

## **Internalising evaluation results through learning: Complementary perspectives, dilemmas and some lessons learned**

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Paper to be presented to the joint French and DAC Working Party-Evaluation Workshop “Development partners in evaluation – Learning and accountability”, to be held in Paris, 25-26 March 2003.

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### Abstract

Consistently, development agencies are required to improve their performance, not only at the project level but also at the programme and institutional level. In a very practical sense evaluations are now perceived as learning opportunities. To seek to improve the internalisation of evaluation results through learning then seems a logical step. How can this be done? What dilemmas do we face and what have we learned so far?

The paper draws substantially on a recent expert workshop: *How can we learn more from what we do? Evidence-based communication for development*; jointly organized by ECDPM and Exchange at Maastricht, 13-14 December 2002. The internalisation of results from evaluation is placed within three progressively more comprehensive perspectives on learning for development. The first focuses on *improving feedback* to development policy and planning; the second on *organisational learning* by development partners and the third, on *learning in society at large*. Next, a number of dilemmas are mentioned that emerge when emphasis in evaluation moves towards learning and eventually, institutional development. Finally, some lessons are drawn with respect to evaluation policy, practice and research, professional requirements and South-North exchange.

### Introduction

Development agencies are under pressure to improve their performance; they are expected to learn from their successes and their mistakes and to demonstrate it. As a result, evaluative functions are increasingly articulated into processes of institutional learning. Besides, mainstream thinking today emphasises development partnerships, national ownership, facilitation, stakeholder participation, dialogue and mutual obligations, as well as a strong move towards decentralisation of decision-making, democracy and local dynamics. Wide-spread involvement of stakeholders is seen as a fundamental requirement for success in development co-operation. Effective communication becomes more and more important. Within the complex development arena that emerges, clearly only the ones that learn and learn quickly and effectively may find their way eventually.

Evaluation<sup>3</sup> has always been about learning, about how to be accountable, how to be transparent, how to learn from experience. Given the above, today's questions do not evolve around *whether* it is desirable, but focus at *whose* learning we are talking about; for *what purposes*, and *how*? Besides, many *quality issues* come to the surface when learning is to be shared widely.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we use the term *evaluation* in its inclusive sense, referring to the gathering of evidence as well as its processing, valuing and weighing. It includes also the more extensive societal interaction with respect to evidence gained through monitoring and evaluation.

This article does not pretend to address all relevant issues and challenges in this dynamic field. It will focus upon one rather instrumental issue: How may a focus on learning help to fortify the internalisation of evaluation results? First, it will address three complementary perspectives to look at learning for development and provide at least one recent example of each. Next, it will focus on some of the dilemmas that emerge when learning and evaluation are brought together. Finally, it will highlight a number of lessons learned in development practice so far, drawing heavily upon the discussions and conclusions reached at the *Evaluation and Evidence-based Communication Workshop* jointly organized by ECDPM and Exchange at Maastricht, 13-14 December 2002.

### Internalising evidence from evaluations: three perspectives on learning

Development practice being a quest for innovation and societal change, we take an inclusive approach to evaluation as well as learning. In its most general expression, development may be understood as “learning our way into a sustainable future”, implying, amongst other things, that we try to avoid mistakes; and if we fail to do so, we intend to learn from them. The history of development cooperation, again confirmed by the recent Johannesburg Summit, shows such an intention is not at all easy to achieve in practice. Yet current thinking about learning from evaluations very much reflects this wish to learn and, to learn faster from what we do. Spearheaded by the OECD/DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation (2001), donors have taken the initiative to step up learning and to commit to improving their practices. Within this context too narrow a view of improving the tools of the trade seems inadequate. A serious effort has to be made to open up new vistas, refine and develop new approaches, new tools and to inquire into new experiences. In our contribution to this debate, we propose to look at three strands of current thinking about improving learning in development, each at a different level of societal complexity, and try to match these with evaluation practice.

### ***In development policy and programming***

#### **Box 1. CIET social audits and socializing evidence for participatory action (SEPA)**

The CIET social audit methodology aims to build the community voice into the evaluation process. It uses a 10-step approach to gather relevant local data that can be used for social action and planning. A crucial step in the method is enrichment of the evidence with local stakeholder views and the sharing of results with the service providers and users through workshops and training sessions. CIET evidence is 'socialised' through advocacy networks, the mass media and key opinion makers like political and religious leaders, who are trained to make sense of the evidence for local action. The feedback loop from data gathering to information sharing for policy, planning and local action is fairly rapid and, repeated periodically, fuels an awareness and discussion about public service performance, helping to ensure accountability of planners and donors to beneficiaries.

Examples of the application of the social audit methodology can be found at the CIET website (<http://>).

*For more information see also: Robert J. Ledogar & Neil Andersson, Social Audits: Fostering Accountability to Local Constituencies, in: Capacity.org, ECDPM, Maastricht: issue no.15.*

Probably the most straightforward way of enhancing learning is to look at its internalisation in development policy and programming. However, many of the existing feedback mechanisms are still mainly one-directional, drawing on the logic of information dissemination to selected target groups rather than communication around evidence as a reiterative learning process. The OECD/DAC Working Party on

Aid Evaluation (2001) reviews some of the current experiences. Most call for the establishment of what may be called *policy innovation networks*, mobilising Southern partners and stakeholders to engage in existing learning and feedback routes.

There is also need for a more direct link between feedback and the planning and monitoring of country programmes. Participatory monitoring and evaluation is recognised as a valuable addition to more conventional approaches. IFAD recognises the need to “shift the fulcrum of evaluation feedback to the South”. Emphasis on results-based planning and management is seen as a way to improve the practical use of evaluation results. The European Commission’s “Fiche Contradictoire” and DFID’s “Public Service Agreements” are examples. The communication of lessons through mass media to stimulate wide recognition is increasingly seen as important. Finally, the sharing of experiences between development agencies is promoted.

### ***In organisations and among partners***

A second approach focuses on organisational learning. It recognises development processes result from actions and interactions by diverse stakeholders, all of which are actors in the same play. Active participation, capacity building and learning of all these actors becomes a fundamental rather than an instrumental condition; the locus for change becomes the facilitation of collective rather than individual learning. As a result, policy makers and/or donors become *one among many*, rather than the only intended learner.

#### **Box 2. The DFID experience of moving to thematic networks for learning**

To further a more enabling environment for organisational learning, a Knowledge Sharing Consultation Group was established within the Rural Livelihoods Department of DFID. Diverse aspects of Knowledge Sharing (KS) were considered, such as cultural issues, content, processes and technology involved. It appeared many disincentives to knowledge sharing existed. Team/individual behaviour emphasises competitiveness rather than sharing; an internal view, rather than external checks on performance prevailed and the use of technology was predominantly focused on 'information' provision as opposed to 'knowledge' sharing. As a result, the group determined its vision for 2003/2004 as *'to link ideas and knowledge with those who will benefit in a way in which they can use it'*. Specific focal issues were to improve the appreciation among staff of methods of knowledge sharing; to clarify the confusion over terms used; to link knowledge sharing and learning directly into organisational strategy and to identify champions of organisational learning. Specific lessons learned included: knowledge is shared differently in distinct working environments, and in relation to the prevailing operational modes within these environments: the degree of collaboration versus individual work that exists and the degree of routine jobs versus jobs requiring a high level of individual judgement, are important indicators.

*Drawn from presentation by Jane Clark (Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office - DFID) at the workshop 'How can we learn more from what we do? Evaluation and evidence-based communication', ECDDP/Exchange, Maastricht 12-13 December 2002.*

An organisational learning approach to evaluation not only changes fundamentally the way social actors relate to each other, it requires a radical shift in the role of the evaluator as well. All actors, including the evaluator, are to recognise they are part of a joint learning effort. In such an “epistemic community”, the evaluator becomes a facilitator in a joint inquiry rather than the expert wielding an “objective” measuring stick. More often than not, multiple ways of assessing success pop up, each valid from the perspective of one or some of the members. Yet such communities run the

risk of ‘clique-building’, reducing diversity of opinions if discourse is captured by the most vocal actors of the group (Sutton, 1999). Critical self-reflection is to be maintained in order to build in ‘reality checks’ to avoid too narrow a discourse among closed-off opinion circles.

### ***In society at large***

A third perspective focuses on societal change and performance in dealing with resource dilemmas. The sharing of evidence and communication now are to extend beyond those directly involved and reach out for interested parties in society at large. As a result, conflicts of interest are common, consensus the exception. The question becomes whether and how interested parties can exert pressure for change. Besides, different societies are involved in assessing outcomes: Southern as well as Northern ones.

#### **Box 3. Internalising evidence for social change: UNICEF and HIV/AIDS in Africa**

Currently, most HIV/AIDS communication strategies are based on one-way communication and behavioural change models. Their rationale is that the successful targeting and delivery of messages will cause individuals to change their behaviour. Such models, however, prove less successful when sexual relations or HIV/AIDS are at stake. Many social barriers, cultural practices and beliefs prevent effective follow-up on messages. In Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF has now developed a new approach to health communication, consisting of three steps:

- (1) Give voice to the voiceless/find a way for the marginalised to express their realities.
- (2) Facilitate community conversations and construction of action plans, with the formerly voiceless participating.
- (3) Build channels of communication with governments and donor agencies so that they can support the action plans developed by the communities themselves.

For example, in Tanzania UNICEF helped establish village-level theatre groups for marginalized youth, in order to explore community issues such as HIV/AIDS. After training in participatory theatre techniques, the young people produced plays on relevant social issues and recurrent practices in their villages. After performing the plays in the community, they lead discussions, giving them a voice in village affairs and a sense of self-esteem that supports behavioural change. The plays also start a spontaneous process of change for other community members. Young people, for example, acted out the community's free sexual behaviour at *ngomas* or traditional dances, leading to extensive community discussion about potential dangers. As a result, communities have passed by-laws on the timing and duration of *ngomas*, and also ensured that condoms are available during such events.

*Drawn from a presentation by Neil Ford, RA Programme Communication UNICEF Regional Office, Nairobi, Kenya, at the workshop 'How can we learn more from what we do? Evaluation and evidence-based communication', ECDPM/Exchange, Maastricht 12-13 December 2002.*

Weiss coined the term ‘knowledge creep’ in 1980, referring to how the conceptual use of evidence can ‘gradually bring about major shifts in awareness and reorientation of basic perspectives.’ These ideas have recently re-emerged in concepts such as knowledge management, and knowledge as a global public good, pioneered by the World Bank and others. Yet, the use of scientific evidence to address development problems, has long brought with it the risk of failing to connect with realities and evidence at local level and the schools of thought that aim at recording and enhancing endogenous development processes and knowledge. Guijt<sup>4</sup> stresses the need for multi-

<sup>4</sup> Forthcoming PhD dissertation: Learning by Design/Contribution to the ECDPM/Exchange *Workshop How can we learn more from what we do? Evidence-based communication for development*. Maastricht, 13-14 December 2002.

stakeholder “sense-making forums” to validate scientifically derived conclusions. Uphoff and Combs show that scientists and policy-makers alike often need to ‘unlearn’ the things they think they know to avoid “paradigm traps”. This again calls for a more direct engagement with communities and stakeholders. They argue that engagement is particularly important because it can ‘engender the communities that prompt one to become detached from dogma in ways not possible otherwise.’ (Uphoff, Combs, 2001).

In order to come to grips with the social processes underpinning technological and social innovation in rural areas, Niels Röling and others at the Communication & Innovation Studies Group of Wageningen University developed the *knowledge systems approach*. It leaves behind oversimplified linear notions of knowledge and technology transfer. Instead innovation is posed as an emergent property of social interaction and learning among multiple stakeholders who, invariably, represent multiple intentionalities and (often conflicting) interests. The appreciative character of such social processes is emphasised; a participatory action-research methodology for improving the social organisation of innovation – RAAKS – is proposed (Engel and Salomon, 1997). Drawing upon Chilean scientists Maturana and Varela, knowledge itself is understood as *effective action in the domain of human existence*. (Röling, 2002).

#### **Box 4. Internalising evidence for social change: The Australian Land Care programme**

The Australian Landcare programme emerged because of growing concerns about salinity, soil erosion, water quality and biodiversity decline in rural areas. It needs to be understood within the broader context of economic and social problems in rural Australia such as: declining farm profitability, out-migration and an ageing farm population. Eventually, a community-led network emerged of more than 4000 Landcare groups involving farmers, scientists, politicians, business and community leaders, aiming at overcoming land degradation and improving agricultural sustainability. Its impact was visible in the high level of community mobilisation and an increased societal understanding of the problems involved. Various participatory forums/platforms were established at the local, regional as well as the national level. Conditions that helped trigger effective social learning were: (1) appropriate forums and platforms, (2) clear mandates and legitimacy for the forum and the process, (3) engagement of all key stakeholders, (4) incentives for participation, (5) integration with existing institutions and processes, (6) a clear scope and boundaries for learning and change, (7) coordination at and between different levels, (8) effective facilitation and leadership, (9) utilisation of a diversity of methodologies, (10) effective establishment and monitoring of performance questions and indicators, (11) consciousness of what social learning is and why it is needed and (12) the questioning of overarching policy-paradigms.

*Drawn from presentation by Jim Woodhill, IAC, University of Wageningen, the Netherlands, at the workshop 'How can we learn more from what we do? Evaluation and evidence-based communication', ECDPM/Exchange, Maastricht 12-13 December 2002.*

The perspective on societal learning emerging from the above is the most recent, most inclusive and as yet, less developed one. It promises far-reaching consequences for our thinking on development cooperation. Traditional evaluation as we know it may gradually disappear into the background, being replaced by multiple forms of evidence gathering and sharing among diverse groups of stakeholders; adaptive management of resources and multiple communication and negotiation processes at various levels. The need for good governance to create enabling conditions for such processes and for conflict resolution strategies where stakeholder relationships become antagonistic will increase. As a result, governments and donors are no longer

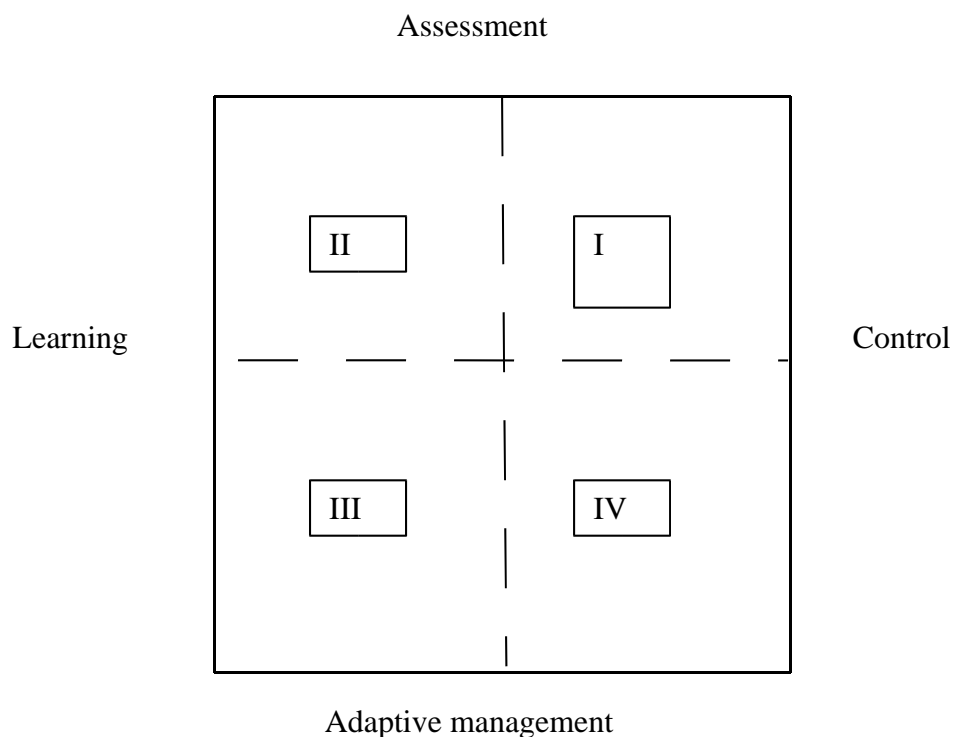
at the side line, on the contrary, they are perceived as fundamental players that may enable or disable society's chances to learn. As called for by development policy-makers and field workers alike, such a perspective seems to hold the potential to link evaluation into governance issues, such as performance-based resource allocation and the functioning of democratic institutions.

### Dilemmas at the evaluation – learning interface

When we reflect upon current evaluation practice from the above perspectives on learning, we may identify a number of dilemmas that appear when trying to turn evaluations into learning processes. We believe it is the way we respond to these questions that will decide the future of such initiatives.

### **Why strengthening learning? What other purposes are to be served?**

Evaluation serves a purpose. A growing emphasis on learning from evaluation means a shift in intentions. In figure 1 we have tried to summarise the purposes generally served by evaluations.



Traditionally, *control* has been an important purpose directed at enhancing transparency and accountability, particularly from the donor point of view. The next important purpose can be seen as *assessment*, i.e. judging whether efforts are in fact contributing to achieving agreed upon objectives. Now, *learning* to improve performance increasingly becomes a purpose for evaluation. Eventually, evaluations

might become geared towards *adaptive management*<sup>5</sup>, requiring as a prerequisite institutional learning and development of those institutions involved in governing development.

Naturally, an intriguing question is whether pursuing one purpose might imply a trade-off in terms of pursuing another. For evaluation, might these aims be mutually exclusive? Or does the shift in intentions from quadrant one to four reflect a growing complexity of evaluation functions rather than a shift from one to the other? In a very simplified and schematic way, might not the above mirror the growing complexity of development itself, rather than just of its evaluation?

### ***What do we mean when we say learning?***

Learning is a buzz-word, often used but not often clearly defined. As a result, one of the challenges defined by the OECD/DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation 2001 is the need to *unpack the learning concept*. What do we mean by learning? Who learns, how and why? Different approaches to answer such questions are offered. In adult education, different types of learning are linked to distinct cognitive and motivational processes and fulfil complementary roles (Van der Veen, 2000). Organisational learning theory distinguishes single, double and triple loop learning, reflecting the degree to which underlying rules, values, norms and behaviour are truly affected (King & Jiggins, 2002). A third approach focuses on cognition, the process by which the organism deals with changes in context. It stipulates two fundamental drivers for social learning: the coherence sought among values/emotions/perceptions on the one hand and theory/interpretations/actions on the other; and the need for correspondence between the above elements and the prevailing context (Röling, 2002).

### ***Whose learning are we talking about?***

Who is to internalise the evaluation results? Is it referring mostly to a need on the part of donor agencies? Does it reflect a felt need of national governments, institutions and private agencies to learn? Does it include recognition of the local actors' right to learn from their mistakes? Amongst our three perspectives, the development policy and programming focus emphasises donor or policy-makers' learning mostly. It aims at improving policy performance. Hence, its quest for "participation of local actors" has an instrumental ring to it, more intent upon actor consultation than effective local participation in actual decision-making. On the contrary, the *organisational learning* approach recognises the need to involve all relevant stakeholders, recognising their complementary roles. Their different points of view are seen as vital ingredients for achieving a collective understanding of relevant development issues and the way to go forward. While diverse perceptions, responsibilities and cultural differences may make it hard to work together, no one stakeholder is expected to hold all the keys to improvement. Finally, the *societal learning* approach recognises the existence of potentially insurmountable differences in perspectives among interested parties yet at the same time, the need to negotiate sustainable answers to common challenges. In line with its attention for adaptive management and aspects of governance, it focuses on institutional development for improving societal learning and decision-making.

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<sup>5</sup> *Adaptive management* is used here, in line with Holling, 1995 (cf. box 4), to refer to a management style based on flexible regulations, continuous probing, observation and adaptation of policy and programming frameworks, stimulating human learning and institutional change so as to adequately respond to ever changing understanding and circumstances.

**Wide-spread learning versus the quality of the learning process**

When learning through studying one's own and others' performance becomes wide-spread, what consequences does such "popularisation" of evaluation entail for development practice and practitioners? Active engagement with local communities may increase the risk of co-opting them into existing development paradigms, thereby reinforcing rather than counteracting existing inequalities (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). One may also argue that quality will be reduced due to lack of uniformity of methods. Scientific "rigour" might be at stake. On the other hand, one may counter that quality is increased by greater richness of opinion while stakeholder participation enhances applicability of results. Unfortunately, while discussing these topics widely, very few studies of learning for development so far pay much attention to assessing learning and its concrete outcomes.

**Power relationships and learning**

Maybe even more than others, the development arena is characterised by skewed power relationships between those who hold the keys to decision-making about resource allocations, and those who don't. How do such power differentials affect the process and outcomes of learning, even when local ownership and development partnerships are intended? In their analysis of institutional learning with respect to local forest management, Engel et al. (2001) point at the need for empowerment of local stakeholders and conclude that even then the national policy context may make or break the process at the local level. This leads us directly to the question of governance of learning: Who sets the rules? Who monitors them? What about evaluating the performance of (learning) evaluators?

**Learning and the role of the evaluator(s)**

Towards learning and adaptive management, the role of the evaluator changes fundamentally. From a distant, research-oriented person trying to systematise the known and unearth the hidden, he or she becomes a process facilitator. His or her role is to help design and organise others' inquiry and learning effectively. Stakeholder analysis and communication skills as well as the ability to manage group dynamics become prime assets. Non-partisanship is a prerequisite, yet specialist knowledge might even turn out to be a hindrance. When we move further towards societal learning, at times even objectivity may be challenged, for example when empowerment of disadvantaged groups is felt to be a prerequisite for their full participation in joint learning. Situation analysis skills, a comprehensive and practical understanding of society and its development, of conflict resolution and negotiation skills become essential to the facilitator. Enhancing learning will eventually mean a fundamental restructuring of the training, methodological baggage, professional skills and outlook of (would-be) evaluators.

**Can internalising evaluation results be mainstreamed through learning?**

At first sight, to push evaluation into a learning mode seems easy, though certain conditions are to be met. However, it almost naturally leads to a next level: adaptive management; a systematic and continuous effort to adjust individual and organisational behaviour to lessons learned. The consequence is that agencies prone to promote learning *by others* will be drawn irresistibly into asking questions about *their own in-house* learning capability. Hence, in order to push impact beyond a rather trivial level, institutional development emerges as a logical complement to systematic efforts to improve the internalisation of evaluation results through learning.

***How to create conditions for effective learning?***

Again, different approaches emphasise different enabling conditions for learning. The following are widely recognised: inexistence of threats to openness and sharing of opinions; curiosity and motivation on the part of the participants; the availability of intellectual and/or practical challenges, incentives and institutional support: opportunities for practical follow-up. In addition, Guijt and Woodhill (2002) underscore the need for a systematic and explicit learning process and awareness about minimum conditions to be met to turn joint learning effective.

**Some lessons learned**

A number of lessons may be drawn from the above. These are not new. Institutional development and evaluation specialists have been highlighting similar issues insistently for some time now. Our purpose here is to underline those we deem central to our intentions to strengthen the effective uptake of evaluation results through learning.

***Evaluation policy***

Improving the internalisation of evaluation results implies a shift in perspective with respect to the way development processes and indeed, development institutions are managed. Adaptive management, i.e. flexibility and responsiveness to lessons learned, is to become a key institutional feature. As a consequence, institutional development is a necessary complement to learning by development agencies.

The balance between accountability and transparency on the one hand, and learning and adaptive management on the other, needs further scrutiny. This is particularly important in view of the power differentials that exist between donors and recipients in development cooperation. Ways and means to safeguard the credibility of evaluators and development professionals engaged in learning through evaluation will have to be developed.

***Evaluation practice***

In terms of methodologies, a pragmatic process-oriented approach is needed rather than a dogmatic content-oriented one. There is no single set of tools that guarantees learning, yet many tools can be turned into learning ones. Attention, however, should be paid to the principles governing success in a learning setting; mutual respect, inclusive thinking, the wish to understand others' perspectives, willingness to take criticism seriously and the preparedness to renew institutional cultures, rules and procedures, seem more important for long term success.

Complexity, unpredictability and uncertainty are regular features of multi-actor learning processes. "To keep it practical" is then no simple task. Methodological issues, Irene Guijt concludes, "...extend far beyond simply which method works best, as these are just a small part of the extensive communication processes that lie at the heart of M&E." (Guijt, 2000)

***Evaluation professionals***

The need to rethink the professional profile of evaluators is paramount whenever these are to engage in facilitating learning. Next to research skills, excellent communication, process facilitation, conflict resolution and negotiation skills are a

must. Analytical skills and tools will have to include instruments for situation and stakeholder analysis, as well as for understanding conflict and group dynamics. A truly interdisciplinary education is a prerequisite, as well as a permanent and systematic exchange of practices and experiences among professionals and students.

### ***Evaluation research***

A much stronger emphasis is needed on developing effective conceptual and practical tools. So far, research has hardly touched a systematic assessment of the learning effects of different monitoring and evaluation approaches, tools and techniques. A systematic orientation of approaches and methodologies towards specific developmental situations and learning needs has only just started. The conceptualisation of learning for development remains fuzzy at most.

### ***South-North exchange***

Given the societal and institutional implications of the quest for enhancing learning through evaluation, this seems one field of inquiry where much can be learned from a systematic collaboration between evaluation researchers and practitioners from the South and the North. Some of the most inspiring collections of reviews of experience span cultural boundaries between countries as well as continents. International cooperation might have a distinct competitive advantage in furthering this field of study.

#### **Box 5. Some of the challenges ahead: shifts involved in strengthening learning through evaluation<sup>6</sup>**

##### *In evaluation practice:*

- From advise on issues to facilitation of reflective process
- From consulting to valuing local actors, evidence and knowledge
- From single expert to nested, multiple learning
- From output assessment towards managing joint inquiry
- From theoretically constructed to “harvested” performance indicators
- From talking and saying to asking and listening

##### *In institutional management and culture:*

- From adapted to adaptive management
- From an expert culture to a learning culture
- From practices locked in structures to institutional learning

##### *In evaluation theory:*

- From input/output logic to recognising ‘fuzzy’ realities and emergent outcomes
- From linear understanding to dealing with unpredictability and cascades of feedback
- From aiming at short-term simplicity to dealing with long-term complexity
- From theories of planning to methodologies of connecting

##### *In evaluation policy:*

- From predefined outputs to open-ended learning
- From evaluating ambitions to understanding outcomes

<sup>6</sup> Based upon concluding remarks: ECDPM/Exchange Workshop *How can we learn more from what we do? Evidence-based communication for development*. Maastricht, 13-14 December 2002.

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