

EVALUATION: A KEY POINT FOR FUTURE COOPERATION

Steering Group of the Italian NGO Association on Evaluation

Full paper

The Italian NGOs are aware of the need to **reinforce trust** in the values of solidarity, which must prevail in the relationships between peoples. These values are neither inane or abstract. Rather, their moral and rational practicality can be demonstrated through concrete results that this vision of international co-existence produces when achieved in through programmed actions realized in a professional and competent way.

However, the NGOs –not only in Italy– are rather unwilling to invest resources in the exercise of evaluation. On one hand, this shows an administrative weakness in entities with relatively modest organizational dimensions, and on the other hand, it demonstrates the objective **existence of difficulties** inherent to the activities of evaluating social projects. These difficulties may give a good explanation to the unwillingness encountered by evaluation when taken as a natural and permanent tool of management.

1. **Subjectivity and arbitrariness.** An evaluation is always a subjective and arbitrary operation. This means that it is performed on the basis of needs that, being voiced by various actors who take part in the implementation of a social development program, are often at odds. These needs, however, may also be ambiguous, ill-defined, and devoid of any definite reference and, therefore, leave considerable room for an evaluator's interpretation and, as a result, his/her arbitrariness.
2. **Lack of objective criteria.** There are quite a number of evaluation methods, but very few criteria that enable an evaluator to take measurements and collect data and information that are not susceptible of variations so great to reverse the soundness of the judgments based on them. Suffice it to mention the example of the calculation of the beneficiaries.
3. **Plurality of languages and uncertainty as to the nature of the objects to be evaluated**
Assistance, aid, contribution, development, poor country, rich country, community, society, central government, local government, program, project, cost, value, etc. These are but a few of the most commonly used words in the international development co-operation language. None of them has an unquestionable and a universally accepted definition. Let's consider the most important one: development. What is actually meant by the word "development"? An increase in the GDP: a reduction in illiteracy; the rate of physician to every 1000 inhabitants; a reduction of the death rate in children; an increase in the number of persons who say they are happy. All these things together... It is not at all easy to limit the concept of development to one or more indicators. Development is a complex concept that refers to a set of values. The hierarchies, the mix and, at times, the contents of these values change, being affected by ideologies, religions, and cultural contexts.
4. **Contradictoriness of judgments.** The object/subject of social programs is a dynamic reality that evolves in consequence of various variables. The interaction of these variables is a forecast that becomes the more difficult the wider is the social context taken into consideration. An entrepreneurial-type valuational approach - whereby everything may be brought down to a cost/benefit ratio - is inadequate, although relatively simple. In fact, this ratio may seem positive in a given universe but, should this universe be enriched by additional variables, the evaluation could end up, giving even totally contradictory results. For instance, the overall income of a given community has increased thanks to the improvement in the agricultural output. Hence, a positive result has actually been attained. However, if the evaluation is extended to different fields, it may turn out that the program has occasioned an increase in income distribution differences and a break-up in the forms of community solidarity existing before the implementation of the program. There is no question that this is a negative fact. While it is reasonable to think that the higher the number

of information feeding the decision-making processes, the more deliberate they are, it is unquestionable that the contradictoriness of the results stemming from one or more valuational practices, and the complications that it may cause at the level of those responsible for the programs, are among the definite though unavowed reasons of the resistance to the recourse to an evaluation.

The lack of univocal definitions on essential concepts (i.e. the notions of development and cooperation) increase the ambiguity of evaluation, also making them the possible instruments for decisions finalized in goals of a political and ideological nature, often in flagrant contradiction with the activities of cooperation. To all this, the other important **problem of costs** must also be considered: costs that are not proportional to the size of the programmes; costs that, whether right or wrong, are considered non-productive and therefore unwillingly accepted either by the donors or by the beneficiaries.

When working out a program, an evaluation (when actually anticipated) is usually calculated as a percentage of overall costs, in point of fact it is not proportional to the financial size of the program. Instead, it depends on the type of evaluation that should be made (it is but natural that an evaluation based exclusively on monitoring reports is definitely less costly than the regular dispatch of experts, or the setting up of sophisticated data-collection systems, or the organization of participatory events providing for the active participation of the beneficiaries), the complexity of the program (a multi-sectorial program entails greater valuational complications than an action limited to a single field) and, finally, the objects of the evaluation (to calculate the induced effects of a program is much more complex than to measure the attainment of the targets of a specific project). Whatever the case, the cost of the evaluation is a cost that is borne with the utmost reluctance and that even the program donors are unwilling to finance. The institutions that benefit by the initiative are always inclined to consider the evaluation costs as precious resources wrongfully withdrawn from the program. Since the cost of quite a number of the evaluation components does not change much in relation to the size of the program, the organizations that handle programs having a limited size are those who meet with greater difficulties in bearing the relatively higher evaluation costs.

The Italian NGO's are placing their attention and efforts on overcoming this resistance, which continues to oppose the use of **evaluation as a permanent managerial element**, knowing the importance that this tool will have, in the future of activities of cooperation. From this point of view, their reflections are primarily focused on practical criteria of evaluation, and its methodologies.

What the evaluation should not be.

- An evaluation should never serve *a priori* political causes. Hence, it must guarantee that it is not going to provide pretexts for ideologically pre-established decisions: for instance, an evaluation purposing to show that the schooling performance of an ethnical group is lower or higher than the schooling performance of other groups.
- An evaluation should not be mistaken for a financial audit and an accounting review. It should always have a constructive purpose and should never turn into a trial without defense of persons or institutions.
- An evaluation should not be carried out by bodies that are not independent and that give no adequate guarantees of their confidentiality.
- The evaluation outcome should never be disseminated without a prior consent from all the parties involved.

What the evaluation may be.

- An evaluation should be first of all a management tool, designed to improve the organizational efficiency and measure the effectiveness of the solutions being adopted.

Besides, it is susceptible of being positively used:

- as a strategic tool, in order to modify final processes and adjust them to the evolutionary dynamics of the context affected by the program. For instance, the sudden afflux of refugees in a territory meant to be the location of pilot projects in the training sector may give rise to about effects that need to be evaluated in order to establish whether and how that forced emigration phenomenon is likely to limit the feasibility of the program or may indeed represent an important opportunity to be seized;
- as an occasion of active participation of those involved in the program. A participatory evaluation is an extremely sound process, particularly to allow the program executors and the beneficiaries to grow more in tune. It is a strong constructive challenge to become fully aware of the results that the program is producing, even if the latter were considered unsatisfactory. Taking collectively stock of a given situation and debate how such a situation may be evaluated is, at times, the only way to single out viable solutions;
- as a methodological improvement tool. Every valuational practice should include a section devoted to the lessons learned - the positive and negative experiences that are bound to modify the DNA of the decision-making processes. For instance, the selection of the local partner. An evaluation repeated for a number of programs in similar contexts may provide precious guidelines for the procedures to be adopted;
- as a means to avoid wasting the experiences gained from the implementation of programs and, indeed, as a means to make the most of them in a systematic manner with a view to allowing increasingly more sophisticated comparisons among goals, operational choices and results;
- as a production source of statistical data and additional information that are invaluable both to analyze contexts, trends and complex variables and to add plausible fuel to activities designed to enhance the effects of development cooperation programs and promote their popularization in a serious manner, devoid of propaganda-type and emotional elements.

Last but not least, **collaboration between NGOs** working in the same geographical areas should be reinforced by the joint practice of evaluation. Many Italian NGOs are already working to set up a common framework of analysis of the results and impact linked to a given project and of its capacity to respond to the problems of a specific area or sector. The standardisation and structuring of a monitoring and evaluation system, shared by a group of NGO's currently active in more than fifty developing countries, will reinforce the organisations' ability to assimilate from experience by sharing lessons learnt.

An **Evaluation Manual** is also under completion, aiming to further increase the efforts of these NGOs to maximise their efficiency and effectiveness.

Despite the multitude of points of view, this reflection is guided by some common principles and goals, above all the need to place development aid within a broader strategic framework aimed towards the overarching objective of poverty reduction.

Some Italian NGOs have decided to accept the global challenge of poverty reduction by including specific projects and interventions – of both humanitarian and developmental nature – under this broader strategic framework, in the belief that no single development cooperation intervention can influence, alone, the determinants associated with poverty. These NGOs have always attached great importance to the issues related to monitoring and evaluation, and therefore to the challenge of assessing their projects and, more specifically, of understanding the way in which they make a difference in peoples' life.

The forthcoming adoption of a monitoring and evaluation Manual represents a further step in this direction, as it will not only lead to the adoption of standardised internal procedures, but also to an improved external visibility of the specific contribution that non-governmental actors bring to the common goal of poverty reduction. The manual is under completion and its elaboration has been

preceded and accompanied by a strong consulting and analysis work oriented to the enhancement and the standardisation of the evaluation practices already applied by NGOs.

First of all, the adoption of a common framework of analysis of the results and impact linked to a given project and of its capacity to respond to the problems of a specific area or sector will lead to an improved understanding of the technical, economic and organisational principles and means which characterise the work of non-governmental organisations. Secondly, the standardisation and structuring of a monitoring and evaluation system, shared by a group of NGOs currently active in more than fifty developing countries, will reinforce the organisations' capacity to learn from experience by sharing lessons learnt.