

The Big Push Back [and push forward!]

On the 22nd September, Rosalind Eyben organised a meeting of some seventy development practitioners and researchers worried about the current trend for funding organisations to support only those programmes designed to deliver easily measurable results, although these may not support transformative processes of positive and sustainable changes in people's lives.

Following on from a major conference in May in the Netherlands about evaluative practices in relation to social transformation (<http://evaluationrevisited.wordpress.com/>), the meeting took the first steps in strategizing collectively in support of these practices. Below is Rosalind's brief report of the meeting.

Funding agencies are increasingly imposing extraordinary demands in terms of reporting against indicators of achievement that bear little relation to the manner and possibilities development activities have for supporting social transformation. As Andrew Natsios, former USAID Director notes, 'those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable' www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424271

In my invitation to the meeting I wrote that many development practitioners cynically comply with the performance measurement demands, often with a nod and a wink from a sympathetic bureaucrat equally despairing of what is now required. Compliance is accompanied by secret resistance. People carry on doing what seems most appropriate according to their own judgement. But compliance and resistance consume energy and enthusiasm. The methods demanded of us to be *more accountable* are actually having the effect of our becoming ever *less responsible* for seriously enquiring of ourselves how we can most usefully contribute to transformative social change and be held accountable for our actions in that respect.

My note struck a strong chord. People e-mailed and phoned about their interest in being part of what I was calling '*The big push back*'. One senior official from an international development organisation phoned to say 'We negotiated for several months with [a government donor] and they themselves knew it was ridiculous what they were asking for but they said it was political. In the end it comes down to money and for several hundreds of millions of dollars we had to agree.'

A sense of frustration – and even despair - was reflected in the feelings participants wrote down at the start of the meeting. One person felt part of the problem: 'My staff and my organisational partners are oppressed by the agreements I make with funders whose demands I pass on'. Another commented that too many of us are 'averse to accounting for what we do. If we were more rigorous with our own accountability, we would not be such sitting ducks when the scary technocrats come marching in'. However, despite their anger, shame and despair, those at the meeting were enthused by this opportunity to come together that, as one person noted 'suggests that change is possible'. Another wrote about being 'hopeful that there is a momentum for new and better ways of how we can achieve change'. Several stressed this should not be a 'them' versus 'us' event. There were sympathetic participants in the room from funding agencies and we all knew of many others working for change from the inside.

What are the issues?

There are different views on how change happens: linear cause-effect or emergent. With linear change it is easier to imagine oneself in control and therefore claim attribution, whereas with emergent change the most we can claim is a contribution to a complex, only partially controllable process in which local actors may have conflicting views on what is happening, why, and what can be done about it. Whose voice and whose knowledge counts risk being ignored when organisations report on their achievements with indicators of number of farmers contacted or hectares irrigated. Thus 'value for money' becomes equated with aggregated numbers rather than with effectiveness in supporting social transformation. Symptoms are treated as goals and turned into indicators of success. A participant mentioned an encounter with a high-level official who said, 'I want a simple problem with a simple solution so that I can measure value for money.'

How to explain what is happening?

Why are many funders – philanthropic foundations as well as government ministries - placing ever-greater stress on demonstrating tangible results in terms of aggregate numbers? The meeting noted that this is not restricted to the international development sector. Someone in Australia had previously e-mailed me that 'The front-line local government community development workers, bushfire reconstruction teams and indigenous workers all face exactly the same issues'. But why is this trend strengthening and is most exaggerated in international development?

Supporters/taxpayers have little appetite for complex messages but international NGOs are afraid to be transparent about how they spend their money; they have been complicit in pretending that development is simple - 'the goats-for-Christmas syndrome'. Organisations are competing for financing so they comply with donor requirements to meet their income targets and thereby confirm and reinforce the current trend. Aid has been around for a long time and there is increasing pressure for quick 'wins' to demonstrate that it works. The shift to the right in European politics puts aid flows at risk. Numbers can be very misleading but they provide a comfort blanket when reporting achievements. The prevailing neo-liberal ideology, which claims that individuals are merely pursuing their own self-interest, has created an environment of suspicion; the desire for quantitative data arises when there is a lack of trust, when agencies or individuals have to cover themselves against attack. This trend is exaggerated in international development because of the reality gap between citizens in the North providing the money and those in the South who are meant to be benefitting. The less that governments are in control – climate change, financial, food and fuel crises – the more they seek to pretend that they are. At the same time, social transformation is not on many funders' agenda, including the new large philanthropic organisations and large accountancy companies which are increasingly influential. Technical solutions are sought to what are perceived to be technical problems. At the same time, the effects of development aid are expected to be 'sustainable'; but this pretence rings hollow, since what is most measurable is least transformational and therefore least sustainable without further donor aid.

Strategic responses

From analysis to strategizing. While academic researchers have an important role to play in reporting how schemes that are able to tick all the "results" boxes may be ineffectual in tackling the causes of poverty, even such research needed the political space to be funded and disseminated. Equally important, development organisations need to enquire into their own practices - how they present themselves to the public - to engage in constructive dialogue with their funders. Strategies identified for collective follow-up action by interested participants were:

- Build *counter-narratives* of development and change that stress the significance of history, challenge the primacy of numbers and emphasize accountability to those who international aid exists for.

- *Communicate* in more innovative ways the complex nature of development to the general public by collaborating with and drawing on the expertise of development communication agencies in facilitating debates and expanding spaces for voices from the South, while building knowledge of how the public in the North understands development.
- Develop *different methods of reporting*, so that the requirement for aggregated numbers at Northern policy level does not influence the character of programming in complex development contexts; building on already available methods for assessing impact and continuing to develop and test new approaches..
- *Collaborate* with people inside donor agencies who are equally dissatisfied with the prevailing ‘audit culture’ and are seeking to promote sustainable change.
- *Re-claim ‘value for money’* by communicating with donors and the public that some aspects of development work are valuable while irreducible to numbers; improve development organisations’ own internal practices in terms of value for money, e.g. in procurement; and work together to develop more self-critical standards.
- *Enhance organisational learning* and reflective practice, using professional training and education to nurture out-of-the-box thinking and approaches.
- *Scrutinize the role of big business* in development aid and its impact on discourse, quality and accountability; who will watch *them* if they assume the quality control function?

Next steps

The significance of donor funding for the organisations and job prospects of almost everyone at the meeting did not escape comment. This is why participants welcomed the possibility of collective research and action to dialogue with donors and create more space for transformative development practice. The Participation, Power and Social Change team at IDS is currently exploring the possibility of resources to support communications and knowledge sharing among an informal network of practitioners and researchers pursuing the strategies listed above, as well as others that may be identified. Participants suggested making such meetings annually, and in the meantime networking with the meeting participants and other interested parties to collaborate against the current ‘audit culture’ and in favour of more transformational and sustainable change.

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