

Session 4 – Enhancing evaluation capacities

**"FROM ENHANCING EVALUATION CAPACITIES OF
INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY ORGANISATIONS
TO BUILDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE,
F3E FRENCH EXPERIENCE"**

Abstract

F3E – an association gathering various non governmental organisations with the aim of pooling resources and methods – also fosters consultation with public authorities. For several years now, it has contributed to the strengthening of capabilities and the dissemination of an evaluation culture in France. The thoroughness of F3E's monitoring process helps International Solidarity Organisations (ISOs) to improve the quality of their studies and actions. They have learned lessons for their own development, their internal reflections and their methods of intervention. The investigation of their practices is more easily seen as a positive exercise. The challenge for F3E is now to enhance its role of support, valorisation and training. For that, it must take the diversity of those involved into consideration and, in particular, suggest forms and modalities for evaluations that will be appropriate and likely to produce significant changes. Evaluation has indeed quite often been turned into a tool to support decision-making and improve practices, and at the same time has created a space for dialogue and consultation between the parties involved. But while evaluation tends to be systematised and used above all for accountability, sometimes without sufficient debate of the results, further study needs to be made of its usefulness in terms of change. From this point of view, the issues of internalisation, willingness to change and the necessary resources for this, prior negotiation and definition of the results expected from evaluations, follow-up in the implementation of their recommendations, etc... are all issues that require further study. Discussions and study groups at European level on these different topics would merit further encouragement.

"FROM ENHANCING EVALUATION CAPACITIES OF ISOs TO BUILDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE, F3E FRENCH EXPERIENCE"

The Fund for the Promotion of Preliminary Studies, Cross-Disciplinary Studies and Evaluations (F3E) is a system of association and consultation between public and non governmental organisations. Its purpose is to provide its members with technical and financial support to carry out different types of surveys, among which evaluations have a predominant place.

F3E's global objective is to "strengthen the skills and professionalism of non governmental organisations involved in the areas of development support, emergency assistance or international solidarity, with a view to improving the effectiveness of their action programmes"¹.

One of its specific objectives is to turn evaluation into a decision-making tool and improve the quality of actions available to non governmental organisations.

I. F3E, A SYSTEM FOR ASSOCIATION AND EQUAL REPRESENTATION WHICH WORKS ALONGSIDE ITS MEMBERS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EFFECTIVE STUDIES AND EVALUATIONS.

An association of non governmental organisations, in consultation with French public authorities.

- **A diversified base of associations.** F3E has the status of association under the French law of 1901. Founded in 1994², it has **close to 50 members**, mainly associations involved in promoting international solidarity, with a wide variety of sizes, fields, competences and approaches. It is currently being opened up to associations in the process of "professionalization" and to parties involved in decentralised cooperation.

¹ Extract from F3E's articles of association (July / October 1997).

² F3E was born from the merger of two funds that were already in existence – FEP (Fonds d'Etudes Préalables) (Preliminary Studies Fund) and FEE (Fonds d'Evaluation et d'Etudes transversales) (Cross-Disciplinary Studies and Evaluation Fund) themselves founded respectively in 1988 and 1990.

We thus find "big" and "small" ISOs, "generalists" and "methodologists", associations for the education of French ISOs in development / lobbying / consultation, parties involved in decentralised cooperation, a wide variety of associations working in the fields of health, environment, education, microfinance, rural development, urban development and so on.

- **A pooling of competences and resources.** Members of F3E pay a **subscription** for access to services when needed and to a forum providing methodological resources. **This pooling system** provides responses to individualised requirements and ensures a **valorisation** of the results of studies with all its members and more widely, through circulation, discussion, capitalisation, **training programmes** and methodological product guides.
- **Associative governance.** Members of F3E are voluntarily involved in the **Executive Committee**, a body which takes a particular interest in the initial handling of requests for assistance, as backup to the permanent technical secretariat.

F3E's **Executive Committee** is made up of eight members appointed by the Annual General Meeting from among member institutions.

- **Decisions taken in consultation with public authorities.** Final handling and decision-making are the responsibility of the **Review Committee**, a body with equal representation where consultation helps to converge viewpoints on evaluations and projects.

The Review Committee is chaired by an independent person and brings together the F3E Executive Committee, a representative of the *Mission pour la Coopération Non Gouvernementale* (Mission for Non Governmental Cooperation) and a representative of the *Bureau de l'Evaluation* (Evaluation Committee) of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Direction Générale de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement* - General Directorate for International Cooperation and Development), a representative of the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD - French Development Agency), a representative of the French Ministry of the Environment.

Financial and technical support for surveys and evaluations.

- Historically, F3E supports the implementation of **three types of studies**³:
 - **Preliminary studies** intended to verify the technical, economic and social sustainability of an innovative action.
 - **Cross-disciplinary studies** consisting of evaluating actions conducted on the same topic by different organisations.
 - Project or programme **evaluations** that may be ex ante, external and for consultation.

- In order to strengthen the competences of its members in implementing these different studies, F3E offers **three levels of support** (the 3rd also being accessible to non members):
 - **Technical support** for formalising requests and selecting experts.
 - **Financial support** in the form of co-financing where the members and F3E itself have a 30% interest and the French Foreign Affairs Ministry a 70% interest.
 - **Valorisation** activities (awareness / information, circulation / discussion, capitalisation), including **training** schemes and the development of methodological guides.

- F3E thus supports **twelve to fifteen studies each year**. Since its creation, more than 100 studies have been supported including some 80 evaluations concerning close to 50 different ISOs. These review actions in the field and their results just as much as the strategies, systems and institutions concerned. The areas covered are also very wide and diversified.

- Valorisation and training activities are themselves developed gradually (realisation of an **annual**

³ It also organises **evaluations of new types of contracts** between the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISOs: conventions on programmes (e.g. conventions on objectives), multiple participant joint programmes (e.g. priority programmes), appropriations to partnerships.

capitalization, organisation of **discussion days** and **cross-disciplinary feedbacks**, development of a **training programme** and implementation of modules in different areas, development and circulation of **methodological guides**, etc.).

Evaluation promoted by F3E.

- **An evaluation requested and carried by ISO members as true sponsors.** The evaluation promoted must be neither systematic nor compulsory, at the risk of distorting the "aid to decision-making" dimension. For this, it must be decided and carried by the NGO that benefits from it, which does not exclude the interest of sharing in the decision-making and discussing the objectives with donors and other parties concerned. F3E has an advice/consultation role with the member NGO, which is entirely responsible for its methods, its decision-making and its definition as far as choices of action that will be made at a later date.
- **Ex post, external and advisory evaluation.** An ex post evaluation is based on the review and analysis of the project's advancement. An external evaluation provides transparency on the project and ISO in relation to its different interlocutors. With its focus on relevance and effectiveness, evaluation is intended to be a tool guaranteeing the quality of actions undertaken. Unlike auditing, it is intended to produce advice.
- **Results reverting to the collective good.** Evaluation is intended to be an element of collective good: the results of evaluations circulated within F3E members help to reinforce the action of ISOs. Their circulation has been improved via the creation of a website that makes it easier to consult the studies.

II. FROM ENHANCING EVALUATION CAPACITIES TO BUILDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE.

Help in preparing evaluations and development of training actions on programming monitoring and evaluation.

The monitoring, valorisation and training activities implemented by F3E help to enhance evaluation capacities and build an evaluation culture, and then disseminate it.

- **Help in terms of drawing up and writing terms of reference and then selecting the form of appraisal.** The aim is to support sponsors in defining and formulating issues and objectives, and then questions and methodologies for the required studies and evaluations, by facilitating dialogue and consultation among the different partners involved.
- **Valorising the results of studies and evaluations put forward.** The aim is to share and discuss analyses, observations and recommendations that may be of interest to all non governmental organisations on a specific topic and/or geographical area.

For example, a discussion day has been organised on the role of village committees in local development in Cambodia, based on three separate evaluations of ISO member projects. Capitalization has also been made of the exploitation of different studies and evaluations on a specific topic: the one carried out in 2002 was called "*Ensuring the continuity of an action: the empowerment of development projects initiated by NGOs*" (F3E/GRET). This work has also been the subject of a discussion day open to interested experts and ISO members⁴.

- **Developing a training programme and designing methodological guides.**⁵ The aim is to strengthen the methodological capacities of NGOs to prepare, monitor and use studies and evaluations and help them to develop their own tools and methodologies.

⁴ Documents downloadable on the F3E site (www.f3e.asso.fr/etudeval/capitalisation/cap-gen.htm)

⁵ *L'évaluation, un outil au service de l'action* (F3E / IRAM - 1996), *Prise en compte de l'impact et construction d'indicateurs d'impact* (F3E / CIEDEL - 1999), *Le suivi d'un projet de développement : démarche, dispositif, indicateurs* (F3E / EUROPACT - 2002): documents downloadable on the F3E site (www.f3e.asso.fr/methodo/guides.htm)

Modules already produced or programmed cover for example the issues and modalities involved in preparing an evaluation (or preliminary study) then monitoring and exploiting the results of an evaluation (or preliminary study), building and using the logical framework, introducing monitoring devices and indicators, assessing the impact, making an organisational diagnosis, and so on.

Items in the review shown below are from the external evaluation of the F3E system carried out in 2000 by an independent consulting firm.⁶

- **Fostering learning through attention to detail.** *"The evaluation process such as encouraged by F3E, once it has been capitalized by the ISOs themselves, provides added value to all their activities. It then becomes a true support in decision-making. The length of the instruction process (between 4 and 9 months) presupposes a certain level of anticipation but the ISOs consider that this is justified and not a waste of time: the reflection process itself is a gain in terms of learning. The ISOs consider that this obliges them to structure and formalise the reflection process. The attention to detail imposed by F3E gives concrete shape to certain evaluation habits."⁷*
- **Improving the quality of studies alongside that of actions.** *"Through dialogue with F3E's secretariat and executive committee on their evaluation project, NGOs acquire specific knowledge which helps them to better formulate terms of reference and beyond, project documents. This is confirmed by public authorities which over the years perceive an improvement in the reports produced:*

- *the terms of reference are more thorough and accurate.*
- *the studies are steered better.*
- *the results of evaluations are used.*

Based on the results of these studies and evaluations, ISOs try to continually adapt their methods of intervention. They progress for example towards a better definition of

⁶ Centre Européen d'Expertise en Evaluation (Centre for European Evaluation Expertise) "Evaluation du Fonds pour la promotion des études préalables, des études transversales et des évaluations (F3E)", April 2000, order from the French Foreign Affairs Ministry (DGCID).

⁷ op. cit.

*their role in relation to the South and their position in relation to donors, they try harder to structure their action and clarify their collaboration with local authorities."*⁸

- **Building an evaluation culture and disseminating it.** *"F3E has contributed to the development of the evaluation culture among the vast majority of member ISOs, particularly those that are themselves involved in a process of professionalization. It has strengthened its members in terms of development or restructuring, and stimulated thought.*

Most ISOs acknowledge that even if there was already a certain level of evaluation culture before joining F3E, what they did before was done differently. They have found their way in an unknown methodological sphere, they have reinforced their processes or have made them more systematic and more pedagogical.

Beyond that, F3E has motivated changes within certain NGOs in terms of ways of thinking and/or operating. Spin-off in terms of internal improvement is now totally integrated by ISOs which can now launch themselves, more easily and with fewer complexes, into project evaluations where they are not very satisfied with the results. Reappraisal of practices is more easily accepted as a positive spin-off⁹.

Circulating the results of studies and evaluations, carrying out cross-disciplinary studies and capitalisations, developing training modules and designing methodological guides, organizing open feedbacks and discussion days are all ways of amplifying the circulation of the results and of the evaluation culture among F3E members as well as towards all the parties involved in actions of cooperation and international solidarity.

III. FROM MAKING EVALUATIONS EFFECTIVE IN TERMS OF CAPACITY TO PRODUCING CHANGE.

*"The contribution of evaluations to the corresponding projects has been judged high from the point of view of methodology, strategy (reorientation, reflection, support for building a new strategy), operations and in terms of partnership (better image in relation to partners, coordination, gain in autonomy so that support can be withdrawn)."*¹⁰

⁸ op. cit.

⁹ op. cit.

¹⁰ op. cit.

The implementation of change based on the results of an evaluation is a question that F3E and its members have been asking themselves since F3E's creation. However, now that evaluation as a tool is increasingly recognised and used, and that the evaluation culture is starting to be more widespread, this question is making itself heard more loudly.

F3E's Annual General Meeting in 2002 identified the need for **further study of the conditions of effectiveness of evaluations** supported by F3E. This started from the observation of a risk of trivialising evaluation, which tends to become a compulsory or systematic action before any new application for funding. This observation reveals the difficulty of managing the tension between the ISO's wish to be accountable and its need to ask questions that will help it to improve its practices. Enhancing capacities and building an evaluation culture are only one aspect of the global solution to be looked for.

A certain number of keys for success, drawn from F3E's experience, can be summarised here.

- The modalities of definition and the content of the **order**: to a great extent, this is what determines the result and its future use. It implies:
 - Involving all parties concerned, at the time of the decision and throughout the process.
 - Defining how results of the evaluation are used from the design phase of the project (or policy).
- **The effectiveness of evaluations.** An evaluation involves an internal dynamic as well as a partenarial approach. These will predetermine in particular the way in which an evaluation, in its advancement and in its results, will or will not bear fruit (in terms of decision-making and change). It implies:
 - Developing the system of monitoring and evaluation, the internal evaluation or self-evaluation.
 - Planning and organising sufficient time for "digestion" of an evaluation, after it has been carried out.
- **Training** and reinforcement of the skills of sponsors and partners (as well as evaluation service providers) help to improve the effectiveness of project evaluations, their exploitation and their impact.
- Analyses and recommendations will not be truly taken into consideration unless they are **credible** in the eyes of decision-makers: such credibility has to be built up in a participatory approach to evaluation; the restitution and circulation of results are essential steps in achieving this situation, in the same way as the neutrality of evaluators, the transparency in their methods of selection, the involvement of national evaluators and so on...
- In addition, carrying out an external evaluation very often remains an over normalised or standardised exercise. It should probably involve thinking up new and original **forms of evaluation** (and investigation in general), better suited to the parties, requirements and particular situations concerned.

However, above and beyond such purely methodological recommendations, let us now emphasise the following aspects.

- Evaluation is not a miracle cure... Evaluation, seen as external evaluation, is a necessary step in the project's life, making it possible to produce knowledge, define reorientations, question and reappraise the project. However, the transition between this external analysis and a change in practices implies:
 - a willingness to change by those concerned. If this willingness does not exist, if this openness to reappraisal, questioning of what is behind the action does not exist, then the evaluation will not be useful to action.
 - the resources for change. Today, public authorities agree to fund evaluations. However, the necessary resources for changing actions based on such evaluations remain inadequate: chronic under-funding of head offices, difficulty in funding the monitoring and evaluation of actions, severely restricted personnel expenditure, ... NGOs often do not have the resources to move from evaluation to action.
- Evaluation must be properly negotiated, for shared issues ... The renewal of funding remains an issue for many evaluations, since those who request an evaluation are *de facto* those who finance it. Negotiation, *a priori*, of the issues of evaluation, between the main protagonists, is necessary in order to get beyond this issue alone.
- The result of evaluations must favour the identification of real changes... Work remains to be done in order to specify more clearly the results expected from evaluators by setting clear objectives that make it possible to identify tradeoffs, scenarios and other potential changes to which evaluation may lead.
- Post-evaluation is just as important as evaluation... Systems need to be developed so that studies, decisions and changes occurring after the evaluation can be monitored. Such systems might involve evaluators or other means of support, in charge of "implementing" change.

F3E – an association gathering various non governmental organisations with the aim of pooling resources and methods – also fosters consultation with public authorities. For several years now, it has contributed to the strengthening of capabilities and the dissemination of an evaluation culture in France. The thoroughness of F3E's monitoring process helps International Solidarity Organisations (ISOs) to improve the quality of their studies and actions. They have learned lessons for their own development, their internal reflections and their methods of intervention. The investigation of their practices is more easily seen as a positive exercise. The challenge for F3E is now to enhance its role of support, valorisation and training. For that, it must take the diversity of those involved into consideration and, in particular, suggest forms and modalities for evaluations that will be appropriate and likely to produce significant changes. Evaluation has indeed quite often been turned into a

tool to support decision-making and improve practices, and at the same time has created a space for dialogue and consultation between the parties involved. But while evaluation tends to be systematised and used above all for accountability, sometimes without sufficient debate of the results, further study needs to be made of its usefulness in terms of change. From this point of view, the issues of internalisation, willingness to change and the necessary resources for this, prior negotiation and definition of the results expected from evaluations, follow-up in the implementation of their recommendations, etc... are all issues that require further study. Discussions and study groups at European level on these different topics would merit further encouragement.