



**LEARNING AND GROWING THROUGH DEVELOPMENT
PROJECT:
A TRADE UNION EXPERIENCE**

**by Public Services Labor Independent Confederation
(PSLINK), The Philippines.**

ABSTRACT:

Background.

For the last seven (7) years, the Public Services Labor Independent Confederation (PSLINK), an organization of government employees in the Philippines and their unions has carried out a project with the LO/FTF Council (The Danish Trade Union Council for International Development Cooperation). Prior to the partnership, PSLINK was an obscure organization. It was founded in 1987 with an initial membership of 120. By 1994, it grew to a little less than 10,000 government employees representing 23 unions which were mainly concentrated in Manila.

The project-cooperation with the Council began in 1995. The project adopted the LO/FTF council's strategy of an education-based campaign and a campaigned-based education. Today, after seven (7) years of cooperation, PSLINK is one of the strongest confederations of government workers in the Philippine public sector. Its membership has grown to 70,000 members who are distributed all over the country prompting PSLINK to open three regional offices. While it continues to strengthen the National Headquarters, it is now in the process of decentralizing its activities to the regional and local levels. It has also instituted a dues-paying culture among its members enabling PSLINK to sustain many of its activities. It now has a total of 19 paid staff.

Evaluation.

The success of PSLINK could be attributed as much to the strategy employed as to the judicious implementation of the project. One of the pillars of the strategy of the project is evaluation which in the two phases of the Project has taken on the character of a learning and action-oriented tool. Evaluation of the PSLINK project is integrated into the planning and implementation of the project activities.

Both phases of the project requires at least seven (7) self-evaluations:
four (4) -periodic/quarterly evaluations;
two (2) summative/semestral evaluation and
one (1) Project Advisory Committee meeting conducted annually.

The PSLINK-LO/FTF Project has also been the subject of five (5) independent evaluations:
one (1) independent internal evaluation and
four (4) independent external evaluations.

The periodic evaluations are attended by the Project Management Team along with field implementers. On-going systematic information are provided by the regions as they are required to render a report of their performance, difficulties encountered and their recommendations. Feedback is not only obtained but it also establishes accountability and cultivates a sense of ownership among implementers of the project. It also gives implementers the chance to explore alternatives, in most cases, local solutions to issues peculiar to their regions. The downside of this type of evaluation is that implementers tend see these occasions to determine whether the project is a failure or a success, hence, they tend to downplay shortcomings and justifications are often made for unsatisfactory accomplishment.

The Project Advisory Committee meetings which are jointly composed by representatives of LO/FTF, FTF and PSLINK assess periodically the progress of the implementation of the plans in relation to the objectives. In all cases, field visits are conducted by members of the PAC to supplement desk reviews and workshops. The PAC meetings are very instructive because PSLINK, an infant compared to LO and FTF always learn from the technical knowledge and experience of its Danish partners. The partnership is bilateral in the truest sense because it is consultative rather than dictative. The meetings also allow both parties to obtain in-depth answers to questions hence, large amounts of information are gathered and information is shared candidly and honestly. The disadvantages of this type of evaluation are that direct feedback from the project recipient cannot be obtained. Most of the information from the field is channeled through PSLINK representatives in the PAC.

The four (4) independent external evaluations that were conducted used a variety of methods in obtaining information the evaluators needed. Aside from reviewing project and PSLINK documents, the evaluators used interviews, focused group discussions and observation. In such cases, interviewees are gathered in surroundings familiar to them helping them feel comfortable and willing to share opinions honestly and revealing

feelings, attitudes and perceptions that might be useful to the project. The duration of the independent evaluations that the Project has undergone range from four (4) to ten (10) days.

From PSLINK experience, one of the drawbacks is that evaluators tend to make sweeping generalizations about the Project and PSLINK as a whole without the benefits of having the time to validate these observations. Further, evaluators cannot just simply generalize about the entire organization based on the data they have collected because although the groups they have interviewed may be typical, they are not representative of the entire PSLINK.

Conclusions

Apart from the evaluation process per se, PSLINK has learned that one vital component which cannot be isolated – if success is to be achieved – is the process of communicating the results of the evaluation. PSLINK is a learning organization and its success is largely due to its ability to learn from the evaluations and to communicate this to the stakeholders. PSLINK clients, members, staff, leaders and funding organization are informed of and consulted on the results so that recommendations can be put into practice.

If one is to compare the different types of evaluations and judging from the above comments, the internal and the independent internal evaluations are the ones, which gives the most immediate and operational results for the beneficiary organization and the project. The external evaluations, however, assist greatly in raising concerns, issues and discussions between the donor agency (the LO-FTF Council) and the beneficiary organization (the PSLINK), issues and discussions which might not have been raised without the external evaluation. In order for this effect to be seen as useful and wanted by both partners, however, it is important, that findings and conclusions from external evaluations, are not given undue weight as compared to findings and conclusions from the other types of evaluations conducted.

In retrospect, PSLINK and what it is today is a product of the learning it has gained from the project. However, there is no single and perfect method of evaluation. A hybrid form – a mix of the different method proves to be the most effective way of assessing the merit and worth of the project.

Background:

The journey to this day began in 1994, when the first thought of a bilateral project between the LO/FTF Danish Trade Union Council for International Development Cooperation and the Public Services Labor Independent Confederation (PSLINK) was conceived. PSLINK's General Secretary, Annie Enriquez-Geron was then involved as a resource person in the Workers Education in Asia Project of the LO/FTF and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions/Asia Pacific Project Regional Organization covering 10 countries.

The cooperation of the Council and PSLINK was formalized and eventually materialized in 1995 when PSLINK was granted a three-year project to pursue an education-based campaign among selected workers in the Philippines. A second phase was granted and started in 1999. Currently, we are in between phases where PSLINK is placing imperatives for a decentralized operation.

Prior to the cooperation, PSLINK was a small and obscure federation of government employees and their unions among five other public sector federations. Established in 1987 with an initial membership of 120, recruitment proceeded in an excruciatingly slow pace. Seven years into its establishment, PSLINK had only 23 unions with a little less than 10,000 government employees as members – an insignificant number compared to the 1.3 million organizable government employees. Other than the most basic facilities (tables, chairs and filing cabinets), PSLINK had no property to its credit. In those seven (7) years, it has moved to five different rented offices which were mainly ran by volunteers aside from the three (3) paid staff members. PSLINK then had no formal structures other than the political one which was operationally flat and undemocratic. This structural anomaly was unintentional. In the first place, one of LO/FTF's essential criterions in funding a project is that an organization must be democratic. This incongruity could be best appreciated when one considers the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Confederation. 1987 was a crucial year for the entire Philippines and its people. The country was still reeling from the euphoria after freeing itself from over 20 years of dictatorial regime and the Aquino government was instituting reforms to make up for the democratic deficit one of which was granting public sector workers the right to self organization. Civil servants therefore were neophytes in this area, hence, were still groping for ideal structures. Private sector unions are viewed then and now as inappropriate models to emulate mainly because of the disparate nature of both sectors.

Then PSLINK's National Council members, composing the policy making body which was elected every three years by the Convention, was impeachable by the Council of Leaders composed by the Presidents of the local unions. Meanwhile, the accountability and political structures are not only shaky but are also discordant. For instance, the National Council is tasked to approve the budget but the Council of Leaders approves the program thereby giving the latter the possibility of blocking the programs. PSLINK was also very unstable and its growth was more accidental rather than planned and deliberate owing to its volunteer-driven character. Its activities were almost always contingent on external forces – the events of the day, the whims of its activists and the dictates of the

labor center where PSLINK was then affiliated. If anything, it was a recipient of change rather than being at the forefront of change.

Fast-forward 2002. PSLINK, in terms of membership, has grown by 700 percent with over 70,000 members distributed all over the Philippines. The members represent the different branches and instrumentalities of government – national government agencies, local government units, state colleges and universities and government owned and controlled corporations. To put it another way, what it has accomplished during the first seven years of the Confederation was duplicated seven times over during the succeeding seven years of its life from 1995 to 2002. It is widely recognized as a legitimate partner of employers leading top ranking officials from the Department of Labor and Employment and the Department of Budget and Management to claim, “When we want a rational and progressive opinion, we consult PSLINK. We consider the federation as very respectable”. PSLINK is a member of several technical working groups of both houses of Congress, which are avenues for democratic consultation in crafting laws and policies. It boasts of its own land with three buildings located in Metro Manila. Currently, its headquarters has 10 paid staff members. With a very strong center, the peripheral overflow has been tremendous. Organizing in the regions netted numerous activities leading PSLINK to open three (3) regional offices which are now located in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, with a total of 19 paid staff members.

Ask any member of the Confederation how they see PSLINK years from now and there is a big likelihood of getting an answer resonant to PSLINK’s vision – that of attaining a Strong, Accountable, Comprehensive, Responsive, Effective and Democratic (SACRED) public services. Unlike its early years, members are consulted every step along the way and are informed of all issues concerning the organization. Its growth could hardly be called a phenomenon because it is premeditated and its activities are carefully planned and purposeful. And nothing happens by accident nor by chance anymore. One of its most important contributions to the public sector union movement in the Philippines is instituting a dues-paying culture among its members. In an environment where “no union dues” is the norm rather than the exception, where “no union dues” is the come-on for membership, PSLINK stands out like the proverbial sore thumb. Dues payment was and still is an uphill struggle but gradually, members are beginning to accept the principle that dues payment is sine qua non to a viable union who can negotiate from a position of strength, for improved living and working conditions.

The first phase of the project centered on strengthening the national headquarters which was based in Manila by recruiting members through education – seminars, trainings, workshop and the like. The second phase, lasting from 1999 to 2002 built on the experiences of the first phase. Education, including non-traditional union education activities, was still the strategy used to organize the public sector. However, the depth and breath was expanded to include skills other than those required in trade unionism. Professional skills training which is the other half of the tandem hinged on the belief that workplace effectivity is a function of workplace democracy and competence. These strategies seem to work as evidenced in the number of civil servants joining in PSLINK’s fold. Mid-way through the Project’s second phase, resources had to be adjusted and its

coverage had been brought down to the regions. Its membership was not concentrated in Metro Manila alone but growth was already apparent in other urban centers like Davao City in Mindanao – the Southern part of the Philippines. There has been an increasing need to decentralize and bring PSLINK at the doorstep of its members. Thus, the support is being shifted from the central to the regional level.

With an enlightened public sector and more democratic space guaranteed in the 1987 Philippine Constitution crafted after Mr. Marcos' downfall, civil servants are increasingly enthusiastic to join trade unions. Hence, PSLINK is poised to grow at the same if not faster speed than the last seven years. The challenge it is faced with today is to install the necessary structures at all levels, more importantly at the regional and local – vital to accommodate new members and maintain the current ones.

PSLINK's Experiences with Reviews/Evaluations:

To say that the PSLINK-LO/FTF Project is the combustion engine of the growth of PSLINK is to put it very simplistically for one organization may be given limitless resources and yet may fail to prosper as desired. The progress of PSLINK is rather due to a confluence of factors. It owes its success as much to the strategy employed which PSLINK and its partners as to the judicious implementation of the Project jointly agreed, one of the pillars of which is the entire evaluation process. For the PSLINK project, evaluation has taken on the character of a learning and action-oriented tool. PSLINK has become a viable learning organization and its success is also attributable to its ability to learn from the various feedbacks it gets. All evaluation sessions invariably ends up giving the stakeholders a run down of all action points. These are then communicated brought down the line to its members and employees.

Evaluation of the PSLINK project is done in parallel with planning and the implementation of the project activities. Both phases of the project require at least seven (7) self-evaluations: four (4) periodic/quarterly evaluations; two (2) bi-annual summative evaluations and one (1) Project Advisory Committee meeting conducted annually. The PSLINK-LO/FTF Project has also been the subject of one (1) independent internal evaluation and four (4) independent external evaluations.

Self-evaluation

Periodic and Summative Evaluations

Periodic evaluations are done usually at the first month after the quarter in review while summative evaluation is done bi-annually. The participants include the project team, composed of the Project Officer, Regional Project Coordinators, field activists and the General Secretary of PSLINK who is also the Confederation's Chief Executive Officer. Systematic information is provided by the implementers by requiring them to render a report of their performance vis-à-vis the plans. They are also required to report the difficulties they encounter and offer possible remedial actions. It brings the project team together and by making field implementers part of the evaluation, feedback is not only

obtained first hand but it also establishes accountability as well as cultivate a sense of shared ownership. Implementers are also given the chance to explore alternative recommendations to local problems, to offer local solutions to regional concerns. Through this, they are able to learn from their experiences and can therefore work effectively towards the attainment of the Project's goals. This is a very facilitative activity especially when one considers the cultural diversity of the Philippines.

However, these types of evaluation can be very subjective especially if implementers do not understand its purpose. The lack of understanding and misunderstanding are brought about by the working arrangements prevailing in the Project. There are only a handful of Project Staff members and many activities are carried out by activists on a part-time basis. Those who are on full time are only allowed secondments for a year; hence, there is a swift turnover of positions. In the Philippines, union rights of public sector workers are still limited that the idea of a union leave is foreign. The fast turnover of positions has been pointed out in one external evaluation and discussions on career pathing for full time professional trade unionists are now taken seriously.

Although the periodic and summative evaluations are not designed to gauge the success nor failure of the project, the tendency of the implementers is to justify mediocre performance for fear that it may have bearing on the kind of implementers they are rather than finding out what can be done to prevent difficulties. There is a tendency to downplay failures or hide them by highlighting success extraordinarily. Hence, when the implementers are not thoroughly probed, there is the danger of not getting to the heart of the cause of problems.

Project Advisory Committee Meetings

This is an annual evaluation ranging from four (4) to eight (8) days. The Project Advisory team is composed of two representatives each from PSLINK and its partner. The donor is represented by the Executive Consultant of the LO/FTF Council's Asian Desk and FTF's International Secretary, while the PSLINK block is composed of its President and the General Secretary with the Project Officer sitting as the Secretary. However, during the last PAC held in April 2002, the three (3) Regional Secretaries of Visayas, Mindanao and Luzon, respectively, were invited to the meeting. It should be noted that these PSLINK people are elected by the Convention and are holding regular 8-hour jobs in government.

These annual activities are very instructive especially for an organization like PSLINK. Compared with the LO and FTF, it is still an infant, very much in its formative years. Hence, PSLINK has gained so much from the technical knowledge and experience of its Danish partners. But meetings alone are anemic. Direct feedback from the recipient cannot not be obtained while information from the field is channeled through the PSLINK representatives in the PAC. PAC members, particularly the donor, could not really appreciate what is on the ground unless it is supplemented by other methods like field visits where they go right to where many of its activities are also happening. Hence, the desk reviews are supplemented in all cases by field missions and workshops usually

done at the end of the meeting. During the field missions, members of the PAC interact with project implementers and the beneficiaries of the project. Through interviews, PAC members are able to acquire a wealth of information, which is candidly, and honestly shared by PSLINK members and the former observe first hand the impact of the project.

It should be noted that PSLINK's partners are very much involved in the Project. The Danish partners have been to a number of PSLINK activities and these have contributed to the very cordial relationship that has developed in the last seven (7) years. They were given the opportunity to address the 1998 Convention and had the chance to address the National Executive Board Members in its meetings over the years of cooperation.

The field visits where interviews are conducted and observations that are carried out make up for the limitations identified in the desk review method. One of the negative aspects in using observation, however is that members may change their behavior and do some window dressing just before the visit. Further, this type is vulnerable to misinterpretation not only because of the cultural variance existing between Denmark and the Philippines but also the prevailing differences between the countries' industrial relations framework, unionization rate and even nuances in language.

It is worth mentioning that during the last PAC meeting with the three regional secretaries in attendance was particularly very enriching for both parties. In a more solemn atmosphere with nary the distractions of a field visit, the donors were able to ask in- depth questions. The information disclosed by the Regional Secretaries dramatically highlighted the gapping regional differences convincing all PAC members that a "one size fits all" project strategy would be costly because somehow it will not achieve project objectives. For instance, the Christian-Muslim conflict in the island of Mindanao is a common information here and abroad and is always mentioned off-handedly. However, the portrayal by the Regional Secretary of Mindanao allowed them to enter an inner sanctum of somebody who has grown up with the conflict and disclosed aspects never appreciated before and which have direct bearing on project strategies. This gave more credence for the need to decentralize the Project and shift the support to the regions.

Independent Evaluations

Four (4) internal evaluations were done on the PSLINK-LO/FTF Project so far, the most recent of which was done in May 2002. Perhaps the most pivotal evaluation done on the Project was the organizational analysis carried out in 1997 by Ole Stilund Jeppesen, FTF's Education Officer which lasted two and a half months [3]. It did a comprehensive organizational analysis of PSLINK. While PSLINK has been claiming that it embraces democracy, it was through this independent, semi-internal evaluation that PSLINK came to realize that its organizational structures tell a different story. Other than its undemocratic features, there was also overlapping of staff and political functions. Further, the structures gave a lot of room for political maneuvering thereby potentially destabilizing the organization. There was a lot of debate around the issue because the PSLINK political leaders were so possessive of the organization that the idea of a major structural overhaul was unthinkable. However, by pointing out the symptoms of the

anomaly PSLINK eventually became convinced that indeed there was a looming organizational crisis.

One of the issues that often confronted PSLINK was its membership with the biggest national center – the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP). In 1993 there were already cracks in the relationship but this was veiled with diplomacy. The animosity reached a crescendo that PSLINK found enough intestinal fortitude to disaffiliate with TUCP. Always in the interest of unity and greater workers solidarity, the LO/FTF through the evaluator, Jeppesen strongly prevailed upon PSLINK to maintain membership with the TUCP and to avail itself of democratic mechanisms and avenues to resolve conflict. But the disaffiliation came about as a collective decision borne out of fundamental and irreconcilable differences in values, practices, principles and organizational stand on prominent issues including PSLINK's anti- United States military bases stance, resistance to tow the line and be identified with a political party and politicians, and its strong critique against the family dynasty in the TUCP. The last nail though that sealed the coffin of the PSLINK and TUCP relationship was the National Center's unacceptable support to those leaders whom PSLINK charged in court for misused and abused of union funds. The National Center went further by assisting them in forming a breakaway group.

During its Third Triennial Convention in 1998, radical constitutional amendments were introduced and were consequently approved overwhelmingly by the Convention. Yes, it took intense discussion and debate between the evaluator and PSLINK leaders to see and accept the consequences of the existing structures. The crisis was forestalled because the weaknesses in the structures were in many ways compensated by idealism, genuine enthusiasm, high level of volunteerism and earnest desire to transform PSLINK that is the opposite of that conservative national center - a democratic, accountable, independent, inclusive and sustainable public sector union. PSLINK, in losing something had gained so much more and was all the more better for it. Today, PSLINK can genuinely say that it is democratic. Members in the provinces can be snug with the thought that they are justly represented in the Board. They can claim that they are a vital part of the organization because of the regional structures allow for more participation and consultation among members. And a reasonable hierarchy, which is more inclusive, has been installed.

Further, it was during the comprehensive organizational diagnosis and interviews conducted among rank-and-file members in the Visayas region those anomalies in union and project fund disbursement and accounts were uncovered. As a consequence, two (2) former members of the National Council were impeached and were charged administratively and criminally while three (3) others were meted with votes of no confidence. It was this episode in PSLINK's fledgling life when bitter and hard lessons were learned. Henceforth, the collective resolve to fight corruption has since become an on-going campaign platform of PSLINK to promote responsible unionism, good governance and to fight poverty through provision of quality public services.

The independent evaluation done on PSLINK in 1999 [6] was designed to assess how the project contributes to the attainment of the twin goals of the LO/FTF and the project which is poverty alleviation and the promotion of a democratic society. The results were mixed. On one hand there was an affirmation that the Project was a success as evidenced by the attainment of some objectives. On the other hand, they saw certain serious shortcomings because according to the evaluators there are weak or at worst, no apparent links between what the project achieved and the LO/FTF's broader goal of eradicating poverty and inequality. However, the latter finding is debatable. What is lacking or weak is the capacity of PSLINK to value its contribution in these areas. As it is, poverty and inequality alleviation is a multifaceted effort and PSLINK failed to see its contribution towards this effort. Hence, one of the lessons to be learned from this evaluation was to improve the reporting mechanism and communication structure.

In the most recent evaluation carried out by International Development Partners [3], one of the important learnings that PSLINK had was the issue of sustainability. This is addressed in the Project by saving 20% of member's union dues as counterpart contribution. Apparently, this does not suffice and had to be improved. This triggered serious discussions resulting to a more refined definition of sustainability. As far as PSLINK is concerned, sustainability is a stool and the three (3) legs it needs to stand on are political, economic and institutional. Efforts are expended towards the attainment of these in all levels. This has set the tone for serious discussions not only among leaders but members as well, to devise ways to attain sustainability.

The internal evaluations done in PSLINK utilized various methods including desk reviews, workshops, interviews, observations, field visits, and focus group discussions.

Although PSLINK derived valuable insights there are also a few pitfalls in the process. For one, evaluations, particularly those done in relatively short time, tend to portray superficial if not wrong impressions hence evaluators may draw wrong conclusions. Further, the data they collect are often used to make sweeping generalizations about PSLINK. For instance, the LO/FTF has been accused of micro-managing PSLINK – this after about one (1) week of evaluating PSLINK. The Project Management Team has been observed as not transparent after interviewing members who received all reports but cannot understand its contents. Although those interviewed may be typical PSLINK members, they are not necessarily representative of the whole of PSLINK. When time is against evaluations, such inaccurate conclusions are inclined to happen.

Overall, independent evaluations provide valuable information that is otherwise not derived from self-evaluations. It affords a venue to raise concerns, issues and discussions between the partner organizations that tend to be overlooked in self-evaluations. However, in order for this effect to be seen as useful and wanted by both partners, results of independent evaluations should not be given undue weight and should be treated in the light of other learning obtained from other evaluations conducted.

Conclusions:

For PSLINK, evaluation is in itself an educational tool. PSLINK today is a product of the collective and cumulative learning it has gained from the feedback it has received through the years of cooperation with the LO/FTF Council. There are indeed valuable insights:

1. It is essential that all stakeholders should be involved in the evaluation process – the partners, the project management team, field activists, target recipients and even representatives of the larger society where PSLINK belong such as government officials and other NGOs. This is an imperative especially if one is to appreciate the broader impact of the project. Involving the stakeholder is also necessary in order to understand the meanings they attach to the project.
2. It is important that results of the evaluation should be communicated. The how and when is equally vital. From experience, PSLINK knows that implementers who have very little knowledge about the results of the evaluation cannot effectively carry out the needed adjustments and will have a diminished or no capacity at all to learn from experience. Further, members who are ill-informed cannot make any commitment to support such adjustments. These make it very important if commitments are to be drawn to act on the recommendations of the evaluation.
3. PSLINK has moved away from the traditional mold of seeing evaluation as “judgement” day, where donors are seen as judges out to give a verdict on the performance and consequently mete out punishment if PSLINK fails to come up with the required standard. Rather, it sees evaluations as very a rational, collaborative activity, which can result to great gains for both parties. This metamorphosis did not come easy particularly to Filipinos who are usually overwhelmed with evaluations. The fact that the latter forms of evaluations are carried out by white men, made the transition doubly difficult – the flip side perhaps of the while man’s syndrome.
4. Recipients of development aid must realize that politics in the country of the partner organization tend to spill over project evaluations. Because funding is limited, there are competitions among funding agencies. Thus, if the evaluator comes from a “competitor” NGO or may be biased towards a “competitor” chances are, the evaluator would subject the project to more critical standards, if only to justify downscaling of assistance or worse, the phase out of a project. With this in mind, recipients should be sensitive to these subtleties so as to formulate a defense. Being forewarned is being forearmed.
5. PSLINK is convinced that no single method of evaluation is effective. A hybrid form is more appropriate if only to acquire the best approximate, if not the genuine merit and worth of the project. Evaluation results should not be treated in isolation and should be appreciated in the lights of the results of other evaluations conducted.

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