

“What conditions are required for an optimal internalisation of evaluations?”

International Federation Terre des Hommes (IFTDH)

Executive summary

It is now a well-known fact that evaluations are increasingly focused on learning. This trend, concerning all the different stakeholder categories, is confirmed by the multitude of publications, case studies and initiatives on this subject.

Yet changes to practices are not always systematic. Although a large number of factors clearly come into play, the ownership of evaluation findings by the project teams and the institution concerned remains a considerable challenge. Behind every evaluation lie varying degrees of judgement. What can be done to ensure that an external evaluator’s findings will be well received by the teams, who still often perceive the evaluation (albeit to highly diverse extents) as a means of control and interference, an “ordeal” rather than an “opportunity to stand back and think about what we are doing”? What decisive steps can an institution take to prepare itself (before), be more receptive (during) and consequently take an evaluation’s recommendations more on board (after)? How can a good balance be found between the requirement for accountability to the donors and beneficiaries, and a real institutional will for transparency and self-criticism to learn from successes and failures?

We would like to address these questions using the example of the Terre des Hommes Foundation – Lausanne (pioneer of the movement of the same name and member of IFTDH). Over the last six years, the Foundation has put its institutional and human development process to work to substantially improve its approaches and the use of evaluations as a learning tool. Although it claims neither to be comprehensive nor to have a total command of all the factors at work, this experience can provide some interesting options for a more in-depth study of evaluations to further improve the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of aid.

INTRODUCTION

What is IFTDH?¹

The Terre des Hommes movement was created by civil society in Lausanne (Switzerland) in 1960 to fight for children’s rights and equitable development irrespective of race, religion, political opinions, culture and gender. To this end, Terre des Hommes assists development and humanitarian aid projects designed to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged children, their families and their communities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child forms the conceptual framework that guides the Terre des Hommes movement’s activities.

Following its creation, the movement gave birth to other organisations of the same name in various countries. In 1966, these organisations joined together to form IFTDH, a non-profit umbrella association registered in Switzerland. The members of IFTDH are independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that bear the same name, pursue a common objective, use similar methods to attain it and have the will to work together (especially in terms of advocacy, lobbying and awareness-raising campaigns).

At present, IFTDH has ten member organisations² assisting some 850 projects in 65 countries on different continents with a total budget of some 50 million euros. This makes it one of the

¹ www.terredeshommes.org

² Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Syria. The Swiss branch of IFTDH is made up of two organisations that are independent of one another: Terre des Hommes Switzerland (Basel and Geneva) and the Terre des Hommes Foundation (Lausanne).

main global alliances of NGOs specialised in children's aid, with some of the member organisations having over forty years of experience in international solidarity and development assistance.

The Terre des Hommes Foundation (Tdh)³, which forms the subject of this presentation, is the leading IFTDH member organisation both financially (annual budget of 22 million euros) and in terms of the number of countries in which it operates (30 in 2002). Although some IFTDH members work exclusively through partner NGOs in the South, the Tdh Foundation conducts approximately 50% of its own projects directly and some 50% in the form of partnership actions. In terms of human resources policy, Tdh keeps the number of expatriate staff sent into the field to a strict minimum (one delegate, sometimes assisted by one assistant delegate in the case of substantial missions and crisis situations). The aim here is to foster and make the most of local expertise.

EVALUATION WITHIN THE TERRE DES HOMMES FOUNDATION

Although evaluation approaches have always existed (not only in the form of reconnaissance missions and field visits, but also in the form of ad-hoc evaluations), Tdh had no "systematic evaluation approach" as such until the mid-1990s. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Humanitarian action and development assistance have evolved a great deal in recent decades. For Tdh, this has meant a steady transition from an approach centred on the individual (more humanitarian assistance orientated) to an increasingly strong will to consider the context in which the individual is evolving and to find viable solutions to the problems of social groups in a given geographic area (more development orientated). This has made the notion of impact harder to measure: a good in-team monitoring system used to measure (or at least assess) the direct effects on the children. However, changes at social-group level are subject to a greater number of factors that are harder to understand and often call for more external observation.
- The institutional environment has also changed. Donors used to insist less on the need to plan, track and measure (indicators and impact). This trend has since sharpened considerably, with the same institutional donors putting more and more pressure on their partners due to pressure from, for example, their governments. The same phenomenon can be observed among private donors, who now demand greater transparency.
- Lastly, the situations calling for assistance, whether crisis situations or in more stable contexts, are also becoming increasingly complex and therefore harder to interpret and steer.

Starting point: the joint evaluations

Around the mid-1990s, the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC/SHA) launched an evaluation process for a number of Tdh projects. A total of over a dozen evaluations were made in as many different countries over a two-year period.

These approaches were said to be joint, in that a representative of SDC and a representative of Tdh formed an integral part of the evaluation team alongside the main evaluator (external consultant). There were a number of reasons for launching such a process:

³ www.tdh.ch

- The same Tdh projects were submitted every year to the same office for their financing to be renewed. SDC/SHA wanted these approaches to assess the relevance and effectiveness of these different projects to be able to make a more informed decision as to whether they should continue to be financed.
- Relations between Tdh and SDC were not very good at the time. SDC/SHA wanted additional guarantees as to the quality of the projects and Tdh's monitoring/readjustment capacities.
- The idea was also to introduce a self-evaluation practice, a concept on which SDC had placed an emphasis and which it wanted to extend to partner NGOs. Hence each joint evaluation was preceded (or followed in two cases) by a self-evaluation workshop involving the project teams concerned and headed by an external consultant appointed by SDC.

The first joint evaluations were more reminiscent of “sanction” or “sledgehammer” evaluations. SDC sought arguments to be able, where necessary, to financially withdraw from endless projects. Tdh felt these approaches were imposed by the donor, despite the fact that one of its representatives was on the evaluation team.

Every year, the external consultant made a cross evaluation to provide an overview of the situation and a basis for joint discussion between Tdh and SDC.

As the process progressed, these joint evaluations brought the two institutions closer together and generated more open dialogue between them. In general, SDC realised that the supported projects were not necessarily as “stuck” as they might have been led to believe by the analysis of the financing application alone. For its part, Tdh gradually gained more of an understanding of SDC's aim in conducting these approaches and its concern with having to also be accountable to its management and MPs.

These evaluations also revealed Tdh's project management shortcomings. The most conspicuous of these were the coexistence of different planning and monitoring systems, the lack of strategic vision and poor feedback (learning). Tdh took note and reacted on the institutional level by simultaneously launching three additional projects:

- Corporate Identity: the redefinition of Tdh's identity (values and principles of action) and a think tank on the movement's image (external communication strategy).
- ISO 9001 certification: improvement of the quality of decision-making processes at headquarters.
- Institutional and Human Development (IHD): improvement in the quality and viability of field projects.

As regards the subject in hand, we will concentrate mainly on the third project. A remarkable and, to our knowledge, unique fact in the world of Swiss NGOs is that rather than focusing on the weaknesses and negative aspects, and depending on the co-operation and dynamic initiated by these joint evaluations, SDC⁴ agreed to financially and substantially support the IHD project, hence giving Tdh the opportunity to become more professional and build a firm “quality system” foundation (strategic steering at different levels: institutional, programme and projects).

The next step: the institutional and human development project

This project was launched in 1998 with a timetable of three and a half years to:

⁴ This time, SDC's Development Section (NGO Unit), with which Tdh still had relatively little contact in 1998. This co-operation has been substantially strengthened since, especially with the IHD project, leading to a 2002 agreement on a three-year contribution per programme (all thematic projects) instead of individual and annual project authorisation.

- *Develop in a participative manner a five-year strategic plan (2000-2004).*

This was not the first five-year strategic plan in the history of Tdh. However, the previous plan (1995-1999) was devised by the management of the time without any broad consultation with all the stakeholders concerned (headquarters, field workers, Southern partners and volunteer working groups in Switzerland). Neither was it particularly monitored or reviewed. Consequently, a slick document was produced that ended up in a drawer.

The challenge for the 2000-2004 plan was therefore not only to further develop the institution's strategic vision, give it more value in the world of international solidarity, but also to promote its ownership by all the stakeholders involved who sometimes had different expectations depending on the role they played in the institution. There was also the challenge of keeping this document alive, by regularly monitoring and revising it. Hence the 2000-2004 plan was reviewed mid-term in 2002.

- *Design, construct and introduce a harmonised project/programme cycle management (PCM) system*

This essentially took the form of strategic planning and project monitoring training workshops for the main headquarters and field stakeholders, including the Southern partners. Over 40 workshops were organised in 27 countries, headed by two experienced external consultants. Drawing on existing PCM methods, the Tdh system was developed gradually with each new workshop and was tailored as much as possible to the types of projects implemented by the Foundation (children's aid). In late 2001, this work was consolidated with the publication of the entire PCM system in a Tdh project cycle handbook.⁵ Monitoring-evaluation and capitalising on experiences naturally dominate this handbook.

A dozen other sessions, in addition to those organised in the field, were held in Switzerland for headquarters staff (in-service training) and for new recruits to Tdh to familiarise them straight away with the method in force.

As Tdh evolved and started to master these new tools, it set out to make the system sustainable by creating a new project cycle resources position in the organisation. The main task of the person in this position is to gradually take on and carry the torch so as to depend less on external consultants for in-house training needs, while continuing to work and develop the content. This position is to some extent the mainspring of the Tdh quality process.

- *Set up a system to capitalise on experience*

Given the large staff turnover, Tdh also wanted to have a system that would allow it to share, draw on and make the most of the various positive and negative experiences. This system is essentially based on three elements:

The Tdh teams and local partners, expatriate and local staff, who deal daily with the realities in the field and the implementation of projects in the South. Since capitalisation is now an integral part of the Tdh PCM system, each team must produce at least one capitalisation document per project phase (capitalisation report or information sheet).

The resources personnel, each specialised in a key Tdh area and/or a horizontal area. In 1998, Tdh decided to round out the operational sector (geographic desks) with a pool of specialists whose main tasks are technical assistance and the development of thematic sector-based strategies based on field practices (capitalisation per sector). Tdh currently has seven resources personnel.⁶

⁵ This can be downloaded in English and French (Spanish and Portuguese pending) from www.tdh.ch Documentation/Download.

⁶ Street children, children's rights, mother-child health care, nutrition, psychosocial, HIV/AIDS and project/programme cycle management (PCM).

A software program to electronically manage and share capitalisation documents. This has been in use since 2002 and can be accessed by all the teams, from headquarters to the field, at any moment in time.

The executive director of an NGO specialised in institutional development made an external evaluation of the IHD project in 2002.⁷ The report states that all the expected results had in effect been accomplished and were of good quality. The evaluator considered that the systems set up during the project enabled Tdh to become a “learning” organisation. Nevertheless, certain PCM aspects needed further development and improvement, not to mention that professionalisation calls for the ongoing design of new tools that need to be tested and circulated. Moreover, even though staff turnover was lower than before, it demanded constant professional improvement.

Therefore, at the end of this first IHD phase, Tdh decided to continue in the same vein and enter into a second phase (2003-2004) to consolidate the achievements (such as more in-depth thinking on the evaluations, still not sufficiently developed in the PCM handbook). Since SDC had made it clear right from the outset that its financial contribution would not be renewed at the end of the project, Tdh is now financing this process entirely from its own funds.

And what about the evaluation in all this?

The project evaluations (all types) continued during the IHD and their number is rising. Over twenty evaluations were made⁸ from mid-1998 (end of joint evaluations) to late 2002. This is a definite sign of collective awareness building of the utility of such approaches.

Yet, over and above the quantity, the development of the approach is interesting. We have mentioned this above. Tdh was on the defensive and had rather endured than welcomed the joint evaluations during the initial period. With the launch of the IHD, Tdh was able to make this approach its own and gradually accentuate the “learning” component of the evaluations. A number of underlying factors can be identified:

- ❖ Institutional environment: assured by strengthening its management capacities and a more open and transparent dialogue with its donors. Tdh could now concentrate on how to improve its actions rather than spending its time justifying them. Although some evaluations were and still are set contractually, other approaches were launched on Tdh’s own initiative, without financial implications necessarily being at stake. With the positive dynamic established by the IHD, Tdh no longer systematically trembled at the idea of uncertain evaluation findings. Moreover, the evaluations were perceived, and even encouraged, as crucial approaches contributing directly to the development and consolidation of sector-based strategies.
- ❖ More frequent use of self-evaluations: two different methods (but similar in spirit) were gradually introduced. One consists of advising the field teams to make a self-evaluation before an external evaluation is made. The very fact of holding a team discussion and being clear about strengths and weaknesses and the results actually achieved by the project should help the teams to prepare mentally and especially to have sounder arguments to put to an external evaluator. Unlike the more formal workshops, there is no “expert” or external moderator in attendance. The teams can therefore review and self-evaluate at will without any external “pressure”. The other method consists of encouraging the use of an assisted self-evaluation in certain cases (especially in the case of a partnership with local organisations operating as a

⁷ Herman Snelder, Management for Development Foundation (MDF), Ede, the Netherlands. The evaluation report is available on request.

⁸ Not to mention the frequent resources staff field visits, which can be treated as “informal” internal evaluations.

network). An external consultant who has taken part in the IHD process (hence known to the teams) comes to facilitate the discussion and self-criticism. The emphasis is therefore placed on the team itself becoming aware of its strengths and weaknesses rather than making do with an external judgement that could, in certain cases, be seen as “over simplistic” and/or “traumatising” (especially, but not solely, for the local staff).

- ❖ The use of internal evaluations: with the strengthening of Tdh’s technical management (resources staff), the practice of internal evaluations has become more frequent even though it is not yet systematically formalised. Since these staff have no direct hierarchical link with the field (unlike the geographic desks), they can more easily focus on and criticise project content and promote improvements for a better quality of action. Obviously, the resources staff remain fully-fledged employees of the Foundation and, as such, are subject to certain rules and institutional biases. Yet they are more able to stand back and judge than the operational sectors and are hence theoretically more impartial. Internal evaluations are not a cure-all, but they do usefully supplement the external evaluation approaches and provide a different angle on the project. They are also important to the learning aspects that can help develop sector-based strategies.
- ❖ Development of consultant loyalty: the vast majority of the external evaluations over the last five years have been conducted by the same consultants who actively participated in and contributed to the IHD project (training and heading workshops in the field). The fact that these consultants are on contract to Tdh, even for joint evaluations requested by SDC, has also had a beneficial effect, if only from the point of view of the state of mind of the teams evaluated. A climate of trust has hence gradually taken root between the consultants, the management teams and the evaluated teams. The evaluators are aware of the progress, values, principles and methods of action, but also of the institution’s weaknesses. They have therefore had more time to focus their evaluation work on unresolved questions and on Tdh’s key areas, whilst remaining as impartial as possible. These same consultants have also often put together teams comprising “juniors” and local resources staff to compare different views of the same situation within the team.
- ❖ Different perception of the action taken: the IHD project contributed to a sort of “cultural revolution” within Tdh. Contrary to certain practices in use in the past, a project is now seen as an action limited in time, with a beginning and an end. Given the complexity of the issues (especially social) on which Tdh works, a project rarely produces concrete results in the short run. A project is hence broken down into a number of phases, generally ranging from two to three years, with each phase representing a project cycle in itself. A project cycle entails planning (setting a goal for the end of a phase and developing a strategy to achieve it), monitoring and evaluation. This latter element is hence made easier since there is now a strategic plan (working frame and basis of comparison) for the vast majority of the medium-term projects and no longer merely programming renewed every year. Moreover, there is a clearer differentiation between strategic options (primarily of interest to management and donors) and operational procedures (important, but with room for more flexibility and adaptability by the teams themselves when working directly in the field).
- ❖ Enhancing internal capacities: in the same way as the teams now perceive the projects differently, the fact that they have received at least planning and monitoring training has given them extra skills in terms of PCM.⁹ They are hence less anxious about the

⁹ This is especially valid for the Tdh field teams. The IHD external evaluation report quite rightly states that more still needs to be done for the Southern partners who, although they have attended at least one training workshop, still need strengthening as regards PCM.

evaluations or have a better understanding of their utility, if only in terms of making adjustments to the next phase of the project. Although there is obviously still resistance to the evaluation, still sometimes seen as an oversimplified judgement, their new management skills also enable them to better prepare their argument, if necessary, in answer to the evaluators' conclusions.

Self-evaluation, internal evaluation or external evaluation: which approach?

As mentioned above, Tdh has used a number of different approaches over the last decade. Yet the organisation still has no real evaluation policy to date. Although the usefulness of such approaches is now recognised within the organisation, the choice of the most suitable approach is often negotiated ad hoc, based on a number of factors:

- What is an evaluation for: what are the goals; what information are we looking for; what are we more particularly interested in knowing?
- Who is behind the approach? The grass roots level or headquarters? Is there a contractual obligation with a donor or is it on Tdh's initiative?
- Who and what is being evaluated: the Tdh project or a local partner; the programme or the project; the entire project or only part of it?
- Why make an evaluation at this stage: end of project; start of project; during a phase; end/renewal of a phase?
- What are the implications of the evaluation: what are the surrounding circumstances (partnership relations, institutional set-up, etc.)? What is done with the findings? To what should the approach give rise: decision-making assistance (closure or continuation) or improvement (project reorientation)?

The answers to these questions are obviously crucial to the drafting of the terms of reference, which is a necessary step before any evaluation (regardless of its type).

We have no magic formula for the choice of approach, and the question could be asked as to whether one exists. Although financial accountability (sound use of funds) is an important and necessary aspect, there is also and even a greater emphasis placed on the "awareness/learning" component by the project teams and the institution. This gives rise to a more negotiated approach that offers a learning purpose that the teams can more easily "own". What is the point of making an external evaluation if, at the same time, the teams are not ready, put up resistance and/or do not become aware of the situation in which they find themselves? In this case, it is highly likely that the evaluation's recommendations, however judicious and relevant, will never really be taken on board and applied. This entire approach and investment in terms of time, financial means and human resources would ultimately end in disappointment.

Ownership is facilitated by internal evaluations and self-evaluations (assisted and unassisted), and these are the lines that we wish to continue to develop in the future. As regards the external evaluations, we think that the development of consultant loyalty could help minimise resistance effects. We believe that a restricted choice of consultants is a prerequisite, albeit not the only one, conducive to the team's improved ownership of an evaluation's findings.

Obviously, vigilance is still called for as regards impartiality issues. We deliberately use this term rather than "neutrality", which is much harder to define, especially since a consultant's "employer" remains the organisation that gives him or her the mandate. Experience has shown us that consultants, even those with whom loyalty has been developed, have the necessary capacities to take a distance and can attain the required extent of impartiality, somewhat along the lines of "spare the rod and spoil the child". Anything that might be lost (theoretically) in impartiality is largely offset by better ownership and a higher probability of

practices changing. It is also clear that we will continue to occasionally use other consultants to bring in new points of view and broaden the range of opinions of Tdh's work.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the perception of the team whose project is evaluated. All those who have been in the field and/or made evaluations know that: regardless of the orientation and more or less strong justification for learning ascribed to an evaluation approach, such an approach always has an explicit or implicit intrusive aspect, somewhat like an audit. "We come to check what you, as a team, claim to have accomplished." This is done in a short space of time by an external person who does not necessarily have a command of all the ins and outs of the question and who has not experienced the project at first hand. Relational and cultural elements, especially when dealing with a local partner, make such approaches even more complex.

Social psychology research and studies have also shown the dangers and limits of evaluations, especially external evaluations. For example, "*The evaluation must consider the human, social, political, cultural and especially contextual aspects of the organisation. It is a question of sticking to the stakeholders' reality such as they perceive and define it with their values.*"¹⁰ Along the same lines, the very notion of objectiveness, which is more readily conferred on an external evaluation, is brought into question in that, "*the evaluation is a socio-political process of intersubjectiveness between the stakeholders and the evaluator. In other words, objectiveness emerges from the discussion, knowledge and communication of each stakeholder's subjectiveness. The evaluator hence becomes a mediator working with the participants in an educational and learning process.*" In addition, "*social action designed to initiate social change is too unique, complex and changeable to be directly transparent to an external observer. If the stakeholders are not fully aware and in command of their actions, it is hard to replace this lack of awareness with another's critical consciousness.*" Moreover, "*taking away from the stakeholders the responsibility for making their evaluation is tantamount to divesting them of their primary responsibility for their daily actions.*"

A poorly conducted external evaluation can hence trigger strong resistance from the team, which may, "*perceive it as a threat to its autonomy, like a bureaucratic constraint on its work. The evaluator is hence perceived as "a controller in league with the power structure, providing justifications for the decisions made and the ways in which these decisions are applied in line with the management's criteria"* (Zuniga, 1994a: 32). *The social worker sees himself as a subject of evaluation and, like a child, tries to justify his actions.*" In these circumstances, it is highly likely that, "*the evaluation's findings will be underused by the social workers. The organisational learning aspect is replaced by a frozen picture of the action.*"

For these various reasons, social psychology clearly favours the self-evaluation approach as the only one that, "*fosters a reorientation of the social action by the stakeholders, since it is rooted in the stakeholders' inevitably subjective reality (their universe of values) and in the collective and individual choices. We feel it vital to work on these subjectivities and comparing them, by means of discussion, would help build the institutional reality. (...) Self-evaluation, possibly accompanied by an evaluator, hence enables social action to attain a contemplative and critical awareness, and to develop organisational learning.*"

These few elements (among others) bring into question the so-called greater objectiveness provided by an external evaluation. Yet does this mean that external evaluations should be discarded and systematically replaced by self-evaluations (assisted or unassisted)? At this point in time, we think not, but it is certainly an interesting area of thinking that we should consider in greater depth in the coming years.

¹⁰ The excerpts in this chapter are translated from Albert-Luc Haering, *La qualité de l'action sociale et son évaluation*, IES Editions, Geneva 2000.

LESSONS LEARNED TO IMPROVE THE OWNERSHIP OF THE EVALUATIONS

Given the issues hitherto addressed and other elements, and based on our own experience, we will now endeavour to summarise the different factors conducive to improved ownership based on three chronological evaluation steps (before, during and after). We will then conclude this section with some more general comments.

Note that we will concentrate mainly on the external evaluations, based on the principle that they pose greater problems of blocking and ownership than an assisted self-evaluation and/or an internal evaluation.

We will methodologically endeavour to complete the following sentence: “*Based on Tdh’s experience, an evaluation’s findings are best owned if ...*”:

Before

... the terms of reference are developed and negotiated jointly by headquarters (geographic desk), the field (delegation + project), the donors concerned and the consultant. They should, in particular, extremely clearly and transparently answer the above-mentioned fundamental questions (p. 7).

... the relations between the organisation concerned and its donor are good and transparent. This will reduce the defensive pressure based on the sole justification of the said project (question anyway asked in each evaluation under the heading of relevance) and will enable a focus on the potential for improving project quality. It is in everyone’s interest to improve the quality of the projects. This can be done with all the more transparency and ease if relations are good.

... the consultant has the required profile (laid down by the terms of reference) and already knows the organisation (loyalty). This in no way compromises the possibility of regularly using new consultants.

... the consultant forms a complementary and multidisciplinary evaluation team, including a local resources person.

... the project team concerned has made its own self-evaluation before the external evaluation.

... the field level has a command of and owns the project’s strategic plan (prior PCM and planning process training) and has set up a good monitoring system.

During

... the consultant manages to build a relationship of trust with the evaluated project team, without comprising his or her impartiality. This could be done by means of an initial information session, immediately after his or her arrival in the field, in order to present and explain the role of the evaluation and during which the team could express its expectations and fears as openly as possible and could get to know the consultant.

... there is ongoing attentiveness to providing feedback to the evaluated project team throughout the process and not just at the end of it. Particular care should be taken to explain the approach and provide feedback following consultation with the beneficiaries and the other stakeholders involved. This is an essential element, but is often also the most critical since it is the most dreaded by the team (since each team member is convinced that he or she is doing excellent work, there is a fear that the beneficiaries and other NGOs will be critical of this work).

... the entire project team is involved and not just the delegate. Avoid overly long private conversations or meetings behind closed doors with the delegate, which could generate fears and questions.

After

... a round table is systematically organised at the end of the exercise, where possible with all the stakeholders in attendance (headquarters, field and donors).

... the management (headquarters and field) take an official position following the presentation of the evaluation report. The report's conclusions and recommendations represent the evaluation team's point of view, based on the terms of reference. The management should take an official position with regard to these conclusions and recommendations (which ones are accepted and which ones are rejected), and inform the consultant of this position. This is still done too rarely.

... headquarters, and not just the field, are involved in "how to make the changes" following an evaluation, based on a timetable negotiated with the field. Another term sometimes used is backstopping, a process in which the evaluator can also play a role at the request of the organisation.

In general

... we support, wherever possible, internal evaluations and self-evaluations, both assisted and unassisted. This does not rule out an external evaluation, but it means that the choice of the approach should be made in the light of the results sought and the outlook for the team's owning these results. In short, what is the aim of the evaluation: an improvement in the quality of action (realisation/awareness by the team leading to a change in practices or approach), an appraisal of all the aspects (financial and content) for a donor, or both? Obviously, this choice needs to be discussed and negotiated with the donor concerned, where appropriate, in keeping with each party's prerogatives.

... we do not evaluate solely the problem projects, but also those that work well. We have somewhat of a natural tendency (and we are probably not the only NGO) to focus our evaluations (in their different forms) mainly on projects that have not achieved the expected outcomes and/or that are complex or problematic to analyse and understand. It is important to understand our failures, but it is just as beneficial to analyse and draw lessons from our successes. Yet the projects that work well are more rarely evaluated. Finding a better balance between the two would show all the teams that the evaluations also endeavour to make the most of the successes, which could in return minimise the reticence still in evidence about this tool.

CONCLUSION

Tdh received substantial financial assistance from SDC to launch and enhance its institutional development process. This has enabled it to move forward and become a learning organisation. Without these fundamentals, it is highly likely that the evaluations would still be perceived today essentially as a means of control and interference, as an "ordeal" rather than an "opportunity to stand back and think about what we are doing". The IHD process therefore prepared a fertile ground for improved practices and self-criticism.

Scepticism and resistance obviously still exists. Of course, not everything is as simple as it seems in this brief document and a lot of work and challenges still loom on the horizon (especially as regards the evaluation of entire programmes). Yet, in general, it could be said that the ownership of the evaluation approaches has been improved by a simultaneous institutional development process.

It would also be useful for all the institutional donors, even as they are demanding increasing professionalism and quality from the NGOs, to think about finding ways of financially assisting the construction or enhancement of an internal “quality system” tailored to each organisation, as SDC did with Tdh in the IHD project. Obviously, this implies that all the organisations concerned dare to work more closely, consult and establish transparency with their main donor, while maintaining their own NGO identity. It is a fact that quality has a price. Suitable means are therefore required to commit to quality, and not all the NGOs have enough funds to do so. Evaluation plays a vital role in this process, as we have just seen. A comprehensive approach would generate even better results in that the conditions for ownership would be substantially improved, since the teams would have a better understanding of the evaluation approaches and their purpose in the “quality” whole.

This is the only way of providing an opportunity to make real changes to practices in the field, there where they are needed, so as to improve the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and viability of our actions.

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