

Facilitating Sustainable Monitoring and Evaluation Capacity Development

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Abstract

A surprisingly rapid and multi-national process of strengthening Monitoring & Evaluation capacities has taken place over the last five years. Before 1997, only half dozen National Monitoring & Evaluation Organisations existed, all based in developed countries. By 2002 this number increased to about 30, with most of the new organisations located outside Western Europe and North America. At the same time, governments, donors, UN Agencies and NGOs have all demonstrated a substantively enhanced interest in and support of M&E as well as M&E Capacity Development initiatives.

The aim of this paper is to examine some of the characteristics of this proliferation of organizations, interests and initiatives and to present some tentative sketch of lessons learned that might help to make new organisations effective, low in cost and simple to run. A large part of the analysis is based on the experiences of the African Evaluation Association and National Associations and Networks in Africa, especially those in Niger, Kenya and Rwanda.

The 4-year experience of the Niger Monitoring & Evaluation Network (ReNSE) is used to test the joint UNDP – UNICEF conceptual framework on Capacity Development.

Keywords

Monitoring, Evaluation, Associations, Networks, Capacity Development, Africa, Niger, Kenya, Rwanda

Extrait

Depuis ces cinq dernières années, le renforcement des capacités nationales en Suivi Evaluation s'est formidablement accéléré à travers le monde. Avant 1997, seule une demi-douzaine d'organisations nationales de Suivi Evaluation existait, toutes situées dans des pays industrialisés. En 2002, ce chiffre est passé à environ trente organisations, dont la plupart sont localisées hors Europe de l'Ouest et Amérique du Nord. Dans le même temps, un intérêt grandissant des gouvernements, des bailleurs de fonds, des agences du système des Nations Unies et des organisations non gouvernementales pour le Suivi Evaluation en général et pour les initiatives visant au renforcement des capacités en Suivi Evaluation se manifestait partout dans le monde.

Le but de cet article est d'examiner les caractéristiques propres à cette prolifération d'organisations nationales, d'intérêts et d'initiatives, et de tirer les enseignements de certaines de ces expériences afin que les nouvelles organisations soient efficaces, peu coûteuses et simples à gérer. Une grande partie de l'analyse est basée sur les expériences de l'Association africaine d'Evaluation et de réseaux africains de Suivi Evaluation, notamment ceux du Niger, du Kenya et du Rwanda.

Les quatre années d'expérience du Réseau nigérien de Suivi Evaluation (ReNSE) permettent, en particulier, de tester la mise en œuvre du Cadre conceptuel conjoint PNUD-UNICEF de Développement des Capacités.

Mots clés

Suivi, Evaluation, Associations, Réseaux, Développement des capacités, Afrique, Niger, Kenya, Rwanda

1. Introduction

Monitoring & Evaluation capacity is increasingly being acknowledged as a key to improved public sector management. Russon and de Silva (2001) identified several trends in governance to which evaluation is contributing. Evaluation can contribute to

- democratization by promoting citizen participation in government through inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation (House & Howe, 2000), and
- de-bureaucratization by promoting public accountability, responsiveness, transparency, and efficiency.

Evaluation is also being viewed as an instrument of organizational learning. Segone (1998) found that international development agencies have been focusing on evaluation as a strategic tool for knowledge acquisition to facilitate decision-making and organizational learning. The World Bank (Picciotto, 1998), in parallel to internal performance for accountability purposes, is connecting evaluation to knowledge management to achieve organizational learning. Similar developments are taking place throughout the development community in agencies such as UNICEF, UNDP and WFP.

Meanwhile, the traditional roles of international agencies and NGOs in promoting evaluation work and capacity development are being supplemented by civil society organizations of evaluators.

These new actors are developing innovative strategies. The efforts of the long established developed country associations (the American Evaluation Association, Canadian Evaluation Society, Austral-Asian Evaluation Society), as well as the newer ones (European Evaluation Society, Associazione Italiana di Valutazione, Société Française d'Evaluation, etc) in developed countries, are rapidly being supplemented by this rapid proliferation of professional associations and networks of evaluators in developing countries. These developing country groups are adopting some quite innovative strategies, based on lessons learned from the experiences of the more established institutions.

2. Historical background

The first functional networks of evaluators in developing countries were the Asociacion Centro-Americana para Evaluacion (ACE) funded in 1995 with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and Preval, a listserver based network serving Latin American countries run by Ada Ocampo, which started in 1996. The first formal group that met regularly was the Nairobi M&E network, which was started by Mahesh Patel in 1997. The Nairobi M&E Network was rapidly joined by the Rwanda Network, started by James Mugaju in 1998, and the Niger Network, started by Marco Segone in 1999. By end of 1999, there were 9 national evaluation associations and networks in Africa and one in Sri Lanka. (In almost every case, the local – usually national - UNICEF M&E Project Officer member called the first meeting of evaluators. The UNICEF staff member usually continued to run the group for about a year after which the group was mostly self-sufficient and under local national leadership.) In 2002 there were 16 in Africa and several in developing countries elsewhere.

Recognition of the potential benefits of evaluation has also led to efforts to establish international organisations of evaluators. Two fundamentally different approaches have been proposed: the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) and the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE). A short description of each approach may be found below and will serve as context for the ReNSE case study.

The history of IDEAS dates back to a regional seminar on evaluation that was held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire in 1990 (African Development Bank, et. al., 1998). The seminar was jointly organised by the African Development Bank (ADB) and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The purpose of the seminar was the clarification of evaluation needs as perceived by African countries themselves and the exploration of ways and means of strengthening self-evaluation capacities.

In 2000, the World Bank and UNDP introduced their plans for the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS). IDEAS would be a membership-based organization like the Canadian Evaluation Society, exclusively dedicated to international development evaluation. IDEAS would seek to provide opportunities for professional networking; spreading evaluation experience and best practice; organizing conferences and workshops; facilitating the development of evaluation training programs; raising evaluation standards and promoting the exchange of development evaluation skills across countries and cultures. It is the understanding of the authors that a conference to launch IDEAS will be held in September 2002.

The history of the IOCE dates back to the international evaluation conference that was jointly organised by the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) and the American Evaluation Association (AEA) in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1995. Sometime after this conference, a discussion about the international nature of the evaluation profession was held on AEA's listserver, EVALTALK (Russon & Russon, 2000). One of the principal issues discussed was the creation of a federation of regional and national evaluation organizations.

This discussion ultimately led AEA's International & Cross-Cultural Evaluation (I&CCE) Topical Interest Group to organize a plenary session of the 1998 AEA conference during which the presidents of several regional and national evaluation organizations discussed the creation of a worldwide evaluation community (Russon & Love, 1999). The panel was moderated by former-CES President, Arnold Love. This event served as a catalyst for some informal evaluation networks in developing countries to take the step to become formal associations and societies – a step that had mixed consequences for some.

One of the outcomes of the Presidents Panel was the decision of the presidents to move slowly ahead with this effort. Funding was obtained from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for a strategic planning meeting that was held in 2000, in Barbados, West Indies. During the meeting, 15 official representatives identified purposes that might orient a loose coalition of their regional and national evaluation organizations, established broad organizational principles that might guide a coalition, and developed an extensive list of activities that might be undertaken by a coalition (Mertens & Russon, 2000). Each representative took the subsequent proposal back to his or her organization's policymaking body for endorsement.

Additional funding was received from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for a meeting in 2002, in the Dominican Republic to plan the inaugural assembly of the IOCE (visit www.internationalevaluation.com). The two-day assembly, as envisioned by the organizing committee, would be attended by formal and informal evaluation organizations from around the world that are committed to pursuing the IOCE principles of openness and inclusivity. The purpose of the assembly would be to affirm the IOCE's Terms of Reference, determine a system of governance, establish a decision-making mechanism, plan activities, and address substantive international issues. The inaugural assembly is tentatively scheduled for March 28-30, 2003 in Lima, Peru.

Africa is a key stakeholder within this global Monitoring & Evaluation empowerment process. A large number of African countries are seeking to build national Monitoring & Evaluation capacity through civil society initiatives. In 1999, the African Evaluation Association (visit www.afrea.org for additional information) was launched during a conference organized by Mahesh Patel in Nairobi. This conference accelerated the formation of national evaluation groups in Africa. Kenya, Niger and Rwanda had already formed their own national association and, as a part of preparations for the Inaugural Conference of the African Evaluation Association, national networks were formed in the Comoros Islands, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Malawi. After the conference, focal points for constituting national networks were identified in Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. The Zimbabwe network was formed the day after the Conference ended – the first national group in Africa to call its inaugural meeting without UNICEF initiated support and facilitation.

In September 2001, the World Bank and the African Development Bank (World Bank, 2002) organized the second round of the African Conference on Monitoring & Evaluation capacity development in Johannesburg, South Africa. In June 2002, a second African Evaluation Association Conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya. Each of the African Evaluation Association Conferences had about 300 participants with presentations of about 100 papers. Funding for the first was mostly by donors and for the second mostly by international development agencies and NGOs.

As mentioned above, the first three developing country groups of evaluators to formally meet were those in Kenya, Niger and Rwanda. A number of shared experiences of those groups led to an exchange of lessons learned on the listserver for evaluators in developing countries – XCEval.

The Nairobi M&E Network was initiated by Mahesh Patel, the M&E Officer of the UNICEF Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa in 1997. This group had about 50 meetings over a 3-year period. The meetings took place on UN premises and

participants were from a range of UN Agencies, NGOs, University of Nairobi, and sometimes various government departments and donors. In 2000, work started on development of a constitution and the formal registration of the Kenya Evaluation Association. This focus of attention by leading members displaced the previous seminar and training activities and resulted in a cessation of activity of that type through to 2002. In 2002, formal registration was obtained. Donor funding has been promised and it is hoped that seminar and training based activities will now be able to resume under national leadership and outside UN premises.

The Rwanda Network started in 1998. The first 12 meetings focussed on development of a constitution. The inaugural meeting was called by James Mugaju, the (Rwandan) UNICEF M&E Officer in Kigali. There was senior level governmental participation. The early focus on constitutional issues led to a drop off in attendance by those who were looking for training and personal development and the somewhat reduced group is now mostly governmental in orientation, including in its leadership.

The Niger M&E Network (ReNSE – Réseau Nigérien de Suivi et Evaluation) was initiated by Marco Segone, the UNICEF M&E Officer based in Niger. This group has 15 meetings on M&E technical issues over a 4-year period and it counts now more than 200 members from Public Administration, University, UN agencies, NGOs and private sector. The Nigerien experience is described in detail below as a case study of the conceptual framework developed by UNDP and UNICEF for capacity development and so is not elaborated here.

The common elements of these and quite a number of other early networks were: that initial meetings were called by UNICEF M&E Officers, that meetings were held on UN premises, that no funding was required or requested (although UNICEF tended to facilitate photocopying and often provide tea and coffee), and that principles of openness and inclusivity of membership were practiced. In most cases, a transfer to local national leadership was achieved in a year or two.

3. Conceptual framework for monitoring and evaluation capacity development

This section will briefly describe a conceptual framework developed by a group of UN Agencies in support of capacity development in developing countries and then assess how closely experiences in development of M&E capacity match what one would expect from the conceptual framework.

In 1999, UNDP and UNICEF held in Harare, Zimbabwe an international workshop on Planning and Monitoring of Capacity Development (UNDP/UNICEF, 1999). Both organizations had been advancing work on capacity assessment and the monitoring and evaluation of capacity development. In view of their potentially complementary efforts, UNICEF and UNDP undertook this joint workshop, funded primarily by UK-DFID, to analyze and draw lessons from the different conceptual approaches and field experiences in planning and monitoring of capacity development.

The objectives of the workshop were: a) to reach an agreement on the characteristics which define capacity development in practical terms useful to programme or project planners and managers, and b) to identify the elements for simple, practical, and flexible guidelines (including operational steps, methods, and tools) for planning and monitoring of capacity development interventions in a wide variety of contexts. The workshop brought together country offices from 8 countries: UNDP - Egypt, Madagascar and Niger; UNICEF - Tanzania, Uganda, and Vietnam; and both UNDP and UNICEF - Nicaragua and Zimbabwe; as well as representatives of partner organisations from Madagascar, Nicaragua and Vietnam.

Based on a literature review, a background paper prepared in consultation with UNCDF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNIFEM, and case studies prepared by each of the teams participating, the workshop proposed a definition for capacity and capacity development respectively. Capacity was defined as the ability to define and realize **goals**, where defining goals entails identifying and understanding problems, analyzing the situation, and formulating possible strategies and actions for response. Capacity development is

about creating conditions that support the appropriate actors to assume the appropriate roles in this process of identifying problems, and defining and realizing goals. More specifically, capacity is derived from:

- establishing effective **processes (functions, roles, responsibilities, tasks)** for identifying problems or issues, and formulating and realizing goals;
- carried out by appropriate **actors** (individual and collective);
- organized in effective **structures** for accountability, management, and collective voice;
- who have the **motivation, knowledge, skills, and resources** to perform effectively; and
- are supported in doing so by “**rules**” or **norms** (formal and informal, economic, social, political) that exist within organizations (public, private, civil society), in social groups and across society.

The above view encourages the use of a systems approach to identify, define and achieve goals. This means that it is necessary not only to look at actors at different levels and across sectors but also, crucially, the network of relationships or connections between them. Such a viewpoint illustrates the fact that weaknesses in capacity at any level or with any key actor, whether at the community level, nationally, or somewhere in-between these levels, will affect the capacity of the whole system to deal with a problem in order to achieve a goal.

This conceptualization of capacity underlines the importance of identifying and understanding the system relevant to achieving a goal as a basis for determining who needs to do what in order to achieve that particular goal. Capacity is neutral in terms of the nature of the goals pursued. However, the reference to “appropriate actors” does indicate that a value-based choice must be made in terms of whose involvement is appropriate in what roles. The choice may be dictated by considerations of effectiveness, such as who has the necessary knowledge and skills, or who has leadership and energy.

In bringing the “appropriate actors” together, their interests and broader societal norms are critical factors to consider. Interest and norms shape how different actors in society – individuals, groups and organizations - interact with one another and determine who is linked in formal and informal networks, and in what roles. Resources in this equation are of course also important. Access to and control over financial, material, technological, information, and human resources are vital issues and, in their absence, potentially constraining.

In addition, capacity must be understood in terms of a specific cultural, social, and political context. Capacity must be understood as something that exists in degrees at all levels of society – community/national, individual, household, institutional, and system. Capacity can exist without outside intervention, though it may be very much constrained. This implies that one must first understand capacities or elements of capacity that exist before engaging in any effort to build on or strengthen them.

4. Niger M&E case study application of the capacity development conceptual framework

The Niger Monitoring and Evaluation Network (ReNSE) (visit www.ird.ne/reuse for additional information), an informal group of monitoring and evaluation professionals, was created in August 1999. Its creation was in response to two processes:

- a) on the local level, the growing demand for Monitoring & Evaluation and the unorganised potential offer stimulated the necessity of a sustainable local organisation to co-ordinate, facilitate and advocate Monitoring & Evaluation culture and function;
- b) on the global level, the necessity for Niger to fit into the African process of constituting national networks, and the global process of constituting a world Monitoring & Evaluation community, was indicated in order to benefit and contribute to the exchange of experiences and competency at an international level.

ReNSE decided to adopt the UNDP/UNICEF capacity development framework as a means of conceptualizing and planning its goals and activities. It was the only evaluation group to do this and so is unique as a case study and test of the conceptual framework. The list of concepts considered essential for the development of capacity described above is assessed systematically in the following paragraphs in relation to the experience of the ReNSE.

Regarding the criterion of identification and definition of **goals**, ReNSE adopted its general and specific objectives in 1999. The general objective is to support a national sustainable process of Monitoring & Evaluation Capacity Development through the implementation of a forum that will contribute to the definition of norms, methodologies and professional practices in Niger. The specific objectives are:

- a) to facilitate informal learning by sharing experiences and skills in the field of monitoring and evaluation,
- b) to organise formal training sessions,
- c) to facilitate information sharing (meetings, training sessions, scholarships, grants, books and manuals, newsletters, international electronic networks, etc.),
- d) to bring purchasers and providers of monitoring and evaluation services together to promote a mutual understanding of evaluation needs,
- e) to create and maintain a database of evaluators containing information on areas of expertise, experience and recent publications, and
- f) to facilitate the definition of professional norms and practices.

Regarding the criterion of effective **processes** for formulating and realising objectives, it was decided that ReNSE's processes should be participative and transparent. For this reason, it was decided that the General Assembly composed by all members should take all major decisions by consensus. A web-site was created and is regularly up-dated to post, disseminate, and make all major decisions and activities related to the Network freely and openly available. Moreover, ReNSE facilitates a "networking" process through the creation and development of contacts and relationships among different institutions,

ministries and agencies. One strategic decision was to adopt a “rotation” approach for the hosting of the ReNSE’s meeting. Each meeting is hosted by a different organisation (to date, by the Ministry of Plan, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Water Resources, UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank, SNV and Cermes). This allowed, on the one hand, the ReNSE’s members to get to know new institutions, and on the other hand, to let different institutions to know and appreciate ReNSE. A list of the network’s members (complete of telephone, email and address) was created and is up-dated every two months, and e-mailing is used to disseminate day-to-day messages.

Regarding the involvement of **appropriate stakeholders**, it was decided that ReNSE should adopt the principles of inclusiveness and an empowerment based approach. The network’s meetings are open to every person and organisation interested in Monitoring & Evaluation, regardless of position covered, institutional belonging, seniority or experience. Every member is asked to contribute, on a voluntary basis, in terms of time, competency, and technical skills, to the network’s activities. Internal working groups were organised to widen the possibility of active participation to the network’s life and to optimise the potential of each member.

Regarding the criterion of **effective structure**, a Coordination Committee was established in a democratic way. It was decided that the Coordination Committee should be elected every two years by the General Assembly. The first Coordination Committee was elected in 1999 to cover the period 1999/2001.¹ A second Committee was elected in 2001 to cover the period 2001/2003.² To assure motivation, knowledge, skills and

¹ The first Coordination Committee was composed of Mr. Marco Segone, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UNICEF (United Nations System), Mr. Ben Adji Mamadou, Project Coordinator at the Ministry of Plan (Public administration), Ms. Mary White-Kaba, Project Coordinator GTZ-Alafia (Civil society), Mr. Galy AbdelKader, University of Niamey (Learning and knowledge institutions), and Mr. Maman Sani Sanda, free-lance consultant (Private sector).

² The second Coordination Committee is composed of Mr. Zakou Djibo, Programmes and Projects Monitoring & Evaluation Division, Ministry of Economy and Finance - (Public Administration), Mr. Jean-Charles Rouge, Economist, UNDP (United Nations System), Mr. Amadou Sayo, Agriculture and Natural resources Division, CARE International (Civil society), Mr. Attaher Kamed Ibrahim, Director, National School of Administration (Learning and knowledge institutions), and Mr. Maman Sani Sanda, free-lance consultants (Private sector).

resources, the principle of broad representativeness was adopted. It was decided that the Coordination Committee members should be chosen to represent different categories connected to monitoring and evaluation, notably:

- a) the National Public Administration,
- b) the United Nations System,
- c) Civil Society,
- d) Learning and knowledge institutions (University, National School of Administration, etc.), and
- e) the Private sector (independent consultants).

As part of participation in wider structures, ReNSE facilitates the funding of the participation of network's members to international conferences. Two members participated in the Inaugural African Evaluation Association Conference in Nairobi in 1999, one in the French Evaluation Society in 2000, two in the Conference on African Monitoring & Evaluation Capacity Development in Johannesburg in 2001 and four in the Second African Evaluation Association Conference in Nairobi in 2002.

Regarding the criterion on **rules and norms**, the network recognised the importance of having shared values and understanding. The network adopted the following shared values:

- a) *Emphasis on usage of local capacities.* In Niger there is an important potential for local capacities. For this reason, the Network is based on local experience and knowledge, and its focus is on national Monitoring & Evaluation Capacity Development. At each bi-monthly meeting, local institutions and/or specialists are invited to present their own experiences and systems. A database with Curriculum Vitae of national evaluators was created and the network's web page is hosting calls for African evaluators from development agencies.

- b) *Country-led and owned.* The network is based in Niger and its objectives and activities are relevant to, and implemented in, Niger. Most of the network's members are Nigerien monitoring & evaluation specialists.
- c) *Common understanding.* Evaluation, whatever its ultimate and appropriate nature may be for a given developing country, must have a clear set of concepts to which all can agree in principle. According to Barbarie (Barbarie, 1998), achieving this clear set of concepts should be considered an essential early step for a Monitoring & Evaluation Capacity Development effort. For this reason, one of the first Network priorities was the organisation of a meeting to discuss and reach clear terminology and a common understanding of Monitoring & Evaluation.

The joint UNICEF-UNDP Conceptual Framework on Capacity Development was validated through its application in Niger from 1999 to 2002. It helped the Niger Monitoring & Evaluation Network to develop its strategic vision, capacities and activities. Nevertheless, some potential implications for the future evolution of that conceptual framework were noted:

- a) It is not necessary to have resources, skills and knowledge available internally. In the case of ReNSE, for instance, there were no financial resources available at all, and the human resources were only on voluntary base, thus, enough financial resources, skills and knowledge were not assured. To face this challenge, it was chosen to look for and build up strategic alliances and partnerships with external institutions. To date, the Network has succeeded in building up numerous strategic alliances with a diversity of institutions from the public sector. These institutions share a common interest in National Evaluation Capacity Development and believe ReNSE can make a difference, based on its previous achievements and its own dynamism. So far, UNICEF and UNDP Niger hosted the two first ReNSE Secretariats (1999-2001 and 2001-2003, as scheduled). Improved services to members have been supported through a number of UNDP commitments, such as a free internet access for all members at the UN Documentation Centre in Niamey, a regular access to its Conference room for internal and formal meetings, the funding of the first issue of

ReNSE semestrial Newsletter, and the funding of a one man month international consultancy for network members (training) needs. The ReNSE website is currently hosted free of charge by the Research for Development Institute office in Niamey (IRD, formerly ORSTOM), but due to its own development needs (creation of a discussion forum, insertion of the CV database, etc.), the UNDP Niger web server will ultimately host the website.

Regarding the participation of ReNSE members in international evaluation conferences, a number of institutions are regularly facilitating the funding of such activities. For instance, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (AIF) funded the participation of four members at the last AfrEA Conference in June 2002 in Nairobi, Kenya. AfrEA itself invited one member to its 1999 Conference in Nairobi. AIF also funded the participation of one member to the French Evaluation Society annual Conference in 2000. Moreover, due to strengthened relationships with the Canadian Evaluation Association and the Société Québécoise d'Evaluation, new initiatives are under investigation, among them the participation of ReNSE members in their annual Conferences and the publication of Nigerien evaluator's articles in their Journals.

On the training aspect, building strategic alliances with partners willing to support training initiatives is definitely a priority because of the strong demand by Nigerien evaluators. The French Cooperation Office in Niamey invited three ReNSE members to a one week training in "M&E of Agricultural Projects" to be held by an international expert in Niamey in November 2002 at the occasion of an evaluation mission. A formal ReNSE meeting will be held with him at the end of his mission.

Contact persons have been identified and met by ReNSE National Coordinator at the UNDP Evaluation Office in New York, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, Canadian Evaluation Association and Société Québécoise d'Evaluation in Ottawa to link any evaluation mission organized by these institutions in Niger to a formal ReNSE meeting with the mission participants. On a more sustainable

perspective, ReNSE Coordination Committee, along with a Scientific Committee composed of University of Niamey, Niger National Public Administration School, Administration and NGOs representatives, developed the curriculum of a two-week training seminar to be held in Niamey and are currently seeking funds to support the project. The objective is that such a seminar on advanced M&E techniques would be given to ReNSE members on a yearly basis.

- b) An important item missing in the conceptual framework is **the capacity to carry out activities**. To date, ReNSE organised 15 meetings and participated in the French Evaluation Society Conference and African Evaluation Association Conferences. ReNSE members meet every two months and a discussion forum takes place. It can be thematic and give the opportunity to working group's members to make presentations on M&E issues, share best practices and teach the M&E techniques they used to achieve their results. Members can also hold a meeting for feedback on participation in international or national Conferences. Few meetings are devoted to discuss ReNSE management issues. At its early stage, specific meetings were held to adopt ReNSE objectives, discuss M&E norms and standards for Niger, elect the Coordination Committee and adopt the Action Plan (every two years), adopt each working groups terms of reference, etc.
- c) It is important to **enhance an enabling environment**. In evaluation, a crucial aspect of an enabling environment is consonance between supply (Monitoring & Evaluation technical skills) and demand (Monitoring & Evaluation culture in government and agencies). Different international organisations (Segone, 1998) have discovered that the key bottleneck is not always technical capacity, but weak evaluation culture. The World Bank (Picciotto, 1998) suggests that the fact that an enabling evaluation culture has been only incipient is a formidable obstacle to evaluation capacity development. Participants at the UNICEF Workshop on Programme orientation, process and guidance (UNICEF, 1997) recognize that a pro-Evaluation culture would improve programme performance, enhance accountability, and serve as a basis for decision-making and programme modification. UNDP (UNDP, 1997) and the World

Bank (World Bank, 1999) believe that the most fundamental challenge is the frequent lack of genuine demand within countries for evaluation and ownership of results. Creating technical capacities for evaluation makes little sense if undertaken in isolation from the essential processes of decision-making. The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB, 1997) explains that the first challenge to develop evaluation capacity is to produce a genuine Evaluation culture. Moreover, the main purpose of several national evaluation organizations, including ReNSE, is to strengthen the Evaluation culture within their country, and not just the evaluation technical capacity.

5. Lessons learned

The Niger Network has been consistently active for four years and is currently the most active evaluation group in a developing country. The number of members increased from the initial 40 to more than 200 experts. During these four years of activities, a number of important lessons have been learned:

- Focus on technical issues and not on internal organisational issues. Monitoring and evaluation specialists are most interested in capacity development than internal organisational issues. ReNSE was able to organise itself during the first two meetings with the adoption of objectives, adoption of a Plan of Action, themes to be discussed at the next meetings, and an election of the Coordination meeting. From the 3rd meeting hence, the core themes presented and discussed were technical, and organisational issues have been kept to a minimum.
- Keep the structure as light as possible. The Network is based on the voluntary work of members. For this reason, the structure of the Network has been kept to a minimum level. The secretariat was assured by UNICEF from 1999 to 2001 and by UNDP from 2001 to 2003.
- The Coordination Committee has a central role to play. The Coordination Committee is extremely important in assuring the Network's function and development. It

proposes new strategies and activities, facilitates their discussion and adoption, monitors their implementation, and reports to the general assemblies.

- Be open and transparent. The Network is based on the trust within the membership and credit among external institutions. To assure a personal commitment to the network's objectives and activities, every major decision has to be taken openly and transparently.
- Keep focused on the openly discussed and adopted objectives. Members are experts interested in monitoring and evaluation capacity development. To be sure to optimise the limited resources available and to keep interest high, the Coordination Committee ensures that the Network's activities are relevant to the openly discussed and adopted objectives.
- Look for strategic alliances with similar institutions. The Network, being representative of different stakeholders, has a huge potential to advocate and mobilise strategic alliances in order to strengthen monitoring and evaluation within the country. The real value-added of the Network is its capacity to co-ordinate and facilitate synergies and potentialities already existing within the country and abroad.

Experiences of the most long-standing networks in Africa, those in Kenya and Rwanda, mostly confirm the above analyses. An extended discussion between leaders of national groups took place in 2001 on lessons learned and there was a strong consensus that work on constitutions actually hindered the development of the networks. Formal constitutions were generally too high an overhead to carry, especially during the first few years of a network. That the Niger group managed to carry that off is much to their credit, but their case must be regarded as exceptional. Indeed, their conclusion – that paperwork must be kept to a minimum – was strongly endorsed by other groups. The source of this error was in trying to copy the form and structure of national associations in developed countries (which generally do have formal constitutions), rather than to focus on developing local solutions. The 'Presidential' leadership model for an association as adopted by developed country associations also caused some difficulties and was largely abandoned after a few false starts. The concept and model of a 'Chairperson' of a network was generally preferred.

Additional common factors were that most networks managed to continue without a funding line while under UNICEF leadership, but that the transition to national leadership did result in a small budgetary requirement. Part of the ‘cost’ of national ownership is that networks can finance their own room rentals (rather than used UN premises for free), cover costs of tea and coffee, and pay small fees to trainers. Some groups have continued to use UN premises for meetings, where these were conveniently located. In some countries, UN premises provided either a safe haven for the discussion of ideas that might have been considered contentious by national governments. In others, UN premises provided actual physical safety – meetings of the Burundi network took place while gunfire was being exchanged on the streets of Bujumbura. In both cases, the existence of a national evaluation network provided an opportunity for intellectuals and specialists to meet and exchange ideas that was otherwise absent.

6. Conclusions

The establishment and evolution of groups of evaluators in Africa has been rapid and dramatic. Over a period of just five years, 16 national groups have come into existence, several with over 200 national members. These groups are effectively supported by an continental umbrella organisation – the African Evaluation Association. The costs have been minimal. While impact on capacity development has not been formally assessed, demand for services has been high and continues to increase. International agencies, particularly UNICEF, adopted a lead role early on, but seem to be successfully transferring leadership to national entities – and achieving sustainability (which is not always the same thing) - in most cases. The AfrEA, for example, is now being run by the South African Evaluation Network, rather than by the UNICEF Regional M&E Officer.

Of the 16 national associations in Africa only two are still being led by UNICEF staff, although UNICEF (and in the case of ReNSE, UNDP) staff typically continue to play key supportive roles. During preparations for the 2002 AfrEA Conference, the number of UN Organisations extending active support increased to about half a dozen, with a somewhat

larger number of NGOs also now playing key roles. It is expected that support for these initiatives will continue to rise and that it will do so from an increasing broad base.

Considering our case study, to date the ReNSE has been able to organize itself in an efficient manner, accomplishing its meeting schedule and raising interest among partners. It has greatly benefited from the dynamism of its coordinators and its members, all voluntarily involved in ReNSE activities. ReNSE sustainability, as a means of M&E best practices sharing and teaching for professionals, is deeply relying on this dynamism that has to be permanently inspired by each Coordination Committee so that every meeting (presentations, teachings and debates) are high-level quality. If not, the network's *raison d'être* and the overall objective of strengthened national M&E capacity development will be jeopardized. Parallel to that, the interest of members and strategic partners, financially and logistically supporting the network development activities, will shrink over time. Under these circumstances, it's a continuous challenge for anyone willing to coordinate such an organization because he or she always has to initiate changes and motivate people, whose response is, so far, in the case of Niger, very encouraging and rewarding.

The experience of the Niger Monitoring & Evaluation Network is an important example of how to develop monitoring and evaluation capacities at the national level in a sustainable manner. During the 2001 Canadian mission of Universalia a diagnosis of the status of Monitoring & Evaluation in Niger was carried out, funded by the World Bank, among others. Thibault (2002), a member of the diagnostic team, stated that recent initiatives of the civil society in Niger in favour of Monitoring & Evaluation constitute a positive advancement in this discipline. The creation of ReNSE is, without a doubt, the most important event in this context. ReNSE is a good forum that allows stakeholders with different perspectives to dialogue to find common strategies and share their own professional experience. In the final report of the Diagnostic (Universalia, 2001), Universalia states that ReNSE is growing very quickly. The network grew from the initial 40 members in 1999 to about 150 in 2001. Moreover, ReNSE's activities are carried out based on the voluntary contributions of its members and without external financial contributions. The leadership of the Network rotates to different members while its initial

donor, UNICEF, withdrawn from financing follow-up activities. ReNSE now has an important independence and autonomy that encourages the dynamism and the initiative of its members.

It is hoped that the analysis of experience and lessons learned provided in this article will facilitate the creation and development of new national monitoring and evaluation networks and will improve understanding of the rapidly spreading empowerment process.

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