathy and a somewhat longer term perspective on the part of the consultants.

3.3. Participatory Evaluation: Pre-conditions for Success.

While it would appear that large gains are possible from the transition to more participatory forms of evaluation through all parts of the development aid delivery system,(4) for donors and recipients to switch to full-fledged participatory evaluations certain pre-conditions need to be met. Chief among these are:

1. *Recipient willingness* cannot be presumed to exist in all cases. Recipients may be new to the concept and unwilling to take on the additional responsibility and learning required to be involved in the evaluation. Certain recipients, such as government departments and agencies involved in a large number of bi-laterally funded projects, tend to be conventional and bureaucratic and participation of the requisite degree may not be easily forthcoming.

2. *Adequate resources* may not be available for such evaluations especially in the short-run. Participatory evaluations tend to be more demand of staff time from both the donor and recipient. Further, the requisite expertise in terms of facilitators, consultants and resource persons experienced in initiating agencies into more participatory evaluation modes may not be easily at hand.

3. There may not be *widespread acceptability for the participatory mode* within the donor agency itself. Typically program staff working with projects would need time to demonstrate to and convince the administrative and accounting wings of their own organizations that

participatory evaluations do not compromise the requirements of accountability and objectivity.

Where these preconditions are met or where the project is of sufficient mutual significance to donor and recipient alike to justify expending effort in the direction of creating the right climate for participatory evaluation, these approaches represent the way ahead. Thus, the same donor agency may find it fruitful to introduce more participatory evaluations for some of its projects while opting for amending the traditional external evaluation for the rest of its portfolio. A third option, rarely exercised in practice, consists of drawing upon the internal review systems of the recipient to generate and provide the information needed by the donor. This is dealt with in the next section.

4. Internal Review Mechanisms in Recipient Institutions: Dovetailing Strategies

This section briefly looks at some of the most commonly used mechanisms in place in different development organizations to foster reflection and learning internally. It is hoped that this will serve two purposes: One, donor evaluations do not normally take cognizance of the fact that there is already a set culture of evaluation prevalent in the recipient agency, which differs widely across different agencies. There are perhaps gains to be made by understanding and working in tandem with this internal culture. Two, sometimes full fledged external evaluations may not be necessary and donor objectives may well be better served by putting the issue to be explored into the recipients' internal review agenda via an annual retreat, a thematic study or whatever other familiar mechanism.

The main internal review tools found to be in place were:

1. *Information Sharing Mechanisms*: The work culture of some organizations places a great deal of emphasis on the documentation and circulation of reports relating to key activities related to the organization's work. These may take the form of Back to Office/Trip reports where travel constitutes an integral component of work; or shared correspondence/reading files where a large part of the business relates to responding to queries and requests; or meeting records where organization of groups is central to the agencies work. In all cases the objective is to make the work of different members of the staff known to and open to review by others in the organization. These mechanisms work to reinforce learning by creating a culture of transparency, sharing of approaches and peer review. The importance of these mechanisms is in that they attempt to build in a continuous system of reflection, recording and review in relation to performance of the organizations core activities or tasks.

2. *Mission/Vision Reinforcing Mechanisms*: This heading (for want of a better one) refers to a variety of mechanisms in place in different agencies whereby the organizational mission is brought out up front and translated into a form readily accessible to participants and workers on a day to day basis.(5) Thus SEWA (Ahmedabad) has reformulated its basic mission into a set of Ten Questions (see box on next page) which are prominently displayed, actively discussed and used in reporting, and are available to its members and staff as a reference point at all

times. These cut across the different project initiatives and component programs to provide a unity of purpose.

Ten questions of SEWA

1. Have more members obtained more employment?

2. Has their income increase?

3. Have they obtained food and nutrition?

4. Has their health been safeguarded?

5. Have they obtained child care?

6. Have they obtained or improved their housing?

7. Have their assets increased? (E.g. savings, land, work-space, tools, licences, share in cooperatives, all this in their own names)

8. Have the workers' organizational strength increased?

9. Has workers leadership increased?

10. Have they become more self reliant individually and collectively?

Similarly NUKCFP encourages user communities and workers to articulate the basic mission/objectives in the form of a set of tangible future scenarios e.g. 'what role would a district forest office be playing 20 years from now? what would a successful community managed forest look like in 20 years? what are we doing towards getting there?'. This again works by putting the organizational mission and goals in the common domain and allowing all constituents to evaluate progress towards it.

Somewhat different but in the same direction is an experiment by AKRSP (I) to involve staff in monitoring qualitative changes. Staff are encouraged to report on a monthly basis any 'significant changes' they see occurring in the field due to their work, under four categories (emanating from the mission) viz. changes in Quality of Life, Sustainability, Participation, Gender and Equity Focus. These are then passed on to the next level of the organizational hierarchy for discussion and analysis and the process is repeated upwards. Thus all parts of the organization are provided with a means of reflecting upon their work against the light of organizational objectives.

3. *Thematic and Process Studies*: Organizations often find it useful to undertake studies which cut across their different projects and interventions and focus on key issues like impact of their work on equity, gender, tribals, the environment or any other objective central to their missions. These studies then provide insight and learnings which are incorporated into the different interventions. Also common are process studies which document and analyze approaches to group formation, village institution management, peoples' participation etc.

4. *Meetings and Retreats*: A large number of agencies reported using periodic (monthly/quarterly/biannual) staff meetings as the main forum for reviewing progress, discussing approaches, debating alternate strategies, reflecting on achievements/failures etc. In addition, some agencies resort to annual retreats to provide a space for revisiting organizational goals, examining effectiveness and renewing/forging a shared vision.

5. *Annual Reports*: A fair number of agencies, in addition to reporting physical and financial progress, use the annual report to reflect on more substantive issues and to take stock of the organization's experiences and learning over the last year.

6. *Strategic Reviews*: One or two larger agencies reported to have undertaken a strategic review of the organization - these did not follow a set periodicity (e.g. one every 3 or 5 years) but were more triggered off by factors like change in leadership, threats from the external environment in terms of reduced funding and indicators of internal malfunctioning such as high staff turnover or low staff morale.

7. *Internally Commissioned External Reviews*: Agencies mentioned an occasional resort to this mechanism prompted largely by a need to get a certain type of expertise not available within the organization, or to get a fresh and independent assessment vis-à-vis an approach/intervention the agency had been working with over a protracted period or to produce a document of wider credibility. In some cases external experts were brought in for purposes of conducting the thematic, process and strategic reviews described above.

While the internal learning mechanisms detailed above occupy a separate domain and fulfill a different role from that of external evaluations, in certain situations dovetailing of objectives and strategies may be possible and should be explored. During the course of this survey two cases were brought out by recipient agencies where donors had funded a *program evaluation* (in this case an appraisal of the concerned agency's interventions over time in the reproductive health field) and a *strategic evaluation* (support was provided to an agency at its own instance to carry out an appraisal of its institutional strategy and effectiveness). In the case of both these evaluations user agency feedback was very positive and the perception of value addition through evaluation much higher.

5. In Summation

The following are the main conclusions that emerge from the study:

1. *The current practice of donor funded evaluations is too project-centric, its objectives and timing being driven exclusively by the project cycle* . This leads to the following lacunae:

- A neglect of process related recommendations or their implementation in a truncated, add on fashion with a marginal impact.
- Works within the overall scope and design of the existing project and rarely results in the revaluation of basic approaches and premises.

2. Both donors and recipients feel that evaluations make a positive contribution and result in value addition to their work. However, *donors and recipients view the gains from evaluation very differently*. For donors the evaluations are useful for ensuring the *accountability* of their investments and for *improving project management*. For recipients they are useful in that they create a *space for reflection* and stock taking and, in the shape of external evaluators, provide them with a *fresh perspective* on their work. Most donor evaluations are designed in consonance with the donors' needs and therefore take project objectives as the starting point. *Learning from project evaluations could be made more pertinent from the recipient's angle if the evaluation expanded its brief to re-interpret and review the recommendations additionally from the perspective of the organization's overall goals and strategies.*

3. *By and large the process of evaluation is managed by the donor and by external consultants with recipients having moderate to little say in the planning and conduct stages of evaluations*. Enhanced consultation does take place in the reporting stage via de-briefing sessions and eliciting comments on draft reports but this occurs too late in that it *fails to build a sense of ownership* and commitment to the utilization of the evaluation on the part of the recipient. Simple modifications to the process by way of shifting the responsibility for some components (e.g. drafting terms of reference), ensuring greater consultation and transparency in others (e.g. consultant selection, methodology) and instituting mechanisms which allow differences of opinion to surface early and be dealt with before finalization (e.g. frequent de-briefing, record of dissenting opinion, provision for revisiting) are suggested to enhance the utility and acceptability of evaluations.

4. Though the bulk of evaluation practice is in the conventional non-participatory mode, *several donors in partnership with their recipient counterparts, are innovating and moving in the direction of more participatory approaches* . These approaches are still in the experimental stages but initial reports indicate a *greater degree of utilization* of evaluation results and a very positive contribution to *institutional strengthening* in the recipient agencies. *All of these newer approaches work by replacing the conventional team of external evaluators with different permutations and combinations of stakeholders as evaluators* .

5. A large number of *internal review mechanisms* are in place in most recipient agencies. *Sometimes it makes better strategic sense for the donor to draw upon these instead of instituting separate evaluations*.

6. *Several constraints hamper the emergence of participatory evaluations as the norm in donor funded evaluations. Some of these are recipient unpreparedness, shortage of experts and facilitators and lack of support for the concept within donor bureaucracies*. Moreover, participatory evaluations, more demanding of resources, may not be necessary in all cases. *For most donors the way forward would comprise of a combination of approaches*: evolving full fledged participatory approaches for the most important initiatives, making necessary changes in the conventional evaluation modalities to better reflect recipient concerns and selectively supporting those internal review processes in the recipient agencies which can simultaneously address donor needs.

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Annex 1

List of Persons Consulted

Ajay S. Mehta, Chief Executive, Sewa Mandir, Udaipur.

Barry Underwood, Chief Executive, Aga Khan Rural Support Program (India), Ahmedabad, India

Bo Schuiltz, Chief Advisor, DANIDA - Nepal Community Forestry Training Program

D. D. J Kudaligama, Additional Director General, Department of External Resources, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Government of Sri Lanka

Dinabandhu, PRADAN Resource Management Team, Purulia, India

George D C Murray, Chief of Party, Agroenterprise and Technology Systems Project, Nepal Agricultural Research Council

Girish Sohani, Executive Vice President, BAIF Development Research Foundation, Pune, India

Hiroyuki Hagiwara, Environmental Planning Expert, Japan International Co-operation Agency, Sri Lanka Office

Jan van der Laan, Royal Netherlands Embassy, India

Jane Rosser, Ford Foundation, India

Janet Seely, First Secretary, Rural Development Office, Overseas Development Administration, India

Jaya Chatterjee, Indo Canada Environment Facility (ICEF)

Krishna B Shreshta, Deputy Director General, Community and Private Forest Division, HMG/Nepal

Keith Jones, Project Director, Integrated Pest Management, CARE International, Sri Lanka

M.F.M Fallil, Engineer, US Agency for International Development, Sri Lanka

Mallika Karunaratne, National Planning Department, Government of Sri Lanka

Mirai Chatterjee, General Secretary, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India

Narayan Hegde, President, BAIF Development Research Foundation, Pune, India

Nick Roche, Coordinator, Nepal - U.K Community Forestry Project

O.P. Gaur, Director, Indian Farm Forestry Development Cooperative Ltd., N. Delhi

Paul Steele, EFTEC, Sri Lanka

Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Sanjeev Lowe, Small Projects Fund, GTZ, India

Sathyamurthy, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

Steven M. Hunt, Team Leader, Nepal Australia Community Forestry Project

Sumith Pilapitiya, Energy, Infrastructure and Environment Operations Division, The World Bank, Resident Mission in Sri Lanka

Vijaya Pastala, Aga Khan Foundation, India

Annex 2

Donor Agency Interviewing Schedule/Checklist of Questions

1. What is your organization's policy towards evaluation? Are there any guidelines, policy documents which are available? (May I have copies?)

2. Are evaluation components built into all projects supported by the organization? If not what is the criteria for evaluating or not evaluating, as the case may be?

3. Which have been the major evaluations conducted on your behalf over the last two to three years? Can you recommend any of them as a case example for the purposes of this study? Would it be a good idea to interview the recipient organization? Is it possible to get a copy of the evaluation document/ report?

4. What is the method of evaluation used (e.g. staff appraisal, external consultants? joint evaluation teams?)

5. Who decides?

a. Timing and duration of evaluation?

b. Broad objectives of the exercise?

c. Consultants to be used?

d. Terms of Reference of Consultant?

e. Issues to be explored?

f. Resources to be spent on evaluation?

g. Travel itinerary and work program of evaluation team?

h. Acceptability of the final report?

6. What are the main aspects you emphasize/ take care of while designing/ commissioning an evaluation?

7. In your experience to what extent are recommendations emanating out of the evaluation exercise accepted/ implemented by the recipients?

8. Do you feel that greater recipient participation or utilization of evaluation is an issue at all? Why/why not?

Annex 3

Recipient Institution Interviewing Schedule/Checklist of Questions

1. Have you been the subject of a donor funded evaluation in the past two to three years? How many? Which?

2. To what extent were you involved in decisions on different aspects of the evaluation exercise?

a. Timing and duration of evaluation?

b. Broad objectives of the exercise?

c. Consultants to be used?

d. Terms of Reference of Consultants?

e. Issues to be explored?

f. Resources to be spent on evaluation?

g. Travel itinerary and work program of evaluation team?

h. Acceptability of the final report?

3. What kind of investment/ commitment of staff and organizational time was required for the evaluation?

4. What were the major recommendations emanating from the exercise and to what extent did you agree with them?

5. To what extent have you (and your donor partner) been able to implement them?

6. Do you feel that the evaluation helped your organization to learn more about itself, reassess direction or strategically position itself better?

7. Were some issues neglected/ overlooked which, if addressed, could have made the evaluation more meaningful to your organization?

8. What are the main mechanisms for monitoring, internal evaluation and strategic assessment employed by your agency? How do they correlate with/ feed into the external evaluation process?

9. Do you feel greater recipient control of and participation in the evaluation process is an important issue?

10. What recommendations would you make to donors to change the process so that evaluations contribute more positively ?

11. If you have had more than one donor funded evaluation could you compare and contrast approaches to illustrate what works, doesn't work, needs to be encouraged/ discouraged etc.

12. Any other issue you would like to mention.

1. The term is used broadly and includes both development and development research agencies.

2. In an instance personally known to the author, 22 PCRs for projects completed between two to ten years ago were completed over a period of three weeks by a research assistant, previously unknown to the agency, contracted for the purpose and paid on a piece rate basis!

3. It may be pertinent at this juncture to caution that many view the search for objectivity as a flawed concept in itself : all evaluations are based on someone's judgment and are therefore subjective.

4. While outside the scope of this paper, an equally urgent need is for recipient agencies themselves to engage in more participatory approaches to an evaluation of their programs and interventions in partnership with their target communities, the clients and users of their services.

5. To furnish a crude analogy, this is somewhat akin to transforming the mission statement from a remote beacon into a pocket torch - some of the awe and aura surrounding it are regrettably lost but use goes up many fold.