Knowledge to action:

evaluation for learning in a multi-organisational global partnership

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'Partnership' is a dominant approach to international development cooperation today. But the challenges of multi-institutional collaboration are vast, even more so when they aspire to collaborative learning. At the same time, partnerships have access to a potential tool for organisational learning in a process they must undertake anyway: evaluation. Increasingly, evaluation is seen through the lens of learning, shaping (e.g. a 'learning-based approach to institutional assessment', Carden 2000:175), and revitalising forms of participatory monitoring and evaluation as 'learning from experience' and 'shared learning' (Estrella 2000:6). However, evaluation, in spite of its obvious potential as a learning exercise, is seldom used for this purpose. Perhaps organisations do not know how to shape their evaluation activities towards this end. 'There are many NGOs that claim to be "learning organisations", but how they promote shared learning and engage their staff in new learning is still unclear' (Hailey 2000:63). Or perhaps they do not know how to view and articulate evaluations as such. Taylor tells us that the learning organisation concept 'is most effectively used as a reminder that the process of learning is inherent in everyone and in all organisations. The first challenge is not to start learning, but to become more conscious of how learning already takes place, in order to use and further develop this innate ability' (Taylor 1998:1).

This paper attempts to examine our own practice of evaluation, showing how evaluation processes have been used in the Global Partnership's NGO Leadership and Management (NLM) Postgraduate Diploma Programme in Bangladesh to support learning and change. From this experience, we draw out lessons that may be helpful to other organisations striving to create or maintain thriving partnerships, foster learning, and enhance their organisational capacity to use evaluation for learning and development.

Global Partnership's NGO Leadership and Management Programme: background and methodology of the evaluation

The Global Partnership for NGO Studies, Education and Training (GP) is a consortium of educational centres established by BRAC in Bangladesh, the Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) in Zimbabwe, and the School for International Training (SIT) in the USA. The Global Partnership offers the postgraduate diploma in NGO Leadership and Management (NLM) leading to a master's degree programme, providing middle- and top-level managers of Southern development NGOs and those who liaise or support such NGOs (trainers, consultants, government officials, donors, etc.) with an opportunity for international higher education specifically relevant to their organisations and career development. From 1997 to 2000, 79 NGO managers from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Australia and New Zealand came together to develop skills, exchange perspectives, and complete the diploma programme.

In the fifth year of the programme's operation (2000/01), the Global Partnership undertook a systematic evaluation of the NLM programme to inform decisions about continuous improvement and about expansion of the programme to other sites and in alternative configurations.[1] The specific objectives of the evaluation were:

- to understand the results for participants and the impact once participants return to the NGO workforce;
- to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the course in relation to its objectives, in light of the impact desired and impact achieved, and in relation to other similar international courses;
- to determine what we needed to do to maintain the strengths of the programme, to improve areas where weaknesses exist, and to plan for increasing participant numbers and outreach (Chowdhury *et al.* 2001:2).

The evaluation methodology consisted of a self-study entailing surveys, interviews, and a reflection workshop with graduates, supervisors of graduates, and faculty. Following this self-study, an external review by experts in the field of NGO management and development took place.

The approach to the evaluation process was based on the idea of evaluation as learning, involving deep self-study to lay recurring issues on the table for careful collective examination, in combination with an

outside perspective for healthy critique and infusion of new ideas. Evaluation for learning

> *... is a means for fostering individual and team learning about complex organizational issues. Evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and change is more than a means to an end; it is more than developing skills that result in increased competence or improved profits. A significant consequence of evaluative inquiry is the fostering of relationships among organization members and the diffusion of their learning throughout the organization; it serves as a transfer-of-knowledge process. To that end, evaluative inquiry provides an avenue for individuals' as well as the organization's ongoing growth and development.*
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> (Preskill and Torres 1999:18)

We viewed this approach as more than appropriate; in fact it was essential to this stage of development of the programme and the Partnership. Though we evaluated a specific programme of the Partnership, the growth of that programme and others depend on the vitality of the Partnership itself. This evaluation provided an opportunity not only to learn about the programme's impact, strengths, and weaknesses, but also to strengthen the programme's learning culture and capacity for self-critique and change, and to build stronger capacity for doing and using evaluation effectively within the Partnership.

Many evaluations, however, begin with this well-meaning intent but are challenged to fulfil it. What in this particular case contributed to actually fulfilling that intent? This article begins to answer this question. How did this process and its results contribute to learning within the Global Partnership, the NLM programme, and the two primary partner institutions involved in the evaluation, BRAC and SIT? Why did this evaluation work as a learning exercise as opposed to a 'policing' exercise?[2] What specific elements of the evaluation process contributed to creating knowledge used for action? And last, but equally important, what challenges blocked further potential learning or could prevent translating knowledge into action?

Six factors that made learning work

Orientation towards learning and change

Of the Global Partnership's main members, BRAC and SIT are primarily responsible for the planning and implementation of this programme. Both institutions are oriented towards learning and

change within their organisations. The success of the exercise had its roots in the two organisations' past receptiveness to learning from their own experiences. 'BRAC has been characterised as a learning organisation, and its extraordinary success in rural development has been attributed to this basic feature of its operational mode (Korten 1980)' (Lovell 1992:4). BRAC also has a long tradition of examining its programmes with a research lens and of acting on the basis of the outcome of such studies. BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division (RED) produces research that helps 'achieve programme objectives by modifying and improving the programme strategies and identifying new programmatic issues' (BRAC RED 2001:10). SIT's orientation towards organisational learning is founded on its pedagogical approach – experiential learning, which it uses in its academic and non-credit training programmes alike and is often also infused into the operations of its programmes.

These commitments to learning, made concrete through an effort to use careful planning and evaluation, have been evident in the Global Partnership from the outset. For example, the three member institutions of the Global Partnership designed the NLM programme over more than a year with concentrated efforts carried out through three planning forums, one held at each of the three partners' home locations. External advisers were invited to contribute their views to the programme design, and an external evaluation was commissioned early on in the NLM programme. Though, in hindsight, this evaluation was done too early to provide in-depth assessment, it became a useful advisory exercise; the Global Partnership used several of the recommendations and built extensive formative evaluation processes into the programme itself.

Although the Global Partnership's orientation to learning from experience is not always problem-free in practice, it helped set the stage for the use of evaluation for learning in this case. Without this orientation, bringing about learning through evaluation might be an arduous paradigm-shifting effort. Because of this orientation, framing this evaluation as a learning exercise was, although not a seamless process, something that made sense.

Planning and resources

A second factor that made learning work in this evaluation involved adequate planning and resources. Once the idea of carrying out a systematic evaluation emerged, we sought substantial funding to 'do it right'. We also committed Global Partnership's own funds to start the

planning process well. The SIT evaluation team leader travelled to Bangladesh to meet with the BRAC evaluation team leader and to build a team and work on an evaluation process that all could agree upon. Both organisations were willing and able to commit the time and talents of personnel with appropriate skills. The individuals involved had good process-facilitation skills as well as technical skills in evaluation, essential to creating a collective approach to evaluation for learning. The use of these resources in this way renewed the organisational commitment to learning for this specific evaluation exercise.

Trust

Trust between SIT and BRAC was the third key factor. This trust has been built up over the years, even pre-dating the formalisation of the Global Partnership. In fact, the Global Partnership emerged in part because of positive collaborative experiences and relations of mutual respect between staff members of the two organisations. Through working together on the NLM programme since 1995, this trust has developed further. Building on these institutional and individual relationships, the evaluation team leaders took time and effort to develop trust within the evaluation team as well.

Building a shared paradigm of learning

Following from these three factors, we were able to build a shared paradigm of evaluation for learning. The evaluation used a team approach involving cross-departmental collaboration within BRAC (RED and GP/Training Division) and with SIT. The view of evaluation as learning was discussed by the team and used to shape the evaluation design. It was fortunate that the outside reviewers also held this view and so helped push learning from the external exercise. (More on the contributions of the 'outside' view appears below.)

But there were tensions here that proved to be stumbling blocks to further learning. Adjusting to the view of evaluation for learning was challenging for some team members, as their research backgrounds gave them a very different perspective. This impeded the presentation and analysis process of questionnaire data and the preparation for its use at the reflection workshop more difficult. Thus, there was little exploration and interpretation of questionnaire data at the reflection workshop, a great loss to learning. Also, the need for collective analysis was difficult to reinforce and even harder to implement given long-distance relationships. Data analysis was carried out largely by the individual writer of each section, and rigorous group analysis was done

in only a few of the sections. In addition, completing the analysis and final self-study report with a long distance between SIT and BRAC was challenging. Deadlines were invariably extended, and in the end the evaluation team leaders did more of the final analysis than was originally desired. Even with our history of trust and the time and resources to create a shared team paradigm and approach, these obstacles were considerable. Perhaps this shared paradigm was part of what allowed us to work through these obstacles and still emerge with a learning result.

Learning became action

What in particular contributed to using knowledge for action? The fifth factor helps answer this question: Global Partnership decision makers were involved in the evaluation process. This made it possible to take action as we proceeded, even before there was a final report. For example, the evaluation activity dovetailed with an opportunity to act immediately to solve some of the problems raised by the evaluation. SIT gained an opportunity for programme development through a FIPSE[3] grant for curriculum enhancement through educational technology and because the NLM programme evaluation chose to use this grant to develop the Global Partnership through electronically enhanced learning. The learning from the evaluation shaped this new direction and opportunity; the findings from the reflection workshop were used to shape the FIPSE grant request (in fact, the grant request was written just following the workshop), and the opportunity to apply for the FIPSE grant shaped the writing of implications and recommendations from the findings, especially those pertaining to expansion of the programme in the self-study. This kind of 'incremental' use of evaluation results (Hailey 2001) was possible because the General Secretary of the Global Partnership Board and the academic director of NLM were closely involved with the evaluation, and were present at the reflection workshop. In addition, supplementary funding became available to enable us to address some of the needs emerging from the evaluation findings.

Of course, the goals that have been achieved in this way address only a portion of the recommendations from the evaluation. Many still remain to be acted upon. The will to translate these into action exists, but obstacles include time, resources, and the difficulty of shifting focus from implementing a programme in its current form to putting energy into changing it. It is perhaps too early to say to what extent we will be able to achieve what we have agreed upon as a result of this learning

evaluation. This will depend largely on our ability to harness additional resources, both human and financial, to work towards our goals.

Internal–external views working together

The sixth factor was the use of an internal–external study combination in the evaluation design. Because of a shared paradigm and the agenda for deep self-understanding, recognising and naming problems, and accountability, the internal–external combination was especially effective in this case. CDRA makes the point that two functions of evaluation – learning and accountability – are necessarily intertwined. 'It so happens, if we were learning from our actions, we would be in a position to fulfil, in a meaningful way, the accountability demands made of us. We would also be enormously strengthened to manage external evaluations in a productive and collaborative manner, and to learn from them too' (CDRA 2001:8). This happened in this case. The external report gave new insights, examined the programme's blind spots, and contributed to further learning and action; at the same time the external review was richer because it built on an internal study. The external reviewers used the self-study extensively and we were able to determine what we needed from them because we had already done the self-study. We knew the gaps that we needed to fill and what their perspective could help us do. Further, because of a commitment on the part of the external reviewers and ourselves to using evaluation, one reviewer made a follow-up visit to the Global Partnership Secretariat to give further input for future planning on the basis of the evaluation (Rahman Khan and Hailey 2001).

What we learned from the evaluation results

Much was learned *about* the NLM programme through the evaluation. All those involved in the self-study felt they had learned a great deal about the uniqueness and value of the programme, especially its importance for individual graduates at a personal level. In particular, the reflection workshop showed testimonial evidence of the important effect of the programme on graduates' lives, thinking, and careers. These testimonies – and Global Partnership managers' direct witnessing of them – had a far greater impact on what was learned than any of the questionnaire data. (See more on limitations of the questionnaire data below.)

At the same time, the evaluation brought to the fore certain issues and concerns in such a way that action could be taken. Many of these issues had been named in ongoing formative evaluation during each programme cycle, but laying them out for all to see and making clear

recommendations (both those of the self-study and of the external reviewers) allowed the NLM management to move forward and think of solutions to continuing problems. Again, qualitative data strongly influenced learning about, and creating a commitment to, taking action on these issues.

Finally, the results of the evaluation shaped the October 2001 planning session of the Global Partnership Board. The recommendations from the internal and external reports pointed out ways to approach marketing, fundraising, and networking to ensure future programme sustainability and expanded impact. At the same time, the generally very favourable internal and external evaluation results justified asking potential funders for resources to strengthen the programme. This will be one of the key tasks for the Global Partnership over the next year.

What we learned from the evaluation process

The evaluation process itself contributed greatly to learning with the Global Partnership, highlighting organisational challenges and bringing about organisational benefits.

Linkages and relationships

Through the evaluation, relationships were both enhanced and challenged, reinforcing in our minds the importance of linkages in global-scale efforts. On the challenge side, the evaluation process raised important questions about the composition of the Global Partnership membership, including how many and what kinds of partners are needed to grow and vitalise the Global Partnership's programmes. It became clear that without some serious attention to broader external networking, we would be unlikely to achieve our goal of increasing the quality and impact of the programme. On the enhancement side, the evaluation process led to the first visit by the SIT president to BRAC and the NLM programme on the occasion of the external review visit. Further, the process enhanced cross-departmental cooperation and understanding (RED and GP/NLM) within BRAC. The process also raised the interest and support of key experts through their involvement as external reviewers.

Credibility and accountability within the partner organisations

The combination of wide participation internally and an outside expert perspective led to enhanced credibility and accountability of the NLM programme. The credibility of the programme was

enhanced within BRAC and SIT, both for those directly involved in NLM management and for those at other levels of the organisations. Donor money for the evaluation elevated the status of the programme. Key decision makers understood the programme better. A sense of accountability and credibility grew within the programme, among the partners, and externally.

Models and modes of learning

What were the benefits of the process for the Global Partnership's orientation towards learning? And what did we learn about evaluation for learning that we might use in future learning efforts within Global Partnership? First, the sense that self-study (internal evaluation) is valuable, which was doubted at some levels of the Partnership at the beginning, grew enormously. The evaluation laid the issues on the table for everyone to see and own – stakeholders could recognise the issues together and didn't have to convince each other of what they were – and this was the result of doing the evaluation collectively rather than being evaluated only from the outside. Second, evaluation served as a training ground for BRAC personnel within RED and NLM; the involvement of staff with little evaluation expertise gave them skills to use in future evaluation studies and broadened the commitment to evaluation for learning. The process also led to increased desire on the part of the NLM programme director to carry out enhanced ongoing evaluation and study of the programme; he saw the benefits of systematic study, of finding out and documenting lessons learned.

Difficulties of assessing impact and the importance of qualitative data

As for how we might do evaluation in future, we learned that the organisational and field-level impact of this training programme (or any training programme) is difficult to measure. We learned that this type of data collection has to be context rich. The quantitative data themselves could not provide the whole picture; the qualitative data generated at the reflection workshop provided more sense of the programme's meaning and led the data analysis. Some problems in the quantitative data contributed to this situation. The response rate on self-study questionnaires was limited, making the statistical analysis of the data not particularly meaningful. We were also unable to take the quantitative analysis beyond its first limited iteration, owing to time and communication constraints.

However, even if we had had deeper quantitative data – and certainly because we did not have them – the richness of the qualitative data, especially those collected at the reflection workshop, probably would have overshadowed it. At that event, graduates almost spontaneously took the workshop in the direction of recounting their experiences following the programme, how they had applied their learning, and the benefits they had derived from it both personally and organisationally. Those testimonies led to a thorough exposure of problems in the programme and ways they could be solved. This qualitative data became an important part of learning because Global Partnership managers and Board members were present to hear it first hand. The reflection workshop could have been more meaningful had more faculty, supervisors, and donors attended; but this kind of evaluation is very time consuming and it was difficult to obtain their time or participation. Participation of local supervisors and donors was also restricted because a national strike was called by the opposition parties in Bangladesh at the time of the reflection workshop.

What it takes to take knowledge to action

Perhaps the most important lesson – not new, but reinforced by this experience – was that you need resources to solve problems. The resources gathered to do a systematic evaluation and the new resources available to help solve some of the programme problems that had been raised bear witness to this. The human, financial, and knowledge and networking resources are equally important. This lesson has reinforced our commitment to building a strategic and effective marketing, networking, and fundraising approach to Global Partnership programmes in order to ensure their impact on the future of the development NGO sector. Along with helping us achieve impact, this approach will help us assess impact.

> As we begin to articulate what we see and know, so another contribution takes shape – a picture of what is being measured, how we measure it and what it looks like. When we manage to express this, then we will have something to say, something engaging, interesting and persuasive to put on the table in response to those questions, 'How do you know that your work makes a difference? How do you know that it does any good?'
> (CDRA 2001:19)

We hope to continue to build our capacity to learn from our experience, to link knowledge to action, and to understand if and how it 'makes a difference'.

Notes

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2 Thanks to John Hailey and Paul Ventura for this and other stimulating ideas in early discussions about this article.

3 The Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) is a foundation-like arm of the US Department of Education.

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