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LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS:

THE ROLE OF DATA COLLECTION IN

THE MONITORING SYSTEMS OF

DEVELOPMENT NGOS

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Laying the Foundations:

The Role of Data Collection in the Monitoring Systems of Development NGOs

By

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Introduction

It is almost two decades since David Korten (1980) first identified the need for development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to learn from the implementation of project and programmes in order to improve their effectiveness, and those of future activities. Since then the concept of the 'learning organisation' has become embedded in development theory and practice. Organisational learning is now widely regarded as an essential process enabling NGOs to discover what works and what does not, and thereby improve their effectiveness as agents for poverty relief (Fowler 1995; Edwards 1997).

For smaller NGOs, operating close to the field, learning may be a largely informal process. However, larger NGOs, or those wishing to scale-up their activities, need more formal management information processes to ensure that lessons learned at field level are systematically identified and disseminated for adoption in other areas (Billis and MacKeith 1992; Noponen 1997). Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are central to these processes. Yet, although most NGOs

claim or aspire to be 'learning organisations', and some have indeed developed effective and innovative M&E systems, many, particularly in the South, remain weak in these fields or ignore them altogether (Farrington and Bebbington 1993; Riddell and Robinson 1995).

NGOs are also coming under increasing pressure to improve their M&E systems from external sources. Since the 1980s there has been a dramatic rise in the levels of official aid channeled through NGOs in both the North and the South. However, donors are becoming increasingly reluctant to continue this level of support without concrete evidence of developmental effectiveness (Noponen 1997). At the same time, competition between NGOs for scarce development funds is creating pressure on individual NGOs to justify their funding (Edwards and Hulme 1996). The establishment of appropriate M&E systems can therefore be seen as essential both to the learning capacity of NGOs and, in many cases, to their very survival as institutions (Edwards 1997).

However, while the improvement of NGOs' monitoring and evaluation systems would generally be regarded as a positive development, there is evidence that these twin goals may be in conflict. This paper argues that M&E systems have become distorted towards the measurement of results, and that this has contributed towards three distinct areas of bias within academic literature and development practice:

- a concentration on evaluation rather than monitoring
- an emphasis on the selection of data over its collection
- a focus on specific tools and methodologies instead of the processes through which information is collected, analysed and used.

It further argues that this distortion is not only compromising learning within many NGOs, but is also undermining the collection of high-quality information at field level. It concludes that a balance needs to be restored if NGOs are to be encouraged to develop M&E systems that generate accurate, reliable information, thereby providing a basis both for learning and for the measurement of results.

## THE FIRST BIAS: Evaluation Over Monitoring

Monitoring can be defined as " .. the systematic and continuous collecting and analysing of information about the progress of a piece of work over time" (Gosling and Edwards 1995, p.12). Programme monitoring - with which this paper is primarily concerned - consists of two different categories.

- **Process monitoring** covers the use of resources and the progress of activities. It is designed to provide the information needed to plan and review work, assess the success or otherwise of the implementation of projects and programmes, identify and deal with problems, and monitor changes in the external environment.
- **Impact monitoring** relates work to its purpose on an on-going basis by assessing the impact that an activity is having on its target population.

Evaluations, on the other hand, are normally carried out at a specific point in time during a project or programme, or after its completion. They are designed to provide a " .. *retrospective assessment of performance against objectives*" (Robinson and Thin 1993, p.5). Evaluations often involve the collection of information from outside projects or programmes in order to compare progress,

or question the validity of the goals of an intervention. They may also be designed to assess the impact of activities on people who lie outside the target population (Eade and Williams 1995; Casley and Kumar 1987).

Figure 1: The Original Project Cycle
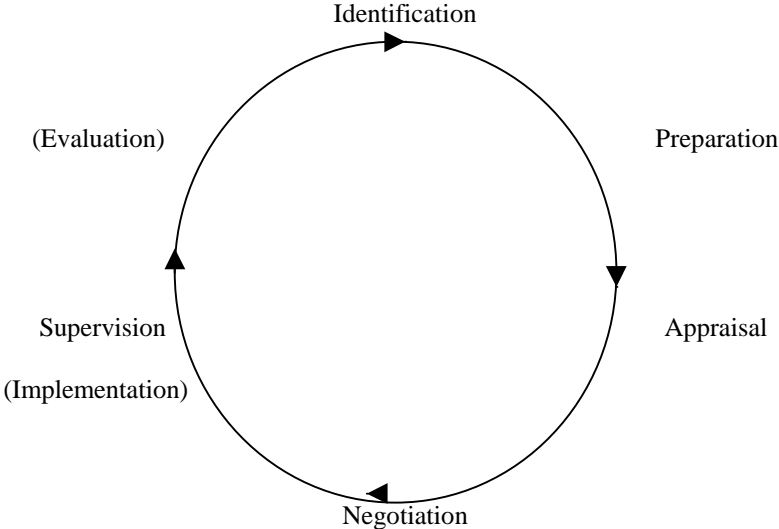
Original cycle identified by Baum (1970) unbracketed. Implementation and evaluation added in 1978. Source: Johnson (1984)

Monitoring and evaluation were first formally separated as distinct disciplines in the project cycles designed by international funding agencies to plan and control development projects in the 1960s and 1970s. In these project cycles, work was divided into discrete phases (see figure 1). Monitoring was carried out throughout the lifetime of projects, while evaluations were carried out after their completion. Under the influence of these project cycles, and later of the logical framework, monitoring was seen primarily as an exercise designed to measure the effectiveness of the implementation of projects, while evaluations were intended to assess those projects' success in relation to their objectives (Mikkelsen 1995).

Partly as a result of these historical influences, and in spite of the fact that there has been a growth of interest in impact monitoring over recent years, evaluation is still widely perceived as the key discipline that enables organisations to assess the impact of their work. This perception, along with the current emphasis on the measurement of results, has led to an increasing focus on evaluation rather than monitoring, which is frequently regarded as the 'poor relation' of the two disciplines (Pratt and Boyden 1985).

However, there are grounds for regarding monitoring as the more essential discipline for NGOs wishing to learn from their experiences. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, monitoring is almost always conducted by in-house project staff, while evaluations are frequently conducted by outside consultants, or staff from organisations external to the implementing agency. This means that the monitoring process provides greater opportunities for NGO staff to utilise their own knowledge and experience, while the learning resulting from evaluations is often focused more on the needs and perceptions of outside agencies. Secondly, because monitoring is a continuous process, rather than a periodic one, it enables adjustments to be made in a timely and methodical way (Eade and Williams 1995), thus shortening the time span between the recognition of problems or opportunities, and the taking of appropriate action (Howes 1992). This ensures that any lessons learned can be applied immediately rather than waiting months, or even years, for a formal evaluation or impact assessment to be conducted.

Even where the sole criteria for carrying out M&E work is to measure the impact of activities, there are still compelling reasons why a continuous process of information collection and analysis is needed. Social change is an extremely complicated process to which NGOs can only make a small contribution in most

cases. Projects are influenced by the economic, social and political climate in which they operate, and may themselves have effects on the wider environment. This can make it extremely difficult to establish whether or not local changes can be attributed to NGO interventions (Billis and MacKeith 1992). Consequently, any attempt to judge the results of a piece of work must be based on a very clear record of what activities have actually been undertaken. As such it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate a project unless it has been adequately monitored over its lifetime (see Pratt and Boyden 1985; Oakley 1988).

Monitoring can therefore be regarded as the most basic requirement of any reporting system, underpinning both learning within NGOs and any activities designed to measure the effectiveness of their interventions. This implies that any organisation wishing to develop its information systems must pay sufficient attention to the monitoring process, or risk wasting time and resources carrying out activities such as evaluations or impact assessments which may prove to be of little or no value.

THE SECOND BIAS: Selection Over Collection

Monitoring is often seen as the 'poor relation' of the other disciplines in the project cycle and some feel it is also the most difficult to do well because it relies on a system rather than being a 'one-off' effort carried out over a discrete period by individuals with a specific task (Gosling and Edwards 1995). In order for it to serve a useful purpose, this system needs to generate information that is both relevant and accurate. Yet the information generated by many NGOs is of such poor quality that some in the development community have come to regard it with at best scepticism, and at worst almost complete mistrust.

Here, too, there is something of a bias. Debates over recent years have been concerned more with the relevance of information than with its quality. Two primary examples of this are the long-running debate over the respective merits of quantitative and qualitative information, and the continuing search for indicators that can measure performance in social development projects with intangible goals such as participation and empowerment (see Howes 1992). In addition, the current focus on demonstrating effectiveness has led to " .. a flurry of efforts to identify indicators and measures of outputs, outcomes and impacts" (Fowler 1997, p.167). However, this emphasis on the selection of information has frequently resulted in the processes of data collection being ignored. An alternative approach is to consider first how the quality of information collected can be maximised, and then to examine the implications for its selection.

The Criteria for High Quality Data Collection

At the most basic level, the collection of accurate data will depend to a large degree on the skills of the staff responsible for carrying out the work, and on how well they are supervised and trained. Some consider it also important to ensure that staff know how the data they collect is to be used. Based on a study of British voluntary organisations, Connor (1993) argues that staff are much more likely to spend time and effort collecting high quality data if they understand the value of the work they do, and are confident that those whose job it is to analyse and use that data will take account of it, and act upon it if necessary. If staff are unaware of how data will be used there is also a danger that they believe they will be judged on the basis of the information they provide, and as a result may be tempted to supply only positive information, while hiding the negative. Much also depends on how top management

responds to the actual reporting of errors or failure. If they regard it as evidence of personal incompetence, field staff and their managers will quickly become skilled at concealing such information (Korten 1980).

When data has been passed from the field to higher level decision-makers, they may wish to make modifications to a project or programme, based on their analysis of that data. This means that information needs to flow in both directions, to and from the field (Cusworth and Franks 1993). A monitoring system should therefore encompass not only the collection of data but also the " .. communication system in which information flows between all the people involved" (Gosling and Edwards 1995, p.86). This two-way flow of information has two important benefits. Firstly, it ensures that data is actually analysed and used, and so serves an important function. Secondly, the feedback of results and analyses to the field allows staff to see how the data they provide is used. This helps to ensure that they do not feel threatened by the monitoring process, and improves the likelihood of them providing high quality data (Ahmed and Bamberger 1991).

However, if a monitoring system is to progress beyond a rigid process in which data is collected at field level and analysed at higher levels, mechanisms need to be established allowing field staff to participate in the analysis process. If field staff are given the opportunity to comment on the data they produce and resulting analyses through regular review mechanisms, their sense of ownership of their work is likely to increase, and so therefore is the quality of that work (Ahmed and Bamberger 1991).

The processes so far described can help to improve the quality of data collected irrespective of how it is selected, or who selects it. However, while the

collection of pre-defined data or indicators is almost always an essential component of any monitoring system, it is by no means the only component. No formal monitoring system can cover all the different eventualities that can occur during a project's lifetime. Instead, project managers and field staff spend much of their time collecting information on a range of matters not covered by pre-defined indicators (Rubin 1995). These include changes in the wider environment - such as important political events or changes in weather conditions - unanticipated problems or opportunities affecting the implementation of projects, and any unexpected impacts of the projects themselves. Field staff can play an especially important role in identifying this kind of information, particularly where they are in close contact with the intended beneficiaries, and are therefore in the best position to recognise the effects of projects on those beneficiaries. However, in order for this kind of information to be systematically identified, and any lessons learned fed back into future activities in other areas, channels of communication need to be established through which information can be passed to higher level managers on an irregular basis (see Holcombe 1995).

While this is regarded by some as the most important type of monitoring (e.g. Moris and Copestake 1993) it is rarely considered during the design stage of a monitoring system. To a large extent it requires the co-operation and commitment of NGO staff, who will only volunteer information if they are confident that it will be considered and used if necessary. It is therefore important to reassure staff at all levels that their experience, knowledge and opinions are valued (Edwards 1997). The need for this kind of supplement to the formal monitoring system provides more compelling reasons for ensuring that monitoring is seen as a non-threatening process in which staff feel they are able to provide information objectively, whether positive or negative.

Finally, there is evidence that staff are much more likely to spend time and effort collecting high quality data if it is useful to them in their own work. If staff are allowed some input into the design or modification of monitoring systems they will be able to ensure that at least some of the data they collect is relevant to their own needs. If they are then given the opportunity to make their own analyses of this data, and act upon them where necessary, they will no longer be collecting data entirely for the benefit of others, but to fulfil their own needs and requirements as well (Cusworth and Franks 1993). Fowler argues that a general rule of thumb is that " .. the quality of data collected is negatively related to whether or not the collector requires it" (Fowler 1997, p.169). A system that encourages field staff to select and analyse their own information is therefore likely to result in the highest quality data of all.

Such a system requires some decentralisation of decision-making within the monitoring process. However, this is seldom the case in conventional systems. Standard approaches to monitoring involve the extraction of information from the field and its concentration at the 'top of the programme' with programme managers or funding agencies. Rarely have monitoring systems been designed to enable information and analyses to be fed back to the field, let alone decentralised to allow analyses or independent action at field level (Davies 1996; Noponen 1997). In order to understand how a climate can be created in which information can flow easily in both directions, it is necessary to look beyond the monitoring process itself, and examine how information exchange is affected by an organisation's structure and culture.

The Influence of Organisational Structure and Culture

NGOs have often been criticised for having hierarchical organisational structures which encourage centralised decision-making. Much of this criticism is aimed at Southern NGOs (see Edwards and Hulme 1996), though Billis and MacKeith (1992) point out that the ten largest NGOs in Great Britain also have hierarchical structures. Some argue that this tendency is on the increase, and that NGOs are becoming more, rather than less centralised, and are introducing increasingly formalised, bureaucratic communications systems, partly because of internal and external pressure to scale-up their activities (Clark 1997; Billis and MacKeith 1992), and partly at the behest of official aid agencies (Batkin 1992).

As far as monitoring is concerned, there are two major problems associated with a hierarchical form of management. Firstly, information can be lost, and its quality reduced as it is transmitted from one level of an organisation to another. Secondly, a hierarchy with clearly defined levels of influence and status can inhibit participation within an organisation (Bryant 1980). If, as argued, some decentralisation of decision-making is required to enable field staff to actively participate within a monitoring system, and so improve the quality of the information they provide, anything that inhibits this process may result in a lowering of information quality.

The excessive centralisation of decision-making was identified as a major problem in two recent studies of NGOs in Latin America (see Carroll 1992), and in Africa and Asia (see Riddell and Robinson 1995). Both studies provided evidence from projects in which it had undermined staff commitment, and reduced the potential for decision-making at field level. However, this need not necessarily be an argument against hierarchy in principal. Some argue that it is perfectly possible for an organisation to encourage the participation of its staff

within a formal hierarchical structure. For instance the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) - one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh - is described by Batkin (1992, p.50) as a " .. hierarchy with clear lines of accountability from one level to the next". He also points out that the results of the monitoring process are made available to all staff within the organisation, and claims that RDRS is encouraging an increasingly participatory culture. Wils (1995) argues that the challenge for NGOs is to achieve a degree of decentralised decision-making, whilst maintaining an adequate level of centralised control.

Rather than concentrating entirely on hierarchy, it is therefore necessary to look at the processes within an organisation that facilitate or inhibit the flow of information between interested parties. Some argue that the formal structure of any organisation is less important than its prevailing spirit or 'modus operandi' (e.g. Finsterbusch and Van Wicklin 1987). This is the focus of the 'culture' concept in organisational studies which refers to the informal attitudes and values of the staff within an organisation, or to the " .. formal organisational values and practices imposed by management as a 'glue' to hold the workforce together" (Wright 1994, p.2). Organisations are also affected by racial, national, regional and religious influences (Anthony 1994), and sometimes acquire a unique character and set of values unrelated to the purposes for which they were established (Ickis 1983).

In turn, the culture of an organisation depends heavily on its leadership. Leadership is responsible for conveying the vision of an organisation (the direction in which it is going) to its staff, and organising their efforts to pursue that vision (see Batkin 1992). If leaders are successful in communicating this vision to an NGO's workforce, the prospect of decision-makers at lower levels pursuing their own individual goals or objectives is reduced. Based on a study

of the Grameen Bank, Holcombe (1995) argues, perhaps paradoxically, that the ability of an organisation to operate a participatory culture within a formal hierarchy depends on the strong centralised management of vision and values, because staff at lower levels can then be allowed more scope to make their own independent decisions within a shared framework of ideals and goals. Where leadership is able to instil this kind of culture, field staff will be better able to actively participate within a decentralised monitoring process, which, as argued, will increase the likelihood of high quality information being produced.

Figure 2: The Criteria for Achieving High Quality Data Collection

Quality of Information	Requirements of Field Staff	Institutional Requirements

LOW QUALITY ↑↓ **HIGH QUALITY**	• Data collection skills • Motivation • Understanding of how monitoring data is used • Confidence in monitoring as a non-threatening process • Opportunities to comment on data / analyses • Reporting of own experiences / knowledge lying outside the formal monitoring system • Opportunity to analyse / use data at field level	• Training • Supervision • Specific training on the uses of monitoring data • Feedback of analyses / results to the field • Positive responses to the reporting of errors / mistakes • Systems to encourage the two-way flow of information • Review mechanisms • Some decentralisation of decision-making • Establishment of informal channels of communication • Reassurance of field staff that their experience, knowledge and opinions are valued • Mechanisms to allow field staff some input into the design of monitoring systems • Decentralisation of decision-making • Organisational culture encouraging participation

Conclusions

This analysis shows that the collection of accurate, high-quality data is not a trivial process that can be dealt with effectively on a project-by-project basis. Although the criteria necessary to facilitate this process (see figure 2) are relatively straightforward, their actual implementation can present considerable difficulties. Even the more basic criteria, such as training and supervision, can be hard to do well, and may require additional resources or staffing levels. At the other extreme, changing an organisation's culture requires much managerial expertise, and is often a complicated and lengthy process (Anthony 1994).

Two other important lessons emerge from the proposition that the quality of information collected is negatively related to whether or not the collector requires it. Firstly, if field staff are responsible for the collection of information then this information is likely to be of highest quality when it is relevant to their needs. Yet the information required by field staff to plan and review their work, identify and deal with problems, take advantage of opportunities when they arise, and assess the effects of projects on the target population is precisely the kind of information required by NGOs for learning purposes. This suggests that there is a positive correlation between the quality of information collected and its relevance to an organisation's learning needs.

Secondly, as argued, if information is to be relevant to field staff, they need to have some say in its selection. The selection and collection of information are therefore heavily interdependent. This implies that an exclusive focus on the selection of information, no matter how relevant to external agencies or higher level management, may cause the quality of the information generated through the monitoring process to be reduced. If so, the current efforts to devise new

indicators and measures of developmental effectiveness will achieve little unless corresponding efforts are also made to improve the processes through which information is collected, analysed and used.

THE THIRD BIAS: Tools Over Process

This paper has so far highlighted the biases of evaluation over monitoring, and the selection of information over its collection. However, there is a third bias. Even when serious consideration is given to the collection of monitoring information, attention is often focused more on specific monitoring tools than on the kind of processes described in the previous section. These tools do not involve the pre-selection of information. Instead they define the manner in which it is acquired. Many have been developed by NGOs themselves in response to the perceived failures of their M&E systems to provide them with the information they need to understand development processes, or assess the impact of their activities. This section examines the conditions under which such tools can be effective.

The Tools of Information Collection

Of the many different tools available to NGOs, two of the most widely used are the logical framework and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In many ways these tools represent alternative approaches to the generation of information. While the logical framework is often seen as contributing to a top-down approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation, PRA is designed to enable greater grassroots involvement in the collection and analysis of information. Though originally applied to the appraisal of rural projects, it is increasingly being used within the fields of M&E (Chambers 1997).

Both tools have avid supporters and equally fierce critics. However, although very different, debates concerning their advantages and disadvantages tend to centre around two broad areas. The first relates to their technical strengths and weaknesses. For example, supporters of the logical framework claim that it encourages a systematic and logical approach to planning and implementation (Mikkelsen 1995), while its critics argue that it encourages the measurement only of physical and quantifiable targets of achievement (Crittenden and Lea 1991). Similarly, supporters of PRA claim that it can help to reverse power relations between communities and outside planners and experts, while its critics argue that it is less effective when used within hierarchical cultures or non-homogenous communities (Leurs 1996). These debates are valuable because they enable NGOs to assess where, and in what circumstances, the tools are likely to be effective.

The second area centres around how these tools are applied, and there are grounds for arguing that these debates are less helpful because they are based around a mistaken assumption. For instance, when the logical framework is accused of being inflexible, its supporters respond by arguing that regular reviews can offset its rigidity (e.g. Wiggins and Shields 1995). Equally, when the quality of facilitation of PRA is criticised, its supporters claim that this represents a failure on behalf of the implementing agency, not the tool itself (Chambers 1997). Essentially, the supporters of both tools are stating what should be obvious: that a tool can only be effective if the management of that tool is itself effective. The fallacy of the criticisms lies in the mistaken assumption that a tool has an intrinsic value that enables it to compensate for any deficiencies in an organisation's processes for information collection and analysis.

This assumption is partly due to the way in which new tools are piloted. A great deal of effort is usually taken to ensure that they are tested in a supportive environment. Yet if successful the credit goes entirely to the tool rather than the process that supported it. In order to illustrate this it is worth examining the example of a tool developed by Rick Davies for the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB). This comprised a system in which the staff members and beneficiaries of a project each month recorded what they considered to have been the most significant change in the lives of the project participants, and why. CCDB claimed considerable success for the tool, both in addressing its own information needs, and in analysing qualitative processes of change (see Davies 1996).

However, an examination of how the tool was implemented provides important insights. During the piloting stage the leadership of CCDB were committed to the system, and took pains to ensure that it was given every chance of success. In the planning stages, workshops were held at various levels to ensure that project staff and managers fully understood the system. Reports were analysed at head office and fed back each month to project staff, so ensuring that there was a " .. slow but extensive dialogue up and down the CCDB hierarchy" (p.4). Field staff and beneficiaries were given the opportunity to analyse the information they collected at field level, and were encouraged to use different approaches that best suited their needs. This ensured that, although located in a hierarchical structure, the system gave " .. significant power to those at the base" (p.7). Finally, due to its very nature - and its main technical strength - the system did not rely on pre-selected indicators but instead allowed participants to report any changes they felt were important, within general guidelines.

In short, almost all the criteria necessary for the collection of high-quality information were met. It would therefore be possible to argue that under the same circumstances almost any monitoring tool or system would have the maximum possible chance of success. Significantly, one area in which the piloted system was least effective was the reporting of negative changes. When asked to explain why so few were recorded, field staff replied that they were worried that the critical reporting of events could affect their job security, therefore implying that CCDB had failed to ensure that the process of monitoring was 'non-threatening' - a failure of the collection process, not of the tool.

The experiment showed that the tool could address CCDB's problems in analysing qualitative processes of change, and was flexible enough to be used at different levels of the organisation in response to different needs. In other words, the tool was strong enough technically to achieve its objectives. However, much of the success of the experiment was built on the processes through which CCDB collected and analysed information. Where these processes were inadequate, the tool itself could not compensate. The danger is that other NGOs adopt this tool in the hope that it will address their information needs without giving due attention to the processes which underpinned its successful application.

Ultimately, virtually any conceivable monitoring tool will involve the collection and analysis of information. Its success or failure will therefore depend not only on its technical strengths and weaknesses, but also on whether or not the criteria necessary for the collection of accurate information, as described previously, are met. A monitoring tool, as with any tool, is only as good as the hands that wield it.

Participatory Monitoring

Participatory monitoring tools, such as PRA, require special consideration because the responsibility for information collection and analysis is shared between NGOs and community groups. Participatory monitoring is both a management tool and an " .. educational process in which participants increase awareness and understanding of factors which affect their situation" (Mikkelsen 1995, p.169). When implemented in its purest form, NGO staff and community groups collaboratively discuss the reasons for monitoring, define objectives, select indicators, decide how and when information is collected, analyse that information and present those analyses (Gosling and Edwards 1995). However, there are few recorded examples of NGOs completely sharing responsibility in this manner. Instead, the bulk of the examples within development literature describe systems in which NGOs define the structure of the monitoring process, while community groups are given varying degrees of control over the selection, collection, analysis and use of information (e.g. Damodaram 1991; Shah and Shah 1995; Davies 1996; Noponen 1997).

Because much of the responsibility for collecting information lies with community groups, it could be argued that these groups' structures and cultures are more important than those of the NGO facilitating the process. This would mean that NGOs could facilitate effective monitoring without establishing all the criteria necessary for the collection of high quality information. However, this would only be true if it were possible to isolate an NGO's internal systems and procedures from those of the community groups with which they work. Many argue that this is not possible (e.g. Cernea 1985, Holcombe 1995). Bryant

(1980), for instance, argues that organisations replicate in their outputs what they practice internally. This implies that an organisation with structures that inhibit the participation of its own staff is unlikely to be able to encourage the effective participation of beneficiaries. Participation requires shifts in power away from NGOs and towards local communities. Whether or not development workers are able to achieve these shifts depends not only on their own behaviour and attitudes, but also on " .. organisational structures and decision-making systems, of which they are a part and from which they cannot cushion participants" (Nelson and Wright 1995, p.14).

Consequently, NGOs will only be able to derive significant benefits from the use of participatory monitoring tools when they have first developed systems that allow their own staff to fully participate within the monitoring process. The same conditions required to ensure high quality data collection within a traditional monitoring system are also required to facilitate the effective participation of community groups. There are no short cuts in development.

Conclusions

The successful use of tools, or participatory approaches to monitoring, is heavily dependent on an organisation's internal processes of information collection and analysis. When used within the context of a system that fulfils the criteria for the collection of accurate, high-quality information, these tools and approaches can enhance the quality of the monitoring process. However, they cannot compensate for deficiencies in such a system. The two are complementary, they are not alternatives.

ALL THREE BIASES? Externally Imposed Monitoring Systems

This paper has argued that much of the responsibility for the creation of an effective monitoring system lies with an organisation's leaders. However, while many agree that monitoring should be seen primarily as an internal activity serving the information needs of implementing agencies (e.g. Binnendijk 1989; Cusworth and Franks 1993; Casley and Kumar 1987), others argue that both monitoring and evaluation should be designed to meet the requirements of donor agencies (e.g. Mikkelsen 1995). While opinions may vary, it is certainly true that the information collected through the monitoring process is commonly determined by donor agencies, either to ensure that information is kept receptive to their own needs (see Epstein and Tripoli 1977), or to control recipient organisations and hold them formally accountable (Hulme 1994). This perception of monitoring as an auditing or 'policing' function has often resulted in recipient organisations attempting to avoid it where possible (Binnendijk 1989).

At worst, in their desire to maintain control over the NGOs they fund, donors may impose systems that conform to all the three biases described within this paper.

- They rely primarily on their own external evaluations of projects and programmes to assess the impact of development activities. Recipient NGOs are expected to monitor activities in such a way as to verify whether implementation is being carried out according to a predetermined plan.

- The information generated via the monitoring process is pre-selected by the donor in order to fulfil their own requirements. NGOs are expected to collect this information whether or not it is of any use to them, and whether or not they are capable of collecting it accurately.
- NGOs are forced to adopt certain tools or techniques as a condition of funding. Sometimes this can exceed their capacity to implement them effectively. For example, PRA is increasingly being demanded by donors irrespective of whether NGOs have developed the internal systems and procedures required for the effective facilitation of participatory tools (Mikkelsen 1995; Chambers 1997).

Two major problems may arise from the imposition of external monitoring systems on NGOs. Firstly, they may undermine many of the criteria necessary for the collection of high-quality information. For instance, they may reduce the extent to which staff understand how the information they collect will be used; they reduce the prospects for analyses and results to be fed back down to field level; they are almost always biased towards pre-defined indicators of progress or achievements; and they deny field staff any involvement in the design of monitoring systems, which may mean that the information they collect is of no use to them in their own work. Inaccurate information will suit neither donors, who will receive incorrect data on which to base their decisions, nor recipient organisations, who will spend time, resources and energies on activities of little or no value to them.

The second problem is that imposed monitoring systems may reduce the potential for learning within NGOs. Smillie claims that there are two reasons for M&E; the first has to do with learning, the second to do with verification and control. While accepting that both are important he argues that an emphasis on

the latter " *.. will almost guarantee that the former is compromised, if not seriously impaired*" (Smillie 1998, p.37). There are at least two ways in which this could happen. Firstly, if NGOs are expected to operate monitoring systems which meet the needs of external agencies, they may have neither the resources, nor sufficient staff to run parallel systems to supply their own learning needs, particularly if they are funded from more than one source, and therefore have to meet the information requirements of several donors at once. This could result in formalised learning within those NGOs being minimised. Secondly, if NGOs feel they are being judged on their results, they may be tempted to treat the provision of information as a public relations activity, reporting only the positive and hiding the negative (see Edwards and Hulme 1996). This will contribute towards the evolution of a culture which discourages honesty and transparency both at the organisational and individual level. The kind of objective, unbiased information required for learning will then be much more difficult to obtain.

Figure 3: The Flow of Development Funding
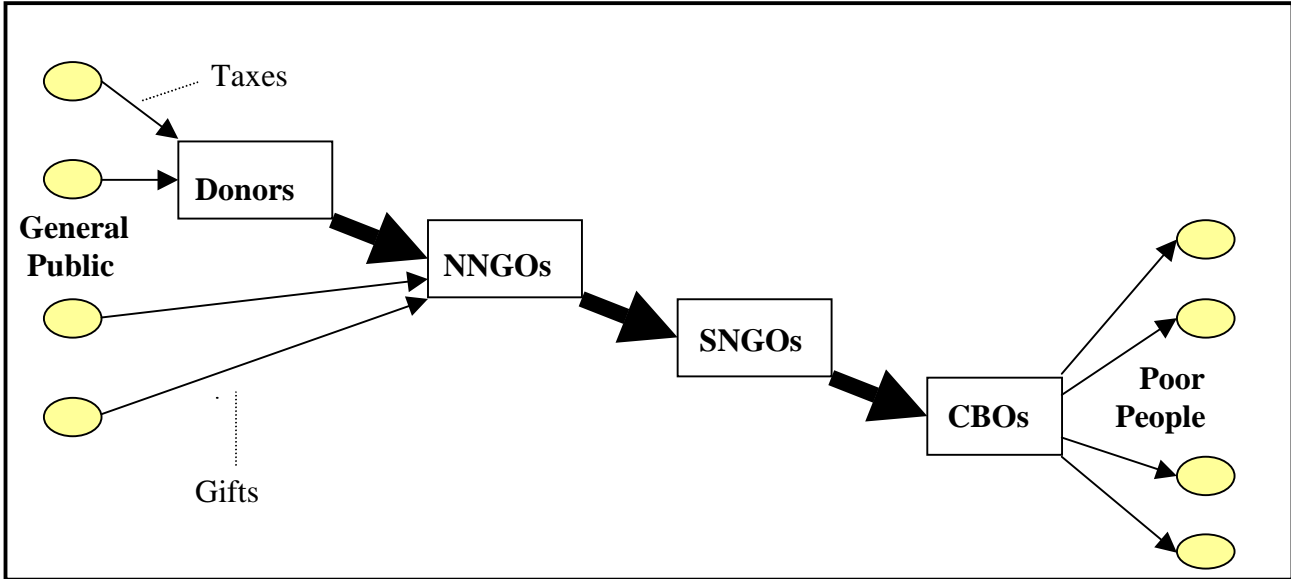
Key: Arrows indicate direction of funding. Large arrows indicate imposition of monitoring systems. NNGOs = Northern NGOs; SNGOs = Southern NGOs; CBOs = Community Based Organisations. Source: Adapted from Fowler (1995)

Donors may argue that they too have their needs, and - as in the case of some Northern NGOs that impose systems on their Southern counterparts (see figure 3) - have to be accountable to their own donors and supporters (Eade and Williams 1995). However, there are alternatives. Rather than imposing monitoring systems in order to keep a tight control over projects and programmes, some argue that donors should instead encourage recipient organisations to develop their own systems. The quality of an organisation's *learning* could then be used to assess their effectiveness, instead of information on specific interventions (Fowler 1997; Smillie 1998). This would ensure that NGOs that are honest in their reporting of errors or failure would not be penalised - provided they were using that information to improve present and future activities - while at the same time providing donor agencies with criteria by which to make informed choices about who, or who not, to support. This would not only encouraging learning within NGOs, but, by removing the need for dishonest reporting, would also remove one of the main barriers to the collection of accurate, high-quality information.

CONCLUSIONS: Laying the Foundations

This paper has argued that monitoring and evaluation systems are essential to organisational learning for all but the smallest of NGOs. It has also argued that many NGOs are coming under pressure to prove the effectiveness of their work in order to justify their funding. This emphasis on 'results' has led many

academics and development practitioners to search for new ways to measure the impacts of development activities. Some are examining new approaches to evaluation and impact assessment. Others are seeking indicators that can better measure the outcomes and impacts of projects and programmes. Others still are devising more powerful tools for information collection and analysis, or are experimenting with different approaches to participatory M&E. These efforts have a valuable role to play in expanding the range of options for NGOs and other organisations wishing to measure and improve the impact of their work.

However, there is a danger that in focusing predominantly on the measurement of results, the more basic processes which underpin these efforts will be ignored. This paper has argued that an effective monitoring system is the most basic requirement of any reporting system, without which evaluations or impact assessments are unlikely to be successful. In turn, the collection of high quality data from the field is essential to the success of any monitoring system, or to the effective application of information collection tools or participatory approaches to M&E. This paper has also suggested that information is likely to be of highest quality when it is relevant to the learning needs of the NGOs and field staff responsible for its collection.

A monitoring system that produces inaccurate data is of little use either for learning or measuring impact. Therefore, if the current efforts of the development community are not to be wasted, a balance needs to be restored in order that sufficient attention be given to the internal processes within NGOs which enable them to collect, analyse and use accurate information. The processes defined within this paper are both simple and complex - simple because they rely on a small number of relatively straightforward criteria; complex because implementing these criteria may mean introducing changes

which go to the heart of an NGO's culture, and beyond that to the policies and practices of donor agencies.

The establishment of these internal processes may be insufficient in itself to ensure the provision of all the information needed to judge the effectiveness of NGOs' interventions, or to maximise their learning capacity. However, it can be seen as a basic first step without which other efforts will not be successful. By developing effective monitoring systems, based on the generation of accurate, high-quality information, NGOs will at least be laying the foundations on which further efforts to improve practice and measure achievements can then be built. In the absence of these foundations, the prospects for any widespread improvements in the quality of NGOs' monitoring and evaluation systems will remain bleak.

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